CONSTRUCTING THE CLIENT IN ARCHITECTURAL COMPETITION

An Ethnographic Study of Revealed Strategies

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1   Introduction: 'Shadow dancing' and masquerades

This essay describes and analyzes architectural teams as they prepare their design proposals in architectural competitions. It focuses on the routines and heuristics involved, not least in relation to the mental and social construction of the client's preferences, the design task, and the rules and conditions of the competition. It seeks to understand the interplay between, on the one hand, a competition process that previous research has described as fundamentally uncertain (Kreiner, 2006; Kreiner, 2007), and on the other hand, the need for the architectural team to find solid knowledge and information to direct their design efforts.

If architectural teams were to describe the competition as a dance, they would describe it as a peculiar form of dance in which they are dancing with an *absent* partner, fancying him or her and responding to his or her imaginary movements and gestures. The absent partner is the client (and in some respects, the jury which will appoint the winner of the competition). Such 'shadow dancing' is performed concurrently by a small number of teams of architects, each representing one of the selected architectural firms taking part in the competition. Each team is dancing in isolation from other architectural teams, but they all dance to the same tune – a tune that is elaborated in the competition brief.

The 'shadow dancing' has an instrumental aim, the aim being to win the competition and subsequently be awarded the design contract. The winning team is selected on the basis of the jury's assessment of the submitted design proposals. The entries are made anonymously, which means that the client and the jury are witnessing a masquerade in which the architects all

hiding behind their respective entries. In ordinary cases the client is stuck with the architectural firm that produced the winning proposal, even if other architects appear fairer upon the fall of the masks.

In the present paper I will focus on the 'shadow dancing' and the ways in which the absent dancing partner is made present through imagination and enactment. The focus is strictly on the imagination and enactment, but, as it has become common to argue (Gherardi, 2006; Whittington, 2006a, 2006b), as soon as we try to focus narrowly we discover that the whole world is still implicated and linked. Every individual act or practice is situated "within a broader field of practices which ramify in every direction" (Gherardi, 2006: xvii), and every organizational practice has an extra-organizational character as well (Whittington, 2006b:1904). We will soon discover that what architectural teams are doing while constructing the client and preparing their entries are framed, channelled and made sensible by established practices and prior experiences. Thus, the choice of focus is perhaps rather a choice of vantage point from where to get a richer view of all the things that go into preparing an entry for an architectural competition and the strategizing necessary to meet a very pressing deadline for submitting a design proposal.

1.1 Aim and plan

Ambiguity is a fundamental aspect of the process of preparing an entry in architectural competition, as the use of metaphors such as 'shadow dancing' and 'masquerades' aptly suggest. Things are kept apart and confidential until it is all over. This means that incorrect interpretations and conjectures can go unchecked until nothing can be done about it. A proposal based on attributions of the client's needs and preferences cannot be corrected before the competition has already been lost. Consequently, uncertainty does not wane with the accumulation of information and the active sensemaking in the course of the team work – and if it should appear so to the members of the architectural team a rude awakening to realities will await them upon receiving the "verdict" from the competition jury.

In other publication (Kreiner, 2007) we have argued that the uncertainty has a Knight'ian character. By and large the criteria for choosing the winning proposal, including the definition of the client's needs and preferences that are used to justify the choice, are defined retrospectively. This is so by necessity and by virtue. The competition brief may help the jury in determining if entries are legitimate or not. But the crucial task of selecting the winner among the legitimate entries cannot be done on criteria other than the features and qualities that distinguish one entry from the others. Obviously, such distinguishing features and qualities can only be discovered and defined when all the entries are available for comparisons, i.e. after the competition is over for the architectural teams. When the criteria for winning are defined *after* the competition, the future successfulness is fundamentally unknowable and unpredictable ahead of time. Furthermore, if the client learns about negative implications of stated preferences and wishes it would be entirely possible and rational to reconsider and restate such preferences and wishes. Again, such learning of new preferences on the part of the client is done *after* the architectural teams have submitted their design proposals and will consequently add to the experience of unknowable and unpredictable outcomes.

The aim of the essay is to explore the implicit dilemma that architectural teams face in coping with such unknowable and unpredictable realities of architectural competitions. The dilemma is defined by, on the one hand, the desire to get an early understanding of the needs of the client, the design task and the criteria for winning and, on the other hand, the risk to be enacting an unnecessarily restrictive and even misleading reality. We claim that this dilemma is relevant no matter if the architectural teams are oblivious of it. The dilemma has some similarity to the well-known specs-fix versus specs-float in the product development literature, but in our case the dilemma is aggravated by the fact that we are dealing with competitions for primacy. Dilemmas do not facilitate either-or choices, but rather beg us to think in terms of coping strategies.

The coping strategies we have in mind are similar to habits in a Dewey'an sense. The coping strategies are not standardized ways of doing architectural competitions. A habit and strategy does not signal that individual competitions have been reduced to 'just another one of the kind.'

> *... Repetition is in no sense the essence of habit. ... The essence of habit is an acquired predisposition to* ways *or modes of response, not to particular acts ... Habit means special sensitiveness or accessibility to certain classes of stimuli, standing predilections and aversions, rather than bare recurrence of specific acts.* (Dewey, quoted from Cohen, 2007: 778))

Thus, habits and strategies are at least one step removed from the actual performance. Given that situations and environments vary, the same mode of response will produces variable action. But the special challenge in our case is the fact that architectural competitions provide very poor conditions for continuous learning and refinement of habits and strategies. Environmental feedback is delayed and failing (in the sense of not winning the competition) is a recurrent experience. In some ways, habits of innocently enacting architectural competitions are not likely to become more and more refined in response to the accumulation of experience. It is even possible that architectural teams have developed a predisposition for discarding feedback – and should that be the case at least they are not in risk of being fooled by randomness (Taleb, 2005/2007).

Yet, the aim of this study is not merely to argue that nothing can be learnt from experience in architectural competition. It is true that the fate of any design proposal is unknowable ahead of time, and specific outcomes of competitions have little or no implication for future practices. Still, it is our ambition to show that not all competition strategies and architectural habits are equally good or bad. We envision that by enhancing the sensitivities to also new classes of stimuli, to develop more interesting predilection and aversions, etc., current habits and practices may become enriched. Since such enrichment cannot come about by experiential learning and continuous adaptation in an unknowable and uncertain reality of competitions for

primacy we will have to convince others of the superiority of an enriched strategy by analytical reasoning.

The rest of the essay is organized into four sections. The first section describes the empirical study that forms the foundation of our analytical reasoning. The sources of data as well as challenging methodological issues are discussed. The second section describes the common practices of doing architectural competitions as an architectural team. We describe at some length the ways in which the team work is structured and the ways in which the client's needs and requirements are defined and translated into the design proposal. The third section analyzes the described practices in a strategic perspective. We will form an argument why the construction of the client's needs and preferences need to be taken seriously, but not too seriously. In the fourth and final section we draw conclusions for the study of practices in highly ambiguous, abstract circumstances.

2   THE STUDY

The essay builds on a case study of an architectural competition documented Kreiner (2006). Technically speaking, the architectural competition we studied was a *single, sealed bid, invited tender competition.* The client was a Danish university and the design task was to transform an existing building located in an old industrial complex into a modern university facility.

2.1   Data

We collected data from several sources before, during and after the competition. First, we conducted an ethnographic study in one of the participating architectural practices. We observed a team of architects while preparing the entry to another competition than the one discussed here. This ethnographic study provided us with a set of observations and understandings that served as tacit knowledge for the current case study. It informed the types of questions asked and guided the discussions with the participating architects.

Secondly, we conducted interviews with three of the eight participating architectural practices. The three were selected for pragmatic reasons, primarily ease of access. The winning architectural practice was among the three interviewed ones. All three were seasoned participants in architectural competitions and belonged to the absolute architectural elite; competitions were the main (and preferred) method of job acquisition for all of them. All three had worked for the university on previous occasions. We interviewed the CEO and the partner responsible for this particular competition in all three architectural practices. In one case, we also interviewed a member of the design team. All interviews were tape recorded and subsequently transcribed. An interview guide was developed, mainly specifying the themes to be covered. The purpose of the interviews was (1) to reconstruct the design process as it unfolded in the perspective of the directly involved parties, (2) to solicit self-assessments of the design choices behind the entry, and (3) to inquire into the lessons that the participating architects had drawn from the specific sets of events.

Thirdly, the three CEOs and the three responsible partners were assembled for a full-day seminar, at which we presented our preliminary observations and analyses. This seminar was also tape recorded and transcribed. The discussion across the architectural firms provided new data, and their reactions to our presentations allowed us to triangulate and calibrate our accounts and understandings.

Fourthly, the author was a full member of the panel. All written material concerning the competition, the brief, the queries, the competition entries, and the final report of the panel were automatically available. The author was present at all formal meeting of the panel. The deliberations were highly confidential and we were not granted permission to tape record the meetings. The research interest in the process was made generally known, but primarily the author enacted the role of a panel member. Only few references will be made to the panel's decision-making processes. However, the author's participation made possible a more informed reading and

interpretation of the publicly available documents, not least the brief and the panel's final report (Kreiner, 2006:4-5).

2.2 <u>Methodological challenges: Maintaining a prospective perspective</u>

In analyzing the case study we know about the result of the competition and the panel's assessments of the individual entries. Knowing some design choices to be ill-fated and some attributions to be incorrect puts us in a privileged position in comparison with the participants at the time when choices and attributions were made. 'Monday Morning Quarterbacking' (Taleb, 2005/2007) is a constant temptation, implying that what we know now could and should have been known when choices and attributions were made (Fischhoff, 1975). The temptation only grows when the participating architects readily accept the blame for having erred. However, to give in to such temptations would be to betray the very premise of the study, namely that the architectural teams face Knight'ian uncertainty. All entries were made on design choices *subject to error*, no matter whether subsequent events vindicated and undermined the premises of the choices. Hindsight renders a less ambiguous picture of history because it can afford narrowly to focus on things that *actually happened*, to the exclusion of all the things *that conceivable might have happened*, and that would have changed the outcome of the competition. A commitment to study the practices of architectural teams requires us to identify with the true circumstances of their performance. We have to accept that the specific future outcomes are unknowable ahead of time, and that, in the case of architectural competitions, the horizon of possible futures is extremely open.

A practice perspective implies a focus on the routines and heuristics in processes of task accomplishment. Doing, knowing, competence and accomplishment become one and the same. However, if practice becomes too closely identified with accomplishment we run the risk of mistaking the task (the effort) for the achievement (the accomplishment) (Ryle, 2000). In this case we would likely come to drain our investigation of the experiential content (Weick, 2006) of doing architectural design. If architectural

competitions are seen as 'just another competition done' we would hide the pain, the uncertainty, and the struggle that goes along with doing 'just another competition'. While we may describe participation in architectural competitions in terms of organizational routines, all evidence points to the fact that each competition is experienced as unique and unfamiliar. The practice of doing architectural competitions cannot be linked closely to accomplishments, since all but one fail. We can describe the use of heuristics (e.g. studying the competition brief for information about the client's needs and preferences), but it is the 'use', not the 'heuristic' that is the focus of attention. In uncertain and ambiguous realities, the *use* of routines and heuristics may require much ingenuity and imagination.

3 THE PRACTICES OF DOING DESIGN PROPOSALS

A large university in need of additional office and teaching space is inviting architects to participate in an architectural competition. Perfectly symbolizing current societal and economic changes, a knowledge institution is moving into a large, abandoned industrial building complex. The object of the architectural competition is a storage building that requires considerable redesign and construction to become functional for its new use.

The building is far from notable for its aesthetic value. However, the building complex in which it is located is declared worth preserving as a fine exemplar of the built environment of the industrial age. The building is located in adjacency to a large public park and as such very attractive to the university. But it is also potentially obtrusive to the public and to the local town planners and politicians. Thus, restrictions exist on the changes that can be made to the building, especially to its exterior.

Eight architectural practices are invited to compete for the design contract. The processes we study here spanned a few months, from the *competition brief* was received by the architects to the ultimate deadline for submitting design proposals. Prior had gone much longer time in organizing and

planning the competition, and subsequently much time would be spent on evaluating the design proposal and appointing the winner. It goes without saying that given the time frame the design proposals operated at a level of essential ideas and sketches more than spelled-out solutions. The limited time frame and restrictions on the format of entries challenge the team to strike a balance between the need to cover the whole design proposal in general terms and the need to be specific enough to allow an assess the technical and economic feasibility of the proposed design.

Architectural teams structure their work in three consecutive phases,

1. The delimitation of a solution space;

2. The search for and the definition of an organizing theme for the design proposal, and

3. The production of the entry in text, pictures and sketches.

On the surface of things, this sequence is absolutely mundane. However, the apparently mundane practices have several implications as soon as we start to consider the delimited solution space, the defined organizing theme, and the communicative strategies in more qualitative details. In the present paper, we will concentrate our focus on the two initial phases.

3.1 <u>The delimitation of a solution space</u>

For natural reasons the architectural teams start their work by studying the competition brief carefully. They continue with the collection of other types of information, like visiting the building site and establishing the reputation of the members of the panel. By the end of this phase they know more about the task ahead of them. Supposedly they have established the central requirements, the client's needs, and the preferences represented among the members of the panel. Knowing the task in more operational terms allow the team to direct and organize their subsequent collective effort.

In the present case, the competition brief was unusually vague. The university had not decided which functions should be housed in the revamped building and refrained from defining even a floor space plan. In essence the brief posted the following question: 'Given that this is the building; and given that we are this type of university: How would a university like us want to change and utilize a building like this?' The competition brief expressed it in different terms, but with the same meaning, e.g.

> *[The building] should support and encourage social and professional sparring and become a place where informal learning processes take place.* (Competition Brief, p. 6 – author's translation)

> *The architecture should reflect that it is a dynamic teaching and research institution where knowledge is created and taught in close interaction with the business world and the international community.* (Competition Brief, p. 6 – author's translation)

The lack of a specified floor space plan is very unconventional, and it was legitimized in the following manner,

> *The purpose of refraining from defining mandatory requirements is to encourage visionary solutions which [the winner] in collaboration with the client can develop into a specific floor space plan ...* (Competition Brief, p. 9 – author's translation)

However, such open-ended tasks leave the architectural teams at a loss in directing their creativity and effort. To compensate for the admittedly very vague signals and directions, the competition brief continues to elaborate an *illustration* of a possible floor space plan. The architectural teams are explicit warned that the illustration is provided

> *as inspiration and is neither complete nor binding for the entries.* (Competition Brief, p. 9 – author's translation).

In spite of the immediate impression that the brief contains little information that will direct the creativity and effort of the architectural team, it is read and reread several times for information, clues and possibly also inspiration.

The teams tell how they return to the brief when they get stuck in the design work and how it is used for internal evaluations. In the process of reading and rereading, some form of closure is in fact reached, but only by interpreting the text richly and by adding own sense and meaning. For example, in the end the illustrative floor space plan came to serve as a requirement, as they usually do, for all of the teams, and for some of them this "incomplete and non-binding" illustration became the very point of attention in the design work. For instance, the illustration mentioned a multifunctional auditorium holding 50-70 people, and while an auditorium could be seen to indicate little in the direction of "informal learning processes" quoted above, all entries contained such an auditorium of approximately the indicated size. The difficulty of finding room for this auditorium was the central constraint in one of the entries:

> *[Interviewer:] So it was in fact the auditorium that played the central role in your [design process], it was this that created resistance …?*
>
> *[Architect:] Yes, … and you always learn when you see the final result. When seeing the winning entry, I realised … that they had not taken the m2 requirements in the programme for such a function literally. We gave it priority – yes, we found it important …* (Interview transcripts – author's translation)

Reading authority into the illustrative text gave the design work direction. Not that they didn't explore different solutions to the problem – our interviews showed that they did. But they took the illustration as a revealed real preference and need – a preference and need that might not be expressed explicitly because it could be seen as inconsistent with the proclaimed identity of the university. Consequently, they accepted the auditorium as a fix-point in the design and set out to find ways of accommodation this requirement without too heavy compromises on other aspects of the design. In the architect's own words, this was not easy and the auditorium became "a roadblock" for them. Nonetheless, they stuck with the auditorium and had to make heavy sacrifices to do so.

The interview also indicates that the winning entry took the indicative plan for an auditorium less seriously. However, also the winning entry included an auditorium holding only slightly less than 50 persons. This proves that also in this case the illustrative floor space plan was treated as an important design premise, but perhaps not given absolute priority over other concerns.

Why will an architectural team give such ultimate authority to an illustrative floor space plan? There would be so many other statements in the competition brief that would encourage them to read a less restrictive message into the suggestion of an auditorium. As would be expected, the reading is not arbitrary, but heavily conditioned by tradition and prior experience.

3.1.1   The Construction of Clients and Panel Members

In assessing the image, identity and reputation of the client organization and the members of the panel the architectural teams find other anchoring buoys for their creative processes. These images, identities and reputations are used as premises for interpreting and supplementing the vague statements of the brief.

All three interviewed architectural firms had previously worked for the university in major projects. They knew the organization and its culture, aims and policies. They had gained insight into the preferences and attitudes of many of the central decision-makers. Such prior experiences and insights influenced the way in which the architectural teams read and interpreted the competition brief, but the experience and insights were contingent upon the exact prior history.

To continue the example from above, the architect explained the priority given to the auditorium in the following way,

> *We were too much influenced by the experience of designing [a previous building for the university], because at that time it proved immensely important that the auditoriums could hold the number of people required in the programme. Back then we*

> *worked a long time on that problem. (Interview transcripts – author's translation)*

The experience of working with the client on earlier occasion influenced the reading of the brief. Other teams had other experiences, and weren't as focus on the size of the auditorium as on other aspects. Another team referred to prior knowledge in this way,

> *… would create quite different contexts for those exiting break-out situations. From what we know, after all, about the wishes of the university and the milieu that can be registered on various locations, there exists a strong need for these informal transition zones and in-between spaces which should preferably be naturally integrated into the building. (Interview transcripts – author's translation)*

The latter architectural team focused their creative attention on a different element in the competition brief than the former team did. But their reasoning was similar. In both cases, previous experience with this particular client had taught them about the client's true needs and preferences: needs and preferences hidden, implied or merely inadequately expressed in the brief. They read information into the brief which was not necessarily there, but which would be consistent with *their* picture of the client. They gave priority to one aspect that had earlier proven to be salient, while others gave priority to other aspects that in their experience had proven to be similarly salient.

When direct experience is not available, teams relied on the experience of others, sedimented in the form of reputation etc. Much information about the preferences and taste of individual panel members were improvised (Shibutani, 1966). It was public knowledge who sat on the panel. The competing architectural teams had members who often served as judges in similar competitions and they knew the potential importance of the preferences and biases of individual panel members. For example, one of the consultants was known to dislike reflecting glass facades. Another participant was known to be 'political correct' about certain design

strategies. Such information, rumors and reputations were used to further delimit the search for solutions.

In short, the architectural teams construe of the competition brief as an important source of information, but need to interpret the texts extensively to derive sufficiently unequivocal information from it. Such interpretations are not made completely out of the blue, but are heavily framed by prior experience from architectural competitions and from working with the specific client and panel members. A rich reading of the actual text allows the team to prioritize between multiple, often conflicting or competing needs and requirements. Reading richness into vague and contradictory messages in the brief created some delimitation of a solution space for the design efforts.

3.2   Search for Organizing Themes

While the first phase has to do with establishing an understanding of the design task and defining the requirements that the solution has to meet, the second phase has to do with performing the design work. This is a creative and hard-to-manage process. Every indication tells us that the design technology is uncertain. The problem is complex and multidimensional. Because they are designing very fixed physical spaces, the implications from even small choices proliferate in unpredictable ways. They approach the complexity of the problems, but they also assume that a hidden order, a principle that will produce a "rational" solution to this complex problem, can be found. This central organizing principle; this Archimedean point from which everything can be derived and to which everything can be referred, is important in two ways. It allows a *consistent design*; and it facilitates *convincing communication* of the design proposal to even the lay members of the panel.

The importance of finding and experimenting with Archimedean points cannot be underestimated. The metaphorical thinking that it implies encourages the asking of new questions; the insistence on consistency

becomes another mother of invention. They have difficulties defining what makes a good metaphor, but they know it when they see it. They experiment with alternative metaphors and settle often late in the process on the one that organizes and communicates the design proposal most efficiently.

In this phase the uncertainty is high and frustrations and disappointments abound at times. The following quotes, taken from the ethnographic study, reflect the changing moods in the design team over a period of four days,

> *In this competition it takes longer time to find the central idea. In the last competition we had it after one day, but in this case we really cannot find it and it is frustrating because time flies and there is only limited time left.*
>
> *****
>
> *We miss the grand narrative.*
>
> *****
>
> *I think we have it now, but it needs still to be drawn!*
>
> (Field notes – author's translation)

The optimism expressed in the last quote was disappointed, on this occasion as well as on many other occasions, because they could not produce consistency when they drew the solution. Thus, the criteria are clearly 'performative'. It is not the metaphor in itself, but its ability to organize things (ideas, solutions, narratives, thoughts etc.) that counts. Even when the central idea comes from luck or a strike of genius, the team needs to do the tedious trial-and-error work of applying it. It is easily recognizable, even to others, when it works. In commenting on another competition, acknowledging own defeat, an architect observed,

> *We pushed the wrong button. They pushed the right one.*
> (Interview transcripts – author's translation)

The button was the metaphor or Archimedean point that somehow gave order and consistency to an ambiguous design task and world. The point is that if it can order the world for the architectural team, it can be

communicated and potentially order the world for others as well, not least the members of the panel. Even if metaphors are themselves ambiguous, they are often evocative in their ambiguity. They may invite the panel to extend and add to the ideas explicitly described in the design proposals. The panel will likely read much more into the proposals than is actually written, just like the architectural teams read much more into the competition brief. It is not a farfetched idea that the winner will be the proposal that inspires the panel members to see the ideas and potentialities they like the best, whether or not they are explicitly present in the proposal.

Let us illustrate how Archimedean points may look and work. In one of the entries, the central form element is an open stairway that runs through the entire building. It is referred to as "The Belt" and it promises to transport people efficiently to all places and functions in the building. The allusion to the industrial history of the building, as a conveyor belt, may not have been intended, but is a possible reading and a natural thought. And true it is that everything seems to be organized around this stairway.

The ideal is a simple, but efficiently organizing principle: the hidden key; the right button; the central theme, or the grand narrative. To be sure, it is not always found, and supplementary principles and metaphors may need to be introduced. But the ambition is significant in itself since it means that the architectural teams are willing to bet everything on one single idea. It crystallizes the ideas and inspirations into something very concrete (even if it is often expressed metaphorically).

We may speculate that the ideal of a single organizing principle, an Archimedean point, can be traced back to the need for distinctiveness in architectural and other forms of competition. Here it is important to note that in developing these organizing principles the architects probably focus more on the coherence and internal consistency of their design, and less on the alignment with the client's needs. Without suggesting that the latter aspects are completely absent, they may still have been relegated to a subsidiary awareness in the second phase.

4   STRATEGIC PERSPECTIVES ON DESIGN PRACTICES

We know that giving priority to a large auditorium did not pay off, like the metaphor of "the Belt" did not capture the positive imagination of the panel members. In the end, the size of the auditorium was not as important as on previous occasions, and the allusion to the industrial history of the building was less engaging than the allusion to the neighbouring park. As discussed above, we should refrain from passing judgement like "they should have known". The point is, on every aspect of the building design there were at least two options, and they were to a large extent explicated in the competition brief. For example, one could opt for preserving the original physical structures of the warehouse or opt for increased flexibility by tearing it all down. When the client saw the implications of preserving the original structures they preferred the flexibility – but not until they saw the implications! Had it been inconceivable that a feasible design could be found while preserving some of the original structures the brief would probably not have encouraged the team to experiment with such preservation! A winning proposition along this line is still conceivable, but was simply not found on this occasion. None of the entries that contained a partial preservation of the original physical structure were seriously considered as winner of the competition.

We further know that one could opt for stressing the historical context of the industrial complex or opt for stressing the link to the park adjacent to the building. When the panel saw a solution that integrated the greenery of the park into the building they knew that they preferred that option over the alternative. They preferred it so strongly that the reservation towards glass facades was completely forgotten, as were the few explicit and operational requirements in the competition brief concerning technical feasibility, work health and safety concerns and facility management! Here is what the panel said about the winning proposal concerning the glass façade,

> *The proposed glass south-façade is interesting, but is also technically challenging. The shown façade is still to find its final form. … In relation to the south-façade a number of issues*

> *remain to be resolved, e.g. water-proofing and especially [shading]. The façade must possibly be changed somewhat to function satisfactorily. ...The south-façade should be simplified and possibly also modified in order that its expression to a higher extent concords with the identity of the surroundings. Further the panel has doubts about the economical viability of the heat-reflecting glass without any form of sunshades. The façade needs further elaboration and technical documentation.*
> (Panel's assessment report – author's translation)

The façade was an integral element in the winning design proposal, and in many respects it is said in no uncertain terms that the panel does not find it persuasive. It violates the general requirement that "the principles of construction and installation should be simple" (The Panel's Assessment Report, p. 9); it violates the mandatory requirements of working conditions in the building; it violates technical requirements; it violates the explicit concerns for minimizing the operational costs of the facility. Nonetheless, the panel issues an invitation to elaborate on the chosen façade solution. It is fairly obvious that the panel might also have decided to disqualify the entry on exactly these grounds. Both outcomes are easily conceivable, and it would have been virtually impossible to predict to which side the panel would lean in the end.

Because the final assessment of the panel is done during the assessment of the entries, and because these assessments determined which design premises and priorities came to be regarded as superior, there is no way of knowing ahead of time that the Belt was an inefficient metaphor. Conceivable, it could have won, as the number of seats in the auditorium might conceivable have become the decisive criterion. For the architectural teams the competition for primacy is a gamble, which is not to say that everybody could participate and risk to win! It takes considerable skills and competence to prepare both a winning and a losing proposal. However, it is a gamble whether these skills and such competence are wasted on a futile cause leading to defeat rather than victory.

The immediate result might be one of despair and fatalism. There is really nothing one can do to ensure success in architectural competitions. One may

have to rely on one's good luck. However, there is also a liberating story in our results. We have established that any reading of the competition brief may subsequently be proven wrong, no matter what you read into it. Read it carefully, and you will regret it. Read it casually, and you will regret it. Carefully or casually, you will regret it! Little room for competition strategizing seems left until we find other strategic options for reading the brief. And remember, any reading may also be proven correct by subsequent events. Here is a suggestion. Weick (2006) makes a distinction between fancy and imagination. Fancy is defined as "the power of inventing the novel and unreal by recombining the elements found in reality" (p. 447). Aligning all aspect; achieving consistency; fulfilling all the requirements that are read into the brief, and calibrating solutions against the needs and preferences attributed to the client organization: this requires creativity and skill. It may also provide a fair account of the practice of architectural teams. When all the elements can be aligned in the design proposal – when nothing in the brief resists any longer – a viable solution has been found. However, in Weick's view, "[fancy] plays with what is fixed and dead" (p. 447). The needs and preferences of the client are fixed and dead because the team has identified, named and solidified them. Having done that, they force the team to enact a fixed and narrower reality. The design solution is found when appropriate combinations and compromises are found between the various design criteria and requirements.

Weick contrasts fancy to imagination in the following manner,

> *… imagination can be understood as an ability to conceive of something, seen only fragmentarily or superficially, as a complete, perfected, and integral whole (p. 447)*

> *To imagine reality is to start with some tangible clue, and then to discover or invent a world in which that clue is meaningful (p. 449).*

If imagination should be a quality of the ways in which architectural teams do competitions they would not read the briefs for information. They would not dissolve inconsistencies by choosing side (either for alignment with the

industrial history or the green neighbour) in order to find solid ground for their design efforts. They would rather read the brief for *inspiration*. They might come to see more than the hidden requirement in the illustrated floor space plan. For example, they might possibly take the fact that no floor space plan is provided as a symptom of an organization that is looking for a new identity. Thus, the brief may in this way be extending an invitation to the architectural teams to speculate over what functions and roles – besides teaching, research and administration – a modern university could perform and how the refurbished building might come to symbolize such a new function and role. The issue is not how we can exploit the new building given the kind of university we are, but what kind of university we can become by exploiting the building in imaginative ways. Clearly, such imagination might produce radically new solutions, the fate of which is as unknowable and unpredictable as the fate of more pedestrian solutions. When the brief is read for inspiration, not information, we remove lots of constraints and set free the creativity of the team. But needless to say, even when imagination is the strategy constraints will be felt. They are limitations on our ability to recognize vague symptoms, to imagine alternative realities, and to protect of our imagination in the face of evidence-based renderings of reality (March, 1999).

There is no way to argue that one strategy is better than the other. Chances are that they both will lead to occasional success and recurrent defeat. But in view of our analysis of architectural competitions and the nature of the practices they encompass we could convincingly claim that both strategies are feasible. Reading the brief for inspiration, thus individually and locally changing the "rules of the game", does not necessarily spell failure, because the rules of the game are defined retrospectively anyway. We saw that what was perceived as information in the brief, and probably was also meant as information by the client, later on became invalidated by new insights and subsequent events. Such information might also have become validated by subsequent events and experiences. We have no way of knowing ahead of

time whether valid information early in the process is also valid information later in the process.

The practices of architectural teams, as they have been described above, are primarily characterized by fancy. There is the possibility that new habits might develop that would constitute a new practice of reading competition briefs with more imagination. In this sense, the construction of the client would not be a limiting premise for the design proposal, but a potential outcome from it. Then, 'constructing the client' would acquire an additional, more profound meaning.

5   CONCLUSIONS

What is our analysis bringing to practice scholars' potluck dinner? Clearly, we have studied processes of enactment, through which design tasks are delimited and the efforts of the architectural team are given direction. We have also studied practices in the sense that the work of architectural teams seems to follow a recurrent pattern, and that across the multiplicity of design proposals there is a common disposition to seek solid foundations for making informed choices about the needs and preferences of the client and the panel. By implication, there is a collective disposition to believe in the rationality of design choices.

But the common disposition, the recognizably recurrent action patterns in doing architectural competitions, and the achievement in the form of predictable submissions of design proposals before the deadline, are hardly a healthy dish on the table of practice studies. We would like to suggest that the practice perspective is useless unless we preserve the experiential richness of practicing. In terms of form, sequence, attention etc., the case study reports on 'just another competition'. It is probably extremely seldom that teams do not start by studying the brief and that they fail to submit a proposal in the end. But doing architectural competitions takes place in a situation of high anxiety and immense ambiguity. There is nothing

pedestrian or repetitious about the process as it is experienced by the participants. There is little coordination and little trust in eventual success. There is even less trust in the ability to learn from the repeated failures. Practice in the context of architectural competitions seems to lack many of the characteristics of practicing as it is commonly described in the literature.

We believe that our contribution might be summarized by claiming that practice is more task than achievement. It is not clear that practice, competence, skill etc. are necessarily linked to outcomes, at least not in all contexts and under every circumstance. It is possible that practice, competence and skill are related to the ability to see reality in more nuances and to appreciate more options for action. But whether such abilities will translate into more or less coordinated action and higher or lower achievement is an open question.

If we read the literature correctly, the practice perspective partly claims relevance by showing the organizing capacity of standards and routines. It boils down to the argument that order and collective effort hinges on the predictability of the individual act. We would accept such a proposition, but only as one out of several alternative propositions. Our study shows that unpredictability may have organizing effects as well. There is little effort on the part of the client to ensure predictability in the design proposals solicited in the architectural competition. On the contrary, the effort is to solicit surprises, newness, creativity and originality. And while the entries could be said to vary on multiple dimensions, the panel had no difficulties in reaching a conclusion. It came to look as a perfectly orderly and organized competition, not because of high predictability, but because the panel found motivation and occasion to adapt its criteria, rules and preferences in view of attractive design proposals. Predictability allows prior planning of response and the calibration over time of collective routines. But unpredictability may increase motivation to seek alignment in the situation and achieve order and coordination more spontaneously. The specific situation and the interrelation between the individual acts will determine if

order can be produced spontaneously – whether improvisation is an integral part of practicing or its logical opposite.

In continuation of this issue, we would also like to suggest that action dispositions should be perceived, not so much as inhibitions that make social action predictable, but also as strategies that could possibly be adopted and substituted by choice and coincidence.

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