

# **Managerial Implications for Architectural Competitions Based on Paradox Theory**

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### **Abstract**

Despite being one of the most important means to obtain commissions, explore in design terms and develop design quality, architectural competitions are an extremely controversial practice. Nevertheless, they are increasingly adopted within the European procurement law, to the point that exploring and understanding their debated issues is essential to improve their effectiveness. We use a paradox lens to open up managerial insights and to develop a theory of architectural competitions' paradoxes. We propose a set of paradoxes and managerial implications for architects and clients/juries with regard to each competition phase: programming, selection and shortlist, design of the proposals, and jury decision making.

### **Keywords**

Paradox, competition stages, procurement system, competition tradition, managerial implications

### **Introduction**

Starting at the latest with the Greeks, architectural competitions have traditionally been a vehicle for the creation of major civic buildings and public spaces, such as government buildings, performing art centres, educational facilities, public libraries, museums and housing (Strong, 1996). Architectural competitions have multiple goals (e.g. Larson, 1994; Spreiregen, 1979): disclose new talent, challenge 'conventional wisdom', create a dialogue on design, enlarge support, increase competition, select an architect, educate students, gain insight in competences, contribute to the cultural dimension of the built environment and expand the boundaries of design. Svensson (2009) adds the aims of marketing a project, assuring quality through jury assessment, running architecture politics and coordinating different fields of interests. Yet, competitions cost money, take more time and their designs rarely get built (Spreiregen, 1979).

Despite this, competitions are still common practice. They are even incorporated in the European procurement regulations for architectural services (Sudjic, 2006). Exploring and understanding the debated issues of competitions therefore remains essential to improve the effectiveness of these phenomena for both the client and the architect. Given this, we aim at understanding the paradoxical features that are embedded within the present architectural competition system and the

managerial challenges they determine for the actors involved. We mainly provide a theoretical contribution, critically examining and interpreting the current European competition system in light of paradox studies.

The paper is organised as follows. First we introduce the current procurement system and competition tradition. Then we review paradox studies as a theoretical framework to interpret and analyse competitions. Finally we discuss paradoxes of competitions and managerial implications for architects and clients/juries.

### **Different systems beyond competitions**

Today architectural competitions are the result of diverse roots: the competition tradition versus the tendering for works and services, and the search for a design partner, which flow into the procurement principles (Strong, 1996).

On the one hand, the competition tradition is based on the client's intention to acquire a design product as a patron. This tradition acknowledges the artistic characteristics of architectural design and increases scholarly acknowledgment of unique shape-making creative services (Duffy & Rabeneck, 2013). The anonymous design submissions become part of a peer review and/or a public debate about the potential quality of the firm. The client and the architectural community are represented on a jury committee that has the authority to choose a winner based on an evaluation of the design proposals.

On the other hand, procurement principles apply when considering an architect selection as a partner selection process (Morledge & Smith, 2013). In the procurement approach, architects are considered entrepreneurial service providers competing for a contract, by acting as either model users or critical reviewers (Duffy & Rabeneck, 2013). Such a partnering selection process aims at acquiring maximum value for the client. Hence, the client has the final say. In order to know with whom the client will be doing business, physical interaction between the client and the service provider is an important element in the selection process.

Both traditions are equally important, even if their coexistence originates several contradictions and dilemmas, which can be fruitfully addressed as paradoxes.

### **Paradox studies as a theoretical framework**

A paradox is defined as “a thing that combines contradictory features or qualities” (Oxford English Dictionary). In the academic literature, it is a set of contradictory yet interrelated elements, logical in isolation but irrational when juxtaposed (Lewis, 2000). These elements can be demands, feelings, perceptions, identities, practices or messages at multiple levels (organizational, project, group, individual). Tensions exist with regard to goals (performing paradox) and to identity and interpersonal relationships (belonging paradox), as well as to processes (organizing paradox) and knowledge (learning paradox) in professional organizations (Smith & Lewis, 2011).

In general, architecture faces a broad paradox between long-term sustainability and short-term business performance (Aho, 2013). Architects have to earn money through commissions, while winning awards to build up a particular design reputation (Brown et al., 2010; Manzoni et al., 2012). They have responsibilities towards the profession, the client, the staff and the own firm; they see their profession as both a vocation and a job and wear the hats of artist and consultant (Gotsi et al., 2010). Furthermore, they are caught between preserving creative freedom and novelty, while controlling and ruling creative processes (DeFillippi et al., 2007). Finally, they struggle between the ambition for creative exploration and the need for commercial exploitation (Duffy & Rabeneck, 2013).

Clients – and juries representing them in competitions – also look for design excellence to make a

stand in society. At the same time they are interested in keeping the investment they make under control. They search for a design project, which meet entirely their own idea of the project, while also for a design partner able to suggest them something they did not think about (Volker, 2012).

Having to contend with extremes typically drives actors towards making a choice between two opposites. Because tensions are interrelated and persist over time, however, a choice between extremes does not ensure sustainability in the long term. This reveals a synergic potential, which is also what distinguishes paradox from other apparently similar concepts, such as that of dilemma (see Smith & Lewis, 2011 for a detailed comparative review). Resolving a dilemma means weighing pros and cons and choosing the option where pros prevail over cons. Dilemmas can prove to be paradoxical, however, when tensions can be more usefully approached from a both/and perspective rather than an either/or perspective (Quinn, 1988).

We believe this is the case of Rönn (2009)'s competition dilemmas for example. Anonymity versus architect–client communication is evidently an illustration for competing choices. In this case, an either/or approach is possible, but under anonymity no direct interaction is possible; while if communication is chosen, there is no competition based on anonymous product quality in its traditional meaning. Instead, if we look at this dilemma as a paradox, a balancing act between the two choices could lead to anonymous submissions with briefing sessions that allow for a dialogue, ending up in, for example, competitions based on competitive dialogue (Kreiner et al., 2011). This combination has recently been recognized in diverse countries as an improved competition formula. Approaching tensions as paradoxical implies accepting and fostering the coexistence of competing extremes (Quinn, 1988). This helps in capturing and explaining the complexity of reality, sustaining long-term performance, enabling learning and creativity, and fostering flexibility and resilience (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Because tensions foster creativity and complex insights, paradoxes can also be something exceptionally positive. They trigger change, acting as brainteasers and challenging common logic and thinking (Handy, 1994).

In the following section we use existing literature to explore the current architectural competitions' system with a paradox lens, revealing paradoxical tensions in the concept. Then we bring to the forth several managerial challenges that result from the system's controversies, leading to implications for architects and juries in dealing with the different phases of the competition process.

### **Paradoxes of architectural competitions and managerial implications**

This section presents inherent paradoxes of architectural competitions, as encountered in each competition phase, as well as managerial implications for the actors involved – architects and clients/juries, as summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Paradoxical characteristics and managerial implications

<i><b>Competition phase</b></i>	<i><b>Paradoxical characteristics</b></i>	<i><b>Managerial implications</b></i>
Programming	Writing a brief which is prescriptive as well as open to interpretations	Client/jury: enabling the submission of controversial entries and facilitating adherence and non-adherence to the brief. Architect: reading the brief with conflicting demands in mind, listening to and teaching the client.
Selection and shortlist	Ensuring an open competition but among relevant players	Client/jury: ensuring comparability among entries and influences the character of the selected design proposals to evaluate in the final competition. Architect: having a rich portfolio of other similar projects to enter competitions, while entering competitions to acquire projects.

Designing the proposals	Conforming to brief and instructing the client	Client/jury: including a dialogue in competitions and/or answering effectively to Q&A sessions. Architect: balancing brief's possibilities and constraints within the same proposal; reconstructing client–architect interaction and dialogue within the competition team.
Jury decision making	Balancing emotions and rationality	Client/jury: composing a jury that mirrors the composition of the criteria required, including the relevant stakeholders to embrace multiple views on the project. Architect: offering a rigorous submission that is also triggering emotions and debate.

### ***Programming: prescribing AND allowing for interpretation***

#### *Paradoxical characteristics*

Each competition begins with the definition of the project that entails writing the brief, deciding the process' schedule, goals and requirements, selecting the jury, allocating the budget and prizes and setting up the logistics. Afterwards the client or commissioning body publicises it, and in some cases alert or invite qualified architectural firms.

At this stage the brief is the most critical aspect, being a prominent cause of failed competitions or abandoned projects when inadequate (e.g. Andersson 2010; Svensson, 2009). The brief includes the purpose of the competition; the nature of the design problem; a site description and the expectations in terms of architectural, urban or landscape expression; a description of the functions and activities required as well as technical, environmental and architectural requirements to be met (UIA, 2008, Art. 9). By doing so, the brief nourishes architectural teamwork and equips the jury with arguments for assessing entries (Andersson, 2010).

Given this, the brief has to be prescriptive, but also leave space for freedom of interpretation for the competitors to operate. There is a paradox between 'precision' and 'latitude' (Rönn, 2009). On the one hand, "the more clearly the stakeholders can define their positions, the better equipped designers are to understand the motivations that are at work and to present solutions that work" (Malmberg, 2006: 4). On the other hand, the freedom of interpretation should be as wide as possible, being competitions exploration-oriented by nature (UIA, 2008). Thus, a competition brief reads as both instruction and inspiration and should be both unambiguous and non-constraining.

#### *Managerial implications*

For architectural firms competing, the paradox above implies reading the brief with conflicting demands in mind, listening to the client and teaching the client what he wants, adhering to the brief requirements and challenging the brief (Manzoni & Volker, 2013; Manzoni et al., 2012).

In the preparation of the competitions, the client needs to design "the rules of the game" and define the level of playing field. This requires involving domain specific experts in advantage (Volker, 2010). For juries that have to make a decision, this implies dealing with contrasting entries and selecting a winner, enabling a combination of adherence and non-adherence to brief requirements in the same proposal, when a contrasting design solution seems preferable (Jones & Livne-Tarandach, 2008).

### ***Selection and shortlist: ensuring an open competition AND preselecting relevant competitors***

#### *Paradoxical characteristics*

With the exception of open competitions, all the other competitions require to submit application documents, to be selected for competing. Most of the time, these documents include data about the company's financial status and organization and reference projects. These are relevant information, according to existing regarding the selective search of professional service firms (Day & Barksdale, 2003). Yet they inevitably limit a wide access to competitions and prevent from making a choice based on architect's performance.

This entails a paradox between allowing for an open and democratic competition among all potentially interested professionals and ensuring a competition only among relevant and comparable competitors.

On the one hand, prequalification criteria are often too many and too restrictive to ensure a democratic access to competitions (Volker & van Meel, 2010). If these criteria had been adopted in the past, many buildings commissioned to unknown architects wouldn't have existed today. On the other hand, an open access to competitions prevents the entrants from competing with relevant and similar competitors and the jury from choosing among a reasonable and comparable number of entries. Too many entries jeopardize the fairness and reliability of the judging process.

#### *Managerial implications*

Architects have greater winning chances within restricted competitions, which preselect based on relevant and coherent past project experience and firm's structure and allow for competition among a limited number of entries. This implies building a specialised project portfolio in order to be pre-selected, which forces however the practice into a specific market (Manzoni et al., 2012). At the same time competitions are often the channel through which many architects and practices start their own professional activity, but asking for a minimum turnover and number of projects automatically excludes younger and smaller practices. Moreover competitions should offer the chance to diversify the core business, doing projects client would not directly commission to the firm.

Similarly to the previous paradox clients and juries also need to ensure the comparability between the entries by having a limited number of similar competitors, as well as a wide range of competitors for choosing better design quality. Within the given rules, they have to be able to pursue what they originally had in mind. This sometimes requires creativity, pragmatism and political intervention (Volker, 2010).

### ***Designing of proposals: conforming to the brief AND instructing the client in a shadow dance***

#### *Paradoxical characteristics*

This phase entails the conceptualization and development of the competition assignment. Competing teams decode and translate the brief into a proposal, dealing with unclear substantial aims; complicated briefs; unrealistic project budgets; too many or too elaborate documents required for submission; an almost non-existent honorarium paid for competing; little or no interaction with the client during the process; delay during the process (Volker & van Meel, 2010).

Given this, every design proposal acts as a 'letter of intent' but also as 'educational development' (Rönn, 2009), being an answer to a client's question, but shedding light on the competition program. Meeting the brief is not always the optimal answer. It can happen that the winning entry is less compliant with the brief than were others. At the same time, ignoring the brief in favour of educating the client can be counterproductive.

In addition to that, competing is 'shadow dancing' with an absent partner, who is the client and/or the jury (Kreiner, 2007). This entails a paradox between 'anonymity' and 'direct communication'

(Rönn, 2009). Anonymity is the best way to select a design, but dialogues at different stages of the process are useful to clarify the brief, build a relationship and facilitate the jury's assessment (Kreiner et al., 2011), yet in public design contests dialogues are not allowed to protect anonymity.

#### *Managerial implications*

Architects need to balance possibilities and constraints of the brief in the same proposal, purposefully improvising, while being pragmatic in dealing with clients' requirements and being authentic. Moreover they need to seek and reconstruct client–architect interaction and dialogue by replacing the absent dialogue with the client (e.g. with broader conversation within the office) (Manzoni & Volker, 2013; Eikhof & Haunschild, 2007).

Juries need to create the conditions for a client-architect interaction, by either including a dialogue in current procedures (Danielsen, 2010; Volker & van Meel, 2010; Kreiner et al., 2011). Answering the Q&A sessions in a matter which resets the boundaries of the competition while maintaining a equal level of playing field is something which requires a certain consistency among client organisations (Volker, 2010).

#### ***Jury decision making: balancing emotions AND rationality***

##### *Paradoxical characteristics*

Juries are in charge of choosing the winner among design submissions. The composition of the jury, as well as the process of assessing and awarding the entries, presents paradoxical features.

The jury has to represent the often conflicting diversity of interests and issues in the creation and use of the future building (Banerjee Loukaitou Sideris, 1990), aiming at being at the same time the expression of a 'professional' and a 'community' taste (Rönn, 2009) and being responsible to several stakeholders, such as clients, future users, critics and other architects (Kazemian & Rönn, 2009; Svensson, 2009). A jury has to choose an entry, which is relevant both to the client and to the profession, satisfying the call for both 'security' and 'innovation' that means well-proven construction, efficiency and durability, but also a longing for something new (Rönn, 2009).

Moreover, jurors need precise evaluation criteria set on advance in the competition brief to ensure fairness in decision making, but at the same time they ask for flexibility in assessing the entries, because entries can reveal new unplanned insights into the competition's problems. Rigid criteria do not allow for unexpected design concepts, while flexibility does not offer elements on which jurors can anchor their comparison of the entries (Rönn, 2009).

Finally, the awarding process is the result of a paradoxical sense-making process, which involves emotional affective responses to design proposals as well as rational criteria privileging design technicalities (Kreiner, 2006; Van Wezemaal et al., 2011; Volker, 2010). Privileging rationality points towards fault-free design solutions, which fulfil all the brief requirements. Privileging emotions may favour submissions presenting unplanned insights and solutions mobilising unforeseen criteria opportunities.

##### *Managerial implications*

Architects should offer a submission, which is at the same time rigorous in meeting the brief requirements, as well as triggers an emotion that catches the attention of the jury. Research shows that discussion about the submission increases the changes of selection (Volker, 2010). This can be done by contributing just a little more or different than the others, while also answering the problem as drawn by the client.

On the client side, jury panels should mirror the composition of the participants required: if a particular professional qualification is required from participants in a contest, at least a third of the members of the jury shall have that qualification or an equivalent qualification (EU Directive, Art. 73). The minimum they should include is authorized clients' representatives and experts in specific

domains that relate to the assignment (Volker, 2010), when not even potential users (Nasar, 1999).

## Conclusions

Based on previous research we stated that the current competition system is the result of a merger between the procurement principles and the competition tradition. Within these traditions different interests are at play: finding a partner vs. a design; focusing on the process vs. on the object; allowing client-architect interaction vs. ensuring anonymity.

Despite the worldwide downfall in real estate construction, competitions remain an important tradition in architectural design. New traditions, concepts and processes should therefore be inhabited in common use. Only by on-going discussion and critique practitioners will implement the necessary adjustment to current reality. In this paper we suggest that the competition system would possibly benefit from a paradoxical mind-set, approaching what is traditionally recognized as a trade off/dilemma as a paradox. Paradox theory opens up an interesting perspective to able change and innovation in the competition tradition.

We suggest that management approaches aiming at improving the system and its procedures should go in the direction of understanding how to make actors accept and resolve the interwoven contradiction between the extremes. For architects this often implies submitting balanced but controversial proposals that trigger the right kind of emotion in satisfying the clients' needs. For clients this involves interweaving both boundaries and solution space in the assignment and the competition rules. Furthermore, the composition and supervision of the jury panel is essential in bringing competitions successfully to an end.

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