



Under the microscope

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The winning formula for architectural competitions

I am currently in the middle of preparing material for a significant architectural competition here in the United Kingdom. As a result I have become increasingly aware of other architectural competitions that are being run at present and also increasingly interested in the UK's experience of competitions over the past decade or so.

One doesn't have to think hard to turn up some high profile examples, amongst which there are memorable highs and lows: the debacle at Cardiff Bay with Zaha Hadid's Opera House, the uncertainty of Alsop's Fourth Grace in Liverpool, the success of Wilkinson Eyre's Winking Eye bridge across the Tyne, and a raft of Lottery-led projects (many of which I have had the privilege to work on) including Eden, The Lowry, The British Museum Great Court, et al.

Amidst all this reflection, I have begun to question how well, as a nation, we have been served by the process of high cost, high profile architectural competitions. What, I ask myself, did the Cardiff Bay episode (wonderfully captured in all its gory detail in Lord Crickhowell's book *Opera House Lottery: Zaha Hadid and the Cardiff Bay Project*) do for confidence at the dawning of the Lottery age? Is the Victoria & Albert Museum blessed or blighted by such a high profile architectural solution as Libeskind's *Spiral* waiting in the wings? Has the operational sustainability of The Glasgow Science Centre, The Baltic or The Centre for Popular Music at Sheffield been helped or hindered by the process that delivered the landmark solutions in which they sit? My first thoughts, erring on the side of operations as they always do, lead me to the conclusion that the glamorous beauty parades that are architectural

competitions, are not all they are cracked up to be. But in thinking about the project I am currently embroiled in, it has been necessary, as part of the preparation, to think more particularly about the specifics of the competition process and the key components that are required to deliver success. And herein lies another question: what is success? Is it PR and profile or pragmatics and procurement? Success to my mind (and to that of Locum's client team), is very clearly measured in

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terms of the latter: deliverability, sustainability, viability and of course quality. Profile and good PR exposure are desired bi-products, but are not an end in themselves.

So, how can success be achieved? What is critical to the mix? What are the key factors? Locum's view is that the management of a successful competition will to a large extent be facilitated by the preparation of a clear and well-articulated brief. Whilst there will always be a set of factors that lie outside one's control, a strong brief coupled with a clear set of objectives at least provides a framework in which progress can be made and outputs measured. In this regard, I see the management of architectural competitions a bit like decorating: it's all in the preparation! As a result of this rather simplistic rubric, Locum has been focusing significant effort on understanding the web of issues at play, the objectives of the stakeholders and the available budget in terms of both

capital and revenue. Needless to say, as is our wont here at Locum, we will wrap all this in a well-founded market analysis that seeks to ensure a sustainable business model that will deliver legacy and ongoing benefit. We will take significant care to develop a brief for the competition that sets a clear framework within which we want competing architects to work. Not only do we believe that the quality of the competition returns will be impacted by the quality of the brief, but that in addition the buildability and deliverability of schemes articulated within submissions will be more certain. And this isn't buildability at any cost, but buildability on time and on budget. And, dare I say it, buildability of a form that allows effective and efficient operations from the outset. Whilst there is significant public awareness of the horror stories relating to projects that go over budget (Portcullis House, The Scottish Parliament), at Locum we are also aware of a lesser publicised scandal relating to the operational position of some of the nation's new iconic landmarks. What is often forgotten is that architectural ambition and experimentation can be at the expense of operational budgets (who are the architects to care about this downstream detail?). The natural focus upon architecture that a competition drives can encourage the sacrifice of common sense and practicality in terms of internal layout and design. The implications of these failings are ones that an operator must live with in perpetuity, often at great cost both financially and, more critically, in terms of the visitor experience. So, can the competition process be hardened up? Can architects be corralled, not at the expense of flair

and innovation, but in an effort to strike out budget risks and operational dysfunction? In terms of competition outputs can the delivery of solutions be the norm, rather than the delivery of schematics that only live on a plan or as a figment of the creator's imagination?

The answer must be yes. It has to be. The implication otherwise is that as a sector and profession we are at the whim of a single discipline that has the power to wreak havoc. Interestingly, following a lecture I recently gave to a group of post-graduate students of design at Central St Martin's College, I was surprised (but also greatly encouraged) to hear that as working professionals this cross-section of the design community longed for better and more closely defined briefs. "Give us some boundaries. Test our abilities to solve difficult problems. Set us financial constraints", they were saying.

It struck me, on the reflection, that perhaps the failings of the system that creates such costly overruns and ghastly high profile competition mess-ups lies not simply at the door of our flamboyant friends the architects, but with their indulgent clients and advisors too. It is not just that people are too scared of these precious geniuses to say no, but that more often than not they don't want to. Put more mundanely it is the mega-scale equivalent of seeing our TV heroes unable to fend off the black and scarlet stripes of Lawrence Llewellyn-Bowen for their two bedroom semi in Sheen. Given a blank canvas what architect wouldn't try and have some fun. They are, after all, spontaneous types who like to let their minds roam and creative juices flow.

And this brings me right back to the architectural brief that I am working towards on my current project. Here,

as I have said, the intention is to deliver a very full and comprehensive brief pulled together by a multi-discipline any team. The brief will provide a framework not only for the built form but also for the content and operations too. As a team we are seeking to avoid a disconnect between the architectural design of the building and the functions and activities that it needs to contain. We want a seamless approach from the beginning rather than one based on "cut and shut". We want our

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outputs to be practical, affordable and operationally effective. We want to create an outstanding visitor experience in a unique and appropriate building.

In essence we are striving to increase knowledge and transparency across the board. We want architects to design a real building for a real budget, we want to tease out 'whole life costs' associated with the completed product so that proper budgets can be drafted and we want the project promoter to think in advance about the availability of revenue funding and the implications of this choice.

And it doesn't end quite here. What we will also be doing is fully briefing our jury to ensure that they understand the wider context, the objectives and the long-term aspirations. When they make judgements, ultimately anointing a gold medal winner, we want them to have made those judgements in an

holistic and well-rounded fashion. We want them to take responsibility for more than just the architecture. We want them to think about the project – and how it will work for the long-term.

We are quietly confident about our approach. Indeed, it served us well recently when we managed the architectural competition for Swansea's new National Waterfront Museum. We are committed, at all costs, to avoiding the problem articulated by Deyan Sudjic in the Observer last summer when he said that high-blown architectural competitions serve nothing but the egos of "self important clients and socially dysfunctional architects". Now, this may all combine to mean that our competition will not be as much fun as some of the other more glamorous, avant garde affairs that encourage the flourish of charcoal and the sweep of crayon. But it might also mean we can expect a building to arrive at the end of the process which works for the client, for the visitor and for the site in which it is located. In the final analysis that is ultimately what we have been paid to do. Notwithstanding any of the above, I was reminded recently that Hausmann's re-engineering of Paris rose in cost from 18m francs to 5bn, over a build period that extended to 17 years. What would we say about that now? Who would we blame? Indeed, would we risk pointing the critical finger at all with the threat of Napoleon's guillotine in the background? The reality, of course, is that all we do is marvel, time having melted the pain of the financial and human upheaval involved in such projects. Perhaps a 100 years from now Enric Miralles will get the same gentle treatment over the Scottish Parliament.