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The Future of Architecture Competitions

Why a structured approach can improve collaboration between client and architect even during a competition

This final article in our series on Whitepaper I 'A Unified Framework for Cost reconciliation and 5D BIM' – 3rd edition, offers a vision of how architecture competitions can be adapted for a digital, more structured and transparent construction sector.

Current situation in design competitions

In practice, architects often experience that clients **demand much more** than what the goal of an architecture competition should be: **finding a reliable partner who can translate the client's vision into the built environment**. Sometimes **BIM models** are requested, but these are rarely sufficiently compensated. Architects often add them **to gain an advantage**, but this leads to **unrealistic expectations** on both sides. The risks and **unpaid costs** of these extra efforts result in **confusion and tension** during the design phase, where the client naturally still wants to make substantial changes, but the architect starts putting on the brakes.

The issue with BIM models filled with parameters

BIM models offer great advantages in later project phases but can hinder flexibility during **design**. **BIM models packed with parameters** are much more complex than **traditional DWG drawings** because they are deeply interwoven. This makes quick changes difficult, especially when the design is still evolving. Where a DWG drawing can be easily modified, a change in a complex BIM model triggers major cascading changes, requiring much more time and resources. It limits flexibility during the early design stages where clients frequently change their minds.

The missing piece in competitions

One critical component often missing is clarity on **space requirements and corresponding budgets**. This can be addressed through a simple **step-by-step method:**

1. First question: how many net m² are needed for **primary activities**? Suppose you need 1,000 m² of Primary Area (PA). You also need circulation areas (CA), amenities (AA) like restrooms, and spaces for technical installations (TA). Thus, you need to build more than just the net primary area. The **first requirement** is how much extra m² you allocate, e.g., 25%. This means the design should not exceed a **Net Room Area** of 1,250 m².

2. Around the spaces from step 1 are **walls**, which also take up floor area. The **second requirement**: how much floor area can the architect spend on walls? The almost impossible Dutch standard of 8%? The more common 10%? Or the more realistic 12 to 15%? Suppose we accept 12%. This brings the **Gross Floor Area Type A** to 1,400 m².

3. Clients want **unique designs**, but that costs money! The **third requirement:** how much **freedom** will the architect have for features like voids or atriums? Suppose you allow 5% additional floor area for design freedom. This brings the **Level Area** to 1,470 m².

4. Finally, for **outdoor spaces**: you must define the type desired. An internal terrace with luxury finishes (**Gross Floor Area Type B**) costs much more than a simple cantilevered balcony with a metal railing (**Gross Floor Area Type C**). This forms the **fourth requirement** in the objective framework for the competition.

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How clients can make better choices

Clients can select **a reliable concept partner** by only requesting the following during the competition:

- A **mass model** demonstrating that the **programme of requirements** can be realised on the site or within the building to be renovated. This serves as the basis for an initial assessment of the required funding.

- A preliminary **estimate** using **element clusters** and **cost benchmarks** based on the mass model.

- A **few sketches** showing the "**look & feel**" of the design in its context.

- A **portfolio of reference projects** illustrating the **architect's design style**.

What are we waiting for?

This approach adds real value for both architects and clients.
By setting clear requirements from the start, architects can align their work better and clients benefit from cost transparency and realistic expectations.
It prevents unpaid work and creates a true win-win.
The proposed methodology strengthens collaboration — the foundation for project success.

👉 *Why wait to start applying these improvements today?*