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A new call for quality

Shifting the paradigm for development policy in Greece through competitions

Abstract

This paper is following up on Kouzelis, Psilopoulou and Psilopoulos (2010), where it was partly suggested that skipping architectural competitions in favour of a quantitative (i.e., fiscal) approach was a prevailing paradigm for the building procurement policy in Greece at the time. Here the aim is to trace a notable shift from that paradigm by reviewing three case studies: the case of the UpTo35 competition conducted as part of a private development scheme, the case of two ideas competitions organized by architecture review GreekArchitects.gr as part of an open discourse on politics and urban issues, and finally a general turn in policy by the 'Ministry of Environment, Energy and Climate Change including a new legislative framework aiming to establish a central role for architectural competitions in the development of public space. As these cases are studied in terms of narrative inquiry, the focus will be primarily on the incentives behind them and a proposal that they all find themselves on common ground by the narrative of simply 'breaking with past practices', in addition to introducing the notion of quality, not by prescribing it in qualificatory terms but rather by simply supporting and safeguarding it in both policy and will.

Keywords: Greece, architecture competitions, architectural quality, policy, ideology, strategy

Introduction

Architecture competitions in Greece still remain a highly undocumented issue. As with so many other cases all too familiar to those affiliated with this line of research, their account mostly stays in the realm of empirical commentary and critique on specific instances. One principal reference for a scientifically structured overview is the Report of a Research Program issued in March 2000 (NTUA & SOA, 2000). In order to establish a wide overview of the practice of architecture competitions in Greece, it attempted both a statistical and a qualitative assessment of at-the-time existing literature and references, while a good part of it, also projected toward the future in documenting a genuine shift of interest toward the practice of competitions. Apart from that single reference, one hardly finds the subject in peer-reviewed literature¹, with the exception of S. Paisiou and J. Van Wezemaal (2012) at the University of Fribourg. Outside of pure legislative analysis works, a comparative review of the Greek Legislation on Public Procurement concerning architecture competitions and the coordinating European Directives was offered by Kouzelis, Psilopoulou and Psilopoulos (2010) taking as case studies the architecture competitions for the New Acropolis Museum and the combined offer competition for the Renovation and Extension of the National Theatre in Athens. Within the general context and scope of the aforementioned paper, these cases were indicative—if not representative—of two trends that were equally afforded in Greek law regarding public procurement for buildings and public space: one that invests in architecture competitions and one that intends to bypass architecture competitions by all means.

In the present study, the aim is to mark an actual and noticeable change of this praxis concerning architecture competitions in a three-fold way: as a way of conducting private business, as a platform for public discourse, and finally as a means of public procurement. This will be done by examining three cases, respectively:

- The case of the UpTo35 competition organized by OLIAROS S.A., a property development firm that is active in the area of Kerameikos—Metaxourgeio;

- The case of two competitions organized by e-magazine GreekArchitects.gr (GRA): the ‘D. Areopagitou 2008: reformation of the rear views of historic buildings at 17 and 19, Areopagitou Street’ (Greekarchitects.gr, 2008) and the competition for the ‘Piraeus Tower 2010—Changing the Face/Façades Reformation’ (Greekarchitects.gr & DuPont Hellas, 2010);
- The case of the ministerial decree titled ‘New framework of conducting architecture competitions and generally of contests with the awarding of prizes’ (Y.A. OIK. 26804, 2011) issued by the Ministry of Environment, Energy and Climate Change² (YPEKA). This last case shall extend to examining the actual strategy behind the YPEKA procurement policy as it was applied through the ReThink Athens competition (Onassis Foundation, 2012).

In tracing this change, no arguments will be made for proclaiming this an ‘improvement’ over past ways, nor will there be an interrogation of the methodology that was followed in these competitions. Instead, the argument is that all three cases commonly introduce a dimension of ‘breaking with the past’, whether in narrative or in experiment, and in that sense meet in their drive for shifting the prevailing paradigm toward a ‘new’ understanding, where architecture and architectural competitions play a more central role. It will also be shown that although the initiatives and convictions behind these cases are quite diverse, all three cases converge in simply believing in this ‘new’ praxis and ‘taking it upon themselves’ to safeguard the role of the architectural competition in it.

Research Framework

Methodology

The principal question of this research is ‘why’: what is the nature of the initiative behind opting for a competition instead of avoiding it? A secondary question is the following: What is the nature of the faith invested in the competition as a method as well as an institution? Both questions address the fact that the legislation has been shown to afford both trends and, by extension, an argument stating that no prescriptive measures are sufficient to ensure a particular way of conduct by the authorities involved (Kouzelis, Psilopoulou and Psilopoulos, 2010). In this light, all three cases are especially interesting as a concurrent whole because they derive from a significantly different standing point (private venture, open access publication, and official public procurement) in addition to distinct levels of accountability for actually delivering the projects. Evidently this case-study research, is also carrying the sub context of ‘why now’, which distinguishes it from a purely historiographical standpoint (Yin, 2012). Because of the nature of this research, and the lack of academic literature on competitions in Greece, the principal material comes from first-hand interviews conducted by the author with key actors in each of the cases studied, while all supporting literature was used mainly to elaborate, verify or support the testimonies.

In this context, the research is aimed at exposing underlying narratives, which introduce points of convergence in principal questions, such as the role of architectural competitions, the convictions and initiatives that initiate a change in praxis, and the dimension of personal involvement and commitment, as opposed to the general provisions of the legislative framework. By these aims, this approach can also be regarded as a ‘narrative inquiry’. According to Duff and Bell,

Narrative inquiry (...) [i]n its fullest sense, (...) requires going beyond the use of narrative as rhetorical structure, that is, simply telling stories, to an analytic examination of the underlying insights and assumptions that the story illustrates (...) Hallmarks of the analysis are the recognition that people make sense of their lives according to the narratives available to them, that stories are constantly being restructured in the light of new events, and that stories do not

exist in a vacuum but are shaped by lifelong personal and community narratives (2002, p. 208).

The obvious limitations of a qualitative approach in this inquiry consist of imposing personal preoccupations on the research process. As Fossey, Harvey, McDermott and Davidson have argued,

(...) central to the quality of qualitative research is: whether participants' perspectives have been authentically represented in the research process and the interpretations made from information gathered (authenticity); and whether the findings are coherent in the sense that they 'fit' the data and social context from which they were derived (2002, p. 723).

Fortunately in this case, the input was by definition verifiable due to the very nature of the line of actions that were discussed, given that they concerned a practice with an actual trace on the public realm. Furthermore, as far as the interviews themselves are concerned, it was interesting to note that despite an inescapable presence on the interviewer's part, all the subjects were found rather disposed to discuss issues that they themselves deemed important, regardless of the underlying structure of questioning.

The selection of the actors was based on the level of their involvement with the actual project, aiming toward acquiring information as valid and as close to the source as possible. In the cases of the GRA competitions and the UpTo35 competition the accountability of the interviewees is direct:

- In the case of the GRA, Manolis Anastasakis and Vasilis Mistriotis (architects, editors of the GRA, members of the organizing committee), while in their founding and continuing involvement with the GRA, the two should also be viewed as initiators and sponsors of the two events.
- In the case of the UpTo35 competition, Iasson Tsakonas (managing director and founder of OLIAROS Property Development), who acted both as organizer and sponsor, in addition to a member of the jury for the competition (Oliaros S.A., 2009a).

In regard to reviewing the policy of the YPEKA, accountability of the interviewees is partial:

- For the part of the YPEKA, Lenousa Choleva, public official at the General Secretariat for Regional Planning and Urban Development of the YPEKA. Choleva has had extensive experience with competition policy at the YPEKA, in regard to (1) her past involvement with organizing the European Competitions in Greece, and (2) her ongoing involvement with aspects of policy that are based on the provisions of the ministerial decree that is being examined here, albeit, by her own saying, 'she was introduced to the subject at hand at a later stage'. To compensate, Choleva mediated in contacting Panagiota Kaperoni-Blesiou, former director of the Direction of Special Projects for Regional Upgrade that supported the production of the decree, and relayed her recollection of the initiative behind the case.
- Prof. Panayotis Tournikiotis, professor of architecture at the National Technical University of Athens (NTUA), who was interviewed in light of his involvement with the early planning stages of the Panepistimiou Intervention as academic supervisor of the research program commissioned by the YPEKA, on which the ReThink Athens competition was largely based, in addition to his ongoing involvement as an advisor to the Alexander S. Onassis Public Benefit Foundation, that has organized and sponsored the competition (Onassis Foundation, 2012).

The interviews were conducted in terms of a semi-structured, open-ended set of questions to allow for: (1) the subjects to develop their line of thinking unrestrained, and (2) the line of

questions to develop in-place and accordingly with the interviewees' responses. This approach was deemed appropriate because of the interrogative nature of the conversation, which required a certain breathing space for the subject's narrative to unfold, and it is consistent with Yin's (2012) description and requirements for open-ended interviews.

All the interviews were conducted in person and recorded in real time (Mistriotis and Anastasakis were interviewed together), except for Tournikiotis, which was conducted through email. Although this was simply a case of difficulty to reach Tournikiotis at the time the interviews were being held, email offered the opportunity of an edited response, which was considered more a benefit than a limitation given Tournikiotis' academic and research background. All the interviewees were basically asked to give a personal account of their involvement in the context of the according case. The line of questioning was formulated in the following general structure:

1. affiliation with the institution / project,
2. recollection of the event, and
3. retrospective assessment.

Other than this structural approach, no preconfigured coding was imposed, with the exception of the underlying question of 'why'. A further elaboration on the actual research question was given only after the conversations reached a certain saturation.

The transcripts of the interviews were segmented in sequential units according to the turns of the conversation in each particular case. This provided for both a review of the conversation, in face of personal preoccupations, and an assessment of the actual structure of the end result. The arguments and their distribution were coded according to content-based key concepts for each case. See 'Structural Coding' (Saldaña, 2010, Kindle location 1413). Although attempted, a quantitative follow-up (e.g., frequency counts) proved unfruitful because of the limited number of content/concept clusters that were developed. However, it was indeed possible to assess (1) the structure and distribution of weight of the arguments in the actual conversations, (2) a number of recurring themes in these arguments, and (3) an underlying context in some of the narratives. These were deemed indicators for the resulting analysis in this paper, which thereon questioned the interrelationship, i.e., the 'qualitative "correlation" that examines possible influences and affects within, between, and among categorized data' (Saldaña, 2003, as cited in Saldaña, 2010, Appendix D), including cross-referencing with the supporting textual documentation.

The primary themes that emerged from the initial analysis were 'reformative action', 'responsibility vs. accountability' and 'personal involvement' in terms of assuming the risk of challenging the status quo. In furthering the analysis, besides testing an initial hypothesis of convergence, another interesting theme emerged to inform this case: 'moral responsibility', as a necessary condition for taking action.

All of the interviews were conducted in Greek. All references that were made for the purposes of this paper were translated to English by the author. The final text was sent to the people who were interviewed in order for them to review both the language and the rendering of their conversations and the accuracy of the references made to their words and person.

Concepts and theoretical framework

Lipstadt has repeatedly enriched the historical perspective of the study of architecture competitions with its dimension as a social practice (2003, 2005), especially in her view of them as a Bourdieuean field (2010). In her conclusive remarks on her introductory article for *The Experimental Tradition* (Lipstadt & Bergdoll, 1989), she presents aspects of social narrative in stating that

[Our exploration] (...) has uncovered the even deeper sources of hope, aspiration, and pleasure sought through competition design. Making sense of the competition process has led us to discover in it a fundamental sense-making structure that it shares with other times and other parts of society. The story of competitions bears repeating (...) as history and as myth (p. 17).

This aspect is widespread in the NTUA Report (NTUA and SOA, 2000), especially in the assessment of the ‘inefficiency or efficiency’ of the competitions, the ‘successful or unsuccessful’ nature of the venture, or whether laureate projects ‘ever get built’. However, despite a chapter introduced to investigate ‘the limits and possibilities of statistical data’ (NTUA and SOA, 2000, pp. 117–121), i.e., an attempt to a quantitative approach, the majority of the report mostly services statements of a historiographical nature and therefore integrates itself immediately in Lipstadt’s ‘story’.

In this case, narratives, or, as Lipstadt would have them, ‘representations’ (2010, p. 41), are considered as a generative drive force, an argument that this multiple case study will seek to validate, especially while refraining from evaluations of their practice, such as ‘good’ or ‘bad’. As Lipstadt says, ‘For sociologists and cultural historians representations are presuppositions and assumptions which are shared by a social group. They are inscribed in the workings and makeup of daily life and in the social institutions and social organization grounded in these beliefs’ (2010, p. 41). In this context, it is hoped to demonstrate that the change in belief toward architectural competitions studied here is grounded in a more general narrative of breaking with ‘past’ or ‘foul’ practices. This introduces an underlying theme of ethical responsibility, which was also found to stand as a point of convergence in this multiple case study, despite the fact that it is assumed by the ‘actors’ in very different ways and from very diverse standing points. This understanding provides valuable insight, once it is considered in comparison to how the legislative framework can be proven very weak, unless it is invested with a more general acceptance of its core values (Kouzelis, Psilopoulou and Psilopoulos, 2010).

Finally, by referring to the subjects for the interviews as ‘actors’, it is important to attribute this kind of responsibility to actual people who take necessary action and integrate it in will and policy, rather than the rigid and ‘inanimate’ provisions of any kind of prescriptive text, let alone law. This acknowledgment rises through the study as a necessary condition for discourse. As Ken Friedman notes in a surprisingly concise argument for the necessity of ethics on the question of ‘agency’:

Primary actors are those beings who intend or decide something. Actors possess agency in the sense that they are ethically responsible for their intentions or decisions and for the consequences that follow from these decisions. Agents are those who carry out or execute the decisions of primary actors (Friedman, 2012).

Reviewing the Cases

The UpTo35 competition

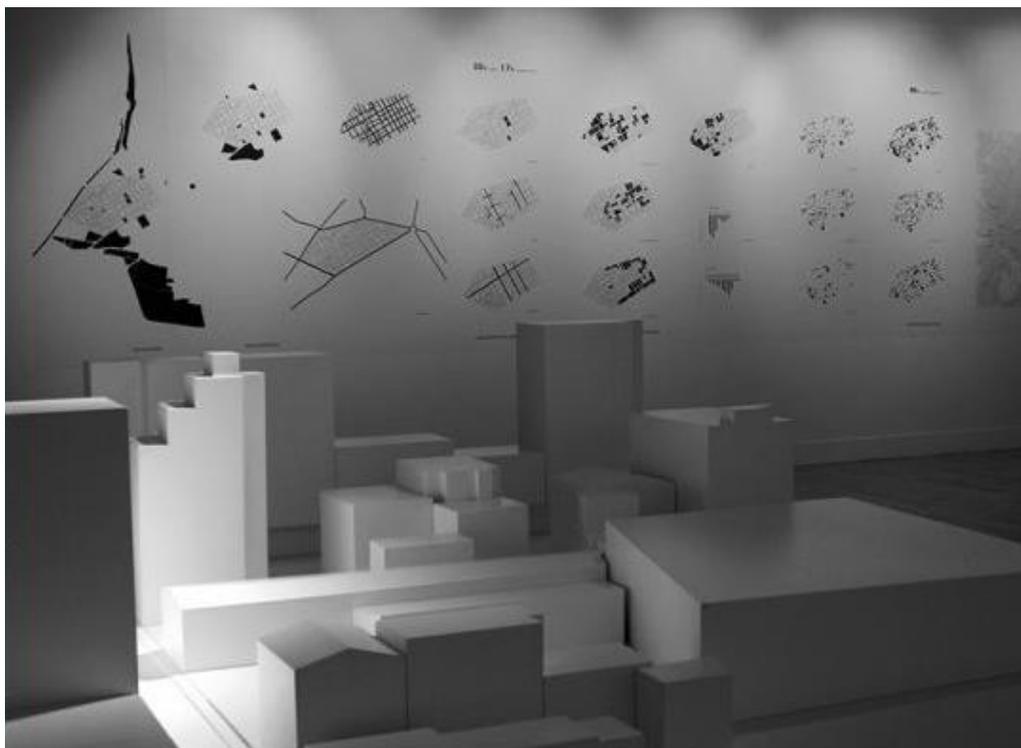


Figure 1. Student Living 18+ Kerameikos-Metaxourgeio Exhibition, Benaki Museum, 24 March - 4 April 2010. Photo credit: LambandLamp.

UpTo35 (Oliaros S.A., 2009b) was an international architecture competition for architects up to 35 years old that was organized in Athens by OLIAROS, a property development company. According to the press release for the exhibition that followed (Oliaros S.A., 2010), the competition was launched in 29 June 2009 and invited participants to submit proposals for the design and construction of a model student housing complex in Kerameikos-Metaxourgeio, in the historic centre of Athens, on a property owned by the company.

Participants were asked to explore new building typologies that could house 18 students on the 200 m² lot, which could also potentially sprawl into the neighbouring properties owned by third parties, aiming at creating ‘a contemporary student housing hub’ (Oliaros S.A., 2010). The jury committee consisted of Bjarke Ingels, Andreas Kourkoulas, Marcel Meili, Iasson Tsakonas, Yoshiharu Tsukamoto, Yorgos Tzirtzilakis, and Elia Zenghelis. A number of selection criteria was originally adopted by the jury (Oliaros S.A., 2009c), namely:

- the originality of the design
- its contribution to improving living conditions
- the professional responsibility demonstrated by the participants
- its response to the objectives laid out in the competition notice
- its response to the constraints of the site and its context
- its sustainability and environmental awareness
- its feasibility
- the clarity of the presentation materials

Yet, after the actual deliberations of the jury, an overarching theme of ‘quality over compliance’—or, in comparison to Kouzelis, Psilopoulou and Psilopoulos, ‘innovative vs. qualified’—interestingly emerged. In the words of Elias Zenghelis who acted as president:

Taking into consideration the terms of the competition, the jury from the outset, decided to establish its terms of reference and criteria for the selection of the finalists for the next stage of the competition. In doing so, the jury unanimously decided that the overriding concern in its deliberations for the first stage of the competition was the search for excellence: that is the extent to which the submissions under examination would demonstrate evidence of the ability to develop and carry out a project of outstanding architectural quality. This meant among other things, the conscious presence of given principles, (...), even if, on account of these perceived qualities, the proposals deviated from some of the stipulations in the brief, such as strict compliance with statutory rules and regulations etc. (...) In short, promise and inspired impetus, more than factual compliance was the deciding factor in choosing the 5 finalists at the first stage (...) (Zenghelis & Oliaros S.A., 2009).

This example is preceded by Tsakonas’ realized ventures in Greece (namely the development of upscale properties on the island of Antiparos besides a more general investment in the area of Kerameikos-Metaxourgeio) as ‘investing in architecture’ has been one of the main principles of his practice. Quite contrary to the norm for private development in Greece, Tsakonas has persistently invested in the talent of architects, including both young firms and established, in addition to both foreign and Greek. In the interview he particularly picked on that experience to distinguish his preference for a ‘novel’ and ‘younger’ approach rather than an ‘established’ mindset, while, in the same context, he was keen to point out his preference to collaborate with people who are able to ‘think outside of the box’. In fact he was also compelled to point out the inability of many—even the younger—architects to this kind of thinking, which in his view was usually the result of an inherent ‘pathology of the Greek academic system’. Given this position, he is often found to introduce a backdrop of fusing foreign experience with local development schemes to his projects. This is a somewhat out-of-the-norm practice given, for one, the lack of familiarity of the teams with local rules and regulations. Still, as he pointed out, he feels that ‘(...) just as we demand for Greek architects to develop outside of Greece, in some way we need to invite foreign [architects] to develop inside Greece’. This initiative was already consummated in the Antiparos project because only three out of the nine firms that worked for designs on the project were Greek.

In the Upto35 competition, the theme of ‘international’ was combined with ‘young’ and ‘up and coming’ in the very idea of limiting the participants’ age to 35. This was obviously a risky decision, given that this was supposedly a private venture trying to obtain ‘a best possible solution’ both architecturally and fiscally. Yet Tsakonas himself also saw it as ‘kind of a scouting process’: by Tsakonas’ word, he was equally ‘interested to survey the field for who’s next’, so opting for these specific requirements was partly due to this context.

On a different note, the issue of quality obtains quite a different perspective given Tsakonas’ position as a private investor. When asked whether a kind of ‘surplus value’ can be accounted for in architecture, Tsakonas was keen to distinguish between immediate profit and long-term investment:

(...) [I]t’s not clear that architecture can bring surplus value, immediately, especially in the Greek market. (...) Yes, it takes time to talk to committees and persuade them, instead of taking a readymade design out of the drawer and get a permit the easy way... So, it does have to do with how I look at things personally (...) Therefore I am looking for quality, and I think that quality is a matter of timeframe: it is more long-lived, and I think that in the long run it will bring the right surplus value. On one hand you can have the ‘flip’, where you can make

surplus value in 6 months or a year, or you can have surplus value in the long run. And I believe that quality, in the long run, will have surplus value.

Tsakonas also brings forth the issue of responsibility in distinguishing between having a competition per se and actually looking forward to an outcome:

I've got a responsibility for this to work, it's not like I have a priority to make an architectural experiment. I do have a priority to make an architectural experiment that works.

In this aspect it is important to differentiate between accountability and responsibility. Given that Tsakonas ultimately makes a personal decision, 'taking responsibility' introduces the notion of ethics on a pragmatic level. Tsakonas wants the thing 'to work', being accountable not to a vague entity of 'rightfulness' or 'clarity', but rather to his investors through the result itself. When asked about his assessment of the competition, he suggested that 'judgments would have to wait for a time when the project is realized'. However, not opting for immediate profit is quite the shift from the usual business plan of the majority of building contractors in Greece. On the same note, Tsakonas also discussed extensively how his decision of having a competition in the first place was based on the fact that he simply 'felt incapable of addressing the program at hand on his own'. In these terms he 'basically saw the jury as a team of advisors' making it 'obvious for him that he was going to respect their verdict'. At the same time however, he also opted to deviate from the expected code of conduct for competitions in disregarding the condition of anonymity for the second round of competition in order for the qualified teams to receive special advice on issues of regulation. In this decision he is found consistent with the overarching narrative of 'quality over qualification' mentioned previously. At the same time, all these aspects illuminate Tsakonas' values as his principal preoccupation is seeing 'the project' through. In the cases that follow, it is interesting to see some of the same—or similar enough—underlying notions of 'taking it upon oneself' to shift the praxis from the norm, the moral standpoint for each case is respectively diverse, revealing thus this narrative as a point of convergence.

The two GreekArchitects competitions

GreekArchitects is primarily an online platform for architecture, founded in 2002 by Vasilis Mistriotis 'aiming at covering an info void regarding architecture in Greece' (Greekarchitects.gr, 2002). On its mission statement (Greekarchitects.gr, 2002), Mistriotis states that GreekArchitects aims to present and comment on architectural issues 'on the basis of respect and objective observation' keeping from subscribing to 'theory battles' or 'schools of architecture', but rather in view of 'dealing with subjects of theory and practice that are addressed by architects today, as well as to giving voice to their comments.' The GRA also aims to act as a platform for the collection of material, 'that will function as a database as well, through the registering of news, events and points of view'. Finally it addresses an open call to contributors:

Even if each and everybody's knowledge is only partial and finite, which is to be expected, there is always in it a small part that belongs to a bigger truth. For this reason the views of all colleagues, be it young or old, experienced or 'rookies', academics or not, are very important to GRA, no matter how dogmatic or heretic they are. They are important indeed in the same way that is considered important the right to live in well-designed buildings/cities that are in tune with our natural environment, or whatever remains out of it.

In 2008, the GRA introduced an architecture competition regarding the 'rear facades' of two listed buildings on D. Areopagitou St. The buildings were in the centre of an ongoing

argument as they were located next to the entrance of the New Acropolis Museum (NAM) occupying the northwest corner of Makriyianni street block where the NAM was situated. While their facades (facing D. Areopagitou) carry significant historic and aesthetic value, the rear facades were either blind or partially blind, and clearly unattended for in their original architecture scope. However, they were directly visible from the ground floor of the NAM, and were therefore accused of obstructing (indeed, partly) the visitors' view of the Acropolis from inside the museum. At the time of the competition, the debate about keeping or demolishing the two buildings was fervent. See, e.g., Vatopoulos (2008), in Greek.



Figure 2. D. Areopagitou 2008: reformation of the rear views of historic buildings at 17 and 19, Areopagitou St. International competition for the design of the urban space in front of the New Acropolis Museum. First prize, doxiadis+ (<http://www.doxiadisplus.com>). Photo credit: doxiadis +

According to the proclamation (Greekarchitects.gr, 2008), the objective of the competition was ‘to adopt a design plan that ensures the best possible of combining the New Museum with the historic buildings and configuring the Museum’s surrounding area’. The proposal could ‘comprise overlaying or façade renovation works, constructions of any kind or height, or plantations of any kind or even a combination of the above’. The passage concluded that

[i]n designing this façade, candidates w[ould] be subjected to no limitation whatsoever— designs may vary from suggestions totally incongruous and incompatible to the broader environment to others totally harmonized with it; from aggressive interventions to very light and gentle ones. However, all proposals must be convincing that configuring the rear views of the buildings is not only a dynamic answer but a particularly important choice and that the idea of breaking down the buildings at 17 and 19 D. Areopagitou Street is a thoughtless and unreasonable solution.

The competition, though it almost exclusively circulated through the GRA platform, had significant success. There were 172 proposals submitted, in which 405 designers participated. Out of the 172, 141 proposals came from Greece, while the other 31 came from 14 foreign countries. An exhibition of the results was organized and displayed in Thessaloniki and in Athens, featuring extensive live presentations and panel discussions on the subject.

In 2010, the GRA followed up its act with a second competition. This time it concerned an abandoned twenty-two-story building in the Port of Piraeus, known as Piraeus Tower. As the organizers stated (Greekarchitects.gr & DuPont Hellas, 2010), ‘The only tower of the area is “sleeping” in one of the bigger ports of the Mediterranean that presents a dynamic growth at the last decades’. The call was to design a ‘fictional façade’, ‘in order to set off a [cohesive] and clear position regarding the conversation of the Tower with the Piraeus urban landscape and how this new “facade” takes part in and partially forms the relation between the Port, as an important entrance and exit point of the capital, and the urban complex of Athens’. The façade reformation aimed ‘to include the building in the urban landscape through the design proposal and to highlight it as the landmark for the wider area’. Finally, in the context of the GRA mission statement,

[t]he initiative of our architectural ideas competitions is the localization of urban issues at vital points of Greek cities and the attempt to resolve them through Architecture, presenting to the citizens and State the real proportion of Architecture in the real urban space (Greekarchitects.gr & DuPont Hellas, 2010).

The competition was an even greater success: 380 proposals were ultimately submitted by 949 ‘studiers’ from 44 countries. In the organizers’ own words,

[t]he fact that many participants actually visited the Piraeus Tower in order to gather more details and information about the building, as well as the inclusion of the competition in the academic curriculums of international technical universities, demonstrates how the Tower of Piraeus evolved from an ideas’ competition to a research and study field project (Greekarchitects.gr & DuPont Hellas, 2010).



Figure 3. Piraeus Tower 2010—Changing the Face/Façades Reformation: Windscraper. First prize, HWKN (Hollwich Kushner). Photo credit: HWKN

Reviewing the two competitions makes it evident that an underlying idea of ‘public intervention’ is in place. According to Mistrionis during the interview, ‘the aim is to intervene in the architectural situation, to proclaim a competition in order to initiate a dialogue on a particular subject’. This particular aim was seconded by Anastasakis in view of the D. Areopagitou competition. In Anastasakis’ view, the idea was ‘to activate the existing dialogue, but also to enrich it with supplement material, which would be proposals on how to see the co-existence of these buildings with the NAM’. On the same page, Mistrionis also saw a case for political action:

In Greece we’re accustomed to a[n] [authoritarian] process of ‘decide and execute’, e.g. the Ministry reaches a decision and executes [n. in reference to the Ministry’s presumed disposition to see the buildings go in favour of ‘an unobstructed view’]. In this case I saw it as a kind of resistance. (...) We wanted to open up the dialogue. (...) So, at the bottom end, the competition for D. Areopagitou was in some degree a political action.

The GRA’s narrative of ‘breaking with fixed ideas’ and abstaining from ‘taking preconfigured sides’, which runs through their whole line of initiatives (by Mistrionis’ claim, but also self-evident in the ideology behind their various ‘actions’), introduces a dimension of reform. During the interview a very critical disposition against ‘the establishment’ was evident—in fact, the very motivation of Mistrionis for introducing the GRA was ‘to break the barriers imposed by existing publications’. In that context, a number of emerging themes were comparable to Tsakonas. For one, the idea of opening up in order to have novel voices be heard. For another, the preoccupation of opening up to foreign experience, and especially in ‘inviting people to Greece, instead of the all too common trend of leaving from Greece’.

The issue of the GRA’s accountability is similarly quite particular. To begin with, both GRA competitions were based on the assumption that they were principally a means of introducing a question of discourse. The GRA broke the norm by opening both competitions not only to certified practitioners, but to all who would be interested in participating, including students, because there was no actual construction initiative to develop. In that sense, both of the GRA competitions remain in the realm of public dialogue, and therefore they are primarily accountable not to regulation but to ideals. Notions such as ‘clarity of the procedure’, ‘assembling an undisputable jury’, ‘looking for the best possible project’, etc., are subject to (1) a record of integrity in view of creating a condition of trust, validity, weight and even prestige for the competition, and (2) a moral disposition on behalf of the organizers. These preoccupations were in place in both Mistrionis and Anastasakis’ interview, in addition to the chief editor of the GRA, Alexios Vandoros’, speech at the TEE–TCG, on the competition being ‘a meritocratic process of developing the built environment’ (Vandoros and Kaliagra, 2011).

The ministerial decree and general policy of the YPEKA

As was stated in the introduction, two things were obvious in Kouzelis, Psilopoulou and Psilopoulos’ (2010) review of the Greek Legislation on Public Procurement concerning architecture competitions and the actual praxis of the Greek state authorities: (1) that no prescriptive regulation could ensure the success of an actual project, and (2) that despite the provisions of the legislative framework, both dispositions of either following or bypassing the architectural competition altogether were allowed for in practice. In addressing the conditions on which an architecture competition was prescribed, Law 3316 (N. 3316/2005) would rather vaguely attribute it mandatory for

projects of great importance of the extended public sector, or projects of a wider social, architectural, urban and ecological significance (...), and their function, volume or any other specific features have an impact on the wider built or natural environment, such as important building projects, projects of a repeated type, monuments or projects of monumental scale, landscape design or refurbishment projects of a regional or historic character, or urbanism interventions of special significance (...). (N. 3316/2005., Article 5, Recital 6, p. 457)

The ministerial decree titled ‘New Framework of Proceedings for Architecture Competitions and General Design Contests Involving Prizes’ (Y.A. OIK. 26804, 2011) was aimed by statement precisely at this passage, and in particular at the disambiguation of the loose framework it provided. According to the press release (YPEKA, 2011), it described ‘the conditions, the obligations, the terms and the procedures for conducting architecture competitions, aiming to update and enrich them in total, as well as the institutionalization of procedures that establish architecture competitions as an attractive process which leads to the production of quality studies for a variety of works’. The key issues of the decree were:

- Describing in clear terms what constitutes a ‘remarkable technical project’ and establish architecture competitions as the means to provide solutions (article 2).
- Establishing the concept of an ‘architecture competition’ as a studies competition, the principal of which is the architectural study, and describing the accepted typology of competitions in terms of methodology (article 1).
- Addressing the specifics of procedural issues such as the terms and conditions of participation, the obligations of the organizer and the participants, the range and limitation to monetary awards, etc., in scope of the clarity of the procedure.

Special mention should be made for the provisions regarding the composition of the jury, not only in terms of representation of the parties concerned, its obligations and duties, and the qualifications of its members, but in introducing a threefold grouping among:

- judges deemed as ‘prominent individuals’,
- judges representing the organizing authority, and
- judges drawn by lottery from an open ‘judges pool’ that’s constituted by virtue of the decree under the joint supervision of the YPEKA, TEE, and SADAS.

This last part was fundamentally a tool for opening up the judging procedure toward the public, in that it was basically a call for all qualified individuals with no particular affiliation with the state or the organizing authorities to submit their qualifications and enter the pool, thus rendering themselves potential judges in any competition that is conducted under the provisions of the decree.

Given the background on which this decree was issued, i.e., the two ‘dispositions’ discussed previously, this kind of legislative action could easily be considered as reformative. While it could be amended in the future—as it already has³—it did provide for a concrete institutional framework on the subject that was lacking up to that point. According to Choleva, in her interview, the initiative behind the decree was grounded on the ministry’s actual experience with public procurement. In relaying Panagiota Kaperoni-Blesiou’s account (see ‘Methodology’), she suggested that ‘a feeling came to be at that time, that this framework was lacking from the legislation’. Choleva also pointed out that there was a general disposition ‘to stress the architectural dimension of the projects they were dealing with’. For an administrative authority, such as the ministry, this was fundamentally a matter of ‘seeing the project through’, that is, a matter of people working together in faith of an outcome, in this

case of an initiative, originating from and being ‘adopted by’ the Direction of Special Projects, finding open mindset along the chain of command, and people ready to do their best in contributing to a common purpose. In this context, one can hardly distinguish administrative action from policy making bringing forth, once again, the issue of personal responsibility in the fact that administrators are taking it on themselves to act. This also marks a significant distinction from ‘accountability’, given that the public sector is often known to be an environment fostering quite the opposite disposition to action. Choleva, on her part, described ‘an inspired environment’ attributed to a specific timeframe and specific individuals, prominent among many, former General Secretary Maria Kaltsa and YPEKA Minister Tina Birbili.

Another important theme that emerged from the conversation was the ‘opening up of a closed shop’. This notion underlies two aspects of policy regarding architecture competitions: the ‘judges’ pool’, and letting significant parts of authority go. For the ‘judges pool’, the aspiration was to allow people that have no external affiliation to a particular competition into the process, provided they fulfil certain (rather demanding in comparison to provisions of the past) qualitative criteria. In Choleva’s account of the process, this includes people who are ‘young’, people who can introduce ‘fresh’ and ‘novel’ ideas to the project. It was also deemed a ‘democratic process’, in that it necessitated opening up the dialogue inside the jury, (the design of which can be known to affect the outcome of the competition) as the majority of the judges must come by means of lottery from the judges pool. Obviously this was also a tool for the impartiality of the jury. It also represented a significant turn for the role of the ministry toward being a regulatory institution rather than an actual organizer, not in regard to its statutory obligations, but rather in its will to surrender part of its power to influence things first-hand.

That brings the discussion to the ministry’s actual policy of public procurement. The example was already set, since 1997, with the introduction of the Enopeisi Archaeologikon Xoron Athinas (EAXA) (standing for Unification of the Archaeological Sites of Athens S.A.)⁴, a special purpose body which oversaw a number of major interventions in Athens and other regions in Greece. The EAXA was exemplified in introducing major architecture competitions on urban planning, e.g., the ‘Grand Promenade’ around the Acropolis, or the four major squares in Athens (Syntagma Sq., Omonoia Sq., Monasteraki Sq., Koumoundourou Sq.), where the winners were actually afforded the opportunity to see the project through —something which is not considered a given in the practice of public procurement through architectural competitions.

During the term of Birbili, one of the most prominent examples of this kind of practice was the introduction of a major intervention in the centre of the city of Athens, along the axis of Panepistimiou St. The project was developed on the framework provided by the ‘Regulatory Plan of Athens/Attica 2021’ (RSA), and YPEKA’s own ‘Athens 2014’ Program of Actions, on the basis of the research program ‘Mutating characters and policies in the centers of the city of Athens and Piraeus’, commissioned by the YPEKA in September 2010 for the School of Architecture of the NTUA, under the academic supervision of Prof. Panayotis Tournikiotis. After a series of deliberations, the Alexander S. Onassis Public Benefit Foundation was appointed to organize an architecture competition titled ‘Re-Think Athens, Towards a New City Centre’, assuming, as it was stated in the Competition Brief, ‘all costs and expenses associated with carrying out the Competition and with the production of the final design’ (Onassis Foundation, 2012, article 3). At the end of this process, ‘[t]he design and studies produced [would] be donated by the Onassis Foundation to the Hellenic State, without return consideration. Thus, the Hellenic State is the final recipient of the design and project owner’ (Onassis Foundation, 2012, article 2).

Keeping away from criticism or praise, this line of collaboration among various organizing bodies from public authorities to the private sector was indicative of a practice of distribution of authority, certainly far from a centralized procurement policy. Tournikiotis, during his interview, in fact attributed this approach to the ‘same people’ behind the YPEKA decree:

The decision for the ‘New framework of conducting architecture competitions’ was composed and signed by the same driving forces of the YPEKA that pursued this particular intervention in the Center of Athens, ‘ran’ its implementation, and proposed the Onassis Foundation to undertake the studies and the competition on the specific terms they themselves suggested. (...) It could [have] be[en] pursued otherwise, or not at all, but it was the state that opted to proceed with this openness of spirit and objective.

This collaborative framework is also applied to the ideological dimension in Tournikiotis’ account of the project:

The final proposal, as it was developed, was obviously also the result of the collaboration of th[e] [participating] bodies, and it constitutes an ‘emblematic’ project of intervention in the Center (...) I don’t think there are hidden goals [behind this project]. All those who, in one way or another, participated in developing or realizing the proposal, projected upon it a part of their individual goals, on the convergence of which the project is currently developing.

In this context, it is important to notice also the subject of continuity. Following up on his argument, Tournikiotis continues:

It is characteristic that [the project] was supported by two YPEKA Ministers of different views, or that at the official presentation at the Onassis Foundation, on 21/3/2012, it was supported by YPIMEDI Minister Voridis who had no participation in the programming (...). His ideological intentions, as they were presented on that occasion, are by definition part of a collective understanding about the project, in which the exact opposite [intentions] are included. As far as the Onassis Foundation is concerned, it accepted the state’s proposal in accepting the responsibility of a public benefit foundation—and public benefactors, for that matter—in a period of crisis.

In the end, an argument can be maintained once more on distinguishing between ‘accountability’ and ‘responsibility’ as this line of procurement is accountable to the public by law, stressing therefore the significance of a proper legislative framework. Still it is evident that when a particular project is concerned, an actual policy is needed, which, at the bottom line, relies on actual people and their personal drive to ‘see the project through’.

Both Choleva and Tournikiotis suggested that involving a variety of bodies (especially the Onassis Foundation for Tournikiotis’ part) provided anchors that ensured that the project was fortified against changes in policy from a centralized procurement body. This can be seen as a ‘stratagem’ on the part of the YPEKA, however in the ministry’s own context it is far more preferable to consider it as ‘policy’. As such, this study can therefore attribute ethical values to the subject and assign actual people to the process. By the end of her interview, Choleva was keen to submit that initiatives such as ‘the continuity of the projects’, ‘the clarity of the procedure’, etc., persisted still within the walls of the ministry by ‘keeping clear records of deliberations and procedures’ and ‘maintaining a general disposition of good faith in the collaboration between colleagues’.

Conclusion

[A]lthough formulated in objective terms, most assessments of the merits and demerits of competitions are the product of a complicit relationship with the object under study, and a firm belief in its value. Although it should be more frequently avowed than it is, there is nothing wrong with that, for the competition cannot be separated from the beliefs that have been invested in it (Lipstadt & Bergdoll, 1989; Lipstadt, 2003) (Lipstadt, 2006, p. 10).

Kouzelis, Psilopoulou and Psilopoulos (2010) have argued that it takes more than prescriptive measures to address the question of quality in public procurement projects. In this paper we have tried to examine the context on which a set of prescriptive measures can actually become a policy, a discourse, or a way of conducting business. Going through the narratives of the key actors involved and the supporting literature, convergent themes were found on ‘actually seeing the project through’, on ‘reformative action’ (sometimes borderline with ‘statement’), on ‘experimentation’, and on the sub context of ‘having faith in the project’ altogether.

It should be evident that the stories recited were stories about people taking action. Considering Friedman’s argument (2012), this introduces an ethical dimension. The necessity of values was present in all three cases examined: consider Tsakonas’ question on ‘surplus value’, or Mistriotis and Anastasakis’ actualizing public dialogue as a borderline political action, or the YPEKA’s providence to safeguard the competition as a tool for public procurement, or fortifying the Panepistimiou St. project by forfeiting multiple levels of authority and control of its own. By this argument, a distinction between ‘accountability’ and ‘responsibility’ should also be evident.

Does the convergence of these narratives constitute ‘a paradigm shift’? For one, these cases sum up to a certain turn of events, both in ideology—as they suggest a notion of ‘breaking with a foul past’—and in practice. In seeing these narratives fuel initiative concerning architecture competitions, they can safely support Lipstadt’s assessment at the beginning of this section. Even more so, establishing a point of convergence between very different entities with equally diverse starting points is a valuable asset for further research into the particularities of the Greek praxis. Once researchers choose to abstain from judgments, such as ‘success’ or ‘failure’, they will find the necessary distance for the ‘reasonable questioning’ Lipstadt was calling for in Stockholm (Lipstadt, 2010, p. 71). In the same way, scholars can hardly assess the probability of achieving reform, either in Tsakonas’ business plan, the GRA ‘guerrilla’ approach, or the YPEKA legislative and procurement interventions; yet, in revealing the underlying narratives behind such diverse initiatives, they can once again see the architectural competition function both ‘as history and myth’ (See Lipstadt and Bergdoll, 1989), establishing the argument’s validity in this multiple case study for further reference.

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Notes

¹ A doctoral thesis submitted to the National Technical University of Athens (Lambropoulos, 2011) also deals with an overview of architecture competitions in a rather concrete framework, however it is hardly dealing with a contemporary Greek experience.

² The Ministry of Environment, Energy and Climate Change was established following the Decision of the Prime Minister N. 2876 on October 7, 2009. Formerly, the ministry was under the name of 'Ministry of Environment, Physical Planning and Public Works'.

³ The decree was amended with a new ministerial decree, less than a year later, on May 4, 2012. Although most of the alterations can be considered technical, it's hard not to notice the exclusion from the provisions of the 2011 decree of those projects that are funded by the Joint European Support for Sustainable Investment in City Areas (JESSICA) program. For further information, see Projects Eligibility | JESSICA (JESSICA and Investment Funds & European Investment Bank, n.d.)

⁴ EAXA was founded in October 1997 as a Société Anonyme type company owned entirely by the Greek Ministry of Culture, and the YPEKA, assigned to 'implement a program for unification of the archaeological sites of Athens, as detailed in the specific plan that includes physical projects and other interventions'. See UNIFICATION OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES IN ATHENS. 2008–2009.