

## Architecture as Exchange

### Framing the Architecture Competition as Contact Zone

Mejia Hernandez, J.A.; Nuijsink, C.T.

**DOI**

[10.7480/footprint.14.1.5121](https://doi.org/10.7480/footprint.14.1.5121)

**Publication date**

2020

**Document Version**

Final published version

**Published in**

Footprint

**Citation (APA)**

Mejia Hernandez, J. A., & Nuijsink, C. T. (2020). Architecture as Exchange: Framing the Architecture Competition as Contact Zone. *Footprint*, 14(1 #26), 1 - 6. <https://doi.org/10.7480/footprint.14.1.5121>

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## Introduction

# Architecture as Exchange: Framing the Architecture Competition as Contact Zone

Jorge Mejía Hernández and Cathelijne Nuijsink, editors

The extraordinary speed with which ideas cross the globe today has prompted architecture historians to consider new modes of writing history. In the face of unprecedented cultural intricacy and rapid change, existing histories of architecture suddenly appear as both limited and limiting devices; unable to grasp the complex processes of global travel, collaboration and exchange that have decisively influenced the way in which we conceive of the built environment. A mere widening of the geographical scope to include previously uncovered regions and cities in our histories, or the recognition of actors other than the single architect-author in our accounts of the production of buildings seem insufficient corrections to the way we write about the past and present of architecture. To understand the growth and development of architecture knowledge as a result of quickly evolving global processes, new histories must account for cross-cultural negotiations and translations of shared architectural questions.

This diagnosis is not new. Current modes of transnational historiography has been the subject of scholarly research since the 1980s. Inspired by Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) and by the emergence of subaltern studies a few years later, scholars like Swati Chattopadhyay and Mark Crinson, for example, have criticised architectural histories' strong Euro-American bias by directing their focus towards architectures of the southern hemisphere.<sup>1</sup> Another strain of contemporary architectural historiography, used among others by Dell Upton, has

challenged the myth of the single authored building by recognising the host of actors and voices (and the many exchanges between them) that are indispensable for the production of architecture.<sup>2</sup> Yet another novel mode of history writing, linked to global travel, collaboration and exchange, questions passive conceptual metaphors such as 'import /export', as well as the often unidirectional notion of 'influence', and instead registers the complexities and ambiguities of cross-cultural interrelations using concepts like 'translation', 'exchange' and 'reciprocal comparison'.<sup>3</sup>

To contribute to this ongoing quest for more dynamic, inclusive and global histories of architecture, this issue of *Footprint* explores architecture as a series of cross-cultural exchanges, transactions, or 'contact zones'.<sup>4</sup> Appropriating the term from the work of comparative literature scholar Mary Louise Pratt, who defined contact zones as 'social spaces where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other often in highly asymmetrical relations of power', we are fascinated by moments and places in which intense transcultural and transdisciplinary exchanges of architecture knowledge take place.<sup>5</sup> Pratt's contact zones are 'intended in part to contrast with ideas of community that underlie much of the thinking about language, communication, and culture that gets done in the academy',<sup>6</sup> and reveal 'exhilarating moments of wonder, revelation, mutual understanding and new wisdom'.<sup>7</sup>

But how to capture these exhilarating moments? Where can we spot them, amid the vastness of architecture and its production over the years? From a number of conspicuous instances of trans-cultural and trans-disciplinary exchange among architects, such as international exhibitions, biennales, summer meetings, development aid programs, and competitions, we have chosen to focus on the latter – the competition – as exemplary of architecture performing as a contact zone.

At the outset, we recognise that the production of knowledge fostered by architecture competitions is not a univocal, unidirectional process, but rather emerges as an open arena for debate between different architecture cultures. The simplest imaginable competition involves a sponsor, a competition brief, at least two competing architectural teams, an evaluator, two or more entries produced as responses to the brief, and some kind of reward. Interactions between these agents range from the technical to the aesthetic, and from language to politics. More commonly though, these numbers are much larger, and include public and private funding agencies, interest groups, several levels of legislation, media attention, a mixed bag of jurors, evaluation criteria, a polytechnical throng of professionals, the projects that result from their work, and of course, prizes.

The convergence of different cultures in architecture competitions is not limited to local identities either. It also includes professional, generational, technological, and political cultures, among many others. Against this proliferation of cultures, present in every competition, focus on a single transcultural discussion (for example, a younger generation superseding an older one; architects from a particular country succeeding beyond colleagues from another) seems futile. Instead, the techniques, theories, and principles required to research and represent a history of architecture competitions point to *exchange* as a much more

enlightening object of study – something discovered three decades ago by scholars like Pratt in their examination of texts and power dynamics.

In line with this realisation, Bénédicte Zimmermann's opening article, *Histoire Croisée*, can be read as an elegant development of Pratt's contact zone, with a cross-border approach directed against territorial categories of exchange. After presenting a succinct explanation of two well-known modes of exchange studies – comparison and transfer historiographies – Zimmerman proposes to complement both lines of inquiry with the third modality of crossed history which, she argues, can syncretise histories' long-term structures and short-term actions at the empirical, epistemological and methodological levels of research. The articles that follow Zimmerman's illuminating text explore a diversity of architecture competitions as contact zones, and reveal the many ways in which the actors and stakeholders involved in those competitions collectively produce and develop architecture knowledge beyond the limits of academia.

Bruno Gil, Susana Lobo, and José Ribau Esteves, for instance, present an in-depth study of a contact zone that encompasses several well-known dichotomies, as it lingers between modernist and postmodernist architectures, mainstream European (central) and Portuguese (peripheral) artistic canons, international abstraction versus localism, and architects' choices for open or closed configurative strategies, among others. True: their comparison of the seven proposals presented by Portuguese architects to the 1967 Amsterdam Town Hall competition does cling to national categories in order to reveal a number of cross-influences that underlie an alleged paradigm shift in Portuguese architecture. However, it also suggests that the seven Portuguese entries can be seen as concrete responses to inter-national professional debates, and even further as points within a broader constellation of local and global political

tensions, supra-national technical debates, and the trans-national academic experiences of individual architects.

A very different type of contact zone is developed by Carmela Cucuzzella in her article 'Competition Juries as Intercultural Spaces'. The cultures involved in this analysis of recent Canadian competitions are not bound to national cultures, as in the above-mentioned case of Portuguese architects in the Netherlands. Instead, her research elaborates on the different value systems utilised by the artistic, technical and managerial cultures that converge in many juries nowadays, as well as their effects in the briefs, evaluations and final outcomes of those competitions.<sup>8</sup> According to Cucuzzella, the contrasting ways in which objective facts, subjective experiences, and normative expectations are weighed and communicated by these different professional cultures, erodes the illusion of a homogeneous architecture community, and brings to the fore the often noxious role of the authoritarian expert who hampers balance and productive deliberation among jurors.

Concurrently, Jean-Pierre Chupin's article 'This is Not a Nest' studies the architecture competition as a contact zone between political forces that operate simultaneously at the local and global levels. The competition process is not depicted here as the stage where national architecture cultures collide, but rather as a positioning device amid globalisation. Revealing an interesting contradiction, the article shows how the very precise language used by competition promoters to situate their built-environmental ambitions in a global context, is strongly related to the deliberately nebulous transcultural metaphors used by participants to make their projects appear neutral, non-partisan and politically correct.

Like Cucuzzella's article, the contribution by Véronique Biau, Bendicht Weber, and Jodelle

Zetlaoui-Léger also focuses on the inner workings of the competition process, this time turning towards the normative and procedural basis on which exchange is carried out. Implicit in this evidence-based study of French and European competitions is a critique of architecture as an artistic discipline carried out by unaccountable experts. Innovation – the authors claim – should not be limited to the former, nor reliability to the latter. Instead, a case is made for *legislation* as a contact zone in itself, which would be able to promote broad and diverse participation in all stages of a competition process, and could therefore (if well designed) lead to architectures that are simultaneously innovative, reliable, but also more meaningful and appropriate.

Iterating on the contact zone as a place where national cultures meet, Torsten Lange's review of the Hannes Meyer Seminars at the Bauhaus Dessau towards the end of the Cold War uncovers professional transactions that have remained rather hidden in the folds of mainstream histories of architecture. The review article studies a contact zone where different architecture cultures meet, but more importantly, situates it at the margins of global power. By doing so, Lange exposes the effects of geopolitical contingency in our profession and on the shape of our cities, and reveals the manifold consequences of casual contact between Finnish and East German architects in construction processes and techniques, urban planning policies and the configuration of housing models in both countries.

In turn, Pratt's critique of the academy (and 'the sort of thinking' that gets done in it) is challenged by Federico Ortiz, whose review article offers a reconstruction of the multiple connections that were established between the budding Office for Metropolitan Architecture and the Architectural Association's Unit 9 diploma studio in the 1970s. The wealth of themes and project strategies discussed, the number and the diversity of actors involved,

and the way academic institutions were utilised to explore architecture and architectural practice as sources of knowledge, support the idea that even within an apparently limited context, competitions foster unexpected exchanges between different professional cultures.

Contact zones have also been characterised as spaces of critique, parody, imaginary dialogue, and absolute heterogeneity of meaning.<sup>9</sup> Hamish Lonergan's review article offers a sharp analysis of memes as expressions of these traits in the dizzying realm of social media. The torrent of proposals to rebuild Paris's most iconic cathedral, he notes, sprung from a virtual competition, snow-balled across established and emerging practices, and revealed the extraordinary weight of architecture communication in our time. Lonergan's use of the contact zone as an instrument to analyse the proliferation of projects sparked by media attention raises provocative questions regarding originality, authorship and reproduction, labour, the legitimacy of architecture institutions, and the role of the individual architect in our time.

Closing the issue we have talked to the architectural historian and critic Sarah Williams Goldhagen, whose seminal description of architecture as a discourse is evidently in tune with Pratt's contact zone and Zimmermann's *histoire croisée*.<sup>10</sup> Goldhagen's reflections on current historiography, postmodern architecture, and architecture competitions bring to light a host of new concerns for architects and historians alike; ranging from the role and nature of architectural education and the irrelevance of style, to the possibility of histories of architecture that should transcend narrow divisions and categories by focusing on key elements of the architectural discipline, such as technique.

Together, these contributions reveal the utility of studying architecture and competitions as contact zones. Framed as inter- and trans-cultural

exchanges between different professional value systems and their normative apparatuses, competitions are certainly much more than discussions among a homogeneous community of designers. They are arenas for public debate, spaces where different world visions are transacted, instances of cognitive growth via competition and collaboration.

It must be noted that the fuller and certainly richer demarcation of architecture and its history which we have captured in this study of competitions as contact zones has brought forth a communicative challenge. Exchanges, interrelations and interactions do not seem to fit, much less be expressible with conventional methods of architectural representation. Consequently, descriptive texts, perspective renderings and crisp photos of buildings – standard illustrations in most journals of architecture – have been mostly replaced by charts, tables, and index cards in these pages, indicating that new modes of writing history inevitably demand new instruments and methods for architectural expression. Aware that every discovery brings forth a new challenge, this realisation leaves us confident that we have assembled a valuable contribution to the growth and development of our knowledge of architectural historiography, by convoking the following, notable attempts to examine architecture and competitions through the methodological frame of the contact zone.

## Notes

1. Swati Chattopadhyay, 'Depicting Calcutta', PhD dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1997. Swati Chattopadhyay, *Representing Calcutta* (Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge, 2005). Mark Crinson, *Modern Architecture and the End of Empire* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2003).
2. A thought-provoking publication that put the spotlight on the clients of architectural houses is Alice Friedman's *Women and the Making of the Modern House: A Social and Architectural History* (New York:

- Abrams, 1998). Dell Upton pioneered the approach of addressing the people involved in the design process and ignoring the canonical architects of modernism. Dell Upton, *America's architectural roots: Ethnic groups that built America* (Washington, DC: The Preservation Press: 1986).
3. In her PhD dissertation, Esra Akcan used the literary metaphor of 'translation' as a way to understand the global circulation of culture. 'Modernity in Translation', PhD dissertation, Columbia University, 2005. She further developed the argument of the liberating and colonial effects of translation in *Architecture in Translation: Germany, Turkey, & the Modern House* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012). For studies that addresses the complexities of cross-cultural exchange, see for example Tom Avermaete et al., *Oase 95: Crossing Boundaries: Transcultural Practices in Architecture and Urbanism* (Rotterdam: Nai010 uitgevers, 2015). Jean-Louis Cohen and Christa Weil, *Scenes of the World to Come: European Architecture and the American Challenge 1893–1960* (Paris: Flammarion, 1995). The method of 'reciprocal comparison' elucidates how developments in 'peripheries' are no longer compared to Europe but to other previously colonised regions. See for example Alex Bremner, *Imperial Gothic: Religious Architecture and High Anglican Culture in the British Empire, c. 1840–1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).
  4. Together with Tom Avermaete, Cathelijne Nuijsink is currently defining the larger theoretical and methodological framework of 'contact zones', and its meaning for the field of architecture. See Tom Avermaete, and Cathelijne Nuijsink. 'An Architecture Culture of "Contact Zones": Prospects for Changing the Historiography of Architectural Modernism'. Paper Presentation at the Society of Architectural Historians (SAH) Annual International Conference 2020, Seattle, United States. The paper will appear in extended form as a book chapter in the edited volume Vikramaditya Prakash, Maristella Casciato, and Daniel E. Coslett, eds. *Global Modernism and the Postcolonial: New Perspectives on Architecture* (New York: Routledge, 2022). With similar ambitions, but using elements from scientific methodology for the appraisal of architecture, Jorge Mejía has advanced a new mode of cross-cultural history writing in 'Transactions; or Architecture as a System of Research Programs', PhD Dissertation, TU Delft, 2018.
  5. Mary Louise Pratt, 'Arts of the Contact Zone', *Profession* (1991), 33–40; 34.
  6. Ibid., 37
  7. Ibid., 39
  8. Also suggested in the interview with Sarah Williams Goldhagen in this issue, focus on the effects of managerial and technological cultures in architecture suggests an interesting paradigm shift in architectural historiography.
  9. Pratt, 'Arts of the Contact Zone', 37.
  10. Sarah Williams Goldhagen, 'Something to Talk About: Modernism, Discourse, Style', *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 64, no. 2 (2005): 144–67.

## Biography

Jorge Mejía Hernández graduated as an architect in Colombia and received a PhD from TU Delft, where he teaches design studios and research with the section Methods and Matter. He is co-director of the Delft/Rotterdam-based research group Architecture, Culture and Modernity and acts as science communications manager for the EU-funded COST action Writing Urban Places: New Narratives of the European City.

Cathelijne Nuijsink graduated in architecture from both TU Delft and the University of Tokyo before obtaining a PhD in East Asian Languages and Civilisations from the University of Pennsylvania. Currently, she is a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Fellow at the Institute for the History and Theory of Architecture (gta) at ETH Zurich, where she is exploring the potentials of architectural contact zones as a theoretical and methodological framework to rewrite the history of architectural modernism using as a case study the Shinkenchiku Residential Design Competition (1965–present).

