

What did we learn from "The Competition"?

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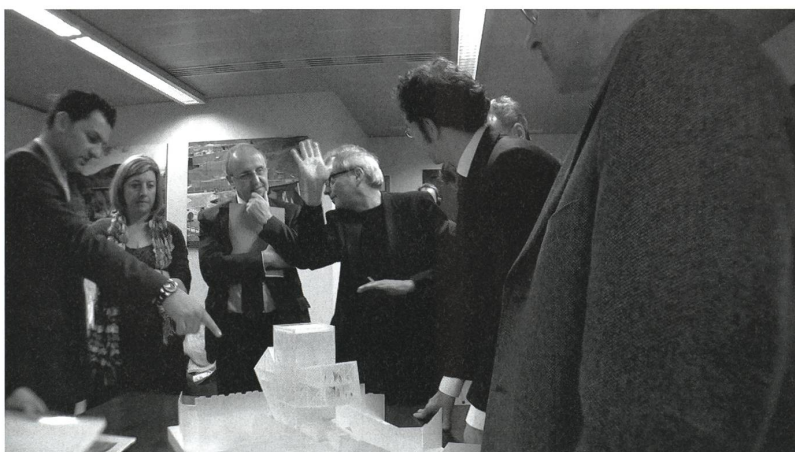
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WHAT DID WE LEARN FROM «THE COMPETITION»? Angel Borrego Cubero



TAKE 1 WHAT WE THOUGHT WE KNEW

DARK MATTER

When we had the idea of making a documentary about architectural competitions¹, the entire office laughed at the idea, a bit incredulous, as if it were the typical workplace joke. At that moment we were halfway through the second phase of the competition for the Civil Registry of Madrid, and we still had six weeks to agonize over it. A strange feeling of necessity, of fate, seemed to hover over and around the idea of making a film about architectural competitions and about one competition in particular, whichever competition it would end up being. Architectural competitions seemed to be the dark matter of architecture. They are an overwhelming presence in the daily architectural struggle, that goes unseen for the most part. Only a fraction of the work needed to produce a winning proposal is on show in the final presentations. And only a tiny percentage of the submissions are winning ones; the rest goes unnoticed.

MONEY MATTER

Everyday, every time I entered the office during those three months, the office collaborators would be asking something along the lines of «how can we beat the other five participants» (a typical setup, we were six teams in the second phase, selected among more than one hundred proposals). OSS was a young office that was trying to get back into architectural work after I had completed my PhD, so all of our jobs depended, to a great extent, on winning the competition. Perhaps for that, because competitions are tainted with the necessity to beat the opposition, the dirty world of economic and professional endeavors, the challenging allocation of money and resources among architects, it seemed clear to us at that moment that architectural competitions were not represented, not talked about, not discussed enough, at least not as much as their prevalence in the architectural universe granted.

PUBLIC MATTER

In «Learning from Las Vegas», Scott Brown, Venturi and Izenour suggest to us that the default mode of modern architecture was stuck in the public space as understood in the typical

Italian square, and they called this shortcoming Architecture as Space. It is difficult to argue that the problem existed and it has not died away, and it may have contaminated the rest of the arts and sciences, as all the comments, seminars, interventions, courses, congresses, etc. on public space in the last decades attest to. Still, it seemed also clear to us that only architects compete like architects do. Of course. This mode of competition is at the same time public (with public rules, a need to maintain an appearance of objectiveness, a jury, a publicly announced result, etc.) and weirdly artistic and subjective, with jury decisions usually fought over slippery concepts of form and propriety. At a moment where the public seemed to be both in permanent crisis, and the source of permanent crisis, it appeared that architectural competitions stood right in the correct place for discussion, but they were strangely absent from it.

STAR WARS

But architectural competitions also seemed special in a wholly, truly spectacular way. There is no other field where the most accomplished practitioners compete for the same jobs in public, putting their personal reputations in play. Even less on a frequent basis.

Engineering, supplies or services firms will also compete for public jobs frequently, but personal reputations will be diluted in the group. And, relative to their economic size, these tenders have very little media impact compared to architecture competitions.

On the other side, a public competition between, say, the likes of Tarantino, Spielberg and Almodóvar for the right to film the same project would have a huge media impact, but the truth is that it will never happen. The same can be said of any other artistic or professional field, where the topmost practitioners will never compete in public for the same jobs, they will probably never risk their reputations in public, and once they have reached a star status in their respective fields, they will usually be able to pick and choose the work they do without the need for frequent competition. Even less, public competition.

It was clear from the outset, from the first minute the idea had materialized, that an architectural competition had the very realistic potential of featuring stars in it, fighting each other.

It was also clear that such an event had the potential of being a good film. If we were able to hunt down and film any competition out there, even one without star names on it, the script was already designed for us, and it would be a small thriller, with its characters, its argument, its mystery, and a fast and abrupt resolution.

DOUBLE DOUBTS

With all that in mind, the setup was simple: We needed to find a competition. If we did, all the rest would flow from it. The first approach we did to the project involved writing up a grant proposal for «Fundación Arte y Derecho» (now VEGAP), in Spain, a week after we had won our own Civil Registry competition. The grant was awarded and we were able to continue pursuing the idea with some backing, something which was crucial to allay not only our own doubts, but the doubts of those to whom we explained the project in the following months.

The idea, at that moment, was to make a film both about competitions in general and about one competition in particular. Finding a competition we could document was essential, but we feared it would be very difficult. We still think we were lucky to spend «only» six months searching for it.

TRANSPARENCY

There were questions that made the documentary relevant to much of the work done by OSS in the previous years regarding the visibility of social, political, economic and spatial practices: Was it possible to render the processes of architectural competitions, usually designed and developed behind closed doors, transparent? Is it possible to learn, through repeated exposure, how the same problem can have wildly different and valid answers? Could that exposure show how to choose objectively from an array of comparably suitable proposals to that same original problem?

Even more interesting were for us the relationships of architectural competitions to democracy. Let's lay aside, for the moment, the balance between competition and collaboration, and the precise politics employed for the definition and negotiation of public space. At some moment in that definition, a certain professional, or group of professionals will be charged with some part of the spatial design work.

That selection, in a democratic state, is usually made through some kind of competition. Focusing on competitions produces an interesting array of shining and painful paradoxes... It seems to us that architectural competitions, in their somewhat outmoded naiveté, and their emphasis on difficult-to-judge formal, spatial and relational aesthetics, offer a better platform for thinking about the relationships between democracy and the economy of the commons than just about any other social process out there. And it is a platform that is strangely overlooked.

TAKE 2 WHAT WE THINK WE LEARNT

It is fair to say that we failed miserably to respond to the more fundamental questions we set out to answer with the film. We were unable to make more transparent the hidden processes of architectural competitions. It follows from this that the problematic relationship between architectural competitions and democracy remains just that: an unsolved problem.

TRANS-PARENCY

The two main questions we set out to answer, namely how do different teams reach different valid proposals with the same data, and how does another team – the jury – decide among these diverse designs in an objective way, remain unanswered. We were unable to document the design process of all the (finally) four participating architects. Only Jean Nouvel granted access to our cameras required by the competition's rules, so we could not strictly compare the four of them. Furthermore, the jury meetings were cut short due to events outside anyone's control. The collapse of Lehman Brothers fifteen days before the supposed start of filming had a ripple effect on the whole process that ultimately led to its demise. Beyond the fact that the objectives we had stated for the film were met with total failure, deeper anxieties and doubts materialized regarding transparency. The impression remains for us that even if we had been able to film every single action pertaining to the Andorran museum competition, we would still be ignorant of the reasons why any design decision was made. In the end we would be left with the

visual or textual traces, however valuable these might be, of thought processes that would be impossible to pin down.

Architectural competitions, the ones based on design proposals, are impossibly hard to judge in any scientifically meaningful or objective way. Since design qualities are difficult to measure and their origins and intentions are impossible to represent, an argument could be made that architectural competitions are socially irresponsible and politically unsound for a democracy for their lack of transparency. Architectural tenders, with their simple numeric values allocated either to the different economic offers or to the previous experience of the competing firms (usually regardless of the quality of such experience), would represent then a welcome way out for anxious administrators. Judging them becomes mere arithmetic. The process seems scientific, transparent, and easy to oversee. The human factor could almost be overlooked. Tenders have thus become the efficient answer to the need for the mass-production of administrative transparency. Unfortunately, though, architectural tenders, the dominant mode of public space and building production, are to architecture what trans-fat is to food. They are the apparently benign and convenient but ultimately dangerous substitute offered by a corrupt industry and a lazy bureaucracy. In the need to appear democratic, careless societies are stuck with trans-parency.

LIKABLE DISLIKE

After many interviews we did for the film, it seems to me, that architects profoundly dislike competitions.² Recent studies³ about competitions duly reflect this climate, dissecting their multiple pitfalls and shortcomings. Interestingly, many of those problems seem repeat across centuries, as Daniel Fernández Pascual took good care to point out.⁴ We need to wonder why are the competitions still with us. The constant repetition of architectural competitions in history, with much the same characteristics and problems, points to their inevitability. Disliked as they are, and clear as it is that they are not the only means of architectural production or discussion, design competitions are paradoxically central to architecture. It seems to me that architects make a titanic mistake when they offer unqualified or sweeping criticism of architectural competitions.

DESIGN FOR DESIGN

The «Andorra museum competition» shown in the film, gets a lot of criticism from most audiences, and from our point of view some of it is undeserved. It may be the film that is at fault for it. The fact is that the Andorra competition is a very unique one, even accepting the fact that most competitions are unique in their own special way. Probably, little can be learned from our film about competitions' design, which I think is one of the most important issues facing architects today and looking into the future. But one of the more interesting things I ever learned about competitions I did in Andorra. I did not learn it by making the film, but showing it there.

All Andorran architects I met were outraged they had no opportunity to participate in the competition for the first Andorran museum, and that global stars were brought in. In the dialectics of global versus local that joined the recent bubble and crash economy, it seemed the museum competition crossed all the wrong lines. What was more interesting for me, though, was to learn that there are no architectural design competitions in Andorra for public work, they are all tenders. Andorran architects compete through experience or economic offers for the same public jobs. Almost no architectural work is involved in deciding who gets the commission. In a way, the Andorran museum competition could be seen as a play of compensation, where in place of all those small design competitions that never happened, the government organized a huge, spectacular one, where all the design that never happened could be properly sublimated by the most famous practitioners of the time in one huge gesture.

The design of competitions is crucial for the future of architecture. Sweeping criticism of the competitive process only alienates the discipline from well grounded political and administrative processes. Instead, a lot more work would need to be done in the design of competitions, to make them more open, more useful, more understandable to society; less resource-intensive for the participating professionals, but more knowledge-rich and solution-based for society.

NEGOTIATE SMALL DIRTY MIRACLES

Negotiations need to happen, and many inputs made by many actors and on many levels of the design process, both before and after what we know to be a competition, ensuring fewer mistakes and wasteful changes of heart.

We did not only learn this, it more or less hit us in the back of our heads: All is negotiation, everything happens through negotiation and the (partial) fulfillment of many desires. We were aware of the many small «miracles» that made «The Competition» possible, and all the negotiations, both visible and invisible, both in the open and in silence, both explicit and tacit, that helped carry it along. It was no different from a complex architectural work, where many different actors need to compromise to make it possible. Perhaps the better illustration in the film of the tangle of all the consecutive desires, negotiations, and compromises were those that happened around the need to film the different teams' work on the museum proposal.

We had very few conditions to produce the film: We were to be allowed to film the jury meetings; the organizer of the competition would have no say in the script, edit, or any other approach to the film; and finally, the competition's brief would say in clear terms that participation in the competition for the design of the National Museum of Art of Andorra would necessarily imply

letting our team film the entire development of their proposal, which would imply having one or two people, with cameras, following almost every movement of the design team for the museum for the entire duration of the work, which was set to be around three months. Only Jean Nouvel, of the selected architects, allowed the prescribed access to our team. All the others fought our presence in their offices to varying degrees. Norman Foster dropped out in order not to have the documentary team at his office, which was also consistent with the rules of the competition. The rest were able to negotiate and force our teams out of their offices successfully while still being allowed to participate. We protested to the Government of Andorra, but after Foster had already dropped from the competition, we had strong reason to believe that if another architect threatened to leave the competition because of the docu-

mentary, it was the documentary itself that would be the next out. We could protest, but we could not press the issue if we wanted to make the film at all. We did not have any other competition on the horizon for a Plan B.

Many of the negotiations in and around competitions, probably as with almost everything else in life, will be asymmetric, and will in all likelihood subvert previously stated rules. The relative power and the ethics of the different actors will determine the flow and elasticity of the negotiating process... and it will be up to those involved to decide how conformity and deviation balance out: Is the result worth it? Were those broken rules crucial, or relatively unimportant? Is it acknowledged that rules were broken and future modification and agreement sought regarding them?

The idea that it is possible to reach a transparent, simple, arithmetic result to a competition is a dangerous and inefficient illusion. The better, more reasonable solutions will always be complex, will respond to many inputs and answer multiple needs and desires. An equally complex, multi-colored, and difficult to evaluate system, such as the traditional jury, seems the appropriate tool for it. There is no easy substitute for the need to build trust in those fickle, derivative, surprising juries which rapidly go from the powerful to the comic, naturally anxious to hide the difficulty of the task.

INADVERTENT ADVERTISEMENT

All those little dirty miracles, with their gorgeous mix of ridicule and cunning, became more important than the strict completion of our script. They represented the actual complexity and difficulty of almost any endeavour. We wanted to avoid the polished, idealized, and mostly complacent, presentation of architecture that seems to have become the default mode of spatial narrative, and that has moved architecture slowly away from any claim to cultural relevance, bringing it ever closer to inadvertent advertisement.

A FILM IS NOT OK

I do not really know how much of the approach to the film that I have tried to convey is owed to the fact that it is made by an architect, with the peculiar interests and doubts of one. I thought this was the case, but, strangely, many people ask me if I am still an archi-

tect... Lesson to be learned: no matter how many times architects will speak about the similarities of architecture with filmmaking it is much better if you make a book—you will be more of an architect, not less. With this in mind, I humbly ask you all to be patient, since I may still need to do both: there are plans to do a film about European, plans also to finish up the more analytical part about competitions in general and, yes, doing them myself.

- 1 I use the term «architectural competition» sometimes to refer to all architectural competitions, but mainly to refer to the subset of «design competitions», that is, competitions that have become, historically, their most defining image: those in which the only, or at least the most important, deciding factor of the competition is that of the general architectural concept and design, which may include any related themes deemed important, and judged by a jury that bases its decisions on the graphic or three-dimensional documentation submitted by the participants. To distinguish them, I use the term «architectural tender» whenever the main deciding factors in the process are either experience or the economic proposal or a mix of those.
- 2 Over 50 interviews were made for «The Competition» which did not find their way into the film edition. We thought the Andorran competition interesting enough and needed no commentary. These interviews will likely find their way into another film, about architectural competitions in general, and more analytical in nature.
- 3 «Making Competitions», in «Wonderland: Manual for Emerging Architects», Vienna 2012.
- 4 Fernández Pascual, Daniel; Rodríguez Cedillo, Carmelo, «SF1: On Anonymity, Deception and Ambition», in «Think Space. The Competitive Hypothesis. Storefront for Art & Architecture», New York, 2013.

Angel Borrego Cubero, born in Spain, 1967, is a PhD in Architecture from the Universidad Politécnica de Madrid-ETSAM, where he is associate professor of Architecture Design, and MArch from Princeton University. In 1999, he founded Office for Strategic Spaces (OSS), an office of art and architecture whose work and research, on different aspects of contemporary space production, has been widely published. He is producer and director of the feature documentary «The Competition».