

Competitions: Opportunity or exploitation?

Practice Matters

By Andy Pressman, FAIA

Architectural competitions have been likened to a double-edged sword. On one hand, they can provide architects with opportunities, enlighten the public, and advance the design dialogue. On the other, they can exploit architects from financial and intellectual property standpoints. One thing is clear: the stakes can be very high—big money and reputations are often at risk.

Opportunities

Dolf Schnebli, a Swiss architect, views competitions as “continuing education,” because they offer the opportunity to experiment with new technologies and design options. Bruce Kuwabara, principal of the Toronto architecture firm KPMB, is also emphatic: “Competitions are an important way of expanding our thinking. We see them as part of our body of work.” Indeed, architects can push the design envelope in competitions because they encourage an open and inventive approach to projects. Even losing schemes can enhance a firm’s marketing portfolio, particularly in difficult economic cycles. Moreover, competitions provide a chance for small, evolving firms to have a shot at large-scale commissions.

Roger Schluntz, FAIA, a noted professional advisor for competitions, suggests that one of the biggest beneficiaries of design com-

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petitions is the public. The educational consequences of presentations, exhibits, and the media can be extraordinary. Schluntz says, “as a result of the increased awareness of the value of design and heightened expectations, both the profession and public can profit.”

Regardless of the outcome, participating in competitions can benefit a firm. New York City-based Kohn Pedersen Fox (KPF) used a competition to pursue its first project in the health-care industry, an effort that earned a third-place award. Even though KPF didn’t win, the partners were delighted; the experience increased the firm’s knowledge of this market and positioned it for similar future projects.

In theory, competitions provide the possibility to secure commissions on pure merit. KPF’s London office entered 30 competitions (and won a staggering 17) in its first four years, giving the firm an almost instant reputation and workload. Competitions in Europe tend to be more frequent, shorter in duration, and less costly than those in the States, thus minimizing the risks and increasing the potential return for the architect.

The down side

Still, all competitions involve some risk for the professional. The biggest problem, according to New River, Ariz.-based architect Will Bruder, FAIA, is politics. Jurors frequently have personal agendas. Bruder cites a competition in which he partici-

pated where all five finalists were either former students or employees of jurors. “How can jurors be objective under those circumstances? It’s a travesty!” exclaims Bruder.

In the most egregious examples, clients or juries have chosen an architect before the competition begins. Architects have also charged that their ideas have been used even when they did not win. RECORD has received numerous complaints from architects who felt that their intellectual property had been appropriated without credit or remuneration.

For architects who don’t win, the costs can be substantial. Even if an honorarium is given, it rarely covers all the architect’s expenses. Michael Graves, FAIA, deems this “a hideous way to select an architect.” Notwithstanding the aforementioned successes of his firm, KPF, Gene Kohn, FAIA, believes it’s unfortunate that architects are eager to do competitions without a fee. He says these professionals are giving away their most valuable assets: creative ideas.

Because good buildings require the consensus of users and designers, competitions are further criticized because there is no dialogue between client and architect. Hugh Hardy, FAIA, of Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer Associates in New York City, believes the process is inherently flawed. Lacking “proper access to the client,” he says, “an architect alone cannot represent all the values required for the best buildings.” Schluntz suggests this may not

always be the case: “Development of a detailed program for the competition should help distill the issues.

Entering competitions requires vigilance on the architects’ part. Critical assessments of selection criteria and jury predisposition are essential to understanding the politics. The financial risks are too high if a firm has no chance to win.

The architect should also understand the competition’s rules regarding intellectual property. Typically, the architect owns the “Instruments of Service” and grants the sponsor a nonexclusive license to publish and display submission drawings and models. Once ideas have been published and displayed, however, they can creep into the subconscious, making it difficult, if not impossible, to prove plagiarism. Having an agreement that binds the sponsor and each firm to the competition’s schedule, requirements, and honorarium prior to the start of the competition is a must.

The very best competitions result in better designs than the RFQ process. Poorly run competitions, on the other hand, can mire architects in costly and unnerving political muck.

The notion of the architectural competition is analogous to a Shakespearean play. In addition to the rarefied layer of design excellence, there’s an abundance of subtexts: power struggles, political agendas, and financial issues. Indeed, the Bard might have been “in love” with architectural competitions. ■