

# PARADOXES OF ARCHITECTURAL COMPETITIONS: THE COMPETITION BETWEEN EFFICIENCY, JUSTICE AND CREATIVITY

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Architectural competitions can be analyzed as an institutionalized social technology that seeks to elicit and select great architectural designs in an efficient and fair manner. The introduction of dialogue-based forms of architectural competitions is a new and radical innovation of this old institution. An empirical study of a dialogue-based architectural competition reveals a number of concerns. For dialogues to become sustainable elements in competitions these concerns will have to be addressed and coped with. One major concern to be addressed is the widespread but problematic presumption that dialogues embody a continuous learning and clarification process towards the logical and rational decision of the competition panel.

Keywords: dialogue-based architectural competitions, ethnographic studies, social technology.

## INTRODUCTION

Recently, a new form of architectural competition was introduced on the Danish building scene. This institutional innovation may aptly be called ‘dialogue-based architectural competitions’ (DACs). It builds on traditional forms of architectural competitions, e.g. the ‘sketch competition’ (Bergdoll 1989) and the ‘invited architectural competition’, but it adds an organized set of dialogues to the process. In the specific instantiation of a DAC described below, the architectural teams met with each other and the members of the competition panel on several occasions during the competition. On these occasions they openly presented and discussed the current state of their ideas and plans for the final design entry.

Sharing your preliminary ideas, plans and problems with your competitors and future evaluators is bound to change the competitive dynamics. Usually such interaction during a competition would fuel suspicions of collusion and unfairness (Landau 1989), and traditional architectural competitions are designed to discourage such interaction. Consequently, the following questions seem important to investigate: In the evolutionary history of architectural competitions, how can we understand the sudden introduction of dialogues? Which further adaptations will increase the retention of dialogues in the future of architectural competitions.

In the perspective developed below the architectural competition is considered to be a social technology. It is a technology for picking a winner in a competition for primacy. The fact that we need a carefully designed ‘technology’ is an indication in itself of the difficulties in accomplishing this task. Not only must the technology

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ensure that there is something attractive to choose between; it must also ensure that the choice of the winner is legitimate and that the ‘transaction costs’ in terms of time and effort are not prohibitively high. Thus, the design of the architectural competition as a social technology has at least three premises, i.e. three types of concern to address: creativity (attractive entries), legitimacy (fair outcomes), and efficiency (sustainable investments of time and effort).

The historical evolution of architectural competitions can be understood as a constantly shifting balance between these three concerns: creativity, legitimacy, and efficiency. Such a shift in the balance between the three concerns also characterizes the currency of the dialogue-based competitions. However, establishing a new balance requires the participants and competitors to attend to multiple other concerns, some of which will be illustrated below.

In other words, we will show that the sustainability of DACs as a social technology for picking winners hinges on the successful handling of multiple other matters of concern.

In the following paragraphs we will first argue that architectural competitions can be understood as social technologies and briefly show what such an argument implies. We will spell out the ways in which the three fundamental concerns are balanced against each other. Next, we will describe the empirical study of a specific instantiation of a DAC. Finally, we will analyse a few empirical observations that will illuminate the claim that a major new concern in relation to DACs is the false impression of the dialogue process as a progressive learning and clarification process that leads logically to the panel’s choice of a winner.

## **ARCHITECTURAL COMPETITION AS SOCIAL TECHNOLOGY**

The architectural competition has a long history. It dates back some 2500 years (Lipstadt 1989; King 2000). For an institution to survive that long, it must have changed over time in sync with the evolution of norms, values, and concerns of the surrounding society. We intend to show that also the introduction of dialogue in architectural competition reflects such current norms, values, and concerns in present society.

However, before doing so we need to argue that such competitions, in whichever specific form they appear, can be understood as social technologies. By ‘technology’ we mean devices which are designed to serve specific functions. The fact that technologies are ‘social’ means that human actions and interaction are at the fore, not merely mechanical processes. The fact that technologies are ‘designed’ indicates a focus on the intentions and the knowledge that inform the specific arrangements, more than on the exact outcomes. However, the fact that they are meant to ‘serve specific functions’ is also significant because the motor of change is the experience of functional failures or the discovery of new functions to be served.

We have already claimed that architectural competitions are technologies for picking winners. Thus, the function is clear, until we realize that the winner may be both a design and a designer. The issue has been current for a long time, and it is quite possible that practice has developed in another direction than was originally intended. Thus, in the early 19th century “... RIBA was eager to persuade sponsors that competitions should select a designer not purchase a design.” (Bergdoll 1989, p. 43) This tension between the design of the competition and the practice that develops

around it will never be resolved and it will continue to give impetus to renewal and change in the specific arrangements of competitions.

It is also well-known that architectural competitions have come to serve many more functions than they were originally designed to serve. They have been seen to symbolize and celebrate central achievement values in modern society, being the entry point for many young and unknown architects on their path towards fame and power. They have also helped to build architecture as a profession since "... [the] positive contribution of the process to the rise of architectural professionalism ... is indisputable. The competition procedure was the single most outstanding factor in promoting solidarity among American architects, and their success in regulating it has helped win them the respect of the public." (Landau 1989, p. 73).

While clearly significant, we will not be concerned with the multiple latent and unintended functions that architectural competitions have had in the past and may get in the future. We will concentrate on the ways in which architectural competitions pick winners and the sustainability of such a social technology when it is designed to allow the competitors to interact and collaborated while competing for primacy (March 1999).

### **The three concerns behind the design of architectural competitions**

The architectural competition is generally thought of as experimentation (Lipstadt 1989), and therefore they can be considered investments in the exploration of new ideas. Asking many people to work in parallel to produce alternative solutions to the same task, knowing that only one of them will be implemented, is in retrospect necessarily a wasteful procedure, but the wastefulness is rationalized as a necessary investment in creativity and the implied exploration of an uncharted solution space. While there would be easier ways of picking a winner, the competition procedure would appear to promise that the winner will be picked among more, and especially more qualified, alternatives.

However, the wastefulness of the procedure remains to be a concern, especially because those who stood to benefit from the exploration, i.e. the clients, are normally not the ones to carry the wasted costs and efforts. Primarily, the waste falls back on the participating architects who do not win, and possibly on society at large, at least indirectly. Many changes in the arrangement of competitions have been especially targeted at preventing the exploration to become too wasteful. Consider e.g. the two-stage competition in which many participants compete in the first stage, each investing a limited amount of resources in sketching a solution, while only a few participants compete in the final stage, each investing considerable amounts of resources in detailing their designs. Such a procedure was meant "... to eliminate the huge expense to architects of competing in the escalating market of special effects ..." (Bergdoll 1989, p. 43).

The need for experimentation and the wastefulness of exploration are two valid concerns that goad us to act in contradictory ways. As such, they constitute a dilemma (Ryle 2000). However, add to this the concern for the fairness of the process of appointing winners. Competing on equal terms and appointing the winner on 'objective criteria' are the hallmark of fairness, and many parts of the social technology of architectural competitions have been designed to induce trust in the fairness of the evaluation. Such fairness has historically been policed by the professional associations when taking responsibility for organizing the procedures and staffing the jury with professionals. More recently, elaborate legal and regulatory

frameworks, implemented by e.g. the EU, have supplemented, and to some extent substituted, the role of professional associations in this respect. Many aspects of architectural competition are nowadays a matter of prescription more than design. Such prescriptions are embodiments of the fairness concern.

### **Challenges and Dilemmas**

We have described the three fundamental concerns that also architectural competitions have to struggle with. Creativity, efficiency, and fairness: those are the keywords for such concerns. We claim that very often they are conflicting concerns, and that each specific form of competition reflects a different balance between the concerns. We also claim that whichever form is chosen in a particular case other types of concern will have to be handled during the execution of the competition. Facing a dilemma, any specific design will tend to favour one or two of the fundamental concerns, making the neglected concerns the more likely to cause difficulties along the way. In this sense, any design is more strategy than solution. It sets the scene for the types of problems and concerns to be faced subsequently. Since some concerns may be easier to manage than others, there is still an argument for designing architectural competition carefully.

Designs, in general, and forms of architectural competitions in particular, are strategies for meeting an emergent reality of considerable complexity, uncertainty, and ambiguity. It is to the particular balance informing DACs, and its meeting with such emergent realities, that we turn next.

## **METHODOLOGY**

We have conducted empirical studies of a number of architectural competitions (Kreiner 2005; Kreiner 2006; Kreiner 2007). This paper builds on an intensive case study of a DAC (Jacobsen, Jensen and Kreiner 2010). The participating architectural teams were asked to design a new public school and library on the frontier of a major city in Denmark. The municipality was the client and was eager to make this project a showcase, not only in terms of its design (e.g. sustainable construction and modern pedagogical principles) but also in terms of the competition procedure. Thus, it was decided to use a DAC, a form of competition that previously had been used in a few urban planning idea competitions, but that, to our knowledge, had never been used in a regular architectural competition with a large design contract as the ultimate prize.

Three architectural teams were selected after an elaborate process of prequalification and tender. The teams had members from multiple disciplines, including not only various types of civil engineers but also experts on e.g. playground design, sustainability and green construction. The exact composition was not prescribed and did vary across the teams. However, their multi-disciplinary composition was prescribed to enable an early integration of these other concerns with the architectural design.

The organizing of architectural teams was mirrored by the early assignment to the collective process of many experts from different disciplines and by the early mobilization of the professional members of the competition panel (the jury). These experts and panel members met with the teams on several occasions during an unusually long competition process. The collective process included many more encounters, e.g. with future users and neighbours of the school, but in essence the procedure included five steps: (1) The announcement of the competition brief, a very long and detailed description of the task, including numerous prescriptions and

requirements to be observed by the teams. (2) Workshop 1, at which the architectural teams presented their early ideas, plans and designs and received detailed feedback from the experts and panel members. All teams were present during the whole workshop and therefore experienced all presentations and feedbacks. (3) Workshop 2, a repetition of workshop 1, but on this occasion the teams were required to present quite detailed designs and plans. (4) The submission of the entries which was organized as a seminar with the teams, the experts, the competition panel and other stakeholders. Each architectural team made a formal presentation. After the presentations, extensive and unregulated networking took place around the exhibited design entries. (5) The panel's announcement of the result of the competition, which was also turned into a public event. All three design entries were exhibited and a member of the panel gave an evaluation of each entry before announcing the winner.

### **The study**

Our data collection started at the time of the second workshop and continued long after the completion of the competition. We observed and documented the process in depth. Thus, we have video-recordings of all sessions at workshop 2. We also have video-recordings of the teams working on the feedback after the workshop. Three researchers observed all meetings and deliberations of the panel, including the meeting when the winner was picked. We have interviews with the central players, not only the members of the architectural teams, but also the assigned experts and panel members. These interviews were conducted during the competition as well as after the announcement of the winner. The themes running through most of the interviews were all centred on making sense of this highly unusual and immensely complex competition process.

Our research aim is explorative in character. What happens when you engage people in extensive dialogue across roles (architects and panel) and across the competing teams? This is a truly empirical question that justifies the methodology of our study. However, analytically we should be careful with learning from empirical case-studies. While we observed a professionally organized and successful DAC the lesson is not how to run such competitions in the future. What we may gain insight into are the multiple concerns that make it difficult to organize such competitions, whether or not it is done successfully in the particular case. Excavating 'matters of concern' is more important than the 'matters of fact' of each empirical instantiation (Latour 2004; Ripley, Thün *et al.* 2009; Kreiner 2010). In the following paragraphs we will excavate and discuss a few such matters of concern.

## **ANALYSIS**

In this section we will reflect on issues of designing architectural competitions as social technologies. The DAC is one such design, and its emergence can be understood as a redress of the balance between the three fundamental concerns, i.e. the creativity, efficiency and justice of the competition. There are alternative designs, of course, which try to redress the situation in different ways. But we claim that whatever consequences a competition form will have are primarily a matter of subsequent achievement. The form is important, as we shall see, but only in the sense of determining and framing the issues that the participants will have to deal with. It is in the dealing with these issues that consequences on creativity, efficiency and justice emerge. We have to allow for the fact that in each instantiation the DAC may have very different outcomes in terms of these three concerns. If we cannot design the DAC to have favourable outcomes, we can design it to goad the participants to act in ways

that will more likely result in such favourable outcomes. However, in order to goad the participants in such a direction we need to know a lot more about the participants, their circumstances, their sense-making and their concerns.

### **The extensiveness of competition briefs**

Two aspects of the studied DAC seem to capture the rationale of the design. First, the procedure with workshops and feedback on early ideas and plans was meant to ensure that the eventual design entries were more aligned with the client's needs and preferences. Misunderstandings are claimed to be common in architectural competitions in general, and in relative terms the costs of having entries that are aimed inadequately increases when the number of entries is reduced for efficiency reasons. Weeding out mistakes early enough for the architectural team to correct them before the final design entry is an additional gesture to efficiency. On the other hand, the open dialogue between the competing teams was also meant to be a gesture to the concern for creativity. By granting all teams a financial compensation that equalled the first prize the client had acquired the rights to all design solutions, and it was publicly announced that all teams could adopt such solutions no matter who invented them. This is a roundabout way of saying that the teams were supposed to learn from each other, to take inspiration from the other's presentations and feedback and even to 'steal' their well-received ideas. Furthermore, the assignment of the many experts to the collective process provided further resources to feed the creativity of the teams. All in all, the dialogues were expected to favourably impact on both the alignment and the creativity of the final design entries. Since the DAC demanded of the sponsors an unprecedented investment in preparation, participation and compensation to the architectural teams, in the end the concern for efficiency was probably sacrificed on this occasion.

However, it might also be argued that the DAC represented a potential sacrifice of the concern for justice, i.e. the fairness of competitions. The terms on which the architectural teams competed were muddled by the interaction and open dialogue. Such a process would also provide ample opportunities for learning by all parties involved, indicating a potential drift of the task to be accomplished over time. Perhaps in an attempt to compensate for this, the legality of the procedure was investigated up front, and some legal engineering was observed. The fairness was also observed by putting extra effort into preparing the competition brief which specified the task and delimited the solution space in great detail. Longer and more detailed briefs reflect a general trend in society at large. In architectural competitions their role is to delineate the solution space within which legitimate entries should be located. Thus, the brief is meant to clarify the premises for the competition, a clarification that facilitates and orientates the work of not only the architectural teams but also of the panel. By demarcating the qualified and legitimate solutions from the disqualified and illegitimate ones, the extensive brief represented a gesture to the concern for justice and fairness.

### *Complications in practice*

However, the dialogues of the DAC proved to challenge the role of the brief to ensure fairness. In the effort to clarify the design task and to demarcate the solution space the brief ended up producing uncertainty and ambiguity of its own. These paradoxical effects may lay dormant in all forms of architectural competitions, but the dialogues made them visible and amplified their impacts in the present case.

For example, the dialogues gave the architects the opportunity to ask for further clarification of the text of the competition brief. Texts are necessarily ambiguous in the sense that some of their meaning is added through the interpretations of the reader (Weick 1995). When texts define complex tasks, the ambiguity of the text will become transparent in the attempts to accomplish the tasks. Thus, e.g. the brief defined the following requirements concerning the logistical problem of the school: "... In terms of traffic, the safe delivery and fetching of the large number of children and youths who are taken to school by their parents should be facilitated. It is important that the traffic follows a simple, circular pattern which enables the approach of multiple cars without creating queues or stopping or interfering with other motorists in and around the parking lot ..." (Brief, p. 52, our translation). Complying with this seemingly central requirement prove a great challenge for the architects. Any solution would require the modification of existing roads which was outside the jurisdiction of the sponsors of the competition. Formally speaking, they could not authorize such modifications, and time did not allow them to apply for authorization. When the architects kept inquiring about the parameters of the task and the sponsors were unable to define them formally, it was decided to neutralize the issue all together and seek solutions at a later stage. Thus, the competition became a competition between architectural designs that did not include suggestions for how to get the school children and staff to and from the school.

The illustration is simple, but the implications are significant. The dialogues gave the architects the opportunity to deconstruct the text of the competition brief. Since any requirement could possibly be deconstructed, while of course not all of them, the architects could use the dialogues strategically to have the most difficult, irrelevant and/or disadvantageous requirements neutralized. The power behind this is the call for formal authorization that cannot be given at the time of the competition. Without dialogues, asking for authorization would not be an option. The architects would be forced to make their own interpretations, and they would eventually be judged on the creativity and sensibility of such interpretations. However, the dialogue gives the architects ample opportunity to pass the buck to the sponsors and thereby to avoid the risk of making wrong interpretations. As was discussed during the workshop, a "kiss 'n ride" zone would be a solution that the sponsors could not authorize, but which the architects could easily have proposed. Ideas are not always judged on their proven feasibility, a point which came out when the winning design was praised for suggesting that the surplus heat from a nearby shopping mall should be regained for the school. This idea was almost undocumented and had not even been presented to the owner of the shopping mall. Nonetheless, it was taken as a proof of the innovativeness of the architect who would subsequently be responsible for finding energy-efficient solutions. Thus, the dialogues gave the architects ample opportunities for requesting further instructions, but still they relied on their own judgments on most of the issues and were not always penalized for doing so.

A second set of complications stems from fact that figuratively speaking the competition brief delimitates an empty solution space. Not to mention the multitude of requirements defined by the building code etc., the number of prescriptions and instructions in the brief probably exceeded 500. In such a situation of over-determination, the only way out is to make priorities, i.e. to take a few requirements seriously and to neglect or re-interpret the rest. The big challenge is to select those requirements that subsequently will prove decisive for the panel. Again, the

uncertainty mounts because many requirements may become decisive, while only a few will.

Paradoxically, most competition briefs reinstall an element of randomness by over-determining the design solutions. Forcing the architects to give priority to some aspects while neglecting or giving scant attention to other aspects, subjects them to the fate control of the panel and its unknowable choice of criteria. This is true also of the DAC, because contrary to what might be expected dialogues will not necessarily help clarify the evaluation criteria of the panel. The following illustration shows that the dialogue may create a false belief in the panel's intentions and preferences.

As indicated above, the public school was also planned to house a public library (Jacobsen, Jensen and Kreiner 2010). From the beginning, two of the architectural teams located the library on the ground floor while the third team had located it on the top floor. In the feedback to the teams, the location on the ground floor was praised by experts and panel members. The third team was told in no uncertain terms, especially at the second workshop, that the location on the top was unacceptable. Having received very positive feedback the two former teams saw no reason to make changes, but subsequently that proved to be a false implication to draw from the feedback. In the end, the third team moved the library to the ground floor but placed it in the opposite end of the building compared to the two other entries. This gave the library a face to the busiest street of the neighbourhood which was claimed to attract the public to the library. In the panel's decision this location was used actively to justify the winner, while the others teams were told that they had chosen a suboptimal location. Without moving physically, the location of the library changed from being a favourable to an unfavourable feature of the losing designs.

This illustration shows that in competition for primacy all evaluations are relative. We cannot make relative evaluations until we know the ideas and solutions to be compared. In the end, what counted were not the intermediate evaluations, even if they appeared to be authoritative. Only the final evaluations of the final design entries count! The dialogue gave the impression of more durable and consistent standards for evaluation, but the data showed this to be a false impression. The significance of this observation is general. Any feature may change from good to bad without changing content if the content of competing designs changes.

In this sense the dialogue is not a linear and progressive learning and clarification process. It may have such an appearance, but as we have seen the final choice may be somewhat discontinuous and inconsistent in view of the prior process. This is one of the challenges to the sustainability of the DAC as a social technology. The evaluations are neither unfounded nor unfair, at least not in a legal and normative sense, but still they are surprising and disappointing.

In another sense the dialogue process proved more discontinuous than expected. The design of the DAC was premised on the assumption that the architectural teams would openly and willingly share their ideas along the way. On a number of occasions, the teams were criticized for submitting too little input to the workshops and the collective dialogue. Also, some new ideas were introduced only in the final entries, as was e.g. the case with the library location in the winning entry. Some of our informants suspected that such lack of input and the ultimate surprises might reflect a strategic withholding of ideas, a form of participation which would be considered illegitimate. However, we have shown elsewhere that at least on some occasions the lack of input and the late introduction of ideas reflected an uncoordinated performance

of the teams relative to the competition schedule (Jacobsen, Jensen and Kreiner 2010). E.g. one team offered little input to the second workshop because they prioritized participation in another competition with a more pressing deadline. In no way does this observation rule out the possibility that strategic withholding of ideas took place and the suspicion of such illegitimate participation remained a subject in formal and informal conversations. However, we claim that empirically, given the unavoidably asymmetrical information, illegitimate participation cannot be distinguished from uncoordinated participation. Whether a disappointing contribution reflect illegitimate withholding of ideas, lack of effort or simply a lack of ideas to present remains a matter of judgment. Thus, the suspicion will linger on, a fact which may reduce sponsors' willingness to repeat the experiment and thereby threaten the DAC as a sustainable social technology.

## CONCLUSIONS

In our study, DACs appear to signal a return to the focus on the creativity and the design task of the competition, after an epoch with the primary focus on the fairness and the efficiency of architectural competitions. But we have also shown that the introduction of dialogues in the architectural competition raises many new types of concerns. It gives opportunities for architects to deconstruct the brief and relieve themselves of the risks of misinterpreting the requirements. It reveals the over-determined solution that will require the selection of a few requirements to be decisive, while giving other requirements scant or no attention. But first and foremost, the dialogue creates a false impression of the competition process as a continuous process of learning and clarification that leads directly towards the conclusion of the panel. This is a false impression and a wrong expectation because the number of potential criteria far exceeds the number of criteria that can be processed. Thus, an element of surprise and randomness is added to the process by the selection of decisive criteria. Secondly, it is a false impression and a wrong expectation because architectural competitions are competitions for primacy. Consequently, all evaluations must be relative and can only be made after the submission of the final entries. As the illustration of the changing evaluation of a fixed location of the library showed, evaluations can only be known retrospectively.

The study has built on a highly unique form of architectural competitions and on a single case study. It is very hard to imagine that this account should be a representative case, as it is hard to imagine how a quantitative study of the commonness of the described processes and phenomena could be conducted. However, we make no claim on studying prevalent processes of architectural competitions. E.g. our study has shown empirically that, when introduced in architectural competitions, the dialogues did not produce a continuous process of learning and clarification. We have established such an outcome as a possible outcome, but not as a necessary (not even a likely) outcome. If it could happen in the case studied, it could probably happen in other cases as well, even if we cannot know the probability for it to happen again. What can be generalized from our study is the potentiality of the specific instantiation of the DAC and not the prevalence of the effects of engaging competitors in dialogues.

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