

CRISTINA GOBERNA AND URTZI GRAU — Competition Climate

EDITOR'S NOTE: THE FOLLOWING ESSAY WAS WRITTEN IN RESPONSE TO PEGGY DEAMER'S "THE GUGGENHEIM HELSINKI COMPETITION: WHAT IS THE VALUE PROPOSITION," PUBLISHED IN THE AVERY REVIEW IN MAY 2015.

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Shortly after the 1,715 submissions for stage one of the Guggenheim Helsinki Design Competition and the six finalist entries were released to the public, the wild rumpus started. Rem Koolhaas's complaints about the nature of architectural competitions resurfaced—"No other profession would accept such conditions," he had once claimed. [1] Pier Vittorio Aureli used a screen shot of the mosaic-like gallery of entries as an example of how architecture leads to consensus over controversial issues and therefore cannot be political. [2] Aaron Betsky titled his review of the competition "Guggenheim Finalist: Meh," and eventually added its outcome to the list of Worst Architectural Events of 2014. [3] Taller de Casquería released the 4:30-long video "Guggenheim Helsinki// Architectural Competition Data" that extrapolated averages to portray the excesses of material (three tons of paper submitted) and of labor (€18,336,780 worth of architectural office work) brought on by the competition, as well the conundrum of deliberation (given the large number of entries, the jury would need a full month, working eight hours a day, to review all the proposals). [4] The journal *Clog* published a special issue on "Guggenheim." [5] The Global Ultra Luxury Faction (GULF) and Check Point Helsinki launched a countercompetition: Next Helsinki. [6] The architecture blogs seemed divided between posts titled "Why Open Architecture Competitions Are Bad for Architects?" and "Why Open Architecture Competitions Are Good for Architects, a Counter Argument." [7] The traditional inflammatory rants flooded the comments sections of architecture online aggregators.

As members of one of the six finalist teams, we witnessed this escalation, surprised yet powerless. Our proposal was public but anonymous; intervening in the debate raised ethical and legal concerns. It could have appeared as an attempt to identify ourselves as finalists or even to influence the jury's final decision. Also, Koolhaas's paradoxical dismissal of the format that brought recognition to OMA in the first place seemed like just another of his ironic turns. The only consensus around the competition concerned its problematic status vis-à-vis architectural production. Betsky forgot to mention our proposal in his review. Our means of production did not fit Taller de Casquería's averages—the economic ones at least. We toyed with the possibility of submitting our same finalist entry to Next Helsinki. To respond to things like "you are more likely to meet a stranger at a bar that will hire you to design a real building than to win

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[1] Philipp Oehmke and Tobias Rapp, "Interview with Star Architect Rem Koolhaas: 'We're Building Assembly-Line Cities and Buildings,'" *Spiegel Online International*, December 16, 2011, [link](#).

[2] Pier Vittorio Aureli, "Can Architecture Be Political?" Lecture, the Architectural Association, December 6, 2014, [link](#).

[3] Aaron Betsky, "Guggenheim Finalists: Meh," *Architect*, December 9, 2014, [link](#); "The Best and Worst Architectural Events of 2014," *Architect*, December 30, 2014, [link](#).

[4] Taller de Casquería, "Guggenheim Helsinki// Architectural Competition Data," October 2014, [link](#).

[5] *Clog: Guggenheim*, 2014.

[6] GULF, "The Next Helsinki," [link](#).

[7] Both articles date back to 2010 but somehow resurfaced in several online discussions. Derreck Leavitt, "Why Open Competitions Are Bad for Architects," *Modative Blog* May 18, 2010, [link](#); Karen Cilento, "Why Open Architecture Competitions Are Good for Architects (A Counter Argument)," *Archdaily* May 19, 2010, [link](#).

an actual architectural commission from an open competition”—as one online pundit claimed—seemed ridiculous. [8] Even with zero chances of meeting a stranger and getting a commission, going to a bar is always a better option than staying in the office.

Peggy Deamer’s essay “The Guggenheim Helsinki Competition: What is the Value Proposition?” however, requires further clarification. [9] As admirers of Deamer’s recent scholarly work and her efforts to eradicate unpaid internships in the US, we felt a particular urgency to contest the analysis of someone whose sympathies we often share. Our reasons for writing are neither her criticism of the Guggenheim as an institution (unexpectedly characterized as a bank when, as Deamer’s description proves, it is simply a franchise, licensing its brand for a 23.4-million-euro fee), nor her dismissal of our competition entry, GH-5059206475, which she noted for having a “depressing effect on us viewers.” We partially agree with the former, and find the latter oddly flattering. What worried us was that Deamer’s criticism of Guggenheim Helsinki Design Competition could easily be extrapolated to open competitions as a whole, especially those that led to an actual commission. What follows is what we thought then, at a moment when we felt unable to respond. The competition results are behind us; it is time to make these thoughts public.

Deamer divides the motives for entering the competition into three forms of capital—economic, social, and creative—to subsequently prove the impossibility of each. For the first, she argues, the odds of getting selected in such a tumultuous competition are not just absurdly poor. Those long odds also illustrate how we, as a profession, subscribe to a myth “which prevents us architects from applying valuable time to productive things.” [10] The description is quite accurate. Yet the myth is to assume that this situation is specific to architecture—a popular belief according to Koolhaas’s comments quoted above. Competitions are a well-established capitalist *modus operandi*. Other fields tend to name them differently, perhaps to placate the obvious connotations. Calls for tenders, grant proposals, EOI, calls for abstracts, open bids, calls for submissions, all ask bidders to put forward work in the form of a proposal before deciding what fits the bill. The ever-growing mountain range of unsuccessful business plans, Excel spreadsheets, design schemes, abstracts, drawings, or book proposals shows that the word *architect* in the quote above can easily be substituted for almost any other profession.

This generic criticism of competitions is counterbalanced by Deamer’s claims regarding social capital, which are categorically specific to architecture. After listing several possible relationships among architect, community, and site—including good intentions, critical perspective, or discipline—she writes “the myth here is that a project assigned to four A1 boards and 500 words offers either the designer or the ‘community’ deep thinking on either site or program.” [11] We have to disagree. The history of architecture is full of examples of contextual and/or programmatic deep thinking deployed in *fewer* than four A1 boards. Architectural documents have had incredible resonance in this regard. Some are competitions; others not. Yet the ability of architects to use a combination of texts and drawings limited by format and quantity to propose and communicate architecture is usually part of their success.

Finally, according to Deamer, the impossibility of creative capital

[8] This is a claim that Derreck Leavitt makes in his list of alternatives to open competitions that includes 1) Pro Bono Architecture, 2) A Design Intervention, 3) Non-Architecture Projects, 4) Architect as Entrepreneur and 5) go to a bar. Derreck Leavitt, “5 Things Architects Should Do Instead of Entering Open Competitions,” *Modative Blog*, May 18, 2010, [link](#).

[9] Peggy Deamer, “The Guggenheim Helsinki Competition: What Is the Value Proposition?” the *Avery Review* no. 8, [link](#).

[10] Deamer, “The Guggenheim Helsinki Competition: What Is the Value Proposition?”

[11] Deamer, “The Guggenheim Helsinki Competition: What Is the Value Proposition?”

is self-evident since “looking at the results of the Helsinki Guggenheim entries, such creativity is hard to find.” [12] The reasons she proposes for this absence range from the speed at which images are consumed on the Internet to the confusing status of parametric design, and they seem to explain the spectacularly cynical schemes just as well as the depressingly logistical ones. Indeed, this claim is hard to rebut, but primarily as a question of scale. We lack the energy and time required to evaluate the creativity of 1,715 entries, but we are glad others seem to have browsed through 6,860 A1 boards and approximately 857,500 words of text to reach such conclusions. Yet, these numbers are important. They undergird a general sense of outrage, and make Deamer’s rather generic criticism specific to the Guggenheim Helsinki Design Competition. They define the question at the core of the controversy: Why so many entries?

We have an alternative proposition that does not entail capital mystifications: There are not enough competitions.

The architectural competitions we refer to are intrinsic to architectural culture in countries across Europe and South America. They have played structural roles in the urban transformations of Medellín and Barcelona, for example. The majority of well-known European practices of the last thirty years have been part of (if not the start of) an open competition. They belong to the social democratic paradigm. Their goal is to control and regulate the market, granting small and young offices equal access to large commissions. Strategies vary, but competitions tend to include productive safeguards like anonymity, juries of peers, and public accountability throughout the process. In that sense, these kinds of competitions are the opposite of those in the Gulf or Southeast Asia that have cemented a generation of starchitects. They are also different from the limited opportunities in the US, which take the form of ideas competitions that lead to no commissions, or the various “young architects programs” that usually entail closed short lists, a commission of a temporary pavilion, and, more recently, the need to fundraise to pay for the structure. [13]

The Guggenheim Helsinki Design Competition—probably due to Helsinki’s rejection of the Guggenheim Foundation’s first museum proposal back in 2012—belongs to such a tradition. [14] As much as we might disagree with their final decision, we acknowledge that the jury was exemplary in its composition, including well-known international practitioners and academics, local architects and municipal representatives, and a curator from the Guggenheim Foundation representing the client. [15] Following EU and Finnish guidelines, anonymity was maintained to an extreme. [16] And even when the jury deliberations were not public, each step along the process was.

In this context, to discredit the model on the basis of its limited productivity, or to call for substituting entrepreneurship in place of competition participation, or to fail to contextualize its pros and cons on a global scale, are uncannily familiar arguments that are frequently used to dismantle what is left of social-democratic welfare. As an alternative, we would like to see more competitions of this kind—hundreds, thousands. A greater number of competitions not only will reduce the number of participants and allow new practices to emerge, it will reinforce architects’ role in the production of the city as mediators between private interests, public institutions, and citizens. If competition proposals are architectural documents, judged by our peers, made

[12] Deamer, “The Guggenheim Helsinki Competition: What Is the Value Proposition?”

[13] While the final budgets of the MoMA PS1 Young Architects Program are not public, the fact that they systematically go over budget is, and the offices are responsible for the difference. The City of Dreams Pavilion program on Governors Island goes beyond asking the architects to pay for the pavilion using a crowd-funding campaign.

[14] Helsinki City Council rejects Guggenheim project,” *Yle Uutiset*, April 2, 2012, [link](#).

[15] The jury was chaired by Mark Wigley (Dean Emeritus GSAPP Columbia University) and included Mikko Aho (Director, City Planning and Architect, Helsinki City Planning Department), Jeanne Gang (Studio Gang Architects), Juan Herreros (Estudio Herreros), Anssi Lassila (OOPEAA Office for Peripheral Architecture), Erkki KM Leppävuori (CEO of VTT Technical Research Centre of Finland), Rainer Mahlamäki (Lahdelma & Mahlamäki Architects), Helena Säteri (Director General, the Ministry of the Environment, Finland), Nancy Spector (Curator, Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation), Yoshiharu Tsukamoto (Atelier Bow-Wow), and Ritva Viljanen (Deputy Mayor, City of Helsinki).

[16] According to the consultancy that ran the competition, the procedure was conducted to meet EU procurement guidelines, under the Design Contest procedure and in accordance with Sections 53 and 54 of the Finnish Public Procurement Act. Consequently, both stage one and two needed to be anonymous, which led to bewildering situations, like a public presentation and Q&A in Helsinki in January 2015 in which the finalist teams were not allowed to talk about the proposals. Malcolm Reading Consultants, *Guggenheim Helsinki Design Competition Conditions* (London: Malcolm Reading Consultants, 2014).

public and systematically appropriated by non-experts to make claims about the future of the city, the role of a competition, besides proposing a project, is to set the table for the discussion.

We would like to conclude with a rather grandiloquent but earnest note on Deamer's piece. We do not fit there. Our ultimate motivation for entering the competition voids her tripartite categorization. The common rather than capital drove our effort. Architectural competitions are one of those disciplinary spaces in which a project cannot be reduced to a single object or to the authorship of one single office or person. Beyond the winning entry, the pool of proposals is, by definition, collectively produced. Its circulation in magazines, on blogs, in publications, and on social media transforms it into a body of knowledge—a vast one, with uneven quality, but a body of knowledge nevertheless. Beyond personal credibility, it constructs common knowledge. Deamer's classification of the motivations that draw architects into entering the competition fragments this common, and mystifies it as forms of capital. Against her analysis, we propose a commitment to the common, i.e., the political acknowledgment of competitions as a productive force, and as one of the cores of architecture itself.