

Handbook of
Architectural
Design Competitions

Preface

Design competitions have been a subject of interest to members of The American Institute of Architects since its founding. In 1870 the AIA issued its first "Schedule of Terms" regulating the conduct of architectural competitions. Over the years a series of documents was developed to promote fair conduct on the part of all competition participants. Like other methods of architect selection and design exploration, architectural competitions must be managed carefully and judiciously. Therefore, the Institute advises that any sponsor undertaking a competition inform itself thoroughly about the detailed procedures, methods and techniques involved. Well-run design competitions require:

- a conscientious sponsor,
- a competent professional adviser,
- a thorough and carefully written program,
- complete graphic and other illustrative material,
- fair and precise competition rules,
- clearly stated submission requirements,
- a realistic schedule,
- a qualified jury,
- appropriate prizes,
- arrangements for publicizing the winning design.

The Institute's participation in competitions is advisory and informational. Decisions regarding the appropriateness of the competition method or of a particular type of competition for a specific building project must be made by the sponsor after careful analysis.

This handbook has been produced for sponsors, architects and others interested in learning about the proper procedures for running an architectural design competition. "The Competition Method" provides a brief overview of the design competition system of architect selection. It discusses the types of competitions that can be held, the design "dialogue" they stimulate

and the conditions which make a design competition appropriate or inappropriate for a specific project. The next four sections describe in detail the roles and responsibilities of the competition sponsor, the professional adviser, jurors and competitors. "The Competition Program" recapitulates many of the themes developed earlier in the handbook while offering a step-by-step guide for the preparation of a sound and thorough competition program. The time planning and cost estimating guides are included as aids to competition sponsors and professional advisers. Finally, a brief bibliography has been included for the student or professional who wants to learn more about architectural competitions.

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The Competition Method

A Method of Selection

An architectural design competition is one method of finding a design of quality. It generates a broad search for the best solution to a particular building opportunity. The architects who compete for a prize or commission each try to develop a design that answers the program requirements of the client/sponsor. A properly run competition requires that the architect-competitors:

- receive a program prepared by a competent professional adviser,
- work under fair and equitable rules,
- have their submissions evaluated, solely on the merits of their designs, by a qualified jury.

Like other methods of architect selection, design competitions must be managed carefully and judiciously, in this case by a professional adviser. With the assistance of such an adviser, a competition sponsor should inform itself thoroughly about the detailed procedures, methods and techniques involved in holding a competition.

Appropriate Conditions

Design competitions can be used for a wide array of design opportunities: houses, office buildings, parks, squares, libraries, schools, apartments for the elderly, etc. It is the sponsor who must determine if it is in a project's best interests to hold a competition. The following guidelines outline the criteria to be examined in determining when a competition is appropriate:

- The project requires a wide degree of design exploration.
- The project is on an important or unusual site. It may be located in an historical area, or the site itself may be unusual in location, terrain, vegetation or visual impact.
- The project features a type of structure that deserves a fresh examination by the design community.
- The project will have a great and

beneficial influence on subsequent design work.

- The project will benefit from the additional public interest a competition may generate.

In summary, the project considered most appropriate for a competition is one that is best served by addressing the problem to a wide range of talent that will submit a broad array of design concepts for evaluation by recognized experts.

Inappropriate Conditions

Projects are inappropriate for competitions when any of the following conditions exist:

- *Projects the client wants built on a very short schedule* are poor candidates for competitions, since there may not be adequate time to plan, organize, manage and judge a competition under these circumstances.
- *Projects for which a sponsor is unwilling to establish a qualified jury* should not be undertaken as competitions.
- *Projects for which an adequate development budget is not available* will not be successful. The additional expense of holding a competition is a modest one relative to total project costs, but adequate initial funding is essential.
- *Projects that are insufficiently financed*, but for which a sponsor hopes that a design chosen in competition will either help raise the funds or generate sufficient interest to make eventual construction possible, tend to squander the competitors' design efforts while raising false hopes regarding a project's realization. Design competitions should not be used as fund-raising events.

- *Projects for which sponsors do not offer sufficient prizes solicit design advice without providing proper remuneration. If a sponsor cannot afford adequate prizes, it is not in a position to hold a competition.*
- *Projects lacking adequate professional advice result in poorly run competitions that benefit neither sponsor nor competitors.*
- *Projects without a sound and adequately developed program do not sufficiently inform the competitors. A design competition should not be held to search for programmatic needs, but rather to discover different ways of addressing such needs.*
- *Projects that do not guarantee fair and equitable treatment for all competitors violate a central principle of design competitions.*

A Variety of Projects

Competitions have produced projects of all types in the United States, including:

- Grand Central Station, New York, N.Y.;
- Board of Trade Building, Kansas City, Mo.;
- City Hall, Boston, Mass.;
- Jefferson National Expansion Memorial, St. Louis, Mo.;
- College of Architecture and Planning, Ball State University, Muncie, Ind.;
- Art Museum, Charleston, S.C.;
- Tribune Tower, Chicago, Ill.;
- Housing for the Elderly, Trenton, N.J.;
- Civic Center, Los Gatos, Calif.;

- State Capitol, Lincoln, Neb.;
- Plan for Washington University, St. Louis, Mo.;
- University of California Arts Center, Berkeley, Calif.;
- Police and Courts Building, Jacksonville, Fla.;
- Copley Square, Boston, Mass.;
- Washington Monument, Washington, D.C.;
- Branigan Memorial Library, Las Cruces, N.M.;
- Central Park, New York, N.Y.;
- Birmingham-Jefferson Civic Center, Birmingham, Ala.

Competitions

The competition process is readily adaptable. It can generate a wide array of solutions to a variety of design problems. Competition formats can be modified to accommodate most project requirements. Indeed, each competition must be designed to suit a particular set of circumstances.

The first question to be addressed is what the competition is for. The basic division is between competitions for projects that are to be built, undoubtedly the most useful type, and competitions for exploring design ideas.

Project Competitions lead directly to the erection of specific projects on definite sites. The sponsor's goal in holding such a competition is to:

- *select a design solution* for the project that is judged the best of the competition. With that, the sponsor will also
- *select an architect* who will be commissioned to develop the design and realize the project.

Idea Competitions are held for projects that are not intended to be built. They are useful as explorations of significant design issues, but are limited insofar as they stop short of realization. Nevertheless, idea competitions can stimulate interest in untried possibilities in such

areas as memorials, symbolic architecture, city planning and urban design. The subjects for idea competitions should be carefully chosen. Designers are likely to be wary of entering idea competitions that promote or advance a narrow interest, that fail to benefit either the public or the profession, or whose benefits are limited because the ideas cannot be applied or realized.

A second question to be examined is eligibility; that is, who is qualified to enter a particular competition.

Open Competitions are addressed to the entire national or international architectural community. They may be entered by any licensed architect. Usually, open competitions permit entries from architectural designers, students or other design professionals, provided they associate themselves with an architect. The purpose of such an association is to assure a sponsor that the design concept being offered in a project competition has come from an experienced professional and can be realized, should it be selected. Idea competitions and some project competitions are even more "open." They permit students, associates and professionals in various design fields to enter their submissions directly.

Open competitions are appropriate under the following circumstances:

- The nature of the project suggests that all architects have an equal opportunity to be selected on the basis of design merit.

- The project requires the widest exploration of potential solutions made possible by an open competition.

Limited Competitions restrict the submission of entries to a specific set of architects, such as those who reside within a specified area, are licensed to practice within a particular state or who satisfy other conditional requirements.

Budget restrictions, a desire to make use of local talent, an awareness of and sensitivity to local or regional styles and concerns or a small-scale project that requires a site inspection may all suggest the holding of a design competition limited to those architects living in a specified area.

Invited Competitions are appropriately used by sponsors who want to address their design needs to a small number of firms—frequently six or eight—whose work is of interest to them. The competing firms are paid a fee adequate to cover the costs of their work. In effect, invited competitions "commission" the preparation of several design concepts. Through the recommendation of a qualified jury, the sponsor can then choose the most appropriate design for its building project. Invited competitions also enable the competing firms to develop their designs to a greater degree of detail.

Student Competitions limit the submission of entries to those who are enrolled in a school of architecture. Winners may earn a special prize, such as a scholarship, fellowship or travel award.

A third important question is the phasing of competitions, the steps and time sequences that are employed.

One-Stage Competitions select a winner and rank other prize winning designs in a single sequence. The majority of design competitions are held in one stage, since the requirements of a single-stage submission can be reduced or expanded in relation to the complexity of a project. For idea competitions and real projects of moderate size, a single design phase is usually sufficient as a test of the competitors' designs.

Two-Stage Competitions afford competitors a chance to develop further their initial designs. Those architects who are invited to participate in a second stage receive compensation both as a reward for their work in the first stage and as a means of paying for costs incurred in developing their more detailed second stage entries. The advantages of holding a two-stage competition are summarized as follows:

- It reduces the amount of work required in the original first-stage submission, thus attracting more entries.
- It is an excellent process for selecting promising concepts in the first stage that can be further developed in the second.
- It provides the opportunity for comments by the sponsor and jury before the start of the second stage so that suggestions can be transmitted to the competitors before they refine their designs.
- It permits a further level of judgment on the part of the jury, since in the first stage, only concepts are sought, while in the second, the detailed development of these concepts can be rigorously examined.

Two-stage competitions are appropriate for complex building projects. They encourage architects to undertake a broad exploration for general

design concepts in the first stage, while requiring detailed design elaboration in the second.

In the evolution of the competition tradition, formats have been established for a variety of highly specialized projects.

Product Competitions are sponsored by manufacturers interested in the promotion of particular types or brands of building materials. Designers may be reluctant to enter such competitions because they are frequently of more benefit to the manufacturer than the participants. As a result, manufacturers might give careful thought to serving the public concern (and through it their own interests) by sponsoring competitions for subjects of significant public concern rather than holding narrowly defined product competitions.

Prototype Competitions may be sponsored by corporations interested in the prefabrication of various kinds of structures. Architects may be wary of entering prototype competitions unless the prize winning designers are appropriately rewarded and their copyrighted or patented features adequately protected.

Developer/Architect Competitions include design as one of the factors deserving consideration by a public agency in choosing a development scheme, often at a guaranteed price, for a particular parcel of land. Such competitions may be appropriate to the extent that the design aspects of the competition are fairly managed and judged, with all other aspects of selection kept independent.

Combinations of Types

In designing an architectural competition, various procedural combinations are possible. One sponsor will decide to hold an open one-stage idea competition while another may announce an invited two-stage competition for a real project. The approach a particular competition takes will be dictated by the sponsor's perception of what is likely to be most beneficial in a specific context.

Communications Between Sponsor and Designers

An architectural design competition establishes a highly structured dialogue between designers and sponsor. Through the employment of a professional adviser and an expert and objective jury, competitions add several dimensions to the conventional client/architect relationship by structuring communications:

- between the sponsor and a professional adviser,
- between the sponsor and the design community through the competition program,
- between the competitors and the professional adviser during a question-and-answer period,
- between the competitors and the jury examining their designs,
- between the sponsor and the winner commissioned to develop a design.

In an architectural competition, communication between the sponsor and competitors requires a high degree of discipline and a systematic presentation of information. The client/architect dialogue is not eliminated in competitions. On the contrary, it takes place in a structured and systematic way. As a result, when the sponsor and a competition winning architect begin their person-to-person exchange, it can take place at an advanced level.

The Competition Sponsor

Role of the Sponsor

The role of the sponsor is crucial to the success of a design competition. To make use of the reservoir of talent and energy within the architectural profession, a design competition requires the following components:

- a conscientious sponsor,
- an able professional adviser,
- a clear and professionally prepared program,
- a qualified jury.

Of these four key ingredients, only a conscientious sponsor has the opportunity and the obligation to assure the other three. No competition can take place until the sponsor provides the project, the organization and the financial resources to make it possible.

The sponsor's decisions will, to a large extent, determine the success or failure of the competition process. If it is to advance a particular building opportunity, a design competition must be governed by an impartial and carefully developed set of procedures. Poorly run competitions create difficulties that can undermine an entire project.

When a sponsor holds an architectural design competition, it obligates itself to running the competition in accordance with the procedures set forth in the competition program. Prize money, fees and honoraria must all be paid as promised. The contract for architectural services must be awarded in accordance with the competition rules. The sponsor is also responsible for the accuracy of the statements it makes about the competition project. In return, the sponsor should expect all other participants—professional adviser, jurors and competitors—to honor the rules and perform to the best of their abilities.

Cost

The amount of cost, time and effort involved in holding a design competition depends on the complexity of the architectural problem and the

extent of participation which the sponsor wishes to encourage. A limited competition for a small library might be run in a few months with a modest amount of funding, while an open two-stage competition that attracts hundreds of entries for a complex subject, such as a major public building, might involve a yearlong timetable and a significant investment. The cost generated by any particular format should be analyzed, for the expenses involved in each will be different.

According to the International Union of Architects (UIA), open international architectural design competitions may range from .5 to 2 percent of the total cost of a project. Generally, the larger the project, the smaller will be the percentage of cost for holding a competition. A range of costs for architectural competitions may be gauged from the information below. The list indicates that competitions can be held for rather modest investments. All but one of the following competitions were held for less than 1 percent of the project budget:

- The Johns Manville (invited) Competition, Colorado (1972-73), cost its sponsors \$186,000 or .7 percent of the construction budget of \$24,600,000.
- The Rainbow Plaza (open) Competition for Niagara Falls, New York (1972), cost its sponsors \$76,000, or 1.9 percent of the budget of \$4,000,000.
- The Osaka United States Information Agency (invited) Competition (1967) cost its sponsors \$11,000, or .22 percent of its budget of \$5,000,000.
- The Birmingham-Jefferson Civic Center (open) Competition (1966-67) cost its sponsors \$80,530, or .146 percent of its budget of \$55,000,000.

- The Boston City Hall (open Competition (1961-62) cost \$60,000, or .20 percent of its budget of \$30,000,000.

Source: Paul D. Spreiregen, **Design Competitions**. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979, p.222.

The costs of a competition can be divided as follows:

- the fees and expenses of the professional adviser and jurors,
- the prize money awarded to the winning designers,
- managerial and administrative expenses, including advertising, printing, mailing, photography, handling, insurance, storage and meeting space rental, exhibit of entries and press information.

There is, of course, considerable variation in cost distribution. Limited competitions may have a higher percentage of funds devoted to prize money, while most open competitions will incur higher administrative expenses. In general, the amount of prize money should be sufficient to attract competitors. It should also be reflective of the amount of effort and expense required of those who enter. Competitions with extensive submission requirements should offer larger prizes. The specific level of each cash prize should be set by the sponsor after conferring with its professional adviser.

Benefits to the Sponsor

Although they require considerable planning, architectural design competitions offer a number of major benefits to their sponsors, including:

- a means of attaining an outstanding design by stimulating a range of exploration within the profession on the sponsor's behalf,
- sound and experienced judgment and advice from the jury evaluating the different submissions,
- the instructive discipline of having to prepare a comprehensive and realistic building program,

- public attention for the sponsor and project.

A competition places the sponsor's design problem before a large segment of the architectural profession. With many competitors submitting designs in a typical open competition, the sponsor benefits from a wide search for the best solution. Even in smaller competitions, the sponsor has the advantage of finding the most appropriate design.

A partial listing of competitions held in North America since 1958 indicates the profession's continuing interest in entering.

To commission an equivalent number of preliminary designs for any of these projects would obviously have been prohibitive.

In addition to stimulating a search for an innovative design, competitions elicit a great amount of public attention, not only for the winning architect, but also for the sponsoring organization. Contests of all kind stimulate public interest, and architectural design competitions are no exception. The competition announcement, the deadline for receipt of submissions, the decision by a jury, the awarding of prize money and the opening of an exhibit all of interest to more than the profession. Each of these events offers the sponsor an opportunity to inform the public about its goals and activities as well as its search for good design.

Limited Competitions:

	Number of Design Entries
Elderly Housing, Trenton, New Jersey, 1975	27
Old Age Housing, Utica, New York, 1973	63
College of Architecture and Planning, Ball State University, Muncie, Indiana, 1967	40
Civic Center, Los Gatos, California, 1963	81

National Open Competitions:

Rainbow Plaza, Niagara Falls, New York, 1972	292
Birmingham-Jefferson Civic Center, Birmingham, Alabama, 1967	277
City Hall, Boston, Massachusetts, 1962	256
Copley Square, Boston, Massachusetts, 1960	190

International Open Competitions:

Pan American Health Organization, Washington, D.C., 1961	100
City Hall, Toronto, Ontario, 1958	525

Source: Paul D. Spreiregen, **Design Competitions**. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979, pp. 10, 83-84.