Competitions of Distraction or Hope?

*Public Responsibility, Social Advocacy, and the Dismantling of Architectural Priorities in the Open Ideas Competition*

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Introduction:
The paper addresses the cost and issues around the open idea competition in architecture through an understanding of disciplinary syntax and priorities. Through using case studies of successful competition submittals, including access to the design decision-making process, competition entries are discussed as having other issues than the widely noted efficiency and cost critiques. On a disciplinary level, there is an absence of architectural concerns in the projects and the outcomes only look like architecture. That is, there is a clear misalignment between competition outcomes and architectural priorities. Following this line of enquiry, the research connects the architectural idea competition as a form of marketing to a legacy of social advocacy and activism. However, this form of advocacy might be limited and ineffective on a cultural level when considering the voice it replaces.

Research method:
Qualitative Sampling, Reflective Analysis, Case Study Research, Cross Case-study Pattern Search

Preliminary Results:
The paper is professionally based. Preliminary results show the lack of architectural priorities and syntax application (circulation, context massing, environmental effects, structure) through considering major idea competition proposals using an unified framework theory of design process. This was collaborated through reflective and critique-based interviews with the young designers involved in competition process. The question was raised of what is replacing architectural content in these major publicity events.

Statement in relation to theme:
The research, abstract and resultant paper addresses theme statement 4 “Why do clients and architects participate in competitions? Contributing to the long lasting debate about impact and legacies of competitions.” and the question "How can the structure and procedures contribute to client/architect interactions, and how do they push them apart?" It does this by discussing the contest as a conflict between architecture's ideas of public responsibility and developing the internal syntax of the discipline. The idea competition can be seen as problematic in syntax terms but also positive as it provides a forum that separates designers from clients, replacing client with constituency. Ultimately, the question becomes that while the aspirations might be positive, is the current format one that is sustainable or even ultimately effective?

Keywords:
architecture, open ideas competition, disciplinary syntax, advocacy, social hope
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Design competitions are a staple in architecture. Their presence as part of the discipline can be traced back as far as the documented history of architecture — at least two and a half thousand years (Kreiner 2010, Lipstadt 1989). From Athen's Acropolis, Rome's Spanish Stairs or the dome of Florence's Cathedral, the competition has been at the heart of architectural culture and project delivery methods. In architectural education, the competition has played a seminal role as far back as the 17th century formation of the French Prix de Rome (as a contest of elimination) and Beaux-Arts education of the 19th and early 20th centuries (Cret 1941). And where the competition has existed, so controversy has followed. Currently, there is a growing concern in North American and British architectural communities, protesting against the competition as a form of schematic design delivery. The critique is raised by professional architects and centres around issues of ethics, wastefulness and negative economic impact due to the expense firms and designers incur to pursue such work (Slessor 2013, Kreiner 2010). The current dialogue has reached professional consciousness through the broadcasting of one architect to another in social media. The general tone is a plead for architects to abandon the competition form due to its vampiric intentions on the profession (Basulto 2010, Brown 2010, Leavitt 2010).

Most of the concerns, complaints and protests centre around the open, limited or invited project competition – those competitions that theoretically end in an awarded project. Documentation regarding this style of competition stresses that there should only three objectives to an architectural competition: “1) To select a design and an architect; 2) To select an architect; and 3) To provide awards for design ideas and/or research” (RAIC 2013). The American Institute of Architects (AIA), Royal Architectural Institute of Canada (RAIC), and Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA), as professional architectural bodies, have been involved in addressing competitions since their formation. Early twentieth century records in popular media and professional journals confirm that the same concerns regarding competitions found today have been addressed since the formation of professional societies, namely the wastefulness of competitions (“The Competition for the Indiana Centennial Building “ 1913, Medary Jr. 1913, ). The issue was one of ethics expressed as business concerns, using the analogy of medical and legal professionals giving away core products. Herbert Foltz, as the former Chair of the Indiana Sub-Committee on Competitions, made statements in 1912 of which are echoed in the arguments today (Leavitt, 2010). Foltz was quoted as saying, in regards to the Indiana Centennial Building controversy, “that the Commission was expected to obtain, from as many architects as possible, as much information and as many ideas as possible without cost, and without any assurance that the architect furnishing the best design, or the most helpful suggestions, would be employed; . . . In the medical profession, the patient does not call in a half-dozen physicians to diagnose his case, and employ him whose diagnosis best suits, nor does the client with a legal case obtain briefs from a number of lawyers in competition, and select the one who submits the brief best suited to his case” (Journal of the American Institute of Architects 1913, 105). The focus is the fees that should be exchanged for time, professional knowledge, “special training and varied experience” (Journal of the American Institute of Architects 1913, 106). In North American, this type of work is currently becoming known as “speculative” or “spec” work. Non-profit activist groups, such as No!Spec and SpecWatch, have started to develop a social media network dedicated to educating the public, clients and designers to concerns around this style of work in the hopes of eliminating it as a form of service.

Many times the professional organisations of architects, such as the RIBA, have been accused of perpetuating an exploitive system (Ichioka 2103). Jeremy Till, the head of Central St Martins and past Dean of Architecture and the Built Environment at University of Westminster, was quoted recently as saying, “the professional body is allowing architects to prostrate themselves on the altar of potential fame. Architects do this willingly, particularly now when they are in a state of economic desperation… I do wonder why the profession allows itself to be degraded in this manner” (Hopkirk 2013). More than this, Till notes that the project competition focuses on the building “as static object … It privileges a whole set of architectural values that are counter to what might make really great architecture” (Hopkirk 2013). This comment invoking 'architectural values' necessarily opens up the need for a discussion of architectural priorities and syntax.
Many of the disciplinary issues can be more clearly identified in the open ideas competition rather than the open or invited project competition. While built on the same structure, the open ideas competition makes no claims to awarding commission for a built project but instead stresses prestige and exposure as its end goal (objective #3 from the RAIC guidelines noted above). The economic and ethical concerns might be mitigated somewhat but it does raise issues of whom ultimately benefits, what desires are leveraged into a business model, what are the hidden costs, and what are the effects on disciplinary content.

This paper will attempt to explore some of these questions, particularly the ones of content and desires. It will do so by communicating the previous results of case study research, reflective interviews, and cross case-study pattern search examining the process, priorities and results of 87 entries in 14 open ideas competitions between 2007 and 2011. The case-studies had an award success rate of 16% (second place to finalist). All the competitions were international, professionally-focused competitions without awarded design contracts. They offered, instead, dissemination of the winning designers, nominal cash prizes, and ‘bragging rights’. The qualitative research was part of a formal educational structure in which the institutional knowledge of the previous competition experience was applied back to modify approaches for the following year. In addition, reflective analysis was applied to two professional competitions, one a two-phase open competition while the second was a two-phase invited competition.

What was found, beyond the standard complaints of wastefulness of time, resources, lack of publicity, and insular architect-to-architect marketing, was other issues with open ideas competitions. When examining the outcomes (graphics & text) of the competition entries along with dialogues that occurred through the design process, there are disciplinary issues present. The structure and delivery format of competition stressed visual novelty and currency of fashion at the expense of architectural syntax, nuances of spatial refinement and priorities of bodily experience. The mindset of the designers, as well as the outcome format, suppressed or replaced the priorities of rich architectural space. In fact, what was often developed and presented as a competition deliverable only looked like architecture but contained none of the internal concerns of the domain of architecture (Figure 1). One could say it was part of a larger trend that claims the increasing aestheticization of architecture (Leach 1997) or an aspect of populism in design (Lefaivre 1972/2005).

Figure 1: Hydrogram (2008) finalist by Vince Daniele and Philip Plowright (advisor) – for the Line of Site competition, a
Disciplinary Content and Priorities

When Till referenced a “whole sets of architectural values that are counter to what might make really great architecture”, what was he really critiquing? It seems problematic that architecture has a values within it that undermines what it is – a paradox of content, one might say, as architecture can not contradict architecture. The statement, however, does revolve around the use of “sets of values” as known criteria found within the discipline of architecture. As a discipline, architecture has a particular set of values as responsibilities which mark a domain of knowledge, making it identifiable as architecture and not as something else. All disciplines necessarily have a domain of knowledge, something that is considered owned by that discipline and contains its priorities and expertise. A working definition of a discipline comes from Michel Foucault. He considered a discipline as “. . . defined by a domain of objects, a set of methods, a corpus of propositions considered to be true, a play of rules and definitions, of techniques and instruments: all this constitutes a sort of anonymous system at the disposal of anyone who wants to or is able to use it . . .” (Foucault 1971, 59). A discipline exists by defining boundaries and setting rules so they can be accessed by its members with consistency. This is made possible by syntax and tools (Plowright 2014).

In a discipline, a syntax contains the objects, forces, priorities, thinking structures and habits which have been defined by that discipline. Syntax also contains the limits of what that discipline can address while the tools contain the limits of how content can be addressed. All conclusions of an architectural design process will, necessarily, be manifested in architectural syntax. Architectural syntax can be built from foundational operations of manipulating form, strongly influenced by the social context of space. The presence of the human body brings event, circulation, sequence, procession, presence, and occupation while environmental factors associate formal and social content with physical context by addressing adjacency, light, air and surface temperature, humidity, air movement, extension, biofilia, and field (as datum and context). All of these aspects have been historically associated with the architectural discipline and can be directly engaged by the tools of the discipline (Plowright 2014, 13-17).

Even self-proclaimed avant garde theorists and critics such as Patrik Schumacher (2011) and Jeffrey Kipnis (2013) accept and define the notion of architectural boundaries and internal versus external content. Kipnis, in particular, is extremely clear about disciplinary priorities even as he engages art, critical theory, philosophy, and pop culture in relation to architecture and architectural theory. Kipnis considers that buildings, as architecture, can speak in three different ways – either intellectually as a formal composition, socially as cultural representation, or phenomenologically as grounded sensation of place (Kipnis 2013, 57). All three of these positions, considered equally valid, rest on the relationship between social and formal factors – never simply one or the other but both. In addition, context and sequence as well as the human body and environmental qualities are present throughout the discussions. The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art by Steven Holl is considered by Kipnis to speak with a phenomenological voice, while the San Francisco Federal Building by Morphosis addresses both intellectual and social voices. All critiques, however, return to fundamental factors of spatial occupation, circulation, containment and the housing of the body as architectural content.

So when considering architecture as a discipline that has particular responsibilities, it could be argued that Till included one too many words in his intentionally polemical statement. It isn’t that architecture has values within it which weaken the ability to produce “great architecture”. It is that architecture shares aspects of its production with other disciplines, disciplines that hold different values and have different priorities. The difficulty is keeping the syntactical priorities of one discipline straight while using content that is shared between itself and other disciplines. To return to Till’s concern with competitions, when the term ‘architectural’ is dropped from the first part of the sentence the statement could be rephrased as competition entries that treat buildings as static objects privilege non-architectural values that masquerade as architectural concerns. The critique that Till brings to bear on the competition is the consideration of architecture as a static object – either judged in terms of sculpture or as a piece of graphic design.
The Open Ideas Competition as Content Violation

The core of the content of this paper comes from participation in 87 entries of open ideas competitions over five years (2007-11). As part of the process of pursuing these entries, a concept-based framework approach was used as design method combined with content extracted by Reflective Analysis, Case Study Research, and Cross Case-study Pattern Search research methods. While all 87 entries contributed to initial data collection, the 14 placements from this group are considered as significant evidence of priorities associated with open ideas competitions due to their identification of being successful through peer-review. These placements were in open competitions sponsored by 2A (second place), Arquitectum (third place, Honourable Mention), eVolo (Honourable Mention, Finalist), d3 (Special Mention – Dystopian Future), Zombie SafeHouse (Honourable mentions - 4), Line of Sight (Honourable mention, Finalist), DaTE (Special Award – Energy) and Design for the Children (Finalist). While the topic of each competition was different, the final deliverables and context was the same – digital boards, no physical model, high profile events, large submission volume (100+) and concluding focus on publicity/media broadcasting (reputation). As such, an approach was developed through reflection that focused on cultural novelty, graphic presentation, and identification of jury priorities over context sensitivity, spatial analysis or spatial sequencing. In all cases, impact and visibility were chosen over architectural enrichment and subtlety.

Visualization over experience

We can elaborate on the concern of image use by quoting from Till’s book Architecture Depends. A section of the book recreates a jury discussion at the conclusion of a design competition and can highlight some of the overarching issues. Till presents two schemes, one that is ‘colorful and blobby and empty’ which he labels blob, while the other is ‘full of activity, where the architecture acts as a setting’ labelled as setting (Till 2009, 124). The discussion revolves around differing support by the jurors for these two, with the following commentary:

“But I can’t see the architecture,” says a critic of setting, “the drawings are so busy with people! What are they giving us? What would I tell my colleagues we have actually got?”

“But that, that . . . thing. It’s just vacant form. Where’s the content?” replies the critic of blob.

“A least I can see it. And what I see looks really exciting”

“But it is just eye candy. You are falling into the trap of being seduced by image. It is just another clever architect playing the commodity game.”

[...]

“They aren’t just drawing people. Of course there is stuff there, it is just that it is background. Kind of modest,” says the second advocate for setting.

“Oh, that is so dull. So damn worthy. At least these guys are giving us something interesting and new. Something luscious, something soft.” (Till 2009, 125)

While it could be argued that setting is prioritizing the human experience (phenomenological) and blob is based around formal representation (intellectual), the real issue revolves around what disciplinary content is actually addressed by either submission, and what priorities do they hold. The challenge raised is the inherent ideology maintained by the vehicle used for transferring intention and it relationship to deep architectural values – the image. It is argued that the image, through the presentation boards, represents architecture rather than being architecture (Till 2009, 110). Or, to say it a different way, the graphic presentation creates a simulation of architecture which is then mentally reconstructed by an individual in order to interpret that simulation. This, however, leads to the second issue. The awarding of ideas competition placements, like all human endeavours, are not value neutral. A jury makes the award and jurors exist both in a cultural milieu and have their own agenda. The rapid format of first stage review privileges soliciting quick interest rather than deep study – with interest being the critical aspect of the board. In addition, the competition organizations also have expectations – generally revolving around community standing, exposure and/or notoriety rather than spatial quality. As Friederike Meye wrote in her article challenging the purpose and effect of the Arquitectum organization, “The recipe for the so-called academic competitions idea is always the same. The organizers are looking for a prominent place to connect
with the dreams, and a building contract that probably everyone would like to realize” (Meye 2008).

Anyone serious about playing the competition game understands these factors. However, the end result is one that suppresses architectural refinement for marketing impact.

The suppression of architectural values occurred in the first phase of the case-studies competition entries in the selection of a ‘position’. A position or a concept was indispensible to the development of the work and a concept-based framework, one of the trilogy of possible underlying structures that architectural design uses (Plowright 2014), was always engaged in the case-studies to pursue open competition proposals. This was due to the nature of the Open Ideas competitions media restrictions (digital graphic file) as well as the judging processes – the focus for the project teams was to quickly communicate an “interesting” concept in the most evocative manner possible. The conceptual position was roughly based on the briefs of the competition or the focus of the institution behind the competition – for example, eVolo had to address height in some way, while D3 projects focused on systems and prototypes. However, once the competition frame had been considered, the direction of the project was chosen by cultural currency based on media interest. The selection process was determined by ability to visualize the concept in a manner aligned with the values of the competition and the potency of that expression.

In pre-2008 case-studies, results of highly visible and visually-based ideas competitions, such as eVolo, could award purely geometrical investigations as concept – architecture as sculpture with a tendency towards the parametric. However, in post-2008 ideas competitions, the focus has been more heavily focused on social and ethical content. The architectural competition, as seen through the sample group, acts as a conduit for a larger cultural conversations and isn’t about architecture itself. However, evidence implies that the focus always was about novelty and interest rather than real responsibility or any socio-political realism.

The Du(b)ailities project (2009) connected social media to place identification through an interactive wall and handheld devices (Figure 2). At the time that the project was completed smartphones were current but the Apple Ipad wouldn’t be introduced for another year (this project was completed in January 2009 while the first Ipad was released on April 3, 2010). Social media was coming to the forefront as a cultural discussion and the evolution of technology made the entry point of the competition content as a factor in this discussion important. However, the ‘architectural space’ considered to support this concept is used only as a background to the larger conversation and was ultimately undeveloped, remaining a gesture. The Chichen Itza third place winning proposal introduced an ‘infrastructure’ of educational moments which progressed an visitor from apprentice to associate while engaging in a historical cultural site (Figure 3). While the competition proposal asked for a tourist lodge, this winning entry developed no core architectural content or qualities or even attempted to render architectural space. It ignored the program and architectural requirements as well. The discussions centred around intellectual human development and education, while the graphics obscured the content purposefully to elicit interest while remaining esoteric. The closest the project came to engaging architecture was to infer spatial placement of elements through a
circulation arrangement. Meye’s critique of the entry was correct when she wrote that the “choice of work by Philip Plowright and Steven Nielsen in third place [… ] provided pretty graphics of vertical lines and pictograms, while the theoretical approach does not even demand to be understood.” (Meye 2008). Fortunately, it did not need to be accessible to win as it was intriguing, provocative and had what Till would call “virtuosity of […] technique.” (Till 2009, 111) – as in, it looked good. But as Till also notes, it also “fails to represent the fullness of the conditions it is addressing, but this failure is disguised” (Till 2009, 111).

The other placements and entries followed the same selection process for concept. Two major themes were engaged for source material. Either the social was stressed through activist positions or technological utopian ideas engaged as belief statements. Examples of the first are the Chichen Itza project, Occupy Skyscraper (Figure 4), the eVolo Honourable Mention from 2011 (Figure 7) and the d3 Natural Systems Special Mention (Figure 10). Other projects in the case-study group engaged topics such as landfills as cultural symbols, movable or adjustable buildings reacting to social changes or efficiencies, high density forms through changing social relationships, slums, low-income housing and homelessness. The technological utopian projects regularly engage energy, climate change, food production, pollution, recycling, fresh water and waste – all current issues as underlying positions. The concepts that were generated as starting points for the competition entries, however, needed to move past the general position to a particular proposal. That proposal would be based on media currency (interest) and used shallow surface knowledge of the topic.
Cultural Currency

The idea of cultural currency was a primary concern for the designers based on past project pattern search, in the case of multi-year competition programmes, and analysis of language use in competition briefs. In this way, it isn’t enough just to produce a project on renewable energy production, for example. While a project produced in the early 2000s could tackle solar as alternative energy source, by 2006 the timeliness of this idea has passed in public interest. This is a common occurrence – either an idea has saturated the “market” so completely that its novelty has worn off, or it was a short-lived fascination replaced new content. After solar energy needed to be abandoned as a competition topic, other aspects of the same general utopian position where highlighted in mass media and cultural interest. These included wind energy, hydrogen and biomass (grasses, algae, etc). However, post-2010, we find very few of these projects submitted or placing in ideas competitions as their currency had also passed. Now more unusual forms of renewable energy need to be taken on or even a shock position that challenges conventional expectations in order to elicit interest. These may not even be based on honest beliefs but as a strategy for competition placement. The Coal.3 project for eVolo 2013, is an example of this (Figure 5). When discussing the project,
the designers did not believe that coal was a viable energy source, yet they pursued the entry for its challenge to expectations and the ability to translate the ideas into dramatic graphics. Even in ideas competitions that seem to have no relationship to technological utopian ideals, we find the topic of energy reoccurring as a social priority (Figure 6). Zombies as a power source combined with “old school” technology such as steam generation is unique approach to both the competition brief (safety) and human needs (power/food) – and successfully placed as an honourable mention in both the professional juror and the public vote.

Figure 5: eVolo (2013) no placement by Nicholas Cressman, Steven Romkema, Tanner Thaler and Philip Plowright (advisor) – composite of two boards. The project challenged the idea of renewable energy by proposing an integrated coal extraction, processing, and waste use facility combined with energy generation as a skyscraper (Source: Author)

A concerning issue for all the submitted and placed projects in the case-study group has to do with depth of knowledge – both architectural and other. When engaging in the design process, very little time was spent by the designer understanding spatial components, program, human movement, qualities of space, environmental effects or other core aspects of architectural knowledge. In addition, while many of the architectural concerns were replaced by content from other disciplines (social/technological), these were only researched enough to produce a surface level understanding that could be manipulated in terms of formal objects. In following the designers and the choices they made, no full or considered review, literature
search, and expert discussion was engaged and the only aspects of the proposal position used where those that proved to be interesting in order to produce a ‘visionary’ presentation of its effect. For example, while the eVolo finalist project (Figure 8) took on bioengineering as a prop for the technical basis for formal articulation, the designer had no deep understanding of the topic beyond basic internet research and submitted a proposal that was impossible to physically realise at the current state of technological development. However, the concept of bioengineered buildings became the theme for the boards and then a visual case. The organic was picked up as a representational theme to ensure coherence with the conceptual position and some general scientific elements were included help make the proposal believable.

Figure 6: Zombie Safehouse (2011) honourable mention by Tianyi Gu and Philip Plowright (advisor). Zombies power a human refuge rendered in “steampunk” graphic style (Source: author).
Marketing over Architectural Priorities

The ignoring of architectural priorities or engaging cultural vision is not a new occurrence or strategy – in either idea-based or professional project-based competitions. Looking to competitions that awarded building contracts, the same strategies are often used to the same effect as are present in the ideas competition case-studies. Jorn Utzon, when preparing the design for the Sydney Opera House competition, did not visit the site, ignored the directions of the brief and didn’t engage any engineering advice (Yaneva, 2013). However, he won the commission for the project – why? Because he produced something that the public hadn’t seen before, something that resonated with the aspirations beyond the pragmatics of the brief. It was only after the completion of the competition did Utzon need to engage architecture. Daniel Libeskind’s original proposal for the Royal Ontario Museum’s addition (2002), nicknamed the Crystal, was five napkin sketches and a later model showing a glass structure, devoid of structure, environmental mitigation or interior qualities (Figure 9). It won the competition based on a “series of huge transparent forms that appear to be growing out of the museum’s historic east and west wings” (Hume 2002). The initial imagining of the project has only a superficial formal relationship to the final built project, and contains none of the ephemeral and transcendent qualities suggested by the graphic or model presentation (Figure 10). The project is also never experienced in the way it was presented to the public – the comprehensive bird’s eye view found in magazines is not the experience of a visitor on Bloor Street in Toronto. The reasons for the changes between proposal and construction documentation were based on concerns over light, humidity and the fact that the proposal structural glass form could not be actually constructed – architectural priorities. Thom Mayne of Morphosis makes it clear that what his office produced for a competition was not the same as producing a ‘real’ architectural project. During a lecture on his work, Mayne brushed off a design as being a ‘competition design’ defined as a proposal which was based in marketing processes (advertising, promotion & sales) that allowed a client to see a vision but was not yet a real project (Lawrence Tech, April 18, 2013). He clearly acknowledged that the priorities of the competition were gestural and fairly shallow – based on more selling an image than producing critical work. For Mayne, architecture beings after the competition has been won.
When considering the outcomes of idea competitions based on framework and syntax theories of architectural process (Plowright 2014), competition outcomes do not align with architectural priorities. Instead, they are based in marketing, fashion and graphic design supporting sculptural novelty, social innovation or cultural critique. Visionary projects are not only encouraged but required, a tendency also found historically in the disciplinary tradition of the Beaux-Arts and epitomized by the 18th century work of Boullée and Ledoux. Some contemporary competitions, such as eVolo, are described by the participants in the case-studies as 'science fiction'. They engage issue-based ideas that have cultural currency, usually social or technological utopianism, and operate by extrapolating known aspects of society to potential outcomes. The issue remains, however, that the structure of the competitions reinforces those outcomes as visual rather than relational or experiential – which then privileges the image over architectural qualities (Till. 2009, Leach 1997).
None of the projects shown above, as well as the rest of the placement group, developed any architectural content beyond what was visible. The stress was on representation and aligning the qualities of the presentation boards to the conceptual position. Circulation, interior qualities, realistic material expression or use, and individual experience were completely ignored in all the case-study projects. Design gestures only needed to look right and the overall impression of effect dictated decision-making, stressing the object as an image. The priority of image raises the question of the role of the icon and iconic work in architecture. While icon used to mean a unique representational form that was generated by repetition and copying, the iconic in contemporary architecture has come to be “defined in terms of fame and special symbolic/aesthetic significance as applied to buildings, spaces and in some cases architects themselves.” (Sklair 2010). The expression of the icon is non-architectural, rather it celebrates “corporate economic performance” (Aureli 2011). Architecture has long had a role in defining cultural identity though monuments, landmarks and iconic elements, these playing an important part in the conceptual composition of cities and inhabitants. The historic examples of competition project, such as the Acropolis, the Spanish Stairs or the Duomo, are all iconic aspects of their representative urban spaces and even stand in as symbols for their cities. This is a considered one role for architecture and the “architectural icon is imbued with spacial meaning that is symbolic for a culture and/or a time, and that this special meaning has an aesthetic component in that it is a worthy and/or beautiful way to represent what is being represented. It is this unique combination of fame, symbolism and aesthetic quality that creates the icon” (Sklair 2011, 180). While image is a strong component to iconicity, as iconic work operates through representation rather than experience, there is an aspect of experience to these works. Although as Sklair points out, the experience might be more than the representation, it also might be less (Sklair 2011, 181).

In the case of the competition case-studies, however, there was a tendency away from the iconic as much as there was a suspension of the architectural object. While some project proposals from ideas competitions implied the architectural monument through form-making, many where too formally diffused to even be
considered 'object' let alone 'building'. These projects pursued statement rather than icon and those project that suspended pursuit of the architectural object for information organisation made the goal of iconicity impossible. This is different to the professional project-award competition, such as those of Morphosis or Libeskind, which use the icon to create difference through sculptural effect but still have a responsibility to build if successful. In the ideas competitions, the proposal representation acted as a social statement or judgement, sometimes suggesting a prototype for culture and other times a polemical statement. A case in point was the d3 Special Mention, Anti-Urban Net project (Figure 10). The project proposed a large interlocking field to cover vast areas of Detroit neighbourhoods and slowly return the territory back to landscape. There was no intention to create a realistic or building proposal but instead the goal was to make a political statement towards shrinking cities. It would be impossible, in both scale and field approach, to consider this work iconic in any traditional sense. However, it is also challenging to align the proposal with sculptural, architectural or even urban qualities. It is a representation that infers spatial occupation but does not prove that occupation. As iconic architecture has been identified with visual interpretation along with cultural mythologization, this is not present in the work. We might argued that globalization and media penetration has transferred the priorities of iconic building from a experience to a broadcast campaign.

Figure 10: Anti-Urban Net - d3 Natural Systems (2012) Special Mention – Dystopian Future by Jian Xu, Tianyi Gu and Philip Plowright (advisor). Detroit, USA is covered in a field structure that allows the decaying urban fabric to return gracefully back to pastoral landscape as a political statement (Source: author).

What needs to be remembered is that at the core of iconic architecture is the connection to an institution or institutions (Grombrich 1972, Aureli 2011, Sklair 2011). The majority of the ideas competition proposals resisted institutional alignment and outright symbolism, although they shared the representational quality of iconic architecture. The ideas competition entries were image-focused representational proposals, and the representation was a vehicle to illustrate a position, either social or technological content that used physical gesture as a primary holder of that content. It is probably more correct to say that the work was visionary and prototypical of future development – making it aspirational rather than sculptural. This was influenced by the social agenda of many of the designers but presented in a format that is driven by commodification.

Advocacy and Social Hope

The questions raised by syntax and priorities might be addressed by examining the conceptual framing around competitions – asking what is the value of the idea competition and should there be a clearer representation of that value? Ethical concerns are raised in the relationship between the participants,
competition organizers and the use of outcomes. These concerns, as noted in current critiques of the project-award model, are present for the ideas competition as well. While there isn't as significant an investment of resources with the expectation of some significant return in the idea competition, such as a building design contract, there is still the application of time and energy for some exchange value. In recent decades, the open idea competition structure has taken the form of a business model. D3, Arquitectum and eVolo are professional organisations that run competitions as an income source, gaining capital from entry fees, publications and advertising. The designer is participating by providing free resources to this model but with little understanding of the overall mechanism of funding. While most who engage this style of competition use it as exploration and exposure, there is little recognition of the cost. As one commentator on the architectural idea competition notes, “remember: it’s not the failure that will kill you. It’s the hope” (Basulto 2010). If the idea competition is understood as an exchange of resources, the architectural designer needs to ask what is the return on investment (ROI)?

The major return that many of the designers in the case-studies, and various discussion groups, note is the ability to design in an organised structure while the client or owner aspect is suspended as an active participant in the process. In a word, freedom while still engaging with a peer group for status. This is also the major difference between the idea competition and professional project-award competition. While guided by a brief, the designer in the idea competition is theoretically left to design without political consequences. It seems that, as one socially concerned architect wrote, “Architects are apparently shy to speak out against almost anything that might come back to effect a project in the future– a restaurant around the corner from the stadium, a dream house or corporate campus for a CEO that might also be a big baseball booster. So it seems that a likely cadre of professionals that might have great insight into what is appropriate or not, remain silent […]” (Motherjones 2007). As a virtual project, the idea competition is considered a forum which allows for those statements of belief or ethics to be presented to the general public or peer group without affecting economic outcomes. They are also not constrained by the notion of service and responsibility to contracted outcomes (i.e. a building).

However, the question is whether the client is really absent or whether the concept of client is simply broadened beyond a person or group who are engaging the service of the architect (either with or without a fee). While it might be argued that client in the case of open idea competitions could be considered the organising agency or even critic group, the designers in the case-studies didn’t see an equivalently between the traditional idea of client and these more inaccessible and non-direct groups. The suspension of rendering professional services opened architectural design to engaging social and cultural concerns, an aspect that is already a strong vector in the ethics of architectural practice, on a broader basis. In most of the case-studies, the notion of client was replaced with either constituency or public responsibility aligning the purpose of the design representation with notions of advocacy and activism. The same shift of priorities can be found in professional offices that use the format of the idea competition as part of their professional structure, such as Toronto’s Lateral Office or New York’s Interboro. Mason White of Lateral Office believes that the speculative work their office is pursuing, themed around issues of the Canada Arctic, is a way to formulate a discussion that is absent or underprivileged (White 2011). He clearly defines this discussion as not architecture, but uses architectural strategies and graphic representation as a way to bring awareness to socio-cultural issues that are normatively non-visual. Georgeen Theodore of Interboro also applies the idea competition model and the removal of the client to instead create “a constituency by rendering visible a (yet to be identified) public’s practices, naming the community, and helping it organize. Advocacy shouldn’t always be about helping an existing constituency obtain its stated goals, but about producing or assembling a public out of the infinity of practices that exist in the city.” (Theodore 2009).

Seen in this way, it could be argued that the value of the idea competition is not financial, professional or even architectural but cultural. The value is, in fact, about social hope (Rorty 1999). Idea competitions leverage participant interest in order to generate submittals – something important if your funding model is based on how many people register to work for free – while offering a platform for public discussion. As such, these competitions target areas of concern within the collective cultural mind. They “often focus on urgent social and cultural issues [such as] disaster recovery, homeless housing, urban renewal, city planning, or environmental consciousness.” (Brown 2010). Even a generic yearly competition like eVolo, one that is
based on envisioning “the future of building high” (eVolo 2012), award projects that take a social stance based on the current cultural priorities – that are beyond the architectural capacity to respond with internal syntax. In recent years, winners have addressed prison reform, renewable energy, third world recycling, food production and global warming. While the competition can be considered as an experimentation (Lipstadt 1989) and an investment in the exploration of new ideas (Kreiner 2010), those ideas are well beyond the domain of architecture. Architectural gestures become the vehicle for social advocacy and activist voices. This might be considered a continuation of the social agenda of architecture with the evidence of ethics found in 19th century British socialism and picked up in the 1960s activist movements. However, it is a pale cousin to this legacy. The architectural designer, in this case, is acting as a social activist but in the most passive of capacities.

There is a connection between this form of social activism and the new populist position. This is opposed to the “‘traditional’ populist tendencies in architecture” that empowers the collective, instead referring “to the strategies of mobilising or orchestrating people. It has to do with the process by which architects themselves communicate with their clients and the public. It addresses the term populism in its causal context – namely, the way in which persons or special interest groups attempt to curry favour with the public.” (Shamiyeh 2005, 26-7). Echoing the attitude of architectural designers such as Lateral Office, this form of populism is used to “to bring about key changes in the course of a construction project without a great deal of effort and with practically no risk” using rhetorical devices and mass media (Shamiyeh 2005, 27). Architectural graphic techniques have the ability to bridge divides – they can spatially manifest societal positions through imagery, making that position alluring, enticing and, most of all, visible. However, it is explicitly not architecture though it is a service that architecture can provide. The architectural ideas competition outcomes are then a form of marketing with a social agenda rather than evidence of architecture.

While the social discussion seems positive on the surface, it is an ineffective way to engender social change, protest or activism. The biggest issue is that the realm in which the discussion or advocacy occurs is not public. Often it is commercial and it is always curated, monitored, filtered and even censored. As the outcomes of the idea competitions are connected to the agency that sponsors the event as well as the jury selection, there is a bias towards satisfying that agency’s own needs and public appearance. For example, during the “Redesigning Detroit: A New Vision for an Iconic Site” ideas competition that recently concluded, Amy Nicole Swift submitted a proposal to intentionally provoke a larger discussion about competitions as a commercial strategy and the loss of authenticity in the urban fabric (Figure 11). The competition was promoted by Opportunity Detroit and financially supported by Rock Ventures LLC, a family of companies that include Quicken Loads. The group is focused on revitalizing Detroit through profit and non-profit ventures. Both the Rock Ventures group and Opportunity Detroit were founded and run by Dan Gilbert, a local billionaire who is also a majority owner the Cleveland Cavaliers and several other sports franchises. The scope for the competition was “to imagine the possibilities for one of downtown Detroit’s long-vacant, most significant pieces of real estate: the site of the old Hudson’s Department Store.” (Opportunity Detroit 2013).

Swift’s entry was a satirical take on the intentions of the organisers who claimed to wish for public input through the competition process. While, on the surface, the idea of a public debate surrounding the continued attempts to revitalize Detroit seemed like a positive idea, Swift was challenging the issues of a depoliticized community, single source urban development with one group of companies buying up most of downtown real estate, the competition as a publicity show rather than an authentic process, the ineffectiveness of architects to engage in the development process, and political decisions over the past decade that removed landmark and historical buildings weakening the overall fabric of the city. She referenced the lack of architectural priorities and content in successful idea-based proposals and the ethics of ceding intellectual property rights without recompense (Figure 12). Swift used an intentionally sophomoric context of art patrons viewing an image of dog faeces on pavement whilst discussing the context of the idea competition, the development process and community debate. The text included on the board satirises Dan Gilbert’s own open letter to the city of Cleveland, issued in 2010, when basketball star LeBron James announced he was leaving the Cavaliers through what was considered by the franchise and
public as an inappropriate format and venue.

Ironically, as the entry’s intended voice was to challenge the notion of public input, it was censored and removed from display by the organisers. Regardless to the intellectual or design merits of the entry, it never entered the ‘public’ discussion as this didn’t meet the objectives of the competition’s priorities. In order to attempt to continue public debate around the issues of idea competitions, Detroit development and architectural values, Swift contacted local media outlets. Not a signal media source would publish either the story of the banned entry or the larger discussions around urban development and architectural design services. As Swift noted in a forum post, “Media circuits in Detroit are pretty pro-Gilbert, or at least steer clear of ruffling his camp’s feathers. No editor or columnist will touch this with a 10-foot pole, not even the snarkiest of the bunch” (Swift 2013). Ultimately, the events around the removal of voice illustrates the loss of public space not only in our urban landscapes but also in our media landscapes. The promise of the idea competition as a public forum for discussion, disagreement and dialogue extends only as far as the priorities of the organisation that controls the space of display and award. As such, it is difficult to support the open idea competition as a site for advocacy and activism.

Figure 11: Redesigning Detroit: A New Vision for an Iconic Site entry by Amy Nicole Swift (Courtesy of Amy Nicole Swift).
Some practitioners such as Farshid Moussavi, late of Foreign Office Architects and now at Harvard University, advocate for transparency in the competitions process (Slessor, 2013). The idea is that more visibility, conceptual as well as critical, will encourage a discourse in architecture. However, transparency will not address the core issues that the structure of the idea competition is ultimately not focused on architecture. They are competitions of special effects that privilege the image – a beauty contest of slick surfaces. In the competition case studies, projects that placed in major idea competitions from design organisations such as eVolo, D3, Arquitectum and 2A, contained little to no development of program, circulation, structure or other spatial-technical aspects of architectural knowledge. The research that was completed focused on adapting current trends and ‘hot’ cultural interests to a means of formal visualisation. Little to no time was spent on architectural exploration focused on the quality or refinement of space. However, the competition brief was analysed, the jurors researched for their aesthetic preferences as well as personal biases in form-making, and where possible past competitions final projects were studied for trends in topics, layout, colour schemes and content level. The guiding principle was to design to the boards, make it sexy, alluring, and interesting, but invest no time in the development of quality architectural space or be concerned with core architectural issues of circulation, structure or occupation. There was little work developed beyond what would be visible on the competition boards or media and many of the final proposals could not even be realistically inhabited. Across every case study of competition work, architectural ideas of spatial and experiential quality were sacrificed for graphic composition and visual interest.

A change in the format and recognition of disciplinary syntax in open idea competitions is occurring presently. This is the expansion of field of involvement and the inclusion of multi-modal responses. Both changes require involved disciplines to be clearer about domain knowledge even when the competition is identified as ‘belonging’ to architecture. Warming Huts, the yearly Canadian design-build competition, requires the design team to include an architect and an artist with clear definition of the role of each through examples of projects and publications. The competition is judged on how well art and architectural priorities are presented within a single project. Blank Space recently issued a Fairy Tale competition that is “open to architects, engineers, designers, illustrators, students and creatives worldwide.” (Blank Space 2013) The outcomes are clearly defined as being concerned with reintroducing a socially critical voice of architectural concerns but through narrative and illustration. The organisation presents its concerns as purposefully interdisciplinary so to “uncover the true power of architecture by creating new opportunities for design to engage the public” (Blank Space 2013) while the image is co-opted as a mechanism of narrative. Other organisations issuing idea competitions are supporting multi-modal formats of deliverables.
while stressing disciplinary content. Landscape Urbanism’s journal Scenario have released their fifth competition, this one addressing the urban forest. The mode of submission is open to many different formats including “critical essays, provocations, and design projects that explore the topic of building the urban forest.” (Carlisle 2013). Another journal/magazine sponsored idea competition, SOILED – No.5 – Cloudscrapers, also broadens the modality of submission while addressing territory usually held by eVolo. SOILED is clearly socially concerned, and concerned its role to “investigates latent issues in the built environment and the politics of space. The stories we tell about architecture are messy” (SOILED 2013). While being clearly concerned with architectural content, the competition organisers invited the submission of “narratives, manifestos, critical essays, infographics, diagrams, mappings, photographs, comics, speculations, and ephemera, among other salient media, in responses to the instigation”(SOILED 2013). The purpose, from the organiser’s point of view, is to extend the architectural dialogue beyond the community of the discipline to engage the larger public.

Still while the trends seem positive, there is still the issue that idea competition exists in a private sphere masquerading as public and the format and judging patterns reinforce superficiality and novelty. It is at the whim of the ethics and intentions of the organisation group that submitted work is represented as part of a larger dialogue. Debate and public discussion/disagreement is allowed only should it align with the intentions or goals of the competition sponsor. Transparency does become important as the open idea competition seems to be already acting as a defacto site for social engagement for socio-spatial designers. Ultimately the issues that should be raised are around the clarity to disciplinary knowledge, the cost of image-based presentation on architectural quality and the effectiveness of the format for activism and social engagement.
References


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