

Why You Didn't Win and Why That's Alright: A Report from the Frontline

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Architectural design competitions do not necessarily result in projects that are admired by our society at large. This circumstance is unsurprising to most designers. *Why are winning competition entries often misunderstood by the general public? Why did I lose?* Certainly, many designers have privately and publically pondered such questions at some time during their career. As coordinators of the d3 Natural Systems international architectural design competition, we have a deep knowledge base of the inner dynamics of the competition, and can expound on many of the misconceptions participants may have.

When determining whether or not to enter a competition one must first contemplate a series of important questions before committing. Some of these concerns are based on compensation, including: *What's the prize? Who will I be competing against? Is it worth spending my time and money? Will the winning entry actually be built?* Others may be related to the nature of the competition itself such as: *Is the call limited to professionals and/or students? Is there an age limitation?* While more specific parameters may include imposed eligibility requirements such as: *Are entrants solely by-invitation? Is there an interview component? Are there geographic constraints--local, national, or international?* Other questions relate to the nature of the competition itself: *How does this exercise, win or lose, strengthen my body of work? Who is on the jury? Will they understand and support my ideology?*

Once an appropriate opportunity has been identified, preconceptions should be evaluated. Imagining how the driving elements of one's project will be understood by a competition jury must be carefully considered. To do this, a dissociated eye is absolutely essential at the initial stages of the process. Conveying a graphically succinct design argument is critical; too much text, no matter how brilliant, simply will not be read. *What does the jury really want?* Playing to the panel may lead to a personally compromised end result. Even so, throughout design and development, competition requirements must be continually reassessed. Knowing when to break the guidelines is essential. *Are the regulations too stringent? Is there any wiggle room?* From the inside track we've determined that you can, in fact, liberally stretch these boundaries. A compelling concept that expands the confines is always intriguing to and appreciated by the jury.

WHY THIS? WHY NOW?

As architectural practitioners and academics, we have personally been involved in many competitions—as affiliates with professional offices, in collaboration with others, and independently—on both the winning and losing sides. We determined that sponsoring an international competition ourselves would be an opportunity to extend our interests while framing theoretical thought in experimental design. Natural Systems offered a means to further the goals of d3, our New York-based organiza-

tion committed to advancing innovative positions in architecture, art, and design. By providing collaborative opportunities for designers from around the world, d3 focuses on generating dialogue across geographic, ideological, and disciplinary boundaries in art and the built environment. As an extension of these efforts, this first competition invited architects, designers, engineers, and students to collectively explore the potential of investigating nature-based influences in architecture, interiors, and designed objects. The call requested innovative proposals that advance sustainable thought and environmental performance through the study of intrinsic geometries, behaviors, and flows found in the environment at various scales.

The competition's open-endedness extended to typology--allowing designers personal freedom to approach their creative process in a scale-appropriate manner. From large-scale master planning endeavors, to individual building concepts and notions of interior detail, there were no restrictions on site, scale, program, or building type. Submissions were intended to be environmentally responsible while suggesting innovative conceptual solutions. Although proposals were supposed to be technologically feasible, fantastical architectural visions of an ecologically inspired global future could be explored.

THE JURY CONVENES

In June 2009, the jury convened in New York to review and select the winning entries. The first run of the d3 Natural Systems competition provided an understandable concern and expectation that the winning submissions could effectively set the tone for future agendas, while suggesting a train of thought reflecting the larger design community. Architectural juries typically begin with a timed first pass during which the group briefly analyzes each submission. This overview allows reviewers to gauge the body of work in its entirety. Jury members were asked to hold comments during the first and second passes. By the third pass commonly held opinions surfaced, as well as individual particularities, assumptions, and interests. The panel began showing support for and opposition to specific proposals.

Juries commonly establish grounds to proceed. In our case, a general rule determined that submissions needed at least two votes of support to advance to the first cut. A certain degree of peer pres-

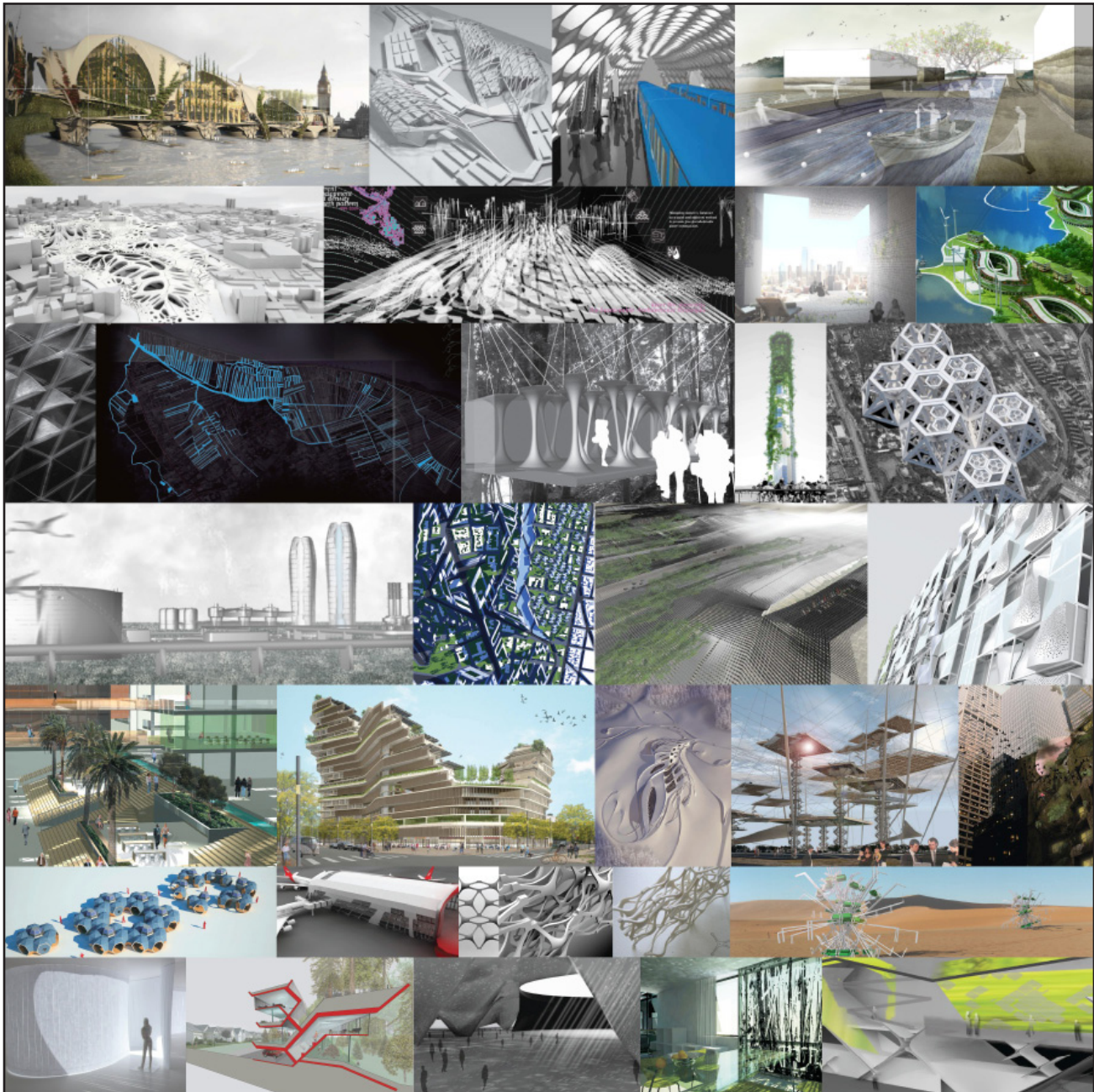
sure and posturing may arise in such settings where personal viewpoints are subject to public critique. *Would a submission be supported if the content, context, or subject could be viewed as ordinary? Likewise if an alpha juror was more vehemently opposed to a project was it appropriate to enter a battle royale to advance the cause?* One-vote projects, recycled entries, and pedestrian ideas were also quickly shown the door. In general, juries may disagree about candidates but stand uniform in the desire for both quality and originality.

After the first cut, individual jury members gained greater comfort with one another and began revealing deeper pedagogical preoccupations and specificities. *Did a project engage critical points of contact?* Often, those points of contact were not commonly shared within the panel. *Did a concept evoke diagrammatic clarity that proved its thesis?* However, the definition of clarity was unclear amongst jurors. Generational and design approach differences became apparent that ultimately balanced their discussion. As organizers, we anticipated this concern and addressed it by crafting a panel of individuals with diverse practice and academic backgrounds. Younger members tended to express less concern with contextuality or buildability and more of an interest in complexity, while older members demanded less fantastical explorations that actually could work structurally, materially, and environmentally. Variances arose related to conceptual complexity as well. *Was a project overly complex, or alternatively, not enough? Was intent not immediately evident, transparent, or clear? Inversely, was the proposal simply an undercooked one-liner?*

The curiosities of this jury shifted and re-shifted, a bit of horse-trading ensued, common ground was finally found, and ultimately a provocative group of winning submissions and special mentions were awarded. *Would competition results have remained the same by changing out a member or two?* Yes, but more importantly, we have come to regard our non-winning submissions as compelling, and in some ways, more intriguing and useful than the winning entries themselves.

LOSING TO WIN

The entire body of work generated for architectural competitions serves a special role for society. Architecture, unlike other arts such as painting,

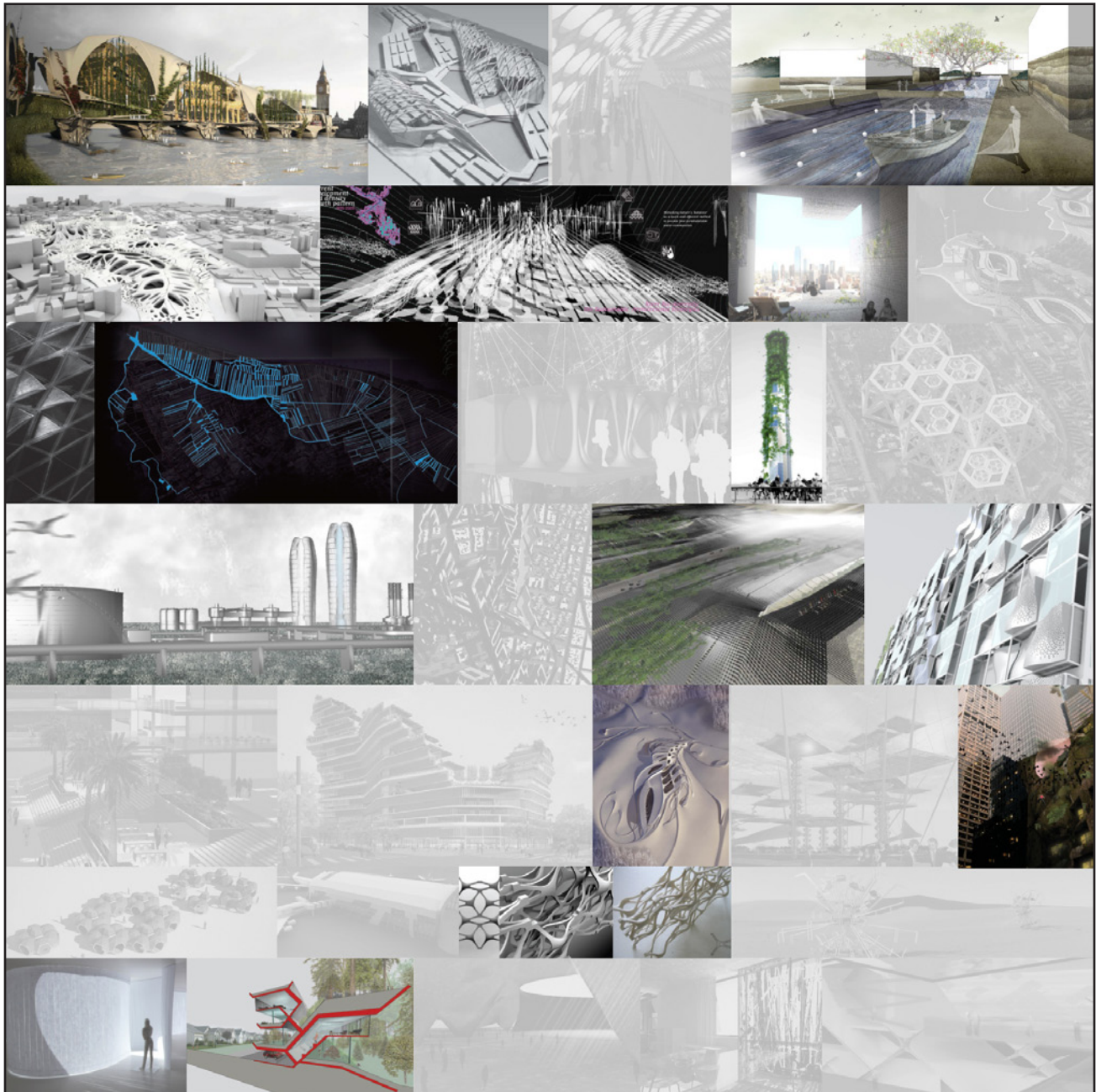


First Pass Matrix: *The contenders emerge...*

sculpture, and music requires excessive capital for physical realization at full-scale to occur. Architecture is the slowest changing art form. Output of other artistic disciplines may be produced with comparatively few resources and made public in various transportable settings. Rather, architecture can typically only operate as a fully investigative and re-deployable endeavor in forums such as

design research, theoretical writing, and competitions. Only through recent technological advances in rapid prototyping, virtual reality, and others has architecture been able to re-imagine itself in real time.

Unhindered by client and budgetary constraints, these unexecuted projects can potentially have a



Second Pass Matrix: *The field narrows...*

more powerful impact than realized buildings. In essence, competition drawings represent the only medium in full-control of the designer, and thus, one of a handful of opportunities for non-winning entrants to pursue their own research goals. In this sense, the level of autonomy afforded the loser is priceless. When winning means building, opportunities for compromise are ever-present.

The risk of surrendering aesthetic, functional, and formal purity is not a factor for the non-winner. The designer remains free to pursue inquiry with an independent lens. The non-awarded entrants may opportunistically continue to refine and deploy concepts in less real, yet more valuable ways.

EDUCATING THROUGH LOSING

As a teaching tool, non-awarded submissions are a veritable treasure trove for students in design disciplines. Using winning work as a benchmark is seductive, yet non-winning submissions offer a potentially more approachable platform for the student of architecture and design. Losing submissions should not be relegated to the cache of what-not-to-do projects. Rather, the work may be viewed in its entirety to gauge its overriding relationship to the whole, as well as its appropriateness to the call. When compared to winning entries, the distinction between the two groups is less clear. Here too, submissions generate an exciting after the fact dialogue that challenges the jury. *What patterns exist within the non-winning work that might suggest an alternative set of goals and concerns more apparent to another jury? Which biases can be revealed by investigating the competition archive?* Indeed, uncovering these traits may underscore the value of working outside current paradigms or fads for students.

As academics and practitioners, non-winning submissions are equally significant to d3's larger goals. We regard these endeavors as opportunities to dial into broader social, conceptual, and environmental imperatives impacting an increasingly global and broad-based profession. As co-directors of the competitions, we remain fully neutral in the selection process. During the collection process, submissions filter into the studio, are viewed, and then psychologically logged into a diverse and dynamic spectrum of conceptual interpretations. Regionally- and culturally-specific themes began to emerge as a constellation of potentialities and methodologies related to a hierarchy of concerns including structural, material, contextual, technological, and ecological. By nature of the competition's open-endedness, the mix of entries incrementally re-focused the trajectory of the original brief. Submissions established unanticipated project categories that blurred the boundaries of origin, language, culture, identity, and discipline. At this juncture the body of work itself, inherently spontaneous and global, began to create a dialogue and organic order of its very own. Projects began to speak to each other across vast geographic and cultural divides. Emergent groupings ranged from research-intensive endeavors engaged in multiple layers of synthesis to those that relied primarily on excessive visualization with little identifiable analysis.

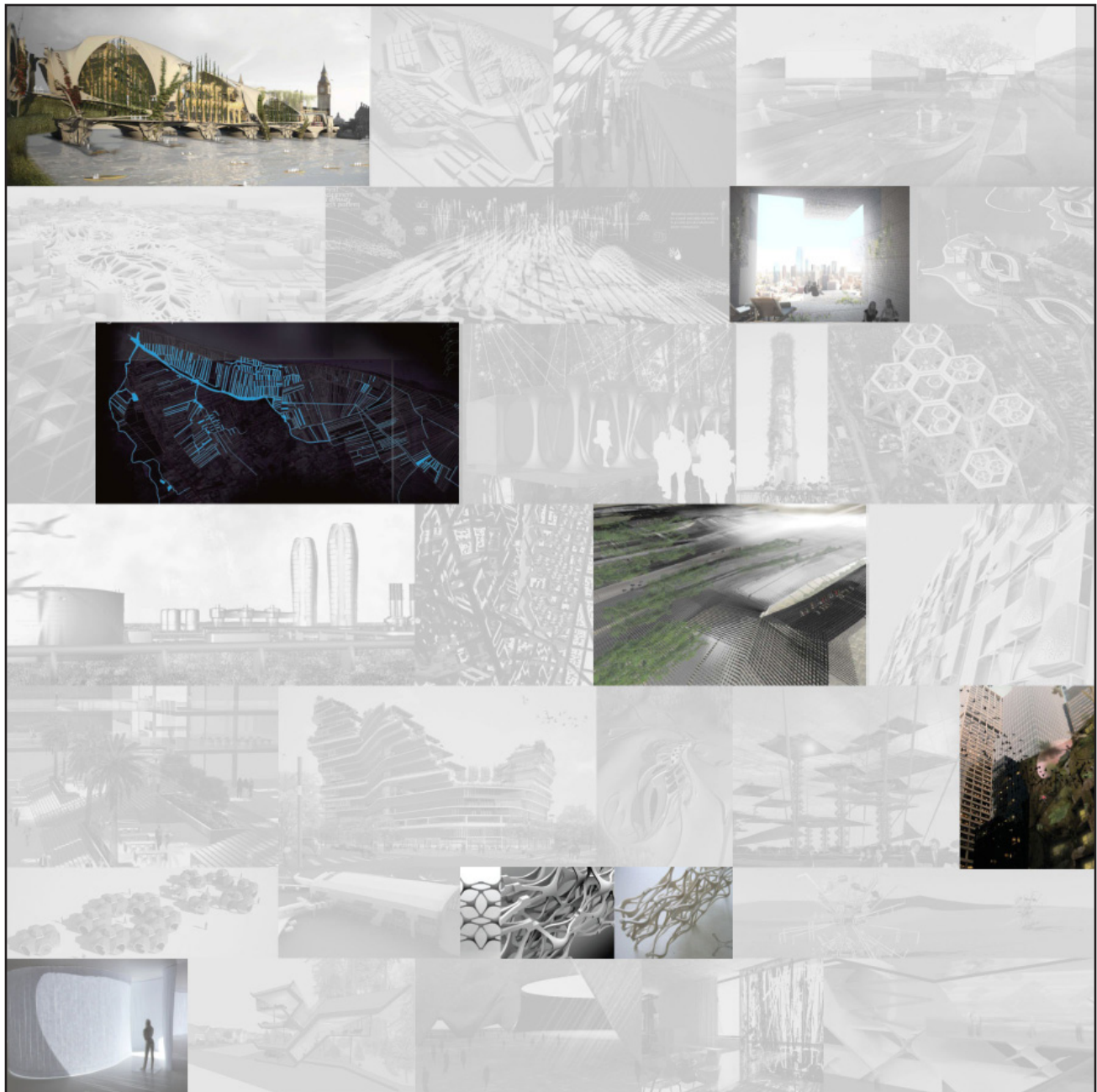
From its origins, d3 established the rule of maintaining a scholarly archive of all work passing through the organization's interdisciplinary exhibitions and competition programs. Our collaborative philosophy seeks to identify effective synergies between design disciplines that may be charted and mapped over time. Consequently, all competition submissions were archived. As a teaching tool, this resource serves our architecture and design students well. Highly diverse typologically, competition submissions continue to reveal cross-cultural methods of conceptualizing, defining, and conveying architecture.

THE PROVING PROCESS

With the rise of the internet, we have come to inhabit an increasingly data-rich world. Competition entrants expressed a tendency to find and use various data sets as evidenced by the extensive collection and documentation of quantitative material deployed in most submissions. It is crucial to consider the notion of *deploying* information as opposed to *synthesizing* its application. Most proposals attempted to tentatively link data to pre-conceived needs, instead of allowing that data to transform the project's trajectory.

Losing projects tended to over-present quantitative information, and often this information did little to promote clarity, establish connectivity, or to convince the viewer of the design's viability. In some cases, no identifiable design emerged from the research investigation. Instead, information was simply arbitrarily attached to fill a conceptual gap between process and product. Architects are not scientists, and the scientific tradition of identification and prediction of a system's behavior related to various parameters was typically not clear in losing work. While our discipline is unique, connecting its design-based language to the pragmatic need to demonstrate proof is fundamental in forming a solid argument.

Although winning submissions shared certain conceptual underpinnings and preoccupations inherent to the time, losing entries tended to exhibit generally less effective means of graphic conveyance. Most submissions employed common media, technologies, computational resources, and analog methods toward non-verbally forming an argument. Yet the ability of top proposals to graphically transmit and convince through visual mediums cannot



Final Pass Matrix: *And the winners are...*(from top)

- 1st Place: Kenny Kinugusa-Tsui & Lorene Faure
- 2nd Place: konyk architecture pc
- 3rd Place: Chen Nai Chun
- Mentions: Laura Garofalo
- Liam Young
- Nicholas Bruscia
- Pilskog & Kanter Architecture

be underestimated. It is within the body of non-awarded work that this reality is manifested--a fascinating reminder of how the representation of data can be so crucial in analysis as well as persuasion. The task essentially requires persuading oneself of the hypothesis while simultaneously generating a rigorous investigation. The charge of visually describing that validity to an unknown au-

dience is the ultimate goal. It is in the proving process that a proposal's inherent seriousness and depth is revealed.

In contrast to winning entries, losing entries were self-ordered into groupings that ranged from ordinary origins/pedestrian presentation to clear concept/convincing communication. It is this notion of convincing and not compelling that ultimately allows the losing project to be overlooked. Indeed, ineffective visualization of a proposal frequently seals its fate. Many borderline cases in the competition were ultimately rejected based on lack of diagrammatic clarity and communication of a thesis. When the jury was log-jammed, it fell back on the most basic competition requirements and rules of engagement to gain consensus.

NOT JUST A PRETTY PONY

The ability to hone graphic mediums by effectively linking co-relationships is an aspect of the winning submission that cannot be underestimated. This skill, while apparent to some degree, is dramatically less evident in losing submissions. For example, sustainable considerations were consistently used as justification for conceptual intent. A consistent theme among losing entries was their failure to connect ecological generators to specific performative capacities. For instance, attempting to justify algorithmic form generated by regionally-specific wind patterns, while neglecting to identify performance-based output, appeared both naïve and superficial. Conceptually weak pretty ponies will certainly not ultimately win the prize. Conceptually strong ones remain in the running.

Non-winning submissions also grouped themselves in relation to their over-specificity. These entries tended to fetishize conceptual drivers that were not equally shared by the jury itself. This project type was perceived as overly didactic and unsophisticated, yet its application in an academic setting such as the undergraduate design studio would be welcomed. The value is in its unapologetic simplicity. Overworked themes that did not propose a radical departure from or reinterpretation of the status quo were set aside. Alternatively, casting well established sustainable means through a regionalized or culturally-specific filter was applauded. These projects re-taught common approaches with a contextual application. Likewise, the non-winning

proposals actively rejected or challenged, perhaps unknowingly, the panel's interests and preoccupations. While those projects remained true to the author's personal intent, they did not pander to underlying biases of the jury—and rightfully so.

We, however, recognized their value. Further underscoring our appreciation for the entire body of work and their important role in teaching, the d3 Natural Systems exhibitions presented in New York, Cleveland, and Savannah featured winning *and* select losing projects. Non-winning submissions chosen for the exhibitions were co-related and mapped into various after-the-fact configurations, providing a dramatic tool for contrast and comparison on various fronts. Although winning projects were exhibited prominently, they were backdropped by an equally compelling assemblage of non-winning proposals that broadened the view into a larger global pathos for sustainable multi-culturalism. By revealing themes from the full spectrum of work, the exhibitions were undertoned with layers that may ultimately surface as more refined visualizations in the future.