Why Have An Urban Design Competition?

Competitions bring forth a wide range of solutions. New talent and ideas are revealed. There is an open community dialogue over the issues. Competitions cost the sponsor time and money, but on the whole they are a genuine bargain. The expense of running a competition is far outweighed by the amount of professional expertise that is leveraged.

Competitions stimulate new thinking within the professional community. Different approaches can be tested and compared. Professional designers are free to innovate and solve problems from different, less constrained perspectives. At times, competitions have changed the mainstream of professional thinking.

The quantity, quality and usefulness of new ideas depends on several factors. For example, the prestige of the competition and the size of the monetary award affect the number of entrants. The capacity of local decision-makers to prepare for and evaluate the results also influences the usefulness of a competition.

Urban design competitions are only a part of a planning process. They are not a substitute for planning. This planning process includes the definition of goals prior to the competition, the generation and selection of alternative solutions by the entrants, and subsequent evaluation and action. Community leaders and the general public must be involved in each step in the process to ensure their interest in the outcome. Competitions do not resolve policy disputes, but they can raise the quality of public debate and focus attention on key issues.

Design competitions can, of course, be disadvantageous. They may raise expectations too high. Solutions may not be feasible or they may solve the wrong problem. Competitions can delay more traditional design and development processes. But these problems only reaffirm the necessity for careful planning and management of a design competition.

WHY ARE URBAN DESIGN COMPETITIONS SPECIAL?

Competitions for the resolution of urban planning and design problems are different than traditional competitions for individual buildings. The resolution of an urban design problem requires different skills, knowledge, disciplines and theoretical perspectives than does the resolution of a building design problem. In the Milwaukee Lakefront Competition, for example, entrants included not only registered architects but also landscape architects and planners. The list of rel-
evant professional disciplines could be extended further depending on the problems to be addressed.

Urban design competitions focus on a special type of problem. In a building competition, the product is usually a single structure or a complex of buildings serving a singular purpose. Often, the specification of different spaces, their relative size, and their intended function is predetermined and comparatively detailed. In an urban design competition, spatial requirements are usually more general and encompass a wider range of functions and purposes.

Building competitions typically emphasize a greater level of architectural detail while urban design competitions emphasize the relationships among architectural and non-architectural components. A building design competition might address the design of a museum, while an urban design competition might determine the location and external character of a museum as only one component of a larger land use problem. Urban design competitions may focus more on landscaping details, land use patterns and transportation systems. Moreover, urban design competitions may require submission of non-architectural products like proposed zoning or development regulations.

Urban design competitions are often envisioned on a grand scale. Presumably they encompass larger geographic areas. But this is not necessarily universal. One could imagine an urban design competition for a small one-block street mall versus a building competition for a large rural office complex. The critical difference is not size but content. Urban design competitions focus on relationships among diverse architectural and non-architectural elements. Building competitions focus more on single purpose architectural products.

Urban design competitions may also dif-
fer from building competitions in the way they are initiated and sponsored. The former are often undertaken by a coalition of organizations. In Milwaukee, for example, both the City and County governments as well as other public and private organizations sponsored the competition. Conversely, in a typical building competition one public or private organization such as a government agency or a major corporation, is the chief sponsor and beneficiary of a competition.

Finally, there are differences in the use of the results of urban design and building competitions. In a building competition the feasibility of implementing a winning solution may be easy to determine. In urban design competitions, the use of the winning solutions — in fact, the use of any solution — is more ambiguous. Part of one solution may be feasible for one part of the problem, while another solution may contain elements which are superior in other areas.

Obviously winning solutions are selected, in part, because of the artistry with which all the individual elements have been juxtaposed. Nevertheless, when competitions, like Milwaukee's, cover large areas with diverse land uses, there is a real option of joining elements of one solution with those of another. The mixture of different designs is more problematic in building competitions. Building designs, unlike urban plans, usually contain more tightly connected and fitted pieces which are harder to treat as independent choices.

THE COST OF A COMPETITION

While there are costs to entrants in a competition, there are also costs to staging a competition. The size of the cash awards and the size of the jury influence cost. Other cost factors include salaries and overhead for the professional advisor and staff, advertising, announcements and any final competition report. Yet the cost of a competition is not necessarily higher than that of conventional contracts for professional services.

Income can be derived not only from public sector operating budgets, but also from private sector gifts, foundation grants and competition registration fees. The latter can be set high enough to discourage frivolous entries but should not be relied upon to generate substantial income.

THE PROGRAM

At the beginning of an urban design competition there must be a well-defined program. The program should state the intent of the competition, its rules and regulations as well as background information. It should state the policies and ideas to be embodied in the solutions. The program must be a carefully drafted, professional document which is reviewed by the organization running the competition. At the time of judging no solution should be ruled out if it fits the program parameters. Neither should a solution be selected as a winner if it violates the program. The program should be written to narrow policy options but not to predetermine the outcome of the competition.

An important program issue is the cost or economic feasibility of a solution. Building competitions sometimes require cost estimates or have cost limitations. It is possible to do this in an urban design competition only when the program is quite specific and quantities, such as square feet of new construction, are known.

It is usually not feasible to require a complete cost analysis as part of an entrant's submission. A requirement that cost estimates be included in the competition submissions also places an added burden
on the administration of the competition. Such cost estimates must be checked by an independent professional so that entries which are over budget or which are unrealistically low are eliminated prior to judging. Costs must also be compared to social and economic benefits. Moreover, requiring cost estimates implies a higher level of expertise and more work on the part of the entrants.

On the other hand, absence of financial data or cost constraints may encourage competition results which are widely divergent. Ultimately the degree to which cost constraints and estimates are required in the submission depends on the objectives of the competition.

THE JURY

Selection of the jury is another critical part of the competition process. The nature of the urban design problem should determine the composition of the jury. Jurors might be chosen from several disciplines and professions, such as planning, architecture, fine arts, landscape architecture, social sciences, finance, engineering and real estate development.

The extent of the jurors' fame or notoriety must also be addressed. "Big names" generate interest in a competition and bestow a certain degree of legitimacy. They can also scare away some potential entrants or encourage the competitors to slant their submissions toward the known likes and dislikes of the jurors. The jury should be kept to a workable number, probably three to seven, for a traditional deliberative jury. A typical jury comprised of outside experts may or may not have local participation.

Traditionally, the jury has the opportunity to review and discuss the submissions in order to reach a consensus on the winners. The degree to which the outside jurors are briefed, in addition to the material contained in the program, depends on the complexity of the problem and the cost of running a competition. Typically a briefing consists of meetings with local decision-makers, the professional advisor, and the committee sponsoring the competition. After the judging the jury should prepare a written report in order to share their insights with the community and make suggestions based on their expertise. The jury should also meet with the local press.

The issue of a public or open jury versus a closed jury must also be addressed. For some public competitions "sunshine" laws are applicable. Open juries may also be useful in stimulating local community interest. Prior to their selection, jurors should be told whether an open jury is being considered, so that they understand the scope and nature of their involvement.

THE MEDIA

Public relations and press relations are also important throughout the competition process. A competition must be publicized so that interest is created among possible entrants and the public. When a competition is first announced a press kit might be prepared showing how other competitions have worked. When the competition winners are announced another press kit should describe the winning entries, relevant insights from the jury, information on costs and benefits, and suggestions for the next steps in the planning process. Also, when winning entries are announced they can be displayed in public buildings, office lobbies, indoor malls and other locations.

THE PRIZES

Competitions often have first, second and third place prizes, as well as honorable mentions. This type of award system may be appropriate for a building
competition, but it may be misleading in an urban design problem. For example, in the Milwaukee Lakefront Competition no single entry presented the best solution for all of the different geographic areas and all aspects of the problem. Yet public attention focussed primarily on the first place winner. Perhaps a more useful debate would have focussed on the commonalities and differences among the six winning entries, or on the way portions of several solutions could be recombined into one economically and politically acceptable solution.

The public's attention can be focussed on several solutions, rather than one, by giving several prizes of equal value rather than designating one winner. Another approach might be to single out components of the problem for special awards (although problem components should not necessarily be singled out in advance).

Two-stage competitions provide another option. In a two-stage competition, there are minimal submission requirements for stage one. This reduces the cost of entering the competition. The jury then selects a small number of first stage entrants as competitors in the second stage. All of the entrants in the second stage are now guaranteed a cash award since they won the first stage. These entrants can then invest more time in the second and final stage which often has still another prize or reward.

Regardless of the awards, the jury comments and any contracts for the winners, the competition sponsor still should undertake a complete evaluation of all the entries. Providing such an evaluation is a primary purpose of this study. This type of evaluation should be funded as part of the competition's administrative expenses and should begin as soon as the entries are submitted. Evaluation of alternatives should be part of any planning process, and detailed evaluation of competition submissions is complementary to the jury process. They are not substitutes for each other.

THE NEXT STEP

The awarding of prizes should not be the end of a competition. There is still the issue of implementation or at least the first steps towards implementation. Privately sponsored competitions often end with a contract for design services. However, public bodies are usually prohibited from awarding contracts in this manner. The competition program should clearly state any possibilities for subsequent service contracts. In a publicly sponsored competition a contract could, for example, be guaranteed by the private sector, through a chamber of commerce or a foundation. This would give winning entrants greater remuneration and would provide the critical assurance that further work would occur on the project.

When there are no contracts for further work, the competition sponsors have responsibilities regarding the authorship of ideas. That is, both the public as well as the design and planning professions have an obligation to see that the work of one individual or firm is not unfairly used by others. Although this is important, it is difficult to assign sole proprietorship to design ideas contributed by the entrants.