

LET'S SMOKE, WALK, AND ENTER **COMPETITIONS**

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+ LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE, DESIGN

Poet Billy Collins declared the best cigarette as the one when he had a “little something going on in the typewriter,” an idea forming, a poem blooming. He fills his coffee cup, lights his cigarette...

That was the best cigarette,
when I would steam into the study
full of vaporous hope
and stand there,
the big headlamp of my face
pointed down at all the words in parallel lines.¹

What does smoking have to do with design competitions? For many, nothing – at least not now in the 21st century, knowing what we do. What we can all relate to is the spark, the joy, the rush of a concept blooming on paper. We work with it in its infancy, push it to grow, knead it, give it structure, manipulate it, question it, start to tell its story, let it rest, and go back to it. Competitions *interrupt* the status quo by giving designers the opportunity to stretch boundaries, to test new ideas, to form new partnerships, to speculate.

In a recent interview, Walter Hood expressed the value of speculation—the “what if?”—and how speculation is sluggish within the practice and education of landscape architecture.² The design of physical places is being approached as a problem to be solved, with words such as resiliency, global warming, and social justice propping up the solution. While no one can argue that those words are connected to the most pressing issues of our time, saying them won’t guarantee change and repeatedly saying them might actually dilute their importance.

Ideas competitions can offer an open door to speculation, theory, debate, and joy. LA+ competitions invite us to walk through this door. The competition LA+ IMAGINATION (2017) called for the design of an island no larger than one square kilometer. The wildly popular second competition, LA+ ICONOCLAST (2018), boldly set forth a challenge to redesign New York’s beloved Central Park after eco-terrorists had obliterated the iconic landscape. LA+ CREATURE (2020) charged entrants with designing for nonhuman clients. LA+ INTERRUPTION (2022)—the latest LA+ competition and the subject of this issue—called for an interruption of any scale within any city or place that disrupts its spatial and cultural contexts. Do you get excited by reading the titles and pithy charges of these ideas competitions? I certainly do.

While the submission requirements are minimal, the competition briefs demand rigorous research, a theoretical stance, imagination, and visual and written clarity. The challenge to speculate via design is a necessary defibrillator to the core of a design education and to the profession. But instead of resetting a failing heart, speculation has the potential to reset the global dominance of a capitalist agenda from endless production, consumption, and destruction.

The role of imagery backed by research and a clearly communicated theoretical stance is integral to the competition, and to the messy, expanding definition of landscape architecture and its agency in the world. Image-making is largely what competitions call for. Image creation also dominates what landscape architects do, and each type of image plays a distinct role in the theory and making of landscape. James Corner wrote about this in his still-relevant essay "Projection and Disclosure in Drawing," published in *Landscape Architecture Magazine* in 1993.³ There, he discusses the problems inherent in treating drawing as a noun instead of a verb – the drawing is a "thing" that is a technical drawing on one end of the spectrum and a fine art object on the other end. The potential of a drawing as a verb to critically engage in an activity of "seeing or projecting" is much more powerful. Creating an image that explores, explains, projects, and invites the viewer into the story is foundational in working through a competition. The drawing set must capture the competition jury's attention and must prompt them to see the world anew...at least if you are to have a chance at winning. But winning is not the primary value in entering competitions. The process of discovery for the makers, and the sharing of ideas in an active manner is where the magic lies. Think of it as taking a daily walk to lose weight. If that is the goal, you may speed up the gait and walk for a longer distance. But to go for a walk *for the sake of walking* can inspire a deeper connection to the environment in which one lives. You may begin to notice what has become invisible in your busy life. You slow down and observe the change in seasonal light, the temperature, the surface beneath your feet, the neighborhood soundtrack as it shifts with the seasons, the domesticated and wild creatures you live among, new plants, and old neighbors.

But back to the image, a primary element of the design competition. Both the production image and the built landscape can have a dark side: gentrification, the conscious or unconscious perpetuation of oppressive cultural narratives, the superficial objectification of people and places. Typically, we see images depicting a perpetual, daytime summer with the same people lifted off Google in various passive and active poses. Academia and the profession are both guilty here. Perspectives or vignettes are now called "renders" with the inevitable technological advances of rendering software. "Rendering" could have been the digital replacement for the term "drawing" but the term didn't stand a chance. Instead, "render" reigns, shifting the verb into the noun – the object. In this predicament of rendering or renders, one must be careful not to let technology transform the creative process of making into a perfunctory act of producing a visually consumable, hyper-realistic object. Visual representation can be a game of trickery, or it can be a challenging, poetic invitation – an authentic inquiry. Images are powerful—powerfully good or powerfully bad—and never benign. The beauty of this power, for environmental designers, activists, and artists is that the image does indeed have the ability to represent, from multiple perspectives, the world in which we want to live.

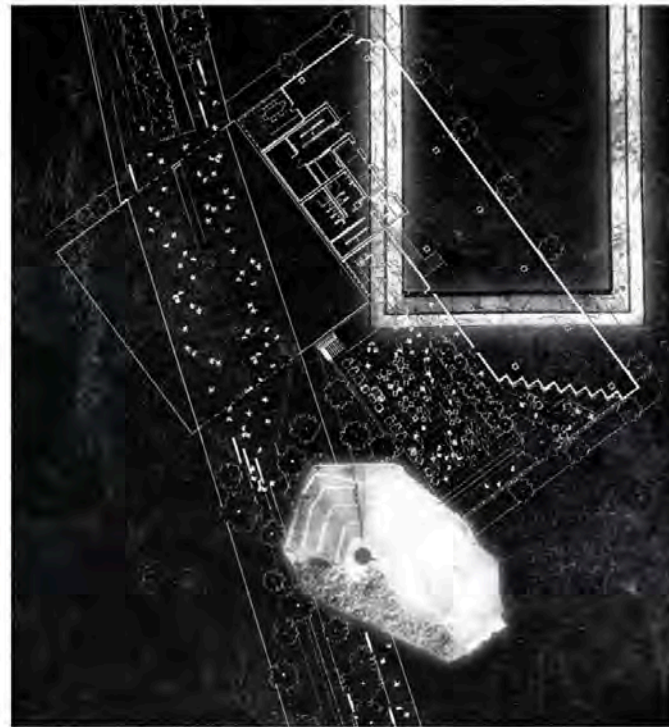
Both students and professionals enter the LA+ competitions. For students, they are either taking on the challenge at hand as part of a class or on their own, in addition to their coursework. Either way, the hundreds of entries denote a thirst for speculative projects. In UNM's Department of Landscape Architecture, where I write from, competitions are built into the studio sequence. We have evaluated their importance as a teaching and learning armature through the work process and product, as well as through conversing with students about their experiences. The benefits are numerous. The students love the opportunity to take on projects that leap over local boundaries, to pour over briefs written by outside designers, engage with a global design community, explore their creative process, and strengthen their writing skills. They love winning too.

While competition directly implies pitting one person/designer against another, the opposite of competition—*collaboration*—is the unsung hero of the competition story. Rarely is a competition entry produced and won by a sole author, and even when it is, it is likely the individual received critical feedback and prompts from a peer or instructor. Both seasoned and novice designers intentionally or unintentionally rub together causing friction and support, igniting debate, furthering the conversation, and improving their knowledge, ideation, and proposition. In an educational setting, collaboration—in tandem with developing graphic, written, and intellectual skills—helps prepare the student for practice outside the walls of academia.

For professionals, one would have to assume that the reason to enter an LA+ competition is for stimulation and joy as there is no chance that a paying contract will come out of a winning entry. Joy, simple joy (as described by Billy Collins), and complex joy—comfort with discomfort, learning something new, realizing difficult truths, shaking the ground we thought was solid, seeing possibilities with new eyes, and exhaustion and energy from making—is the real gift of design speculation for students, educators, and professionals alike. As an example, I would not have given much thought to or felt any empathy toward locusts had it not been for one student's exquisite, short animation of a locust asking for human understanding as part of his process work for the LA+ CREATURE competition.⁴ This student connected our small, 2020 online cohort to deep time, revealing the role that the now extinct Rocky Mountain locust played in transforming the prehistoric seabed of the Great Plains into the planet's most fertile topsoil, while simultaneously discussing the irony of industrialized agriculture being one of the biggest culprits to the climate crisis, creating perfect conditions for locust swarms in less industrialized countries. Engaging in the LA+ CREATURE competition was at once an antidote to the pandemic condition and a mirror back to us.

But let's back up. Ideas competitions are only one type of competition among many. There are open call competitions that present a proposition for designers of all fields to tackle.





An organizing body puts forth the competition with the hopes of harnessing a wide range of ideas. The competition can end after prizes are given out and winning entries published, or it can move into a second phase of invited participants. New York City's High Line (2004) is one such example. Another scenario is the competition winner receiving a contract and the project getting built – such as Bernard Tschumi's Parc de la Villette (1982). A third type of competition is by invitation, where a deliberate selection of designers is asked to compete by the client's advising firm. In this scenario, funding is provided to each firm to cover the costs invested in developing a proposition. The funding rarely covers the complete costs, but it is certainly less risky than pouring time, labor, and materials into a project that you may not get a contract for. A fourth type, popular in Europe, works similarly to an RFQ [request for qualifications] in the United States. The request is called a "competition" and is run through multiple competitive stages until the winner is chosen for the contract. In a recent interview with Agence Ter's Henri Bava, he stated that their Paris-based firm enters approximately 60 competitions a year.⁵

While I have stressed the value of simply entering competitions, it would be wrong to ignore the euphoria and life-changing course winning can have on an individual or firm. My own small wins with friends and colleagues have resulted in leaping and whooping into the air upon finding out, ecstatic hugs, squealing phone calls, and rushes of validation. And I have no doubt that the wins played a large role in my case for tenure. For young firms, winning can launch practitioners into stardom. Take Maya Lin, just 21 and still an undergraduate student at Yale University when she won the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial competition. Snøhetta's Craig Dykers, Christoph Kapeller, and Kjetil Thorsen winning the Alexandria Library Competition (1989) without a doubt set the foundation for their multi-disciplinary practice to soar in the design world. Winning competitions helped Kate Orff start her practice, SCAPE. In her words, it was "a great confidence booster" as she started her practice with a rented desk and a sign on the door.⁶ As Richard Weller wrote in his short piece "Winning and Losing" in *250 Things a Landscape Architect Should Know*, "One of the great highs in a career is winning your first design competition. In a sea of doubt it is a moment of pure, intoxicating validation coming directly from a panel of eminent and most excellent judges."⁷

There is no question that some of the most remarkable, paradigm-changing designed landscapes came into existence through the competition process: Manhattan's Central Park (Fredrick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, 1857), Paris's Parc de la Villette (Bernard Tschumi, 1982) and Parc André Citroën (Alain Provost and Gilles Clement, 1985), Washington DC's Vietnam Veterans Memorial (Maya Lin, 1982), Duisburg-Nord's Landschaftspark (Latz + Partner, 1991), Amsterdam's Westergasfabriek Park (Gustafson Porter and Francine Houben, 1997), New York City's High Line (James Corner Field Operations and Diller, Scofidio + Renfro and Piet Oudolf,

2004), and Beringen's Play Landscape be-MINE (Carve and Omgeving, 2016). The list is extensive, starting with the very inception of landscape architecture as a profession until now. Built competitions have changed the faces of the cities we live in, established landscape architecture as a practice and profession, and continue to expand the field.

Award-winning projects also give much needed visibility to the still largely invisible and misunderstood breadth of the landscape architecture profession. Over one million people a year visit Landschaftspark and an estimated eight million visit the High Line annually. In addition to visitor numbers, successful projects are published in a wide variety of print and digital media and are discussed, debated, and used as case studies in environmental design programs across the globe. Once in a while, controversial non-winners also work their way into the public and academic conversations, such as the Parc de la Villette proposal by Rem Koolhaas and team. Koolhaas's articulation of programmatic "congestion" and design as a method instead of a thing has boldly claimed space in architecture, landscape, and urban design history and theory discourse. The competition entry is a prime example of speculation at its best – the representation of ideas in text, drawings, and models can set forth a provocative manifesto. In this instance, Koolhaas lost but also won, as have we.

Winning and losing are inseparable from the design competition. But power and fear can be taken out of the binary scenario by realizing the complexity and space in between where making happens, paradigms shift, stances emerge, collaborations form, and ideas grow. I urge you to take a walk for the sake of walking and enter a design competition for the joy and stimulation of the creative process. Hell, even smoke a cigarette if you feel like it, or raise your glass and make a toast to your brave design experiments. We certainly need all of the joy, defibrillating interruptions, skill, originality, and collaborative partnerships we can forge in this increasingly mad world.

¹ Billy Collis, *The Art of Drowning* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1995), 22.
² Author interview with Walter Hood (July 28, 2022).
³ James Corner, "Projection and Disclosure in Drawing," *Landscape Architecture Magazine* 83, no. 5 (1993): 64–66.
⁴ Gabriel Raab-Faber, "A Message from Locusts," <https://vimeo.com/user103191754>.
⁵ Author interview with Henri Bava (July 18, 2022).
⁶ Author interview with Kate Orff (July 19, 2022).
⁷ Richard Weller, "Winning and Losing," in B. Cannon Ivers (ed.), *250 Things a Landscape Architect Should Know* (Birkhauser, 2021), 230.