

“Crossing Boundaries: International Design Competitions—Instruments of communication and (ex)change”

Moderator:
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INTRODUCTION

They are the quintessential rhetorical devices of our discipline, producing work at once eloquent and mute, visual texts of seduction and persuasion. They are touchstones that celebrate our professional and academic discourse – even as they precipitate paradigm-shattering change. At once collective (and individual) embodiments of disciplinary values, international design competitions are unique vehicles for cross-cultural communication. Speaking to an increasingly global professional practice, they explode traditional notions of context, effectively removing projects from specificity of site, tradition, and local culture, while focusing discussion on the larger narratives of the discipline. And in the inevitable compromises of jury, selection, development, and construction, they force a (sometimes imperfect) reconciliation between visionary proposals and the particularities of place.

The mechanism is admittedly (some would say indelibly) flawed: It does not lend itself equally well to all building types, nor does it serve all client types well. Yet despite myriad shortcomings, at its outset and best the architectural competition provides the architect with a heady moment of pure, unadulterated freedom: it is a uniquely autonomous design experience. In the body of a project proposal, it provides an unequalled opportunity for the clear exposition of theoretical and formal frameworks. Accordingly, competitions demand a rigorous, compelling clarity and economy of expression. To achieve it, they often push the limits of the representational tools at the disposal of the discipline, mining and expanding their iterative potential.

PANELISTS:

BERNARD TSCHUMI
Bernard Tschumi Architects and Columbia University

STANFORD ANDERSON
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

MERRILL ELAM
Mack Scogin and Merrill Elam Architects

BERNARDO FORT-BRESCIA
Arquitectonica

MARK ROBBINS
Harvard Graduate School of Design

At their idealized best, competitions are anonymous, open, evaluated by prescient juries of visionary peers and farsighted, courageous client/owners. That anonymity has enabled competitions to become invaluable instruments of re-calibration and discovery: Here, professional work that operates on the margins of an acknowledged disciplinary center (theoretical, formal, geographic, political) might gain legitimate voice and equality of footing. Here, it might rise to prominence on a larger/global stage. Indeed, by virtue of their visual formats and highly public nature, competitions generate thematically focused exhibitions of architectural ideas: Presenting the resolution of a specific problem through a range of lenses, they gather, compare, and contrast the broad range of disciplinary discourses simultaneously at work around the globe.

In the wake of September 11, 2001, the World Trade Center site has focused global attention on design competitions –

casting them as engagements in multiple advocacy, as processes at once artistic and intensely political. But in the past half-century, La Villette, the Vietnam Memorial, the Hong Kong Peak, the Pompidou Center, and the Sydney Opera House (among many others) – have each challenged the way we think about our world and our work. At times, projects that fail to win awards advance the discourse most: The Chicago Tribune Competition is but one of many such ‘archipelagos’. And for countless reasons, many extraordinary, award-winning proposals are never built. As a result, the mechanisms that record and interpret these unrealized works become invaluable ingredients in understanding the role of design competitions in the development of our disciplinary discourse.

In this session, a distinguished panel analyzes and frames the role of design competitions in the discipline and profession of architecture.