

And the Winner is...

Why not open architectural competitions to the public vote, asks Hana Loftus?

“If you want a global icon, stop pretending that it’s about functionality for a given brief, and let’s have the X-Factor vote”

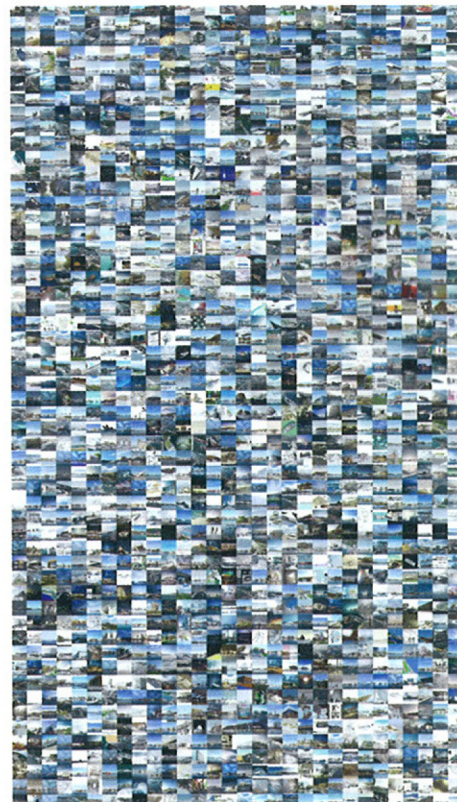
The online presentation of 1,715 entries to the Helsinki Guggenheim design competition naturally attracted much attention on Twitter, the critical medium for which this competition is most suited. With two images and a 150-word summary per entry, each can be well skewered in 140 characters. It’s the Tinder of architecture: you can ‘favorite’, compile your own shortlist, select by ‘tags’ (curved, twisted, shiny, textured, pyramid), mock the crude or the badly rendered, play spot the starchitects or the wannabe starchitects. Perhaps other cities in need of icons should be allowed to take their pick of the entries too: most seem as applicable to any other location as they are to the Helsinki waterfront.

You can be outraged at the superficiality of presenting architecture like a speed-dating website. You can bemoan the millions of wasted hours, coffee beans and processor power that have been used on designing every possible permutation for one building, rather than on worthier causes or more creative means of winning work. You can snark about how shortlists somehow always end up with several well-known names alongside a couple of young turks, no matter how supposedly anonymous the process. You can attack the state of the contemporary globalised city-branding complex, with its insatiable desire for instant imagery and contempt for local democracy.

Right

The anonymous open design competition for a Guggenheim museum in Helsinki received 1,715 entries from architects in 77 countries. A shortlist will be announced in December 2014, and the winner chosen in June 2015.

Details: designguggenheimhelsinki.org



But competitions retain their allure for clients and architects alike, so how should they be run? British architects often look to France and the Low Countries as competition heaven, with their generous honoraria for shortlisted teams and long periods for the development of nuanced proposals. But Helsinki chose to run a British-style competition with an emphasis on image-making and minimal chance of remuneration.

This format is on the increase, while the move online means that conventional competitions increasingly come to resemble the alternative forms that have grown up on the web, such as the ‘crowd-sourcing’ arcbar.com, where clients get designers to submit designs for their projects for modest cash prizes, or the profit-making ‘ideas competitions’ organised by AC-CA.

But despite the mania for competitions, almost never is the public trusted to make the decision, or anonymity genuinely maintained. The Helsinki process is no exception: anonymity is lifted at the second stage, and the online gallery and rankings are just for PR, and not part of the real selection process. For all the ‘open’ label, this keeps architecture in the hands of its elite, and this is arguably where the contemporary competition system goes wrong.

Architects like to think that the public isn’t educated enough to make these decisions, but that’s because it’s more comfortable to keep it that way: the reality is that most architects are terrified of how good the public is at spotting flaws and questioning their smoke-and-mirrors renderings. I’d rather see more baring of our architectural flesh for the scrutiny of our public.

If you want to be serious, how about properly briefed citizen juries to examine proposals for important sites — a method Canada has been pioneering in various fields. If you want a global icon, stop pretending that it’s about functionality for a given brief, and let’s have the X-Factor vote: why shouldn’t the public decide what spectacular building they would like to visit on their city-break in five years’ time?

Television talent shows display multiple clever approaches to balancing an expert jury with public opinion, creating a public that is highly informed about everything from ballroom dancing to baking. If we can choose our governments and our pop stars through a public vote, let’s embrace it for our buildings too. **A**