Castro Street, Mountain View

Design Competition Memo

FINAL

Contents

Purpose statement

This memo is intended to support City of Mountain View staff in the development of a report to Mountain View City Council that outlines whether and when it is applicable to use a design competition as a tool for project development. This memo, developed by Gehl, provides an understanding of four predominantly used design competition entry formats and their benefits and challenges, from process to types of outcomes that can be expected.

- Open: Anyone may enter the competition.
- Limited: Only submissions from teams within a specific geography, meet a certain licensing requirement, or meet unique considerations may enter.
- Invited: Only groups invited by the competition holder may enter.
- Request for Qualifications / Request for Proposals (RFQ/RFP): Design teams are selected to participate based on their experiences and qualifications.

Additionally, this memo provides an understanding of the predominantly used design competition staging formats, which dictates the number of selection phases in a competition, and their outcomes.

- Single Stage: Competition winner is directly selected from the initial submission pool.
- Two Stage: A number of finalists are selected from the initial submission pool. The competition winner is selected from this limited roster after a second round of deliberation or design refinement.

For further details about the above entry and staging formats, as well as illustrative case studies, refer to the corresponding sections of the memo below. This memo is not intended to be an exhaustive survey. Rather, this memo is designed to provide a high level overview of design competitions and their pros and cons. Additional links are also included to provide concrete examples about the positives and negatives of navigating a competition process.

Key Takeaways

History: From a historical perspective, open design competitions were popularized in Europe and employed to construct many iconic early American governmental buildings and memorials. Today however, to better manage design cost, engagement, quality, and feasibility, both the US federal government and many local governments now select competition participants through a RFQ/RFP process. An RFQ/RFP design competition process will require additional time, staffing, and cost than an open or limited competition, but could be more likely to result in a successful project.

Budget and Timeline: While design competitions are often successful at quickly generating a large number of big ideas, they are less adept at developing detailed, context specific responses. As a result, design competitions often struggle to maintain deadlines due to inevitable design changes and falter because of insufficient funds. For examples of this experience, see the Harvey Milk case study below, or the redesign and abandoned competition of the Adobe Creek/101 Pedestrian Crossing.

Community Engagement and Buy-In: Since competitions are designed to bring in multiple submissions simultaneously, competition hosting communities often struggle to find a point of contact and input into the design process, resulting in designs that do not reflect the needs of the community. Compensating for this disconnect requires a longer timeframe and increased process management from the competition host organization. While the different competition formats discussed below can affect the quality of engagement, it is ultimately dependent on the commitment from the host organization as engagement can happen at any stage of the competition process. For an example of how a competition host organization incorporated years of community input into a successful competition brief, see the 11th Street Bridge Project in Washington D.C.

Design Quality and Firm Participation: Participation in design competitions is risky for qualified design firms, who must weigh the opportunity of discovery and future business with the risk of financial loss. As a result, participation in non-theoretical design competitions is often limited to large, established firms. While high profile projects hosted by high-status institutions can attract top quality design firms without significant incentives, smaller, local projects often need to devote significant funds to a prize purse, as well as advertising, to reach and attract a similar level of talent.

The Ask is the Outcome: While each of the staging and entry formats discussed below have an effect on the final design, the quality of the competition host's "ask" is just, if not more, important than the competition itself. Inevitably, the more time and resources competition hosts spend on researching, focusing, and collecting community input to craft a competition proposal, the better the results of the competition will be.

History & Current Context for Design Competitions in the U.S.

The roots of contemporary architectural competitions lie in Europe, where there is a long history of designing large public works through competition selection.[1] The grandeur and cultural significance of the buildings constructed – the Athenian War memorial at the Acropolis, the dome and doors of the Florence Cathedral, the Spanish Steps, and the British House of Parliament – as well as the historical fame of their designers contributes to the enduring appeal of design competitions.

In the United States, design competitions have been used since the foundation of the republic, with the designs for the White House and the Capitol in DC both winning competitions.[2] Though federal buildings are now selected through the General Services Administration's Design Excellence Program, which combines an RFQ with a peer review selection process,[3] competitions have been used for captivating high profile commissions such as the Vietnam Veterans Memorial by Maya Lin.

The US government has shifted away from design competitions for federal buildings. However, the Federal government still actively hosts open design competitions focusing on technology innovation, ideas, and art through the Challenge.gov program. The Rebuild By Design Competition, which was spun out of HUD's response to Hurricane Sandy, connects climate change affected communities with teams of designers through a RFQ process.

For municipal design competitions, many cities utilize a competitive RFQ/RFP system, introducing an element of competition amongst a list of qualified firms to strike a balance between feasibility, quality, and cost. However, it is not uncommon for cities to host open, public competitions for smaller scale temporary installation projects or local placemaking and branding initiatives, such as the Chattanooga Passageways Competition.

Though not directly germain to the City of Mountain View, the public's perception of design competitions are molded by high profile, large-scale, open design competitions, which are generally the purview of large non-profit institutions, such as the Guggenheim and Land Art Generator Initiative. With deep budgets and high status brand recognition to attract leading design firms, these institutions are less concerned about the feasibility or cost of winning design submissions. The spectacle of the competition is a means of generating publicity around an upcoming project or initiative. However, the most common and prolific type of open competition

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[1] Seidel, A. D. (1990). DESIGN COMPETITIONS RECEIVE MIXED REVIEWS. Journal of Architectural and Planning Research, 7(2), 172–180. http://www.jstor.org/stable/43028965

[2] Seidel, A.D.

[3] Douglass, D. (2017, August 13). GSA's Design Excellence Program raises the BAR for federal buildings. GSA. Retrieved April 6, 2022, from https://www.gsa.gov/about-us/regions/welcome-to-the-pacific-rim-region-9/region-9-newsroom/feature-stories/gsas-design-excellence-program-raises-the-bar-for-federal-buildings#:~:text=In%201994%2C%20GSA%20established%20the,artists%20on%20our%20building%20projects.

remains theoretical design competitions, which are aimed at students and sponsored by universities or local community partners.

Types of Competitions & Entry Formats [4,5]

Given that one could host a competition about anything – be it an architectural project, design idea, art, or technological innovation – the structure of the competition process dictates the type of competition. By regulating the entry format and staging formats of a competition, hosts can adjust the cost and resolution of the end results of their competition.

Open Competitions

Open competitions welcome submissions from anyone, regardless of their formal qualification. Open entry formats are great for big idea competitions that want to draw on multiple cross-disciplinary teams for innovative, if not always feasible, solutions. Open design competitions have catapulted the careers of many starchitects, though the format is often critiqued for generating large quantities of context-blind designs that favor style over solutions.

Open design competitions can quickly generate many new ideas, connect hosts with new firms, and allow entry for firms or organizations that may not qualify through competitive bids or RFQ/RFPs. At the same time, they can be resource intensive, and hosts may have limited control over whether a winning design is feasible, especially within areas of high complexity like multiple ownership jurisdictions, communities that require in-depth and meaningful engagement, and resolution to complex design challenges. While open design competitions are accessible to any bidder, there is a risk of ruling out smaller firms that do not have the resources to enter work engagements without compensation.

Pros	Cons
➜ Receive a large number of potentially innovative submissions ➜ Low barrier to entry generates publicity around a project ➜ Chance of discovery for an unknown design talent ➜ Low formal barrier of entry for design participants	➜ Solutions might not be feasible or context-sensitive ➜ Designers may be unwilling to meaningfully invest in a process with many competitors and low chances of winning ➜ Little opportunity for community input ➜ Difficult to coordinate between overlapping stakeholders or multiple owners

[4] The American Institute of Architects . (2019). The Handbook of Architectural Design Competitions . Washington D.C.
[5] Vierra, S. (2016, February 8). *Running a Design Competition* . Whole Building Design Guide. Retrieved April 6, 2022, from https://www.wbdg.org/resources/running-design-competition

Limited Competition

Limited Competitions restrict submissions to teams within a set geography that meet a licensing requirement, or meet unique considerations set by the competition host. Limited competitions are useful for projects that require a set budget or local expertise by allowing the host to mindfully curate the entry requirements and, ultimately, the selection of competition entrants. However, the restrictive nature of these competition formats runs the risk of issues and accusations of bias. Additionally, competition hosts can expect that the more restrictive their requirements, the fewer entries they will receive.

Pros	Cons
➔ Greater host control over design team qualifications ➔ Greater host control over submission type	➔ Requirements can result in limited submissions, especially in smaller geographies

Invited Competitions

Invited competitions only include groups invited by the competition holder. Competition hosts are potentially able to closely manage participants' work, given the lower number of competitors. Because of the exclusive nature of invited competitions they can easily run into issues and accusations of bias.

Pros	Cons
➔ Full host control over design team participants ➔ Fewer teams allow for closer host oversight	➔ Requires significant oversight and transparency to prevent biases ➔ Little chance of discovering new talent or creating new relationships between firms and competition host

Request for Qualifications / Request for Proposals (RFQ/RFP) Competition

A competition where selection for participation is based on a RFQ/RFP, or groups that have standing RFQ/RFPs with the competition hosts are invited to participate. RFQ/RFP competitions are useful for assuring that the eventual design concept selected will be from a team with the knowledge and capacity to carry out a feasible design. They also allow firms to focus their design resources on competitions in which they know they have a credible chance of winning. However, an RFQ/RFP competition may have a higher upfront cost to the host and rule out undiscovered talent or firms that do not yet meet entry qualifications.

Pros	Cons
➔ All participants are qualified to complete the project ➔ Submissions are typically more detailed and higher quality ➔ Less risky for designers to invest time and resources in the competition ➔ Greater host control over project budget ➔ More opportunities for community input ➔ Opportunity to coordinate between stakeholders and design teams ➔ Less risky for designers to invest time and resources in the competition	➔ Increased cost for hosts ➔ Increased competition timeframe

Competition Staging Formats

One Stage

In a one stage competition, the final winner is selected directly from the wider pool of submissions. One stage competitions are efficient for big idea or high level projects that do not require significant details, production, or feasibility studies. One stage competitions require less time and therefore cost less to host. However, their compressed format results in limited room for refinement, and participants have limited ability to meaningfully engage with community members or coordinate with stakeholders.

Pros	Cons
➔ Shorter time-frame compared to longer competition formats ➔ Less cost compared to longer competition formats	➔ Little host control over the process ➔ Little opportunity for community input ➔ Submissions are typically high-level conceptual designs ➔ Difficult to coordinate between stakeholders to solve complex program needs ➔ Limited host control over eventual budget of winning design

Two Stage

In a two stage competition, finalists are selected from the initial pool of submissions and then invited to further refine their designs. Finalists are often given a reward for advancing to the second stage. From an equity perspective, this second round design fee allows smaller firms to participate while assuming less risk. Two stage competitions generally reduce the work required for the initial stage while requiring a more detailed submission in the final stage. Though it requires more oversight and cost from the competition hosts, this two stage process can allow for more focused community involvement and control in the eventual final design. While most multistage competitions conclude after two stages, occasionally hosts will add an additional stage to further winnow and refine the competition.

Pros	Cons
➔ Submissions are typically more detailed and higher quality ➔ Less risky for designers to invest time and resources in the competition ➔ More options for community input ➔ More host control over the process ➔ Opportunity to coordinate between stakeholders and design teams	➔ Increased cost for hosts ➔ Increased competition timeframe

Design Competitions Examples and Case Studies

Saint James Park, San Jose CA

Saint James is a historic park in central San Jose that had fallen into disrepair and undesired use. To redesign and reactivate the two block site, the City of San Jose decided to select a design consultant through a competitive RFQ/RFP design competition. The winning design from CMG incorporates a sculptural event pavilion and ample gardens. Since the close of the competition, CMG and the City have continued public outreach and design refinement over a three year process that has involved online surveys, four community meetings, a public comment period, and seven stakeholder presentations. However, the Covid-19 pandemic and legal protests concerning historic preservation have repeatedly stalled the project.

Competition Type: Two stage RFQ/RFP competition
Project Type: Public park
Size / Scale: Nine acres
Number of Submissions: 14 initial submissions to the initial RFQ/RFP, four teams selected to participate in the second phase, and one design firm selected as the competition winner
Involved Parties: City of San Jose Parks, Recreation, and Neighborhood Services, City of San Jose Mayor and Council, CMG
Competition Cost / Fees: City staff time and labor plus $100,000 in design fees to phase-two participants. $1,000,000 granted to finalists for design development. Figures do not include construction cost.
Timeline: One year for competition in addition to one year for winning design refinement and community outreach
Outcome: Winning competition submission includes conceptual plan narrative, designs, sections, and perspectives
Further Links: Project Website, Refined Concept Presentation, 25% CD Set, Summary of Letter of Protest, City Memorandum Officially Accepting CMG's Design and Rejecting the Letter of Protest, San Jose Spotlight Summarizing Current Legal Woes

CMG's Conceptual Plan and Rendering for Saint James Park

Lake Merritt BART Transit-Oriented Development, Oakland CA

Seeking to create a mixed-use, mixed-income transit-oriented development directly abutting the Lake Merritt Station, BART launched a multi-phase RFQ/RFP design competition to select a development team. The Lake Merritt TOD shows how large, complicated projects that require coordination between multiple stakeholders can successfully, if slowly, progress through a competition process. By using a two stage RFQ/RFP process, BART can assure that they have a roster of feasible plans and qualified teams if their first choice developer is unable to complete the project. Community stakeholders were included in the selection committee, and a wider period of public community engagement will be conducted after the contract is finalized with the winning team.

Competition Type: Two phase RFQ/RFP competition
Project Type: Mixed-use transit oriented design with public plaza
Size / Scale: 2.8 acres
Number of Submissions: Eight initial submissions to the request for qualifications, four teams selected to develop proposals, and one final winner and one alternate selected
Involved Parties: BART Staff, City of Oakland Staff, Local Community Stakeholders, East Bay Asian Local Development Corporation, and Strada Investment Group
Competition Cost / Fees: $25,000 deposit required for all participant teams, with unselected teams receiving their money back. Winner's fee paid towards a $100,000 Exclusive Negotiation Agreement. Development contract currently under negotiation. Figures do not include construction cost.
Timeline: A total of ten months for the competition, composed of three months for community outreach, three months for the initial RFQ and candidate shortlisting, and four months to select a final RFP and an alternative.
Outcome: Winning proposal packet included a development plan and urban design concepts, a financial offer, expected process for community engagement and community benefits negotiation, and team member information.
Further Links: *Project Summary Page*, *Staff Report Including Design Concepts and Project Timeline*, *RFQ*, & *RFP*

EBALDC's Conceptual Renderings for the Lake Merritt TOD

Harvey Milk Plaza, San Francisco CA

Harvey Milk Plaza has been the subject of three design competitions in 20 years. In 2000, the first competition launched with an open call for art installations but winning designs, which called for a permanently suspended pink cloud, were never built due to a lack of funding and technical infeasibility. The second competition was launched in 2017 and aimed to redesign the Plaza as a public gathering space and LGBTQ civil rights monument. Six community meetings were held from 2017-2019. Though the winning design, which called for a complete redesign of the plaza and its transformation into a public amphitheater, initially launched with significant fanfare, the plans were eventually abandoned after three years of opposition and gradual design changes. In 2021, SWA was contracted to redesign the plaza after an invite-only RFP and interview process.

	2000 Memorial	*2017 Plaza Redesign*	*2021 Plaza Redesign*
Competition Type	Single stage open	Two phase open	Two phase, invite only RFP with interview
Project Type	Plaza memorial	Plaza redesign	Plaza redesign
Size / Scale	17,000 square feet	17,000 square feet	17,000 square feet
Number of Submissions	120 entries, two final winners selected	33 submissions for phase-one, three teams selected for phase-two, one final design selected	17 submissions from invited firms, four firms shortlisted and interviewed, one final design team selected
Involved Parties	San Francisco Arts Commission	Friends of Harvey Milk Plaza, SFMTA, AIA San Francisco, Perkins Eastman	Friends of Harvey Milk Plaza, SFMTA, AIA San Francisco, SWA
Competition Costs	$10,000 in winnings divided among five winners. Figure does not include construction cost.	$160,000 in competition cost and winnings. Figure do not include construction cost.	$1 million (includes competition cost and initial funding for design development and construction)
Timeline	Five months for competition	Ten months for competition	One year for competition. Includes pre-competition preparation
Outcome	Winning designs abandoned due to cost and feasibility issues in 2006	Winning design abandoned due to community opposition in 2020	Design is still ongoing. RFP competition required conceptual narrative and visuals such as perspectives and renderings

Christain Werthmann+LOMA's Conceptual Renderings for the Pink Cloud for Harvey Milk Plaza

Perkins Eastman's Conceptual Renderings for Harvey Milk Plaza

SWA's Conceptual Renderings for Harvey Milk Plaza