

SHAPING THE CITY

For Architecture, A Little Competition Can Go a Long Way

By Roger K. Lewis

An increasingly significant debate among architects and their clients—developers, corporations, institutions, government agencies—is being staged about design competitions. And the debate is intensifying because more design competitions are being conducted today than ever before.

Why the debate? What makes a design competition a good or bad idea?

The fundamental rationale favoring design competitions is implied succinctly in the title of an exhibition opening next Saturday at the National Building Museum—"The Experimental Tradition: Twenty-Five Years of American Architecture Competitions, 1960-1985." The day before the opening, a symposium, "Design by Competition," will formalize the debate by exploring the pros and cons of design competitions.

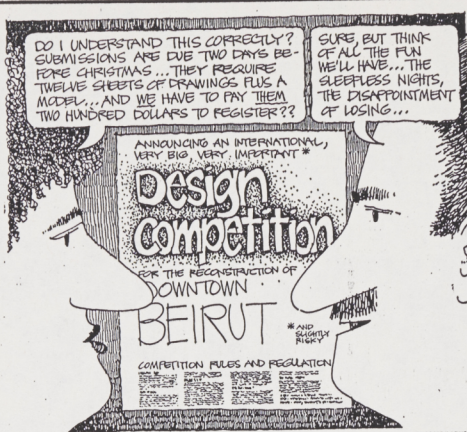
The key word in the exhibition title is "experimental." Design competitions provide a multitude of designers the opportunity to experiment esthetically, to invent and try out ideas that might never emerge when performing conventional design services. Moreover, design competitions permit undiscovered, untested designers to flex their muscles while taking a crack at hitting it big. And national or international competitions can attract a field of talent and diversity of perspectives that otherwise would never be forthcoming.

Through a design competition, a project sponsor can select an architect—and one hopes a buildable design—based exclusively on the quality and originality of design concepts submitted by competing architects when the competition sponsor has never met. In some cases, competitions are organized by federal, state or local governments to select a developer, as well as an architect and a design, for an important project.

Open competitions allow anyone who meets the minimum qualifications stipulated by the competition sponsor to submit a design entry. By contrast, "invited" competitions are limited to those architects or development teams selected in advance to submit proposals, for which they may be paid a fee to cover part—but never all—of their costs.

Competition sponsors typically retain a professional adviser and designate a panel of judges—the jury—to evaluate design entries and select winners. Such juries usually include recognized design professionals and critics along with representatives of the sponsoring organization.

In the United States, the number of design



competitions traditionally has been infinitesimal in comparison with the number of structures that are designed and built. Not only are privately sponsored projects rarely subjects of design competitions, but civic projects as well.

This practice contrasts sharply with traditions in other countries—France, Germany, Japan, Scandinavia—where design competitions are commonly used to select architects, especially for major public buildings. A notable exception occurred a few years ago when the French government, rather than conducting a national competition, broke with tradition and selected American architect I.M. Pei to design the new Louvre Museum in Paris.

Most of the time, a client selects and hires a single architect—after interviewing and reviewing the experience and qualifications of several architects—before serious design work is undertaken. Thus architectural firms depend almost exclusively on their reputations and track records, personal and business contacts, referrals and existing client base for obtaining new design commissions.

That most architects prefer to compete on the basis of past achievements rather than the merits of a hypothetical, future design is understandable,

Indeed, it is this custom that is most threatened by the proliferation of design competitions, especially open ones in which there is one winner, a few runners-up and a host of losers who receive no remuneration at all.

Competing for clients and commissions through open design competitions requires enormous investments of time and money, all fully at risk. And the odds of winning are relatively small, since well-organized and publicized competitions can attract dozens, if not hundreds, of competitors.

In addition to having time and money at stake, architects complain about competition procedures. Registration fees—why should I pay to work for nothing?—are normally assessed, deadlines for submitting designs can be unrealistic or inconveniently scheduled and submission requirements—the number, type and content of design drawings and models—can be extensive and onerous.

Architects further note that design competitions effectively exclude clients and project users from participating actively in the critically important conceptual design phase. Competition designs, they argue, are generated aloofly by architects in a utopian vacuum.

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And many architects love to condemn design competition juries, which often have their own esthetic agenda, independent of the client's and the client's need to realize project needs and constraints. Too frequently, architects say, juries choose a winning scheme that, while imaginative, exciting and graphically interesting, may be functionally impractical, not economical and even technically unbuildable.

Still worse, some competitions are seen by architects as exploitative. They cite instances when it seemed that a competition sponsor was simply fishing for free ideas, having neither the intention nor the resources to sign a design contract or build the winning design. Such competitions are viewed primarily as a tactic for gaining publicity or raising money at the expense of gullible architects investing thousands of hours and dollars.

For these and other reasons, many architects and architectural firms—perhaps a sizable majority—will not even consider entering open design competitions. Disinclined to risk their time and money, they may have neither to risk. And some question the design competition philosophy in general.

Not surprisingly, the majority of

competition participants consist of small, newly established firms, junior faculty members at architectural schools, recent graduates and even students. Typically only a few established design firms, sometimes headed by award-winning, much-published, academically oriented architects, are able to find the time and resources to participate energetically in open design competitions.

For most low-profile projects limited by budgets and calendars, design competitions are inappropriate and impractical—they take too much time and cost the sponsor too much money to administer, even without paying competitors.

But many projects in the public

domain seem well suited to the design competition process. These include civic monuments, memorials, significant cultural and educational buildings, important governmental buildings—capitals, city halls, departmental headquarters—and public parks and plazas.

However, such competitions should not force designers to sacrifice life and limb. After setting forth clear, succinct program requirements and providing only necessary data, sponsors should ask for basic design concepts rather than detailed, elaborately developed documentation—which should be paid for.

The upcoming exhibition at the Building Museum certainly suggests that design competitions can be pro-

vocative and fruitful. Projects shown include the Boston City Hall, 1962; the Yale Mathematics Building, 1970; New York's Roosevelt Island housing, 1975; the National Vietnam Veterans Memorial, 1981; the New Orleans Museum of Art, 1983; and the Ciof Pegase Winery, 1985, in Napa Valley, California. The most notable unbuild project is the Roosevelt Memorial, 1960, in Washington.

Design competitions will never please everyone. But they do bring much-needed attention to, and discussion of, architecture.

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