The Competition That Changed Your life: About and Beyond Winning

Strategic Considerations for Architectural Practices on the Basis of The Analysis of 116 Competitions Stories

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Keywords: participants' profiles and motives, strategic formulations, empirical research

Are there recognizable patterns in the way competitions serve the development of architecture practices? How can competitions be effectively used by architects? The paper is based on a survey developed by the Wonderland platform for European architecture in collaboration with the Vienna based practice SHARE architects. **116 stories about 'the competition that changed your life'**. According to the survey, competitions represented a relevant investment for all responding practices, with an average of 3,4 competitions and **2,000 working hours per year** (corresponding to the annual working time of one full-time collaborator). The quantitative data pinpoints that considering winning as the only positive outcome of a competition could make little sense of the considerable investment in competitions done by the practices surveyed. A much **'broader spectrum of interests and concerns'** (Kreiner 2010a, p.122) tmight actually constitute the reason why some architecture practice considerably invest in competitions. It is in the qualitative perspective (the stories) that elements of the spectrum can be searched for. The stories collected document in fact a range of possible approaches and ways in which competitions can change the life of an architecture practice. Therefore they give indications about what relevant interests and concerns might lead a practice in this field of action.

The analysis has been structured according to two broad categories: 'about winning' looking at what in the approach could contribute to the success, and 'beyond winning', focussing on the side effects of competitions in order to understand what might be gained beyond getting the job. By using competitions as exceptional opportunities to test radical design approach, to find out what one really wants, as 'switches' for experimentation, practices can possibly maximize their 'return of investment', at least in terms of creative and organizational capital. In this approach, winning is actually a positive side-effect while it is the experimentation and learning process that represent the main core benefit.

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introduction

'If I had the chance, I'd like to make the following experiment: take part in a competition every month with my studio and, at the same time, spend the same amount of money hiring people to simply go dancing at every party and talk about me with everybody they meet. Investing the money in people would probably produce better results.'

Herwig Spiegl, Alles Wird Gut, Vienna 2007 in: Wonderland Manual for Emerging Architects, p.157

Is it really true that competitions are a bad investment for architects, as suggested by one of the partners of the very successful Austrian practice ALLES WIRD GUT? (The name of the practice, by the way, translates as 'everything will be well'. The practice is well known in Austria and beyond, and has an impressive record of successful competitions submissions). Does it make sense to invest in competitions or do they represent a futile self-exploitation? What specific benefits do they bring?

From the point of view of the amount of work produced by the participating architects to come to one selected option architectural design competitions represent a 'generous wasting of ideas and excessive meeting of efforts' (Gausa, 2003), 'wasteful procedure' (Kreiner, 2010), a 'suffering process where everyone suffers and only few can be happy' (Dobberstein, 2011),a 'needless multiplication of efforts' (Gilbert and Jormakka, 2011, p.283 quoting Proudhon). Yet, they also represent a fair system of procurement based on the quality of the submitted ideas. They can provide unique chances to get a practice started, access to new markets, propel a practice to fame. As suggested by the chairman of competitions' workgroup for the Architects Council of Europe Georg Pendl (2011), the truth is possibly somewhere in between, as competitions represent simultaneously 'wonderful chances of success and abuse'.

This double sidedness is relevant for all the actors involved. Organizations and bodies overseeing the profession (such as professional chambers), involved in the running of competitions, need to make sure that the system remains fair and as effective as possible. But architects need as well to enter the process with open eyes, fully aware of both the high potentials and high risks that investing in competitions involves, taking care of not falling into futile 'self-abuse'.

It is therefore important to gather information about what can competitions bring to practices (the rationale of making competitions, beyond just winning, thus the 'spectrum of interests'), about the investment required as well as its risks and paradoxes. The experience of practices involved in competitions represents an important source of knowledge. What can be learnt out of experience? Are there recognizable patterns in the way competitions serve the development of architecture practices and how competitions can be effectively used by architects?

Methodological approach
The paper is based on a survey developed by the Wonderland platform for European architecture in collaboration with the Vienna based practice SHARE architects, to which I belong. Wonderland is a network of young European practices aimed at fostering exchange. The survey was part of the project 'Deadline today', an exhibition and symposium about architectural design competitions that took place in Vienna Architekturzentrum in June 2009. It contains **116 stories about 'the competition that changed your life'** submitted by practices from 25 countries in response to an open call. The practices were asked to submit both a descriptive text and answer a series of

approximately 40 questions about the role of the specific competition and competitions in general played in their practice. The survey framed both the general results achieved by the teams thanks to competitions, and the specifics of the 116 entries. Part of the survey is published in the Wonderland Manual for Emerging Architect, in the chapter 'Making competitions' (Forlati et al, 2011, p. 268-328).

The common denominator among the practices is the fact that they had experienced at least one competition that relevantly contributed to their career. The respondents included both teams from outside Europe doing projects in Europe and European teams doing projects outside Europe. One specific practice was directly contacted because of their outstanding achievement (they won an architectural competition against 1556 competitors). The average age of the practices was below 9 years. In terms of size, both the average size and the majority of the practices were below 10 people (including collaborators). Compared to the European average sizes), they were nonetheless relatively large practices as only approximately 6% of the architecture practices in Europe are above 5 people (Mizra and Nacey 2012, p.44).
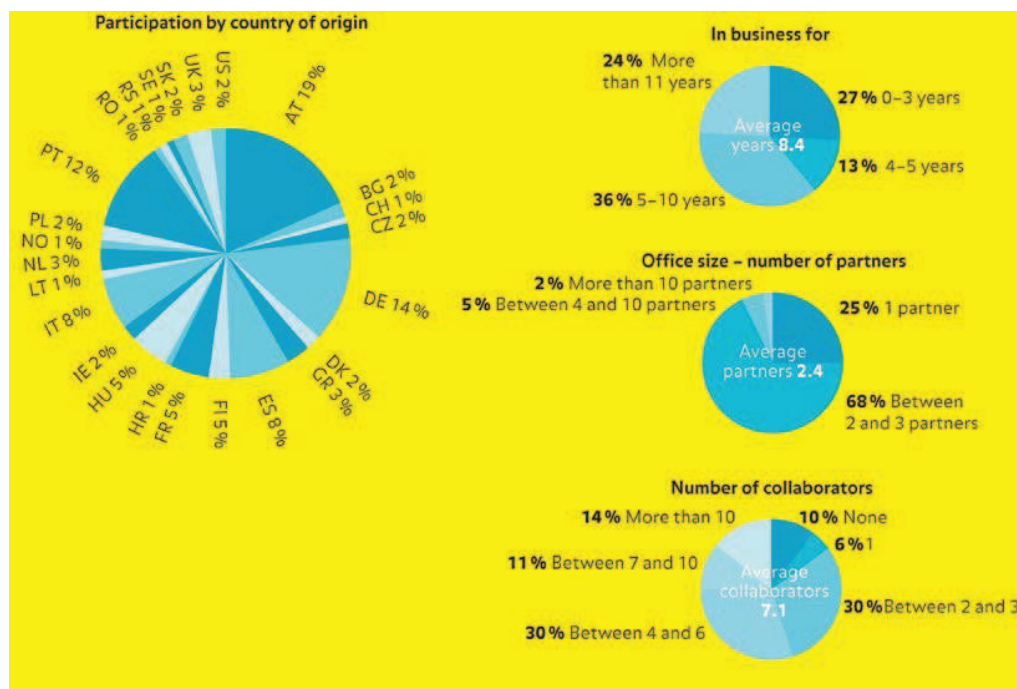

Image 01: Overview of the 116 practices taking part in the survey on which this paper is based. Source: Forlati and SHARE architects(2011) p.287

The call was published through the Wonderland network itself), the Austrian Chamber of Architects and Chartered Engineers, and competitions listings web-sites such as www.*competition-online.de*. By filling in the questionnaire and sharing their story, the teams were given the possibility of taking part in the exhibition. There was no financial reward for the time invested in the submission, yet there was a potential for media attention. Considering the modality of the call, and the fact that their designs were recognized as award winning, the practices are assumed to be design-oriented European small to medium practices, open to an international perspective, interested in

cultural capital and with a relevant experience in taking part in architectural competitions. A minority of the practices were well known-practices at least in the national context of reference, and no 'star architect' took part.

The paper proposes both an overview of the data shared by the practices, as well a cross analysis of the qualitative aspects that emerged out of the stories, focused at the common denominators both in terms of strategic approaches and achievements. In this way the paper intends to pinpoints possible empirical answers to the questions formulated above (*Are there recognizable patterns in the way competitions serve the development of architecture practices? How can competitions be effectively used by architects?*). The relevance of these answers is clearly related to the specific profile of the practices surveyed, and the aims is to document a range of differing approaches within the sample, and not a good for all recipe.

Overview
According to the survey, competitions represented a relevant investment for all responding practices, with an average of 3,4 competitions and **2,000 working hours per year** (corresponding to the annual working time of one full-time collaborator).

One competition involved in average 568 working hours from a team of more than 3 people within the practice. Additional hours were invested by consultants and sometime by partner offices. *(A previous survey of practices with similar profiles showed that in average PR work involved 162 hours per year, and was something where practices did not feel that they were investing enough)*. Once the competition is won, the average fee received for the resulting commission was just above 300,000 Euro.

The average ratio between submissions and realized project shows how difficult it is to reach realization. On the basis of the overall experience of the survey participants the following data emerged: out of 100 entries, 37 received an award of some kind, 17 won a first prize, and of these first prizes only 8 were eventually built. The resulting (possibly oversimplified) average rule of thumb: **out of 10 competitions, two of them result in a first prize, and one gets built.**

In terms of direct return, the practices indicated in average that 19% of the buildings they realized were commissioned thanks to competitions, and 39%of the practices indicated in competitions the most important source of new commissions. Considering the investment quantified above, competitions looked at in terms of one-to- one results represent an extremely time-intensive and in the end inefficient way of procurement for the practice surveyed. Alternatives such as the ones suggested in the opening quote of this paper (PR, networking,…) could be after all much more effective. On the other hand, the relevance of competitions in the practice suggests that the quantitative factors highlighted above and considering winning as the only positive outcome of a competition represent only one side the issue, as they do not catch a possibly much **'broader spectrum of interests and concerns'** (Kreiner 2010a, p.122) that might actually constitute the reason why some architecture practice considerably invest in competitions.

It is in the qualitative perspective (the stories) that elements of the spectrum can be searched for. The stories collected document in fact a range of possible approaches and ways in which competitions can change the life of an architecture practice. Therefore

they give indications about what relevant interests and concerns might lead a practice in this field of action.

The following analysis has been structured according to two broad categories: 'about winning' and 'beyond winning'. In the first of the proposed categories, I have looked at how competitions were approached within the practice, and what in the approach could contribute to the success. In the second category, I have looked at the broader 'spectrum of interests and concerns' beyond winning,) in order to pinpoint the role that competitions making play for the surveyed practices.

*(In the following pages practices have been distinguished according to the their country of origin. More quotes from the same practice can be identified thanks to the asterisks, for example German practice ***).*

about winning
Competitions as turning points

Competition represented determining turning points for a relevant number of submitting practices, and this in at least three ways: by enabling to start a practice for real, by providing access to a different market segment and/ or to a different geographical context.

27% of the practices surveyed declared in fact hat the competition *'that changed their life'* was the reason to start their practice. **Two different patterns emerge from the stories.** In some cases the competition was of an effort done while working for another office, that took place during holidays or in the after-work. For others however the success happened out of a consistent focus on producing competitions to get the practice started. To these two different patterns correspond two equally different approaches towards competitions and success. In the first case there is an obvious sense of having been lucky and a loose approach to winning. The focus in on the challenge, on the 'playfulness', on passion, and winning is experienced as a surprise. For the second type of pattern there is instead a strong sense that the effort required was demanding to an extreme, almost 'heroic'.

*'At the time on e of us was still a student, the other had just finished. **We did the competition only to enjoy** (Spanish practice).*

'In architecture sometimes things happen just like in 'wonderland' (Spanish practice).*

'(We were) just a bunch of friends starting from a blank: no PR network, no money, hardly spare time being busy doing something else to learn a living. (…) A competition is for us more a way to challenge ourselves and keep learning than craving for the first place.' (Italian practice).

The extreme of this 'heroic' phase concerns both the financial conditions of the practice as well as the psychological ones. In this phase there is no secured income and the team has to deal with constant self- doubt and the highest uncertainty over a longer period of time (from one year to fifteen in the case of the Finnish team). Awards other than the first prize might offer short-term help, but only winning means surviving. This need to win is possibly an important specific condition from at least two points of view.

a) The role of luck in winning architectural competitions has been considered as determining as it is not possible to foresee how literally the brief will be interpreted by the jury (Kreiner, 2010,p. 103). Yet the stories share the fact that victory resulted out of a consistent effort, possibly indicating that a learning phase can bring fruits (it is possible to learn the green).
b) The key competition is by many of these teams described as the last try, or last 'gamble' (Austrian practice**), an all-or-nothing situation

*I opened my own office (…) with no contracts at hand. The first year was actually pretty tough and I was always short on money. Working at home from my laptop I tried to participate in as many competitions as possible. **In retrospective I would call this year 'the heroic phase'**. (Austrian practice*)*

Our office started within 12 m2 and two laptops. (…) Most of our contributions were (..) prizes and honourable mentions. The big dream of feeding ourselves by creating good architecture and contribute something to our cultural life came closer, but our architectural ego, increased much faster than our financial one. (German practice who invested two years before winning the competition that changed their life)

where the future existence of the practice will be decided. Similarly to the descriptions of 'after-work' competitions attempt, also here: freedom of thinking, doing the project out of own interpretation, 'basic instinct' (Austrian practice**), and not explicit strategic considerations drive the team. All this suggests that a deeper reach into creativity connected to the extreme conditions described above may pay off.

*Three times they have been left with empty pockets. … today, looking back they'd admit was a bit **foolish and careless**. Had they not won this time, they'd probably got hungry, down to the last cent, and distressed by the broken dream of setting up office together. (Austrian practice**)*

__There is a limit in everyone's self-confidence__ and in the mid 80s we as well started to doubt that it was going to work. (…) we decided that this will be the last one if nothing will come out of it (Finnish team, working for fifteen years part time)

The stories showed as well that competitions could act as turning points also for already established practices, not only for start-ups. By offering the opportunity to acquire projects in a different scale, of a specific typology or in a different county, competitions could change and upgrade the profile of some practices significantly.

In the case of projects in a bigger scale (and consequent scale of the fee), the upgrade has an internal dimension – for example, increasing the stability of the office as bigger projects guarantee an longer term income, or upgrading the way the collaborators are contracted and paid- as well as an external dimension- the increased professionalism changes the positioning of the firm towards the outside. A further benefit is the raise in self- trust, as the projects, once successfully concluded, can provide the confidence *'to plan every project of any size'*, as stated by an Austrian practice who won and realized a prestigious commission in Germany, its biggest project up to that time.

Successfully competing and realizing a project of a certain type further implies the possibility to access restricted competitions for similar projects. This might also become a mixed blessing, pushing towards an unplanned specialization of the practice, as experienced by a German practice that won two competitions for school buildings and *'since that time (…) we were always invited for school competitions and we are doing more or less nothing else than school buildings'.*

In all these cases successful competitions provided unique even if costly opportunities for the submitting teams otherwise not available. In this perspective the relevance of competitions is the opportunity they offer to get a practice started, to jump scale of commission or to set up foot in a different country. Yet this opportunity strongly depends on the type (open/ restricted) and 'density' of competition available, and varies therefore from context to context. **It is possible to successfully use competitions as strategy to set up or upscale a practice, it is however a risky endeavour with no success guarantee.**

Competition as discipline within the discipline

The stories collected where focused on the 'one' competition. The data provided by the practices show however that at least for some practices competitions represent a consistent and continuous effort, and not a one-off event, providing more than success. 39 % of the practices stated that they lived off competitions and 3% in a way. Most of the practices (85%) indicated that they have a specific set-up for competitions, including specialized collaborators both within and outside the office. This information corroborates the idea that **competition making represent an own specialization within the discipline**. This is after all nothing new: competition specialists have existed in history for example in Victorian England (Gilbert and Jormakka 2011,p. 283) and well known offices are known also in connection to their competition successes. What might be however new it the increasing professionalism and level of the submissions, exacerbated by a shrinking demand for professional services and consequent raised level of competition within architectural competitions.

> *'You need to produce at high level, it makes sense to select ,as it is worth to **present less projects, but very well presented**, as participants are more and more belligerent, prepared to do everything to win.'*
> *(Spanish team)*

The information collected suggests that this specialization works in different dimensions, and that **practices might consciously or unconsciously develop (and combine) different kinds of specialized competitions skills**. One relevant dimension is the **specialization in term building typology** partly discussed above. This trend is particularly relevant in contexts where competitive public procurement procedures select the participants on the basis of restrictive criteria such as having already realized building with a similar program or similar building costs. In Germany for example only practices that have realized three schools in the previous 5 years can take part in schools competitions, forcing a kind of 'typological' specialization for competitions participants that excludes young teams from accessing the market, or particular segments of it (Gies, 2011, p. 323).

Yet the practices also described how **winning was supported by a mix of both design-based and not design-based strategic skills**. In this perspective, success in making competitions becomes not only a matter of luck, but also the result of learning and testing process, where also lost competitions become valuable lessons in mastering a very complex task that requires 'exercise and learning'.

> *'…a question of exercise and thinking. It is like playing the piano: you cannot play the piano concerto only by thinking of playing it' Through exercise you **learn to 'read the green'** as golfers would put it.'*
> *(Austrian practice*)*

Jury decisions are partly driven by chance, and jury might or might not select projects that do not literally 'respect' the brief, but move beyond it in some ways. The stories show the coexistence of at least two interesting possible approaches about how to deal with this paradox. One approach is about conscious strategic decisions about how far to go. In order to do this it is important to **'decode' the information**. In this case an important part of the skills is about reading the brief, and transforming this reading in a strategic positioning towards the brief, consciously managed. An important part of this 'decoding' (wording of the practice quoted in the text box above) is about **judging the judgers**, as the composition of the jury *'is an important indicator of how to set up your strategic planning' (Austrian practice*)'*.

Yet for a relevant number of other practices the decision about how far to go is about '**doing what you believe in'** (Austrian practice***), and not the result of an explicit strategy elaborated on basis of the brief or of the jury composition. The relative relevance of these two approaches is reflected in the different criteria the practices indicated as relevant in selecting a competition: for the most a challenging theme is very important, the jury is important for approximately one fourth.

In terms of results, both approaches might pay off, sometimes to an extreme.
At least 6 competitions out of the 116 surveyed were successful even if (or better said because) the submission moved beyond the brief in a very explicit way. The teams that go for the 'do what you believe in' approach do not appear to be consciously choosing between two possible alternatives, but more to have determined in advance a position from which they operate. **Their spectrum of aims, consequently, is broad, and more about defining a creative own positioning and approach than winning. They win nonetheless or possibly because of it.**

Learning to 'read the green' means moving also beyond design, and learning to grasp the complex interplay of the different factors (brief requirements, regulations, jury approach, interests and decision power of relevant stakeholders), either explicitly or implicitly, instinctively or through rationalized analysis. It also means to use experience and exercise to **build up skills and set-ups that work on the long run, moving beyond the perspective of one individual competition**.

The relevance of a long-term approach in the way competitions are developed in a practice is also what emerges from the experience of possibly the most successful competition practice that contributed to the research. The practice in question won (among other competitions) also the largest architectural competition in history in terms of number of participants (1,557 entries from 82 countries). The scale of the project was such that it propelled the practice from a three people practice to leading a team of 117 people with twelve consultants at the height of the project. To explain their success, the practice referred to their **'Five Second Rule'** to make competitions:

'an idea needs to be read from a distance of five meters within five seconds'

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*The interesting point is that **we won the competition in spite of a real radical, conceptual project.** Many colleagues start doing these common, boring designs believing that this is what people want. But we believe the opposite: only if we work on the consistency of your projects, on new, experimental approaches **we push the imagination of the clients into new fields** of interest. (Austrian practice)*

*It was a very **courageous project with very few expectations** towards an honourable mention… we were completely overwhelmed (Austrian practice***)*

While founding our office we decided NOT to participate in competitions (… yet) the competition was special because it provided a platform to show our approach (…). After winning (…) our approach brought us several projects.(Dutch practice)

Architects should not only try to answer but also to question in creative ways. (German practice)

*Dammit, let's make a statement, no overreacting conservators' bullshit.. we don't make a winning entry, we make **the project we want to experience** here when hanging around (…) (Polish team)*

The test is run using the consultants that are relevantly involved from the beginning on. Next to the design work, the practice focuses on preparing and planning the process carefully, using spreadsheets, brief analysis, deliverables, design time, design freeze, sheet layout, production, red-marking, report production, sign-off dates and finally, shipping dates.

The tools and procedures developed by this practice explicitly highlight the importance of a **communication** that works in the specific set-up of a jury session. The 'Five Second Rule' is in fact about being able to catch the attention and interest of a jury with no time or energy for an in depth analysis. But it has also a reflexive effect, as it implies is that the idea at the base of the submission is so clear that it can be easily communicated in its essence. The effectiveness of this clarity is relevant for stakeholders other than the professional jury. These stakeholders might be part of the jury themselves or be anyway in a position to influence the success of the project. (The practice in question noted that thanks to its 'kind of simpleness' people as well as the most relevant stakeholder- not an architect but the president of the country running the competition - could understand the concept very quickly.)

Competitions as collaborative efforts

Collaborations with consultants and beyond were an important contribution to the success of a number of the submitted projects. Competitions mostly resulted out of collaboration with consultants from other fields (61%) and/or other architects (29%).

'Interdisciplinary thinking produces innovation. Today it is a habit for us to do competitions in dialogue with artists, landscape architects, musicians, social workers, etc.'(German practice)

'We linked with another practice to enter the competition, wanting an Irish winner for it' (Irish Practice)

While the main workload remained with the submitting practice, collaborations helped in a variety of ways. Young practices could compensate their lack of experience by referring to experienced consultants and raise so their credibility. Multidisciplinary team work resulted in innovative winning approaches, but also joining up with other architects was successful: it helped fulfilling selection criteria by restricted competitions, but could as well raise the level of design by joining forces.

beyond winning
Overall effectiveness
One important piece of empirical piece of knowledge emerging from the compared analysis of the stories is that **successful submissions are beginning and not endpoints of a process, and that this process rarely is easy and unproblematic**. Substantial difficulties in moving from a successful submission to a realization are in fact an experience shared by many of the practices. While some of the difficulties are possibly comparable to the ones in 'normal' direct commissions, others can be specifically linked to the competition setting.

The submitted stories suggest that **in competitions clients might feel less bound than in a direct commission both towards the predefined requirements and to the resulting project**. The stories included cases where the clients felt free to strongly rework the brief after the project was selected, to contract other architects or to let the project die. The suggestion of one of the teams involved in one of these cases is that in competitions only after the competition is decided *'the client starts to think seriously about his requirements.'* (Austrian practice). This delayed definition results in a substantial additional workload for the architect, and possibly in relevant differences between the winning competition design and the realised project that in the end invalidate the work of the jury.

'The commission went through several difficult circumstances, difficult to explain. We designed two complete executive projects, the second finally was built 6 years after the competition' (Spanish practice).

'11 years have passed, and we are not working on a third scheme based on a new transportation plan' (Greek team)

As clients delegate part of their decisions power to experts, **the final selection might be something that the client does not agree or cannot live with for a variety of reasons** (including not trusting the team but liking the idea), and in the end has little chance of getting properly if at all realized: This pattern can be found in cases where not selected proposals were realized by someone else, as well as cases where the result of the competition was put aside in favour of a new, directly commissioned project.

'I was wondering why the f*ck they established a jury with a Pritzker prize winner, if they preferred a post – modern Disneyland'. (German practice)

As it was an idea competition, we didn't expect any direct commission, but we were sure about the possibility of being invited in case of a project competition for the new train station. (Then) the architect Rafael Moneo was directly contracted (…) (Austrian practice who won an idea award in Spain).

Not only projects do not get build as foreseen in the competition phase, but also they do not get built at all. The data already discussed say something about the 'mortality rate' of successful submissions. In the overall experience of the surveyed practices, only 47% of the won project since the practice's inception were built. Of the 100 projects awarded a first prize in the survey, 39 were realized and 33 were under construction and 9 in contract negotiation. Still 11 were on hold, 8 were cancelled and 11 did not imply realization. Even if we cannot compare these 'mortality' ratios to the

We were informed that the project was very well received (…) yet we were only awarded the second prize. (After four years) we encountered to our surprise (…) a flashy rendering and a model (…) Beyond the non-descript Eastern European developer attitude the project resembled in its massing and urban gestures quite closely our original scheme' (Greek team in a invited competition for a private developer).

one of direct commissions, it is clear that a 'dead' competition project has involved much more work a 'normal' one, both if we look at the total work done by all the participants, but possibly as well only at the work done by the winning practice to get to a successful submission.

The information collected leads to two important reflections. First, the research on the effectiveness of the competition should include the following implementation phase, looking for specific patterns of failure, as the ones suggested above, and their relevance.

'There was a political shift in leadership and the project was cancelled because the new administration preferred not to adorn itself with borrowed plumes… The empty lot was turned into a parking lot – for several million euros.' (Austrian practice, whose project for a transfusion centre was cancelled after construction began)

Secondly, also in view of the risks of winning projects remaining unrealized, in terms of 'getting the job' competitions appear to be relevant where no other options are available (for example for beginners as unique access chance), but otherwise a highly ineffective way of procurement. Yet, as already pinpointed, to look at competitions in terms of 'getting the job' might be a much too limited perspective.

'The financial crisis happened, and not the project is on hold' (Austrian practice)

'The commission is ours if they manage to raise the money' (Slovak practice with a project in Norway)

Side effects

The patterns analyzed in the previous pages already introduce the idea that competitions bring more than just a job, as they strongly affect the way a practice operates, positions and reflects on itself beyond having got an additional project. **To understand the possible return of the considerable investment of competitions, it is therefore important to understand and possibly factor in what I would call side-effects.**

The fact that side effects are relevant by-products of competition is confirmed by the experience of several practices that showed how **even 'lost' competitions could positively and relevantly influence their development**. In these cases the competitions, even when lost, created the opportunity for the practice to show its abilities to potential clients or in general, and thanks to this acknowledgement new projects could be gained.

'Even if I did not won, the work was very much appreciated. This competition gave me the possibility to have other work (…) and to open my office. (Portuguese practice)

Won competitions were indicated as key event that lead to changes in the way the office was organized and run. As already discussed before, self- trust and increased acknowledgement, as well as the network of consultants used in the competition phase constituted further resources for the practices beyond the competition it itself.

But is this enough? Asked about the benefit they saw in doing competitions, only 15% fully agreed that competitions a good opportunity for getting new commissions, while most practices (59%) indicated the fact that they stimulate architectural thinking.

'Moving from working for free all the time to getting paid to be working like hell' (Austrian practice)

'The project has shaped the way in which we approach and run projects now and in the future' (Irish practice)*

This perspective also emerges out of some of the stories: **Competitions are described as exceptional opportunities to test radical design approach, to find out what one really wants, 'switches' for experimentation. In this approach, winning is actually a positive side-effect while it is the experimentation and learning process that represent the main core benefit.**

In this, competitions seem to work differently than usual projects. While this difference is not explicitly discussed in the stories, it is possible to assume that the critical and experimental intensity has to do with the need to take responsibility for the project, as difficult or contrasting requirements cannot be neutralized by talking to the client (as suggested in Kreiner 2010b). the presence of a deadline and possibly the spirit and ambition of the task in itself.

What I have called side–effects constitute potentially relevant interests and concerns for making competitions, beyond the 'getting the job' logic. In this perspective consistently investing in competitions has to do with a return of creative and organizational capital for the practice, and not necessarily with the return linked to winning and to the follow- up project.

'We have completely embraced the fact that every commission might become a competition at any point (and vice versa) and we appreciate it, as it keeps us innovative and self-critical.'(French practice working in Asia)

'A lot of architect friends did competitions to try to get work but to me competitions were opportunities for experiment (…) a sort of frame in which to test ideas. (Portuguese practice)

'We use them as a raw material for research; they become switches that turn on speculations and open up possibilities when other means of theoretical and archival research have come to a dead end.'(Greek practice that used competitions as part of a PhD by architectural design)

'At the end of the day there is no logic in the process. The project is everywhere, but you do end up with the project only because you have to deliver it on deadline day' (Irish practice)

conclusions

What can be inferred from the patterns described until now about how to effectively use architecture competitions to develop an architecture practice? The following series of strategic considerations are primarily referable to not fully established practices similar to the ones responding to the survey, with an interest in a design based profile.

Relevance of competitions
- Competitions offers unique opportunities for practices at different stages of their development, however these opportunities come in face of a considerable investment and risks. Cases where the first try is the first win are possible but totally unpredictable. Usually a successful competition is part of a series of other submissions done by the practice, suggesting the need to develop a consistent line of work in this field in order to come to a result.
- Competitions results are anyway unpredictable, but it is possible to **develop and /or train strategic skills in selecting the competition, design development and in terms of operational and communication approaches** ('reading the green' or procedures such as the 'Five second rule') that might raise the chances of success.
- While it is not possible to directly steer and maximize the winning of competitions, it is possible to **maximize the side-effects** for every competition done and transform them in a capital of some sort for the practice. These side effects include: **developing new/experimental approaches, establishing collaborative exchange networks both within and beyond the profession, developing organizational set- ups and ways of working for producing interesting ideas**. All these resources can be used to inform the way the practice works both for normal commissions and for competitions.
- In terms of design content, the strategy of prioritizing interpretations that move beyond the expectations of the client instead of mere brief implementation pinpoints the potential of developing own stand-points and agenda that can then inform submissions as well the other projects. **Competitions can become so tests or 'switches' for an experimentation that moves beyond the submission**. By this the practice can broaden the spectrum of interests and concerns beyond the submission, and **gain also when the competition is lost**.

Specific risks highlighted in the previous analysis concerns recurrent failures in the implementation phase (winning is not enough), that make the investment in competitions- when looked at in terms of winning – particularly ineffective.

All in all it remains an open question, even in front of a maximization of the side-effects discussed above, if the 2000 hours invested in average per year by the practices surveyed make sense. Alternative strategies of procurement such as PR work could at least in part be considered, whereby- differently from competitions- these strategies are possibly less sexy and attractive to architects, especially to the ones fitting in the profile here considered. PR strategies in fact do no rely on any skills included in most architectural education curricula, do not usually involve a broader spectrum of interests and concerns as competitions do, nor provide the chance of changing the life of a practice in a day. As the saying goes, no risk no fun…
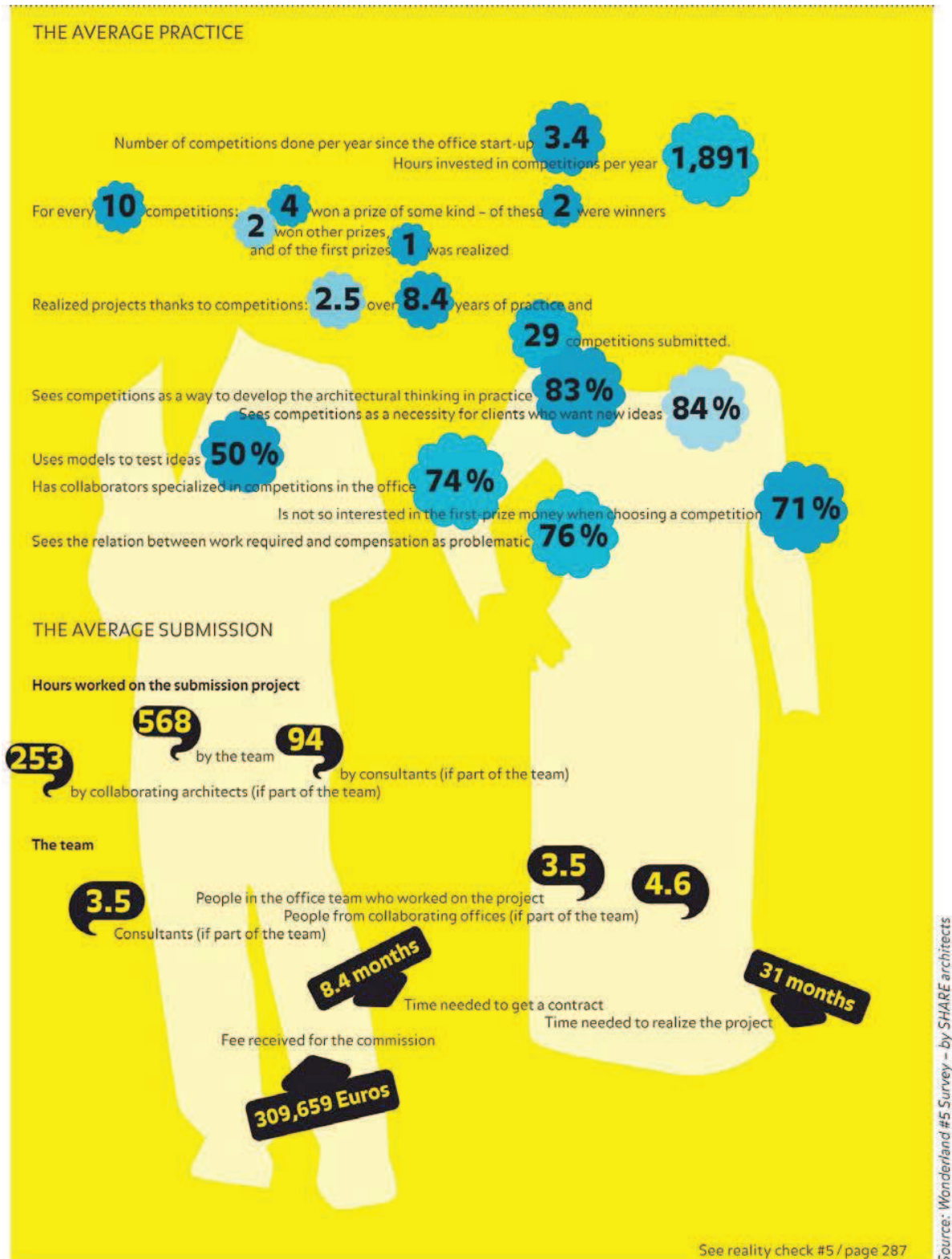
Fig.1: The average practice/ The average submission; Wonderland Survey #5.
in: ForlatiS.; Isopp A; Piber A (eds.).: *Wonderland Manual for Emerging Architects*.p. 272

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