Working through paradoxes in professional creative service firms: lessons learned from design competitions

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Abstract

With the recent focus on austerity and efficiency, dealing with competing tensions has become increasingly critical within the creative industry. Also project-based industries and construction are suffering from a severe downfall in commissions. Architecture is at the intersection of these industries. As such it is a fertile ground for contradictions and management oxymora, such as artistic recognition and market constraints, individual passion and collective collaboration, creative spark and professional discipline. These are examples of paradoxes that architects confront regularly, particularly when acquiring commissions through design competitions. Based on a set of interview data with architects in the UK, the Netherlands and Italy we explore paradoxical tensions that are embedded within design competitions and the way competing architecture firms manage them. We focus on the participation decision and the submission strategy, revealing strategic intent and design strategy paradoxes and related management approaches. Because of the underlying tensions in creativity and managerial rigour, design competitions offer insights for other domains as well.

Keywords

Paradox; professional service firm; strategy; architects; creative industry

Introduction

With the recent focus on austerity and efficiency, dealing with competing tensions has become increasingly critical within the creative industry (e.g. Andriopolous & Lewis, 2009, 2010; DeFillippi, 2009), which is going through hard times, leading to serious cut backs in personnel and bankruptcy of its firms. Project-based and construction organisations (Price & Newson, 2003) are also suffering from a severe downfall in commissions. Architecture is at the intersection of these industries (Oluwatayo & Amole, 2011). As such it is a fertile ground for contradictions and management oxymora such as artistic recognition and market constraints, individual passion and collective collaboration, creative spark and professional discipline. Architects are regularly confronted with these kinds of paradoxes, at times labelled in different ways in literature, e.g. from the architectural practice perspective as 'contradictory forces' (Blau, 1984), or 'dialectics' (Cuff, 1992), or from the management sciences 'management oxymora' (Brown et al., 2010).

In particular the way architects and architectural firms acquire a design job is full of paradoxical tensions, being a fascinating topic of research not only within architecture studies, but also organisation ones (e.g. Jones & Livne-Tarandach, 2008; Ewenstein & Whyte, 2009). One of the most important traditions to obtain strategically important commissions in architecture is through design competitions (Strong, 1996). Despite their popularity in practice, they are a debated topic in literature presenting several controversial issues (Rönn, 2008; Kreiner, 2010; Volker, 2012) in respect to the increasingly important procurement regulations.

Given this, we aim at exploring paradoxical tensions that are embedded within design competitions and the way competing architecture firms manage them. According to Kreiner (2009) competitions are like 'horse riding': you cannot predict if a horse will win or not, but you can train the horse to win, or at least you have to know how to train it. This implies helping architects rationalising their experience of design competitions particularly with regards to those tensions responsible for many architects giving up doing competitions.

Despite being focused on architecture and design competitions, our findings offer also insights for other domains such as professional service firms, creative and project-based firms, but are also relevant for knowledge based organisations in general.

The paper is structured as follows. We first review organisational paradox studies to provide a theoretical lens in approaching design competitions from a management point of view. Secondly we explain our methodology: a set of 31 interviews is used to explore how architects deal with the participation decision and design competing submission strategies. We also explain the tensions in the research setting by detailing issues and characteristics of the present merge of the competition and procurement tradition. Finally, we present and discuss case findings, explaining which paradoxes architects encounter in competitions during initialisation (deciding whether to participate or not) and submission preparation (design strategy) and how they deal with them in their management strategies.

Exploring design competitions through a paradox lens

A paradox is a set of contradictory yet interrelated elements, logical in isolation but irrational when appearing simultaneously (Lewis, 2000). These elements can be demands, feelings, perceptions, identities, practices and messages at multiple levels (organisational, project, group, individual) and typically drive actors towards a choice between one opposite or another. Contrary to dilemmas and dialectics (see Smith & Lewis, 2011 for a review) paradoxes, however, can be more usefully approached from a both/and perspective instead than from an either/or one (Quinn, 1988), as tensions are both contradictory and interrelated, and persist over time.

Current research mainly focuses on identifying paradox categories and management approaches to deal with them. According to Smith and Lewis (2011) there are four categories of paradoxes: learning (e.g. old vs. new, radical vs. incremental change, episodic vs. continuous change), belonging (e.g. self expression vs. collective affiliation), organising (e.g. collaboration vs. competition, empowerment vs. direction, control vs. flexibility, routine vs. change) and performing (e.g. long vs. short term, financial vs. social goals). Tensions exist both within and across these categories, generating for example learning-performing paradoxes, organising-belonging, learning-organising.

Despite the fact that living with paradox is not easy (Handy, 1994), managing paradoxes is a way to catch and explain the complexity (Cameron & Quinn, 1988) and to sustain long-term performance, enabling learning and creativity, fostering flexibility and resilience (Cameron,

1986; Smith & Lewis, 2011). Because tensions foster creativity and complex insights, paradoxes can be something extremely positive. They trigger change, acting as brainteasers and challenging common logic and thinking (Handy, 1994), even if they can be the source of organizational paralysis, as in the case of Lego Company discussed by Luscher & Lewis (2008). Many architectural practices feel the frustration of doing wasteful competitions and abandoning them while continuing participation and serious investments. Facing paradoxes instead helps exploiting their positive potential.

Effective management leverages paradoxes "in a creative way that captures both extremes" (Eisenhardt, 2000: 703) and entails both acceptance and resolution. While acceptance means learning to live with paradox (Beech et al., 2004; Clegg et al., 2002; Lewis, 2000) appreciating the contrasts between the extremes (Poole & Van de Ven, 1989); resolution entails the iteration of separation and synthesis (Smith & Lewis, 2011). This mirrors Lawrence and Lorsch (1967)'s concepts of differentiation and integration. Separation (differentiation) focuses alternatively on the two extremes. It can be spatial when opposite forces are allocated to separate individuals, teams, organizational units or even physical spaces or temporal when attention is shifted from one pole to another ensuring attention to both alternatives over time (Poole & Van de Ven, 1989). Synthesis (integration) accommodates opposite poles and encourages interdependences among them. This implies thinking paradoxically, reframing assumptions and developing a more complicated understanding of complexities (e.g. Beech et al., 2004; Smith & Tushman, 2005).

Within this debate, existing paradox research calls for more research within creative professional domains (e.g. Andriopolous & Lewis, 2010; DeFilippi, 2009). Research on architectural service delivery and the paradoxes faced by architects contributes to understanding of running professional service firms and dealing with creative processes in an organisational setting. It also complements the work of Jones and Livne-Tarandach (2008) in rhetorical strategies of architects when competing for projects with clients. Findings provide input for improving the management of professional service firms, in particular competing for work while preserving the creative character of the firm. Moreover, it identifies the complexity of integrating the individual, project and organisational level of decision making and pursue an organisational strategy that fits the two main aim of doing business in the creative industry: making money while following your passion, capitalizing the things you do best (e.g. Lampel et al., 2000).

Drawing on this, we aim to recognise and explore paradoxes encountered by architects when competing in design competitions. In particular we intend to respond to the following questions: what are the intrinsic paradoxes of deciding whether to enter a design competition or not, and preparing a design submission? How and why are these tensions experienced and managed by members within the architectural firm?

Research setting

The potentially conflicting issues in design competitions originate from the diverse roots of the phenomenon: the design competition, the tendering for works and services, the search for a design partner (Strong, 1996). A design competition is organized at a very early stage of a construction project as a first connection between acquiring suitable accommodation and hiring a designer to create a representation of the building. Although the service delivered by the architect cannot be directly related to the actual product delivery and use of the building, they are connected in the minds of the decision makers. Among these deliberations decision makers also have to comply with (inter)national rules and regulations, such a European procurement law, government policy and sustainability. Since architecture can have significant impact on the living environment of people (Gifford, 2002), submissions also have to fulfill social and economical expectations of citizens and other stakeholders (Volker, et al 2008). Selecting the right solution requires different kinds of sensemaking processes and domain specific skills of decision makers (Volker, 2012). This mixture of aims and means causes paradoxical encounters between clients and architects.

Figure 1 presents the tensions that appear from the different interests at play in architect selections. The left side of the figure shows the architectural competition tradition, which is based on the client's intention to acquire a design product as a patron. This tradition acknowledges the artistic characteristics of an architectural design and scholarly acknowledgment of creative services. The design submissions become part of a peer review and/or a public debate about the potential quality of the firm. The client and architectural community are represented in a jury committee that has the authority to appoint a winner based on anonymous evaluation of the design proposals.

The right side of the figure shows the procurement principles and their managerial processes that apply when considering an architect selection as a partner selection process. In the procurement approach architects are considered as entrepreneurial service providers competing for a contract. Such a partnering selection process aims at acquiring maximum value for the client. Therefore the client has the final decision authority instead of a representation of the architectural community – 'he who pays the piper calls the tune'. In order to know with whom the client will be doing business with, physical interaction is an important element in the selection process. The anonymity of the competition tradition prevents an interactive getting to know.

Architect competing in design competitions deal with both traditions in order to acquire a job. In addition, they have to succeed in running a successful enterprise with a team of creative service professionals. Results of competitions could seriously affect a firm's reputation (Larson, 1994). When taking too much of the considerations and obligations of the client in mind, architects might deny their own professional obligations and vice versa. In a sense they have the responsibility as domain specific experts to introduce clients into the architectural debate, and pass on cultural awareness that comes with designing in a public arena. It is the architects that will be held accountable for the physical outcomes by their peers and their future clients. This requires a strong vision about architecture and architectural design, while managing the balance between commercial and creative interests (Cuff, 1992).

Research methodology

We adopted an inductive qualitative research approach, based on the roadmap proposed by Eisenhardt (1989), consisting of conducting case studies – professional service firms in architecture – while simultaneously reflecting on constructs and theories found in the literature. Case studies can produce accurate, interesting and testable theories and enable more nuanced insights when dealing with paradoxes (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009, 2010).

Regarding data collection, the research involved 38 semi-structured interviews with 15 Italian architects, 16 British architects and 7 Dutch managing partners and architects. In total 8 internationally active architectural design firms in three different countries (Italy, Great Britain and The Netherlands) were included in the study. National construction and architecture industries are 'distinct milieus' (Skaates et al., 2002), however EU regulations set common rules for competitions. Italy, Great Britain and The Netherlands have been chosen for their similarities, differences and accessibility of data.

The interviews, ranging from 40 to 120 minutes in duration, were audio taped and transcribed to ensure reliability. For all interviews an interview protocol, made up of open-ended questions, addressed the design competition process. Archival materials and informal discussions were also useful to expand the understanding of each case context, reinforcing or questioning interviews' findings. The Dutch data were collected as part of a dissimilar study on design competitions than the Italian and UK-based interviews. For this paper both authors decided to select data from the overlapping themes 'strategies to enter competitions' and 'composing design strategies for submissions', and analyse the integrated dataset using a paradox lens.

Regarding data analysis, systematic and iterative comparisons of data, emerging categories and extant literature concurred to the development of cohesive constructs (Miles & Huberman, 1994). From raw data, we identified specific tensions and their management. Examining interview transcripts, we identified descriptions of tensions using language indicators (e.g. "tension", "contradiction", "yet", "but", "one the one hand…on the other hand", and so on) and we looked for contradictory statements within the same interviews. Then we identified management approaches and coded them as integration or splitting strategies. The quotes used in this paper are numbered per country and interviewee type.

In the final stage, we drew on existing studies of paradox, design competitions, creativity management and professional service firms to refine our labels and understandings. We focused on the most robust findings to converge on the data summarised in Table 1, which presents the preliminary and most exemplary data encountered during the analysis.

Findings and discussion

Based on the data collected in the interviews we found that architects encounter paradoxes at different levels and across levels when approaching competitions. In particular, the paper discusses paradoxes related to deciding whether to participate or not (strategic intent), interpreting the assignment (design strategy) and the way these strategies are interconnected (see Table 1). For each paradox, we detail underlying tensions and management approaches. Quotations in the appendix support the discussion below.

Insert Table 1 here

The paradox of strategic intent: Deciding whether to participate or not

From a managerial perspective the decision with regards to entering a competition or not is essential to obtain design work and requires a strategy behind it. At this stage architects are confronted with the following paradoxical issues:

- *Acquiring the job, but at the same time exploring design terms to create knowledge or diversifying the business, given the fact that exploitation well-consolidated expertise in horizontal and vertical direction is essential to survive competition.*
- *Acquiring the job, but also interacting in a highly prestigious architectural arena with different types of firms, not all of them trying to be(come) archistars.*
- *Acquiring the job, but satisfying individual creative ambitions, taken for granted that the most intellectually challenging contests often offer almost inexistent winning and realisation chances.*

Underlying tensions of participation decisions

Participating in competitions creates several underlying tensions that relate to the characteristics of professionals working in the creative industry. Joining a competition always entails the possibility of acquiring a new job. Yet, the temptation of explicitly exploring the design terms during participation and standing out by visualising strong design ambitions, could also decrease the chances of winning. Nevertheless, participating in a competition is a satisfying

activity by itself, which does not always make architects try to actually acquire the job. This is exemplified by an English architect, who explains his drivers for participating within the same interview twice in a different matter: "*you always want to win a competition.*" […], but also "*The reason why you do competitions [...] is not to win the competition, it is to explore in design terms*" (UK 2, architect assistant). So on the one hand, the competitive element of the context motivates professionals to join. At the same time, the challenge of exploring boundaries and creative new concepts already fulfils the need for creativity. According to several respondents this kind of tensions can only be found in architecture, since "*architecture is the only profession in which you enter a competition not only to get along with a client or win a commission, but also because you want to try it out*" (UK 1, architect assistant).

Participation can be just as important as the submission itself. It increases the reputation and power position of the architects in the architectural debate. This addresses the paradox between the rational decisions of firm ownership and internal drivers of being a creative service professional: "*you know of course that you don't win and lose money. But is it also important to be published in those lists. There is no logic behind it* [the reason to decide to participate], *it's people business*" (NL 6, project architect). On the one hand, new jobs are essential for continuation of the firm, especially in bare times. "*The reason why we do competitions is that we are getting less direct work. They are one of the few ways through which we can try to get work*" (UK 7, partner). On the other hand, competitions require substantial financial and labour investments, which cannot be used for regular clients in running projects. Because of the limited chances of winning, these kinds of investments are not completely sensible. Yet, "*competitions are good playgrounds to train yourself in developing good concepts and asking the right questions*" (IT 2, project architect) and this is reason why across all cases architects enter competitions anyhow. For a professional, skill and competence development by intellectual challenge is essential. Competitions provide these nurturing fields, since they are perceived as high level playoffs: "*a competition is a honest game in the premier league. You do have to train hard for it, have no injuries. Yet, you always have a chance of winning*" (NL 1, project architect).

These findings are in line with with a substantial body of literature discussing tensions between the creative ethos and the necessity of winning commissions (e.g. Brown et al., 2010;

Eikhof & Haunschild, 2007; Lampel et al. 2000). On the one hand, architects tend to devote themselves to the production of architecture as a 'greater good' (Eikhof & Haunschild, 2007). On the other hand they are 'business people' (Cohen et al., 2005). These tensions are taken to their extreme within the context of competitions, being the emblematic arena where architects are caught between 'use value' and 'sign value', fighting for peers' respect as well as clients' attention (Őstman, 2010).

Management approaches of participation decisions

Management approaches found across the cases face these participation paradoxes by relying on both integration and differentiation. Integration in particular entails cultivating a paradoxical vision of competitions' goals, while differentiation targets different competitions for different goals.

Integration

Across the dataset integration appears to entail developing a paradoxical vision of competitions as both business and research occasions. "*Profits matter, but what they [partners] are also interested in, is good design*" (UK 2, architect assistant). This is aligned with Andriopolous and Lewis's (2009) paradoxical vision, to foster the synergy between profit and breakthroughs. It also refers to the paradoxical frames for performing creative tasks of Miron-Spektor et al. (2011) and the paradoxical mindset for effectively managing exploitation and exploration (Smith & Tushman, 2005). Partners and project architects aliment a paradoxical vision fostering the co-presence of competing goals in all formal and informal meetings (e.g. Monday meetings, resources and clients meetings, social and knowledge sharing Friday evenings). It is thus a reoccurring theme in the daily activity of the architectural firm, something that has become part of the profession and integrated in management routines.

Integration can also be found in the character of the design activities itself. '*The thinking does not perish, it is research. Sometimes a certain conceptual idea finds acceptance with a client the third time it is applied' (NL 2, architect partner).* Every design act can be considered as an investment in the core business of the company: providing design services for clients. Architecture is a profession, for which counts that expertise is build by repeating practice (Mieg, 2008). Every competition submission adds to a working stock of design concepts and client

experiences. Some firms actively search for collaboration with other firms with adjacent competences, such as engineering or project management, in entering a competition. By enlarging their areas of expertise and service level towards the client, they try to increase their chances of winning, while also trying to learn from and complement each other. This suits their own strategy and the strategy of their partners. Each collaborative submission can be considered as a pilot for further collaboration. If successful, the experiment can be continued.

Differentiation

Informants highlighted that they also target different competitions for different goals. Especially in international design contests for iconic buildings competition is harsh. Yet, winning these competitions is essential in building up a portfolio and developing an architectural signature. Regular or tender based competitions usually not ask for groundbreaking innovations and large-scale publicity, but do offer an opportunity for a secure job. This reflects upon the types of designs that are proposed and the type of firms that enter a competition.

On this point, one architect suggested that: *"there are two kinds of competitions. On the one side […] you have a site, which gives the opportunity to do something similar you did in the past […] On the other side, there is the exploration, when you try to do something completely new"* (UK 2, architect assistant). Italian architects also reinforce this point: *"when dealing with competitions, we have different 'frontlines': the everyday contexts and the exceptional ones"* (IT 3, communications manager).

This finding reveals similarities with Andriopolous and Lowe (2000)'s 'commercially promising' and 'creatively promising' projects. In our cases, commercially promising competitions pursue a strategic fit with regards to past projects, while creatively promising ones encourages a strategic stretch (Price & Newson, 2003). Yet, several cases reveal that systematically entering competitions for different reasons only appears possible with a certain company size. Then *"you can sometimes go crazy as an architect, but also restrict yourself"* (NL6, project architect). Several firms indicate to diversify in the staffing profile of the design teams in order anticipate to the different outcomes. This kind of variety has a price and can only be paid with available means and staff. Since most professional service firms are SME's, this includes investment risks.

Decision-making criteria for participation differ among the architectural firms. On the one hand, the decision to enter an exploitative, 'easy' competition is mainly the result of a rational assessment against a set of criteria, such as brief alignment with the firm's core business, process fairness and transparency, client's reputation, project size. Collyer (2004) and Day & Barksdale (1992) also pointed out these factors. Some respondents indicate not to join competitions in which they don't receive a financial compensation for their work. Their business plan even applies to acquisition. Hence, most of them also admit to "*always participate in an interesting competitions*", despite all good intensions and rational considerations. They do not consider design firms as commercial businesses: "*We are an architectural design firm, not a company. At a design firm these things are done instinctively. You just see year by year if you haven't invested too much in acquisition" (NL 6, project architect).* On the other hand, explorative competitions are often the result of a positive affect, which can foster quicker and more superficial decisions, but also more creative and open thoughts (Sadler-Smith & Sparrow, 2008). In this matter, one British architect observes that "*an architect often make decisions intuitively and emotionally, simply because they fall in love with the competition project and say let's do it [...] There is a sort of gut reaction to something"* (UK 1, architect assistant).

The paradox of design strategy: Interpreting the assignment

The paradox of strategic intent cascades paradoxical tensions when approaching the brief to interpret the assignment and develop a design strategy and proposal:

- *Responding to the brief requirements, even if they are too many, ambiguous and contradictory.*
- *Obeying to the brief, even when architects believe they have a better design idea fed by their professional expertise.*
- *Choosing whether to be faithful to a relatively traditional brief or not, especially when clients explicitly seem to have started a competition to receive innovative and inventive proposals.*

These paradoxical issues reconnect with the long-standing dispute in the cultural industries between cultural goods as the expression of the consumers' needs and desires, versus expressions of the imagination and creativity of the producers shaping what the consumer wants (Lampel et

al. 2000, 2006). In fact, similarly to cultural producers, architects also face the issue between giving the client what he or she wants and asks for, and suggesting the client what he should want but he or she is not aware of.

Underlying tensions of design strategies

In the requirements' interpretation process of architects, we found tensions that mainly related to the way architects deal with the brief, the programme of requirement introducing the competition assignment.

On the one hand, informants suggest that they pursue meeting the brief, as expression of the client needs. This implies 'listening' to the client and seeing the brief as a source of instruction (Kreiner, 2009, 2010). *"What is written is written" (IT 8, partner),* and also *"in particular in large competitions, you compromise: there is something you really want to do, but you moderate your design and you do take into account how it would perceived by the client" (UK 3, architect assistant).* On the other hand, challenging the brief appears to help distinguishing from the other competitors. Moreover, challenging the brief has an element of fascination for the architects. The 'freehand reinterpretation' of the competition is a sort of 'successful insubordination', 'fuel[ing] the ambition of the competition participant to eclipse collective knowledge, as articulated by the public promoter in the competition brief, with allegedly better individual knowledge' (Chramosta, 2012: 294).

Across all the interviews, however, architects stressed the co-presence of these opposing tensions. One British architect, for example, remembered that when designing a shopping mall they always *"have to be very careful and find the right balance between achieving the ratio and having blocks which are not boring"* (UK 8, architect assistant). Similarly one Dutch architect says: *"we usually develop a number of concepts, which we select based on the most crucial elements. Then we check again what is being asked, to let a feeling arise with the essential question and the solution space. If the concept is clear, then you can start to expand the team capacity."* (NL 2, partner). In line with these findings, existing research suggested that 'tight coupling' with the client entails loyalty to its requirements and helps to fulfil commercial goals; but also that 'loose coupling' allows for exploration and innovation (Andriopolous & Lewis, 2009).

In the context of competitions, these paradoxical tensions are actually exacerbated because it is difficult to estimate the intentions of their clients: "*sometimes you think that they want to pursue a dream and then we go for that dream. But no, then you have to stick to the bandwidth to win*", as explained by a Dutch architect (NL 6, project architect). Interpretation comprises the risk of a wrong direction: "*You just have to know by intuition what you think the assignment is about*" (NL 1, project architect). Yet, to be creative and innovative new paths need to be taken. In many cases, it is a particular emotion triggered by the design that eventually leads to a positive judgment among the jury members (Volker, 2008). While dealing with their own suspense, architects also incorporate the implicit desires of clients. These clients search for secure investments by selecting an experienced architect with a solid and established architectural practice on the one hand, but also secretly hope for something unique and iconic. They want architects to listen to their prescribed requirements, but also go beyond when it suits them.

Management approaches of design strategies

As for the strategic intent paradox, dealing with the assignment also implies both integration and differentiation strategies. Integrating management approaches usually contain some kind of dialogue between the client and the architects. Differentiation techniques include risk taking and strong design strategies.

Integration

Informants suggested cultivating a paradoxical vision of brief's possibilities and constraints, yet remaining faithful to their design strategies: "*It is not like to have to sell something or do something in a particular way. That would mean very average architecture and that is often not the case.*" (NL 1, project architect). Integrating the vision of the architect while listening to the directions of the clients could lead to interesting submissions. Similarly to Boland et al. (2008), embracing constraints not only makes the design process more interesting, but also allows for serendipitously inventing new and valuable elements in the design. Andriopolous and Lewis (2009) proposed to improvise purposefully leveraging synergies between current project constraints and emerging possibilities. "*Every aspect of the brief is double angled. Client's requirements can be seen as limits or opportunities. If you live them as limits, it is painful, you can't express yourself, feel boxed with no exit strategies. If you see them as opportunities, you*

can do your best as a designer. You need to transform the limit into a resource you can leverage upon" (IT 9, project architect).

Suggesting that the practice can be the right design partner entails openness to client's requirements as well as integrity with firm's design convictions. All informants stressed that the alignment between assignment and design strategy benefits of a form of dialogue within the competition process. In this sense *"competitions are unique processes than cannot be compared with regular design processes." (NL 3, director).* Existing research also recently stressed out this point (Kreiner et al, 2011; Danielsen 2010).

In particular British and Dutch practices have experience with explicit client-architect communication during a traditional (tender) competition. The other practices replace absent dialogue and interaction with conversations within the office. For them developing a design strategy beholds a continuous search into the brief or concepts for explicative sentences elucidating the design task. *"I actually try to fulfill an ambition for the place, not for the client. The place is normative for the program but the program is also important for the concept [...] First the concept, the identity follows later" (NL 4, partner/project architect).* This also depends of the level of detail in the brief. *"Often these briefs are pretty detailed. Then you have to stick to them reasonably well. That is also part of our strength." (NL 5, project architect).* In this sense they integrate their core competences with the character of the competition.

Differentiation

Informants suggested that adhering or challenging the brief is a matter of the brief's characteristics, or at least of the way architects perceive it. *"In a limited competition you know a bit more what the client is looking for and we would probably target our effort at addressing these issues. In open competitions it is less sure and we spend less time worrying about that. You get more a sort of release of ideas and creativity in open competitions"* (UK 9, director). This quotation exemplifies that informants tend to adhere to the brief when they expect higher winning chances. This typically occurs in the case of restricted competitions, when there's a fit between the brief and the practice's design approach. Another condition leading towards the choice of adhering to the brief is the presence of normative and prescriptive briefs, and the belief that all needs – implicit and explicit – are included and represented by the brief.

Architects do tend to challenge the brief when contests are open, when there is misalignment between the brief and the practice's design approach, and when there is the perception of an open and non-prescriptive brief. In some cases architects say that they try to understand which response the client will value most, which of course does not imply they will go for it and select it as a winner of the competition. Management strategies also differ when clients request a design strategy instead of a design concept: *"A design implies serving the dish, while a strategy means naming the ingredients" (NL 3, partner).* When clients search for a list of the ingredients, the actual design process start after the competition. Clients in a traditional design competition just eat the dish or not.

Architects might also decide to teach the client something, especially if they feel they are not aligned with the brief in terms of design approach and attitude (Kreiner, 2009). *"You never know how the public will react. Sometimes we take a guess and knock over several requirements. That is however a strong intervention so you can expect critique"* (NL 5, project architect). Answering exactly to the brief or not, both strategies imply the risk of not being selected for particular reason that cannot be predicted without a proper design based dialogue among people. Unfortunately the concept of the competition does not allow for this.

Conclusions and directions for future research

In this paper we approached design competitions through a management lens, instead of studying the outcomes of such competitions as traditionally done in the field of architecture. We explored the paradoxical tensions that architects experience and analyzed how they deal with paradoxes in their management approaches. On the one hand, we aimed at supporting architects in making sense of the experience of tensions when competing for new work through the architectural design competition system. On the other hand, we suggested more general implications for professionals working in the creative professional service domain. The contribution of this work therefore is multi-fold.

We highlighted two paradoxes in particular that relate to deciding whether to enter a competition or not, and how to interpret the design assignment. We found that acquiring the job, exploring the design terms, diversifying the business and being part of the architectural debate are the most perceived underlying tensions in the participation decision. Architectural firms tried

to deal with these tensions by adopting a paradoxical vision and targeting different competitions for different goals. In interpreting the assignment, architects felt that they could either adhere to the brief or challenge the brief. These tensions were managed in an integrated way by balancing possibilities and constraints in the same submission and differentiated by reacting to the format, client characteristics or strategic alignment of the brief.

From a theoretical point of view, this paper answers Lewis (2000)'s call for using paradoxes as a lens to examine organizational life. The present research also responds to calls for more empirical research of the management practices and work processes that arise in creative industries (Thompson et al., 2007; Andriopolous & Lewis, 2010) and for comparative research across different cases within this industry (DeFillippi et al., 2007). Architecture being one of the professions in the built environment, this paper contributes to deconstructing paradoxes in the construction industry (e.g. Price & Newson, 2003) and more specifically in architectural design (Rönn, 2008; Kreiner, 2010).

From an empirical point of view, this research makes architects aware of the possibility to leverage on competitions' contradictions in a positive way, instead of simply dealing with them as full of contradictions. Recognizing competitions' contradictions as paradoxes help architects in managing them. Effective and efficient management is particularly critical in times where architectural practices have fewer resources to invest with no clear returns. By comparing architects in three European countries, working under the same EU regulations, similarities and differences in management approaches are presented. This integrates research domains originally and frequently detached – management and architecture – even if they could mutually benefit one from each other (Boland et al., 2008).

A link for further research could also be established with recent developments on institutional logics, in which similar challenges are faced (Thornton et al., 2012). Whereas the field of institutional logics used to assume that one logic dominates over the other, the notion of co-existing logics recently gains support (Greenwood et al., 2011; Jones Reay & Hinings, 2009). This opens up a connection to paradoxical management strategies. Further research could also explore paradoxes related to the other competitions' phases (staffing, planning, facilitating design work). Comparisons with other European and non-European countries could be also beneficial to reinforce findings from this paper, which mainly revealed similarities rather than

differences. Moreover, future cross case comparisons should be targeted at exploring strategies adopted by large, medium vs. small professional service firms. In particular small practices were excluded in this paper, believing that emerging practices can difficultly afford to strategize for competitions, especially in bare times.

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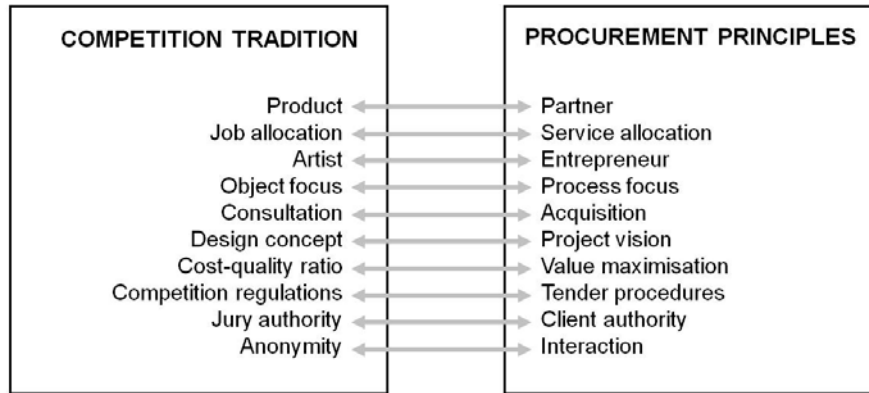*Figure 1. Design competitions vs. Procurement systems: two different traditions*

Table 1. The paradox of strategic intent: underlying tensions and management approaches

Paradoxes	Underlying tensions	Management approaches
The paradox of strategic intent: deciding whether to participate or not	- Acquiring the job - Exploring in design terms - Diversifying the business - Being part of the architectural debate	- Adopting a paradoxical vision and using communication to reinforce the co-presence of these goals - Targeting different competitions for different goals (e.g. open vs. restricted/invited)
The paradox of design strategy: interpreting the assignment	- Adhering to the brief - Challenging the brief	- Balancing possibilities and constraints of the brief in the same proposal - Either adhering or challenging the brief depending on the characteristics (real of perceived) of the brief, the format of the competition, the characteristics of the client, the strategic alignment architectural firm/brief

Appendix. Most relevant data used for cross case comparison

Paradox	Underlying tensions	Integrating management approaches	Splitting management approaches
Strategic intent	*Acquiring the job vs. Exploring, diversifying and being part of the architectural debate* "Starting from a competition situation is of course very nice. One of the difficult parts of designing is to find a basic concept. A competition client is warmed up for such a plan. That is a fantastic starting point" (NL 1, project architect) "It is a way to get interesting projects to work on. You get the chance to do something different and limited in time" (UK 4, architect assistant) "Some big high profile jobs just come through competitions. If you want certain projects you have to enter competitions" (UK 5, head of communications) "We do competitions to win them […] Competitions are good playgrounds to train yourself in developing good concepts and asking the right questions to develop a good project in the right way since the very beginning" (IT 2, project architect) "Competitions are the way to acquire major national and international public jobs […] If the project is of great public and cultural interest, it is a new challenge"" (IT 8, partner)	*Adopting a paradoxical vision, using communication to reinforce the co-presence of these goals* "We are mainly interested in joining if we can paid and if we can conduct an elaborated study on something. This is usually the case in competitions over 15.000m2, often when a confrontation of history and modernity is at hand. That is also where we have achieved success previously" (NL 5, project architect) "A financial compensation is not important when we don't need the job. We always join in prestigious assignments. (NL 4, partner) "It is important to learn from what you have already learned or developed, but at the same time it is also important to keep on pushing the design as much as possible and to find different ways of doing things […] There is always an element of both" (UK 1, architect assistant) "[Success criteria] are usually an equation based on the output, the financial requirements, and the experience. So it is very rarely just the creative output" (UK 6, Project Director) "Architects always tend to think they can win. You cannot do the project unless you don't believe you have, even a small one, but a chance to win. It is very	*Targeting different competitions for different goals (e.g. open vs. restricted/invited competitions)* "We think it is possible when you have a particular size as a company. Then you can sometimes act crazy as an architect and at the same time restrict yourself" (NL 6, project architect) "We split the assignments based on our area of expertise. Housing is more for X, the more technical projects are for Y. We talk about it" (NL 4, partner/project architect) "Long competitions are very interesting because they cost a lot of money and require a lot of details. […] But small competitions when you might have an intensive two or three weeks period are also very exciting because you get to try some design and you hope it works" (UK 2, architect assistant) "So it is a matter of selecting and being realistic about what you could win and what you couldn't and what area you would like to move into […] The best competitions are not always the ones you might win […] It is kind of balancing up the ones that are really good opportunities with the ones where we have chance" (UK 5, head of communications) "On the one side, if you do a tender you do it to win it. On the other side, in a

		difficult to put in your time and effort because it is a lot of time and effort. So you always want to believe you have a possibility of winning, maybe behind in your mind you realize the probability is very minimal" (IT 1, partner)	design contest you also wish to win, but the design component is preponderant and the consequent potential fulfilment of self expression ambitions is greater" (IT 10, project architect)
		"The competitions' success is not only about winning it. We also value how much satisfied we are with regards to the project. Let's take the library competition in Helsinki: we didn't win, but the project is a winning one in terms of completeness and aesthetics" (IT 7, architect assistant)	"Bonn belongs to a competitions' category that has the goal to present/introduce the firm to a prestigious city/market. Then there is another category that is the day-to-day one, which does not offer this opportunity" (IT 2, project architect)
Design strategy	*Obeying to the brief vs. challenging it* "Sometimes you think the [the client] want to pursue a dream and then we go that that dream. But then you need to stick within the bandwidth to win. You cannot tell the client that is not the right direction" (NL 6, project architect) "Usually there is so many conditions and complexity that you cannot come out right if you take them all into account. There are too many equations with as much unknown. Then we brainstorm about what is essential. Then you have to trust your intuition" (NL 2, project architect) "If you only stay within the margins of the client, you are not always a good advisor. You do have to have the expertise to walk that line [...] You have to now exactly how far you can go to get the maximum out of it" (NL 6, project architect)	*Balancing possibilities and constraints of the brief, developing a paradoxical vision of the brief itself* "I actually try to fulfil an ambition for the place, not for the client. The place is normative for the programme but the programme is also important for the concept [...] First the concept, the identity follows later" (NL 4, partner/project architect) "You just have to know by intuition what you think the assignment is about. It is not like to have to sell something or do something in a particular way. That would mean very average architecture and that is often not the case." (NL 1, project architect). "Clients don't really know what they want and we inform the brief and it is a more organic process" (UK 10, architect) "When you are working on a competition you are having to form the brief for	*Either adhering or challenging the brief, depending on the brief, the client and the competition's format characteristics, as well as the strategic alignment practice/brief* "You never know how the public will react. Sometimes we take a guess and knock over several requirements. That is a strong intervention so you can expect critique (NL 5, project architect) A decision in complicated project is usually made by increasing the pressure, which causes a conflict. C. [NL 2, director] is usually the one starting the discussion, the younger designers then start searching for arguments to be obstructive" (NL 1, project architect) "When you are on a competition, you have to educate yourself, understand who else is around. It is not just about the building you are going to design, but also the surrounding area. So you can

"You need to satisfy these different requirements but then you also need to make something which is memorable and easy to catch over, very exciting, very memorable and very positive" (UK 1, architect assistant)

"In a competition you make judgments in isolation, sometimes guessing what the client wants […] But to win a design competition you need to be a bit uncompromising and probably competitions are the only last occasions to be uncompromising" (UK 6, project director)

"These hypotheses [talking about Ferrara competition] also came from our needs as architects and designers. We did a visit on site and we understood there is a corridor with a full-length window. Based on these inputs, we made some alternatives which are different versions of the same idea" (IT 9, project architect)

"If you start compromising with your own decisions, you easily get to the point where the project lose its own identity and compromise too much. Some compromises are inevitable and are granted by the project, but if you accept too many of them the project loses its fascinating power and won't be able to impress the jury anymore, not even to be mentioned […] However this does not allow you to ignore the brief" (IT 10, project architect)

yourself. You have to make value judgments about what is good and what is bad. You are reading and questioning the brief, but with no interaction with the client" (UK 11, director)

"Our firm integrates the two sides: creativity is always inserted into the history of the project. It is never about the path breaking extraordinary idea Koolhaas ends up with. Creativity is also linked with the firm identity and design approach. We never turn upside down our profession" (IT 4, partner)

"They [the client and the jury of the Public Library in Turin] were expecting an impressive project, in terms of aesthetics and design, but it was essential to meet all the characteristics and requirements stated in the brief. In that case we won exactly because we had been able to combine a powerful design idea with a meticulous response to any single brief requirement" (IT 11, project architect)

describe and have a good understanding from the building to the panel of the jury. You are not simply looking at this one element. I think you have to understand more about the general area. You do not go into the surrounding area when you have a client. I think this is a big difference. Quite often the client just want you to work on that building" (UK 12, architect)

"In limited competition you try to target your work to what you perceive the client wants. […] In open competitions there might be hundred of competitors. It is much more creative and less constrained" (UK 9, director)

"Open competitions leave more space for experimenting. Tenders are more focused on providing a design solution fitting with the brief requirements" (IT 9, project architect)

"In Germany we won with a very classic and traditional project. It was one of our typical projects, evidently 'made in Italy' and therefore different from the ones of the other competitors. In Italy for Ferran Aporte instead we pushed towards a project with exceptional and provocative characteristics and again we won but with a completely different project compared to the ones we are used to" (IT 4, partner)