THE DESIGN COMPETITION AS PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT METHOD

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There is something very open, civic-minded and public spirited about a design competition. It catches the fancy of lay citizens, draws the attention of the news and engages the interests of potential donors and philanthropists, and stimulates young designers to devote their creative talents to developing innovative ideas.

How do you solve a problem like the strip mall? A typical response to such a question would be to investigate the economic, social and historical factors that have contributed to this building type being widely recognized as outdated, outmoded and failing. While this would certainly be worthwhile research—and indeed, this research frames our engagement with strip malls—we realize that perhaps users rather than academics or even designers are better placed to answer this question.

Usually a single-storey, steel-framed building, from the 1930s the strip mall married street-front commercial construction with the aspirations to convenient automobile access. Built on greenfield locations as part of suburban, zoned development, strip malls have been located on collector routes at the entrances to subdivisions and housing developments. Strip malls range from two or three stores to a multi-unit row of a dozen or more stores, generally fronted by off-street parking spaces. In some cases, there are larger chain-stores anchoring one end of the “strip.” The idea took off in the 1950s as a smaller version of the suburban mall, where a set of shops linked two anchoring stores, such as a department store and a large food store. As a business model, however, strip malls have suffered because they were unable to grow: chain stores tend to follow a logic of developing a clientele, then integrating multiple stores into a single larger site at a more prominent location in the urban transportation network. Combined with covenants imposed on owners by these powerful chains to restrict the subsequent re-use of locations by would-be competitors, many strip malls have seen much of their most valuable shop spaces stand vacant. This leads to a cycle of construction, use, abandonment and redevelopment that can stretch over 40 to 50 years but in which only the first periods are directly profitable to owners and desirable to communities. By the 1980s, many strip malls either stood abandoned or had many empty shops, a trend that continued to grow through the 2000s. The larger the strip mall, generally, the worse the situation. What to do with the strip mall?

One of our mandates at the City-Region Studies Centre is to develop new forms of “public research” that position academia in new relations to diverse publics and professional communities. Our public research model is applied in both theoretical reflection and in the development of new models of participatory, community-based research and collective problem recognition. To address the problems associated with strip mall retail, the design competition presented itself as a new model for engaging practitioners and interested publics with the question of how strip malls could be re-imagined to reflect the needs of 21st century suburban communities. This competition was developed as a way to launch research partially funded from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

Architecture and design competitions have been subject to very little critical interest. Design historian Hélène Lipstadt states that we need to understand how design competitions work and who they benefit, and thus to be able to implement best practices. This essay aims to address some of these concerns. By examining Strip Appeal, this essay demonstrates how the design competition can be mobilized as part of a public engagement and public research method.
The Competition Defined

According to Lipstadt, “design competitions always involve the development of a design to the point where it realistically prefigures a realizable building.” There are two main types of competition: the building competition, which focuses on single-purpose architectural objects, and the urban design competition, which focuses on the relationships among architectural and non-architectural elements. There are also “two main categories of competition, the open competition and the invited competition; two main competition populations, national and international, and two main competition objectives, conception on its own, called an ideas competition, and conception leading to construction, which is a competition tout court.”

The core belief in the value of competitions is “the correlation of competitions with innovation and the opportunity for the discovery of new talent,” according to Lipstadt. However, many arguments are put forward regarding both the advantages and disadvantages of competitions. Competitions are perceived to be advantageous due to their “democratic” nature. Intended as anonymous, they are said to offer entrants an equal chance to “win” the commission. This was important historically for the discipline of architecture, as competitions “release[d] [designers] from their dependence on personal patronage.” Moreover, for designers, aside from the rare, but possible, opportunity to win, competitions can also be a means of gaining public attention and attracting future clients. Competitions also present designers with the opportunity to supplement their portfolios, helping them to build up a body of work beyond the limitations of commercial practice. More broadly, competitions have been recognized as important for driving the disciplines of architecture and design forward, by “acting as a kind of engine of innovation within the architectural field.”

Considered laboratories for new ideas, design competitions also help to foster the design of hitherto unprecedented building types and urban design challenges. Lipstadt therefore argues that the importance of competitions that produce designs on paper in shaping our impressions and experience of the built environment should not be overlooked. Conversely, competitions demand a great deal of time, energy and investment from entrants and can also be costly in a monetary sense through entrance fees. This said, the prestige and publicity associated with competitions continues to attract designers because they offer “the opportunity of creation unfettered by client control.” With these factors in mind, Lipstadt recommends that design competitions need to be more thoughtfully designed in order to better serve the interests of the competitors:

These can be called “intelligent design competitions.”

... I propose that the well conceived and implemented competition is one that recognizes the inherent intelligence of the design process itself, and makes the competition an affirmation of such intelligence.

The “intelligent design” of competitions would ensure that every competitor is given the opportunity “to move to the next personal level of design skill, so that the very act of entering the competition is a form of winning.” And the way to ensure this, according to Lipstadt, is for the organizers to underline the ways in which the local particulars of the project are framed and respond to larger challenges in current architectural debate. In this way, the intelligent design competition would have the additional obligation of making clear how architecture and design serve the public realm.

Designing an Intelligent Design Competition

Adding to Lipstadt’s proposal, we argue that the strategic use of the competition as a method of public engagement could expand on the intelligent design competition. This takes
seriously the role of designers as “cultural producers” by
acknowledging and harnessing the fact that in submitting
their ideas to a competition, they can play “a key participa-
tory role in the definition of social values, in the context of
a public sphere of debate.”xv At the same time, the role
of audiences and the public is taken seriously as active
participants in wider debates – not only about the merits
of individual entries but about architectural and civic values.

The City-Region Studies Centre (CRSC) initiated our form
of intelligent design competition to “reinvent the strip
mall,” recognizing not only the potential of the competi-
tion to produce innovative solutions and design visions for
the rejuvenation of strip mall retail, but also that a design
competition can be an “indispensable medium for commu-
nicating such visions with the wider public.”xvi By mobiliz-
ing the competition as a public engagement method, we
hoped, more broadly, to foster conversations about and to
develop an awareness of the potential of design and design
professions to shape the future of strip mall retail and
suburbia and the environment.

We wanted to thoughtfully design our competition as a
type of “invisible college” to maximize the benefits for
entrants and to facilitate public engagement and aware-
ness. The term “invisible college” was first referenced in
the 17th century by the natural philosopher Robert Boyle
and referred to an informal group of intellectuals dedicated
to furthering knowledge through experimental investiga-
tion (what would later become the formalized Royal Society
of London). Today the term is used to refer to an infomal
communication network of scholars.xvii For example, John
Friedmann has described the multidisciplinary set of authors
researching and mobilizing the concept of the “global city”
as the “invisible college of world city researchers.”xviii

Drawing on the invisible college tradition, we saw the
potential for the design competition to create not only an
informal network of practitioners and scholars dedicated to
the development of suburban retail design through experi-
mental investigation, but also to create a network through
which these investigations could be communicated to wider
publics. The first decision taken in this regard was to make
the competition an ideas design competition, as the onus
was on experimental investigation rather than the realiza-
tion of designs. Moreover, the realization of designs was
outside the realms of our remit as a research centre. We
were therefore more concerned with “charting various
possibilities”and “points of departure” than finding a single
best solution.xix

While there would be only “paper architecture” outcomes
in an ideas design competition, we hoped there would be
less tangible “strategic” and social effects. An open, anonym-
ous ideas competition not only catalyzes the generation
of truly original solutions to design problems, but can
also demonstrate the feasibility of asking diverse publics
to think differently about a site or design issue. This was
successfully demonstrated in the case of the High Line,
an abandoned elevated railroad track in Manhattan that
was due to be demolished before the intervention of
Friends of the High Line’s (FHL) design competition.xx

The Friends of the High Line (FHL), a non-profit organiza-
tion established in 1999, sponsored a design competition –
Designing the High Line – to promote the potential of
the High Line structure as public space. 720 submissions
were received from professionals and the general public,
and their display in Grand Central Terminal’s Vanderbilt
Hall further generated a massive amount of support for
the preservation of the High Line. According to Lynne
Sagalyn, the resulting public support “marked a stunning
political turnaround, a David-versus-Goliath triumph for
a grass-roots effort dedicated to preserving the 22-block
long elevated rail structure as an industrial icon and turning
it into a public greenway akin to the Promenade Plantée
in Paris.”xix

Lipstadt argues the High Line underlines the feasibility
of “organizing a competition leading to construction.”xxi
However, the initial idea for hosting a design competition was, according to the organizers, to catalyze the development of truly original designs – designs that were not necessarily realistic or practical but that would provoke public debate about what was best for the High Line. Competition submissions are design statements that contribute to a public conversation over urban space and its use. In this sense, Designing the High Line could be understood as an intelligent design competition, as it enabled practitioners and publics to re-imagine the possibilities for a hitherto overlooked design problem. In our case, this happened to be small suburban strip malls in general. The next step in designing our competition was to follow the FHL’s example and make it open to all to encourage diverse re-imaginings of such sites.

Another important decision we made was not choosing a single strip mall site for designs to respond to. Instead, we asked entrants to choose a strip mall that was local to them. In this way, we acknowledged the fact that almost everyone in North America knows of a strip mall in need of intervention/reinvention, and thus hoped to make entering the competition more approachable for non-professionals. It also allowed international submissions based on building typologies that shared the same problems and forms as strip malls. For us, this tactic also doubled as a method for surveying where strip malls are most problematic. By asking entrants to identify and outline the failings of their chosen strip mall, we could survey common factors between submissions.

We did have some requirements for entrants to meet when choosing their strip malls. Our research focus was small-scale suburban strip malls – those usually attached to a community. We thus requested that selected sites be considered a “small box” retail centre, that is, a strip mall or mini-mall of roughly 5-8 stores. We also asked that the strip malls be located in mature suburban neighbourhoods, as the reorientation of the strip to community use was a central concern of the competition. However, we would accept strip mall sites from inner-ring suburbs (which may no longer be considered “suburban”) and outer-ring suburbs, recognizing that there is often a difficulty delineating where the suburbs begin and end when addressing the problem of sprawl.

By asking entrants to consider the situatedness of their strip mall sites, we wanted their redesigns to consider the relationship between architectural and non-architectural elements of the site and to respond to the needs of the surrounding community and built environment. In this way, the competition and the entrants’ contributions connect to wider debates about how the suburbs can be redesigned into more urban, sustainable places. It was our contention that the strip mall could play a vital part in the re-urbanization of post-war suburbs of the last century, becoming as important to these communities as the old warehouse and market districts have become for the inner city. The suburban strip mall also presented itself as the perfect case study for examining and experimenting with approaches that have been proposed as ways of tackling the problems associated with suburban sprawl, such as retrofitting, infill and re-use. By redeveloping the strip mall to local neighbourhood advantage, the strip mall holds the potential to promote walkability, sustainability and community as suburban experience – as a viable, equitable, accessible and commodious environment.

We also believed that it was not only design professionals who were well placed to respond to our brief, as they were not necessarily the people living in these areas. To maximize the openness of the competition to non-professionals, we made it free to enter and stipulated that responses and design ideas could be expressed using any medium, from architectural and graphic design to photography and video, or even a sketch or a doodle. In this way, the emphasis of the judging would be on the idea rather than simply on the visual appeal of the renderings. Entries were judged (in descending order) on:
Competitions remain poorly understood by potential sponsors. Our lack of outside sponsorship coupled with our decision to make the competition free to enter meant that we could only offer modest monetary prizes for our winners. We aimed to make the competition appealing to design students and lay practitioners – who would not necessarily be put off by the small monetary reward – by making the main “prize” of the competition the opportunity to showcase their designs in a travelling exhibit and bookwork. Here it was hoped that the “event” of the competition, as well as the brief, would be a compelling enough reason to enter.

**Design Competition as Event**

Deyan Sudjic argues that the design competition can be a way to create a sense of an event around the building/site/issue in question. This has been successfully realized in a recent spate of online competitions addressing design problems associated with suburban development, such as Reburbia, How to Build a Better Burb, Flip-a-Strip and Reincarnated McMansion. With the help of powerful multimedia campaigns, competitions like these have transformed suburban planning and design issues "from boring to sexy in the public mind." Some architectural purists, however, argue that the increasingly speculative nature of competitions undermines the work produced, as the competition is transformed into “a purely event-based situation,” rather than a vehicle through which theory shapes practice within architectural and design cultures.

It is important not to overlook the value of competitions as “event-based situations” for broadening participation in shaping environments. For example, the design competition showcase acknowledges the role of designers as cultural producers and communicators. Through the exhibition of their work, designers are able to communicate their design ideas with the communities they are attempting to create and contribute to. If done well, designers can play an important role in enabling the general public to re-imagine the possibilities for a site or design issue. In turn, this can help to generate public support behind a winning project. The display of over 100 submissions from the Designing the High Line international ideas competition in Grand Central Terminal’s Vanderbilt Hall was a huge factor in enabling the public to re-imagine the High Line as a public space and thus get behind the campaign, for example.

Moreover, the online showcase of the Reburbia shortlist, where visitors could comment and vote on each submission, is a great example of how a design competition can turn into a debate. According to Magali Larson, the discursive nature of competitions “can authorize new players to speak about and for architecture [and design].” While he referred strictly to the entrants of architectural competitions, in our opinion, the public showcasing of designs also enables new “voices’ to enter fields of discourse” that were once limited to narrow disciplinary confines, and for conversations to happen between the designers (through their designs) and the public. This was certainly the case on the Reburbia website, as each of the design submissions sparked numerous conversations, which although initially centred on the design itself, often broadened into wider discussions of suburban design and development. In this way, the designs themselves appeared to stimulate their own activity, opening up conversations about, and understandings of, their transformative potential.

As the cases of Reburbia and Designing the High Line demonstrate, the circulation and reception of design ideas through exhibitions underlines the import of the competition as a method of public engagement. This in turn underscored
City of Edmonton map illustrating over 200 strip malls identified as "candidates for intervention" by Ziola NewStudio (Park Aid Submission).
Map copyright Ziola NewStudio
to us the importance of “performing the event” when it came to organizing our design competition. After deciding on the competition brief, we needed to come up with a name that would grab attention. Strip Appeal was chosen as a play on the saying “curb appeal” and because the competition was an appeal for creative re-imaginings of strip malls. We also hoped that the name’s risqué connotations would help generate media and press attention around a planning issue and building type that is generally regarded as uninteresting and decidedly unsexy. We turned to online design competition forums like Death by Architecture, as well as student design societies and more general interest design forums like Inhabit.com, to promote the competition and to encourage submissions from diverse parties. Recognizing that the design identity of the competition itself would need to catch the eye of design professionals and aficionados, we employed a designer to create a logo and design identity for our website – www.strip-appeal.com – where the competition brief was available to download.

The 20 shortlisted designs were showcased on our website and in poster and digital form at the Faculty of Extension’s Enterprise Square Atrium Gallery. This downtown campus is actually housed in a retrofitted department store, which added a layer of retail history and site-specificity to the display in the central gallery space. The density and vibrancy of Edmonton’s downtown core itself has suffered greatly due to the dissipation of investment into suburban sprawl and the retail drains of mega-mall West Edmonton Mall. One of the shortlisted submissions identified and mapped over 200 strip malls within the city that they considered “candidates for intervention.” Given that many of these strip malls back on to neighbourhood communities, their reorientation to community use could play a vital role in making these communities more walkable and sustainable.

The display of the shortlisted submissions within this context was, in its own way, an intervention. At the time of the exhibition, Edmonton had neither a planning nor architecture school, meaning that there were few opportunities for Edmontonians to come into contact with, never mind have a critical engagement with, design ideas and innovation. Although a great deal of interest in city planning and design exists amongst residents on the blogosphere, there are few other forums through which to enter into a public dialogue about design and planning issues. This is something the CRSC mandate aims to address through our Regional Planners Speakers Series and by sponsoring local urban design groups to evaluate and rejuvenate Edmonton’s public spaces. The public display of the Strip Appeal shortlist in Edmonton was therefore intended to contribute to the CRSC’s commitment to creating a forum
for public issues of both local and national importance and to generate ideas that better the quality of civic life.

To our opening reception of the exhibit we invited not only press but community leagues, retail developers and architectural and design associations from across the city so as to stimulate conversations about the submissions and the wider questions they provoke about the way we live in, plan and build our suburban neighbourhoods. The event, combined with the online display of our shortlist, generated a great deal of press attention locally, nationally and internationally. With articles entitled “Rooftop Soccer, Outdoor Movies: the New Strip Mall?”, “Strip Malls Like You’ve Never Seen Before” and “Canada Rethinks Suburban Strip Mall Strategy” appearing in national dailies such as The Toronto Globe and Mail, The New York Times and The China Post and in online and magazine publications such as The Huffington Post and The Atlantic, the “discursive event” of our competition reached far beyond the local setting of Edmonton. The circulation of the competition’s ideas and ideals in print and online form (thanks to enabling comments) spawned diverse conversations about, and awareness of, the potential of the submissions for re-imagining the use and importance of strip malls, locally and worldwide.

The widespread circulation, reception and critique of the design ideas were, in part, thanks to the entrants choosing local strip malls to redesign. With selected sites as far away as the Netherlands, Brazil, Hong Kong, China and Australia, it was clear the problem of the strip mall was not a purely North American phenomenon or public interest story. In this way, following Larson’s observations, the competition helped to authorize new players to speak about, both for and against, strip mall redesign in the form of the entrants, news media and geographically diverse publics. This, again, underlines the cultural role of the designers and the design competition as a method of public engagement. To further encourage public participation, we added, along with the jury vote winner and runner-up, a public vote winner. The public were able to vote for their favourite submission either online, in person or in the gallery space via a QR code that could be scanned for each submission. Overall, there were thousands of public votes, underlining to us that the public had not only engaged with but invested in the designs they had voted for. By staging a reception and press announcement for the jury winners and the public vote winner, we initiated another round of press coverage, and in turn, communicated and stimulated conversations around the outcomes of the competition.

Redesigning the Strip Mall: Redesigning the Design Competition

... to design is always to redesign. xxxii

Strip-Appeal could certainly be understood in Larson’s terms as a “discursive event.” Yet what became clear to us in initiating and curating the competition is that design appears to stimulate its own subsequent engagement and activity, which is not just discursive but also imaginative and material. As Sagalyn argues, even in the absence of a built outcome, the design competition initiates “a jolt of intense, coordinated, creative thinking about challenging urban sites,” which can “stretch the concept of urban living in ways that public agencies may never achieve otherwise.” xxxiii

Our challenging design problem was the strip mall, and the ideas design competition suggested itself as a method for engaging design practitioners and diverse publics to re-imagine the potential of this retail typology. Thus, in redesigning the strip mall, we were also attempting to redesign the design competition as a public engagement method. By developing and engaging public research methodologies, such as the intelligent design competition, we hope to challenge the dominant narrative of research output and both drive and participate in social action and social change.
The outcomes of Strip Appeal might be to shed light on “bricks and mortar;” however, the competition has produced many less tangible “strategic” and social effects. For competitors, it offered the opportunity for experimenting with ideas, and in doing so, design skill advancement. By initiating “coordinated creative thinking” and design experimentation around the problem of the strip mall in the context of suburban development, we also opened up conversations about, and developed an awareness of, the potential of strip malls to make suburban neighbourhoods more walkable, sustainable and community-oriented. This is evidenced in the production of the redesigns themselves as well as in the discursive event that accompanied the exhibition and circulation of Strip Appeal design ideas online, in the news media and in the gallery space.

Lipstadt argues a well-executed design competition also holds the potential to elevate the level of public expectation regarding design and its importance for communities and the environment. By exhibiting the designs locally in Edmonton, a decidedly suburban city, and in other cities, we hope to have contributed to public debate not only about the potential of the strip malls in the city, but how their redesign could play an important role in the densification and urbanization of Edmonton’s suburbs. By circulating the design more widely in the form of this catalogue and a planned Strip Appeal exhibit tour, we expect the designs to continue stimulating their own activity in these new contexts.

In the case of Strip Appeal then, designing itself can be considered the most tangible outcome. This should be understood as a positive, according to Bruno Latour, who argues that we need to work with an “expanded concept of design,” which recognizes that design itself is a material outcome. By this, he means that through the very process of design, certain “matters of concern” emerge that can be considered as much a material outcome as traditionally conceived design products like a building or a chair. Given that, for Latour, there is “always something remedial in design,” it follows that there is hence nothing foundational or terminal in design. Consequently, we should understand design as process in which “matters of fact are turned into matters of concern.” In this sense, design is not simply a medium that brings about “construction” or “building,” but rather, should be conceptualized as a “theory of action.” The social sciences are themselves part of the design profession. Social research has long incorporated elements of a design ethos and intentionality – to solve social problems by improving social spaces, exposing barriers to access and designing institutions as better vehicles for social, political and economic interaction.

In our case, not only can design, in a general sense – and thus the design competition – be understood as a theory of action, but the shortlist, as presented in this catalogue and tour, provides many innovative and implementable “theories of action” for the reorientation of strip malls to community futures.

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Ibid, p. 10.


Ibid, p. 11.

Ibid, p. 22.

Ibid.


Sagalyn, “The Political Fabric,” p. 44.


Ibid.

See, for example, Tristin Hopper, “Canada’s Strip Malls Cramble Towards Extinction,” National Post, November 13th 2011.

See Park Aid.


Sagalyn, “The Political Fabric,” p. 34.


Strip Appeal has been curated by the CRSC as a highly flexible travelling exhibit, with planning and design departments and small and emerging galleries and venues in mind. The exhibit has been designed so that it can be adapted to a wide-variety of venues and spaces and so that it can be on display in multiple venues at once. Strip Appeal will be on display from December 2012 in planning and design departments in Buffalo, Toronto, Vancouver and elsewhere.

Ibid, p. 2.

Ibid, p. 3.
