

# RIBA Competitions

## Guidance for Competition Entrants





“RIBA Competitions has offered us a fantastic opportunity to test our ideas, skills and professional expertise with exciting briefs. As winners it has given us an opportunity to build projects and relationships with clients that we may not have had the opportunity to work with normally. Most importantly as a small practice it has also given us a priceless platform to showcase our work...”

JaK Studio, winner of BBC Radio 4 The Listening Project – Pod Design Challenge



# Introduction

We all know good design is valuable, bringing immediate and lasting benefits, whether improving people's lives, raising profile or generating income. But good design can become truly great design when the aims and aspirations of client and architect are well communicated, clearly understood and mutually aligned. A positive client-architect relationship is critical in fulfilling the potential of any project and the use of architectural design competitions and other processes is an excellent way to begin.

This new RIBA guidance is written in two complementary parts – one addressing **clients** and one addressing **competition entrants** – because excellent and innovative design should both serve clients and bring fair opportunity for designers. Establishing a balanced and beneficial relationship between the two parties from the outset is key to every successful project.

## Guidance for Competition Entrants

Introduction	3
What is a design competition?	4
Competition outputs	5
Why enter a competition?	6
The potential advantages of entering	8
Well-managed competition processes	10
The initial Open Design phase	11
The Invited Design	12
Clarification interviews	13
Contact us	15
Credits	16

This guidance is to help **competition entrants** consider the advantages and disadvantages of participating in a design competition.

# What is a design competition?

'Design competition' is the collective term for any process inviting architects and other related design professionals to compete against each other for a commission or prize. They can be excellent vehicles for opening up opportunities to designers who otherwise might not have been considered for a particular commission. They spur creativity and have been the foundation of some of the finest and most treasured buildings around the world.

There are many different reasons for entering a competition, which should be carefully considered before making any commitment. Winning shouldn't be the only driver – entering a competition is also about exploring an idea, beginning new journeys and a great way to build new design relationships.

The investment of time can be significant, but good competitions can raise profile, create new business opportunities and provide valuable experience for the team. Exposure through winning or being shortlisted for a competition could be the launch pad for a successful career and can be extremely rewarding professionally.





# Competition outputs

“Every project in the office has come through competitions... We wouldn't have an office if it wasn't for contests. It's great to win but it's exhausting when we lose.”

Sheila O'Donnell and John Tuomey following announcement that they were recipients of the 2015 RIBA Royal Gold Medal.

**Saw Swee Hock Student Centre**  
London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE)  
Shortlisted RIBA Stirling Prize 2014

Most competitive processes that lead to a design commission are held over two stages where entrants are shortlisted before a winner is selected.

The exact format is largely determined by clients' attitude to risk. They might be happy to select a shortlist based on track record, or they might prefer to invite project-specific design responses.

Clients need to be confident that the type of competition selected meets their needs and delivers the output they require. Those who shortlist on the basis of the entrants' track record do so primarily because the project requires specialist knowledge and competence. Those who invite design responses from the outset are looking for entries that bring excitement, innovation and creativity to the project.

# Why enter a competition?

There are many different reasons for entering a competition. The various competition formats appeal differently to designers depending on the maturity of their practice and at what stage they are in their careers.

**Not all competition formats will be right for you as an individual or a practice.**

“RIBA Competitions have given some of the best young talented practices an opportunity to begin their careers, by enabling clients to access a range of architects that they otherwise would not have met. They have guided and inspired clients – in many cases inexperienced in procuring buildings – to achieve outstanding pieces of architecture.”

Glenn Howells, Founding Director  
Glenn Howells Architects

## Open Design and Open Ideas Competitions

Open Design and Open Ideas Competitions attract a wide variety of design concepts in response to a project brief for clients looking for fresh or innovative designs.

Entries are evaluated anonymously so that the decision is based on design merit rather than track record. Anonymity is generally lifted at Stage 2 with shortlisted entrants invited to develop their ideas and/or present them at interview.

The **Open Design** format generally leads to a design commission, with the client selecting both a concept design and the team to deliver it. If you are not experienced enough, clients may require you to team up with another practice to deliver the project.

In the **Open Ideas** format, the client does not carry a firm commitment to commission the winner.

### Key Characteristics

- Prize money awarded to authors of best design ideas, or equal honoraria payments made to each shortlisted design team
- Suited to newly qualified designers, recently formed practices, or established practices wishing to break into a new sector or market
- Good for gaining recognition, publicity, and for showcasing your capabilities
- Good for developing your portfolio, gaining experience and moving onto larger projects
- Requirement to develop design proposals without any guarantee of reward, a risk that you must be happy to accept
- The number of entries is influenced by client/project profile, external market conditions, number of concurrent opportunities. RIBA Open Competitions have attracted anything between 30 and 250+ entries.

## Invited Design Competitions

Invited Design Competitions generally involve a selection phase, where you are required to demonstrate a track record of delivering relevant or similar projects.

Where the client is a public body, the regulations require the selection stage to be open to all suitably qualified entrants. Some clients may also organise a **Private Invited Design Competition** where you are approached directly to participate.

If shortlisted, you are invited to develop design proposals in response to a project brief and could also include tender documents. The process commonly concludes with a **clarification interview**.

The format reassures the client that you can deliver the design, particularly where the project requires specialist knowledge and competence.

This format generally leads to a commission, with the client selecting both a design concept and the team to develop it.

### Key Characteristics

- Equal honoraria payments are made to each shortlisted entrant
- Good for established practices with a recognised body of work, and typically attracts fewer entrants than the initial stage of an Open Design competition
- You are not required to carry out project-specific design work at the selection stage
- Good for consolidating your reputation and capability in a given sector
- Depending on the size of project it could be less appropriate for small or emerging practices. Especially for processes involving a selection questionnaire with financial thresholds and minimum levels of professional indemnity insurance.

## Competitive Interviews

Competitive Interviews are generally used when clients wish to appoint a designer or design team before they are ready to seek detailed design proposals.

Following a selection phase, the shortlisted entrants are invited to an interview to outline initial thoughts, understanding of the project requirements, and possible approach to the project.

If you win, you are involved in the early stages of a project and help to develop the brief with the client.

### Key Characteristics

- The amount of project-specific design is generally limited to preparing your approach to the project
- It is a relatively quick process unless it falls under public procurement rules and the client is forced to observe minimum mandatory timescales
- Since funding, planning and statutory requirements may not be in place, there is an increased risk that the project will not be realised
- Best practice competitions should make a small payment to compensate the shortlisted teams for their time spent participating in the process.

# The potential advantages of entering

Before you decide to enter a competition, realistically appraise your ability to fulfil its requirements and to meet the client's expectations. Be selective. Ideally, only enter competitions for projects that really interest you or fit well with your business strategy.

The chances of being shortlisted or going on to win a competition might be slim, particularly in the case of popular competitions. Gauging the number of potential entrants you may be up against is always difficult. The number of entries is typically influenced by the competition format, project/client profile, sector, scale of opportunity, state of the economy and number of other opportunities available.

Carefully weigh up your chances of success against your investment of time, work and effort. Other than the potential to secure a commission, design competitions bring many other creative and business opportunities, including:

## **Raising your profile**

The exposure and publicity that can come from being shortlisted is a great way to gain recognition, particularly if you are recently qualified, or a small or recently established practice.

## **Contributing to your portfolio**

Participating in design competitions helps build your portfolio and can be helpful in pitching for future work.

## **Demonstrating your capabilities**

Even if you don't win the commission, being a shortlisted finalist brings you to the attention of the client (and other clients) and can lead to other opportunities.

## **Developing your business**

Competitions can help you gain experience and break into a new sector, and act as a springboard for moving onto larger projects.

## **Advancing your design ideas**

Competitions support continuing professional development and provide an opportunity to explore your ideas and get involved in projects for different building types.

## **Encouraging team work**

Competitions encourage team work and can help forge partnerships between disciplines when consultants come together to work on a submission. They can be a great way of bringing on more junior members of staff or integrating recent joiners into a team.

It is not always about winning...



“Obviously it would be great to win a competition and go on to design and construct a wonderful building or space. But sometimes taking part in a well-run Open Competition process can have other benefits.

We took part in an RIBA housing competition not with a view to winning, but as a process of testing our thinking about housing design at a larger scale. We also wanted to build a portfolio of ideas beyond the much smaller scope of projects we had typically completed to date.

Imagine our surprise when we were announced as joint winners. We are now able to use the work when pitching for larger projects and we have just secured our first large housing scheme.”

**Carl Turner**, Director, **Carl Turner Architects**

Joint winner of 2013 Housing in the Private Rental Market competition organised on behalf of the Wates Group



# Well-managed competition processes

## What to look for

### A clearly stated objective and post-competition commitment

Confirm whether the competition is a call for ideas only, or will lead to a design commission for the winner. Is the commission subject to the client securing funding or planning permissions?

### A comprehensive brief, clearly defined competition structure, rules and programme

This should include an outline of the work you are required to do at the different competition stages, together with the criteria against which the entries will be assessed. It should include an opportunity to visit the site (if applicable) and a fair system for asking questions and receiving answers about the brief.

### A commitment to protect your copyright

You should ensure that your work cannot be used without your permission and is in accordance with the UK's Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988. The client may request the use of images for promotional purposes associated with the competition.

### An honoraria payment or prize money for shortlisted entrants

In design competitions it is accepted practice that clients should make a contribution towards the cost incurred by the shortlisted teams in preparing their design work. The amount of honoraria or prize money should be stated at the launch of the competition.

### The names of the individuals on the evaluation panel listed in the briefing information

Or at least the organisations from which representation will be sought. The panel should comprise professionals with relevant industry or sector experience as well as key decision-makers from the client body. If the panel's decision will be subject to ratification – for example by a governing body – this should be stated.

### Anonymous display of design proposals

In Open Competitions, anonymity reduces the chances of judges being unfairly influenced by factors other than design quality and the competition criteria.

### Fee proposals (where required) to be considered in isolation from the assessment of the quality of the design response

It is recommended that the marks awarded to the fee proposal should be no more than 30% of the overall marks available.

### A mechanism for unsuccessful entrants to request feedback about the process and their entry

Not only is this good practice, it will help you to improve over time.



# The initial Open Design phase

“Weston Williamson celebrated our 30th Anniversary last year and throughout that time Architectural Competitions have been a key component in our growth.

Either by winning important international competitions such as New England Biolabs in Boston or coming second, commended or nowhere, they are important for us in developing ideas, collaborative working, undertaking research and team building.

The adrenaline rush of working to a deadline that can't be moved and the excitement of finishing a design you are convinced is brilliant is addictive.”

Chris Williamson, Partner  
Weston Williamson + Partners

## Understand the rules

This includes checking whether the deadline for entries is a 'despatch of', or a 'to be received by' date, and whether they should be in hard copy or a digital format. Note the submission requirements, particularly with regard to anonymity, and any specified constraints such as the order of design boards, orientation of the boards and the scales at which plans and drawings should be presented.

## Edit and lay out your response to the brief clearly

Describe the design concept clearly and explain the drivers behind your proposed approach. Avoid dense, impenetrable text. Ensure all illustrations are legible and comprehensible, particularly where schemes will be on public display and the evaluation panel includes people who are not design professionals.

## Do not ignore key constraints in the brief...

such as a site boundary, as it could lead to disqualification.

## Whilst a bold design concept may make your submission stand out from the crowd...

competitions leading to a design commission invariably involve an interview element where you will also need to convince the evaluation panel that your proposals are viable and can be delivered within the project budget.

## Whilst a completely 'off-the-wall' submission might not make a shortlist...

it can sometimes receive a commendation, be featured in a gallery of noteworthy submissions or picked up by the media.

## Resist the temptation to develop the scheme too far at stage one...

particularly where the shortlisted entrants are to receive feedback giving valuable clues about what the panel is looking for at stage two.



# The Invited Design

## Review the documentation

Carefully review the briefing paper and standard Selection Questionnaire (SQ), and assess your ability to meet the requirement.

- Confirm what the process is seeking to do. Is it to select an architect, for example, or an architect-led team? Is it restricted to practices in the UK only, Europe or Worldwide?
- If you intend to team up with another practice and the rules allow it, clearly outline your respective areas of responsibility and explain how the partnership would benefit the client, project and add value
- Check to see if there are any minimum requirements in respect of turnover, levels of professional indemnity insurance cover, or any restrictions in terms of consultants not being able to be included within more than one team.

## Avoid submitting generic practice profiles unless specifically requested

Carefully tailored responses help to demonstrate to clients that their competition is not just another project for the practice or team.

## Make sure you have relevant experience

If you are struggling to find examples of relevant projects in your portfolio, it is likely that the evaluation panel will too.

- Directly comparable projects are not always required. Check that the evaluation criteria allows to have evidence from similar issues on a different type of project
- Outline the relevance of included projects and don't assume the panel will be able to draw these conclusions themselves
- Check that you are allowed to include experience gained from projects outside of your current practice. If so, clearly outline your specific role in the design and delivery of those projects
- Check the time limits within which project examples need to have been delivered, and whether they need to be fully completed on site and/or occupied to comply.

## Make a clear distinction between built projects, computer visualisations of on-going projects, and those that are competition submissions

Where a multi-disciplinary team is being sought, clearly indicate who did what; panels can be frustrated by a lack of clarity, particularly when they see the same project included in other competition entries.

## Treat the SQ return like a job application or exam

It can be hard to stand out from the crowd when the SQ form and format are all standardised. Tailor your responses. Address the project aspirations and evaluation criteria succinctly, and select supporting imagery carefully. Images should be interesting, clear and of good quality. Favour large images from relevant projects.

## Review and edit the final document

If you have copied and pasted from previous competition entries, double-check for irrelevant or left over material, especially in project or client credits.

## Submit the required number of copies in the given format by the stipulated date

Make sure that you have not exceeded any word or page limits for individual sections and the overall document.

# Clarification interviews

## Consider the composition of the panel evaluating your presentation

### Choose carefully which team members you take to the interview

Only take those who are best able to answer the panel's questions, which are likely to be about your proposed design approach, cost plan, team structure, resourcing and delivery. The panel invariably want to meet the individuals who will be directly involved in developing the proposals if you win. They can be wary of figureheads who, no matter how charismatic, they suspect might not be very involved in the project going forward.

### Respect limits on the maximum number of attendees

Avoid bringing too many people to the interview. Only take the team who are involved in presenting the proposals and fielding questions.

## Rehearse the presentation before the interview with your whole team

A disorganised presentation, unfamiliarity with the proposal, or cutting short your presentation because you have run out of time all create a poor impression. If showing slides, be realistic about how many can be shown during the allotted time. If you like, hold some in reserve to illustrate answers to questions that the panel are likely to ask.

Rehearsing helps by presenting to colleagues who have not been involved. Ask them for critical feedback. Brainstorm likely questions, particularly any areas that you know to be relatively weak or where further explanation might be required.

### Familiarise yourself with the interview format

Ensure you know what you have to do, your allocated interview time, what IT equipment is available, and whether you are able to bring any additional supporting material (e.g. physical models, material samples, etc.).

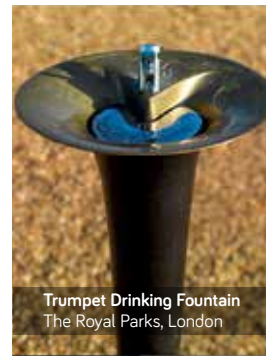
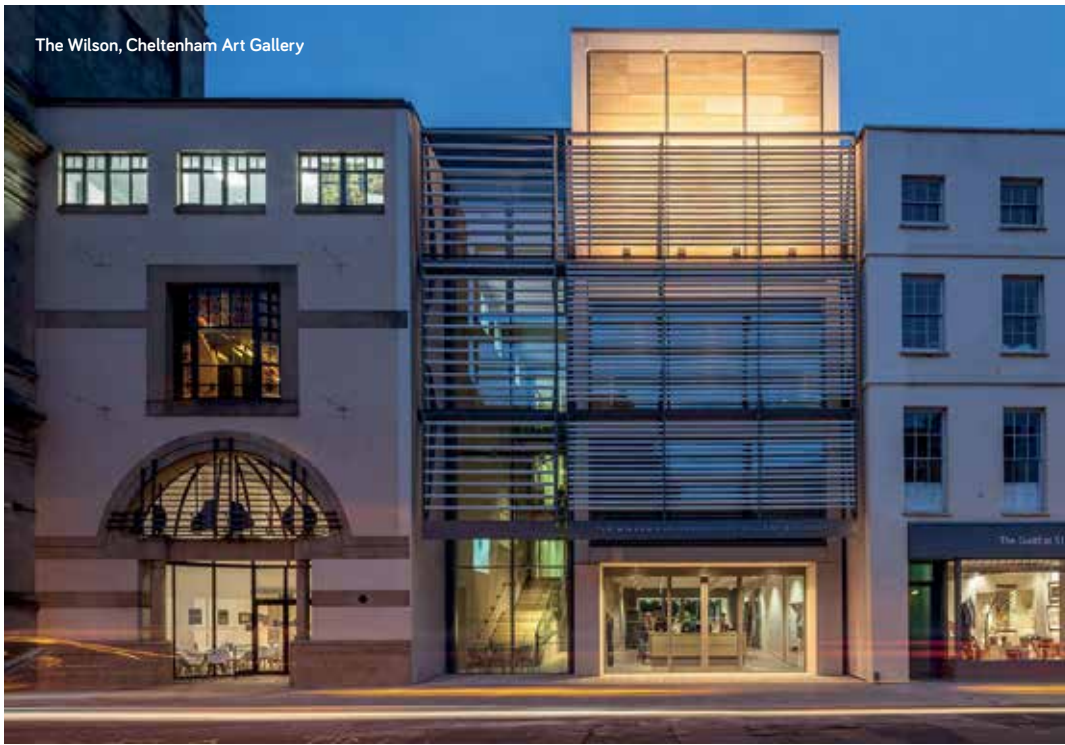
## Turn up in plenty of time for your allocated interview slot

Ask whether there is a twin interview room system (where the panel moves between a pair of similarly set-up rooms). This offers the advantage of being able to sort out any IT glitches ahead of the formal presentation.





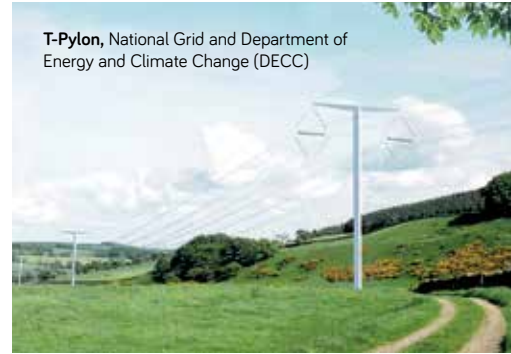
The Wilson, Cheltenham Art Gallery



Trumpet Drinking Fountain  
The Royal Parks, London



The Whitworth, University of Manchester, Shortlisted RIBA Stirling Prize 2015



T-Pylon, National Grid and Department of  
Energy and Climate Change (DECC)



Bishop Edward King Chapel, Oxford

Tristan da Cunha

International  
competition to  
design a more  
sustainable future



76 Portland Place, London



The Paul Marshall Building, London School of Economics (LSE)  
concept image



Bourne Hill Offices, Salisbury  
(see concept image right)





# Contact us

RIBA Competitions has been responsible for delivering some of the highest profile, most dynamic building projects in the UK through competition.

Please get in touch if you would like further advice.

T +44 (0)113 203 1490

[riba.competitions@riba.org](mailto:riba.competitions@riba.org)

[www.architecture.com/competition](http://www.architecture.com/competition)



To view competition briefs from previous projects and digital galleries of entries visit [www.ribacompetitions.com](http://www.ribacompetitions.com)



## RIBA Competitions

No 1 Aire Street  
Leeds LS1 4PR

[@RIBAComps](https://twitter.com/RIBAComps)

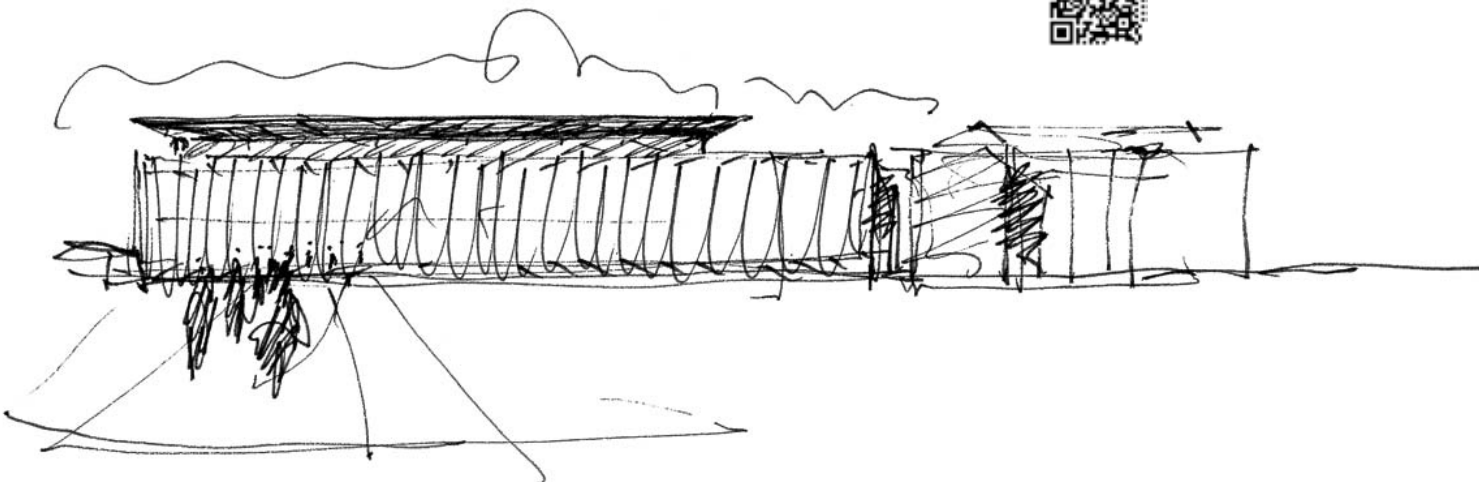
[/RIBAComps](https://www.instagram.com/RIBAComps)

This guide provides general information only and is not intended to be an exhaustive statement of the law. Although we have taken care over the information, you should not rely on it as legal advice. We do not accept any liability to anyone who does rely on its content.

© Royal Institute of British Architects  
November 2016

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system of any nature, or transmitted, in any form by any means including photocopying or recording, without the prior permission of the Royal Institute of British Architects, the copyright owner. Licences issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency or any other reproduction rights organisation do not apply. If any unauthorised acts are carried out in relation to this copyright work, a civil claim for damages may be made and/or criminal prosecution may result.

Designed by New Level







With thanks to the following architectural practices and projects  
that originated through the RIBA Competitions process

- cover □ **Studio Egret West** Maidenhead Town Centre
- 2 □ **JaK Studio** BBC The Listening Project © Nick Kane / Ian Woolcock
- 5 □ **O'Donnell & Tuomey** Saw Swee Hock Student Centre © Dennis Gilbert/VIEW
- 9 □ **Carl Turner Architects** Housing in the Private Rental Market © Carl Turner Architects
- 14 □ **Berman Guedes Stretton** The Wilson, Cheltenham Art Gallery © Quintin Lake
- **BYSTRUP** T-Pylon © BYSTRUP # powerpylons.com
- **Grafton Architects** The Paul Marshall Building
- **Moxon Architects** Trumpet Drinking Fountain, The Royal Parks © Edmund Sumner
- **MUMA** The Whitworth © Alan Williams
- **Niall McLaughlin Architects** Bishop Edward King Chapel © Niall McLaughlin Architects
- **Stanton Williams** Bourne Hill Offices © Hufton + Crow
- **Theis + Khan Architects** 76 Portland Place © Nick Kane
- **Tristan da Cunha** © John Warburton-Lee Photography / Alamy Stock Photo
- 15 □ **Stanton Williams** Bourne Hill Offices
- this page □ **Robin Monotti Architects** Watering Holes, The Royal Parks © Ioana Marinescu