

# INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF THE EXCEPTION:

## THE COMPETITION AS SEARCH AND PROCESS

Through the recent competition of the Guggenheim Foundation for a new museum in Helsinki, this text analyzes the logics of architecture competitions. Understanding them as paradoxical instances that institutionalize the search for exceptional projects, the question arises: where is the exceptional left when the competition is transformed into a factory? Is contemporary architecture an industry of the exception?

KEYWORDS · selection, singularity, museum, Guggenheim, Helsinki

Architecture competitions are processes that, within a regulated environment, promote debate and diversity, while also considering the interests of the promoters. Some of the most important competitions are presented as open and international, exponentially increasing the number of entries received. Within this framework, the Guggenheim Foundation has played a prominent role in the promotion of competitions for the creation of a network of museums, calling for innovative design to function as an advertising and fundraising tool. The competition for the museum in Helsinki (2014-2015) marked a new stage for the institution, being open for the first time to global participation. Using the image as its large-scale marketing strategy and relying on social networks to spread it, the competition received 1715 proposals. Beyond its outcome, the process of searching for and debating over the exceptional is important for an institute that famously encourages the renovation of architecture.

### THE SINGULARITY OF THE ARCHITECTURE COMPETITION

It is not unusual to contest the provision of goods and services, selecting by proportions and relations of economic exchange. In the case of artistic disciplines however, the complexity of the system lies in that the selection criteria usually depends on subjective aspects. In the same way, the architecture competition has been “a way to find the optimal combination between form, function and economy, while selecting the best architect” (Hagelquist, 2010:430). However it is also something else: the establishment of a normed entity that allows for the selection of singularities

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among established relations, as “the maximum correlation between inclusion and belonging” (Phelps, 2013:52).

Architecture competitions have served as testing grounds, motors of innovation –formal, functional, programmatic, urban or technological– that have opened the minds and stimulated the learning. Historically, the idea of singularity in architecture has found in competitions the ideal setting to develop. Sydney Opera House, the Pompidou Centre, Parc de la Villette, the Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao and One World Trade Centre are all examples of iconic projects, and products of competitions that proposed new aesthetics and typological renovations (FIG. 1).<sup>1</sup>

In a liberal society where the service provided by the architect is seen as a commodity, the competition process benefits the promoter. His or her chances of success increase by multiplying the proposals presented to the jury, which will evaluate the options not only according to programmatic requirements, but also based on their abilities and experience.<sup>2</sup> And although competitions are founded on a commitment to quality, they also benefit the architect, allowing the assessment of his or her strengths and creative abilities on a platform of equality,<sup>3</sup> and also the chance to be selected and execute the project, gaining not only prestige and economic reward but also the promotion of his or her work.

Throughout history the architecture competition has served to break established patterns through new solutions, styles and talents (Andersson, 2010). Despite its imperfections, the competition is a democratic utopia, a tradition, a debate, a declaration, and a field of experimentation. It encourages “a process of investigation for the creation of new knowledge (...), for the creation of new forms in the future” (Helal, 2015:233). The notion of “*illusio*” (Bourdieu, 1995:447) can answer the question of why competitions are promoted and why architects decide to participate in them –staying within the game of a selective social group– and the diverse possibilities offered by autonomy (Andersson, 2010).

Museums are among the typologies most frequently called upon for competitions. Given its condition as a symbolic, public

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<sup>1</sup> As well as successes there are also dismal failures. See the competition for the Society of the Nations in Geneva (1926) with Le Corbusier’s famous unsuccessful proposal.

<sup>2</sup> The concept of *expertise* relates to that of the expert and the experience (*experientia*). A jury integrates the ability of having tried, attempted or risked something, attaining notoriety and justifying their importance.

<sup>3</sup> As Farshid Moussavi states: “It can be said that the competition is to contemporary architecture what competitive sport is to the routine training of *fitness*”. (Chupin, et al., 2015:11).



**FIG 1** Centro Georges-Pompidou, París. Renzo Piano + Richard Rogers, 1977.  
Fuente / Source: Centre Beaubourg  
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space it is unlikely that its execution be commissioned directly to an architect without undergoing a search to confirm the decision. In 1943 when the Guggenheim Foundation selected Frank Lloyd Wright to design its museum in New York, it had gone through a long list of architects<sup>4</sup>. For its second museum in Europe, specifically in Bilbao, a closed competition was called, where Frank Gehry was selected over Coop Himmelb(l)au and Arata Isozaki. In time, people referred to the miraculous “Bilbao effect”, and with this many international competitions were held until a point of exhaustion, showing that the success required specific conditions for its reproduction (Falcón, 2012:135). This last decade a museum crisis has been recognized, due to the cost of the projects and the global economic turmoil. Even so, museums could reinvent themselves: “Paradoxically, each crisis has ended up reaffirming the power of the museum as an institution of reference and selection, capable of evolving and offering alternative models, especially appropriate to signal, characterize and transmit the values and the signs of the times” (Montaner, 2003:8).

In spite of this climate, the Guggenheim Foundation celebrated between 2014 and 2015 the open competition with the largest number of participants in history. Similarly the institution corroborated that the media based promotion of the thousands of images of the proposals generated great expectation, debate and criticism even before obtaining the financial resources and laying the first stone on the site.

#### **BETWEEN THE NORMED AND THE EXCEPTIONAL**

The word competition, or *concourse*, from the Latin, *concurus*, means “the reunion of people” or “competition”, while the word “to compete” signifies “to search together”. The competition in this case consists of “choosing the best of those who run together”. Because of this, ever since the Council of Athens called

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<sup>4</sup> László Moholy-Nagy was asked to make a list of the most suitable architects. As well as himself he included Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius, Richard Neutra, Marcel Breuer, Mart Stam, William Lascaze, Werner Moser, Paul Nelson, William Humby, George Keck and Alvar Aalto.



**FIG 2** Centre Pompidou-Metz. Shigeru Ban + Jean de Gastines, 2010. Imagen de /  
Picture by: Jean-Pierre Dalbéra. Fuente / Source: Le centre Pompidou Metz  
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different designers to propose a memorial on the Acropolis (448 BC), contests have been an inherent part of the development of the architectural discipline. Well-known is, for instance, the competition won by Brunelleschi to solve the problem of the Duomo of the Cathedral of Florence in mid 15<sup>th</sup> Century, and also the academic competitions –Grand Prix– within the École des Beaux-Arts of Paris. Some authors relate the origin of the competition with the ideals derived from the French Revolution, since only in the year 1794, 480 projects were presented in 25 competitions. Quatremère de Quincy included the word ‘competition’ in his *Encyclopédie Méthodique*. In his definition he related the direct form of the competition with the process of criticism and judgement, to “protect the artists from the humiliation of the ignorant pride of their patrons” (Quatremère, 1788:38).

Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> Century the competition was used as “an instrument to legitimize the promotion of progress” (Hagelqvist, 2010:442). In this way, the competition has represented “the most important force of innovation for architectural exchange” (Andersson, 2010:35), since its proliferation expresses the need to establish a democratic ground for this exchange, indicating the possibility of reaching an impartial and fair triumph. For this reason the democratic aspirations of the competition are based on the establishment of a normative corpus where the individuality of participating proposals is guaranteed. In addition, the competition is distinguished as a process that produces exceptions.

In a wider context ‘exception’ refers to that which remains disconnected, to a breaking away from a desire to reach a universal theory that would help to integrate a complex diversity (Hlibchuk, 2008). The need to search and find the exceptional makes the competition a body which functions within a state of exception: given this condition, it requires an environment and a process that allows it to adapt to different circumstances.

Farshid Moussavi –who has participated in over 218 competitions– claims that being unsuccessful in a competition has more to do with the unpredictable nature of the process than the professional performance (Chupin, et al., 2015). This unpredictable nature is one of the conditions of the competition: its adoption implies the paradoxical coexistence of the subjective endeavour and its external expression as an objective factor. In other words the competition is an entity that develops within a space of exception, but that finds itself constrained by laws and specified norms: “this determination ensures that the exception and the norm find themselves linked in an impenetrable way” (Hlibchuk, 2008:16).

In this context, opposite to architects that in fear of disqualification keep to the demands of the brief, there are those that since the beginning look to break the established rules, trying to surprise the jury, taking their participation as an opportunity to experiment ideas. This condition is enhanced when dealing with museum competitions.

#### **THE MUSEUM AS A RENOVATING TYPOLOGY**

The museum occupies a privileged place within the contemporary city. It concerns a media project, which may be



**FIG 3** Panorámica del Museum Guggenheim de Bilbao, España. / *Panoramic view of the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, Spain.*  
 Imagen de / Picture by: Mario Roberto Durán Ortiz.  
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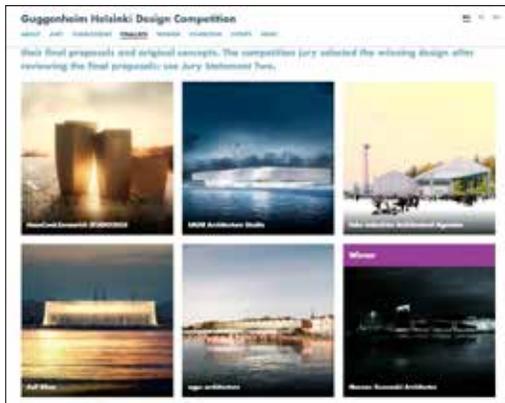
**FIG 4** 1715 propuestas para el concurso del Museo Guggenheim Helsinki / *1715 proposals for the Guggenheim Helsinki Design Competition.*  
 Fuente / Source: Guggenheim Helsinki Design Competition,  
<http://designguggenheimhelsinki.org/stageonegallery/view/>

desired and enjoyed or suffered by citizens and tourists. Its creation has been an on going trend since the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century that impacts on the contemporary city. For certain institutions, architecture plays a fundamental role: Pompidou, Getty, Tate, Louvre, Whitney, MoMA and Guggenheim are true cultural brands that have opted for buildings with high urban impact. A new museum is expected to take on the role of an icon, hopefully becoming a new center of artistic pilgrimage.<sup>5</sup> Due to these conditions the museum is a fertile ground for the expressive innovation of architecture.

After a period of abundance since the 80s, it was affirmed that a museum with exceptional architecture could increase the attraction of a city, regenerate the urban fabric and seize international attention, establishing previously anonymous places as tourist destinations. A famous case is the “Bilbao effect”, a phenomenon through which cities saw the museum as a marketing opportunity. This provoked an expansive movement in which Gehry was asked to repeat the formula, and in which singular objects came out of international competitions, for example the Kunsthhaus in Graz by Peter Cook or MAXXI in Rome by Zaha Hadid. At the same time cultural brands such as Louvre and Pompidou opened branches in strategic places –the Louvre Lens designed by SANAA and the Pompidou in Metz designed by Shigeru Ban– and finally others like the Whitney renovated their buildings to maintain their competitiveness (FIG. 2).

Therefore a large part of the international recognition enjoyed by the architecture of museums is due to institutions like the Guggenheim Foundation. In spite of continuous criticism, since 1943 they have promoted over 20 ‘signature architecture’ projects: New York, Venice, Salzburg, Vienna, Bilbao, SoHo Manhattan, Las Vegas, Berlin, Tokyo, Rio de Janeiro, Guadalajara, Singapore, Taichung and Abu Dhabi have been selected for the installation of branches (FIG. 3). Because of this long trajectory, designing a new Guggenheim has been the aspiration of architects that see it as a path to fame or

<sup>5</sup> The documentary *The Competition* (2013) gives an insight into the offices of Nouvel, Hadid, Gehry and Perrault, showing the work leading to the proposals for a competition for the National Museum of Art in Andorra. There is a general interest in a formal, plastic exercise, while the museological and museographical development is left on second plain.



**FIG 5** 6 finalistas del concurso del Museo Guggenheim Helsinki / 6 *finalist entries, Guggenheim Helsinki Design Competition.*  
 Fuente / Source: Guggenheim Helsinki Design Competition,  
<http://designguggenheimhelsinki.org/en/finalists>



**FIG 6** Art in the City, Moreau Kusunoki Architectes. Ganador del concurso del Museo Guggenheim Helsinki / *Winner Guggenheim Helsinki Design Competition.*  
 Fuente / Source: Guggenheim Helsinki Design Competition,  
<http://designguggenheimhelsinki.org/en/finalists/winner>

as an opportunity for an experimental gesture. In the most recent competition in Helsinki (2014-2015), where many utopian proposals were presented, it is evident that many authors did not intend winning.

This network of museums has maintained the model of the architecture-spectacle against all unfavorable conditions in the discipline. In Guggenheim projects the graphic and models production looks to seduce the audience and obtain financial resources. In these designs image has been used with a media orientated intention. In some cases the transcendence of architectural representation is emphasized as a promotional tool (Bertrán, 2000). This is most clearly seen in the competition for the Guggenheim Helsinki that registered a record participation: “Without an audience, there is no prestige or recognition. The relationship between prestige as symbolic capital, the system of the competition and its audience is reciprocal” (Hagelqvist, 2010:435).

#### **CONFIGURING THE EXCEPTIONAL: THE COMPETITION FOR THE GUGGENHEIM IN HELSINKI**

In the same way as the cities looking to replicate the “Bilbao effect”, Helsinki hoped for a project that was ambitious in its cultural, social and economic dimensions. The museum would put Finland into the international museum scene. However, in spite of the fact that the number of entries received looked promising, the local public criticised the lack of public discussion around a project that would require an important investment from government funds, which eventually led to the cancelation of the project in 2012. A year later a committee was formed, with representatives from the arts, the council, the Guggenheim Foundation and the general public. As a result, a public debate between experts and future users started, alongside pages on social networks in order to expand the discussion and reach a wider public.

In 2013 the Guggenheim Foundation proposed an open competition for the museum of Helsinki, which would be located on a site in Eteläsatama. The competition was opened in June 2014 and lasted for one year, becoming the Foundation’s

first open competition. The international response was substantial, and would become the most popular, reaching a historic record of 1715 entries from 77 countries (FIG. 4). The competition put Helsinki in the spotlight of international architecture scene and in spite of being remembered for exploiting models and images as tools for promotion, this competition had an unprecedented body of graphic work. A website was created specifically for the exhibit of proposals. The Foundation divided the competition into two stages and assembled a jury of eleven members –including Mark Wigley, Jeanne Gang and Juan Herreros, among others– to certify the selection of the participants.

For the first stage six diverse proposals were selected. These would be given two further months to complete their projects and enter the next stage, anonymously (FIG. 5).

In June 2015 the organizing committee came to a decision: the selected proposal was the one by architects Moreau Kusunoki. The design is for a fragmented museum, with a series of exhibition pavilions and public squares organized around an interior street. The museum, composed of nine volumes and a monumental tower –with an iconic shape that is far from Bilbao–, would be lined with Finnish wood with vast glazed areas. The project is the representation of the Foundation's change of ideals: an estrangement from the 'star system' architecture and an approach towards a design that is democratic and participatory. It concluded in a process that was certified and legitimized by an excellent jury that silenced some of the criticisms that could have arisen (FIG. 6).

For the visitor of the competition's Internet page it was possible to view the 1715 proposals, categorized by labels, hashtags, country or registration number, while also being able to list their favourites and share them with other web users. In this case the communication of Guggenheim architecture reached a global level both from the interest of architecture practices –both emerging and internationally renowned– as well as by the general public. As Mark Wigley states: "By making these competition entries available online, we also have contributed an unprecedented volume of design information that freely available for study and use. For this reason, while the design competition has now ended, we are confident that its contribution to architectural discourse and public imagination has only just begun." (Wigley, 2015). In this way, the process of the Helsinki competition can be seen as a factory of the exception in conjunction with a dynamic that turns the communication and use of information into a powerful tool of discussion.

#### **CONCLUSION: THE EXCEPTIONAL AS NECESSITY**

Competitions and museums maintain an intimate relationship. Given these buildings importance, there is a need to guarantee maximum quality in the selection. Likewise in some cases promoters and jury have chosen the most daring solutions, leading to the adoption of typological innovation within architecture.

Today, there is a need for well-designed, detailed, transparent and ethical competitions, which enable typological evolution within the discipline and for the benefit of the users.

An open, public, and anonymous version of the competition is necessary at this time, and its innovative spirit must disassociate itself from absolute decisions.

Nevertheless, the architecture competition is manifested nowadays as a powerful tool of communication. Although its principal aim is to certify the selection of an idea, it is also used as publicity to generate expectation as the outcome approaches. The competition for the Guggenheim museum in Helsinki represents the last stage that this expectation has come to, due to its success in maintaining itself at the forefront of attention during one year without having any physical reality on which to lean. **ARQ**

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