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## CONTENTS

EDITORS' NOTES.....	5
MADELEINE GRANVIK, DANIEL KOCH AND MAGNUS RÖNN	
ATTRACTIVENESS IN URBAN DESIGN.....	7
ERIK HIDMAN	
REIMA PIETILÄ AND GESTURE IN RESEARCH-BY-DESIGN: THE FINNISH EMBASSY IN NEW DELHI, 1962–1982 .....	29
DORIAN WISZNIEWSKI	
CAN SIMPLE TOOLS FOR MAPPING LANDSCAPE VALUE CONVEY INSIDER PERSPECTIVES? .....	57
ANDREW BUTLER, MALIN ERIKSSON AND ULLA BERGLUND	
CULTURAL MAPPING AND DIGITAL PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT IN THE FUTURE NORTH .....	81
MORGAN IP	
DESIGN CRITERIA FOR REGENERATIVE SYSTEMS LANDSCAPES .....	107
DANIEL BERGQUIST AND PER HEDFORS	
<b>DEBATE</b>	
DEBATE/DEBATT: PLANERARROLLEN I SAMTID OCH FRAMTID: KUNSKAPER, FÖRMÅGOR OCH FÄRDIGHETER .....	135
LINA BERGLUND-SNODGRASS AND EBBA HÖGSTRÖM	
<b>REVIEWS</b>	
BOOK REVIEW / BOKANMELDELSE IGNAZ STREBEL AND JAN SILBERBERGER, EDS., 2017. <i>ARCHITECTURE COMPETITION: PROJECT DESIGN AND THE BUILDING PROCESS</i> . LONDON: ROUTLEDGE. ....	157
REVIEWER: ANTIGONI KATSAKOU	

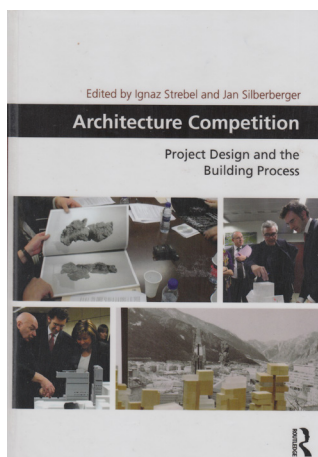


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The research field of architectural competitions has gained considerable momentum in the past decade, with an array of scholars from various scientific fields, such as architectural design, history, management, financial, social and geography studies, acknowledging the importance of this tool for the production of the built environment. In *Architecture Competition: Project Design and the Building Process*, the editors Ignaz Strebel and Jan Silberberger, members of the internationally acclaimed ETH Wohnforum research laboratory in Zurich, Switzerland, aim to contribute to the field by putting forward the original postulate that the architectural competition shapes the entire building process of a project.

They do so by looking at “retrospective and prospective orientation of the building process related to the competition” and by focusing on current challenges that competitions have to face internationally and which further complicate their context. They correctly identify those as: “the requirement to carry out design competitions in internationally regulated procurements systems; the challenge to meet the client’s requirements; and, the task to respond to the growing complexity of both the building process and the built environment.” As retrospective and prospective instances of orientating the building process, in the framework of architectural competitions there are for example the competition brief, the guidance provided to the jury for assessment of submissions and the jury report, as “a text intentionally designed for publication”, with these documents sketching *a priori* and *a posteriori* accounts of the building problem. This is an interesting idea in its own merit that is well explored in some of the book’s contributions.

However, in order to prove that the building process is defined by the competition procedure applied to a building programme at the design stage, there is a need for adequate identification of features that are exclusively typical of competition-born projects. This is rarely the case in the book, especially with the analysis of the Kalkbreite housing competition offered by Strebel and Silberberger in section 3, which rather confirms the popular thesis that competition-born projects are no different from buildings produced without the intermediary of a design competition or a tendering process. The account given of the building programme's modification cannot be inextricably linked to the competition or the specific procedure chosen; in any case, changes in a project's programme are to be expected during the implementation phase.

The book is divided into four parts: the introduction contains a literature review and a presentation of the editors' analytical lens on the subject. The remaining three parts, entitled "Managing the procedure", "Inside the competition" and "Making the built environment", refer respectively to the three separate phases of the building process as defined by the competition: the before, the during and the after. Each of the three parts consists of an opening chapter written by Strebel and Silberberger, two or three essays written by other scholars in the field, mostly from a managerial background, and finally, an interview of the editors with a party actively involved in competitions, e.g. a client consultant, a practising architect or a structural engineer. While the chapters of the second part seem to correspond well to the "Making" phase of the competition, most contributions of the first and the third part do not fit particularly well into the prescribed categories or, to put it another way, could easily fit into both the "before" and the "after" phases of the competition.

There are other tasks set out by the editors on which they fail to deliver. Although promising to keep their distance from "polarised" competition accounts, their choice of at least two of the three competition actors interviewed in the book, Malcolm Reading and Dietmar Eberle, preserves the *status quo* of the current competition framework, rather than provides challenging, original and unbiased views on the topic. Malcolm Reading is a leading organiser of architectural competitions and Dietmar Eberle a star architect in both a Swiss and an international context and is incidentally the leader of the ETH Wohnforum (and one of the few architects the laboratory counts among its ranks, for that matter). One of the points made by Eberle is that his firm never takes part in open competition procedures, obviously believing in the specialisation of architectural services. This point coincides with the editors' remark on invited competitions being popular among architects and clients alike. However, prior research on this issue (and indeed common sense within the ranks of the profession) shows that invited competitions are mostly

preferred by architects who have already reached a certain point of fame in their career. How indeed could it be otherwise?

Another part of the book featuring contradictions is the literature review the editors offer as the “story of competition studies”, and not as the core work on which their approach is based. Important publications, such as Elisabeth Tostrup’s ground-breaking book *Architecture and Rhetoric: Text and Design in Architectural Competitions, Oslo 1939–1996* are missing, or replaced by later works. Others are mentioned in relation to secondary aspects and non-suitable concepts. As for those reviewed, many are dismissed in the book’s introduction through generalising and obsolete statements, such as “What is missing from such discussion [that existing to date on the subject (reviewer’s note)] is a thorough consideration of the heterogeneity of people, institutions, tools, devices, inscriptions and standards they are made of”. The development, in recent years, of the subject of competitions as a field of scientific research is brought to the reader’s attention, but no context is offered with respect to this development. The truth is that a major role in the development and indeed the establishment of this scientific field was played by Prof. Magnus Rönn and his team of scholars at KTH-Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm, whose work is only partly cited and consequently understated in the book. Rönn was not only the first to organise a scientific conference exclusively on competitions, at least in the past 20 years, but also instigated a series of conferences on the topic around the world (several of which were attended by the editors, and their predecessor Joris Van Wezemael, the scholar who launched systematic research about competitions at the ETHZ). Rönn has shaped an important body of knowledge in more than three collective publications that highlight at least two important aspects of the field’s complexity: the broad and diversified range of contexts within which competitions operate, and the interdisciplinarity of the research object. In such a context, it is easy to confuse the vast number of documents connected with competitions with the body of literature that scientifically explores this professional, social, political and financial device. The latter is not at all vast, a fact that makes omissions more glaring, especially when paired with claims about the originality of the approach. On the same note, Strebel and Silberberger oscillate between methodologies and theoretical paradigms originating from fields that are apparently too many to handle, from architectural design and urban studies to anthropological, social and management theories. Perhaps for this reason, the most effective discourse is mounted in their opening chapter of the book’s Part 2, when adopting a clear approach of ethnographic research to participatory observations of jury meetings, a subject that seems more familiar to their background of geography studies.



Regarding the rest of the book's contributions, some are much more engaging than others. Kristian Kreiner's inspired text in the book's first part is an extremely intriguing one. By presenting a unique competition case in Denmark that led to the country's internationally acclaimed Maritime Museum, he elaborates on two aspects of competition procedures which can, surprisingly, prove contradictory: *legitimacy* and *creativity*. Kreiner presents his subject in an accessible way, bringing forward not only the specialist but also the plainly human, inspiring side of the topic. The same goes for Leentje Volker's text, also in the first part of the book, who tackles dextrously the concept of *sense-making* applied in decisions taken by EU public clients in The Netherlands, using four cases of procurement. Her informed accounts and the "two worlds of justification", the professional and the civic, upon which she comments offer useful insights to organising agents and lead to constructive suggestions. Nevertheless, both texts could fit better within subsequent parts of the book.

The contribution by Camille Crossman, in the second part of the book, does not manage to maintain the reader's attention to the same degree, despite dealing with the intriguing research strand of *in situ* observation of jury situations. She asks the wrong question to begin with: "How can risk managing theories offer insights into jury deliberations", instead of "What exactly are the benefits of such an alternative approach (presumably to architectural representation methodologies) for the study of competitions?" In other words, she does not adequately explain why relating the two subjects is at all necessary. While her concept of *assumptions* or *presumptions* of risky situations the jurors read about in the submitted projects is thought-provoking and useful for future research, it is undervalued by the rest of her discourse. In the same line of thinking, Peter Holm Jacobsen & Andreas Kamstrup, who follow a similar approach, deal with the element of jury deliberations in a way that is far too limited in time and scope to offer grounds for further discussion.

The difference between a design competition and a tendering procedure (without a design component) of the Official Journal of the European Union (OJEU) is effectively presented by Torsten Schmiedeknecht in Part 3 of the book. A preference of that author for OJEU procedures can be detected in the text, on the grounds of a potential collaborative relationship established between the architect and the client already from the early stages of a design project. Nonetheless, this preference cannot be justified by the observations originating from his two case studies in Liverpool, the new Everyman theatre and the refurbishment/extension of the Philharmonic Hall. Why, for example, is it not possible to "progress an agenda" rather than "follow an agenda" for complex building situations with a specially adapted architecture competition, conducted in several phases and potentially including interviews with shortlisted architects (as Volker proposes in her text "The best of both

worlds”), instead of with an OJEU procedure? Part 3 of the book concludes with an interview with Werner Sobek, who rightfully highlights the importance of the collaboration between architect and civil engineer in the early stages of a project, and subsequently of a competition. Again, in this case, the text could easily be placed under the “before” phase of the building process, and not the “after”.

However, there is another, thornier issue than suitably assembling the book’s contributions in claiming an analogy between the before, during, and after of a design competition and the distinct phases of a building project. A competition cannot be compared to the entire design phase of a building. Regardless of the emphasis that the editors correctly place on the *non-linear* character of the building procedure, this inevitably happens when bringing forward three separate phases of the construction process. As architects well know, even a project competition with a well-thought brief and a long list of specific requirements cannot possibly produce a ready-to-build solution. Promoting the competition device with clients, through its efficiency, has often led to this misconception, with results such as excessive brief requirements and eventual disappointment with the winning submission. A design competition is not a magic tool; it can, when successful, present the best design solution, but only as future potential to be deployed in the project’s development stages and complemented by fertile collaboration between the client and the architect and constant adaptation to the problem’s often changing components.

The follow-up of a design competition, in terms of bringing together the client and the successful architect and of establishing a collaborative relationship between these, especially in the context of open and anonymous competition procedures, is raised by many of the book’s contributors as well as by the editors. However, in the Swiss case and especially in the context of the country’s German-speaking area, this is in fact less of a problem than in other European countries. The Swiss construction market is one of the most effective in Europe, in terms of quality and competitions alike. The country has a long tradition of architecture competitions. Particularly in Zurich, the period between 1998 and 2008 was extremely productive. This happened with the successful competition model that the city’s public administration and Zurich’s famous Amt für Hochbauten (Office for Building Construction) brought forward (also for private building investors to follow), under Peter Ess’s inspired direction. Although there are no dates to accompany the list of 12 cases Strebel and Silberberger have studied (to see exactly where these are situated in relation to this golden competition era), one can only assume that it has not been an easy task to discern severe inconsistencies between competition projects and implemented buildings, other than those which could usually be expected between a project’s design and its execution phase. Accompanying the client

also after completion of the competition procedure was one of the points that Amt für Hochbauten incorporated in its marketing strategy to promote its success as a competition consultant/organiser with public, semi-public, and private clients. This post-competition service to the client could be the reason why remarks in competition jury reports concerning the winning project's evaluation are often implemented in the built outcome of competition-born building projects. This point and the terms of this continuing service could make for an exciting research avenue, as well as a more promising one regarding the book's main argument, had the editors chosen to pursue it.

Another recurring theme among the book's contributions is the type of quality assessments that take place in the context of procurement and whether, as Strebel and Silberberger successfully put it, those are "solution-oriented" or "performance-oriented", or as Volker puts it, whether competitions are about a "click with the design" or a click "with the architect". This point makes an important difference in the client's expectations of the competition and therefore, in the jury's assessment work.

What remains unaddressed by the editors is the target group for their work. The topic of competitions is inevitably enticing for architects, clients and potential competition organisers, or even for anyone concerned with production of the built environment. However, branding the entire professional group through "popular" attitudes to the institution of competitions ("architects use [...] controversial situations to insist on the fundamental principles of the competitions") makes the book unsuitable for these professionals. Moreover, the over-conceptualisation of certain issues, such as competitions seen as "mediators" and not "intermediaries" of meaning, or the opposition between *procurement laws* and *design competitions* (as elaborated in the book's introduction) and the field-specific language make the book unsuitable for clients and the general public. The use of the term "competition business" seems to target readers from a financial or managerial background, but in this case too, the terminology and spirit of the text, described explicitly as of "non-normative purpose", seems inappropriate.

As a collection of compelling accounts of competitions, mostly in European countries that may boast an exemplary relation with competitions, and as an attempt to explore this particularly complex subject, the book undeniably holds appeal. However, this is let down by the evidence it produces regarding what is probably an overambitious research hypothesis.