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The Guggenheim Helsinki Competition: What Is the Value Proposition?

Cultural capital of the art world type—what is cool, what the street insists needs watching—works rhizomatically in capitalism itself. Whether that “cool” is generated by a Jeff Koons that will rake in millions or by Yes Men whose reward is reputation and increased demand for exposure, this art world cultural capital changes the swing of what had heretofore been deemed valuable. It is different (and, in the current “design”-obsessed world, more poignant) than Pierre Bourdieu’s original, socially determined use of the term that included education, symbolic objects, and informational access. And it is certainly different from economic capitalism, which, as Bourdieu pointed out, includes already produced durable goods quantified by labor/material calculations. Unlike these, aesthetic cultural capital’s arbitrary nature fools the apparatus of traditional capital and forces it to scurry and scratch for its rewards. Capital will adjust, the rewards will eventually come, but before they do, a nomadic, anti-capitalist leak squeezes open. Rap, Keith Haring, the Guerrilla Girls, the installations of Christine Hill, early relational aesthetics, Superstudio, the early work of Diller and Scofidio... the examples of art practices that have (initially, temporarily) subverted hegemonic systems of profit are widespread.

Contemporary art museums are meant to stabilize the rhizomatic nature of cultural cachet they invest and display when the financial risk of destabilizing art has disappeared...this, while proving their daring vision. As institutions, they balance risk mitigation with speculative aspirations. But the Guggenheim, in its global expansions, has abandoned risk altogether. As demonstrated in the Helsinki Guggenheim deal, they operate, indeed, as a bank. For an investment of 1.15 million euros (the cost of the assessment), they receive, as the Finnish weekly magazine *Suomen Kuvalehti* revealed, 23.4 million annually. [1] This isn’t speculation about the value of art or culture. The dollars that the Guggenheim gains are known, negotiated, and secured by guarantee in advance; all risk is assumed by Finland and Helsinki. Despite quibbles regarding which entity has more to gain in the marriage—the Guggenheim or Helsinki—there is no speculation about who operates under whose umbrella: This is a purely fiduciary undertaking in which the Guggenheim “oversees” Finland’s financial performance. The design of this bank will come out of the open Helsinki Guggenheim competition that launched in June 2014; had a submission deadline of September 10, 2014; determined the first-stage winner in early November 2014; and will announce the overall winner in May. It

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[1] “Viikko lukuina,” *Suomen Kuvalehti*, February 2, 2012, 9. See also: Pasi Lehtinen, “Guggenheim-museolle vihreää valoa - Helsingille jättökustannukset,” *iltalehti.fi*, http://www.iltalehti.fi/uutiset/2012011015055489_uu.shtml, October 1, 2012; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guggenheim_Helsinki_Plan, accessed on July 22, 2014.



Six finalist proposals advertised on the Guggenheim Helsinki competition site. Screen capture from designguggenheimhelsinki.org.

may house some edgy work, but as an institution, it no longer has any cultural cachet.

The motivation to enter the competition comes under scrutiny when it is recognized that one's free-labor hours are designing a bank; whatever cultural capital one is hoping to accrue for oneself likewise seems iffy. But those chances are better than the ones for economic capital. This doesn't have to do with just the poor pay that the chosen get—the winner will be awarded 100,000 euros and the five runners-up will each receive 55,000 euros (we know that the cost of second stages greatly transcend this amount)—but has to do with the basic ideological myth so sacred to our discipline: The hours spent on competition proposals will yield life-changing rewards. As Bourdieu points out, society is a complex web of social, cultural, and economic relations that bind us fully at multiple levels. It is why life isn't "fair" but it is also why it isn't arbitrary:

[THIS WEB] IS WHAT MAKES THE GAMES OF SOCIETY—NOT LEAST, THE ECONOMIC GAME—SOMETHING OTHER THAN SIMPLE GAMES OF CHANCE OFFERING AT EVERY MOMENT THE POSSIBILITY OF A MIRACLE. ROULETTE, WHICH HOLDS OUT THE OPPORTUNITY OF WINNING A LOT OF MONEY IN A SHORT SPACE OF TIME, AND THEREFORE OF CHANGING ONE'S SOCIAL STATUS QUASI-INSTANTANEOUSLY, AND IN WHICH THE WINNING OF THE PREVIOUS SPIN OF THE WHEEL CAN BE STAKED AND LOST AT EVERY NEW SPIN...IN WHICH EVERY MOMENT IS PERFECTLY INDEPENDENT OF THE PREVIOUS ONE, EVERY SOLDIER HAS A MARSHAL'S BATON IN HIS KNAPSACK, AND EVERY PRIZE CAN BE ATTAINED, INSTANTANEOUSLY, BY EVERYONE, SO THAT AT EACH MOMENT ANYONE CAN BECOME ANYTHING. [2]

In other words, it is not the particularly poor odds at work here—1,715 entries, compared with 260 for the Chicago Tribune Tower competition, 233 for the Sydney Opera House competition, 471 for Parc de la Villette, 244 for the Bibliothèque Nationale de France—but rather the fact that we subscribe to a savior myth that deflects us from dealing with our essential economic precarity, which prevents us architects from applying our valuable

[2] Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," (1986), online at <https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/fr/bourdieu-forms-capital.htm>.

time to productive things. [3]

Derrick Leavitt, in a laudable anti-competition rant, suggested five other things that one might do with the time you'd gain from not doing competitions:

ONE COULD DO PRO BONO WORK, GOING TO THE "1% PROGRAM" WEBSITE TO CONNECT WITH NONPROFITS; 2. ONE COULD DO A "DESIGN INTERVENTION" IN YOUR COMMUNITY SUCH AS THAT UNDERTAKEN BY PUBLIC ARCHITECTURE (THE GROUP THAT STARTED THE "1% PROGRAM") TO DESIGN A TEMPORARY PUBLIC PARK IN AN UNUSED PORTION OF A STREET; 3. ONE COULD DO NON-ARCHITECTURE JOBS SUCH AS DESIGN FURNITURE AND HOUSEHOLD OBJECTS (AND I WOULD ADD, GO TO YOUR COMMUNITY BOARD MEETING); 4. ONE COULD PUT TO USE THEIR ENTREPRENEURIAL SKILLS AND LEARN TO ACT AS YOUR OWN DEVELOPER; OR 5. ONE COULD GO TO A BAR AND DIG UP NEW CLIENTS (OR, I WOULD ADD, GO TO YOUR KID'S SOCCER PRACTICE). [4]

In the case of the Helsinki competition, the value of the free-labor hours put in by all the entrants combined could be donated to, say, developing a new amphibious community to survive sea-level rise. Instead, the 1,715 entries—that can be conservatively estimated to take eighty hours at \$50 an hour—yields \$6,860,000 of free labor that gives the Guggenheim bragging rights.

It could be that, aware of the labor-wasting loss of economic capital, one entered the Helsinki competition in pursuit of social capital, a powerful draw if one believes that the proposed project, in winning or in debate, will bring good; that the sensitivity to site, program, or cultural context demonstrated by your competition project will offer a community a better product than if you hadn't. That community might be Helsinki, even if one has never been there. The thinking might go that being objective about the local issues, the project-from-a-distance can transcend the petty hurdles that unnecessarily block those who know more. Or perhaps Helsinki needs to be jolted out of complacency and despite the fact that it might initially think your scheme rude, it will eventually come to love it. The social community might, on the other hand, be the art and architecture world that has suffered horrible relations as look-at-me buildings fail to serve the art it houses and as architecture strives to push a stayed institution into the twenty-first century. This dilemma does need fresh thinking, and an innovative proposal would bring social capital. The myth here is that a project assigned to four A1 boards and 500 words offers either the designer or the "community" deep thinking on either site or program.

It is equally difficult to justify the time spent on this competition by way of creative capital—that is, the belief that value will accrue primarily on the basis of your entry's aesthetic quality. This is different from the belief that one's scheme will get picked (that myth already discussed); it rests on the belief that there is an "indirect" audience—friends, portfolio gazers, clients, possible exhibition-goers—in whose eyes your status will rise for the sheer creativity your project demonstrates. This surely is the hope for the majority of

[3] You are thinking Maya Lin? It is the miracle that made the myth. The outcome of that open competition (there were 1,421 entries) might have yielded a spectacular project from an unknown author, but it has done more psychological damage to the profession than we know.

[4] "5 Things Architects Should Do Instead of Entering Open Competitions," <http://www.modative.com/modern-architects-blog/bid/32155/5-Things-Architects-Should-Do-Instead-of-Entering-Open-Competitions>, accessed April 14, 2015.

us architects, but in looking at the results of the Helsinki Guggenheim entries, such creativity is hard to find. Where does that “creative energy” go, or how it is deployed? Part of the answer has to be the energy spent trekking through the plethora of architectural images that circulate on the Internet that, devoid of reference, make designing feel like image shopping. Part of it also has to do with the confusion over what a supposed parametric zeitgeist may or may not imply. These angsts are then amplified by the fact that there is a justifiable cynicism sitting beside the (possible) idealism when doing a competition like this. It says, “They are only looking for five seconds! Impressive image required! Choose your style.” The arresting submitted schemes, in fact, are the ones that have refused the style question altogether and made a proposal based on logistics. One thinks particularly of scheme GH-5059206475, which only sets up the programmatic logic of thirty-one interior rooms without representing the exterior. This may say more about the state of design today than it does about any of the designers, but the depressing effect on us viewers, and I suspect the designers as well, is palpable. It is not difficult to imagine that many who entered the competition were exercising a futile desire to be imaginative in a situation that precluded it; hyper energy spent charretting, symbolizing creative, energetic youth, became the unrecognized but driving end in itself.

Which brings us back to cultural capital and its impossibility when designing for what I’ve labeled a “bank.” If economic, social, and creative capital are possible (but impossible to achieve) motivators for this competition, perhaps their impossibilities are just subsets of the overriding unfeasibility of radical cultural thinking. I don’t believe it is the case that this impossibility is inevitably linked to serving a program and owner of blatant capitalism. The Chicago Tribune Tower competition was, as much as the current Guggenheim, self-advertisement for a major corporation. But the differences between then and now are telling. The Tribune represented a new type as corporations emerged as new civic players. The new Tribune Tower, proclaiming itself to be the epitome of civic virtue, had legitimate claims to national and local symbolic value. [5] It asked architects—in a time of changing positions about the future (eclecticism versus modernism) and in an era of a newly emerged world economic power (the United States)—to lay down their personal ideologies.

That there is no such corresponding set of issues in the Helsinki competition is clear. There seems to be no stake at stake. Perhaps this is not the Guggenheim’s fault—in our networked, global, smoothed world, national, symbolic, or ideological differences disappear. Even so, the Guggenheim’s exploitation of national locales for its global everywhere makes it impossible to eke out their position and hence offer its critical reflection.

Nevertheless, the type of aesthetic cultural capital that we look for in the competition can, however, be found in its by-products. Gulf Labor’s newly formed direct-action wing—the Global Ultra Luxury Faction (GULF)—created a fake website asking for “a cutting-edge sustainable museum of the twenty-first century” (not for Helsinki, but for Abu Dhabi). This project explicitly links the Helsinki competition to the bad labor practices the Guggenheim faces as they construct their everywhere. “The Next Helsinki,” organized by Michael Sorkin with GULF, Checkpoint Helsinki, and Terreform—also linking to Abu Dhabi via its inclusion on the jury of Andrew Ross, protester of these labor abuses and subject of a secret private investigation—has just finished judging the entries to

[5] Annabel Wharton, “The Tribune Tower: *Spoila* as Despoilation,” in *Spoila and Appropriation in Art and Architecture from Constantine to Sherrie Levine*, ed. Richard Brilliant and Dale Kinney (Durham, N.C.: Ashgate, 2011).



Visions for The Next Helsinki competition site. Screen capture from www.nexthelsinki.org.

its parallel competition. The call for entries states: “The City of Helsinki is tempted to spend hundreds of millions of municipal euros in return for the benefits of the branding of the city with someone else’s mark—is this really the best use for the site and tax money?” and asks for entries to “help us seize this opportunity to highlight the city’s singularity, and its residents’ appetite for social, environmental, and cultural justice.” The cultural value of this competition will probably not be in the form of creative capital—although the shortlisted proposals offer excellent thinking on what makes a city work such that art can be appreciated. There might be a smidgeon of social capital. And clearly there is no economic capital, as this competition demands free labor. But its very existence as performance, display, and conversation—its cultural capital—forces the Guggenheim to scurry and scratch for its rewards.