HOW TO WIN WORK
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Design competitions have created some wonderful buildings and places. The Houses of Parliament, Sydney Opera House, Canberra’s masterplan and Amsterdam’s Borneo-Sporenberg are all the results of well-run competitions. This is not to say that all competitions are well planned and many agencies lack the core skills to set up competitions properly. Before entering a competition it’s essential that architects can identify it has a strong vision translated into a clear set of requirements and with a real outcome. One should expect to see a detailed analysis of the site, its potential and constraints, as well as an understanding of the wider social, economic and spatial context. An appropriate timescale to respond demonstrates the desire to get the best quality submissions, and a strong, informed jury is vital.

When Renzo Piano and I won the competition for the Pompidou Centre we were in our thirties and had never built anything more than single-storey buildings. There were 681 entries and if we had known that so many people were going to enter we never would have taken part. We were also wary that this competition was a single stage with a disturbing caveat that stated: “The decision of the jury does not imply an inherent right to executing the design.”

Peter Rice, engineer on the Pompidou and a dear friend, once said: “A good reason for entering competitions is not to win them but to explore relationships and design. Of course one can hope to win but, particularly when it is an open competition, to set out to win is, in a sense, self-defeating because it will induce a conservative and tentative approach.” The design for Pompidou certainly wasn’t either of those things, and we won the competition because an excellent jury, headed by Jean Prouvé, recognised that our project presented a unique opportunity to democratise the experience of art and give a piece of Paris back to its inhabitants.

Our winning entry for Lloyd’s of London was the product of an innovative approach to a particular brief. The competition for the new headquarters was won on the basis not of an architectural proposal but of a convincing strategy for the future of this key City institution. The client told us we were the only ones that didn’t submit an actual design, as the brief only asked us to look at the client’s problems and present how we might go about solving them. We got the job because we understood those issues better than the others.

There is no foolproof way to win competitions, no one approach works for all the different conditions, briefs or interviewers. Sadly, shortlisting is often more about ticking boxes rather than design quality, with turnover often counting for more than talent. Many competitions are seen as ways of getting ideas from architects for the minimum cost. You must consider carefully which competitions are right for you, but don’t compromise on your designs and vision.

Richard Rogers
The best buildings are generally designed by the best architects — however you choose to define “best” — but it is not always true that the best architects are appointed to the projects. Winning work is not only about being good at design — and sometimes that hardly figures at all. In today’s competitive market any practice that wants to succeed has to have a well thought out strategy for winning work and — if it is to remain solvent — a way to avoid losing too often.

Entering any competitive situation is expensive in terms of money and also of time. Entering competition A means not entering competition B, or not doing as good a job as one could on project C. This white paper sets out to help practices take a strategic approach to winning work. It starts by explaining the competitive landscape and the changes that are likely to come. Then it offers advice on deciding the direction that the practice should take, on how to network and become known, and on how to decide which competitions and competitive situations to enter.

Once a practitioner decides to go ahead, they need to know how to fill in the paperwork to maximise their chances of success, and how to behave at interview. Even with all this assistance, no practitioner can expect a hit rate of 100%. But do not despair: this white paper also looks at ways to turn a loss — or more especially a near miss — today, into a win tomorrow. Finally, in recognition of the opportunities that our increasingly international professional world offers, we look at what is needed to win work both in Europe and further afield.

To produce this white paper we have talked to many architects in practices of a range of sizes. Much of the direction for the work was set by an advisory panel comprising Simon Erridge, director at Bennetts Associates, Joe Morris, co-founder of Duggan Morris, and Greg Penoyre of Penoyre & Prasad. We are also grateful to Malcolm Reading, who has run many competitions on behalf of clients, for his help.

We also surveyed BD readers about the number of Ojeu notices they respond to, the costs of bidding and their attitudes to working abroad. The response was fantastic and the results are included in the white paper.

Case studies of practices and of competitions have been written by the team at Building Design, and the main sections have been researched and written by architectural writer Ruth Slavid. Amanda Baillieu, editor in chief of BD, has edited the white paper to ensure it is as valuable and focused to the needs of practices as possible.

Too many architects feel that they never get the chance to display their talents, because they do not win the work that would enable them to do so. This white paper should help to redress the balance by offering practical and focused advice on winning work — the most vital element in any practice’s success.
THE COMPETITIVE LANDSCAPE
1.1 BUILDING AWARENESS WITH CLIENTS

All architectural work has to be won. The old-school approach where architects met clients on the golf course and were given work that way has long disappeared.

Some work does still come through personal relationships and recommendations, of course, particularly at the smaller end of the scale. And that work is often the best kind. Unless the work is repeat business (the very best there is) then the architect winning it will have had to make themselves known to the client, at least by reputation and probably personally.

Building that awareness with potential clients is crucial, both for competitive and non-competitive work, and relationships have of course to be maintained to make repeat business possible. We deal with relationship building in the second section of this white paper, "How to get upstream".

But in order to be appointed for much of the substantial work that is available, it is necessary to make some form of competitive submission. It is mandatory for publicly funded work, and many private developers like to follow a competitive route.

Architects therefore need to understand the different types of competitive routes that exist, the opportunities that they offer and how demanding and difficult they can be, in order to make an informed decision.

The current situation is far from perfect. While there is no point in just wishing it could change, there are some changes on the way, which should make life easier — especially for smaller practices wanting to bid for work.

1.2 EU PROCUREMENT AND THE OJEU

EC procurement thresholds require that all services with a value of more than €130,000 be advertised competitively in the Official Journal of the European Union (OJEU). Architects tend to think of this as relating only to architecture and construction, but it applies to all forms of procurement and it is the peculiar nature of construction work that leads to anomalies.

The purpose of competitive advertising is to create equality of opportunity across the EU. The requirement to advertise in the OJEU does not therefore determine the forms that the competitions take. The Comparative Procurement Report produced for the RIBA by Burgess Salmon identifies the following approaches:

Open procedure: This is a one-stage process, which may be fast, but is more suited to the procurement of goods than of complex services. There will be no interaction with bidders and so there will be a tendency to judge on the basis of financial statements.

Restricted procedure: This allows authorities to thin down the initial number of applicants by the use of a pre-qualification questionnaire (PQQ), which is intended to weed out bidders on the basis of their abilities rather than their design submissions. Burgess Salmon writes: “As contracting authorities strictly cannot thin down
on the basis of design, the benefit of a two-stage procedure is limited to the situation where the contracting authority wishes to select an architect rather than a design.”

Competitive dialogue: This is intended for use on particularly complex projects and may, for example, be used where the design is carried out by a main contractor as part of a wider project for the design, build and delivery of a construction project. After the PQQ stage, selected bidders will be invited to a structured dialogue with the client, and then to submit their solutions, without further discussion.

Design contests: These are what are commonly known, outside the EU setting, as design competitions. The contracting authorities are allowed to create a different process for each design contest but, where design is the dominating factor, the rules require that entries be anonymous. This removes the possibility for dialogue between the client and the entering teams.

The forms of competition described above are all for single projects. Another approach used both within and outside Ojeu is the framework, a way of selecting teams that are then qualified to work on a number of projects. Having been selected, usually on the PQQ route, typically they will have to enter mini competitions for each individual project that comes up.

1.3 INDEPENDENTLY RUN COMPETITIONS

Like the framework, all the other methods of bidding are also used on work that is not publicly funded, and can take a number of different forms. A client can run a competition itself, or can ask somebody to run one on its behalf. One of the main organizations that does this is the RIBA. It has well-established procedures, and from 2000 to 2011 ran 224 competitions. Of those competitions, it says, 57% of the projects built have gone on to win awards.

The RIBA’s Guide for Clients identifies four types of competition:

Open-design competitions are normally anonymous in their first phase. Clients can choose their design at this point, or shortlist and go through a process of more detailed development with the shortlisted teams before making a choice.

In invited competitions the client either solicits expressions of interest or asks a particular group to apply. In either case it will draw up a shortlist, based on examples of previous work and on experience. The shortlisted teams will then be asked to draw up the design.

The RIBA suggests both these approaches where the client is looking for a design. If the client is looking to appoint a design team at an early stage, then the RIBA recommends a competitive interview. There will be an open expression of interest phase and then selected designers will be invited to interview and the winner will work on developing the design with the client.

The other kind of competition that the RIBA lists is the ideas competition, where there is no commitment to create a real building at the end. A developer may choose to do this to generate new thinking or to raise its profile.
There are of course alternatives to the RIBA, which some clients have come to see as too expensive. Malcolm Reading Consultants, for example, runs competitions focusing on arts and cultural buildings. It recommends that clients use a two-stage approach.

Independently run competitions should not be seen as the alternative to the OJEU process, since if there is public money involved they will have been designed to comply with OJEU rules.

Many see OJEU as onerous, so is it possible to avoid it? Statistics would suggest not. Barbour ABI calculates that the total value of work coming from OJEU announcements up until the start of November 2012 was £18.02 billion. This shows a sharply rising trend, since the figure for the whole of 2011 was £14.8 billion, and for 2010 £10.5 billion.

1.4 SIZE OF PRACTICE AND THE OJEU

Some small practices may shrug and think that this does not apply to them, but a recent survey of BD readers suggests otherwise. Out of more than 1,200 architects who responded to the survey, nearly 60% responded to at least one OJEU advertisement in an average year. Some 29% responded to six or less, 16% responded to seven to 12, and 13.4% kept themselves very busy responding to more than a dozen.

It is true that the larger the practices, the more OJEU they tended to respond to. Among practices employing 15 or more architects, a third responded to more than a dozen OJEU every year, and only 15.8% do none at all.

For practices with five to 15 architects, two-thirds respond to OJEU, although most of those (47.7% of the total) do less than six in a year. It is only among the very smallest practices that responding to OJEU is not the norm. Even then, more than 30% reckon to respond to at least one in an average year.

1.5 THE COST OF COMPETITIVE WORK

The survey also asked the practices how much it cost them to do competitive work in an average year. Among the respondents, 39.1% said that the cost was between £5,000 and £15,000, 14.2% said it was between £15,000 and £40,000, and 10.5% believed that the cost was more than £40,000.

Most shocking was that 36.2% – more than a third of all respondents – said that they did not know what they were spending. Given that people who respond to surveys tend to be more sure of their information than non-respondents (if you don’t know the answers you are less likely to fill in the questionnaire) the level of ignorance within the profession is likely to be even higher.

If a practice is to make informed decisions about what it should and should not do, then it needs the information on which to base those decisions.

This ignorance was fairly evenly spread among the practice sizes – and perhaps least forgivable among the largest practices. Of those
practices with 15 or more architects, 33.6% did not know the cost of entering competitions. Among those who did, the costs were pretty evenly distributed among the brackets of £5,000 to £15,000, £15,000 to £40,000 and more than £40,000.

In practices with five to 15 architects, 47% reckon to spend between £5,000 and £15,000 a year (and 29% don’t know). In the smallest practices, with one to five architects, the overwhelming majority of those who measure their spend reckon it costs between £5,000 and £15,000 a year — still a substantial outlay in a business that may only be supporting three or four salaries.

Of course these costs would be entirely acceptable if one were guaranteed to win the competition — and obviously not everybody who enters can win. So what are the odds? The RIBA survey says that the success rate in individual bid stages is 27%, reducing to 7% in two-stage processes. It estimates that the overall success rate is 15%.

Evidently this is a statistical average — one of the things that this white paper will look at is ways in which practices can increase their hit rate, by choosing contests wisely and by their approach to them.

1.6 IMPROVING THE CURRENT SYSTEM

There are many reasons to be unhappy with the existing system and some of these are being tackled now — even in a year’s time, the situation should be better.

“We are one of the most expensive countries in Europe for procurement,” says Walter Menteth, chair of the RIBA’s Procurement Reform Group. It produced a report, called Building Ladders of
Opportunity, which identified some of the major issues and suggested ways of addressing them. As a result of this and other efforts, change is coming.

The study showed that, although EU procurement law is common across the EU, the way it is adopted in national laws is different in every country, since there is a mix of compulsory and advisory law. The UK has erred on the side of caution and adopted almost everything, making procurement more onerous here than almost anywhere else.

The EU is in the process of publishing its revised directive on procurement — the first half appeared in July and the second half is due at the end of this year or start of next year.

The British government is anticipating the changes and shortly will invoke them in PAS 91, its standardised procurement procedure. In particular, when completing PQQs, practices will be able to “self-certify”.

This will remove a lot of the onerous requirements to write about elements such as the health and safety policy. Instead, practices will be able to state simply that they have one (“self-certify”) and any investigation will be made at a later stage when there is a reduced number of bidders.

Another change will be in the earnings that practices have to show in order to qualify for projects. Currently these have to be five times the value of the contract — a reasonable consideration for a supplier of goods, which will probably fulfil their contract within a year, but less so for a supplier of a service like architecture, which will be spread over several years. This figure is to be brought down to three times the value of the contract, enabling many smaller practices to compete.

1.7 MOVING OUTSIDE THE OJEU

The other change that the RIBA is hoping to see is one that takes a lot of projects, particularly social housing, outside the Ojue system altogether. In the Netherlands, for instance, no social housing is let through Ojue.

Again, this is a result of the way that the British government interprets EU law. At present any project that has any public funds in it at all in the UK has to be advertised through the Ojue. But the RIBA is pressuring for this to be reduced to only cover projects in which more than half the money comes from public funds. This should allow charities, for example, which have carried out initial scoping work with a well-regarded practice to stay with that practice rather than having to go through the Ojue process.

Procurement in the UK is among the most expensive in Europe and organisations such as the RIBA hope to persuade government to make some changes. These should also benefit both design of buildings and architectural practices, particularly smaller ones.

The system is still far from perfect, however, and never will be. The canny practice needs to learn to navigate the process to its own advantage. The rest of this white paper should help.
HOW TO GET UPSTREAM
2.1 THE IMPORTANCE OF MARKETING

There are two things that the intelligent practice should do well before starting to prepare an entry to a competition or filling in a PQP — they should take steps to be aware of work that is on the horizon that will interest them, and they should do everything that they can to make sure that potential clients are aware of the practice, its strengths and its ambitions.

Both these activities come under the heading of marketing, and can either bring a practice work by direct recommendation or put them at an advantage in a competitive situation. Caroline Cole of Colander, a business consultancy for architects and engineers, says: “Having watched numerous juries, if you are known to a client, they will pick up your document. If you are not known then you have to work twice as hard.”

In the latest RIBA Business Benchmarking survey, which Cole compiled, she writes: “It is disappointing that there continues to be no correlation between marketing expenditure and profit. In a business where the marketing is working effectively, a direct correlation would exist.”

This does not mean that she believes that marketing is a waste of time — she thinks that most practices under-spend on marketing. But it is important to do the right marketing.

The first step towards that is to have a proper business plan, to know what you want to be doing. Cole says: “It’s much better to decide on two key things you want to do and make sure you are as

ENTERING A COMPETITION IS A BIG PIECE OF WORK
IT MAY BE A RISK, BUT YOU CAN FIND A CHANCE TO SHINE SAYS LOUISE HARRISON

It has to be a practice decision. Entering a competition involves many hours of work and you must be clear why you are entering. You need to be very objective about your expertise to see if you are in with a chance.

Look at who the client is, what they want and whether there’s a commitment to build. If you’ve got any questions, call the people running it. You’ll also want to check there’s an architect and probably an engineer on the assessment team, and what criteria they’ll be assessing you against. Other important things are: how much work you are being asked to do for each stage; how long they’re giving you; what the copyright position is; and what the prize fund is.

Honourariums never cover a practice’s costs but there might be other reasons for entering — aside from winning — such as CPD or boosting your firm’s profile or morale.

You have to accept there’s a risk, putting together a good account of yourself doesn’t take a couple of hours; it’s a big piece of work.

It’s vital to read the instructions carefully and stick to the parameters the client sets. There’s simply no point applying if they want something you don’t have — like a certain turnover or very specific previous experience.

And if they ask for 10 pages of A4 plus six photos, don’t send in two practice books and 12 photos. If they say they just want to interview you, don’t take a model if the competition is being properly run you won’t be allowed to show it.

But there’s usually a question in the brief about why you’ve applied and that’s your chance to shine. Explain why you want to work with that client and why you have the right skills to take the project on.

Small practices can’t compete with a 50-strong firm that’s been specialising in the sector for 15 years. But look out for competitions where you’re purely assessed on design work because then you’re competing on a level playing field. Also look out for competitions that specifically ask for “new talent” or those encouraging collaboration between practices.

One other thing to look out for is registration fees. The going rate is £35-£50. If it’s much higher you should be asking questions.

Louise Harrison
Director, designed2win.co.uk
well positioned as you can be to do them. You should be very specific about who you want to work with, and that is who you should do your marketing and relationship-building to.”

Architectural communications expert Peter Murray says: “Marketing provides you with the freedom to decide the direction of your work. Younger architects still seem to be a bit snippy about selling themselves.”

2.2 BE SEEN IN THE RIGHT PLACES

It is not surprising that Murray recommends that architects should publicize the work for which they want to be known — but he also recommends keeping quiet about work that is not on the chosen path. So, for instance, if a practice is doing house extensions while waiting for the opportunity to design cultural buildings, it should not promote those extensions because it is too easy to be pigeonholed as a practice that specializes in a particular sector.

One way for a practice to get known in a field is through conferences and events. Murray cites the example of Gene Kohn — the “K” in KPF — whom he describes as “probably the most sophisticated architectural marketeer around”.

When Kohn decided that he wanted his practice to get into airport design, he appointed a head of his putative airport division and charged him with going to all the airport conferences around the world. Several years later, the practice had won major airport appointments.

While the scale of this is unaffordable for most practices, the principle still applies. “If you go to the right conferences,” Murray says, “you will meet all the clients, all the other consultants in that sector. You can start creating that network of people who can get you on the ladder.”

Once an architect has some expertise in a field they can, ideally, move from attending conferences to speaking at them, increasing their authority and exposure. Organisers of conferences are always looking for fresh faces to speak, but are also likely to invite back those who make a good impression.

2.3 MAKING CONNECTIONS

Murray is chairman of New London Architecture, which runs seminars focusing on particular sectors that can bring interested parties together. But it also organises more general events, drawing on all its membership who come from across the industry. This is the key to socialising, Murray believes. “A room full of architects is pretty useless,” he says. “It’s the mix that is important. Every industry has events that are important.”

For architects who want to get into commercial work, Murray believes that attending Mipim, the annual property bonanza in Cannes, is essential. It is, he insists, affordable — with deals such as the London stand. But you have to get it right, he says.

“When you sign up you get a password to the website and

“IF YOU GO TO THE RIGHT CONFERENCES YOU WILL MEET ALL THE CLIENTS”
database. There are more clients at Mipim than anywhere else in the world. You can contact them and ask for a meeting. You must work your stand and talk to people. If you want to work outside the UK, visit the stands of the cities that are developing. For a small practice that is a really inexpensive way to suss out international markets.”

Even the journey to Cannes can be fruitful. The Cycle to Cannes charitable ride, which grows in size every year, comprises the same mix of people who actually attend Mipim. One practice, Murray says, now employs a dozen people and has won almost all of its work through contacts made on the cycle ride — and, crucially, followed up.

2.4 ENHANCE YOUR DIGITAL PRESENCE

Although Murray is a great advocate of face-to-face meetings, he also believes that “people totally underestimate their websites and the importance of digital media. Never before have architects had the ability to be seen by more clients.”

Murray believes that the two essentials are to think about your site in terms of telling clients what you can do for them, and to use as many routes as possible, whether by publishing your work on other sites or by raising your profile through social networking, to drive potential clients to your site — and to interest them when they get there.

Magnus Ström, who set up his practice Ström Architects in the New Forest after leaving John Pardey Architects three years ago, says: “All the work that I have has come through the internet, through
having an active website. When I first set up I got 20 unique users a day, now it is 800 a day.” One client, for example, approached Ström after Googling “house in the woods”.

2.5 EFFECTIVE MARKETING

But is it still important to network if your work is all in the public sector and has to be won by competition? Greg Penoyre, one of the founders of Penoyre & Prasad, definitely believes so. His practice specialises in healthcare and education work, both of which are publicly funded.

“We aren’t just sitting around waiting for the Ojeu notices to come out,” he says. “We are already geared up with a team to do the work.” Architects, often working with contractors, will have decided which projects they want to work on well before they are announced. And the way to do this is to get to know people, partly through conferences and partly simply by knocking on doors.

And getting to know the other team members with whom you will wish to collaborate is also important. Duggan Morris Architects, for instance, holds regular Friday night presentations at its offices to which the practice invites engineers and other specialists with whom it might like to work in the future in order to chat about their work.

It is a relatively small investment of time, since it is outside regular working hours, and is inexpensive for the practice. The acceptance rate is high. “Every single person you contact is in the same boat,” says practice founder Joe Morris. “There is always something you can offer.”

Morris is a consummate marketer, seemingly tireless in his efforts to raise the profile of his practice and help it to move up to the bigger scale of work that forms the next part of his business plan.

Successful marketing certainly takes effort. Murray says: “I always think the most successful practices have been the triumvirates — one person to get the job, the designer and the one who runs the office and the project. These three have equal influence on what happens in the practice.”

One of the fears about marketing is that somehow it requires architects to adopt an artificial persona. Leanne Tritton, founder of marketing and PR company ING Media, says: “You don’t have to be a showman to be a good marketer. The most important thing is the way that you communicate with an outside audience.

“Some of the most successful practices, such as Rogers Stirk Harbour and Foster & Partners, have directors who are natural marketers. It’s not contrived. They do it on so many levels, the way in which they integrate their work and life skills.”

Tritton also cites Kohn Pedersen Fox’s Gene Kohn as an example, saying that his mantra is: “The most important thing is get the job, get the job.”

So, for those to whom it comes naturally, the solution to marketing may well be to do what comes naturally — but make sure that it is properly directed. For the rest, the answer may well be to identify
somebody in the practice who enjoys being outward facing. Marketing is a serious part of practice and plays a key role in one of the central ambitions of all practices — to get the job.

2.6 DOING WORK TO GET WORK

One of the most entertaining ways in which architects can get closer to clients is through doing charrettes. These theoretical and quick-fire design competitions, named after the carts on which French students used to push their work through the streets, typically last only a day, and use hand drawing and modelling rather than computerized design.

They are usually used as a way to free up thinking in a difficult area, and also as a way of getting some publicity and exposure for all involved.

Lee Mallett, director of Urbik, a consultancy that works with architects, developers and public agencies, has organised charrettes over the years as part of the London Festival of Architecture. “We have tried to put together teams of architects working with developers and identify bits of the city where solutions are needed,” he says. “We have tried to make it work for the architects as they do meet some clients and work with them. It is a good way of getting their talent on show.”

Architects are usually invited to take part in charrettes, so they need to have made themselves known to the people who will be organising them. The great advantage is that, unlike so many bidding procedures where a lot of technical detail is needed, charrettes goes straight to the creative thinking stage.

Clients are usually heavily involved at the charrettes, and may also be deciding if these architects are people they can work with — so while it may be a time to demonstrate artistic talent, artistic temperament should be kept firmly under control.
IS THE PRIZE WORTH THE EFFORT?
3.1 DECIDING WHAT TO ENTER

There are two major decisions that a practice has to make before deciding to enter any kind of competition. They are: Is the competition any good? And, is the competition appropriate?

In other words, should anybody enter this competition? And, is the competition right for us?

Alongside this is the question of how practices find out about contests and evaluate them. The previous section discussed ways of becoming aware of competitions and invitations to bid before they are launched. While that is invaluable, it is still necessary to know exactly when the invitations are issued, and to appraise them in terms of the practice’s criteria. But first one needs to know what those criteria are.

Probably no competitions exist that nobody should enter at all, since occasionally there are some unconventional reasons for submitting an entry. But there are certainly some of which most practices should be wary.

For example, developer Cleanslate advertised in September for both young and established practices to take part in an open international competition to produce innovative ideas to convert Fort Albert on the Isle of Wight into residential accommodation.

Deluged with information, as more experienced hands could have predicted, the organisers decided to whittle down the entries by introducing a shortlisting phase, judging practices by their websites.

Although in section two the importance of having a good website was stressed, suddenly introducing it as a factor to be considered in a competition entry is not fair. It is unlikely that many of the entrants, particularly if they had already submitted their entries, felt happy about this late change of the rules.

3.2 EVALUATING THE COMPETITION

So how can an architect tell if a competition is any good? Malcolm Reading of Malcolm Reading Consultants, organiser of many competitions, believes that architects should avoid competitions that are single stage, as they will be competing against a mass of entrants, and doing a lot of work for a very small chance of winning. Similarly he cautions against entering competitions where some of the entrants have already been pre-selected. The “outsiders” are unlikely to have much chance.

Caroline Cole of architectural business consultancy Colander says: “I would try to find out as much as I can about the client, the project, and its chance of going ahead as I could. What are the difficulties of implementation, and how is it being run? Some competitions are run simply to come up with an idea that isn’t likely to be built for some time.” For this reason, she says, it is worth asking questions such as “Does the client own the site?”.

Ben Addy, of Moxon Architects, also lays emphasis on understanding the motivation and resources of the client. “If it’s a two-stage competition that will require a significant commitment
LEARNING TO BE GOOD AT COMPETITIONS
WEIGHING UP THE BRIEF IS VITAL, SAYS STEPHEN TAYLOR

In a year we might put in 30 expressions of interest for competitions. Up until recently we were doing a lot of Design for London bids for public space projects, urban frameworks, masterplans — the Rainham masterplan that we won was one of those. We knew that they liked what we did and we developed a sense of how to do the submissions and were relatively successful.

We also enter competitions outside the UK, most frequently in France. They have many more competitions and the system is set up to allow young practices to get on the ladder. My brother-in-law is an architect in Lyon and he’s won many projects in this way.

Also, if you do get on the shortlist — which might comprise three or four firms — you get paid well: €20,000 or €30,000 to do a sketch scheme. We haven’t won anything but have been shortlisted five times and presented to the mayor before being pipped to the post.

I don’t know whether being English ultimately counts against you, or whether we have been unlucky or simply haven’t produced the goods on the day. It’s interesting to me that the two international competitions that we have won — housing schemes in Antwerp and Zurich — were both undertaken as collaborations with other practices. There is something very rich about two practices discussing the same problem separately then bringing their observations together. There is never a sure way to interpret the brief and those different readings tend to come to light more quickly when you work with others.

Some practices are very good at winning competitions in a way that I am not sure we are. I have friends who are very cunning at looking at a competition brief and asking what is going to win. That might be fitting the most accommodation on the site, but might come down to what image is going to succeed. Otherwise there is always a risk that you find an idea, work it through and then wake up and realise that it isn’t what they are after at all. Particularly when you work on your own, you can delude yourself.

Stephen Taylor
Director, Stephen Taylor Architects

at the second stage then the bona fides of the project backers need to be well understood,” he says. “Where the project is backed by a state, then the political context of the project also needs to be understood in managing the risk.”

Addy believes that the jury is also of crucial importance. He says: “As a rule the best competitions — in fact the only ones worth entering — have architects and preferably structural engineers on the panel. We steer clear of competitions whose juries do not have experienced design professionals well represented on the jury.

“Really this cannot be stressed enough, and from our experience the most thoroughly judged competitions have the most experienced architects on the jury,” he says.

Addy goes on to say: “Paul Williams, David Chipperfield, Matthias Sauerbruch and Amanda Levete — to name just a few — have been on the juries of competitions we have won or nearly won in the last few years, and their experience has had a clear impact on the procedure and importantly on the quality of the feedback received.

“It is also reassuring that as often as not the stylistic predilection of architects on these panels doesn’t have much discernible impact on the outcome — we are content losing to projects that are simply better and it takes a properly resourced and experienced jury to make that determination.”

3.3 IS IT RIGHT FOR YOU?

The next step is to decide if the competition is the right one for a practice to enter — in other words, it may be fine as a competition, but is it right for the practice? Cole says, surprisingly: “One of the
things about entering a competition is that you shouldn’t enter to win.” This may sound odd, but she goes on: “Most people don’t win. There has to be something else.”

Cole lists the following reasons for entering competitions:

- To learn about a particular building type.
- As an opportunity to research – the practice may write a paper, or give a lecture.
- It will put the architect in front of certain people, which will create an opportunity that can then be followed up.
- For publicity – if that is the motivation, she says: “You should make sure your drawings are really brilliant, and will look good in BD.”
- And the other important thing, she believes, is that the practice should be wholehearted about doing the competition. “If you can’t be bothered, then don’t bother.”

Reading also has a list, which is as follows:

- Consider your resources. Does your office have the staff and time needed to complete the entry?
- Use bid assessment — all of the major practices do this to make an objective decision about an opportunity.
- Don’t be afraid to enter something “out of your league”, but make sure you explain why you think your work/approach is relevant. But don’t expect to be chosen as a random “wild card” — most clients will not waste their precious shortlist by picking an obviously unsuitable competitor.
- Work within your means. Could you realistically deliver the project if you were selected? If not, consider how you would remove risk, for instance by partnering or collaboration.
- Does the project genuinely interest you? Does it align with the goals of your firm? These may seem obvious or unnecessary questions, but they are fundamental to your decision.

Addy has learnt to be sceptical about PQUs. He says: “After some frustration we now only enter PQUs where we have a body of completed work in the sector specifically in question — for us that means bridges and interior fit-outs. We have gone on to win projects for three local authorities [bridges] and the Arts Council England [fit-outs] in this way but otherwise we avoid, and are increasingly sceptical about, PQU processes where ‘young’ practices are sought — it is well remarked that the architectural world in the UK has an idiosyncratic definition of youth and this is only ever confirmed by such pre-quals.”

3.4 AN OBJECTIVE APPROACH

Robert Sakula of Ash Sakula says: “The things that we go for are the ones that strike us as interesting and serious and where we think that we can offer something.” There are certain words in briefs that ring alarm bells with him. Where the details ask for a “famous” or “celebrated” or “world class” architect, then the chances for a humbler practice will be limited — however good the work, they are unlikely to bring the stardust that a client wants.

“YOU SHOULD MAKE SURE THAT YOUR DRAWINGS WILL LOOK GOOD IN BD”
There is a delicate balance to be struck, especially for practices that are trying to expand either into new types of work, or into larger projects than they have done previously. There is no point in entering a competition where the practice has no chance of winning or of gaining valuable experience, but at the same time it is important to be ambitious.

Joe Morris of Duggan Morris believes that reading the terms is very important. If they ask for the practice to have designed exactly that building type before and they have not, then he will give it a miss. However, if the client is asking for relevant experience, then he will think very hard about ways to present the work that the practice has done previously in the best and most appropriate way possible.

This is why bid assessment is so important — having an objective set of criteria against which a practice assesses potential competitions — because there are vast numbers of them, and a lot of different ways of finding out about them.

3.5 HOW TO FIND COMPETITIONS

The architectural magazines will publicize some of them - by their nature the most exciting. There are online services such as Bustler (www.bustler.net/index.php/competitions, www.competitions.org) and AC-CA (www.ac-ca.org/en/home).

More general sites, such as e-architect (www.e-architect.co.uk/architecture-competitions.htm) and World Architecture News (www.wantoday.com/tenders) have dedicated competition areas.

The last of these is a subscriptions service, and there are a number
of these. There are also numerous services that have been set up to deal specifically with Ojeu notices.

It is of course possible for a practice simply to subscribe to Ojeu and make its own assessment, but the notices are notoriously impenetrable, and many practices use a service that sifts them.

Robert Sakula says: “Sometimes you don’t know if they are looking for a design team or a contractor.”

Ash Sakula pays a service that sifts the Ojeus, using filters that the practice has supplied, such as “regeneration”, “housing” and “arts” to reflect the areas that the practice is interested in. Sakula calculates that he receives about 20 notices a week and it his personal task to go through them.

But at other practices the principals only look at a selection. Duggan Morris uses a series of tender alerts that go to an experienced administrator, who makes a selection to present to the principals once a week. They then employ a bid scoring process, assessing each competition on five criteria, such as how likely they are to win and the wider opportunities it would offer.

3.6 AHMM’S APPROACH

Allford Hall Monaghan Morris uses the World Architecture News tender alert system. Lucy Swift, head of communications at the practice, says: “As part of that service we receive a daily email listing all worldwide available tenders. You can tailor the service to meet your own requirements and the alert contains pretty basic information on deadline, type, brief description, sector and points you in the direction of more information, how to register etc.

“We are also registered with lots of general tender alert services, Tenders Direct etc, and various local authority ones. Consultants will also contact us directly about tenders/competitions which they are interested in working with us on.”

The practice also learns about design competitions by word of mouth, by reading about them in the press or by being invited by other consultants to form a team.
AHMM has a very systematic approach to deciding which work to bid for. It is a relatively large practice with a commensurate amount of resources, but its approach is still relevant to smaller practices.

Swift explains: “We receive the email alert daily and try and look at it that day. It depends on workload, but we will aim to take a detailed look every two to three days. We research suitable bids and then meet with directors Paul Monaghan and Simon Alford once a week to talk in detail about possible bids. The directors make the final decision on which projects we will go for.”

Evidently this process will only succeed if the people doing the sifting can be relied on to make the right decisions. Swift says: “Our communications team know the type of projects we are looking for and are experienced in submitting responses. We have a clear brief from the directors on the type of projects they are interested in bidding for. We have one member of staff whose responsibility it is to look after bids and I supervise this work.

“We decide what to apply for based on our knowledge of the client, our feel for the project and our likely chances of success. We would also do quite a bit of research into the history of the project and try and find out if the project has been tendered before, if there is an architect who has already been working on the scheme and if they have funding in place.

“You can tell a lot about the project and client aspirations from the PQQ and we look for bids where we are able to demonstrate our design work in the submission.”

Even for a practice the size of AHMM, this does not result in a lot of potential projects being presented to the directors. Typically there will be two or three a week, and the directors then whittle those down, liking usually to focus the practice on only one submission at a time.

Making the right decisions relies on a great deal of research, and this is also true of the submission process itself, as the following sections will show.
4.1 ASSEMBLING THE TEAM

Many design competitions and invitations to tender only ask for submissions from a single architectural practice. But there are others where the architect is asked to assemble a team, or where a team is asked to bid together. In this case, assembling the team will be crucial, and there are other things to consider when joining with others — beyond personal liking and admiration for their competence.

In other circumstances it may either be necessary (as a stipulation of the bid) or desirable for different practices to work together. A classic example in the area of landscape architecture was the design of the Olympic Park, for which the successful team of LDA Design, Hargreaves Associates was put together as a result of the client, the ODA, stipulating that there must be an international practice involved. The young garden designer Sarah Price was also involved, again as a result of a stipulation that there needed to be a young practice involved.

This was not a forced marriage — they all worked together brilliantly — and it is essential when assembling such teams that all members are happy to be there. They also had complementary skills and experience and that is of equal importance.

Another area where architects may be collaborating is as part of a contractor-led team — usually invited to be part of the team, although they will need to have positioned themselves in order to receive the invitation.

4.2 RECOGNISE YOUR STRENGTHS

Duggan Morris’s Joe Morris, as a founder of a practice that is trying to grow in the scope of work that it does, is well aware of the importance of collaborating — and of getting it right.

“A PQQ will often ask the architect to lead the team and will ask you to put together the other members of the team,” he says. “There are several things that we ask. Do they have sufficient capacity to support the bid and the project going forward? We are usually able to gauge that on a month-by-month basis.”

He continues: “We also put a particular emphasis on specialisms. Can they compensate for our lack of experience? We would look particularly for a project manager or a quantity surveyor with the right level of expertise to instil confidence in the client that we are
working at a level of professionalism that they are looking for.”

Morris says that more experienced professionals “are happy to work with us, because we are good, and we are the future”. This, of course, depends on them having heard of the practice and probably met people there already — which brings everything back to marketing again.

Patrick Bellew, founder director of environmental consultancy Atelier Ten, believes that, where possible, it is essential for every member of the team to have strength in the chosen field.

“We have withdrawn because I knew that we would pull the team down,” he says, “because we didn’t have the experience in stadium design that the client was looking for.”

4.3 UNEXPECTED MARRIAGES

Morris also has experience of teaming up with other architectural practices. Sometimes these marriages happen within the structure of the project itself. For instance for a housing scheme in Camden several practices were shortlisted for the second lot – one more than the organisations wanted.

They asked if any of the practices would be willing to team up and Duggan Morris volunteered to team up with Mae Architects. The duo won the competition, and then the lot was combined with the first, which Avanti had been appointed to design, so that all three architects are now working together.

BUILDING A FRAMEWORK
FOR SUCCESS

STICK TO YOUR DESIGN PRINCIPLES AND YOU’LL WIN EVENTUALLY,
SAYS PAUL KARAKUSEVIC

There is a degree of track record needed to get on frameworks and that’s a problem for very young offices or for practices working in other disciplines/sectors. You’ve got to get the initial experience somehow.

There are public bodies that commission small projects where people are able to build, for example, five homes or a small school extension, another five homes, then 10, then 15 and after three or four years you have that track record. It doesn’t happen overnight.

Sometimes they ask for minimum turnovers bigger than ours and normally, in that instance we’d call up and advise them they’re ruling out 90% of architects. Sometimes they say “We didn’t realise that.” Sometimes they’ll reduce the figure, other times they’ll stick to it, I sense that sometimes the minimum turnover figure is drawn up for contractors or multi-disciplinary engineers and people in procurement don’t realise that architects generally have smaller turnovers.

When the frameworks run design competitions, such as Design for London, GLA and the LLDC, between the 15 or so practices then these can be run efficiently and everyone puts in a lot of effort because the odds are sensible. Small practices could not afford to endlessly make open design competition bids against 200-plus practices.

Once you’re on a framework it’s then a series of mini design competitions for each piece of work. It’s not just about fees as often these are agreed beforehand. You have to stick to your design principles and you’ll win eventually. I think winning one in five is OK.

You can’t win everything you touch and the reality is that you’re competing against some talented offices. It’s about having the right design approach to the brief and illustrating it as well as you can. From what I can see the design panel frameworks have allowed the likes of ourselves to compete for serious projects without particularly good connections or having to play golf or go to the pub every evening and network.

The large public-sector clients have so many projects and having an open design competition for every scheme would be hugely wasteful for everyone involved. It’s fairer than the situation 10 years ago. In Europe, where design competitions are more prevalent, many offices rely on unpaid staff and interns in order to keep entering.

Paul Karakusevic
Partner, Karakusevic Carson Architects
On Brentford Lock in west London, practices were asked at shortlisting stage to name which of the others on the 18-strong shortlist they would be willing to work with. Rather than submitting a list of names, Duggan Morris made a conscious decision to collaborate with shortlisted Riches Hawley Mikhail and Karakusevic Carson, and won the competition.

While having a sympathy with the other practices is important, Morris also believes that “you try to have some differences of approach to get the buzz of creativity”.

4.4 WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN A PARTNER

Graham Hickson-Smith, head of marketing and business development at 3D Reid, says that his practice often partners with smaller ones. It will look for practices that have a better portfolio in a certain area.

For example, 3D Reid partnered with Sutherland Hussey on the V&A competition because of the latter’s arts building experience.

“We are really open to smaller practices coming to us,” he says. “We will work with them if we think that they are someone who can add to our bid. We are interested in their culture, their philosophy of design and their passion. You have to have a cultural fit.”

Often, Hickson-Smith believes, the smaller practices may have a special something that will appeal to the client. “You buy with your heart not your head sometimes,” he says.

But although he is interested in working with smaller and younger practices, Hickson-Smith is looking for a certain level of experience in the principals. He is interested in working with small practices where the principals have some previous experience in larger practices. “They have excellent experience, good design skills, and very good client relationships,” he says.

Working with contractors is a different type of collaboration again. Greg Penoyre of Penoyre & Prasad says that contractors are currently very “risk averse” and so are most likely to want to work with architects with whom they have worked before, or at least with those with well-established reputations.

The subsequent sections of this white paper will emphasise how an architect needs to put themselves into a client’s way of thinking when making a submission.

Similarly, if an architect wants to work with a contractor on a contractor-led scheme, then they should think about what they can bring to the project that will make them look valuable from the contractor’s point of view. In particular this may be a real opportunity to show ways in which intelligent design can actually save money in the construction process.

Contractors are immensely cost-conscious, and any architect thinking of entering into this kind of arrangement should ensure that the fees that are being discussed are reasonable. Starting with a low fee and expecting to be able to raise it later is unlikely to be a successful strategy.
5.1 IN THE CLIENT’S SHOES

Every architect with a scintilla of ambition will believe in their design skills and that the client will benefit hugely from appointing them. There are other things, however, that clients want — and even design skills have to be communicated.

Caroline Cole of architectural management consultancy Colander warns: “Architects always focus on the design and rarely on the client’s project and the process by which they will deliver. If you put yourself in the client’s shoes, then you will worry about will they get on, will they work to programme or budget, will it be fun to work with them?”

Too many architects, Cole says, fall into the trap when asked to give examples of similar projects of describing simply what they have done, rather than talking about how those projects will be relevant to this client’s particular needs.

In order to address the client’s needs it is necessary to find out as much as possible about the client and what they are planning to do. The internet is an evident source of information, but often it will be possible to call the client and ask questions.

Most clients will be pleased to have potential bidders taking an interest. Also, the organisers of competitions are a good source of information and of help with approach.

Cole, who has organised a number of competitions, says: “People don’t approach me enough. And the questions I do get are all about the project. People don’t ask about the client, about the likelihood of it going ahead. There is such an enjoyment of the project that they just launch straight into it.”

Malcolm Reading of Malcolm Reading Consultants concurs. “I have very few architects coming to see me and asking about how to enter competitions,” he says.

5.2 FITTING IN WHILE STANDING OUT

There are two things that architects need to do, whether entering design contests or submitting PQGs, and at first they seem contradictory. They need to make themselves stand out, and they need to follow the rules and do what they have been asked to do.

The two are in effect related because, as Cole says, if there are 80 entrants a practice may only have “30 seconds to get on to the read-more pile”.

If they have something in their submission that makes them stand out then that is good (or of course if the client already knows their name). But quite often the shortlisting team (which may well be project managers rather than design professionals) will be looking first for submissions that they can eliminate — and they will do this by weeding out those who have not answered some of the questions properly.

Lucy Swift, head of communications at Allford Hall Monaghan Morris, says that with PQGs: “I think it’s very important to answer the questions in relation to that particular project or brief — in other
words a bespoke response is required. We have learnt that general stock answers, whilst being very convenient to use, do not get you very far in the selection process.”

5.3 FORM-FILLING STRATEGIES

There may be a scoring section for every section of a submission. In some areas it may be impossible to score the maximum points possible, through lack of relevant experience, and scoring on design issues will never reach 100%. So it makes sense to score all the points possible on issues such as the health and safety statement, tedious though it may appear.

As noted in section one, changes in procurement practices may mean that many of these requirements may disappear from the early stages of bids. But, until or unless they do, it is necessary to fill them in as carefully as possible and to remember that the answers need to be different every time.

Robert Sakula of Ash Sakula says: “The crucial thing is, if they ask you a question, you have to answer it. Even if in their headings they set out a number of criteria, you have to say I satisfied criterion one, criterion two and so on.”

Patrick Bellew, founding director of environmental consultancy Atelier Ten, which has done many submissions with architects, recommends looking for key words in the documentation and using them in the response. “If they stress innovation,” he says, “feed them back innovation. If they stress value, then feed back value.”

5.4 DISTINGUISHING FEATURES

Cole has reviewed a number of PQPs for clients. She says: “What I find really interesting is how a client organisation can judge if for instance someone has a great health and safety policy. The
distinguishing features are not huge. I think what will help is if you can show that it is being improved — if you can show what lessons you have learnt.”

There are other organisations as well that will help with PQCs. Lee Mallett, director of specialist consultancy Urbik, has worked on them with architects in the past. “Some have a better handle on it than others,” he says. “Some can get a better hold on it than others.”

External organisations may be of help in assisting the principals of a practice to think more clearly or to provide better phrasing. But they will not be taking the work away from the organisation. The drive, the information-gathering and the solution still have to come from within the practice.

5.5 GET THE BASICS RIGHT

Architects are trained to talk about design, and are probably at their most comfortable presenting their work to clients who are also passionate about design. It is more difficult when the client has other criteria.

Cole says: “If this is not a design-savvy client, you have to find another way of exciting them about your proposal. You have to be cleverer about selling your skills. Many architects don’t realise how successful they are. They don’t talk, for example, about the 15 planning approvals they have managed to get in the borough for the last 15 years.”

Cole is proposing elements that architects can include, but Bellew, who has judged numerous competitions as well as entering them, thinks that sometimes the most important thing an architect can do is to leave something out.

“All too often I see the rendering that you know was done four minutes before the board had to be sent off. Sometimes it is best to leave the CGI in the computer. If judges are going through 60 submissions in a morning, the first sift will be quite fast. A bad CGI can knock you off the list,” he says.

Oh, and last of all, do make sure that you know that your submission has arrived. The recent competition for the South Bank where the client questioned why there had been no submission by Allies & Morrison, only to find it in the spam filter, should have been an eye-opener for everybody.
WHAT TO DO WHEN YOU’VE BEEN SHORTLISTED
SHOW YOUR ENTHUSIASM

Congratulations. You’ve been shortlisted for that project that you really want to do. What do you do now?

As at previous stages, research and making contact are both essential. It is vital to understand what the client is looking for — and to present the work in a way that will make the client feel that the architect has been thinking about the client and the client’s wishes, rather than just the next piece of work for the architect’s portfolio.

Caroline Cole of architectural management consultancy Colander believes that the most important thing that an architect can take to an interview is enthusiasm.

“The client is excited about their project,” she says. “They want to work with people who are also excited. Often the only thing that the client can distinguish by is the enthusiasm.”

UNDERSTAND THE CLIENT

In order to understand what will excite the client, it is important to know as much about them as possible. Again this can be done through research, and again it is important, if possible, to actually have a conversation with the client.

Joe Morris of Duggan Morris says: “Sometimes the client group will offer a briefing situation. You should use that occasion to get as close to the client as possible. You need to get your face in front of them.”

If there is no formal opportunity to do this, then an architect would be advised to ring up and ask some questions — there is always something that it would be useful to know.

The way that the architect behaves in these circumstances is vital. Clients will be looking for people with whom they will enjoy working, and will be making a judgement during every interaction, whether by email or on the telephone or face to face.

There is another more prosaic reason for making a telephone call. That reason is, to find out everything necessary about the presentation, about what is required, about the room where the presentation will take place and about the technology that is available.

Clients are looking for people who will be competent and will be able to do the job. It may be unfair to equate running an architectural project with giving a PowerPoint presentation, but any architect who stumbles over their PowerPoint will be unlikely to impress a potential client with their organisational skills.

A presentation should be rehearsed to the point where the team presenting should be able to relax and, crucially, be able to listen as much as to talk.

A FOCUSED TEAM

It’s also vital to take the right people to an interview. One of the crucial rules is that nobody should go to an interview who is not
going to talk. Why are they there? It looks again like a poor use of resources and probably a waste of money, if train or plane fares were involved.

It is a good idea to have somebody senior in the interview team. It shows commitment from the top of the practice. But they should not dominate the discussions.

They will not be the person who will be running the job day-to-day (that person should definitely be at the interview as well). By deferring to more junior staff the senior demonstrates their confidence in them, as well as the competence of those more junior people. Although they should of course be ready to answer a direct question.

The interview team should give the client all their attention. They should not take phone calls or surreptitiously check their emails (it is never surreptitious enough).

Note-taking should be kept to a minimum, and should be done on paper, since taking notes on a smartphone can easily be confused with texting.

This job is the client's major concern, and they want the architect to feel that way about it too. Of course everybody knows this will not be the architect's only project, but if they can't give it their full attention at this point, it will not bode well for the future.

6.4 PRESENT AND CORRECT

The team should arrive at the interview with a presentation that provides everything that they have been asked to provide, in the format in which they have been asked to present it.

There is one instance in which it is worth ignoring the rules, however. Some competitions make it clear that they are not asking the submitting architect to do any design work, or to produce a design.

Designing is of course what architects do, and they will be tempted to at least sketch out a concept. Do not resist this temptation altogether. It is a good idea to take a design idea with you and then decide whether you want to present it or not.

One practitioner recalls going to an interview at which the interviewer said: "I know we told you we didn’t want you to present a design, but if you had done a design, what would it be like?" It pays to be prepared.
TURNING A LOSS INTO A WIN
7.1 LEARNING FROM LOSING

It is galling to lose a job that you were really hopeful of winning and there is a temptation just to turn your back on it and try to forget. But it is not the right thing to do.

Entering competitions and filling in PQPs is a skill and one that develops with practice. It is important therefore to work out why an application was not successful. Some of this may be possible through internal analysis, but the process will be much more fruitful if there is also some feedback from the organisers.

Most will be willing to give feedback, and even if it is of the terse variety, such as “you were eliminated because of the health and safety statement”, that at least tells a practice which areas it needs to address. The feedback should help a practice both improve its entries next time, and also help it to select the projects it wants to go for in the future.

7.2 REPOSITIONING YOURSELF

This is probably as much as can be gained if a practice has filled in a PQP and has not made the first cut, or has entered a design competition and has not been shortlisted.

But for those practices that have reached the final stages, even if they have not been ultimately successful, there is a lot more to be done.

This is especially the case if they are relatively young practices and have been placed in contests where the winner and the other finalists are far more experienced. It is an opportunity not only to add to the portfolio but also to start changing perceptions of what a practice can do.

Architectural marketing expert Peter Murray cites the case of Carmody Groarke, which recently won the Windermere Steamboat Museum competition.

“They went in for a lot of cultural competitions and used them to publicize themselves, to say ‘These are the sort of buildings that these people are connected with’,” Murray explains.

It helps of course if you don’t simply lose but are well placed — early in its career Carmody Groarke came second in the competition for the National Library of the Czech Republic.

7.3 THE NEXT CLIENT

Ben Addy, the founder of Moxon Architects, sees the client to whom he pitches in a competition as only the first potential client. “The second potential client [and third, fourth, fifth, etc] comes later,” he says.

“We have used most of our past competition efforts in presentations for other projects at some stage or other. There are some that help to demonstrate an aspect of our working method and there are some that have direct correlations with projects we are pitching for,” he adds. “Either way a competition submission

The process is as important as the result.

TURNING A LOSING PITCH INTO BUSINESS

WHAT SEEMS LIKE FAILURE CAN BE THE START OF SUCCESS SAYS LEANNE TRITTON

Finding out that you have missed out on a commission after the long and arduous pitch process is incredibly disappointing, so I don’t want to insult your intelligence by putting some Pollyanna-ish spin on it. But there is a possibility that you can turn a “loss” into a “win”.

Successful architects realised long ago that win or lose, the pitch is often just part of the new business process.

First, the client may have more than one project on its books. While you may not suit it, your work, approach and attitude might indicate that you would be great for something else.

Second, while you may see a procurement panel as a single entity, it is made up of individuals with different points of view. They may present a cohesive front publicly, but you don’t know what is happening behind the scenes. There could be myriad of reasons why you missed out that are not actually about you.

You might have been the first choice for a third of the panel, but didn’t get the majority vote. ▶
is an investment and should be utilised as such — it shouldn’t sit gathering dust, or if it does then it’s a competition that shouldn’t have been entered in the first place.”

Addy has direct experience. As well as an impressive roster of wins, his practice has been placed within a number of prestigious projects in both the UK and overseas.

For instance, it came second in a Lisbon bridge competition and came third in the Lalla Yeddouna competition in Fez, Morocco. That, he says, was “the biggest competition, and the best overseas result — we nearly had the most votes for first place... also the jury feedback was extremely useful. It was the most competently organised and judged competition I’ve ever been involved with.”

7.4 AN IMPROVED PORTFOLIO

And he knows exactly how to exploit these results. “There are sometimes good opportunities for press — a 2nd/3rd place or sometimes even an honourable mention where you are the only UK practice could be of interest so it’s worth mentioning it if you can,” he says.

“Otherwise the key is to make use of the work as portfolio, perhaps by recomposing the material so that it is relevant to other clients in the future. We don’t think that we ever waste time in entering competitions — it’s all relevant whether in the development of the practice, securing of future work or the occasional potential for marketing.”

Addy has evidence this approach works. “The first ‘real’ project undertaken by the practice [an automotive design studio in West London] was won in competitive interview and our selection by the client was based in large part on the competition portfolio and the conceptual ideas and aesthetic values that it demonstrated,” he says.

7.5 GOOD LOSERS

For a well-established practice with a nationally or internationally recognised profile, coming second or third in a competition, however prestigious, will be a disappointment. For a smaller, younger practice, which is still trying to establish its reputation, it can be a positive result.

It is important to develop the right state of mind — to think of it not as a failure but as a symbol that the practice has done some intelligent thinking in its chosen field, and that it is ready, or nearly ready, to undertake such a project. It is an opportunity to be exploited as hard as possible.

In some cases, being placed in a competition will also mean that the practice will receive some prize money. That is most common with overseas work, which forms the focus of the final section of this paper.

FOR A YOUNG FIRM, COMING SECOND OR THIRD CAN BE A POSITIVE RESULT

TURNING A LOSING PITCH INTO BUSINESS

▶ That still leaves you with a fan base of individuals who wear other hats, sit on other boards and are in a position to appoint in future.

Third, sometimes they get it wrong. They start working with the “winner”, realise their mistake and reconsider the other bidders — this has happened to our advantage [communications brief] on a number of occasions.

So how do you turn a loss into a win? Be a good loser. Insulting or denigrating the potential client group won’t change their mind, it will only reassure them that they have made the right choice.

Go back to them, preferably on an individual basis and thank them for their time and ask for an opportunity to meet and understand why they made their choice. This can be a more informal chat where you can gain a greater understanding of what led to their decision and perhaps what they liked about your presentation and where there might be future opportunities.

You can build a relationship from there. Keep them updated with your progress. Drop them a note from time to time (remember paper!’) and make sure it’s relevant to them. In this business you do have to kiss a lot of frogs, but even the ugly ones can turn into a prince.

Leanne Tritton
Managing director, ING Media
8.1 WHO’S OUT THERE?

Only 15% of the respondents to BD’s survey said that they work regularly outside the UK, with a further 30% saying that they do so “rarely”, and the rest not at all.

The distribution by practice size is not what one might expect. True, the most international practices were the largest, with nearly a quarter (24.4%) of those employing 15 or more architects working overseas regularly, and a further 39.3% doing so rarely.

But next up in the cosmopolitan stakes are the smallest practices, with 10.9% of those employing five architects or fewer working regularly overseas, and another 23% doing so rarely.

It is the medium-sized practices in the survey, those employing five to 15 architects, that do the least overseas work, with only 6.8% working abroad regularly, and 27.7% doing so rarely.

The picture is a little puzzling, but at least it shows that size is no barrier to working abroad. British architects have a fantastic history of working internationally, and have not always been well established when they won their largest jobs.

The 18-year old architect who won the competition, with Renzo Piano, to design the Pompidou Centre in Paris in 1971 had built very little, but it was the making of Richard Rogers. More recently Hugh Broughton, a talented architect with a small portfolio of well-considered buildings, moved into a different league when he was appointed to design the new Halley Research Station for the British Antarctic Survey.

Such wins can be the making of a career, but working abroad does not have to be on such a dramatic scale. Unlike the time of the Pompidou win, there is now a system in place that is at least relatively familiar across Europe, in the form of the Jouve.

It may be more impenetrable for architects looking at countries other than their own, but help is available. Working overseas is never simple, but the rewards can be great.

Think for example of David Chipperfield, who built his reputation almost entirely with work overseas (and complained how difficult it was to win work on his home turf).

8.2 LOCAL CUSTOMS

Many countries offer prizes, not just to the winners but also to the runners up in a competition. In Switzerland, for example, the Andermatt masterplanning competition run last year had prizes of 30,000 Swiss francs (currently worth £20,000) for each of the five shortlisted firms.

The sums are not enormous, but they should at least allow a practice to break even. Duggan Morris, for example, has made a conscious decision to target Swiss competitions.

The competition system works differently in different countries as each country has adopted different elements of the voluntary part of the EU directive. This means that some competitions may be difficult to understand, but there can also be advantages.
For example, says Walter Menteth, chair of the RIBA's Procurement Reform Group, if an architect gets onto a framework in Belgium their prospects will be far more certain than if they do so in the UK.

The common practice in the UK is for a mini-competition to be held for each project within the framework, with all practices eligible. The result is far too often that architects win no work at all. Menteth says that two members of his procurement group are on 15 frameworks between them and have had no work from them.

But in Belgium, three architects in rotation from the framework are selected to enter each mini-competition. And the successful practice is then precluded from going forward to the next competition. In this way, all should have a chance of some work.

In France, explains Richard Haut, who runs a bespoke service, recently rebranded as Archintel, whose sole purpose is to give architectural practices information on international competitions, the routine payment for producing a model will be €20,000 to €30,000, ensuring competing practices will not be out of pocket.

### 8.3 LEARNING THE LANGUAGE

The Ojeu notices always have a summary in English, but often this does not give enough information to make it clear what the client is seeking. “I read what it says in the original language,” Haut explains. Having worked with large and small practices interested in

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**FROM SHEFFIELD TO CHONGQING**

**SMALL PRACTICE IBBOTSON ARCHITECTS SUCCEEDED IN BREAKING INTO CHINA**

Ibbotson Architects is a practice with a core team of five, based in Derbyshire, just outside Sheffield. It has considerable success in negotiating planning permissions in the Peak District and, building on founder Helen Ibbotson’s previous role as a director at Swanke Hayden Connell: Architects before setting up her practice at the start of 2008, of designing pub interiors.

The first sign that the practice is doing much more than this comes from its website, with a home page in English and Mandarin.

This is evidence that Ibbotson Architects not merely has aspirations to work in China but is actually doing so. And, although the first opportunity came by chance, Ibbotson has seized it and pursued it thoroughly.

A local developer client first decided to investigate China, and invited Ibbotson along, which meant that her costs were restricted to flights and accommodation.

When the developer decided not to pursue the market, Ibbotson went back independently. “We first went in February 2009,” she says, “and had secured our first masterplan by the end of the year.”

Crucial to success, she believes, was finding the right person to act as legal representative, translator and cultural advisor. The man they engaged was initially based in the UK, but Ibbotson continued to work with him when he moved back to China.

Projects include leisure developments in Dalian and an urban masterplan in Chongqing. “We have been appointed for masterplanning and urban design,” says Ibbotson. “You have to be willing to hand your baby over to that stage.”

Being a European architect brings prestige in China, Ibbotson has found, and so does having sustainability credentials. But it is important to be able to communicate.

While her translator can both speak and, crucially, listen in meetings, Ibbotson has learned enough Mandarin to deliver a few sentences at the start of a presentation. She has also travelled around China with a client without an interpreter.

One of her team in the UK is a Mandarin-speaking architectural assistant who can make the crucial phone calls.

While working in China is exciting, it is vital, says Ibbotson, “to work double-hard to show clients in the UK that you are still committed to them”.  

Helen Ibbotson  
Principal architect, Ibbotson Architects
winning work in Europe, Haut has formed strong opinions on how they should set about it.

“In my view, practices need to consider the type of work which brings together their particular range of skills and experience, and also the enthusiasms which make the practice unique.

“If those enthusiasms match with those of the client, then the practice can do what the profession so rightly claims for itself, to offer a design extra over and above what the client anticipates.

“This can also have the advantage of stepping over the locals. Standard work can be done by, and will in most cases go to a local. It is where the project offers difficult challenges that the real opportunities can arise.

“The first step is therefore for the practice to take as objective a view as possible of itself and what it can offer. The second is to consider the financial implications. Projects should be selected on the basis of how and when remuneration is paid.

“Do they simply require a submission about the firm, or is there any speculative work involved? What level of remuneration will there be, if any, at short-listing and what level of return can be anticipated if it is won?

“The cost of applying should always be kept as practical as possible — the temptation to overspend on a single submission can result in resources in practice time and money simply not being available for further applications.”

8.4 BRITISH SKILLS

One area where Haut sees particular potential for UK practices is in urban design. He believes that they have an understanding of the financial and business potential of plans in a way that more “purist” designers in, for example, France, do not.

“The UK urban designers understand issues such as the number of tenants who can be attracted into a retail scheme in a way that designers from other countries do not,” he says.

Odeurs are not the only way to win work in Europe. At the recent Guerrilla Tactics conference for small practices, Julian Lewis of East Architects talked about the way that lecturing and teaching in the Netherlands has led to some commissions for the practice to work on projects or to publish.

The fact that the Netherlands, after having generous publicly funded work is falling on harder times is an advantage for British practitioners, Lewis believes.

“We are used to complexity and used to having problems with money,” he said. “We are used to having to think hard about how to do things with less money.”

8.5 OUTSIDER ADVANTAGES

Lewis also believes that there can be strength in being an outsider. “We can bring a fresh naivete and an openness,” he says. He is teaching in Switzerland, and believes that this is much more
respected in most of Europe than it is in the UK — and that the academic world can lead into paid work in a way that it does not do in the UK.

If the rules vary within Europe, then evidently once one gets beyond Europe there is even more variation. But practices do not have to look at new markets on their own. UKTI (UK Trade & Industry) offers advice in this country for businesses looking to work overseas, and advice in the foreign countries for businesses wanting to work there.

It also runs trade missions of various durations, which are usually subsidised. The RIBA has run visits with UKTI, and is planning training courses on working overseas.

8.6 SETTING UP ABROAD

Some practices start up overseas because of previous work there. McAdam Architects, for example, was set up by the two directors of Alsop Architects in Moscow, and although the basis of its work is still in Moscow, its office is now in London.

Despite only employing around 14 people, “in Russia we are a household name”, says James McAdam, one of the founders. “We are seen as serious international architects, and the fact that we are based in London helps us.”

Because the practice is on an international circuit, it has been appointed to design a house in Israel by a client with Russian connections, and has also been approached about working in China.

And, back in Russia, it has been able to facilitate the offer of work to other international practices. In 2007 it masterplanned the redevelopment of the Red October chocolate factory in Moscow, bringing in eight international architects including Foster & Partners, Jean Nouvel and Jan Stürmer.

Even on the international scene, working on developing and maintaining connections is worthwhile.
THE COMPETITION ORGANISER’S VIEW

SARAH ICHIOKA
DIRECTOR, ARCHITECTURE FOUNDATION
‘DON’T LET EGO GET IN THE WAY OF PRAGMATISM’

During my time at the Architecture Foundation we have organised a wide range of competitions, from a culture-led masterplan in St Petersburg and socially engaged workspaces in the London Borough of Brent, through to an interactive pavilion for the 2012 Olympic Park and urban animal habitats for the Midtown business district.

We average about one competition per quarter, but as we are selective about our project partners, this number varies.
The formats of our competitions are bespoke to particular circumstances. I am very conscious of how exploitative the open competition system can be, with practices essentially giving away their intellectual property with only a glimmer of possible selection due to high volume of submissions.

While PQEs can sometimes be overzealous, if they are sensibly crafted they can actually protect architects from doing too much work upfront that is unremunerated or has a low probability of success. The best offer architects a platform to show how their approach, rather than their built portfolio, makes them a strong candidate for a particular project.

Architects should remember that most juries will contain lay people who appreciate straightforward language, clear conceptual diagrams and visualisations that capture the imagination. Clear demonstration of a thorough reading of the brief (and additional research) gives confidence.

Whatever the submission format, editing is key — I’m surprised by how often people over-submit; this can often convey anxiety and indecision rather than confident focus. Models can be helpful, but they can also be expensive. Don’t spend half your fee on a high-spec plinth; unless the brief gives specific parameters, many clients appreciate in-house working models just as much as glossier ones.

The composition of the team is important. If convened with care, a team of multi-disciplinary consultants can offer complementary skills and experience to those of the architect, whether in terms of sector, geography or simply years of industry presence.

Everyone who attends an interview should be there with an active and specific role to play; no dead wood. Chose the most articulate and socially savvy member of your senior team to present — don’t let ego get in the way of pragmatism on this front! When you think about scripting your presentation: successful narratives often give a sense of why the team is genuinely interested in a project (you shouldn’t be in the competition if you’re not!).

It can be difficult in the hand-to-mouth existence of many studios, but rehearse an argument of why you want it, not why you need it. Don’t ask any questions at interview stage that have already been answered by the brief or could have been researched in advance.
MALCOLM READING
CHAIRMAN, MALCOLM READING CONSULTANTS
‘PEOPLE WHO’VE TAKEN A HUGE AMOUNT OF TROUBLE IMMEDIATELY STAND OUT’

The Cadogan Café competition was the perfect project for emerging architects because the client, the Cadogan Estate, wanted to promote new thinking that would refresh a complicated urban setting. And competitions are a great way to find new talent and offer the client a range of responses.

At the first stage we always aim to make the questions as painless as possible. We ask for relevant experience, but what we really want to know is, for instance, why a school project is relevant to a café? We don’t just want a list of projects. And of course there’s always a killer question and ours is “why do you think you should be selected?”

How the teams answered this became the real test, and that’s what we looked at first, in order to sort out three piles: A, convincing; B, ambiguous; and C, doubtful. Those in A were clearly interesting and we could immediately see that something had been developed; the Bs, similarly, but lacked a spark of engagement... less easy to put your finger on. The C’s we felt had not made an effort.

During my years of running competitions, I’m still surprised how often an architect will replicate something that we’ve seen before from previous competition entries. When you are looking through upwards of 100 submissions, it’s very obvious when someone isn’t making an effort but happily, people who’ve taken a huge amount of trouble immediately stand out.

We were also interested in team composition and why different disciplines have been brought together. What we want to see is a team that gets on and knows each other and is a genuine partnership.

One of the shortlisted architects collaborated with a landscape
architect and we thought the match between the two was fascinating. And emerging architects who bring in a good strong engineer can give the client confidence. But the fit is vital — if an architect picks an engineer just because they’re large, we question what added value this is bringing.

It’s the same with M&E consultants. Of course, all clients want to hear about sustainability but they don’t need to be re-educated with charts and basic principles. They want to see how it relates to their problem.

The interview is when we ensure that the architect can manage the project but it’s also when you get to see if the team has done its homework. For example, it’s always advisable to know something about the client and visit their buildings, and you need to rehearse.

We’re always strict about the time given to each team. Architects tend to get over-focused on their presentation and pour energy into this with the consequence that they go over time. They forget that the Q&A is the clincher — it’s when competitions can be won or lost on the quality of the debate.
FRANCIS GOLDING
TOWNSCAPE AND PLANNING CONSULTANT
‘NEVER UNDERESTIMATE CLIENTS’ SOPHISTICATION’

The thing I personally look for is an architectural idea that stands a decent chance of surviving the planning system, clients' demands, value engineering and all the other hurdles it will face.

Your presentation has to be tailored to who's on the judging panel and who the client is. And you need to research this thoroughly. There's not one ideal way to present — different characters do it in different ways — but if you think of any successful practice, presenting and packaging themselves is one of the things they do best.

If I am asked by a major developer to suggest architects for a particular job, I look for relevant experience. This comes high up the list. Architects should never underestimate the sophistication of clients or offer something they don’t believe. Clients are not going to fall for a scheme that offers the maximum floor space and lowest fee. They're looking for a sophisticated understanding of the site and brief.

My advice would be to go wider than you first think. If you're doing a model — even a simple massing model — show the building in its context. A building’s urban setting is something that architects frequently underplay.

When it comes to the team, don’t introduce the project architect and then never let them speak. If they are going to be the client’s point of contact day to day, then they need to hear from them. Equally, a client doesn’t want to hear from the whizz kid who’ll promise a two-days-a-week commitment but then is then impossible to get hold of — that causes great ill feeling and word gets around.

Francis Golding suggested Walters & Cohen to the American School in London. The project is now on site.
I really like the napkin sketch because it’s the distillation of an idea into its simplest form. When you’re judging a competition what you don’t want to see is reams of words that read like Ulysses all in lowercase with no full stops.

You have to consider that the people in the room are often grumpy and difficult to corral. Boards that connect and communicate will be the ones that stand out. My best advice is: rather than imagining you’re in a crit presenting to your peers, pretend you’re presenting to your mum.

But, however powerful that first idea is, the competition submission is never the scheme that gets built. As clients, what we’re looking for is a broad understanding of the site and that you, as architects, get it. This is the very start of the process.

The architects I’ve enjoyed working with are the ones that have taken me some distance from where I started, and that’s invigorating. I want to be surprised, and then I want to talk about it and explore where this might go.

When Urban Splash appointed Fat to work on New Islington in Manchester we whittled the shortlist down to six and then they went for an interview with the client, who picked the firm they felt they’d get on with. Relationships are important. You’re going to be working together for three years or more, so you need to get on.

THE CLIENT’S VIEW

NICK JOHNSON
CHAIRMAN, MARKETING MANCHESTER AND FORMER CEO, URBAN SPLASH
‘PRETEND YOU’RE PRESENTING TO YOUR MUM’
Much of our work is as advisors and collaborators, but through that we are involved with a great many selection processes. We work with local authorities, with Transport for London and with other teams at the Greater London Authority.

We are also heavily involved in the operation and maintenance of framework agreement panels. At the moment we are in the latter stages of creating a quite ambitious one for the GLA and TFL that is set up in such a way that other public bodies in London, including boroughs, can use it.

The spirit of the public procurement rules is great in that they are intended to support openness and fairness but in practice they extend the process often to the point that clients can’t get projects delivered in the required timescale.

That is why framework agreement panels have become so popular — because they are another route where you do the lengthiest part of the procurement process generically and it is only the latter stages that are done project by project.

We have managed to set this one up in a way that is unusually welcoming of smaller practices with less of a track record. We put a lot of effort into getting the word out but then, like any tender, it comes down to the quality of people’s submissions — how
well they pitch and how well they answer the open-ended but frequently quite clunky questions.

Almost all procurement situations, but particularly public sector ones, have a procedural quality so getting irritated and leaving bits out is bad news. My advice would be to answer all the questions simply and ask for clarification if you are not clear.

When it comes to the bit that requires a pitch, be straightforward and concise because people will never give it as much attention as you would wish. At the same time, though, you need to give enough information to allow people to believe you. If you are presenting projects, don’t just show one image and a piece of text.

These processes don’t always go to interview but we certainly believe it is preferable that they do. If you get that far, prepare, be concise, be on time and be presentable. Follow any eccentric requirements that people give you. The norm is PowerPoint, but occasionally people do come up with something else and that can be very productive.

YOU NEED TO GIVE ENOUGH INFORMATION TO ALLOW PEOPLE TO BELIEVE YOU

Witherford Watson Mann was picked for a landscaping scheme in Woolwich.
MARTYN EVANS
CREATIVE DIRECTOR, CATHEDRAL GROUP
‘WE WANT THE ARCHITECT TO GIVE US IDEAS’

I want architects to approach us but they have to know the kind of work we do. I am not interested in just housing schemes or museums and galleries and neither do I want to be sent a book because I don’t have time to read it. I’m happy with a postcard if it told me to go to a web site, but if you’re selling yourself to me make it relevant.

We’re interested in masterplanning and mixed use but you’d be amazed at how many architects don’t do their homework and don’t seem to know that.

We’ve just run an invited competition for Circus Street in Brighton. We’ve had the site for six years but the market has changed since our first scheme and we needed to take a fresh look at it. We put together a shortlist (AHMM, Shedkm, Make and FCB).

We knew AHMM because we’re working with them at Hayes, and they did our office, but we didn’t know the others so well and questioned hard the purpose of a competition as we tend to be loyal and work with the same firms, but it was a really valuable experience.

We challenged them to excite us but the scheme that won (Shedkm) really answered the brief because it was all about Brighton. They showed us that they understood the city, the grain, the vernacular and made a scheme that felt perfect.

But we’d definitely work with the other three at a later date and that is one of the reasons for entering competitions — it gives a chance for us to get to know you.

We’re not developers who say: “Can you put 130 flats here and 60 flats there.” We want the architect to give us ideas. This is partly because of the way we find sites. We might go and look at a site where somebody has tipped us a nod and a wink, but the first person we’d take with us is an architect.

When we’re sitting in a café afterwards, it’s the architect who’ll make the drawing that will begin the process.
THE ARCHITECT’S VIEW

HUGH BROUGHTON
DIRECTOR, HUGH BROUGHTON ARCHITECTS
‘IT IS VITAL TO EXPRESS SOME OF YOUR PERSONALITY’

You have to approach competitions like a battle campaign. First of all we subscribe to the competitions list prepared by Richard Haut, who translates the headlines from the European Journal. Sometimes we look on government website Tenders Direct and we’re often approached by consultants who ask if we want to enter things with them.

The most important thing is deciding which to go for. They are very expensive even when it’s just an expression of interest. If you want to succeed it’s going to take at least five to seven days of man time.

Most expressions of interest explain to you how their scoring system works. We would never go for a competition where cost was going to be scored higher than quality because we’re not always that competitive. We look for competitions where there’s an 80% weight on quality, or even 70%. But if it’s 50/50 we won’t bother.

A few years ago we realised we were losing points on some of our core requirements like health and safety or quality assurance. We wrote all our policies out properly and got ourselves accredited to the ISO 9001 quality assurance standard. Now we get maximum points on quality assurance every time. We haven’t yet gone through the process of accreditation for the environmental standard, ISO 14001, but we will do that too.

In any expression of interest, it is vital to express some of your personality in the subjective areas. People who whinge about these things say that they’re marked by people who don’t understand the value of design. Often that’s rubbish. They want to understand the kind of person you are and how you’re going to approach the project. This is why these applications take a long time — you have to demonstrate empathy with the project.

Competitions always ask for examples of your work and you have to be careful about what you choose. On the recent Foreign Office framework we came sixth and I only blame myself for it. We lost marks by using an office building that we’d done for a private developer as an example of our work, but our Maidstone Museum project would have been fantastic at demonstrating our ability to work with a limited budget on a public project. It might have been enough to get us into the magic final five who got asked to tender.

At interview, it’s important to talk about the client’s project. Resist talking about yourself too much. As well as the director, they need to meet the person who is going to work on the project day by day and that person needs to make a significant contribution to the presentation. Sometimes we go with one or two consultants too. Not too many people though, otherwise you look expensive.
The biggest project we’ve won via the competitive process is our £85 million Oxford Brookes University scheme, which is currently on site. We initially got onto the university’s framework in 2006 through an expression-of-interest process. We found out afterwards that they’d checked us out by visiting some of our buildings — they’d seen our embassy building in Yemen and another student centre.

When we were interviewed, we were relatively relaxed as we were up against some very big practices and didn’t think we would win. We were very honest about what we thought they needed to do with their campus and told them that the last thing they needed was just another building plopped on the site and should consider significant demolitions.

It was a gamble, but we knew there was a general bad feeling about the campus — we’d been teaching there and done the research.

You have to be confident, but on most projects you can’t afford to be too heavy-handed. We talk about raising the quality of the new build to match what’s already there and try and flatter the client.

It is important to have a bit of humour in an interview to break the ice. And, obviously, try and do a little bit of background research on the people interviewing you — even if it’s just via Google.

We’ve discovered that too much clinical computer work can make the client feel excluded from the design process. Hand drawings tend to suggest that it’s still in development. So we try and mix our presentation with conceptual drawings, sketches, freehand and then towards the end we might have something a bit more whizz-bang with CGIs. Freehand drawings are the best for getting a story across.

We always have a 3D model and we try and make sure the model is engaging so the clients and the interviewers can touch it and gather round it.

Knowing someone on the client side is probably even more important now than before the days of PQQ. Now, the only way we have a chance of getting on a shortlist is if someone is already looking out for your submission. But getting a call from a client flagging up a PQQ doesn’t guarantee anything.
Be clear about the objectives for entering a competition as participation doesn’t come cheap. Everyone wants to win, but competitions can also be valuable vehicles for the development of practice research, presentation skills and sometimes publicity.

Scrutinise the detail and evaluate whether the proposition is realistic, tenable and suitable for your own practice, programme and resources. Is it likely to be judged fairly, on design merit and technically assessed? And will it be built?

Find out what work stages are clients committing to and, if there is a shortlisting stage, whether this will be paid. Discover why the clients are doing a competition and whether they are committed to it.

If low odds are a concern, carefully evaluate those you enter. Otherwise you are far better using the time and energy directly, designing for an identifiable need.

There were over 1,100 submissions to the competition to extend Stockholm’s Asplund Library. But, unlike the UK, many European cities/regions have healthier competition systems.

Antwerp has all its public buildings procured by competition and has recently announced an extension of its strategy to include finance and build on derelict sites. Switzerland (with a population less than south London) has more annual competitions than the UK. And architects are more likely to be offered commissions to completion.

As we have so few UK competitions, the odds tend to be lower. This vicious cycle also increases the assessment cost and participants’ costs, giving a further disincentive to taking part. Some UK competitions have been reliant on the competitors raising a project’s profile, often for speculative funding.

Where a brief has been given inadequate considerations, expect this to reflect upon delivery or the appropriateness of a project.

Check out the judges. If one of them is Prince Charles, then you have been forewarned. Most other north European countries insist on independent architects being in the majority on judging panels.
In the UK there is frequently only a single independent architect. Does it appear they have any authority? If fees are a preconsideration, this provides forewarning of value placed on the design output.

There is nothing like a real context — yet its surprising how many spend weeks on a submission but don’t visit a site.

If a public Ojeu advertised project and the procedures appear to be grossly unreasonable/unfair complain to the Cabinet Mystery Shopper at [www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/form/mystery-shopper-feedback-form](http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/form/mystery-shopper-feedback-form) or email 4999@cabinet-office.gsi.gov.uk They are set up to ensure fair practice.

Unlike many EU countries there is no UK guidance on how to figure out Ojeu procedural vagaries. Nor do we have any national monitoring of Ojeu compliance. Unlike other EU countries, the professional institutes or others do not provide a standard nationally adopted procedural format, or a blacklisting, warning or recall service for Ojeu competitions where these are inadequate. Unfortunately this dearth of professional support also applies for prospective clients holding competitions. Essentially you have to figure it out yourself.
10. RESOURCES

1. THE COMPETITIVE LANDSCAPE

Official Journal of the European Union (Ojeu)
www.ojeu.eu
RIBA: The Comparative Procurement Report
www.architecture.com/Files/RIBAHoldings/PolicyAndInternationalRelations/Policy/PublicAffairs/2012/ComparativeProcurement.pdf
RIBA Guide for Clients
BD Survey on competitions
www.bdonline.co.uk/business/competitions/win-a-lego-architecture-villa-avoye-kit/5045592.article
Building Ladders of Opportunity
www.architecture.com/Files/RIBAHoldings/PolicyAndInternationalRelations/Policy/PublicAffairs/2012/BuildingLaddersofOpportunity.pdf
PAS 91
www.bis.gov.uk/assets/bicsrs/business-sectors/docs/b/bsi-specification-pas91-construction-procurement.pdf
http://bit.ly/eKt0zD

2. HOW TO GET UPSTREAM

RIBA Business Benchmarking survey
www.architecture.com/TheRIBA/AboutUs/ProfessionalSupport/TheRIBABusinessBenchmarkingSurvey.aspx
Mipim
www.mipim.com/mipim
London Festival of Architecture
http://lfa2012.org

3. IS THE PRIZE WORTH THE EFFORT?

Malcolm Reading Consultants
www.malcolmreading.co.uk
Design for London
www.designforlondon.gov.uk
Bustler
www.bustler.net/index.php/competitions
Competitions
www.competitions.org
AC-CA
www.ac-ca.org/en/home
E-Architect
www.e-architect.co.uk
World Architecture News
www.wantoday.com/tenders
Tenders Direct
www.tenderdirect.co.uk

6. WHAT TO DO WHEN YOU’VE BEEN SHORTLISTED

Print on demand service
www.lulu.com

8. WORKING ABROAD

RIBA Procurement Reform Group
www.architecture.com/TheRIBA/AboutUs/ProfessionalSupport/ProfessionalCommunities/ProcurementTaskGroup.aspx
Archintel
http://archintel.over-blog.com
UKTI (UK Trade & Industry)
www.ukti.gov.uk

CASK STUDIES

Architecture Foundation
www.architecturesfoundation.org.uk
Cabinet Mystery Shopper
www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/form/mystery-shopper-feedback-form
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