

JOHN CHOI, PARTNER, **CHOI ROPIHA FIGHERA** ADRIAN FITZGERALD, DIRECTOR, **DENTON CORKER MARSHALL**

While Denton Corker Marshall and Choi Ropiha Fighera share a foundation in competition success, the former has a 30-odd-year head-start on the latter. From their different perspectives, Adrian FitzGerald and John Choi reflect on their experiences.

Adrian FitzGerald: I understand the success of your terrific scheme for the TKTS competition in New York launched your practice. Tell me how that came about and what it has subsequently meant for the practice?

John Choi: It was an open design competition which we won in 2000. The publicity gave us the confidence to set up a practice together. The project has been particularly successful in professional awards and due to its high-profile location, it's featured regularly in television, film and music videos. Though we don't attribute subsequent commissions directly to the success of this project, it has had an immeasurable sweeping impact on the practice.

It's also been a significant influence in our design approach. We found ourselves continually drawn to a more expansive view of architecture and design, looking outside the immediate brief.

In the TKTS competition, the brief requested designs to replace the existing ticket booth. However, rather than asking "What kind of booth can we make?" we asked "What can this project be for Times Square and New York?" The concept reframed the problem as a broader urban design response to provide a centre and a viewing



Times Square TKTS booth, by Choi Ropiha Fighera. PHOTOGRAPHY ARI BURLING

platform for Times Square. Though the project is small in stature, it has recalibrated how people understand and enjoy Times Square.

This lateral thinking suits competition scenarios, but it needs to be treated carefully in a traditional architect/client relationship. Understandably most clients will harbour preconceived ideas for their project and expect them to be met, not challenged. It's a delicate task introducing ideas beyond the brief. Imagine telling the TKTS client that their site would be more suited to public seating than selling tickets – we would have probably been shown the door!

The challenge for our office has been to marry this approach with a viable business model. Such a method will always develop with experience and it has become easier to engage clients to expand their ambition. After 10 years we are finally finding our feet.

JC: Having firmly established a reputation in Australia, it was exciting to watch DCM expand into Europe with an office in London. Has your Australian success assisted in competition invitations and short-listings in Europe?

AF: Not dissimilar from yourselves, the Melbourne City Square competition really helped to launch the practice back in the mid-1970s. The exposure from competitions helped open up larger and international opportunities and we've been fortunate that the competition successes have continued over the years.

In regard to Europe it has been a long sustained effort. I helped set up our London office in 1990 with our UK director Steve Quinlan. It was 12 years before we had any major success, when we won the Manchester Civil Justice Centre. It was a shortlisted competition of three firms, including Richard Rogers and Pringle Richards Sharratt. I'm sure you are right in that our noteworthy work in Australia and Asia helped to get us into the final three.

Being registered architects in the UK gives us access to European competitions. We find we still have to be selective, though. Recently we registered for the Museum of the Second World War competition in Gdańsk. When we received the documents we found it was not going to be a short-listed competition so we didn't pursue it. When the results came out it didn't entirely surprise us that first and second prizes went to Polish firms. Assessing the competition, how it is structured, who the judges are and so on, is critical.



DCM's Manchester Civil Justice Centre. COURTESY DCM

AF: How many competitions would you typically enter in any year? What criteria do you use when deciding which to take on?

JC: We do two or three a year. In the early days, it was all open competitions but now it's more invited or shortlisted competitions.

We select a competition based on its design potential and its chance of being realised. We look at who the clients are and what kind of commitments are in place to follow through with the outcomes of the competition – post-competition processes, construction budget, terms of engagement, technical and planning assessment, and project delivery program. We also look at the complexity of the client group and stakeholders to see how involved the decision-making process may be. We look at the make-up of the jury and the assessment process to see whether it's a design-led selection »

» process, and whether there's client representation and support from technical, planning and cost advisors.

Having said all this, we have found informal design-based selection processes by private clients quite good as well. We've done these for commissions as small as house extensions. In our observation, the high-profile competitions are more susceptible to uncertainty. How about you?

AF: We find a lot of our work is via competitions of one form or another. For instance all the government projects require us to initially compete at an expressions of interest stage that will then lead into a shortlist and a further submission. A number of these also have a design component. The new Australian Embassy in Jakarta, which we won last year, was one of these big complex design/team/process/bid competitions.

Another this year was for the new Singapore University of Technology and Design, which is to be run in collaboration with MIT. Our competitors on the shortlist of five included UN Studio and Kohn Pederson Fox. These large competitions are very demanding. We can expend hundreds of thousands of dollars on large competitions so we have to be selective about how many we take on in any one year – usually only one or two.

For the Stonehenge Visitor Centre, whereupon reaching the shortlist all that was required was to attend an interview and present an approach limited to one sheet. Essentially these competitions choose the designer, not the design. We've actually won this project twice, on different sites, and now it is on hold due to government's austerity measures – a win is no guarantee a project will be built.



DCM's second take on the Stonehenge Visitor Centre. COURTESY DCM

Another variant is developer bid competitions for sites such as Melbourne Docklands or Parliament Square in Hobart. For most of these it is not the design that is the deciding factor but the commercial offer. As architects, it's important therefore to get fee arrangements in place that are appropriate to the amount of work required, whilst accounting for the level of risk.

China has run a lot of international competitions in the past 10 years – we've entered a few of them (see pages 56-1) – but we've noticed them drying up in recent years, no doubt due to the sophistication of emerging Chinese architects.

AF: You were recently quoted on the *Indesignlive* website about some of the pitfalls of competitions. In part you advocated bodies

like the Australian Institute of Architects be involved in assessing suitability of competitions. Can you elaborate upon these views?

JC: Competitions are sometimes held without any real commitment beyond the competition itself. They are sometimes held to promote a project for fundraising or to raise the project profile rather than to deliver a built outcome.

As competitions regularly draw huge amounts of investment from the design community, it would be helpful if professional bodies such as the Australian Institute of Architects could tailor their endorsement of competitions to assist their members in their decisions to participate.

Personally, I favour a two-tiered endorsement system. Firstly, an 'ideas competition', where there is a low level of cost and commitment by client. The winner can always be engaged if circumstances evolve that way. Secondly, a 'project competition', where there is a high level of cost and commitment by client. It would have a larger prize, upfront contract terms, high-level design jurors, technical advisors, stakeholder involvement, cost planner, and post-competition plans. This second tier could come with marketing to encourage the best in the profession to participate.

Even with all the goodwill and planning, however, lots of things can throw a project off course. There's simply no way to guarantee a happy ending every time.

JC: Denton Corker Marshall has been a great ambassador for architecture, particularly in Victoria with John Denton as Government Architect. Can you elaborate on the role of advocacy and patronage of architecture in Victoria?

AF: I know during John's tenure as Government Architect between 2006 and 2008, he actively encouraged government departments to run limited competitions, including the Office of Housing's recent schemes in Footscray and Dandenong. In addition, he was committed to promoting design as the main measure for selecting architects for public projects.

Advocacy and patronage for competitions from public and government bodies are essential to produce great architecture. However, the last international design competitions in Victoria for major public buildings were in the 1980s and 1990s, for the Melbourne Museum and Federation Square. Competitions for prominent projects are great for stimulating public debate and for producing memorable outcomes.

Universities are also providing leadership in this regard. The University of Technology, Sydney has run three design competitions in the past year, including the new Faculty of Engineering and Information Technology building on Broadway, which we won. We are really excited about this design. One commentator referred to it as an "ugly duckling" in the Sydney press and we would like to get it built to hopefully refute this.

PORTRAIT PHOTOGRAPHY RICHARD BIRCH (JC) AND DEREK SWALWELL (AK)