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Architectural competitions and new reflexive practices

Introduction

Projects designed as part of architectural competitions constitute a neglected intellectual and cultural resource, as repositories of "potential" architecture. In the Canadian context, there have been literally thousands of projects produced for architectural and environmental competitions since 1945. Between 1960 and 2000, close to 150 competitions had been held in Canada. More than half of those competitions were organised in Quebec, and more than one third had cultural programs as their subject. Each of these architectural competitions generated dozens, even hundreds of projects. For instance, the competition organized in 1981 for a new City Hall in Mississauga drew 250 entries; the comparatively minor Châteauguay Library competition received almost 60 proposals; and the Montreal Symphony Orchestra competition drew more than one hundred projects from the world over.

The thousands of project designs conceived since 1945 represent a considerable intellectual and creative effort, yet very few have been archived, documented, or studied. Thus, all non-prizewinning projects are on the road to becoming extinct memories, unrecognized in the scope of potential architecture. The richness of these competitions is becoming culturally and intellectually neglected. The adulatory and critical over-evaluation to which prize-winning projects are often subjected to can become just as harmful to the study of potential architecture as the downgrading of the countless other projects, which did not enjoy the same opportunities for scrutiny.

Prizewinning or not, constructed or not, these projects peak our curiosity first and foremost as constituents of architectural knowledge. These projects have a value that goes beyond their actual success or failure in the competition context. There are countless non-prizewinning

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projects which continue to influence architectural knowledge and practice, even to a perhaps greater extent than some of the projects which been actually realized. Indeed, architectural historians have encountered several cases in which unselected, unawarded and even unrealized projects continue to influence the architectural culture and this, beyond the event of a competition and far from the cultural context and historical origin of the project's conception. The degree of influence each project may exude depends largely on the amount of publicity with which it has been introduced. As such, Rem Koolhaas and OMA's project for the *Parc de la Villette* in Paris, in the early 80's, had probably re-emerged with as much impact on educational and architectural knowledge as Bernard Tschumi's prizewinning and constructed project. Many architects refer to their competition projects even when they are not selected. These projects are represented in tenders or on internet sites, however, remaining emblematic images of a fragmented memory.

As much as we might speak about and around competitions, the actual information we currently have at our disposal on the topic is relatively small. Media coverage of competitions tends to focus exclusively on prize-winning entries, and the public exhibitions that accompany competitions are often insufficient to assure the sustained visibility of the diverse array of projects entered. Comparisons between projects becomes difficult as most of the documentation is lost or forgotten in architects' offices. The temporary nature of the architectural competition and the complex particularities of specific competitions contributes to the scattering of documentation. This loss mirrors a devaluation of architecture at the 'project' level: by transforming the competition into a purely event-based situation, the debate on the architectural ideas that emerge in projects is undermined.

The value of the competition

Increasingly, scholars and historians have been recognizing the competition formula as a promising method for research and experimentation. As a process known to produce bold and innovative solutions, the competition method has been a source of critical and reflexive practices in architecture. Some hold that the competition serves as a means for promoting innovation and quality, since it gives giving young firms access to a public venue for their work. On a direct level, the architectural competition stimulates the production of innovative proposals for technical and aesthetic solutions to design problems. At a broader level, competitions play a key participatory role in the definition of social values, in the context of a public sphere of debate.

Paradoxically, in spite of its democratic potential, a competition is always threatened by its 'spectacular' character. Because of this character, other critics adopt a more conservative position, arguing that the competition format discourages quality in architecture by giving partiality to originality and personal expression over professional experience. The role and value of competitions in the process of generating the built environment is currently a hotly debated topic.

For our part, we believe that it is premature to make value judgments on the competition procedure, and that one must envisage the competition phenomenon independently from its direct impact on the built environment. As a complex phenomenon involving political, economic, and social factors, we consider the competition as the source of an intellectual heritage that deserves to be documented and preserved.

The work of LEAP

The *Laboratoire d'étude de l'architecture potentielle* (LEAP) research group at the University of Montreal was formed with the goal of establishing digital databases on architectural and environmental design competitions organized in Canada since 1945. As a long-term research project, LEAP aims to produce a resource that functions on multiple levels, addressing scientific, cultural, pedagogical and technological aspects of projects. The production of this database will make it possible to better understand competition projects, and through them, will shed light on

the changing character of architectural practices as new reflexive practices. By considering architecture from the standpoint of the project, LEAP focuses on the design process and the mediation of design knowledge, rather than taking the more common approach of examining actual constructed buildings.

The principal objective of this database consists in the systematization of digital copies of architectural projects including: preparatory documents, official documents, drafts, presentation panels, photographs of models or digital models, presentation texts, jury reports, as well as press reviews of competitions. This data base is structured in order to allow various genealogical and comparative analyses to be made from it. This operation gradually reconstitutes a cultural inheritance of projects to make it available to scholars and professionals, but also to a broader audience by the means of its web site (www.leap.umontreal.ca).

Founded in 2001, LEAP's efforts have been made possible thanks to the generosity of numerous architectural firms who made their professional archives accessible for university research purposes, and with the financial aid of various research councils. LEAP also consistently works with the resources of the Canadian Centre of Architecture. LEAP has received support from the *Centre d'étude et de formation de l'enseignement supérieur* at the University of Montreal (CEFES), the *Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada* (SSHRC), and two grants more from the *Institut de recherche en histoire de* l'architecture (CCA, McGill, UdeM). These grants have enabled the launching of an ambitious new research program on the reflexive nature of contemporary Canadian architecture designed in the competition context.

Methodology
The program of LEAP is based on on four research areas, which question three bodies of architectural projects, i.e. of "potential architecture".

The four component areas of research at LEAP are :
1. Digital documentation and analysis of Canadian architectural and environmental design competitions
- Comparative analysis of reflexive practices
- Tracing of the transfer of architectural knowledge by analogy
- Canadian architectural competitions digital database

2. Critical history of Canadian contemporary architecture
- Monographic files on the projects designed by leading architectural firms
- Critical articles on contemporary strategies for architectural projects

3. Research by Design Development
- Participation in international ideas competitions (on-site experimentation)
- Research-by-design for problematic urban sites

4. Development of pedagogical tools for teaching architectural design, as well as the support of reflexive practices in environmental design

Research at LEAP deals with 3 different types of projects:

A : Architectural projects designed in the scope of professional competitions

B : Architectural projects designed in the scope of creative research endeavours

C : Architectural projects designed in the scope of higher educational institutions

Several common denominators emerge from these three separate project fields, yet the competition formula stands out as tending to produce situations with strong experimental potential and attracting participation from a larger, heterogeneous public. The need to clarify the influence that competitions may have on cultural, pedagogical and professional practices has led us to an extensive research program involving both epistemological and cognitive histories of professional knowledge. In methodological terms, our team favours research tools which cut across multiple areas. This allows for the establishment of a computerized database of multiple documents constituting a project, and allows for comparative analyses.

Associated research, consulting and public awareness programs
The research activities of LEAP are part of a general study of architecture, based on an understanding of the architectural project as an intersection of historical, cognitive, cultural, and reflexive components. Observing, documenting and analyzing contemporary architectural design in the Canadian context forms the core of the research, which examines these issues as they pertain to a professional scope, a pedagogical scope, and a creative research scope of interest.

Bringing together scholars who have previously collaborated on various scientific and cultural investigations, LEAP acts as a collaborative framework for their efforts, and aims to collect and promote their research in a coherent forum. The group has cultivated numerous national and international collaborations. In addition its core composition of PhD students from the University of Montreal's Environmental Design program, Leap has also attracted students from Masters' programs as diverse as architecture, urbanism, history, and library science. As well, it has partnered with guest scholars from places such as France, Belgium, South Korea, Tunisia, Brazil.

As an extension of its research program, LEAP promotes university research activities that can be linked to architectural research and that can be served by a reconsideration of the architectural project as potential architecture. For historians and scholars, the database constitutes an important source of documentation on contemporary architecture in Canada. As well, it provides vital material for comparative studies that seek to understand the generative process for an architectural project. The university community often works on projects designed and built in foreign countries. The digital database will allow access to these reference documents.

Politicians and public administrators will be able to deal with a reference device complete with precise information on competitions, and statistics they can be used to inform public policy. Professionals such as architects, engineers, professional consultants, jury members, and even developers, will be able to access valuable information to guide their practice and to revaluate the type of competition that might be adopted to suit a particular project. The costs, the list of intervening parties, the description of their role and digital copies of main competition documents (i.e. programs, regulations, jury reports, etc.) would be made available for their reference.

Finally, the public at large could access a 'visible' part of information on this digital database and familiarize itself with related debates. Project competitions propose reflections on the organisation of space and Canadian society, and allow access to a rich comprehension of our common history.

Case study: Competitions and the Public Sphere
Competition documents can prove a valuable resource in addressing a wide array of questions that bridge between disciplines. For instance, one of our current research projects involves using the database to examine a major issue in both architectural theory and sociological studies – the question of the role and importance of the public realm in current society.

In The Fall of Public Man, Richard Sennett argues that since the 18th century, we have been moving towards a recognition of private values, to the detriment of a meaningful engagement with the public sphere. This process is characterized by historical change that can be observed not

only in the domains of thought and cultural production, but also in social practices. According to Sennett, this kind of transformation is particularly pronounced in the degradation of public space in the city and in modern architecture. First published in 1974, Sennett's volume is part of an broader movement in the critique of modernity, which develops in the social sciences and the arts from the sixties onwards. It echoes with particular resonance the concerns that underlie the post-modern discourse in architecture and urbanism. Since the sixties, architecture's concern with symbolic meaning has been motivated by a reaction to disengagement and rationalization of environmental qualities characterizing many of the iconic personalities of modernity. The critics sought to reestablish the role of architecture as a container for social and cultural values in its creation of public space.

The evolution of the status of architecture in the creation of public space has recently been the subject of hot debate on the popular front and critical study on the academic front. A preliminary examination of competition documents produced during the period in question reveals the symbolic importance placed on the creation and definition of public space.

This importance first appears at the level of the competition brief. The competition documents we have examined almost always contain two principle sections: one dedicated to functional and technical requirements, the other to a presentation of the site of intervention. The first section almost invariably includes a systematic listing of goals relating to the symbolic expression of the character and value of the building as a public institution. In the second section, the importance of public space is highlighted in the context of presenting the intervention site in a way that emphasizes its urban role – that is, emphasizing the role of the construction of a new building in the development or revitalization of a street, a neighborhood, a city, or a region.

Public space next emerges as a primary concern in the submitted projects' reaction to the requirements as a whole in their design proposals. The written and visual rhetoric that accompanies the presentation of projects often emphasizes the public spaces of the project and their dynamic relationship to context.

Finally, the reading of jury reports reveals that beyond the objective goals linked to the functional and technical resolution of a building, it is the qualities of interior and exterior public space that become decisive criteria in the selection of winning entries.

In this example, competition documents are used as a resource that begins to objectively study the growing importance of public space, as it becomes expressed by those that formulate, those that participate in, and those that judge architectural competitions. These insights begin to help us understand underlying societal trends, and becomes information not only of interest to scholars, but also with particular relevance to the formulation of public policy.

The work of LEAP in collecting and reevaluating potential architectural can thus contribute towards a practical application of accumulated theoretical experiments. In doing so, we work to discover practical knowledge and insights in the space between architectural research and practice.

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