

EDITORIAL

The recent award of the architectural commission for the Chancery in Washington to Arthur Erickson dominated both the informal and the official discussion of the 1982 Royal Architectural Institute of Canada's Assembly in Winnipeg. It is not the first time that the commission for a major government project has sparked controversy or scandal. Because of the very nature of such a decision, it will probably not be the last time either. The fact is that there were a lot of angry architects gathered together in Winnipeg.

It must be clearly understood that the selection process employed for the Washington Chancery project was competitive, but not a competition in the usual way. Any registered architectural firm in Canada interested in participating was asked to register and subsequently complete a questionnaire with regard to their suitability for such a project. The Selection Panel, composed of members of the Departments of External Affairs and Public Works as well as two representatives of the RAIC, met and established a list of eleven firms chosen for further consideration. Representatives of these firms took part in a site visit and briefings in Washington and then made presentations and were interviewed by the Selection Panel. The Panel determined that one firm was clearly the first choice for the commission (Zeidler Roberts Partnership) and three other firms were also recommended to the government (Moriyama & Teshima, Moshe Safdie / Desnoyers Mercure / Larose Laliberté Petrucci, and Smith Carter Partners). Almost three months later, the Prime Minister announced the decision to award the commission to the firm of Arthur Erickson, one of the eleven firms interviewed but not one of the four firms recommended by the Panel.

The selection of Arthur Erickson would not normally seem so unusual. His reputation in Canada and internationally is constantly being reinforced, notably by his recent appointment to direct the planning of the Bunker Hill redevelopment in Los Angeles. He is easily capable of providing a competent solution. The prestigious programme and budget would seem to be consistent with Erickson's approach to architecture. But his Washington Chancery will always be a scarred monument, another milestone in the already unhealthy situation of the architectural competition in Canada.

The selection of an architectural team for such an important public building is bound to cause debate - competitions by their very nature are cumbersome and controversial. The selection process used in the case of the Washington Chancery seemed promising in its simplicity and objectiveness

but may be so maligned now that it can no longer be seriously pursued. Municipal competitions in the past few years have also resulted in skepticism and disappointment around the architectural community. Instead of having established a democratic process to produce the best possible building by the most suitable architect, we have arrived at a situation in which only a small handful, and usually the same handful of architects can qualify for projects of major significance. The result, underlined by the Erickson case, is that the competitive process itself seems trivial, inconsequential and redundant.

It is now up to the architectural community to convince itself, its clients and the public in general that the benefits of a competition outweigh the burden. Spurred on by the Erickson issue, the RAIC has decided to establish guidelines for competitions in Canada at both the public and private levels. It is unfortunate that the skepticism now rampant in the profession has made the recent lean years all the more discouraging for the practice. Younger architects and students have to be able to believe that an open competition will truly provide them with an opportunity to compete on an equal basis with the established firms. Denied that opportunity, we are depriving the public of new ideas and, ultimately, better buildings.

The Erickson issue is certainly a low point in Canadian architectural practice. It has brought to a head the anger and frustration of the profession fuelled by the failure of recent competitions. We can blame our government for irresponsibly ignoring the recommendations of the Selection Panel that they appointed. We can blame Arthur Erickson for accepting the commission without regard for the circumvention of the selection process and the resulting controversy. But, we must also blame ourselves, the architectural community. We have watched the competition in Canada decline and have accepted the situation with a shrug and some comment about the 'realities' of the profession. Had the concern so evident in Winnipeg this May been expressed much earlier, the government may not have been so casual with its commissions, Erickson not so righteous about his appointment, and the profession not so skeptical about its practice.

The Mississauga City Hall competition is now approaching, the winner to be announced in October. The profession is viewing it with airs of both expectancy and cynicism. A British Columbia architect returned his invitation to enter the competition signed "No confidence... see Washington, D.C. Competition". I hope he changes his mind. I hope we all do.

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by William Mark Piniott