

THE DILEMMA OF DEMOCRACY IN ARCHITECTURAL COMPETITIONS



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As a deliberating procedure, architectural competitions has somewhat of a democratic allure. They seem to exalt one of the most revered ideals of democracy; equality. For architects and designers, it establishes a level playing field where in principle, all are created equal. In most competitions, entrants remain anonymous until a winner is declared so that projects are evaluated not by the reputation of their creators but by the merits of

their ideas. For institutional clients, it provides an opportunity for representative entities from many different sectors to partake in the decision making process. For example a museum competition jury might contain representatives from the director's office, trustees, artists, and municipal authorities sitting shoulder to shoulder on the jury. As a result, the deciding power is derived from a broad spectrum of represented interests.

However, if architectural competitions are really democratic processes, then what are the questions and issues that are being debated and decided upon? In most cases the issues of program, location, and size have already been determined by developers and politicians long before any competition is declared. What is often left up for discussion is what kind of architectural design or style to go with. Would this not render architectural competitions nothing more than a democratic facade on an autocratic decree?

If we are to adopt a truly democratic approach to competition we would need to consider the questions;

how do we involve a broader more representative constituency in shaping the issues behind the competition? And how do we make a more inclusive process without yielding to the lowest common denominator?

Opening up the deliberating chambers normally reserved for politicians and developers to input from the broad constituencies of the public creates its own sets of problems.

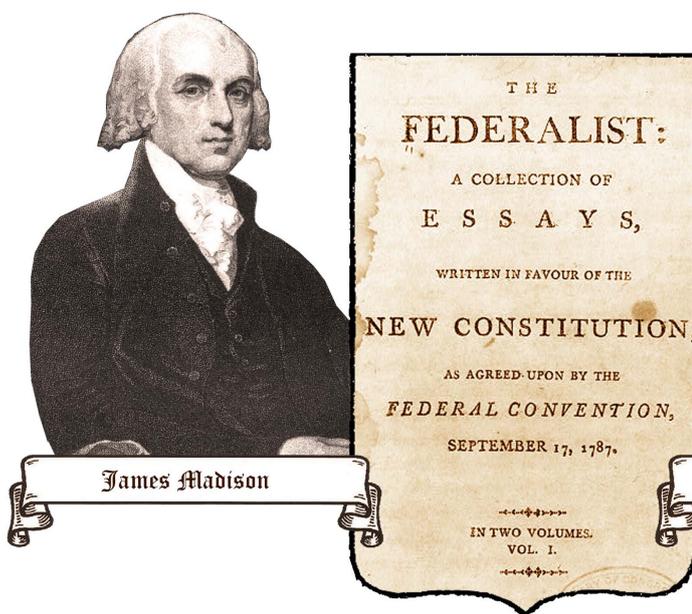
The public is by no stretch of the imagination a unified body with the interest of the common good in mind. It is a multifaceted network of diverse groups and private interests with conflicting opinions, and

competing agendas.

Having the public participate in the governing of development issues risks invoking one of democracy's longest standing nemesis: A tyranny of the majority; where one faction or special interest group gains a majority and force decisions that would endanger the liberties of the minority.

This particular issue is what James Madison, Alexander Hamilton and other founding fathers of the U.S. constitution grappled with as they attempted to formulate the new constitution in 1780's. The solution they came up with could provide a practical way forward in making architectural competitions and urban development processes more democratic.

The primary solution employed both institutional and



sociological structures. The sociological component guaranteed that no one faction would become powerful enough to oppress any minority faction. In the "Federalist Papers" Madison wrote, "whilst all authority in it will be derived from and dependent on the society, the society itself will be broken into so many parts, interests and classes of citizens that the rights of individuals, or of the minority, will be in little danger from interested combinations of the majority"¹

This was further reinforced by the institutional component which exists today as the three branches of government. In this system "the constant aim is to divide and arrange the several offices in such a manner as that each may be a check on the other."²

To understand how these solutions could apply in de-

signing more democratic competitions, we must first understand how factions and special interests groups work in the current model.

We would have to look at each contending group as factions with their own specific interests. This would include developers, politicians and all facets of the local constituency who want to have a say in how their neighboring vicinity is shaped. Any of these factions that have the power to significantly steer decisions would work similarly to the institutional component since they would be in fact governing the competition and the process. In the current model they are typically the owners, developers, and to some extent politicians and local government.

WORLD TRADE CENTER MASTER DESIGN

In the aftermath of September 11th several factions

were formed opinionated around how to redevelop the ground zero site. Among the most vocal was the call to rebuild the towers just as they were, with one caveat, that they should be "bigger, stronger and better" as a show of defiance to the terrorists. Counter to this movement were those who argued that this was a frightening proposition as it would only create an even bigger target. This faction also included families of the victims who favored a plan

that would firmly acknowledge the site as sacred-ground and placed importance on the memorial aspects.

In addition, civic coalition groups like "Imagine New York" emerged. Based on town-hall meetings and surveys, these groups lead by architects and planners proposed to generate an objective representation of public opinion.

But none of these factions had any legitimate stake or say in how to redevelop the site. Ground zero was owned by The Port Authority of New York and New Jersey and leased to developer Larry Silverstein. They were the ones who had the legal authority to decide what should be done and how to do it.

As landlord and developer, the two were mutually allied in their desire to realign their former economic arrangement. However, as primary stakeholders of this site they found themselves confronted by a public who wanted a meaningful say in how it should be redeveloped.

Set in the backdrop of a national catastrophe where passions were highly volatile and the public was emotionally engaged, this created an atmosphere where political careers could be made or lost based on how decisions were made. Public opinion mattered.

Families of the victims had a special place in the public consciousness. This minority and their voice were not to be diminished in anyway.

As a solution to this and other issues, Governor

finalists, they recommended the entry from Rafael Viñoly's team Think. However the families of the victims expressed preference for Daniel Libeskind's proposal and in February 2003 Libeskind's design was declared the winner by Governor Pataki.

But the fact remained; Silversten and the Port Authority were the stakeholders. The LMDC had no real power to carry out Libeskind's design. Not surprisingly, it was met with resistance and severely compromised. Libeskind was forced to capitulate to Silverstien and his architect David Childs. The LMDC was only able to marginally restrain Silverstein's original intent while leaving the impression that the public had a voice and that a democratic event had taken place.

THE HIGH-LINE COMPETITION



When the future of an abandoned elevated rail structure came up for discussion in a public hearing in the mid 1980's the dominant faction was a group of property owners in the area who organized as the Chelsea Property Owners Association (CPO). The decaying structure hovered over their properties and they were eager to dispose of it.

George Pataki and Mayor Rudolph Giuliani established the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation (LMDC) in part, to function as a regulatory arm of the government overseeing both developer and owner in the planning process.

In August 2002, with little involvement from either owner or developer, the LMDC launched an international competition that promised a "transparent planning process in which the public has a central role in shaping the future of Lower Manhattan". The spectacle was embellished with listening workshops, town hall style public hearings and offered the public an opportunity to vote on the proposals.

When the jury consisting of several prominent architects and planners narrowed down the entries to two

The minority faction at the time consisted of two area residents, Joshua David and Robert Hammond who saw the lush wild landscape that had come to life above on the tracks as something particularly unique in New York's urban backdrop. So they founded the Friends of the High-Line Association (FHL) as a public advocate group to save it.

While the CPO relied on the more traditional strategy of petitioning the government for injunctions to demolish the structure, the FHL was able to create a sizable and influential following by using a somewhat less conventional approach; they yelled. Using a variety of publicity campaigns they sent one simple clear message; "we have a great thing here and it's worth saving!"

However despite their strong backing and their efforts

to convince outgoing mayor Rudolph Giuliani of their case, he ordered the High-Line demolished sighting the CPO's argument that it was "a dismal, dangerous blight that cannot be rehabilitated feasibly, attractively or economically" and that it was a hindrance to the development of the area.

The City of New York wanted to do what was in the best interest of its economy.

When the new mayor Michael Bloomberg came to office in early 2002, the FHL proposed undertaking a feasibility study to assess the economic impact of turning the High-Line into a promenade as an alternative to demolishing it.

The study showed that it would have a profound positive impact on the area by radically stimulating economic growth.

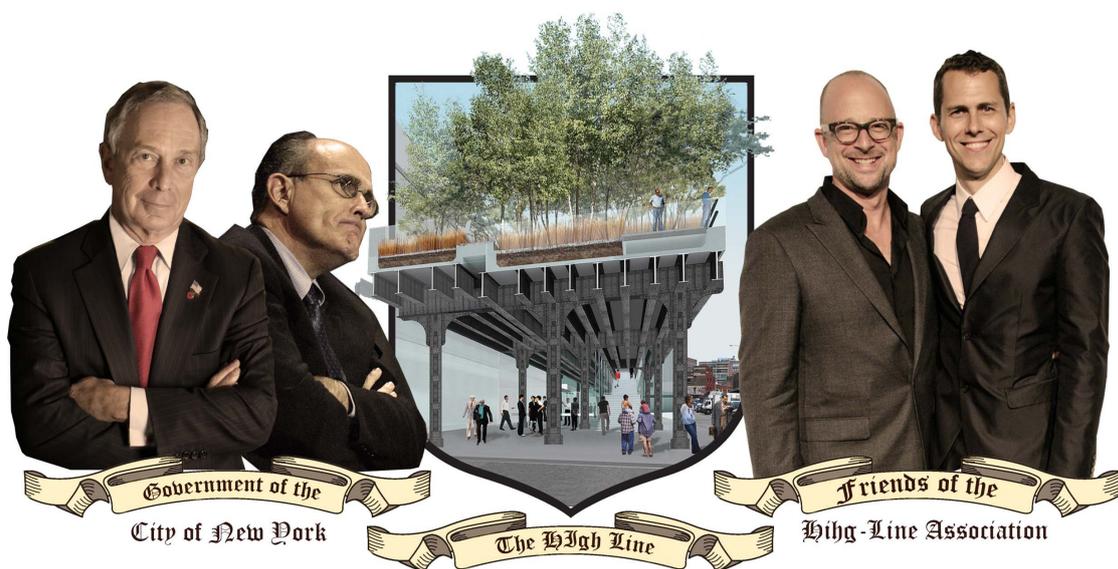
act in the interest of their own self preservation which can sometimes be in conflict with what is best for the public. Secondly, unlike the democratic process where we choose our governments and elected representatives, we have no formal or legitimate structures in place to represent us in local development projects that affects us. But fortunately, as seen in the case of the High-Line, as an organized public we have the power to shape these decisions.

In an environment in which factions and governments seek to preserve their own self interests, it may be in our best interest to apply the same logic that Madison applied to the U.S. constitution to the developments behind architectural competitions. We may need to have public representatives within the institutional components governing urban development projects with the ability to counterbalance between developers and politicians.

For such a component to be consistently present in such processes and withstand the inevitable challenges, they may need to be legally embedded as criteria for certain types of developments. In an ideal world this would be a power granted to the public, but let's face it, this is not likely to happen. However as we have seen in the case of the High-Line, it is a right that must be fought for on many fronts. It is

not enough to petition against a development or say no, one must propose economically viable alternatives and generate support for them.

If we as local constituencies want to have a voice in how our built environment is developed and planned, if we desire a position where we can have a real and positive impact on the architecture around us, we might have to let go of the notion of political participation as something we do once every election cycle and embrace the notion of extra-curricular involvement.



In March, the FHL with Bloomberg's support won a crucial lawsuit that overturned the former mayor's decree and in December the City of New York initiated a legal process that would turn the High-Line into a public space. Because of the instrumental role that the FHL played in saving the High-Line and their overwhelming public support, they were able to partner with the City of New York as clients and authors of the international competition to select a design team for the High-Line.

DEMOCRACY AT WORK

If we step back, we can see some basic truths emerge from these two stories. The first is that although governments are elected to act as representatives of the public, they are also part of a political party and often

References:

1. Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, John Jay, The Federalist Papers, Forgotten Books, (Charleston, South Carolina) page P. 291
2. Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, John Jay, The Federalist Papers, Forgotten Books, (Charleston, South Carolina) page P. 289