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## BOOK REVIEW

### ARCHITECTURAL COMPETITIONS – HISTORIES AND PRACTICE

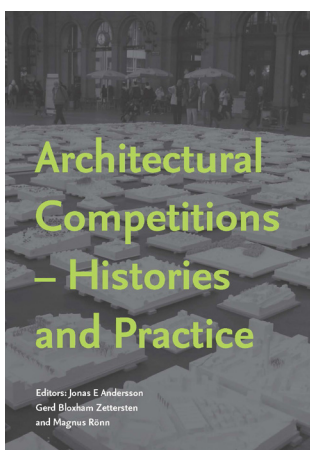
EDITORS: JONAS E. ANDERSSON, GERD BLOXHAM ZETTERSTEN  
AND MAGNUS RÖNN

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In Finland, sometime in the 1980s, a subject of debate came up in the professional press which at the time seemed rather surprising. Some colleagues, more academically inclined than the great majority, were worried about the lack of research published by the architects as a professional body. The reply from the hard-core practitioners was that taking part in competitions was research in itself and that everyone was doing it all the time. The academics disagreed, claiming that competitions were simply an established part of professional practice, a relatively pleasant way of procuring commissions, and practically the only way to become famous.

Since then «practice-based research» or «research by design» have gradually become accepted by the academic community as credible scientific endeavours. The interpretivist research tradition in which the understanding of certain actions, systems and arrangements comes through a process of interpretation, also lends itself well to the pursuit of design competitions. Thus this book constitutes a review of research published about an activity that only recently, and even now not without some protest, can also be classified as research.

In Finland we used to have preconceived ideas about how things work in other countries, ideas that have often proven to be urban myths. For example, we thought that the Swedes only used three categories in their evaluation criteria: quite nice (ganska trevlig), nice (trevlig) and very nice (väldigt trevlig). This made the system, if not totally flawed, at least



Jonas E. Andersson, Gerd Bloxham Zettersten and Magnus Rönn  
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less analytical than our own, and also excessively dependent on typical Swedish consensus policies. Maybe we were not completely wrong since, at the end of this book, Charlotte Svensson stresses the need for total unanimity among the jury members and concludes with: *«In this regard, the selection of a Pope in Rome provides similarities to how jury members choose winners in architectural competitions in Sweden.»*

The (almost non-existent) British competition system we found totally unacceptable. One high profile dictator-judge decided the winner while secretly worrying about what «the Prince» would think about his or her decision. We used to admire the French for enforcing a competition on anything larger than a dog kennel, even if our French colleagues told us that the system did not really work, since the same people were always invited to compete. We always knew and admired the fact that the Swiss organised a lot of competitions, but on the other hand it seemed to be just another feature of a country that holds almost daily referenda about all possible aspects of life.

This book is useful from a variety of perspectives, but also in the way it helps to at least modify these myths and stereotypes. It is interesting to read, in the article by Antigoni Katsakou, that Switzerland may after all not be such a «competition heaven», but the universal criticisms that the same offices always get shortlisted are voiced there as well. The «introverted character» of the Swiss architectural profession is also emphasized. Foreign architects («all the usual suspects» included) apparently rarely win first prize, but usually only lesser prizes. This article also introduces some less familiar names from the younger generation of Swiss architects. I shall follow with great interest the development of the careers of, among others, Frei & Gysel and their FuturaFrosch office, whose work seems original and fascinating. This contribution to the book is, however, somewhat marred by a lack of editing.

In Britain, the situation does not seem to have changed a lot. Judith Strong's article gives the impression that the quiet competition scene is seen entirely as a procurement method, not as research or as a means to generally «improving oneself», not to mention being a natural part of one's professional pursuits. Strong's choice of words is indicative of the depressing situation in Britain. She, for example, cites the «abandoned» Stockholm Library Competition, as one case used in England to argue against the usefulness of competitions. In Finland we would see the Stockholm case as an enormous body of interesting projects (great subject for research!), which unfortunately has not led (so far) to realisation. «Abandoned,» however, is hardly a word we would use in this context.

Lentje Volker presents a fascinating story about what happened after a fire annihilated one of the most famous architecture schools in the

world, the Bouwkunde in Delft. The multi-faceted competition process is described and analyzed in great detail. Finally, when the reader starts to become anxious about the outcome of the whole affair, the writer concludes, *«In this case the aim was to collect ideas and stimulate debate, while in other competitions selecting a single design for a building could be a main goal.»* Thus the Dutch see the spending of resources on competitions as valuable per se, and do not simply treat them as an alternative procurement method, in contrast to the Brits.

According to Pedro Guilherme and Joao Rocha, for Eduardo Souto de Moura *«competitions seem to be the optimal place to innovate and to deal with all that cannot be dealt with on a daily basis.»* This contribution to the book presents facts and figures about the more than 50 competition entries that Souto de Moura has done in the last three decades. The authors of this significant article conclude that *«competitions are either won or lost and even if Souto de Moura wins, it does not mean that the project will be built.»* Unfortunately, this thoroughly researched contribution does not specify whether the listed competitions have been open or limited, i.e., to what extent financial compensation has been guaranteed. Knowing how reluctant the most successful practices are to do any unpaid work nowadays, it would be nice to know that Souto de Moura, a Pritzker prizewinner, is indeed an exception.

Kristian Kreiner appears to be a prolific author on the subject at hand and produces one of the most entertaining contributions to the book. In his introduction he coins a satisfying phrase – *«institutionalized masquerading»* – to describe the behaviour of the various actors in these processes. By stating that this *«masquerading favours creativity over reputation and gives young and inexperienced architects a chance for a breakthrough»*, he gives a simple but astute argument in support of competitions. His analysis is to my mind occasionally slightly overwrought. He claims, for instance, that for a competitor, a competition *«is never just another competition»*.

Kreiner's very relevant discussion on the interpretation of competition briefs is especially topical, since *«unusually vague»* briefs, such as the one in his research case (the re-use of an old industrial building for a *«large Danish University»*) are becoming increasingly common everywhere. The description of the way the jury reacted to the technically problematic glazed southern façade in the winning entry sounds very familiar. It shows that juries *«masquerading»* as objective bodies and staunch advocates of sustainability often end up making decisions that are perfectly understandable but difficult to justify.

Mats T. Beckmann, Jonas E. Andersson, Thomas Hoffmann-Kühnt, Elisabeth Tostrup and Maarit Kaipainen provide contributions based



mainly on interesting case studies. Beckmann brings up another topical concept, that of «parallel sketching,» when concluding his analysis of the 1934 Stockholm-Bromma 1934 case. He writes: *«a reasonable conclusion [...] is that the part of the overall planning process that was completed by the four architects should preferably be termed parallel architects' assignments.»* Finnish colleagues have criticized the procurement method Beckmann refers to as being against the best traditions of real competitions. It is, however, also gaining ground in Finland. Our office recently took part in one, and just like Paul Hedqvist's proposal at Bromma in 1934, ours was chosen. It felt like a competition, but unfortunately it cannot be added to our list of competition successes. Magnus Rönn, in his own contribution, deals with the subject of prequalification, an essential subject in the present competitive procurement discourse. Judith Strong and many of the other writers also touch upon this subject. Rönn finds only a «handful» of studies of prequalification, which is surprising considering its importance for anyone running an office, and, in fact, for anyone concerned with the quality of our built environment. Rönn comes to a conclusion that is easy to agree with, namely that too often *«prequalification is a conservative force»*.

In the introduction to the book, Rönn and his editorial colleagues Jonas E. Andersson and Gerd Bloxham Zettersten express surprise over the fact that the first serious research on competitions did not appear before the 1990s, in spite of the organised competition institution already being more than 150 years old. *«Now,»* they write, *«there are some 15 academic dissertations and a number of ongoing doctoral projects on the subject in Canada and Europe.»* The editors believe, and indeed the book proves, that *«the architectural competition is an interesting and rewarding object for research.»*

To conclude, I would like to suggest a subject for someone to study: the two-stage international open competition, and more specifically, its intermediate evaluation phase. Having been involved in this competition genre both as a competitor and as a jury member, I find that the evaluation of the first stage and the formulation of the written instructions given to the finalists may play a totally decisive role in determining the final success of a competition of this kind. There are undoubtedly several fascinating cases to choose from. One could start with the abovementioned Asplund Library extension competition in Stockholm. Could it be that the «abandonment» had something to do with the way the intermediate evaluations were formulated? Could it be that they contributed to the fact that the top entries did not fulfil the promise of the first stage? I have no idea, but I think someone should try and find out.

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