

Competing realities

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COMPETING REALITIES

Antigoni Katsakou

Housing competitions in Switzerland, especially during the last fifteen years, have often been mentioned as process frameworks generating innovative design and guaranteeing quality architecture. In their immediate outcome, the competition system's interacting forces and sometimes contradictory parameters are also revealed.

Collective housing can be a rather banal architectural theme, mainly because the largest part of the real estate stock results from private stakeholders that normally operate according to previously tested patterns and promote repetitive, sometimes even ill-used, design motives. During the last fifteen years though, the sector of collective housing competitions in Switzerland presents a particularly interesting case.

In general, architectural competitions play a significant role in the practice of the profession for all the usually mentioned reasons – linked to advantages or drawbacks of the system, and depending mainly on the scholar's point of view or the practitioner's experience – but also because they constitute a particular background where sometimes conflicting diversified forces and the interests of various social fields interact on several distinct levels. Apart from emulation among architects, which is supposed to keep alive a spirit for renewal and variety and make architectural production attractive to other social groups, and (in a perfect world...) the fairly just distribution of available commissions and the chances provided to younger members of the profession in the competitions system, traditionally opposed intentions persist

between practicalities and ideals, and between conformity and inspired, breakthrough conceptions. On the one hand, 'practicalities' are defined in terms of the stakeholder's financial profit standards and the usual constraints regarding time, budget and construction techniques, and 'conformity' relates to building regulations, but often also to juries' preferences(!). On the other hand, 'ideals' refer to what is 'beautiful' and 'useful', what is morally and aesthetically desired by the fields' experts.

Housing competitions in particular, especially those organized in the German-speaking part of the country, with Zurich being the most typical example, feature some significant characteristics. Firstly, they are usually part of urban policies that aim to transform and regenerate broader urban and suburban areas of the city and are evocative of a strong political will and concrete planning schemes. Housing competitions are thus directly associated with an explicitly framed operational layout, with certain numbers of housing units to be constructed within fixed time and budget frameworks; efficacy and efficiency are demanded by all actors involved in such tendering procedures. Secondly, emulation focuses indeed on quality architecture and up-to-date solutions to the housing problem. The system of competitions is often presented as a quality-guarantee process; terms such as 'innovative design', 'flexible spatial sequences' and 'quality of the living experience' are standard parts of the brief and apparently invite architects to explore their own creativity. Lastly, state-driven authorities normally promote collaboration with not-for-profit housing associations by leasing land on the condition that an architectural competition is organized. Considering that controlling costs for housing operations of non-profit stakeholders is usually crucial, the demand for the system's efficiency is even greater. Thus, architectural innovation seems ordered and 'packed' in strict execution frames.

Certainly, the results so far have been quite impressive¹. A significant number of competitions have been held, featuring a considerable variety of design approaches and sometimes genuinely innovative solutions. The municipal department for building construction and competition planning 'Amt für Hochbauten' has organized almost 70 competitions in the period from 1997-2008, with at least half of them treating the subject of housing with renovations, extensions, and completely new constructions of residential complexes.² Efficient and client-oriented in its attitude, it operates equally as an independent planning office serving stakeholders external to the municipality and taking advantage of its acquired experience. In its 2008 brochure about organizing competitions in the housing sector, the municipality



fig. a
Competition perspective
Hagenbuchrain project, Bünzli & Courvoisier architects.



fig. b
Photo of the built project, 2004. © Hannes Henz
Hagenbuchrain project, Bünzli & Courvoisier architects.

of Zurich mentioned 30 competitions (and a total of 2600 units) completed during the period 1998-2007.³ Almost 50% of a total of more than a hundred tendering procedures listed in a database⁴ that comprises housing competitions organized during the period of 1997-2010 in various parts of Switzerland have already produced concrete results in the form of completed buildings; a relatively high ratio, and even more so considering that almost a third of these procedures are more recent than 2007 and therefore likely to lead to completed projects in the near future. More than half of these construction projects are situated in the canton of Zurich. What is more interesting is that a basic overview of the majority of case studies reveals few significant changes between competition layouts and executed projects⁵.

Limited modifications in the projects' final phases could be explained by a relative 'consensus' between housing developers and architects. Investors seem to opt more for architectural quality and respect essential conceptual patterns, which generally survive the execution phase (even if, sometimes, the intensity of a certain design feature is significantly attenuated). A constructive dialogue seems in progress within the framework of tendering procedures that deal with particularly demanding conditions in the housing market (modifications of social structures, emergence of new living modes, amelioration of the users' educational standards and requirements, need for authentically attractive alternatives to the suburban detached, single-family home). A real 'bridging' between conception and practice could be suggested in relation to a change in the developers' attitudes towards innovative proposals and implicated risks; this could allow for relatively optimistic interpretations as to the architect's role in the housing market.

However, and despite the fact that the variety of urban forms and diversified housing typologies featured by the completed projects indeed imply live ongoing research in this sector of the architectural practice, a closer examination of visualizations in the competitions' framework calls the above interpretations into question. The architects' imaginations appear to be less daring when it comes to three-dimensional representations of the proposed spaces. First, there is a certain preference for recurring themes that limits the range of the represented zones: perspective images normally concern 'standard' areas of collective use, either in the scale of the entire complex, or in that of the individual housing unit. Even if the project's layout introduces a particularly innovative feature, it is not certain that this will be otherwise emphasized by means of a three-dimensional rendering. Second, perspective images, especially of exterior views, in many cases adopt a rather literal, naturalistic representation style that aims to depict the proposed 'future

reality' with a majority of realistic elements and seeks to remain close to easily-recognizable spatial situations and 'prêt-à-porter' domestic ambiances. The architects' inventiveness seems less oriented towards original representation modes. Cropped photographic snapshots of human figures and trees 'participating' in the 'reconstruction' of the intended atmosphere, well-ordered urban situations and neatly-arranged interiors, vibrant communal spaces with socializing neighbors, fashionable users in elegant housing units – is this indeed the kind of reality produced after the completion and execution of the winning architectural projects? Such elements all point to embellished realities and convincing representations of the briefs' requirements, rather than to three-dimensional representations that evoke the dynamics of the conceptual process and leave certain aspects of the proposal open to interpretation and further research. In this regard, architectural solutions 'look' quite alike. How can this contradiction of the system be explained?

On the one hand, competitions do indeed promote a more generalized dialogue about the built environment by means of discussions, media conferences and exhibitions concerning the specific architectural problem and its integration into the context, before and after the procedure's completion. But this dialogue, and the importance of housing operations for broader urban planning frameworks in each agglomeration, equally tends to transform residential architecture into an iconic field of conception, a characteristic usually associated until recently with buildings of administrative or cultural use, and/or international impact. In many competition procedures, one of the program's basic requirements is the unique identity of the future housing development;⁶ a special image of contemporary symbolization, a particular character enabling the project to function as a pole for a wider urban sector than the one corresponding to its strictly defined neighborhood or urban sector but also as a 'trademark' of the stakeholder. The following passage from the program of the competition for the Rautstrasse housing development (Zurich, 2005) is indicative of such expectations: «Die neue Siedlung soll ein den heutigen Ansprüchen entsprechendes Image bildendes Zeichen setzen und zur Aufwertung des Quartiers beitragen.»⁷ And the La Fontenette competition brief (Geneva, 2008) mentions that: «L'objectif de ce concours vise à définir le développement du secteur et a pour but de faire émerger les potentialités du lieu. Il s'agit de créer un 'morceau de ville' pour quelques centaines d'habitants, et de façonner l'image urbaine de ce secteur.»⁸ Architects are encouraged to design 'exceptionally expressive'⁹ projects, the complex logic of which may often be reduced subsequently¹⁰ and therefore be less noticeable in any related visualizations. It is a kind of simplification also occurring in the repre-

sentation of the architectural work by specialized publications (architectural press, jury reports, etc.), where the material of competition proposals is edited without regard for the original presentation order adopted by the architects, in order to facilitate a comparative overview of the projects through a standardized presentation.

On the other hand, the fact that housing competitions in the previously presented framework aim to produce concrete results in fixed terms may explain why architectural solutions remain, at least in some aspects, rather conventional. An innovative layout presented in an easily comprehensible (especially for the jury's laymen) version of a 'finished product' reduces the implicated risks to some degree.¹¹ Special representation techniques and methods emphasizing the project's incomplete conceptual process may be less convincing; an abstract approach may imply uncertainty towards the materialization of the main idea or suggest a longer time lapse needed for the project's realization. Further analysis of these questions is of course related to broader issues of the profession's reception by society, as for example the impact and current role of three-dimensional images in representing architecture to non-specialists and the public, as well as the way laymen respond to architectural drawings in general, and what could actually be considered more easily 'digestible' by them.

In terms of housing, quantity (of the produced number of units) and necessity (construction is usually due to a relative shortage of real estate stock) competes with quality and comfort (after all, the dwelling space continues to hold its metaphysical meaning for the user). Investors of housing operations seem at present to measure profitability (at least to some degree) also in terms of the result's architectural quality. But are there still too many reservations on their part, pointing to a forced (and possibly fragile) complicity with the architects, as well as to a certain ambiguity with respect to the profession's social role? The increasing number of restricted procedures could also be indicative of the system's losing some of its 'freshness' as younger members of the architectural practice, often associated with more audacious lines of investigation, gradually become excluded from its framework. Innovation needs to be sought in various layers of the architectural conception, and in as broad a spectrum of solutions as possible, in order to secure the long-lasting experimentation and viability of the process.

- 1 Hohe Ansprüche an Wohnarchitektur in Stadt Zürich / Amt für Hochbauten, Bauen für Zürich. Das Amt für Hochbauten 1997-2007. Verlag Neue Zürcher Zeitung, Zürich, 2008, p. 85: «In Zürich blüht der Wohnungsbau. [...] Das AHB engagiert sich für ideenreiche Architektur für ein vielfältiges Publikum und fördert nachhaltige Erneuerungskonzepte. [...] Der Wohnungsbau ist in Zürich, mehr als in jeder andern Schweizer Stadt, eine öffentliche Angelegenheit.»
- 2 Werkkatalog: Bauten und Wettbewerbe 1997–2008 in Bauen für Zürich, op. cit., pp. 297-341.
- 3 Kurz, Daniel: Der Architekturwettbewerb im Wohnungsbau. Das Amt für Hochbauten als Partner 1998-2007, Stadt Zürich, Amt für Hochbauten, Zürich, 2008.
See also Koch Michael, Kurz Daniel: Mehr als Wohnen: Auf der Suche dem neuen Zürich, Durban Christoph et al., Mehr als Wohnen. Gemeinnütziger Wohnungsbau in Zürich 1907-2007. Bauten und Siedlungen, gta Verlag, Zurich, 2008, pp. 16-33.
- 4 Katsakou, Antigoni: Recent Architectural Competitions of Collective Housing in Switzerland: Impact of this Framework on Architectural Conception and Innovation, EPFL Thesis no. 5066, Lausanne, June 2011, p. 415.
- 5 Considered as significant modifications are those affecting the principal compositional logic of the original layout and/or having an impact on an inherent design parameter that introduces some type of architectural innovation (see on that subject Katsakou, Antigoni: Housing Competitions: Elaborating Projects in their Specific Framework in Nordic Journal of Architectural Research, Jan. 2012 – forthcoming).
- 6 Stoffner, Doris; Wigger, Ruth: Wohnüberbauung Guggach, Zürich-Unterstrass. Projektwettbewerb im selektiven Verfahren. Bericht des Preisgerichts, August 2005, Hochbaudepartement der Stadt Zürich, Amt für Hochbauten, Zurich, 2005, p. 4: «Die Baugenossenschaft der Strassenbahner Zürich strebt ein Konzept an, welches der Überbauung eine eigene Identität verleiht und den zukünftigen Bewohnerinnen und Bewohnern Identifikation bietet.»
- 7 Müller, Ursula; Stoffner, Doris: Wohnsiedlung Rautstrasse, Zürich-Altstetten. Projektwettbewerb im offenen Verfahren. Bericht des Preisgerichts. September 2005, Hochbaudepartement der Stadt Zürich, Amt für Hochbauten, Zurich, 2005, p. 3. Phrases of similar content can be found in many competition briefs, especially as a large majority of them follows a common, basic text-grid.
- 8 Un habitat économique en milieu urbain – concours SIA La Fontenette, Fondation Immobilière de droit public Emma Kammacher, Genève, 2008.
- 9 Mateo, Josep Lluis: Iconoclastia, in Sauter Florian (ed.), Iconoclastia. News from a Post-Iconic World, Architectural Papers IV, ETH Zurich, 2009, p. 4: «In the contemporary world, a project that aspires to be exceptionally expressive (almost all) is commonly called an Icon.»
- 10 Krunoslav, Ivanišin: Controversy around images in ibidem., pp. 8-17 (especially p. 13).
- 11 Dehan, Philippe: Qualité architecturale et innovation, Plan Urbanisme Construction Architecture, Paris, 1999, pp. 105-106.

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Architect, holds a PhD from the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Lausanne. Following graduate studies at the National Technical University of Athens, she completed a postgraduate Master course at Barcelona Tech. Co-author of the book 'Concours en Suisse: 2000-2005', she has practiced and lectured in Greece and Switzerland, and has presented her work in several international scientific meetings. She has been working on the subject of housing competitions since 2006.