

MANAGING ARCHITECTURAL COMPETITIONS: EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE FROM PRACTICES IN THE UK AND ITALY

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Since project based organizations are a typical configuration in the architecture industry, two streams of research are relevant for architecture practices. (1) Team management, as architecture design and production originate from collaborative networks among multiple actors, but results from empirical studies have been inconsistent regarding which variables are predictive of team performance and project success. (2) Project management, as management in organizing practices has grown in recent years, even if existing research has difficulty with linking performance attributes to specific factors such as organizational form, company culture or strategy. Based on these premises, the paper focuses on architecture competitions which are a currently debated topic and one of the most important rituals to acquire work. The aim is to explore how competitions are part of the practice's business strategy and how teams work on competitions' proposals. We analyse and compare two case studies of middle-sized architectural practices (around 30-40 employees), one in Italy and one in the UK, competing for work through competitions. Preliminary findings suggest that architectural competitions can serve both exploration and exploitation strategies and are based on a collaborative design process.

Keywords: architectural competitions, architecture practices, team management, business strategy.

INTRODUCTION

Despite their long history and the growing interest towards them, the information available on architecture competitions is relatively small (Adamczyk 2004) and highly anecdotal (Malmberg 2006). The role and value of competitions in the process of generating the built environment are a debated topic, due to the changing regulations requiring a competitive element (Sudjic 2006) and to the fact that competitions are important for a wide range of players as their results shape our environment. Therefore, competitions have been looked at with growing interests as a formula promising research, experimentation, being a "source of critical and reflexive practices in architecture" (Adamczyk *et al.* 2004: 2), and as a fundamental way to acquire jobs. However, research often lacked a theoretical and conceptual foundation and too often competitions have been analysed through intuition and perception, rather than a scientific approach (Wezemaal 2008).

In particular, research on architectural competitions asks for investigation of strategic and organizational implications for architectural practices entering competitions.

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These are in fact aspects which have been neglected by architecture and urban planning scholars. How do competitions fit into the strategy of architectural firms? How should architects organize for competitions? What are the criteria to equip teams for competitions? How do teams play in the context of competitions?

The paper is organized as follows. In the first section we review literature on architectural competitions and architecture work as social collaborative practice: since the debate on competitions is still open, the way architectural companies should work on competitions to maximize performance hasn't been systematically explored. In the second section we describe our research method and two practices, one in the UK and one in Italy, chosen as case studies. In the third section we present some preliminary results of our comparative case study analysis, underling the role competitions play in the business strategy and the way teams work on competitions.

FOR/AGAINST COMPETITION: A NEVER ENDING DEBATE

Mixed feelings towards competitions have always prevailed in the history (Banerjee Loukaitou Sideris 1990) from different point of views: architecture field, architects and clients. First, from the architecture field's point of view, the competition system is recognized as a catalyst for research and experimentation (Malmberg 2006), even if, being too slow and utopian, it fails to provide solutions to spatial problems (Knack 1990) and doesn't guarantee the best design in place (Nasar 1999). Secondly, from the architects' point of view, depending on the experience of the practice, architectural competitions serve different purposes. Well established practices use them to try to extend the range of the practice work or to introduce new clients, while young practices look at them as a launching-pad or a curios gamble (Larson 1994). In both cases competitions are a key strategy to build reputation (Jones and Livne-Tarandach 2008). The other side of the coin is that they ask for huge creative and financial resources (Larson 1994, Seidel 1990), to the point that for many architects it is not worthy taking part in them, also because the fruitful dialogue with the client is missing (Nasar 1999). Finally, looking at clients, they are in a privileged position as competitions give them the unique opportunity to choose not just an architect, but an architect and a design at the same time, selecting the best designer from a pool of almost all adequate aspirants and searching for superiority in design (Seidel 1990, Sudjic 2006).

However, despite controversies, competitions have always attracted and attract architects, even, or even more, in recessionary times and therefore it has to depend at least partially on something other than the economy (Larson 1994). Considering advantages and disadvantages of competitions, how and why competitions are part of architectural practices' business strategies?

MANAGING FOR COMPETITIONS: CHALLENGES FOR PRACTICES

If managing competitions is not a new research topic, managing for competitions is a relatively unexplored one. In 1990, Ollswang points out the need for an effective management of competitions but the focus is on the client/sponsor. This has always been in the past the area of studies of architecture and planning scholars when dealing with the competitions' management side. Alexander, Casper and Witzling (1987) analyse, through a survey on 51 competitions and in depth case studies, the impact of variables related to the organization, the programming and the evaluation of competitions onto the results of the competition itself. Similarly Seidel (1990) looks at

US design competitions between 1980 and 1985, while Eley (1990) at RIBA English competitions between 1976 and 1984. Shifting more towards competitions as a design method, instead of a procedural system, Banerjee Loukaitou Sideris (1990) investigates whether the competition is effective in achieving a product offering a better fit to the needs of user-clients and tries to focus on the interactions between clients and designers in the design process. However, despite the intention of conceptualizing competitions as a design method, the research ends up with contributions related to their role in the field. The literature in fact highlights that, even when trying to address competitions as design methods, scholars neglect the entrant/architecture practice's perspective.

On the contrary, this perspective has been addressed by management researchers, interested in architecture practice's management, but with no specific focus on one of the most important and peculiar rituals and ways to get work (Coxe *et al.* 1988, Mintzberg *et al.* 1988, Winch and Schneider 1993). From a strictly strategy and organization studies' point of view, the interest towards architectural competitions is therefore a recent but increasingly growing one. Management studies now look for effective strategies and organizational models to compete, trying to develop a missing conceptual theoretical model (Van Wezemael 2008). Van Wezemael suggests to look at the entire procedure of competitions as creative processes, where architectural and organizational processes are integrated and not independent (Stangvaaland 2008). From the architects/architectural practices' point of view, managing a competition implies understanding of how collaborative design works and how it can be made successful. The opportunity to improve the performance and value of a project is in fact greater during design stages (Kolltveit and Gronhaug 2004). According to Banerjee Loukaitou Sideris (1990: 127) "design methods are supposed to provide designers with tools that help achieve a better design outcome. However, we do not think that enough emphasis has been given to the link between the process and the product. Much more analysis and research is needed to develop a concrete understanding of what accounts for good or bad design". More recently, Ewenstein and Whyte (2007) explore aesthetic knowledge and knowing through a study of day-to-day work in an architectural British practice working on competitions. They are interested in understanding how aesthetic knowledge in architecture is generated, applied in design projects and shared and developed at the organization level. There is in fact an ongoing debate on organizational knowing and managing creativity in the organizations.

These are themes which can be studied with an experiential observation of how teams play in competitions. The 'shadow dance' played by architects (Kreiner 2007) is studied with the interest towards how architectural teams prepare design proposals in competitions. Recognizing the uncertainty of the process, there is the need to find "solid knowledge and information to direct their [teams'] design efforts". The ambition is to provide more effective strategies and architectural habits for competitions. Simulating architectural practices' management strategies on repeated competitions highlights that "the value of wins that are won by chance may systematically be related to competition strategies" (Kreiner 2009) and this opens new directions for research on competitive and team management strategies for competitions. What are the criteria to equip teams for competitions? How do teams work on competitions, in terms of social processes?

RESEARCH SETTING AND METHOD

Research setting: the architecture sector in the UK and Italy

National construction and architecture industries are "distinct milieus, because of the lack of social ties, common norms and ways of working" (Skaates *et al.* 2002: 601). This is true if we look at UK and Italy in point of sector's numbers. Before the crisis, according to CRESME (2008) the UK was the first European country for turnover (47,554 million Euros against 27,367 in Italy). The UK was also the second country for people employed in the sector (384,731 against 3,619 in Italy), even if in Italy there is the largest number of architects registered in the professional association (136,186 at the end of 2008 – 1 architect for every 470 inhabitants against 1 for 1,925 in the UK). Italy has also the largest number of operating units (253,377 against 58,724 in the UK) but the lowest average size of company (1.4 versus 6.6 in the UK). However, looking at the competition system, UK and Italy are similar, despite a different legislation. Different compared with Germany, the Netherlands and Spain, they both have a relatively short history of competitions which are still controversial but they both see an increase in the number of competitions. In the UK this is due to the fact that RIBA has moved away from the rigid rules and offers more choice and flexibility to clients. In Italy the reason is an increasing attention towards transparency and efficiency in the way projects are assigned, especially at the public level, where competitions are becoming the rule. On the contrary, the UK still does not operate a government-supported system where major projects are automatically put out to competition. Fewer competitions are held in the UK, as in Italy, than across Europe and most of them tend to be by invitation only. Therefore the UK shares with Italy the difficulty of unknown architect to make a name through competitions.

These characteristics give the opportunity to fruitfully compare companies' orientations and practices, in order also to highlight the manifestations and effects of culture in the industry. This is, in fact, according to recent research (Ankrah and Langford 2005) something which has yet to be fully understood.

Methods

We adopted an inductive case study method as an empirical basis (Yin 2009) and theory development (Van Maanen 1979). We build our study based on six comparative case studies. 3 practices are chosen in the UK and 3 in Italy, according to their size, participation to competitions and hierarchy of renown (Stevens 1998). Within the same country we look for similarities and differences among different companies in the same context, while across countries we look for differences in work practices and contextual influences among similar companies. Anyhow the fact that all the practices routinely work with international clients reduces the risk that our results reflect purely a local reality. The two cases presented here serve as pilot case study, assuming the role of a laboratory in detailing the research protocol (Yin 2009).

Data collection and analysis

We conducted semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with 5 people in each company. We followed a guideline consisting of open-ended questions in two categories: (1) the role of competitions in the company's business strategy – advantages and disadvantages of doing competitions and reasons for doing them; (2) team processes in competitions contexts – design competitions as social processes and management practices supporting the way of doing competitions. The interviews, ranging from 60 to 120 minutes in duration, were audio-taped and transcribed. Field notes were taken. At this stage of the research, questions still need to be refined and

further interviews to be conducted. Interviews are complemented with informal discussions, project materials, books, web materials and press releases. The raw data were written up accordance with the case study approach (Eisenhardt 1989).

Following we briefly highlight differences and similarities between the British and Italian architecture scene to set the context in which the two practices operate. Then we describe the two practices, whose names are protected at this stage of the research.

Company A: Architects and Designers

Company A was established thirty years ago in the UK, where it has several offices. Around 40 people are based in London, which is the main office. However the company has worked also in Europe, South America and Asia. It is an "experienced design-led practice with dynamic and creative teams of architects and interior designers", providing a comprehensive architectural design and consultancy service to a wide range of clients in retail based and mixed use development interventions. 70% of the work comes from repeat business. Hundreds projects have been completed in the following areas of expertise: architecture, interior design, masterplanning, historic building conservation, sustainable design advice, retail design coordination, consultancy, urban design, lighting design, graphic design, expert witnesses. The company is quality assured to ISO 9001, ISO 14001 Environmental Management. The mission is to "provide the highest quality professional design service to optimize existing and new business opportunities and strive to exceed our clients expectations in delivering creative and technically competent solutions". "Design", "Service", "People" and "Financial" are the four pillars. The management structure of the company is organized as follows: there is one managing directors, five directors, two project directors, three associate directors, the IT and Administration function and the project architects.

Company B: from one Designer to many Architects

Company B was officially established in 1987 in Milan (Italy) where it still has its headquarters designed by the founder himself in the early '90s. The practice employs around 30-35 people (30 of them are architects). In 1999, the practice obtained the ISO 9001 quality certification, which is owned by few Italian architectural practices. Even if the founder of the practice started as a designer at the beginning of the '60s, since the '80s he has been increasingly successful in the field of architecture in Europe, Japan, the United States, Australia and the Arab Emirates. Nowadays the company offers professional design services related to masterplanning, architecture, museums and exhibitions layouts. Company B works in a range spectrum of sectors such as museums, exhibitions and fairs, cultural centres, institutional and public buildings, hotels, shopping malls and residential buildings. The management structure of the company is organized as follows: the founder is still in the company as president; then there are a managing director and an operating director, seven project leaders, project teams made of up juniors and senior architects and some functions in staff for administration, IT, PR and Quality and Processes.

FINDINGS

Company A and Company B reveal similar patterns, despite their different national context, and highlight the increasing relevance of competitions as a strategic option for companies and the need for team and project management practices to increase the effectiveness in doing competitions.

Architectural competitions as a strategic option

In the case of Company A, which enters approximately 5 competitions per year, there is a limited but dedicated budget for competitions, which are seen as a PR tool, "as you have an annual budget you can spend on either PR or competitions", as one Associate Architect points out. Apart from financial reasons, however, "you couldn't keep doing competitions all time. It is healthy, but in small quantity, as it implies long hours, hard work and even frustration sometimes", as one Architect preferring commission based work explains. Doing competitions is not actually about making money. According to one Associate Architect, it is about "pushing our boundaries a little bit [...] being more creative, inventive and design oriented", even if, as a commercial company, "it is not in our mind to turn the table upside down. Other people do that". Moreover each competition is a "kind of playground, where you can have people experimenting their design capabilities" according to a Project Director. An Associate Architect complains about the fact that "when you are in a working environment, you don't have time, so you tend to do things just quicker, always in the same way", but luckily competitions let you periodically skip this logic for a short while. Based on these premises, there are two reasons why Company A enters competitions. The first one is doing an interesting project, probably unusual for the practice. Even if the company is specialized in the retail sector, doing a competition for a housing project, for example, is an occasion to "compete against architects who do housing [...] Even if we don't win we can make something off it [...] it is useful for the portfolio to prove we don't do just retail" (Associate Architect). This is usually the case of open competitions and smaller projects, which become an opportunity to diversify. The second reason has to deal with acquiring work, and this is usually the case of limited competitions, as it was for a big project under a framework agreement with a retail client. The client was looking for 'Store of the Future 2' and asked the 19 architects working for them already and with proven retail experience to submit ideas on a competition basis.

Compared to Company A, Company B acquires the major part of its works through competitions, entering 4 to 6 competitions per year and usually getting at least a prize. One of the seven Project Leaders in the firm explains that "there are few new works at the national level nowadays, and the major urban interventions, as they are public, are subjected to the competition procedure". Competitions are so relevant in the practice business, that there is a Project Leader who is in charge of selecting and managing all the competitions. Since a couple of years ago, the practice was doing ideas and project competitions, now it is shifting towards tenders with at least a budget of 20 million Euros. However notwithstanding most of the work comes from competitions, as the Communication and PR Manager observes, "B., the founder's of the practice, is not interested in enlarging the practice and getting work for the work's sake. This is the reason why he is so selective in choosing competitions as well". According to the Competitions Project Leader, competitions are used "to experiment ideas and explore new materials' opportunities and even if we lose the competitions, the project can be 'reused' in the future, nurturing other projects". Competitions are chosen depending on "the coherence of the brief with the practice profile, the seriousness and quality of the client, the jury and the brief, the transparency of the process" as a Project Leader observes. Company B doesn't design signature buildings. Being flexible in point of functions and sectors is something inherited from design. As a Project Leader points out, "we always look for a new dress depending on the situation. This is inconvenient from an economic point of view, compared to the approach of those who always use the same details". But it also broadens projects and sectors' opportunities.

Architectural competitions as a collaborative design process

In Company A all the people in the office can propose to enter a competition, but then the decision on the competition is taken by the Directors. The time to be spent on the competition is also decided by the top management. As one Associate Architect explains "the Directors know how much time to put into each competition because our time cost. If I work on a project for two weeks I cost X pounds. That is why they say three weeks, no more. This is your deadline and you stick with it no matter what". There is usually "a couple of weeks intensive work. You tend to work right down to the last minute" as one Architect says. The management levels also take decisions on the competition team. People can propose themselves, but most of the times, "since we are not tightly divided, it is a matter of who is available" explains a Project Director, even if they are some people in the company known for being creative and who are usually therefore picked up. But it is also a matter of experience, particular skills and freshness, as one Architect says: "If I worked on a similar project before, I might have some experience. And then, we need a person who just graduated with a lot of fresh ideas. We are never more than five, but it also depends on the size of the project". The best competition team in Company A is neither too technical, nor too creative. According to the architect specialized in renderings, "you have to have a mixture of people. You need to have people who are not afraid of design, but also people who are quite technical and tell you: "look this is too heavy, the structure won't support it. [...] The key issue is also not to have stubborn people who say this is my idea and I want to follow it". Once the team is equipped, going from the initial sketch to the final drawing is not a straight-line process. One Associate Architect explains the collaborative ideas generation process: "at the beginning, we have very initial ideas, just literally solving the problem [...] The first two weeks we do very sketchy ideas and we have a first rough meeting which is just about things you think about. Two weeks later, after a second meeting, you need to stop thinking and start modelling and you need a story. It is not only about the building, it is also about the story and process through which you arrive to the building". In each of the meetings we "put all the boards out. He [a Director or an Associate Director] knows what you are doing, but he intervenes less in doing the work. He oversees making sure you are not going completely tangent in one direction". For some projects, there is no need for formal meetings, as "we are pretty much all together in one room and we are literally brainstorming every time: you go to the director's desk and he comes to yours" (Architect). At the very end you have to sell your ideas through powerful images, "without exaggerating, otherwise the project looks like too complicated and expensive" (Renderings Architect). What is peculiar of Company A is that, coherently with being a 'listening practice', the full process and different options are always shown on the boards, even if it is a competition, trying to virtually re-propose a dialogue with the client.

Company B has a person devoted to scouting competitions, even if all the people in the company can find and propose a competition announcement. Once the brief has been read, the decision to enter a competition is taken by the Managing Director. The time spent on a competition, especially if it is not just an ideas competition, is the entire time available. The Competitions Project Leader points out that "differently from many other practices, we can even spend from one to two months on a competition. As soon as all the materials are downloadable from the client's website we start work on it". To equip the competition team, 3 to 4 people in the office are picked up. If the office is busy on commission based work, differently from some other practices who choose not to enter it, people from outside are temporarily hired to

work solely on the competition. From outside Company B usually hire either experienced professionals for specific technical competences or recent graduates who bring fresh ideas and energies. According to the new PR Manager, all the people in the practice are "teamwork oriented, committed to quality, but do not have individualist personalities who couldn't go on well with the founder". When a team starts working on a competition, despite the relevant role played by the founder, the first idea on a competition is the one of the Project Leader who reads the brief and maybe visits the site. According to the Competitions Project Leader "you tell the founder your idea, he replies and a dialectic process begins, lasting till the very end. [...] It is not really important who has the first idea. What is important are the process, the dialogue and the interactions. The founder has the role to shape and drive this process [...] What is peculiar here is that we do multiple trials. The project is like a sculpture, whose shape becomes clearer step by step". There is no repeatable method or process. As every project is different, every time the design process has to be different. There are some projects which remain faithful to the initial sketch, some other projects go into different trials to maybe go back at the end to the initial sketch. The founder puts a lot of himself in the projects, as the PR Manager observes. There is a continuous interaction with him over the competition time span. However "there are no formal meetings to which all project leaders take part. We have a more one to one interaction. When he is in, B. moves from a table to another. It is a ongoing brainstorming" (Project Leader).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The growing relevance of architectural competitions in recent decades, due also to changing regulations, asks for a managerial approach towards them. Few management scholars have studied the general management of architecture practices with no specific focus on competitions, while architects and urban planners, studying competitions, have always been interested more in the building than in the process.

A first contribution of this paper is the clarification of how architectural competitions are part of a deliberate or improvised architectural practice's business strategy. From our case studies, what emerges is that competitions serve both exploration and exploitation strategies (March 1991). In project based organizations pursuing unique solutions – as architecture – there is widely recognized tension between unity and variety of projects. This tension has been differently addressed in the past: Mintzberg and McHugh (1985) propose a temporal separation between exploitation and exploration (March 1991); Brady and Davies (2004) an organizational separation between vanguard projects and others. Competitions seem to be the setting where exploration and exploitation can be reconciled. Limited ones are the ideal settings to do exploitation of well consolidated competences and processes, while open ones serve to challenge with unusual businesses and prevent people getting trapped into routines. The exploitation approach suits in fact the analysis of alternatives and solution of structured problems, while exploration is a process of finding, framing and structuring problems (Holopainen 2010: 603). A second contribution is the identification of criteria and processes used by architecture teams working on competitions' proposals. Competitions emerge to be a highly collaborative and relational context where aesthetic knowledge is transferred and applied through reflexivity (Ewenstein and Whyte 2007). They ask for a multidisciplinary team in terms of competences and attitudes and requires a careful resources' planning. Designing a competition proposal requires a relevant relational and collaborative dimension (Yoo *et al.* 2006) and asks for a mix between different professionals

(Guzzo and Dickson 1996). It also needs a mixture between young and experienced members: graduates are less experienced but offer creativity and experimentation; experienced architects are instead more efficient (Ilgen *et al.* 2005). Managing time constraints and resources in an effective and efficient way is also critical to maximize competitions' results and minimize unpaid work.

Despite these preliminary observations, the research has no ambition to generalize results at this moment. The two cases serve as pilot case studies. Further research is needed to develop a theoretical framework for an effective team and project management of architectural competitions.

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