MANAGING THE PERFORMING PARADOX IN ARCHITECTURAL COMPETITIONS

Beatrice Manzoni[1], Peter Morris[2] and Hedley Smyth[2]

[1] Construction and Project Management, Bartlett School of Graduate Studies, UCL, 1-19 Torrington Place, London, WC1E 7HB, UK - Organisation and Human Resources Management Department, SDA Bocconi School of Management Via Bocconi 8, 20136 Milan, Italy

[2] Construction and Project Management, Bartlett School of Graduate Studies, UCL, 1-19 Torrington Place, London, WC1E 7HB, UK

In architecture competitions are fascinating. Over the years, they have increasingly become a popular mechanism for architects in acquiring work and clients in looking for designers. Still they are a debated topic presenting several controversial issues. In fact, competitions, as architecture in general, are a fertile ground for contradictions and management oxymora struggling among opposing forces, such as artistic recognition and market constraints, individual passion and collective collaboration, creative spark and discipline. These are actually examples of paradoxes that architects confront regularly. In organizational terms, a paradox is a set of contradictory yet interrelated elements, logical in isolation but irrational when juxtaposed. Paradoxical tensions exist simultaneously and persist over time with no resolution, therefore attending competing tensions is critical for architectural practices. Through an inductive qualitative case based research, this paper explores why a performing paradox exists within architectural competitions, what tensions are experienced and how they are managed.

Keywords: architecture, architectural competitions, paradoxes, performance, practice management.

INTRODUCTION

In architecture competitions are fascinating. Over the years, they have increasingly become a popular mechanism for architects in acquiring work and clients in looking for designers (e.g. Nasar, 1999). Still they are a debated topic presenting several controversial issues. In fact, competitions, as architecture in general, are a fertile ground for contradictions and management oxymora struggling among opposing forces, such as artistic recognition and market constraints, individual passion and collective collaboration, creative spark and discipline. These are actually examples of paradoxes that architects confront regularly, even if they have frequently been labelled in different ways e.g. contradictory forces (Blau, 1984), dialectics (Cuff, 1992), management oxymorons (Brown *et al.* 2010), but also dilemmas (Rönn, 2008;

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[1] beatrice.manzoni@ucl.ac.uk; beatrice.manzoni@unibocconi.it

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Kreiner, 2010) and potential conflictive interests (Volker, 2010) when looking specifically at competitions. This asks for additional research regarding the paradox meaning.

In organizational terms, a paradox is a set of contradictory yet interrelated elements, logical in isolation but irrational when juxtaposed. Paradoxical tensions exist simultaneously and persist over time with no resolution, therefore attending competing tensions is critical for architectural practices, as it is in many other creative industries e.g. design and consultancy (Andriopolous & Lewis, 2009, 2010), media (DeFillippi, 2009) and film industry (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1998). Moreover, creativity based contexts are an interesting research setting, as they reveal paradoxes and tensions of project organization (Sydow *et al.* 2004). Multiple tensions are in fact also experienced in projects (Brady & Maylor, 2010) especially while seeking to foster innovation and efficiency (Lewis *et al.* 2002).

Based on these premises, what paradoxical tensions are embedded within architectural competitions and firms competing? How are they experienced and managed by architects? Kreiner (2007) said that competitions are like 'horse riding': you cannot predict if a horse will win or not, but you can train the horse to win and at least you have to know how to train it. This paper focuses in particular on one type of paradox of architectural competitions - the performing one - together with its underlying tensions and possible management approaches to handling them.

The paper is structured as follows. First organisational paradox studies are reviewed to provide a theoretical lens to approach architectural competitions from a management point of view. Secondly the methodology is explained: an inductive qualitative multiple case based approach is used to explore how architects define competing strategies. Finally, case findings are presented, explaining what the performing paradox in competitions is and how architects confront competing demands.

A PARADOX LENS TO APPROACH ARCHITECTURAL COMPETITIONS

A "paradox denotes contradictory yet interrelated elements – elements that seem logical in isolation but absurd and irrational when appearing simultaneously [...] Researchers use paradox to describe conflicting demands, opposing perspectives or seemingly illogical findings" (Lewis, 2000: 760) at multiple levels (organisational, project, group, individual). Despite being the two sides of the same coin, opposing elements are rarely perceived by actors experiencing them as interrelated, as their conflicting nature is the one predominant and a resolution often typically implies a choice between one side or another.

According to existing research, the range of possible paradoxes happening in organisational life is so wide and varied, that starting with Lewis (2000) a framework was looked for to identify repeated patterns across studies. Paradoxes are "puzzle needing a solution" (Poole & Van de Ven, 1989: 563) and categorising them is a way to make order into multiple manifestations. The most recent contribution is the one proposed by Smith & Lewis (2011), mapping paradoxes of learning (e.g. old vs. new, radical vs. incremental change, episodic vs. continuous change), belonging (e.g. self expression vs. collective affiliation), organising (e.g. collaboration vs. competition, empowerment vs. direction, control vs. flexibility, routine vs. change) and performing (e.g. long vs. short term, financial vs. social goals). These paradoxes also refer to core

activities of an organisation (knowledge, identity and interpersonal relationships, processes, goals).

Once identified, "living with paradox is not comfortable or easy" (Handy, 1994: 13) and a fundamental current debate regards the management of paradoxical tensions. The fact that paradoxes should be better faced instead of avoided is unquestioned, as well as that paradoxes' potential should be exploited. Paradox can, in fact, be something extremely positive: tensions foster creativity and complex insights and trigger change, acting as brainteasers and challenging common logic and thinking (Handy, 1994), even if they also risk being the source of organizational paralysis (as it was in the case of Lego Company discussed by Luscher & Lewis, 2008). Paradoxes help to catch and explain the complexity, ambiguity and diversity of organizational life (Cameron & Quinn, 1988), sustain long-term performance (Cameron, 1986), through enabling learning and creativity, fostering flexibility and resilience and unleashing human potential (Smith & Lewis, 2011), foster organizational performance (Cameron & Lavine, 2006) and high performing groups (Murnighan & Conlon, 1991).

Recognising possible management approaches to them is therefore critical to exploit this positive potential. Effective management leverages paradox "in a creative way that captures both extremes" (Eisenhardt, 2000: 703). Existing research (e.g. Poole & Van de Ven, 1989; Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009) suggested two tactics in particular: integration, stressing interdependence between the opposites, and splitting, focusing on each pole separately (spatially or temporally).

RESEARCH APPROACH

An inductive qualitative research approach was adopted, based on the roadmap proposed by Eisenhardt (1989), consisting of conducting case studies, while simultaneously reflecting on constructs and theories found in the literature. Well conducted case studies are surprisingly objective because of their close adherence to reality (Yin, 2009) and their capability in producing accurate, interesting and testable theories (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). Moreover creative and professional services are a complex social setting where causal dynamics and actors' motivations are not immediately apparent and this makes the use of qualitative procedures appropriate and rewarding (Elsbach & Kramer, 2003). Case studies also enable more nuanced insights when dealing with paradox (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009, 2010).

Regarding data collection, the research involved in-depth case studies of two architectural practices (Table 1) based in London and approached relying on the Building Design (BD) top 100 list.

Table 1: Case study architectural practices

Firms	Description
Firm A	Established in 1972 in London, where 40 people are based. Working in Europe, South America and Asia. Well recognised in the UK and abroad. Hundreds of projects completed in architecture, interior design, master planning, historic building conservation, retail design, urban design. 17 significant awards won. Around 4-6 competitions done per year, mainly invited, but also open ones, playing a pivotal role day-by-day in acquiring new business.
Firm B	Established in London in 1989, with offices also in Bristol and Amsterdam. Working also in the US, in Africa and in the Emirates. Over 100 employees. Known for houses, schools, sports and exhibition buildings, healthcare facilities and art galleries. Several prizes won. 5 competitions per year on average, mainly invited but also open ones. A competition for a bus station at the end of the nineties played a pivotal role in the story of the practice.

The cases were selected based on their experience in competitions and firm characteristics. As suggested by Andriopoulos & Lewis (2009: 698) firms were sought based on "similarities that would aid comparisons and replication, yet with sufficient heterogeneity to help assess potential generalizability and [...] differing sizes and ages". Their willingness to participate also played a role, as architectural firms tend not to be very open about their strategies (Emmit, 1999; Volker, 2010). 'Archistars' have been explicitly avoided, resembling a biased way of approaching competitions, due to their glamorous reputation.

As suggested by Miles & Huberman (1984) for methods triangulation, several data sources were used: semi-structured interviews, archival data, observation and informal discussions. A total of 30 semi-structured, face-to-face interviews have been conducted with people involved in competitions (e.g. partners, architects, PR and marketing officers...). The interviews, ranging from 40 to 120 minutes in duration, were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim to ensure reliability. An interview protocol, made up of open ended questions, addressed the following aspects: the practice in general and the entire competition process (strategy, staffing, design process and execution). The interview protocol evolved systematically: the initial research aims was general and broad, as suggested by Glaser & Strauss (1967), but as data collection and data analysis proceeded, interviews became more focused. Interviews continued until theoretical saturation was reached (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Archival materials, observations, field notes and informal discussions were also useful to expand the understanding of each case context, reinforcing or questioning interviews' findings.

Regarding data analysis, the qualitative data of this study was processed through a method of cross-case comparative analysis (Eisenhardt, 1989), following Glaser & Strauss (1967) and Miles & Huberman (1994), broadly consisting in within-case analysis and cross-case comparisons. Systematic and iterative comparisons of data, emerging categories and extant literature concurred to the development of cohesive constructs.

THE PERFORMING PARADOX: WINNING THE JOB BUT PROTECTING THE CREATIVE ETHOS. WHAT ARE THE TENSIONS EXPERIENCED AND WHY?

Together with direct commissions competitions should be the way through which architectural practices acquire work. Yet it is much more complex, as competitions serve simultaneously both financial goals and creative ones: "being creative and exploring and exploiting one's creative skills are a major challenge for architect"

(Styhre & Gluck, 2009: 231). This is aligned with the debate between economic and symbolic performance, commercial success and artistic expression (Lampel *et al.* 2000) profit and breakthroughs emphasis (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009).

Financial goals means acquiring new work and clients. Competitions are a way to get work: "through competitions you get other jobs" (Architect Assistant, Firm A) to the point that competitions are entered "where there is an actual job at the end" (Head of Communications, Firm B). Doing competitions is also about establishing long-term relationships with clients. This was the case of a competition done in the early history of Firm B: "the client was important, and we hoped we could create a relationship and get some repeat job: we did something else with them again afterwards" (Architect, Firm B). Competitions serve also the purpose of diversifying and expanding the business, in point of services offered, sectors, clients' typology and geographic market: competitions "help you expanding your business and experience outside your traditional sectors and expertises" (Associate, Firm A) and prevent you from becoming specialised. "I think early on we wanted to get a range of projects and not get specialized. That's the point of winning a school competition, and then a health one. We knew this is the only way to make your practice expanding" (Architect, Firm B). It also happens that a competition "is in a country where we have never worked but we would like to. The Amsterdam project, our first one in Europe, was from a competition. We also opened an office there due to that" (Architect, Firm B).

Winning a competition is critical. "Everybody wants to win!" (Associate, Firm A), also because even when a competition reimbursement exist, it hardly covers the investments actually made for competing and winning the commission is the only way to fully get money back. However even within the same interviews, there are contradictory statements (this 'doublethink' is not infrequent in paradox studies and has also been studied by El Sawad *et al.* 2004). The fact that winning is not so important is a recurring statement in all the interviews. "It doesn't matter a lot if you win or not. We sometimes didn't win but we kept on doing competitions anyway" (Architect, Firm B). Therefore, many times competitions are done for reasons which are opposite to financial performance. It can be a matter if experimentation in design terms: "the reason why you do competitions from an architect point of view is not to win the competition, is to explore in design terms. That's the motivation [...] You can interpret the brief in different ways, you can explore new ideas, either you win or not" (Architect, Firm B). "We use competitions as an opportunity to progress, to find new things about design, to work with different people, work in different technologies. It can be all range of research" (Partner, Firm B).

Competitions fulfil also emotional individual needs and enhance employees' morale and satisfaction, people "feel better, feel the value, enjoy themselves, and you can't price that. There a lot of benefits" (Project Director, Firm A). Competitions keep architects fresh and energized (Andriopolous & Gotsi, 2005). "Say for instance that a partner is interested in a project and wants to try a design out. It happened to me that we worked on this competition we knew we were never going to win it. But the principal just did want to work on it and he was really excited. He basically spent a lot of time to challenge himself. It was an investment for the future" (Architect Assistant, Firm B). Really creative work is an exception in the day-to-day work which is characterised by collaborations with clients and end users, negotiations over time and budget and a lot of routine work (Sthyre & Gluck, 2009). This is recurring observations in case studies. An Associate from Firm A says that "you work on a project for some months and then if the chance happens to work on a competitions and

you do it, it forces you to do also more research than you normally do. With competitions you get into deep knowledge and you can propose everything that is new. And this is interesting". "What a competition does is giving the opportunity to get out of it for a short while doing a bit of design, presentation work, contribute to that process which is away from the usual work" (Director, Firm A). Doing a competition is, therefore, "always intellectually refreshing and challenging" (Architect, Firm B).

It is also a matter of building reputation and getting publicity: "even if we don't win it, you are still in the news [...] if it is a key competition it will be on architectural press" (Communications Coordinator, Firm B). "Architects use competitions as a way to get noticed as a practice (Architect, Firm A). "It is potentially good PR and marketing for the company" (Director, Firm A). Moreover, "even if we don't win we get some interesting work we can show and which might be slightly different from what we usually do (Project Director, Firm A). "If we didn't enter a competition, it would be a lost opportunity for getting a brand into a marketplace. It is important to enter a competition to make people recognize our name (Director, Firm A).

In some case through competitions practices join the local or even national and international architectural debate. Talking about a recent competition an Architect from Firm B says that "it was definitely the most interesting competition last year" and "also the other practices involved were large in terms of profile, scale of projects, buildings realized (Architect Assistant, Firm B). Moreover, "all big practices are made of people who want to be big at one point. The partners are interested in doing works they think are interesting. Of course profits matter, but what they are interested in is good design" (Architect Assistant, Firm B). For company A "the good aspects are that you get the opportunity to concentrate on the design. [...] Design is important and it attracts people's attention" (Project Director, Firm A).

Finally, it is also a learning opportunity both at an organisational and individual level. "In competitions you are looking for new ideas" (Architect, Firm A) and "we certainly learn new things we bring into the commission work" (Director, Firm A).

MANAGEMENT APPROACHES. HOW TO HANDLE WITH TENSIONS?

Acquiring jobs and therefore new clients is a different thing from exploring extreme creativity, being published and fulfilling emotional needs. "The nature of architectural work requires special management practices to handle the creative temperament within an organizational frame" (Brown *et al.* 2010: 540). Implications exist mainly at three levels within the office dealing with architectural competitions: strategy formulation, staffing, design execution. These three levels emerge from the data, being however close to the model proposed by Bayer & Gann (2006) regarding bidding strategies in project based professional service organisations (bidding policy, staffing, project acquisition, project execution and portfolio).

Strategy formulation: targeting restricted competitions to win the job, while going for open ones to protect the creative ethos
In both case studies, reconciling both goals into the same competition is difficult and firms tend to adopt a splitting tactic, assigning different competitions different goals. Invited and limited competitions are joined for financial purposes, while ideas and open ones for creative and reputational objectives. "There are two kinds of competitions. On the one side you have a site which gives the opportunity to do

something similar you did in the past and you basically copy what you have done before: you talk about all the different things, you describe everything really well and discuss all the elements in details. On the other side you try to make something completely new" (Architect Assistant, Firm B). This is confirmed by a Project Director in Firm A who says that "if it is a totally open competition you can get genuine innovation from new people. An invited competition usually implies that you go to people who can do the work, as they did the same kind of works before". This also explains why well-established practices, with almost no difficulty in accessing job opportunities coherent with their business, sometimes enter also more open competitions or call for ideas. Also Wheelwright & Clark (1992), in the product development domain, suggested project portfolios including projects that pay the bills and projects providing experimentation and keeping up the spirit; while Andriopoulos (2003) proposed to involve employees in diverse range of projects to support their passion and creativity, while at the same time achieving financial goals.

Staffing: exploiting established competencies and teams to win the job, while exploring new ones to protect the creative ethos
Across the cases, in staffing people on competitions there are two main issues. First, the tendency is to staff people based on time availability. A Project Director from Firm A says that "you pick people from where you can" (Architect, Firm A), while in company B the situation is similar: "it is just a matter of who is available" (Project Architect, Firm B). Availability is of course a reasonable criterion, but not the only one. Emmit (2010) suggested also to take into account the attitude towards the project to ensure project goals' compatibility; communication skills; compatibility to decrease the conflict risk; staff's costs, experience (even if a mix of experienced and less experienced is beneficial); emotional stability; motivation, personality; qualifications; skills and values. Both cases state that to win a competition, "the best way would be to assign people purely responsible for competitions" (Architect, Firm A). This is the reason why, for example, firm A tend to have "a selected group of people doing more or less all the competitions" (Associate, Firm A). Building knowledge takes time, while re-use knowledge already present in the team because of past competitions is easier and more efficient. Old combinations of members are also familiar and routinised and can speed up task execution, while new combinations offer novel prospects for creativity, together with higher internal and market risks (Chen, 2005). When competitions are done for building reputation or fulfilling emotional needs, both firms take passion and values into account, accepting people proposing themselves, notwithstanding specific competencies. "You might have people coming and asking to take part or you as a director decide the team" (Architect, Firm B). "It is up to individuals: you might have some people who like to find their own field of work, while some others want to always try something new. (Project Architect, Firm B). Firm A is also open to people who "just finished university as they are very fresh with ideas (Associate, Firm A).

Design execution: implementing the brief and fulfil client's demands to win the job, while challenging it to protect the creative ethos
To win a competition clients' demands need to be fulfilled. However the design team always tries to propose something different. In fact "much of the work of architects is expressed in discourse around the brief, drawing on the particulars of the professional identity to negotiate the always indexical conceptualization of the building as a complex project, to present to the world something that embodies their professional ambitions - sometimes despite the client's brief" (Brown *et al.* 2010: 542). An

Architect Assistant in Firm B says that it is also "sort of interesting that architects, even having read the brief and understood what the client is asking, run off and do something else". It is well known in the history, for example, what Louis Sullivan said to a lady who had come in for a colonial house, 'you will take what we give you'. A Project Director in Firm A says they are 'listening architects', however in a competition the dialogue between the architect and the client is missing "and that is the real dilemma [...] It is not like a monologue but it is not a conversation as well" (Project Director, Firm A). In addition to that, "some clients don't know what they want until they see it " (Project Director, Firm A) and this implies the architect has to guess what the client wants and to find a balance between following the brief and challenging it. It is always "about starting from our understanding of the brief, of the client, of the site, of the uses, of the complexity of the program. And then about our response to all of these elements: how we established the building taking into account the constraints, the requirements, the brief, the client" (Project Architect, Firm B). However the way the brief and the design solution is approached is partially different depending on the realistic goal the practice has in mind. If the ambition is winning the commission, "meeting the brief should be the biggest concern [...] this was our initial starting point, but actually it should have been probably creating something eye catching, dramatic and unusual. The brief was very pragmatic. Ultimately they chose the building which was less compliant with the brief and more experimental and more landmark building in the end" (Architect, Firm B, talking about a university building project). In their study upon a Scandinavian architectural practice Styhre & Gluck (2009) also pointed out that especially younger architects complain about the fact that in competitions the focus is too much on actually winning the competition rather than stretching the boundaries for what could be done. Rather than following the programme for example architects should try to reformulate and reinterpret it before engaging into architectural solutions, being "open to be challenged by a brief or a site" (Architect Assistant, Firm B). An integration tactic could also lead to read the brief carefully and transform it into clear guidelines to set the boundaries of the proposal, but being more creative into the concept development phase, challenging some, but not all, the brief's statements.

CONCLUSIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This paper discussed the performing paradox experienced by architects in competitions, when they are divided between winning the job and fostering and preserving the creative ethos. The ability to understand paradox is not only a research skill but also a critical managerial one (Handy, 1994). Exploring paradox facilitate the understanding of inconsistencies and contradictions of the competitions' dynamic context, as also Eisenhardt (2000) noted. Moreover understanding opposing tensions is the first step to manage them.

The performing paradox addressed in this paper presents managerial implications with regards to strategy formulation, resource allocation and staffing, design concept and execution. These implications translate into management approaches to paradox: mostly splitting tactics are adopted by the two British firms, even if a 'balancing act' searching for more integration could be suggested and explored in future research. In sum:

- Selectively address different types of competitions (open, restricted…), depending on the strategic objective (winning the commission, satisfying

employees, pure creative exploration and internal R&D). Avoid addressing a competition with a multi-fold goal.
- Resist the temptation of staffing people solely depending on time availability and exploit existing competences and teams when winning the job is a priority, while exploring new ones when it is more about 'fulfilling emotional needs'.
- Agree to the compromise of what the client asks for when getting the job is a the key point, while risk in affirming the practice's identity, even notwithstanding the brief, when the goal is creativity and people's motivation.

Future research could first explore other categories of paradox (learning, belonging, organising), underlying related tensions and management approaches; secondly extend the comparisons to other case studies; finally explore if and how nested tensions and their management vary in firms with different degrees of project management practices or different success rate in competitions, understanding the impact of project management on competitions' management.

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