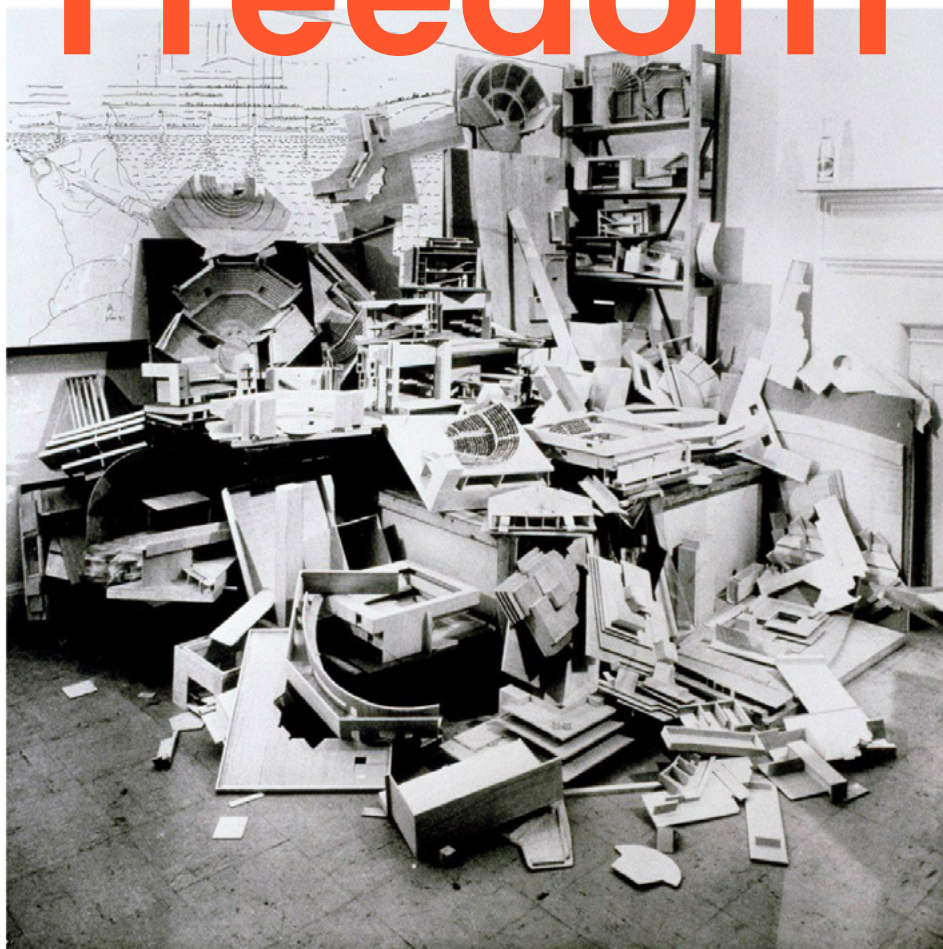


# The Myth of Freedom



# The Myth of Freedom

A study on architecture competitions  
and their realities

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Cover: Scrapped models produced by architectural workers  
during the National Theater competition in London.  
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**PART ONE**  
**BUILDING THE ARCHITECTS**

# Beaux-Arts School



Fig.1 First year students presenting their projects to of teachers and guests © by the author (2024)

## GUILDS AND “CONFRÉRIES”

From the second half of the 17th century onwards, the creation of the *Académies Royales* in France marked a major turning point in the training of artistic professions. This centralization institutionalized arts education, breaking with the system of guilds and *confréries* that had prevailed until then.<sup>1</sup> The latter, inherited from feudal times, were associations of solidarity bringing together craftsmen and merchants, while regulating professional practices within trades.<sup>2</sup>

1. Cret, “The Ecole Des Beaux-Arts and Architectural Education,” 4.

2. Universalis, “CONFRÉRIES DE MÉTIER.”

Membership of a guild was a prerequisite for practicing a trade, and training was generally based on an apprenticeship system in the workshops of established masters. These guilds played a key role in the transmission of knowledge, particularly in the field of construction. The *maîtres-maçons*<sup>3</sup> played a multi-skilled role encompassing both design and construction, functions that were gradually separated with the official recognition of the architect’s profession: the architect dedicated to design, while the *maître-maçons* concentrated solely on execution.

The founding of the Royal Academy of Architecture in 1671, by Louis XIV at the instigation of Jean-Baptiste Colbert, institutionalized and centralized theoretical knowledge, aesthetics and classical art studies.<sup>4</sup>

3. Patrick, “Un Peu d’histoire....”

4. Patrick.

L'ÉCOLE DES BEAUX-ARTS

The end of the 18th century was a period of profound upheaval for royal institutions and the cultural works of the Ancien Régime: the French Revolution brought down the king’s head, but not that of the Royal Academy of Architecture, which merged with the Académie des Beaux-Arts in 1816, officially taking the name École des Beaux-Arts in 1865. This new educational model was inspired by the schools of the “Accademia del Disegno”, founded by the Medici family, and the “Accademia di San Luca”, which helped build the reputation of the Italian Renaissance in the course of the 16th century, which was to become the stylistic standard.<sup>5</sup>

5. “The Beaux-Arts Tradition.”

Mainly funded by the French state, the Académie des Beaux-Arts represented the monarchy’s supervision of the arts. Members of the Académie were appointed by the king and bore the title of *Architecte du Roi*, enjoying the privileges and remuneration associated with the position. The Académie played a central role in defining “good taste”, teaching architectural principles guided by the promotion of a liberal education based on the individual and competitiveness, and supervising major royal projects.<sup>6</sup> However, if we look at the competition program and references offered to students at the École, we may well wonder whether the founding of this institution did not actually seek to reflect the monarchy’s desire to control and promote the arts in France.<sup>7</sup>

6. Caroline, “Fondation de l’Académie royale d’architecture.”

7. Cret, 3.

The École des Beaux-Arts itself, notably its main building designed by Félix Duban, illustrated it: the building served both as an architectural model, a showcase for fragments from the now-defunct Musée des Monuments Français, and a teaching facility, housing a vast educational collection of paintings, models and plaster casts.<sup>8</sup>

8. “The Beaux-Arts Tradition.”

A LIBERAL STUDENT FOR A JOYFUL ARCHITECT

Since the concept of freedom can only be conceived in contrast to the strictest of regulations, the Ecole was to develop the most precise and rigid approach of any system of architectural education ever conceived.<sup>11</sup>

The École des Beaux-Arts aligned itself with the liberal thinkings emerging at the same period, based on the principles of universalism, individual freedom and free competition. The school sought to prepare “a joyful experience”<sup>9</sup> professional practice by promoting liberal values through its two pillars: freedom\* and competition.<sup>10</sup>

\* Paradoxically, this freedom was accompanied by strict rules. The school developed one of the most rigorous educational systems ever conceived in architecture with a structure controlled down to the smallest detail: the recruitment and tenure of its teachers, the pedagogical content, the sequence and number of exercises, and even the size and quality of the student body.<sup>12</sup>

In stark contrast, students enjoyed a degree of freedom unheard of at the time. There were no academic, national, ethnic or age prerequisites for entry.<sup>13</sup> Once admitted, each student could choose his or her design teacher and the studio to which he or she was attached. They could personalize their course and were not obliged to follow a fixed timetable or attend lectures, as long as they passed the required exams.<sup>14</sup>

9. Carlhian, “The Ecole Des Beaux-Arts.”

10. Cret, “The Ecole Des Beaux-Arts and Architectural Education,” 7.

11. Carlhian, “The Ecole Des Beaux-Arts,” 7.

12. Carlhian, 7.

13. Carlhian, 7.

14. Cret, “The Ecole Des Beaux-Arts and Architectural Education,” 10–11.

15. “L’entrée des femmes à l’Ecole des Beaux-Arts.”

The School’s accessibility needs to be put into perspective, however. Women were strictly excluded until 1897, thanks in particular to the activism of artist Hélène Bertaux, who had to fight against the patriarchal, even misogynistic, policies of the period. Their introduction was greeted by protests from male students, worried about female competition for prizes and medals, and the decline in the École’s prestige, which led to the creation of separate studios. It wasn’t until 1898 that the Ecole’s internal regulations recognized the presence of female artists, and 1903 that women were allowed to compete for the Grand Prix de Rome.<sup>15</sup>

## A SCHOOL FOR ALL ?

Admission to the École des Beaux-Arts was under recommendation of a sponsor until 1823, when a system of *Concours d'Admission* was introduced.<sup>16</sup> This competition included several eliminatory tests, each allowing candidates to earn points towards selection. However, only the top 40 students were admitted to each of the two annual sessions. But it wasn't only architectural skills that were examined: a test required the creation of an inspired clay bas-relief, and examinations in scientific disciplines completed the process.<sup>17</sup>

Most of the candidates had only been schooled in the French mandatory system. The necessary specialized scientific knowledge\* needed to be acquired in private institutions or through practical training under the wing of a qualified architect.<sup>18</sup> Although no information could be found on the cost of these courses, we can assume that continuing education in private establishments would have represented a consequent investment. Despite the fact that admission was almost costfree, the knowledge required to succeed could already have been subject to a pre-selection process based on the aspiring students' financial situation and social background. This was also reflected in the profile of the American students who attended the École, who belonged for the most part to the American bourgeoisie.<sup>19</sup>

## CURRICULUM

It's interesting to note that the academic curriculum was designed to cultivate notions of freedom and competition. In fact, it is possible to identify in each of the years learning methodologies and examination conditions that led to the construction of an approach to architectural based on individual achievement, fierce competition and elitism. A working culture that would later set the standards for the professional environment of the "graduate architect".

16. "The Beaux-Arts Tradition."

17. Carlhian, "The Ecole Des Beaux-Arts," 8.

\* This is reminiscent of the system still in place today of Classes préparatoires aux grandes écoles (prepa), which many students take before sitting the entrance exams.

18. Carlhian, 8.

19. "About Buildings + Cities."

## L'ATELIER

Education at the École des Beaux-Arts combined theory and practice, dividing knowledge between academic studies in the classroom and direct transmission in the studio. Similar to today's university curriculum, students attended theoretical lectures in the auditorium of the academy building, covering a variety of subjects such as mathematics, architectural theory, history and construction.

On a practical level, architectural skills were developed in *ateliers*. These became a key component of training at the École des Beaux-Arts when they were first established in the 18th century. From among the three affiliated to the École or the eight other independent ones, known as *ateliers libres*, students were free to choose their teacher, commonly called *patron*\* by visiting them to get better acquainted, in the hope that they would agree to mentor

\* The patrons were renowned architects

20. "The Beaux-Arts Tradition."

their training. Indeed, it was the latter who would pass on his technical knowledge,<sup>20</sup> his approach to professional practice and, above all, his work culture.

**The professor of painting, drawing, architecture, sculpture or engraving, in a word, the head of any atelier, is called "the boss" at the École. The teacher of anatomy, history, perspective, etc., remains the professor. At most, with age and according to the degree of affection shown him by his pupils, he becomes "le père un tel".<sup>21</sup>**

\* Who also commonly referred to themselves as "workers" according to <sup>22</sup>

It is through certain practices and a certain jargon used by the students\* to describe the atelier, that we can draw a parallel between the atelier and the office. Between the student and the employee. The admissions interview and the rhetoric of the employment relationship have made the studio a tool (in spite of itself?) of internalization of the hierarchical, paternalistic culture of the profit-oriented architectural practice.

These structures prepared students for the various competitions required by the curriculum, but

above all in the hope that they would take part in the most prestigious of them all: the Grand Prix de Rome. The five-year scholarship at the French Academy in Rome was certainly worthwhile, but it was above all synonymous with the certainty of being awarded important public commissions and, above all, the eternal recognition of France's cultural elite.<sup>24</sup>

21. Lemaistre, L'Appel En Loge., 39.

22. Lemaistre, 40.  
23. Lemaistre, 39.

24. Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Office of the President, "Reports of the President and Treasurer."

However, the spaces also had a social character that it is important to note. Paul P. Cret underlines the central importance of the ateliers in the pedagogical approach, since they were spaces dedicated to collaborative learning and mentoring between students. Students shared advice, critics and experiences, creating a collective learning environment that evolved alongside the competitive dimension of the exercises.<sup>25</sup>

**On the contrary, he chooses his atelier manager, whom he visits and by whom he must be accepted. This free choice is a bond of friendship, a kind of tribute to the man who will always remain "the boss" for him.<sup>23</sup>**

25. Cret, "The Ecole Des Beaux-Arts and Architectural Education," 11.

## SECOND CLASS AND THE LOGE

Having passed the entrance examination, students were accepted in the Second Class but not yet considered fully integrated into the school. They had to follow a program structured into exercises designed to develop theoretical knowledge alongside the practical design.

1. Scientific and technical knowledge: The various courses covered statics, materials, descriptive geometry, stereotomy and architectural history. These courses were supplemented by ex-cathedra lectures with written and oral examinations.

2. Architectural design: Exercises called analytiques required students to represent elements of classical



Fig.2 (25.) Students from the Atelier Pascal posing © Julia Morgan (1890)

architecture in large-scale, detailed drawings. In addition, exercises called *esquisse-esquisse* were offered each year. In total, a student had to pass at least 3 analytical exercises and 2 sketching exercises before embarking on contemporary architectural projects. A special course was also devoted to the study of perspective\*, taught through blackboard exercises, underlining the importance the École attached to realistic, human point of view drawings.<sup>26</sup>

One of the most important exercises - and one that deserves our full attention - was the “*esquisse en loge*”. It consisted of individual work, carried out in isolation in a specifically dedicated space of the École, the “*loge*”. For this work, which Jean Paul Carlhian - teacher at the Harvard University who studied in the Ecole until 1948 - describes as “of considerable importance and vital consequence”,<sup>27</sup> students could count on no one but themselves. This draft was later developed in the atelier into a “*projet rendu*”. Students had to pass five of these exercises out of the six offered annually in order to advance to the first class.

The spatial condition of the “*esquisse en loge*” plays a role which consequences need to be underlined as the “*loge*” introduced a condition of isolation, both physical and symbolic, into the students’ training.\* While such assessment conditions may be intended to evaluate individual student competence, they leave students alone to face the pressure and consequence of their individual performance, in stark contrast to the mutual support that prevails among fellow atelier comrades. This environment, designed to support the school’s liberal ideals, reinforced the idea that success depends on individual effort, divorced from collaboration. While these examination conditions are still very familiar today, we might ask ourselves if they still contribute to establish a learning culture based on isolated performance and individual gratification.

\* No project required a perspective representation, but the 1863 Grand Prix de Rome did although not officially part of the curriculum. Its teaching of this specific mode of representation from the yearly education year can be read as a way to spark interest in future participation among students. We might wonder whether some students have dreamed of achieving the prestige of the Prix de Rome with one of their perspectives?

26. Carlhian, “The Ecole Des Beaux-Arts,” 8.

27. Carlhian, 8.

\* Funny enough, the first building especially build for the Ecole between 1820 and 1829 is named “Bâtiment des Loges”.



Fig. 3 (28) The “Loge” Call © Alexis Lemaistre (1889)

“EVERYTHING DONE AND STUDIED  
IS FOR A COMPETITION”

In the First Class, students were no longer required to follow technical or constructive courses, and therefore devoted their entire time in ateliers to the practice of architectural design, and this through competition. In the context of the Beaux-Arts institution, competition was seen not as a “necessary evil”, but as “exciting and rewarding”, part of architectural practice.<sup>28</sup> This principle was part of a liberal vision in which success was based on the ability to stand out through individual performance. Competition thus became an educational goal in itself, and a pedagogical tool: same instruction for everyone, always under time constraint, always in competition with their fellow students. The First Class was its clearest illustration.

In all, no less than 18 competitions were held, 6 of which were based on the lodge system described above. The competitions carried the names of renown architect of the period : “*Concours Rougevin*” focused on time constraints, requiring work to be completed over a four-day period without leaving the school premises, *Concours Godeboeuf* addressed issues of landscape, urban planning, *Concours Delaon* large-scale concepts and representation of futuristic and visionary ideas.<sup>30</sup>

A central element of these competitions was the “*parti*”, i.e. the conceptual idea of the project, which allowed students to demonstrate their capacity to formulate and develop a basic idea, implemented according to a “case system” supposed to represent a real-life situation.<sup>31</sup> All renderings were set out in detailed specifications, including an introduction, functional requirements, dimensions, site, and the number and scale of drawings required.<sup>32</sup>

“Everything done and studied  
is for a competition; the  
student does not make a  
single pencil stroke that is  
not part of a competition.”<sup>29</sup>

28. Cret, 7.

29. Guadet, “Les jurys de l’École des beaux-arts et les professeurs,” 39.

30. Cret, “The Ecole Des Beaux-Arts and Architectural Education,” 9.

31. Cret, 11.

32. “The Beaux-Arts Tradition.”

33. Cret, “The Ecole Des Beaux-Arts and Architectural Education,” 12.

34. “The Beaux-Arts: Model, Monster ... Phoenix?,” 51.

Since validation of the projects depended on the judgement of an academic committee, the students were encouraged to propose solutions that seemed most attractive to a jury to convince, often to the detriment of the functional and, above all, constructive aspects.<sup>33</sup> Because this pedagogical approach survived the centuries that Françoise Fromonot points the finger at a competition culture that impoverished proposals in favor of a disproportionate emphasis on visual effect, while cultivating the “artist-architect model”.<sup>34</sup>

WORK, WORK, WORK

It seems clear that the Ecole des Beaux-Arts curriculum has built a culture of overwork within its institution. The ever-increasing number of competitions took place in a short calendar, and students were asked to respond under the weight of important deliverables. Finally, this situation was exacerbated by the intense competition, accentuated by the arrival of talented students from abroad, who were driven to distinguish themselves from other candidates in

35. Carlhian, “The Ecole Des Beaux-Arts,” a frenetic quest to enter the Grand Prix de Rome competition.<sup>35</sup>

DIPLÔME AND GRAND PRIX DE ROME

The Diplôme and, even more so, the Prix de Rome were considered absolute consecrations at the École des Beaux-Arts. By giving over-proportionate importance to competitions, students often neglected other essential aspects of their training, necessary for a complete and balanced architectural practice.<sup>36</sup> This quest for prestige was sometimes even supported by some “patrons”, who were willing to grant passes to their candidates, despite shortcomings in their practical training.<sup>37</sup>

Through this ruse questioning the ethics of some patrons, it is possible to glimpse what this competition

symbolically represented: a feeling of superiority in the face of the institutional rules of the Ecole, as well as those of the rest of the student body. The distinctions served to reinforce the prestige of the candidates, which by trickle-down helped to establishing a distinct status for the students especially trained for the Grand Prix de Rome, those who see themselves as the embodiment of the School's reputation, even its *raison d'être*.<sup>38</sup> Consequently, competitions could eclipse the diversified skills required to qualify as an architect and practice professionally. Whatever we may think of the posture of some Beaux-Arts candidate, we can nevertheless glimpse a shift that still takes place today between “student” and “competitor”, or even between “architecture” and “competition”.

## INFLUENCES AND HERITAGES

The Ecole's influence was matched by its renown, since it was not limited to the other Beaux-Arts schools through France - which were under its authority<sup>39</sup> - but spread throughout much of the Western world, where liberalism was taking hold. The competition as the pedagogical basis of a curriculum and its style of representation became, during the 19th century, the model for Fine Art Schools founded by international students returning home.<sup>40</sup>

American students, who represented almost 20% of the student body as early as 1846<sup>41</sup>, were rubbed shoulders with the 340 Swiss students who attended the Ecole in Paris between 1800 and 1968.<sup>42</sup> The latter directly or indirectly contributed to the spread of a study ethic and culture within Swiss architectural schools. If not through ateliers, modes of representation, juries, prizes or exhibitions, then surely through the “jargon” still unfortunately used today to describe our culture of excessive work and competitive attitude.

38. Cret, “The Ecole Des Beaux-Arts and Architectural Education,” 13.

39. “The Beaux-Arts Tradition.”

40. Pause, “Teaching the Design Studio, a Case Study : MIT's Department of Architecture, 1865-1974.”

41. “The Beaux-Arts Tradition.”

42. Crosnier Leconte, “Les élèves suisses à l'École des beaux-arts de Paris 1800-1968,” 15.

It is unclear whether the culture of the Geneva school, often described as a “product”<sup>43</sup> of Paris, are still present within Swiss architectural schools. If not through workshops, representation, juries, prizes or exhibitions, it is surely through the “jargon” still unfortunately used today to describe our culture of excessive and competitive work.<sup>44</sup>

43. Lüthi, *La Construction de l'architecte*, 44.

44. Lüthi, 50.



Fig. 4 (44) Drawings transported on a “charette” followed by apparently late students © Unknown (1965)

# The Professionalization of The Swiss Architect

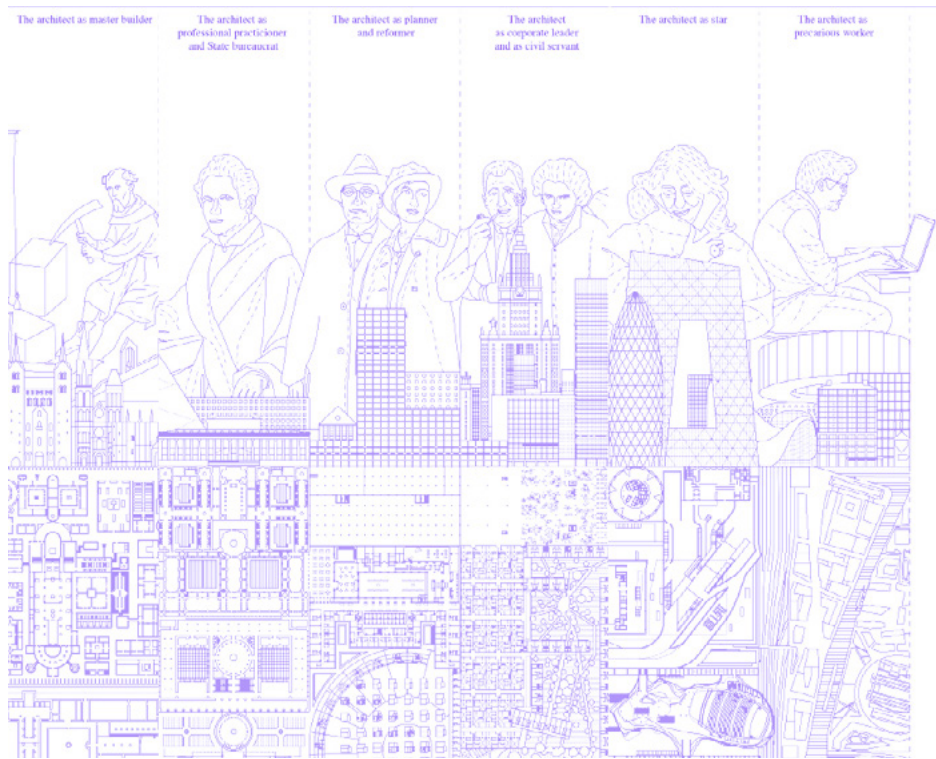


Fig.5 Placeholder © by XXX (2024)

## THE JOYFUL ARCHITECT

The 17th century saw the emergence of liberal professions, driven by the expansion of industrial capitalism and the growth of the secondary and tertiary sectors. Growing urbanization redefined the relationship between society and work, paving the way for a new profile of the architect. At the beginning of the 19th century, architecture was still primarily a craft, often acquired without higher education, and was seen as more of a breadwinner than a career <sup>45</sup>. However, this status began to change, with the profession gradually becoming a full-time occupation requiring a more advanced cultural and technical background. This transformation parallels the social evolution of architects. The status of builder is valued, and architects begin to see their profession in terms of a “career” <sup>46, 47</sup>.

45. Lüthi, *La Construction de l'architecte*, 70.

46. Lüthi, 117

Professionalization also accelerated with the definitive separation of design from execution, of the atelier from the building site. The architect acquired a distinctive role, differentiated from craftsmen, marking a turning point in his social and economic ascent <sup>48</sup>. This evolution towards the status of architect was built at the expense

of the other actors involved in construction, reinforcing the gap between those who could afford to study and those who could not.

47. Lüthi, 30

48. Lüthi, 70

In the Swiss context which interest us, the training of architects remained essentially local, passed on in family workshops where outdated methods and outmoded models prevailed. However, the growth of the bourgeoisie, attached to artistic culture, encouraged a growing number of Swiss architects to pursue their studies at schools in Paris, Munich or Karlsruhe. These prestigious schools, with their European renown, offered diplomas that enabled them to make a name for themselves on their return to Switzerland. Graduates were perceived as representatives of “good” architecture, giving them an advantage in the eyes of clients.<sup>49</sup> The absence of architectural schools in Switzerland before 1855 accentuated this “academic exodus” and the classification of Swiss architects.<sup>50</sup> However, until the 1830s, very few went to study at foreign schools, due to the financial burden it represented for the more modest classes.<sup>51</sup> Similarly to French Beaux-Arts students, only young people from privileged, sometimes aristocratic families, had the financial means to access these training courses.<sup>52</sup>

## THE POLYTECHNICUM

The political upheavals in Switzerland in the 1840s led to a new vision of the state and the creation of the 1848 Constitution. The question of the Confederation’s role in education was at the heart of parliamentary debates, which were reflected in the desire to centralize and federalize the training of Swiss architects. It was in this context that the Polytechnicum was founded in Zurich in 1855, of which the “Bauschule ” was one of the pillars. It was designed to solve two major problems: the exodus of Swiss students forced to train abroad to acquire architectural knowledge, and the technical challenges of developing the national infrastructure needed to support urban growth.<sup>53</sup> Simultaneously, the teaching led to the establishment of two distinct architectural styles

49. Lüthi, 31.

50. Lüthi, 41.

51. Lüthi, 30.

52. Crosnier Leconte, “Les élèves suisses à l’École des beaux-arts de Paris 1800-1968,” 23..

53. Lüthi, La Construction de l’architecte, 42.

among Swiss architects: the “Heimatstil”<sup>54</sup> and the “Semperian style”.<sup>55</sup> One for private commissions, the other for public ones.

54. Lüthi, 45.

55. Lüthi, 46.

The opening of the training school was therefore synonymous with access to public training for Swiss architects. However, as was the case with the Ecole of Paris, women were excluded from this privilege and had to seek alternative training opportunities. This situation persisted until 1867, when the Polytechnicum reversed its policy and began admitting female architecture students.<sup>56</sup>

56. Lang and Gubler, “Les premières femmes architectes de Suisse,” 17.

From the beginning, the school benefited from the prestige conferred by the commitment of Gottfried Semper, an architect and theoretician of European renown. While Paris trained architects who were perceived as “artists”, Zurich, like Munich and Stuttgart, focused on training architect-engineers. The latter acquired a scientific base enabling them to appropriate new materials and processes, such as steel construction and reinforced concrete, which were essential in meeting the demands of a rapidly changing market.<sup>57</sup>

57. Lüthi, La Construction de l’architecte, 43.

But the most important aspect of training in the 19th century was its recognition. It was against this backdrop that emerging professional societies sought to enhance the value of the title by protecting it. This period marked a break with purely “empirical” practices, as the architect redefined himself as an “expert” combining theoretical, artistic and technical knowledge. This transformation conferred an intellectual dimension on the profession, affirming its role beyond that of a mere site executor.<sup>58</sup> The introduction of diplomas, awarded by institutions such as Zurich’s Polytechnicum as early as 1855 or the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris in the 1860s, became a means of structuring the profession. These qualifications established a framework for circumscribing

58. Lüthi, 32.

and privileging a select group of practitioners considered the most competent to respond to prestigious commissions.<sup>59</sup>

59. Lüthi, 79.

This evolution led to a hierarchy of practitioners: at the top, graduates of the “Grandes Ecoles”, such as the “DPLG” \* or Parisian graduates, grouped together in professional associations, displayed their status by signing their buildings, a practice borrowed from artists. This gesture symbolizes their desire to assert social and artistic legitimacy, creating a clear distinction between practitioners trained in the field, without institutional recognition.<sup>60</sup>

\* Diplômé Par Le  
Gouvernements

60. Lüthi, 80.

## THE PRIVATE COMMISSION AND THE SPECULATIVE ARCHITECT

From the second half of the 19th century onwards, economic development, population affluence and the resulting social transformations led to an upsurge in private architectural commissions. This dynamic, supported by the growth of the secondary and tertiary sectors and the revision of commercial law, saw the emergence of new clients: limited companies and housing cooperatives.<sup>61</sup> In most Swiss cities, private commissions accounted for up to three-quarters of architectural projects. Although the main focus is on housing, it also includes commercial buildings and large-scale real estate projects.<sup>62</sup>

61. Lüthi, 63.

62. Lüthi, 63.

Private commissions fall into two categories. The traditional commission, from “physical” individuals, had become a symbol of prestige. Since it offered architects a privileged space for “artistic” expression, notably through the construction of residential buildings, but above all the villas.<sup>63</sup> This model reflected the aspirations of the upper and lower middle classes, for whom the architect became the most accessible and visible artist. Thanks to the combination of the practical utility and symbolic value of his work, they occupied a central position in society.

63. Lüthi, 63.



Fig.6 (25.) Students from the Atelier Pascal posing © Julia Morgan (1890)

It should be noted that this “central position” has nevertheless a gendered dimension, and reflected the rejection of female architects from the professional sphere. Women’s access to the prestigious training offered by Europe’s various polytechnical schools did not therefore mean that they benefited from the same trajectories as their male contemporaries. As they were mainly confronted with domestic architecture seen as less valuable.<sup>64</sup>

Driven by investors and financial institutions, real estate commissions are part of an economic and speculative logic, marking a transition where buildings are no longer simply objects of personal consumption, but become financial investments.<sup>66</sup> The emergence of the “architect-contractor” reflects the profound interdependence between architecture and finance. Actively involved at all levels of real estate speculation, they play a key role in the construction of large-scale urban developments, generating regular and significant income. The dual role of architect Louis Joël can be taken as an example: combining his career with key roles in real estate speculation, notably as director of the “Société Immobilière d’Ouchy” and manager of the “Société Immobilière Lausannoise”.<sup>67</sup>

This period saw a general infatuation with construction, perceived as both a status symbol and a safe haven. This context profoundly transformed the role of the architect. Under the pressure of new construction techniques and the demands of capitalism, the architect now positions himself as an engineer, manager and financier: technical and managerial skills became key elements of the profession.<sup>68</sup>

By many, the work of women architects could only be seen as an extension of their domestic activities. For many, the work of women architects could only be seen as an extension of their domestic activities.<sup>65</sup>

64. Lang and Gubler, “Les premières femmes architectes de Suisse,” 18.

65. Lang and Gubler, 18.

\* In this context, architects no longer confine themselves to designing buildings, but took on roles such as asset manager, shareholder or even founder of financial companies. Their technical expertise in construction and urban planning is essential for efficiency and cost efficiency.

66. Lüthi, Le client de l’architecte, 125.

67. “Architecture and Real Estate Speculation during the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century | EHNE.”

68. Aureli and Korbi, “Base and Superstructure: A Vulgar Survey of Western Architecture,” 2.

## UNIFIED WITH STYLE

The consolidation of the professional body is partly due to the construction of buildings for the Confederation. Although this movement started late compared to neighboring countries, it reflects the desire to benefit from the institutionalization of architectural training by creating a distinctive architectural language for federal and cantonal buildings. This impetus was embodied by the creation of the Federal Construction Office in 1874, which was responsible for such emblematic projects as the Zurich Polytechnicum and the Federal Palace.<sup>69</sup>

Thus, the education given at the Polytechnicum was grounded in architectural models representative of the state\*, which resulted in the construction of a distinct federal architecture. Gottfried Semper, the central figure of this school, left his mark on generations of architects who took up and passed on his doctrine, nearly unchanged until 1923, giving rise to the “Semperian style”.<sup>70</sup>

This architecture became a tool for meeting the desire to unify the entire territory of the newly-founded Confederation under a common architectural language, conveying a Swiss and patriotic identity.<sup>71</sup> This was evident in the types of buildings constructed for the Confederation, such as the military barracks spread across different regions,<sup>72</sup> or the Federal Palace, built between 1894 and 1902 by Hans Auer, an architect who graduated from the Polytechnicum.<sup>73</sup> The Federal Supreme Court, built in Lausanne between 1922 and 1927, is another interesting example, since it was designed by three architects from the French-speaking part of Switzerland who were not trained in Zurich, but who nevertheless adopted the Semperian style to embody the authority of the Confederation.

\* A phenomenon we had already observed in France with the typological or stylistic references taught in Paris

69. Lüthi, La Construction de l’architecte, 47.

70. Lüthi, 46.

71. Lüthi, 48.

72. Lüthi, 47.

73. “Palais fédéral.”

And that was that. The institutionalization of architectural knowledge made it possible to disseminate a distinctly “Swiss” architectural language, which served as the foundation for the construction of a professional architect who mobilized his intellectual capital for the construction of the state’s representative apparatus.\*

\*However, this unification must be qualified, as it collided with the different identities of the linguistic regions. The stylistic influences taught in Paris and Zurich reflect this contrast, giving rise to a predominance of styles specific to French- and German-speaking Switzerland. <sup>74</sup>

74. Fröhlich, “Edilité Publique Fédérale: La Poste, 1885-1902,” 49.

## A NECESSARY COMPETITION ?

Directly inherited from education, architectural competitions took root in a Swiss context dominated by liberal ideologies: <sup>75</sup> Cantons and cities aligned with the doctrine encouraged them, particularly private competitions from the 1860s onwards, which reinforced their role in the construction market. The economic crisis of the 1870s and 1880s accelerated this trend, with competitions seen as a means of controlling costs. <sup>76</sup>

75. Lüthi, *Le client de l'architecte*, 90.

76. Lüthi, 88.

The professionalization of the architect was dependent on the creation of their own identity, based on distinctive technical expertise and cultural capital. <sup>77</sup> Architectural competitions provided a platform where architects could affirm themselves, helping to establish a classification among those involved in construction, and positioning architects as key figures in the transformation of urban space. This culminated in the expansion plans of Swiss cities around 1900, of which Geneva is a perfect example. <sup>78</sup>

77. Brain, “Practical Knowledge and Occupational Control.”

78. Lüthi, *Le client de l'architecte*, 86; Lüthi, 94.

Complementing private competitions, the procedures organized by the Federal Construction Office from 1888 onwards also established competitions in the Swiss professional landscape. <sup>79</sup> Although far fewer in number than private procedures, they offered unprecedented prestige within the architectural profession, as well as the certainty of a long-term future



(Fig.7) Federal Palace conceptualized by Louis-Ernest Prince, Jean Béguin and Alphonse Laverrière as symbol of the State © by the author (2024)

for their practice. In this sense, public procedures also reflected the liberal and nationalist policies of the Swiss Confederation, in which the profession was built upon.

But the introduction of the competition system was not without its challenges. The fiasco of the competition for the Federal Supreme Court highlights the fragility of the process. To legitimize it, the procedure needed structure. This was established through professional standards embodied in the SIA (Swiss Society of Engineers and Architects), created in 1837, which defended the professional interests of architects.

<sup>80</sup> In 1876, the SIA drew up regulations for competitions, in response to their being called into question, and thus served as a legal basis for public authorities that were often supportive but inexperienced. <sup>81</sup>

Without any surprise, competitions were echoed in the progressive mediatization of the architectural profession, bringing visibility to architects and promoting the profession. Reviews founded in the second half of the 19th century, such as the “Schweizerische Polytechnische Zeitschrift” or the “Bulletin vaudois de la Société des ingénieurs et architectes”, played a key role in promoting them, publishing competitions, and examples of projects. <sup>83</sup>

Competitions then be understood as a means for architects to communicate their conceptual skills and professional values. This visibility enables them to reinforce their identity as a coherent group, while aligning their practice with developing standards in the field. This showcasing of their work remains one of the motivations for participating today. It therefore appears to be structuring. From training to practice, the 19th-century professional architect is built on the competition.

79. Lüthi, Le client de l'architecte, 47.

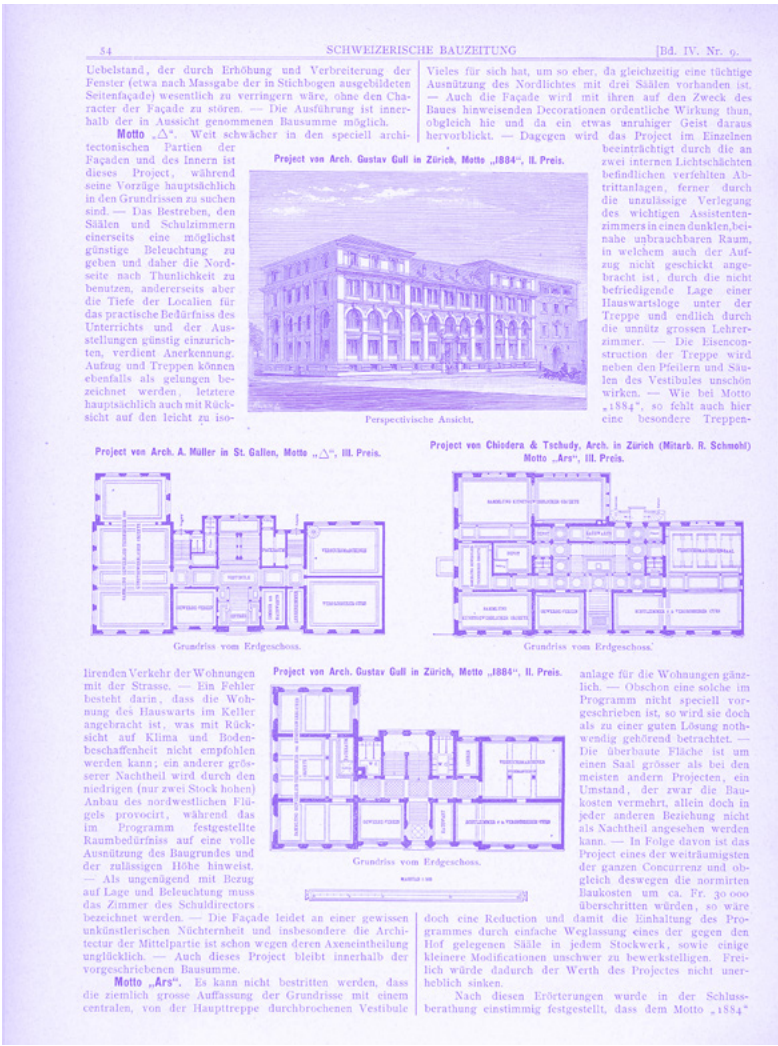
80. Brain, “Practical Knowledge and Occupational Control,” 87.

81. Lüthi, Le client de l'architecte, 88.

**Emulation between competitors, producing great variation in the study of the proposed program. The recognition of existing and emerging talent. The extinction of nepotism and the abolition of architectural monopolies.** <sup>82</sup>

82. Bulletin de la Société Vaudoise des Ingénieurs et Architectes (BSVA), “De l'institution Des Concours En Architecture.”

83. Lüthi, Le client de l'architecte, 75.



(Fig. 8) Results publication of competition for the building of the Museum of Industry and Crafts in St. Gallen. © Schweizerische Bauzeitung (1884)

The earliest regulations surrounding competitions can be seen as the beginnings of those in place today. Although more research is needed on the evolution of competition principles, anonymity already offered emerging talent an opportunity to gain recognition and, sometimes, commissions. In a context marked by patriarchal scepticism about the value of the work of women architects, we might well ask: did the competition enable some of them to gain access to mandates that would otherwise have been denied to them?

Like the Western architects of the late 19th century, the professional Swiss architect is a white, male and bourgeois figure. He is trained to build the devices that represent the powers that be, using his intellectual capital and mobilizing his technical skills. This is reflected in architecture theorist Pier Vittorio Aureli's assertion that the architect reflects the organization of society, its power relations and the social division of labor. This is why the figure of the architect is positioned as an ideological figure.<sup>84</sup>

84. Aureli and Korbi, "Base and Superstructure: A Vulgar Survey of Western Architecture," 2.

# The competition as a system

First of all, it's necessary to define the concept of "competition" based on what it means today and represent its realities. Giving a definition of the competition is a complex task, as we have seen through the different eras the variety and meanings it had for architects and the society in which it exists. However, what we can draw from the analysis is that the competition is part of a social practice that institutes the architect not only as a specialist in a discipline, but also as a professional in a specific activity, the "project".<sup>85</sup> A space for invention created by society as a whole, the competition can be understood as a system comprising a network of interconnected actors, whose motivations and capacities for influence evolve over time. Governed by rules of behavior, this dynamic system operates within a framework of blurred boundaries, where relationships between actors are constantly evolving.

85. Robin, "L'invention de l'espace et Ses «laboratoires»," 16.

\*parallel study commissions, ideas competitions, project competitions or study and execution competitions

\*open, selective or on invitation

Nevertheless, the dynamics of the "competition" system are determined by the type of competition\*, the procedures\* as well as its legal framework.

Those aspects will deliberately be left aside, in order to focus solely on the case of an open public competition procedure.

86. Tracés – Bulletin technique de la Suisse romande, "Concours d'architecture et d'urbanisme: Pratique en Suisse Romande."

Accordingly, the competition must comply with current legislation, such as the Federal Law on Public Procurement (LMP) and its implementing

ordinances.<sup>86</sup> In the case of a “SIA-certified” competition, however, the regulatory framework comes from the “Règlement des concours d’architecture et d’ingénierie” defined by SIA Commission 142 and acquires contractual value. Among the articles, we can highlight those the core ones:<sup>87</sup>

- Art. 1 - Anonymity\*  
\*defined as “the raison d’être”
- Art. 13 - Competition program
- Art. 20 - Evaluation criteria
- Art. 22 - Prizes and compensation
- Art. 26 - Copyright

However, legal rules alone cannot determine the operation of a competition, and by extension selection, as it is only by itself capable of discernment and choice. Consequently, the notion of “ethical rules” allows us to understand the principles underlying the behavior of the actors involved in the competition process.<sup>88</sup>

In the chapter entitled “ The Ethics of Competitions ”, architect Bernard Attinger sets out the development of ethical rules specific to the client, the jury and the competitors.

It is possible to distinguish between primary, secondary and even peripheral actors and to categorize them according to their degree of influence on the process. \*

\* Determining the degree of influence is not an easy task, since it depends on the specific context of each competition. Moreover, its precise definition is of little relevance to our discussion. The only purpose of the proposed classification is to reduce the complexity of the competition system.

PRIMARY AND SECONDARY ACTORS

The main actors can be defined by their direct involvement in the competition, according to the SIA regulations, the governing body of the architectural profession. Indeed, the client, the jury and the participants are the actors with the greatest capacity for influence, and the competition depends on their involvement. By reading the contractual framework for an SIA competition,

supplemented by Bernard Attinger’s ethical rules, the roles, influences and motivations of each primary actor can be understood as follows.

The client, whether an individual or a legal entity, is involved in the competition. He defines the project’s program and selects the jury, while guaranteeing anonymity. It influences the process by setting the judging criteria and ensuring compliance with the rules, with the freedom to follow the jury’s recommendations or not. Its aim is to select a qualitative project and a reliable partner,<sup>89</sup> while remaining open-minded to unexpected proposals.<sup>90</sup>

- \* architects, urban planners or landscape architects, etc.
- \* public services, neighborhood associations, politicians or investors

89. Commission SIA 142, “Règlement des concours d’architecture et d’ingénierie,” 10.

90. Attinger, “Ethique Des Concours,” 14.

91. Jauch-Stolz, “La responsabilité des conseillers et des jurys de concours.”

92. Commission SIA 142, “Règlement des concours d’architecture et d’ingénierie,” 10.

93. Attinger, “Ethique Des Concours,” 14.de l’espace et Ses «laboratoires»,” 16.

The jury is made up of field professionals\* and external experts representing the future users\* . The Jury President acts as a moderator throughout the process,<sup>91</sup> evaluates the proposals, awards prizes and makes recommendations, ensuring that the judging complies with the rules. It directly influences the competition by determining the winners and impacting the perception of fairness. Motivated by the recognition of architecture excellence, jurors respect the principles of fairness<sup>92</sup> and open-mindedness, welcoming innovative ideas without favoritism or influence linked to the appearance of projects.<sup>93</sup>

And finally, participants, whether individuals or multidisciplinary groups, submit proposals in response to the competition program. Through the quality and originality of their projects, they influence the competition and contribute to its reputation. Above all motivated by the prizes, mentions and seek to stand out and gain visibility through the publication of the jury’s report.<sup>94</sup> They must demonstrate professionalism, fully mobilizing their skills to propose the best solution.<sup>95</sup>

94. Commission SIA 142, “Règlement des concours d’architecture et d’ingénierie,” 11.

95. Attinger, “Ethique Des Concours,” 15.

- a. Client/Building Contractor
- b. Future Users
- c. Citizens
- d. Consulting Specialists
- e. Swiss Society of Engineers and Architects (SIA)
- f. Jury/College of Experts
- g. Participants
- h. Winner

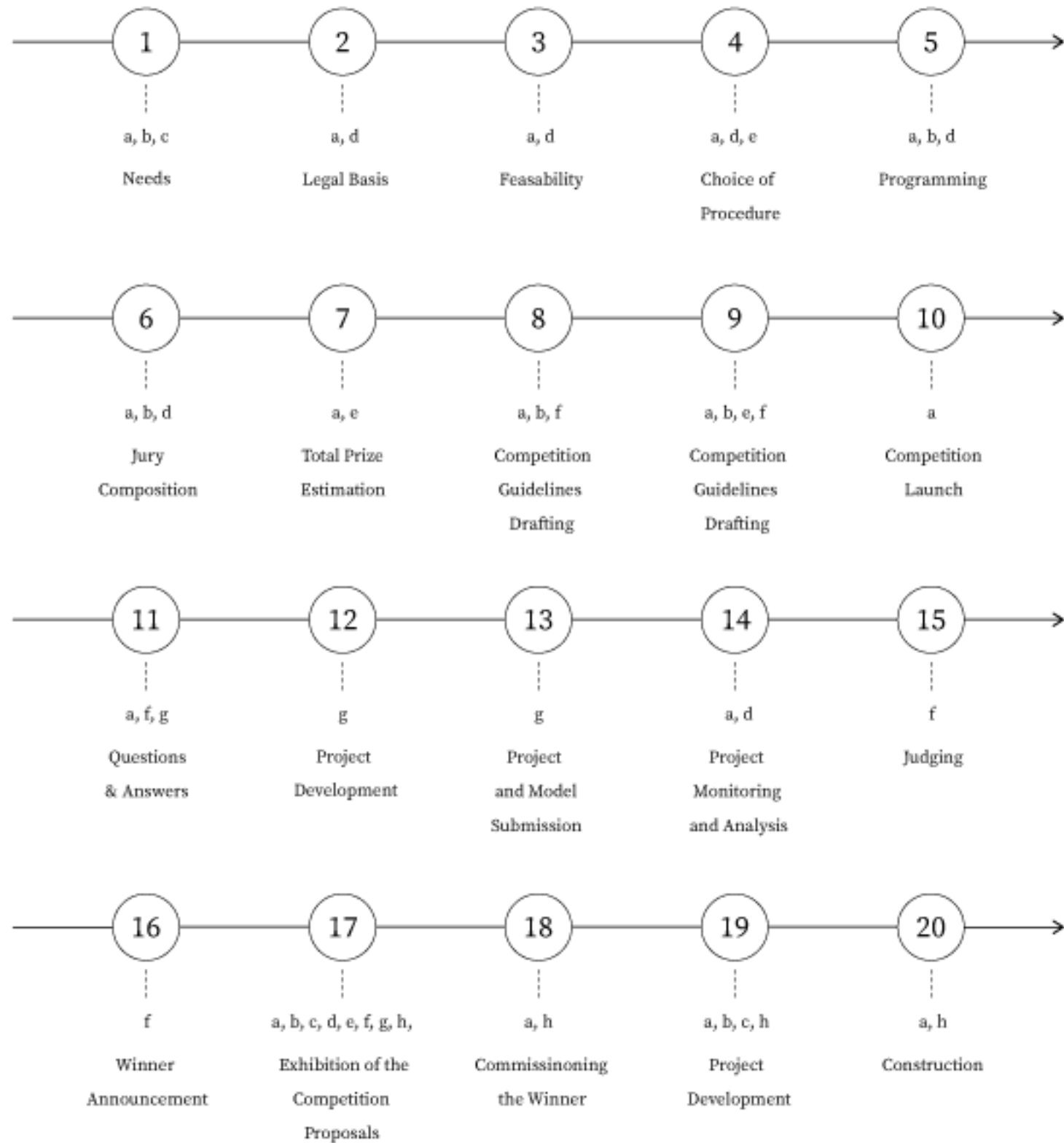


Fig.9 Steps and Actors involved in 142 SIA open procedure

Everything is perfect in the best of all worlds. However, we soon come up against the limits of this description, since it considers the competition as an isolated process, free from any indirect influence from external actors. The latter can be classified as “secondary actors” and will enable us to provide a more nuanced representation of the competition system.

Among these secondary actors, we can identify public authorities and professional associations exerting a major influence on the legal framework, accessibility to and compliance with international standards in the awarding of public contracts. For example, the European Agreement on Public Procurement, signed in 1996, led to the creation of the Federal Law on Public Procurement (LMP), the opening up of Swiss public procurement markets, increasing financial competition. As a result, contractors have adopted more economically oriented practices, which have been reflected in competition<sup>96</sup> programs.

96. Dresco, “L’attente Du Maître de l’ouvrage,” 25.

Let’s also take the jury. While it is supposed to guarantee the neutrality and fairness of the process, its judgment is influenced by social and symbolic dynamics.<sup>97</sup> Public opinion or the expectations of outside observers, such as the media or cultural institutions, add pressure to select projects perceived as innovative or responding to environmental issues. This means that juries not only judge proposals on their intrinsic qualities but also act in response to these external influences. The competition is a paradox born of the tension between a desire for objectivity and the subjectivity of its actors.

With regard to the influence exerted on participants by secondary actors\*, this work hopes to provide a representation, admittedly undeniably incomplete, based on the perspectives of the architects interviewed in the next chapter.

97. Peikert, “Concours d’architecture.”

\* and on a broader scale, the competition system as a whole

What emerges from this analysis is that the architectural competition process is profoundly influenced by external actors of varied profiles, many of whom don’t belong to the architectural field. Furthermore, the Fig. 10 highlights the secondary position of the employed architect and their limited ability to influence the competition. Furthermore, the elements that make up the system are not limited to individuals or legal entities; they also include procedures, norms and dynamics that shape the entire process. These elements interact within sub-systems which limits are blurred, often interwoven and sometimes belonging simultaneously to several systems. The influence exerted on the Swiss competition extends beyond its national borders and is sometimes of European or even worldwide scale, reflecting global issues such as economic crises or regulatory developments. Consequently, the competition system itself can be seen as a sub-system of a larger whole, interacting with other systems.

An architectural competition is a dynamic system, in which the elements, their motivations and influence powers, as well as the rules and standards, are constantly evolving. These changes, though varying in intensity and speed, testify to the complexity and fluidity of a mechanism in transformation.

Unfortunately, this work can neither fully describe nor represent the Swiss competition system, as the complexity of the subject is beyond the scope of this discussion. However, viewing the competition as a system reveals that it is not an end in itself but a means for actors to pursue their objectives. This perspective highlights power dynamics, questioning how some actors benefit at the expense of others’ labor. It also prompts reflection on what competitions produce in terms of value, recognition, and returns for participants. These considerations open the door to critically analyzing the dominant narratives surrounding competitions in Switzerland.

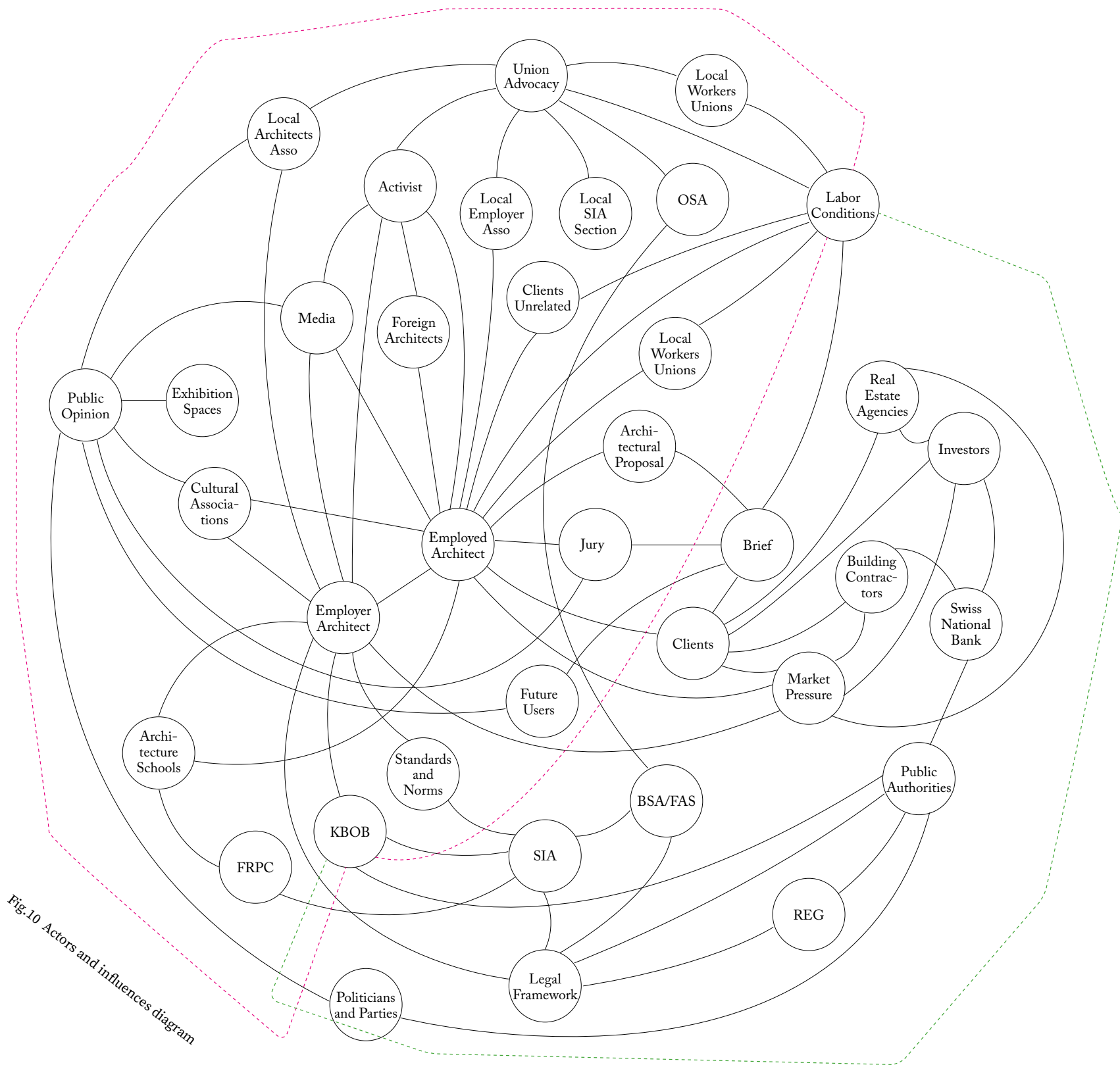


Fig.10 Actors and procedures exerting an influence on the Swiss competition system

## DOMINANT NARRATIVES

The analysis of dominant narratives surrounding the competition system in Switzerland highlights the influences exerted on it, revealing power dynamics among the actors. These narratives tend to sustain a simplified image of the competition, obscuring the distribution of costs and benefits. Understand them is looking highlining the different arguments put forward, the actors and their role in the system and the space in which they are expressed.

The role of cultural actors, such as associations, training centers, and exhibition spaces, can be understood as fostering dialogue among individuals from diverse architectural backgrounds while also making these discussions accessible to the public. Associations like “Le Concours Suisse” contribute to building the cultural foundation of the competition system.

“Le Concours Suisse” is a nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting and enhancing the culture of architectural competitions in Switzerland, particularly through round tables and exhibitions.<sup>98</sup> In the catalog of exhibition “Le concours suisse - Une culture de architecture” that took place in the SAM museum in 2023, the association describes competitions as a

a free space where  
participants can break  
new ground<sup>99</sup>

98. “Le concours suisse.”

99. Kofler, Ruby, and S AM Schweizerisches Architekturmuseum, Was Wäre Wenn, 55.

100. Kofler, Ruby, and S AM Schweizerisches Architekturmuseum, 51.

pedagogical tool for architects as competitions offer. They put forward that the quality of Swiss architecture depends on the competition system as the emulation between candidates drives architectural innovation and quality. Which brings recognition to an international level.<sup>100</sup>

This excerpt aptly illustrates the challenge faced by the catalog in providing a nuanced representation of the competition system. It is presented in an overly simplified manner, overlooking the inherent power dynamics. This limitation was highlighted during the

round tables that accompanied the exhibition. Indeed, the concerns raised by the participants provided a clearer representation, particularly those of major investors (CFF, Retraites Populaires, Losinger Marazzi), for whom the security of their investments takes precedence over the fair valuation of the architects' work, as pointed out by the students.<sup>101</sup>

101. Rédaction, "Le concours suisse en débat."

Another major actor is the Swiss society of engineers and architects (SIA), the regulating institution for the Swiss architectural profession. Indeed, a significant amount of material is put at disposition of the Swiss building industry to shape the general opinion through magazines such as TEC21, TRACÉS and Archi. Their economic perspective on competition can be understood as beneficial for the whole building industry. Through this system, the clients and investors are supposed to find the architectural propositions with the best solutions (quality, functionality, sustainability, cost-effectiveness).<sup>102</sup>

102. Kofler, Ruby, and S AM Schweizerisches Architekturmuseum, Was Wäre Wenn, 55.

In recent years, publications shared by the SIA's publishing house have portrayed competitions\* as the primary means for emerging architecture practices to secure contracts and achieve financial independence. These publications emphasize that commissions are attributed by a non-biased jury evaluating proposals rather than authors.<sup>103</sup> In doing so, they frame competitions as essential for recent graduates and young architecture firms to gain recognition among their peers. This sentiment is echoed in another recently published article, where we read:

\* and more specifically open competitions

**We started out thanks to open competitions.**<sup>104</sup>

However, the stance taken in this article reflects the profile of those given access to widely distributed communication platforms, including at universities. The authors are non-racialized men in their fifties with esteemed professional positions (editors, screenwriters, university lecturers).

It is hard to find disadvantaging positions among the hegemonic discourses. Not that they don't exist, but rather that they are made invisible. As it might impact an idealized system describes by Tiziano Schürch - founder of Zurich based office – as a waste of resources, as an "economic suicide" or even "exploitative" according to a survey conducted by (Non-)Swiss Architects in 2023.<sup>105</sup> As a matter of fact, the scale of unpaid labor "donated" through competition is chilling: just under a billion Swiss francs over a decade according to EPFL researcher Martin Peikert.<sup>106</sup>

**\*absolutely exceptional commitment that the profession makes to society, with no guarantee of reward or even compensation**<sup>107</sup>

Not unaware of the financial burden that the competition system represents for Swiss practices, it is qualified by the editor of TRACÉS, Marc Frochoux, as an\*. Thus, the cultural justifications legitimize the systemic limits and turn them virtues. It is by framing unpaid labor as a necessity to support the Swiss "Baukultur"<sup>108</sup> that proponents of the competition system put in the shadow its inherent exploitive dimension.

107. Padmanabhan, "Concours suisse : fact-checking."

108. "building culture" in German.

The dominant narratives surrounding the Swiss competition system construct an over-positive image that legitimizes its "raison d'être" while obscuring underlying power imbalances. These narratives primarily benefit dominant actors of the system — patronal associations, employers, and those with institutional influence — who enjoy greater visibility and resources. In contrast, marginalized voices, including employees and researchers, remain underrepresented in mainstream communication channels. This imbalance reflects deeper structural inequalities, perpetuated by the unpaid labor inherent in the competition process.

By framing this exploitation as a cultural or professional necessity, these narratives sustain a myth that serves the interests of an elite.<sup>109</sup> As explained by an activist part of the collective (non-)Swiss Architects, a closer examination of the beneficiaries reveals relationships that can be understood as a Marxist class dynamic, where privilege dictates access to opportunities and platforms.<sup>110</sup> For the competition system to evolve, it is crucial to challenge these dominant narratives and advocate for a more equitable redistribution of resources and recognition within the profession.

109. Universalis, “Définition de élite/ - étymologie, synonymes, exemples.”

110. Interview with a member of (non-)Swiss Architects.

**PART TWO**  
**DIRTY REALITIES**

# Freshly graduated



Fig.1 Trapped © Paul Schurich (2024)

The following chapter aims to pick up where the conversation left off. The “more classical” sources that have guided the reflections to come have been supplemented by the experiences and perspectives of voices often neglected: the architects themselves. The aim is to bring into dialogue the different voices around the competition to shed light on the realities it produces.

The voices we’ll find in this section are those of young architects and myself at times too entering the competition system through the office they founded in 2024. The office counts 4 members, employed in parallel in other structures since they fresh graduated. The 6 competitions they have taken part in since their registration in the commercial register are simply the continuation of a process that had already begun during their studies at one of Switzerland’s polytechnical schools.

## A PAVED WAY

Similar to many young architects, their desire to establish an office via the “privileged” route of participating in the competition system may in part be the result of a practice they developed during their studies. Indeed,

like the EBA students, students at the Swiss Federal Institutes of Technology were trained on the model of the “Beaux-Arts” atelier and its competition culture. Added to this is the opportunity to take part in one of the many student competitions, which are also open internationally. In addition, many students also take part in professional competitions through their part-time jobs. This enables them to limit the precarious situation that many students face, while at the same time gaining years of experience that are expected as soon as they enter the job market... undeniably, this double life nourishes an approach to the profession culturally and financially based on competitions.

**“I worked for three years, and that’s all I did. So we were doing [student] competitions next to the Master’s, and alongside that, I was doing two competitions in an office and I was project manager on competitions. I did that for three years. I don’t know how many competitions, but a lot.”**

## IN QUEST FOR FREEDOM

Establishing practice can be understood as a quest for freedom. Professional independence is a central motivation for many workers in a competitive and hierarchical market, and architects are no exception. Like the navies – construction workers employed on post-war construction site in England<sup>1</sup> - who wanted to break free from the precarious conditions of the construction industry, some architecture students and young architects aspire to find a form of professional autonomy. Christine Wall describes this notion of “freedom” as intimately linked to the ability to define one’s own working environment, a central component of professional identity.<sup>2</sup> For navvies, as for young architects, this freedom is understood as the desire to work according to their own agenda, based on their own methodologies

**A young architect explains that their newly founded structure enables him and his collaborators above all to build up an identity that contrasts with that of “a classic offices”. By giving priority to the choice of working partners and hoping for collaboration with other offices.<sup>3</sup>**



Fig.2 Work! Work! Work! © Wang Qingsong (2012)

and have a choice of beneficiaries. This desire for freedom can be result of a rejection of the employee status and a desire to distance themselves with of traditional employment structures, considered incompatible with their values. This reflects a deeper need to redefine the balance between personal and professional life, to professional relationships on their own terms, and in fine work on projects with which they identify. The competition system appears to be a way out for many young architects.

Additionally, the competition offers an opportunity to gain credibility by building up a identity based on professional projects aligning with their values. As the interviewees explain us, projects carried out during studies are often not recognized as being of sufficiently high quality to be able to claim the necessary credibility.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, having their proposal awarded a prize and its quality recognized fulfils a need for peer recognition. Increasing their legitimacy to have the status of the “architect” and legitimizing the uncompensated investment in time, financial and material resources and personal sacrifices.<sup>5</sup>

## DOUBLE LIFE, DOUBLE COSTS

This freedom is only a matter of identity. The lack of resources facing architects in their quest for autonomy confronts them with their own contractual, financial, staffing and experience limitations. This forces many of them to lead a double life: as independent architects and as employed architects.

The first limitation faced by freshly qualified architects is contractual. Although registration with REG category A<sup>6</sup> is not required to take part in a competition, it is to apply for a building permit in certain Cantons, such as Vaud or Fribourg.<sup>7</sup> This legal requirement\* means that

1. Christine Wall, *An Architecture of Parts: Architects, Building Workers and Industrialization in Britain, 1940-1970*, Routledge Research in Architecture (London New York: Routledge, 2013), 157.

2. Wall, 157.

3. Young Swiss architect, interview by Gabriel Ogbonna, October 29, 2024

4. Interview of two freshly graduated architects.

5. Peikert, “Concours d’architecture.”

6. “Fondation des Registres suisses des professionnels de l’ingénierie, de l’architecture et de l’environnement.”

7. Département fédéral de l’économie, and de la formation et de la recherche (DEFR), “Exercice de la profession d’architecte en Suisse.”

\* Registration with the Registres des professionnels dans les domaines de l’ingénierie, de l’architecture et de l’environnement (REG) requires young graduates to be employed for a period of 3 years within an office, and then concludes with an example attesting to professional abilities.

qualified architects who win a competition must depend on the supervision of an architect or office recognized by the REG to carry out the execution phase and associated fees. This puts their autonomy into perspective. Additionally, some architects employed by a structure have to sign a clause limiting their participation in competitions to their free time, even though

the legal framework on unfair competition authorizes this. Indeed, one of the office members interviewed explained that she had to ask permission her employer before competing on her free time.

## SELF-EMPLOYED BUT BROKE

Competitions are accessible to anyone who wants, but above all to anyone who can. As the financial resources required to take part in competitions remain very real. For the two founder architects of the office interviewed, participation in competition procedures represents substantial costs, which necessitate an employee’s salary to cover them. In fact, the first hurdle is the addition of numerous small expenses linked solely to registration and submission documents: registration and model fees, printing of the two sets of plates at a printer’s, the USB key, the binder for transporting the plates and finally their dispatch by post. This is without taking into account the materials required for the competition development process, the workspace and their remuneration.<sup>8</sup> But the competition also involves other costs that aren’t directly visible, but can’t be ignored. These include the infrastructure required for participation, such as workspace rental and insurance, furniture, office supplies, kitchen equipment, drawing and modeling tools, and software licenses. Everything is counted, quantified, accounted for and financed by a financial tinkering between employee salaries, small

direct commission fees or a prize for the lucky ones.

8. Interview of two freshly graduated architects.

On the other hand, what many architects criticize about competition prizes is that they are more akin to a simple “defrayal”<sup>9</sup> than to genuine compensation for work done. As a result, these sums do not allow for investment in the office’s future activities, nor do they finance new entries to competitions. This lack of remuneration is sadly an intrinsic feature of the competition system and has the consequence of hindering their development opportunities and limiting their professional evolution. The financial constraints faced by small architectural practices have a direct impact on their viability, their ability to assert themselves in the market and, consequently, their ability to get a decent return on their work.<sup>10</sup>

9. Interview of two freshly graduated architects.

10. Deamer, Architecture and Labor, 134.

NOT ENOUGH TIME

One of the common features shared by small-scale structures Peggy Deamer identifies in the US architecture industry is their operational limitations. Compared with larger, more settled offices, the difference lies in the means the latter have to put together a structure with a larger qualified and diversified workforce.<sup>11</sup> Smaller structures, like the one interviewed, see their competitiveness limited by the amount of hours employed architects are able to invest in a second activity. As part-time salaried work leaves double hated architects little time for their quest for freedom: evenings, one day a week, even weekends.

The two interviewees explain that a competition represents roughly 300 hours of work divided between four people.<sup>12</sup> However, this figure remains approximate since they won’t be able to bill for it anyway. As their labor is unpaid, they must rely on other revenue sources to cover the costs of their occasional participation, which raises the question of the selection criteria to minimize the risk of unpaid work.

11. Deamer.

12. Interview of two freshly graduated architects.



Fig.3 Atelier Jean Nouvel in the movie The Competition  
© Angel Borrego Cubero (2013)



Fig.4 Atelier Jean Nouvel in the movie The Competition  
© Angel Borrego Cubero (2013)

▲ So how do you approach competitions in terms of the selection criteria? What would be the most important criteria for you? Like, is it the program, the type of procedure, the funding?

● I think the jury is also a factor—who's on the jury, that's important. And then the program, too. Right now, we're doing a lot of competitions in Fribourg because the market there is pretty open at the moment.

■ But also the hype around the projects. Like, is it something people are talking about a lot? For example, the competition for the school was a great competition, with a great jury. That also plays a role.

● Yeah, we're mindful of that—and also making sure it's not overly competitive. That's part of

## SELECTION CRITERIA

it, too. And then it's about whether the project we're working on will get some visibility, maybe even attention. So, we analyze periods and ask ourselves, 'Is the jury good? Is the jury capable of understanding our intentions?'

▲ Yes...

● Nowadays, if we can, we look at the jury's ideas and proposals. Who's the president? Are there professionals or non-professionals on the jury? Are there local groups involved? These kinds of things. And then there's the post-analysis because sometimes we realize we didn't analyze the jury well. Maybe there was someone in the jury with a lot of influence that we didn't notice. So, we debrief and critique, saying, 'Actually, we made mistakes.' I think the jury is an important part.

■ The program for the competition is important too. Beyond just the building

## SELECTION CRITERIA

program, maybe it's the values conveyed through the program. For example, if the program specifies not digging or things like that, it can influence the selection. Or, I don't know, maybe it challenges certain things, like reuse. That's part of how we analyze competitions. There's this kind of...

- With another member of the office, we have sort of a passion for reading jury reports and specifications. So, as soon as we hear about a competition, we read it, analyze it, and assess whether we have the time and energy for it. That's the question—whether it makes sense. Things like the number of documents to submit also matter. If it's A1 format, for example, that's easier. Printing four A0

## SELECTION CRITERIA

sheets gets expensive fast. So sometimes, for us as a small firm, there's also an economic limit to what we can take on. We weigh all these factors to analyze the situation and decide if it makes sense to participate. Then we have a group discussion—about workforce capacity, who's able to take it on, who wants to commit to the competition. Because we also have other projects going on. So we need to consider availability, schedules, and whether this is too much to add on. Or if we can take it on and still enjoy the process ?

## SELECTION CRITERIA

NOT ENOUGH HANDS

What comes out of this exchange is that there is no single selection criteria, but rather criterias to be weighed according to costs, availability and the very ability to produce the deliverables.\* Under time and workload pressure, the size and experience of the office is ultimately a major constraint to be overcome by working methods that optimize the little time available: compressed competition time, even if it means working evenings and weekends.

In the case of a SIA competition, the rendering elements can be defined as “ordinary services” and include: a site plan on a scale of 1:500, plans, sections and facades on a scale of 1:200, the calculation of volumes and surfaces, a model on the model base supplied, on a scale of 1:500, as well as an explanatory section.<sup>14</sup>

Less time equals less iterations: reducing development costs leading to concentrate on proposals that are recognized by the jury, rather than exploring approaches that challenge the client’s expectations and question today’s architecture. This retreat into safer approaches affects their ability to stand out and compete with larger, economically dominant structures within capitalist markets.

“I worked for three years, and that’s all I did. So we were doing [student] competitions next to the Master’s, and alongside that, I was doing two competitions in an office and I was project manager on competitions. I did that for three years. I don’t know how many competitions, but a lot.”

Furthermore, members are responsible for the entire production of the deliverable, whereas financially more stable structures subcontract elements to ensure the quality and consistency of deliverables. Visualizations and models in particular are a decisive element in the jury’s judgement, and a lack of professionalism can lead to a misreading by non-architect members, reducing their chances of winning a prize.<sup>15</sup>

13. Interview of two freshly graduated architects.  
  
14. Société Suisse des Ingénieurs et des Architectes (SIA), “Détermination de La Somme Globale Des Prix Pour Les Concours d’architecture.”, 7  
  
15. Interview of two freshly graduated architects.

directly influences the ability to produce deliverables: the workspace, tools, and technologies are essential factors for ensuring quality and reducing production time. Consequently, production of each deliverable requires certain materials, tools, and technologies, which themselves involve a certain level of complexity and time. Describing the material conditions of the office can thus provide insights into the scale and conditions of unpaid labor taking place. This can be made clear through observing the competition process within the office itself.

MATERIAL AND SPATIAL CONDITIONS

The example of the misread visualization, although being unavoidable, underlines that the work environment

### 1. Organization and set-up:

Tasks: Reading the program and identifying specificities, translating the program into tables and areas, processing shared DXF files, creating common files.

Time: 1 person for one day

### 2. Group discussion :

Tasks: Definition of values, visions and expectations

Time: 4 people for half a day

### 3. Development work:

Tasks: translate group discussion into a volumetric model.

Time: 2 people for half a day

### 4. Site visit :

Tasks: take pictures and question the intentions

Time: 1 to 2 people for half a day (depending on distance)

### 5. Group work :

Task: clarify and rationalize project intentions

Time: 4 people for 2 to 3 days

### 6. Production phase:

Tasks: produce deliverables

Time: 2 to 4 people for an undetermined duration

### 7. Board control:

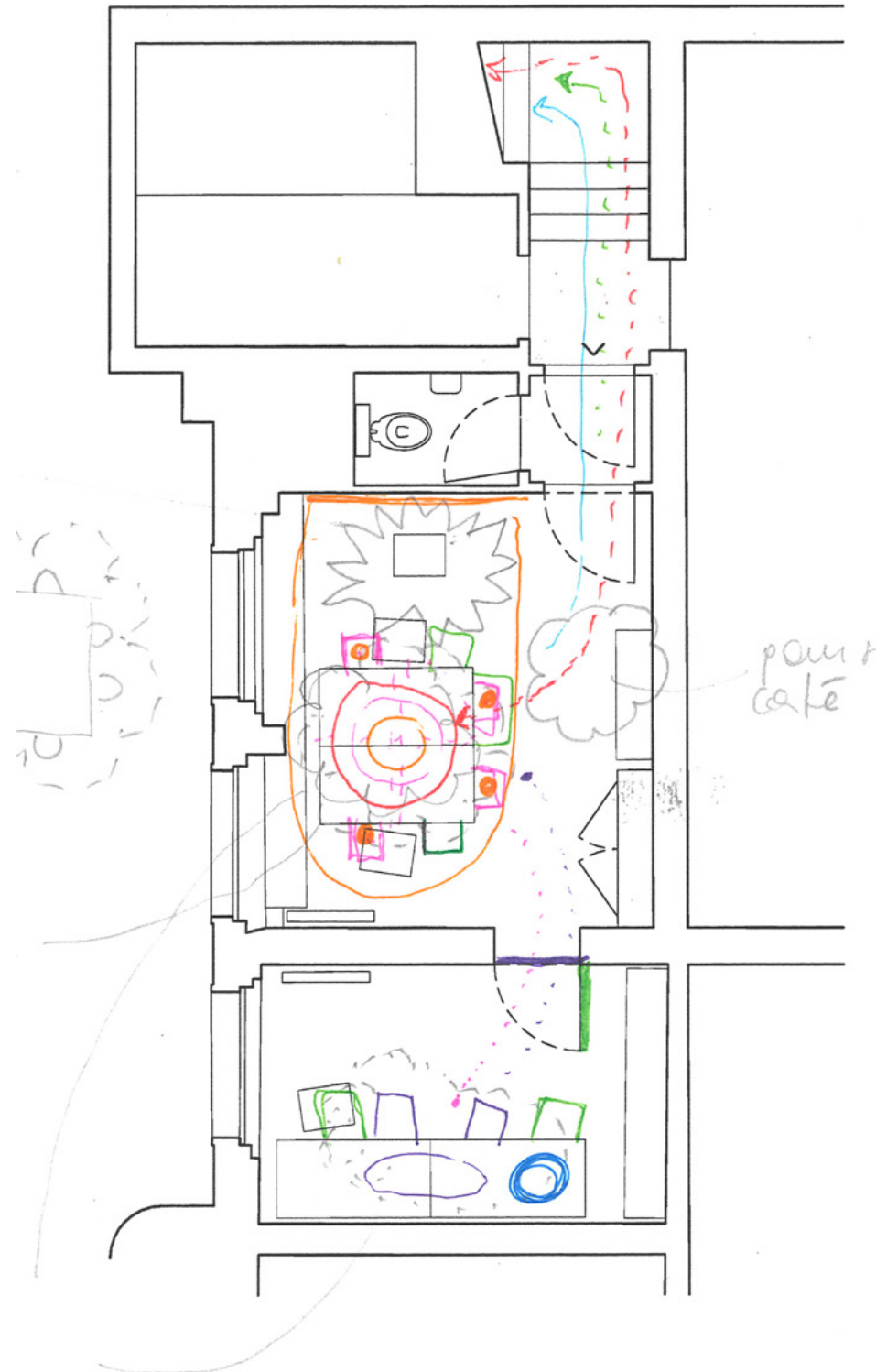
Tasks: retrieve and check prints, calculate surfaces, return boards for correction

Time: 1 person for an undetermined duration

### 8 Mock-up production:

Tasks: correction of site model, construction of buildings and positioning of trees

Time: 1 to 2 people for an undetermined duration



## VISIBLE LABOR

Although the process varies according to the procedure, the degree and complexity of the program, and the size and organization type of the structures involved, there are certain points to be noted in which similarities can be found across different office profiles, and which are inherent to the competition system. The production of deliverables, and thus of visible, material work.

This labor can be identified between points 6 and 8, which are the production of drawings, visualizations, models and explanatory texts. However, their production is impacted by the material and spatial conditions of the office. The space that the office currently occupies is already in much better condition than the kitchen they used to work in. Their production was defined by the lack of space and concentration. The rented workspace they now have alleviates this concern, but still restricts the size and the complexity of the model. Lacking the financial resources to outsource it to model-makers, the model has to be printed\*, silicone-molded, plaster cast and dried, and finally decorated with trees glued one by one. Due to a lack of space, the printer replaces the plotter, the drawings to be printed and billed before being collected at the printer's shop. This illustrates the difficulty that architects have in quantifying the scale of their labor and therefore can only have an approximate idea of what it represents. The lack of managerial training among architects driven to independence may be one of the reasons for the absence of proper measuring tools.

Even if this work can be measured and thus financially valued in the case of a prizes, those are based on the average time required for delivery for a direct commission. Meaning that architects in a situation comparable to those interviewed will have to accept that a part - admittedly difficult to quantify, but important - of their hours will have to be stay uncompensated.

\*in around twenty hours

What's more, in a working environment from which you sometimes have to leave to find some peace and silence for your ideas. Whether text or drawing, work is mobile, invizibilising to the office, and the boundary between professional activity and private life becomes blurry.

## INVISIBLE LABOR

However, there is still a part that prizes cannot remunerate: the invisible work behind the deliverables, illustrated by points 1 to 5. The whole planning of the competition, the analysis of the program and its particularities, the definition of the architects' identity and values to be shared in the proposal, the development of options through the search for references or the analysis of past jury reports, as well as the "care" labor in group discussions. These activities, although essential to the quality of the proposals submitted, are often overlooked in recognition and remuneration mechanisms. This work will be able to discuss whether this invisible labor should be considered part of the competition process, but what is clear is that the quality of the solutions proposed to the client - and by extension the future users - as well as the "Baukultur" benefit from, or even depend on it.

The invisible labor in the context of architectural competitions can be understood through the notion of "immaterial labor", as defined by Peggy Deamer by all the intellectual and cultural activities that accompany architectural creation. This work, although not tangible, is fundamental to the development of architectural solutions.<sup>16</sup>

16. Deamer, Architecture and Labor, 64.

The lack of recognition of this immaterial labor reflects a broader myth in architecture: the construction of the profession as a "calling" rather than a form of work. This understanding leads to the exploitation of architects, who often accept precarious working conditions and a lack of fair remuneration. Applied to the competition system, this analysis helps us to understand why the hours invested in the preliminary stages remain uncompensated, even though they represent a significant proportion of the value produced.<sup>17</sup>

17. Cortright, "Death to the Calling."

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