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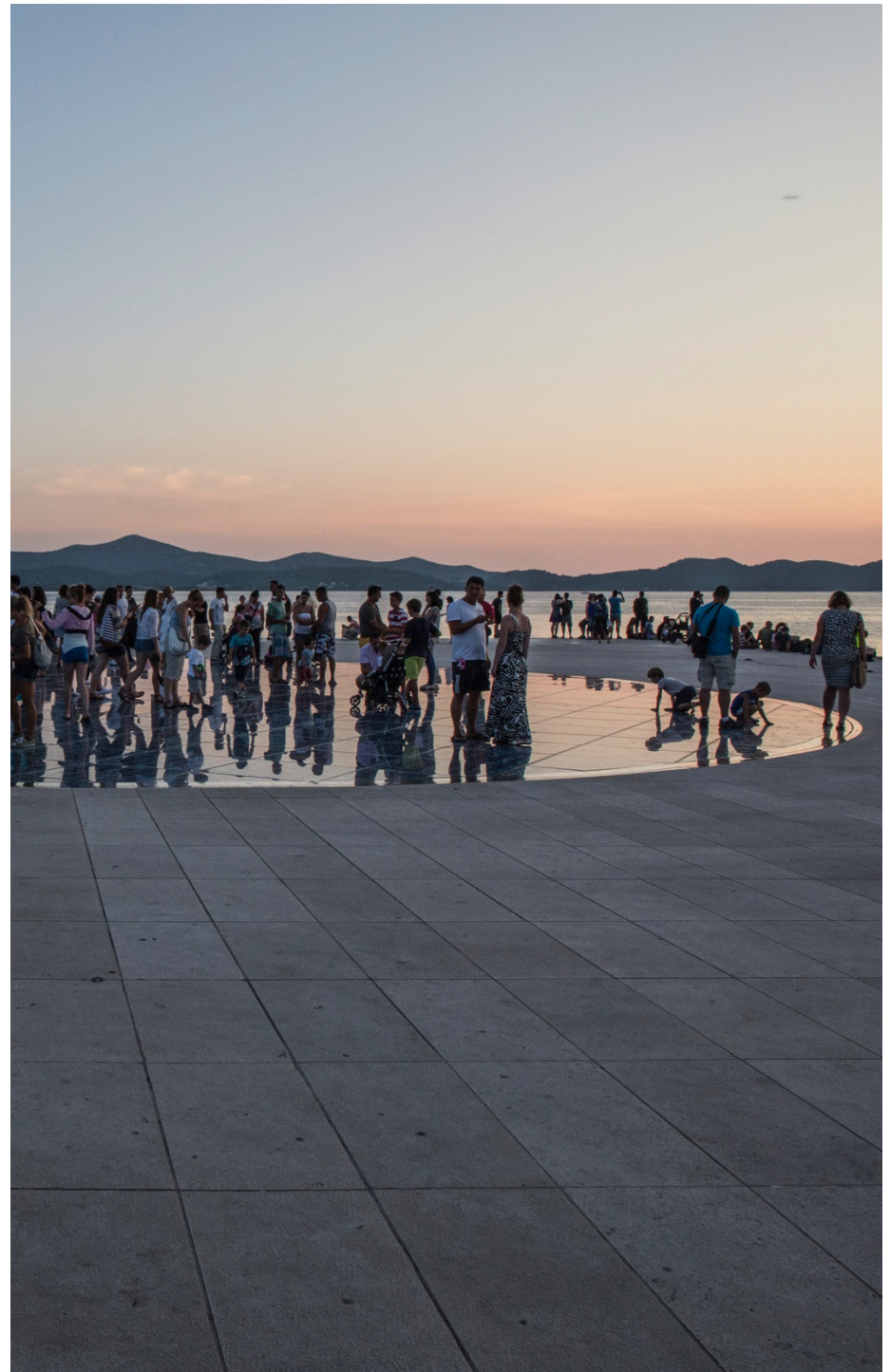
Reflections on procurement processes

Karl Kullmann

2017, *Ground Up (Process)* 6: 112–117

If I were to draw up my personal shortlist of projects from around the world that I find most compelling, the list would include Maya Lin's *Vietnam Memorial* in Washington D.C., Latz & Partner's *Volkspark und Bundesgartenschau* in Potsdam (Germany), Nikola Bašić's *Sun Salutation* and *Sea Organ* in Zadar (Croatia), and Syrinx's *Point Fraser Demonstration Wetland* in Perth (Australia). In terms of procurement, the designs for the first two projects were selected on the basis of a design supplied up front—the first by open international competition and the second by invited competition. The designers for the latter two projects were commissioned by requests for qualifications, with the designs produced after the design firms were signed on. Even taking into consideration the geographical and programmatic diversity of the four projects sampled above, it raises the question: if designs that are produced after a designer is commissioned also routinely produce excellent projects, what is the unique value of design competitions? Are they as an effective and useful mechanism for self-selecting quality landscape architectural design as assumed? Can a commission do everything a competition does but with less theater?

For a designer, competitions promise an alluring mix of skill and chance, where contestants hope to be judged on pure design rather than all the other criteria that normally weigh on everyday practice—even though they know that in reality, politics and special agendas are as much a part of competitions as any other facet of practice. The preparation of a competition entry grants designers all the consent they need to heroically burn the



Nikola Bašić, *Sun Salutation*, Zadar Waterfront, Croatia, 2008 (photo by the author)

midnight oil, worn as it is like a badge of honor. Fellow designers typically greet a declaration of “we are doing a competition” with conflicted reverence: “I wonder what their concept is? What if they win? We should have entered.” But there are also rewards beyond peer-based admiration. As regular design competition entrant Marcel Wilson (principal of San Francisco firm *Bionic*) observes, even if non-victorious, at the end of the day with competitions there is something tangible to keep; a design, some experiments, some testing of ideas and methods in a particular context. The design competition is guaranteed to move a designer forward, whereas an unsuccessful Request for Qualifications leaves them more or less at the same place they started.¹

While designers tend to canonize the open international ideas competition as the ultimate design forum, many of the most celebrated design products that have set the agenda for years to come have actually emerged from closed competitions and commissions.² There is no doubt that soliciting competing designs is an effective mechanism in the case of procuring ideas for difficult sites, broadly applicable themes, or culturally laden projects such as memorials. The analogy is akin to placing a unique and difficult to evaluate item up for auction to let the market establish its appropriate price at that moment in time. Open competitions play an important role in enabling innovative ‘hive’ thinking by generating walls of concepts which subsequently give nascent projects discursive depth, identity, and momentum. The first stage of the World Trade Centre Site Memorial competition with over five thousand submissions, or the High Line ideas competition with over seven hundred entries epitomize this effect. Open competitions also allow lesser-known designers to spar on a more level playing field, to which as non-A-listers, they would not normally be privy. Indeed, competitions of this nature have famously jump-started significant careers.

In Europe, competitions are embedded into EU law as the primary mechanism for procuring government and many private projects. Conversely, in the US most of the work is typically solicited by existing qualifications built on past performance and competitive fee structures (which unlike Europe are deregulated³), rather than future intentions in the form of competitions.⁴ Design competitions are reserved for ‘special occasions’ for some persuasive reasons. They are enormously resource intensive for participants and arguably undermine the designer’s relationship with the client, the

community, and the site.⁵ Competitions have also been understandably charged with reducing the serious and sometimes uncomely job of environmental design to a beauty contest where each drawing strives to be prettier than the next, often at the cost of substance. There are ethical concerns also, such as the case of realization competitions in which the winner’s prize is paid in lieu of design fees, with no compensation included for offsetting the high degree of financial risk that a design office takes on when preparing an entry. There also exists the probability that some of the proliferating private-run web-advertised competitions turn a profit by exploiting the genial willingness of designers to pay to give away their designs. In this regard, I’m not aware of another comparable industry that divulges so much up front for so little potential return.

A further apprehension is specific to landscape architecture. Unlike architecture competitions which are often implicitly or explicitly either only for architects, or for multidisciplinary teams led by architects, competitions with landscape architectural themes are rarely restricted to, or only attractive to, landscape architects. Indeed, whether for ideas or for realization, by invitation or open, design competitions set with briefs focused on landscape tend to attract one of the most varied pools of entrants, from both allied design disciplines and from elsewhere. To be certain, this diversity is part of the identity and richness of the field of landscape architecture, which as the most ‘grounded’ of the design disciplines,⁶ has served as a melting pot and clearing house for other disciplines. But it also has a downside. On balance, landscape architects have not fared well in major design competitions that are ostensibly about landscape architecture. This phenomenon is not restricted to competitions as it is mirrored in other modes of practice as well, and indeed it speaks to a much larger issue of landscape architecture’s insecure position within the shifting overlapping territory of the design disciplines.⁷ But competitions have tended to amplify the discrepancy. That said, the ‘trade deficit’ of landscape architecture outsourcing its noteworthy innovations to architecture has diminished over the past decade, in part because developments in design theory have been oriented toward landscape. But it is also due to landscape architects getting better at playing the game of graphic and conceptual branding.

Because of the ‘reset’ that occurs at the start of each contest, maintaining momentum from one design competition to the next can make the European

competition-based practice model more difficult to sustain than the commission model. On the surface of it, each new competition places the designer at 'square one,' with previous form in the terms of successes or failures being of little consequence. That said, there are actually repeated examples over the years of designers hitting rich veins of form and winning or placing in a string of competitions against the odds. I was once involved in such a seam of good form with a firm in continental Europe. I would like to think that it was the brilliance of our conceptual acuties that crystallized irrefutable solutions to the design briefs. But on reflection, I came to suspect that it was more likely a result of our graphic product, which although a little blunt by today's standards, was at the time more visible and verdant than our competitors. It became our 'brand.' We refined it and became more confident in it with each contest. It was not so much that competition juries came to recognize and reward this aesthetic brand outright, but rather that it started to form a small culture via press and media, which in turn stoked a feedback loop of fashion—which others eventually usurped.

A glance across the recent history of design firms who boast significant success at competitions confirms this. The importance of seductive imagery to the marketability of a competition entry amplifies a relationship that landscape architecture already has with drawing. That is, unless in a craft-based practice, landscape architects do not build landscapes *per se*. Rather, they construct drawings which often take on a life of their own without their authors to chaperone them. The competition environment merely magnifies this condition to the point where the drawing graphics become a device for their own ongoing propagation, manipulating the viewers' perception of the design to such an extent that the competition boards *become* the scheme. As Donald Appleyard cynically notes, a designer "only has to use dramatic shadows, beautiful textures, and fine trees for most people to like any scheme he portrays. Competitions are won on the basis of such simulations."⁸

Taken to its logical conclusion, competition graphics actuate conceptual reductivism to the point of evasiveness. When combined with the cover of 'design indeterminacy' or future 'client/community consultation/collaboration,' the design competition mechanism is subverted from a competition to commission. That is, the goal becomes to get the job without committing to a design position up front. One of the most cunning examples of this remains OMA/Bruce Mau's winning non-design for Downsview Park. If Kooolhaas's longstanding collaboration with an esteemed

brand designer was not evidence enough, the scheme infamously subverted the long history of landscape representation, repacking the picturesque as a hyper-real veil of possibilities. The wording of the text accompanying the imagery was also rediscovered as a powerful medium. Who could forget the bold headline on the first board: "Toronto Suffers from Neglect"?⁹ And of course OMA, like a Y2K door-to-door salesman, happened to have the antidote to a predicament the city didn't know it had. These examples illuminate something most designers know intuitively; competitions are not objective delineators of design skill but are as manipulable as other modes of doing business.

Interestingly, three major impulses have driven the surge in competitions parallels the resurgence in memorial building over the past couple of decades: (1) the urgency to secure collective memory from generational amnesia in the case of the two world wars; (2) the "post-" era of re-vocalizing historical silences; and (3) the traumatic beginning to the new millennium, with so many cultural and natural disasters also requiring individual memorialization. The first category includes examples such as the *Holocaust Memorial* (Berlin) and the ongoing *Gallipoli Peace Park* (Turkey), while the second encompasses the *Vietnam Memorial* (DC) and the *Berlin Wall Memorial* (Berlin). Along with sites in the US commemorating victims of the 9/11 attacks, the final category includes the *Bali Bombing Memorial* (Australia), and the as yet unrealized *Tsunami Memorial* (Thailand). In each instance, the designer's clients become everyone who was affected by, or stands to learn from, the event that precipitated the memorial. When attempting to represent or capture the mood of a society in this manner, the open competition is undoubtedly a highly effective mechanism for soliciting memorial designs.

But what of more routine practice such as public parks and squares? As noted earlier, in the US this kind of work is typically solicited through fees and existing qualifications built on past performance. However, across the Atlantic, under the codified European competition system, virtually all government and a great deal of private work is awarded under the anonymous competition system (albeit mostly in closed format with a discreet number of invitees).¹⁰ The firm that gets the job is ostensibly chosen on the basis of their concept design for the given brief, rather than on their professional profile or fee structure. On the face of it, with good briefs and

learned juries, this system is very effective in the Darwinian way the most lucid design is self-selected and the extraneous or inefficient is dismissed. But in the process, schemes exhibiting the nuances and indulgences that often make great design are often also ushered out of contention. The net effect, even if unintentional, is to play it safer, since winning second prizes for being interesting does not sustain an office.

This led me to begin to question the degree to which the competition mechanism in this context actually stymies—rather than promotes—design innovation. For example, when comparing my experience of practice in Europe with that of Australia (a country in which design competitions are even rarer than the US, and new work is garnished via qualifications, low fees, collegial reputation, and/or networking) I was struck by how much more daring the design work tended to be, even at the risk of failure. The surging China-fuelled economy certainly explains part of this phenomenon, where projects were fast-tracked and consequently not rigorously audited and refined. In this context, design competitions almost seem like a progress-hindering indulgence. It is also a consequence of the tendency for peripheral and emerging economies that seek global visibility to overcompensate with extroverted design statements when compared with the apparently more understated self-assuredness of the North Atlantic (although this remains far more of an architectural phenomenon than a landscape architectural one).

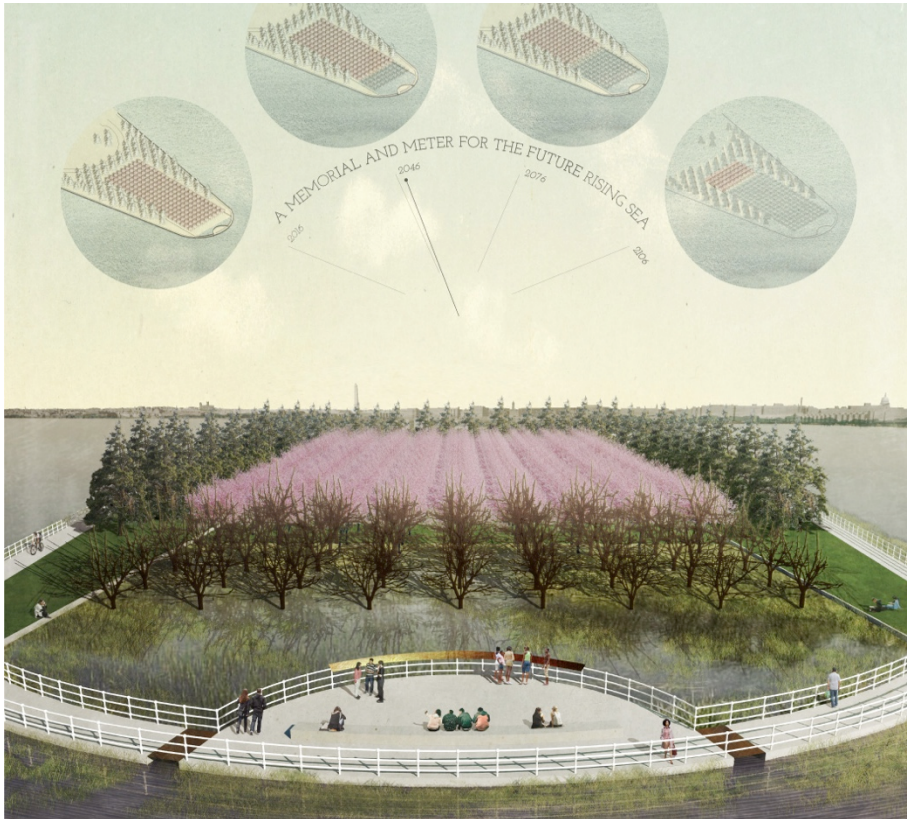
But beneath the differentials between positions in the world economy, there still appeared a strong correlation between the job being already secured and the designers feeling freer to explore innovative concepts. Far more so, that is, than with the reverse scenario of having to get the job first based on the design via a competition. The key is to compare apples with apples; to compare innovation and experimentation between commission projects with that of first prizes in realization competitions. That is, between design projects that are intended in both instances to be carried through to construction, and not those that are destined to remain on paper by virtue of a second or lower place in a realization competition. The Point Fraser Demonstration Wetland mentioned at the start of this article falls into this category, where the real design freedom to innovate began once the designers satisfied the bureaucracy and locked in the project.¹¹

It would be simplistic to conclude that competitions are best for projects of major collective cultural significance, while commissions suit more modest endeavors. There are instances where a designer's reputation should count for something in the context of culturally important projects. Who for example, would begrudge the unilateral commissioning of Dani Karavan, whose memorial designs at sites such as Portbou (Spain),¹² and the Negev Desert (Israel) refine a celebrated body of work. From the other side, there are also many instances where competitions can be more effective at the local community level than commissioning a local firm. However, the disconnection emerges from the global dispersion of the web, wherein an influx of international entries inevitably saturates a local or regional competition. On the one hand this can be invigorating, especially for a small community that suddenly finds itself in the spotlight as its design competition held for a local issue is flooded with 500 entries from designers from all corners of the globe, who, like design venture capitalists, are desperate to invest excess 'design liquidity' wherever it may stick. But on the other hand, it contributes to the loss of local nuances and identity, where the spectacle of alluring but ubiquitous imagery smothers actual grounded knowledge of a place, which is after-all one of the enduring parameters of good landscape architecture.

To be sure, a well-focused and resourced competition with quality site information—combined with contemporary digital techniques and datasets that allow designers to virtually simulate a place from the other side of the world—may mitigate this loss of site tactility. But being 'on the ground' should still provide a 'home advantage,' and the history of international design competitions indicates that it does not; competitions rarely reward those with local knowledge. At the risk of sounding nostalgic and parochial, I contend that there is a place for rediscovering the truly regional design competition, metaphorically advertised on street corners rather than rolling around the web like tumbleweed, collecting flotsam in the form of design products that end up with an evasive global-green-washed patina and look like everything else.

Notes

1. Marcel Wilson, "Beta Testing," *Department of Landscape Architecture Guest Lecture Series* (Berkeley: College of Environmental Design, University of California, November 9, 2010).
2. Competitions lie on a spectrum of completely open to anyone regardless of qualifications or location, through to closed by invitation, with only a unilaterally selected shortlist. In between these limits, regional and professional caveats begin to restrict the eligibility of open competitions, while initial requests for qualifications can improve the transparency of otherwise veiled invited competitions. Design competitions can also be for generating ideas only, or specifically for realization, with two stage competitions creating a hybrid of both. See: Lawrence Witzling, Ernest Alexander, & Dennis Casper, "Design Competitions are Back in Fashion," in *Planning* 51 (1), 1985, 10–17.
3. Robert Gutman, *Architectural Practice: A Critical View* (New York, Princeton Architectural Press, 1998), 75–76. As referenced by, Dan Willis, "Are Charrettes Old School?" in *Harvard Design Magazine* 33, 2010–11, 25–31. p26.
4. Casper, et al. *op. cit.*
5. Marc Kristal, "Measuring the Competition," in *Metropolis* 22 (3), 2002, 96–99, 128–129, 131.
6. See: Christophe Girod, "Towards a General Theory of Landscape," in *Topos* 28, 1999, 33–41.
7. See: Patrick A. Miller, "A Profession in Peril?" in *Landscape Architecture* 87 (8), 1997, 66–71, 85–87.
8. Appleyard, Donald. 1977. Understanding Professional Media: Issues, Theory, and a Research Agenda. In *Human Behavior and Environment: Advances in Theory and Research*, eds. Irwin Altman & Joachim F. Wohlwill. New York: Plenum Press, 74.
9. Quoted from the OMA Downsvievw Design Competition boards. Reproduced in: *Downsvievw Park Toronto*, ed. Julia Czerniak (Cambridge & Munich: Harvard Design School & Prestel, 2001).
10. For examples of how integrated competitions are to European practice, most German and many European design competitions are catalogued at: <http://www.competitionline.com/de/> and reported in the journal *Wettbewerb Aktuell*.
11. For coverage of this project, see: James Quinton, "Point Fraser Wetland in Perth [Australia]," in *Topos* 59, 2007, 14–17.
12. See: Karl Kullmann, "Route Fittko: Tracing Walter Benjamin's Path of No Return," in *Ground Up (Delineations)* 5, 2016, 70–75.



Erik Jensen and Rebecca Sunter, *Climate Chronograph*, 1st Prize, *Memorials for the Future* design competition, Van Alen Institute, 2016 (courtesy of the designers)

Poignantly, Europe—whose institutionalized competition model so many North American and Antipodean designers covet—does not actually run an open system. While not resorting to posting flyers on telegraph poles to localize exposure, the EU does tend to enforce strict eligibility criteria, the most crucial of which is the necessity of residing within its borders. While emulating these protectionist policies may seem to contradict the egalitarian spirit of the international search for ideas—and deny the reality of global media-based practice—it may, in certain instances, catalyze the re-emergence of more contrasting regionalist conceptual approaches. But despite their shortcomings, competitions deployed strategically in any form remain the spark that periodically reinvigorates the design culture of the discipline. Competitions create a place for the 'cloud' of ideas to precipitate onto a site or a problem, and that should not be diminished.