

The Economic Downturn: How to Benefit from It

Most architects in the generation that graduated from an architecture program just a decade ago, have been comfortably enjoying the advantages of a prolonged building boom. They can't remember the early 90s, when firms were trying to stay afloat by even turning to the design of parking lots instead of homes or schools. Commercial architecture was at a standstill in this country — as well as Europe — and governments were pulling back. Beginning to sound familiar?

Firms turned to all kinds of survival mechanisms at the time. Roche Dinkeloo, for instance, went to a four-day week to avoid lay-offs. For firms such as SOM, it was a case of radical downsizing — before that economic downturn, SOM's Chicago

Participating in an open competition is about research and building a portfolio.

office alone had a staff of almost 1,200. That number decreased rapidly to the point where the work force now numbers under 400.

Asia began to appear as an emerging market in the early 90s. California offices of large firms had a slight advantage here. Still, they were facing tough competition from many European firms, where market conditions were at least as bad, if not worse than in the U.S. Rumor had it that some German firms were supplying the Chinese with plans for new cities for as little as \$30,000!

Already projects are being placed on hold, and firms are beginning to become more interested in competitions as a source of new work. Even if entering a competition does not result in a commission, there are other reasons to participate. In our interview with Matthias Sauerbruch of Sauerbruch Hutton in this issue (page 44), he states—as many before him have—that the main reason they would enter an open competition would be “to use it as a research tool.” Participating in competitions during a slump in the economy can be a building block for the future. Yes, one does have to beat the bushes to pay the bills during hard times; but using extra time efficiently can beef up the resume, enhancing a firm's chances when a rebound occurs. ☒



Photo © KC Ramsay

North Carolina AIA Headquarters

Competition Jury (clockwise from left, seated)

Allison Ewing, AIA
Daniel Bennett, FAIA
David Lee, FAIA
Susan Maxman, FAIA
(standing)
Stanley Collyer, Hon.,
AIA (Observer)
Bill McMinn, FAIA
(Professional Adviser)
David Crawford
(AIANC Director)

The Case for Professional Juries

Having participated on and observed a number of competition juries over the years, it is always a treat to see one consisting of professional architects which functions well. In this country, there is always the urge to include a lot of laypersons on juries, especially if the project is a highly political one. After the Vietnam Memorial competition in 1981, where the jury was made up exclusively of professionals, memorial committees exhibited an unfortunate tendency to include more non-design professionals on their juries. In the post-Vietnam Memorial era, we increasingly find military officers as voting members of juries. Added to this was the trend toward issuing RfOs and shortlisting high-profile firms.

When the jury for the Vietnam Memorial was being put together, Jan Scruggs, the main force behind the idea for a war memorial who headed the Veterans Committee, was asked if he wished to serve on the jury. His response should be posted in the office of every mayor and politician whose municipality has a competition in mind. He stated that he would reclude himself from serving, for he felt that other members of the jury might defer to him too much in arriving at a decision. If only our politicians would show as much humility in this situation that this soldier did. We are all aware of the extraordinary results of that competition, thanks mainly to the exceptional jury which made the selection.

Before the World War II Memorial competition took place, members of the military visited the AIA to ask for more information about design competitions. One must ask why this was the case, when the Vietnam Memorial process was

validated by such an excellent design—and universally embraced by the country. At the time the winning competition entry by Maya Lin was selected, it raised a lot of controversy. Funding sources such as Ross Perot, as well as some military officers, endeavored to sidetrack the jury selection, lobbying Congress, the Department of the Interior, and even digging into the background of jury members to unearth an unpatriotic moment. To the benefit of all, their exhortations fell on deaf ears, although it may have resulted in some subsequent unnecessary additions.

So every time we see an announcement of a competition here at the magazine, one of the first items we go to is the jury. When we see that it is overloaded with laypersons, it can send up a red flag. In the case of some competitions — the Jacksonville Public Library competition is a case in point — professionals are retained solely in an advisory capacity, with no voting rights. In that case, based on the statements made by the attending architects, the decision would have been entirely different had their vote counted in the final selection.

Laypersons are a valuable asset in the competition process: their input as to functionality can be a determining factor. In Europe, where this is almost universally recognized, such persons become part of a non-voting 'Technical Jury,' which remains in the background, but can answer questions posed by the professionals.

When the AIA as an institution can organize a competition, such as was recently the case in Raleigh, one may anticipate that good design will prevail. That was exactly what happened in North Carolina. ☒ -Ed.