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Choosing architects for competitions

- experiences from the selection of design teams in Sweden

Abstract

This article presents results from a study of prequalification in architectural competitions. The aim is to develop knowledge of how the organizer appoints candidates to restricted competitions in Sweden. Prequalification is a selection procedure used early in the competition process to identify suitable candidates for the following design phase. The overall research question in the study is about how organizers identify architects / design teams. The methodology includes an inventory of competitions, case studies, document review and interviews of key-persons. Ten municipal and governmental competitions have been examined in the study. The invitation emerges during negotiation at the organizing body. General conditions, submission requirements and criteria for the evaluation of applications by architect firms are part of an established practice. All clients have an assessment procedure made up of two distinct stages. First they check whether applications meet the specific "must requirements" in the invitation. Thereafter follows an evaluative assessment of the candidate's professional profile, which is based on the criteria in the invitation. Reference projects and information from the referees are important sources of information in this stage. Decisive in the final assessment is the organizer's perception of the candidates' ability to produce projects of architectural quality, the ability to combine creative solutions with functional requirements and aptitude to work with developers and contractors.

Keywords: prequalification, invitation, selection, architectural competition, organizer.

Introduction

This paper discusses prequalification of architect firms in contemporary architectural competitions in Sweden. Prequalification is a selection process used by public organizers for competitions with a limited number of participants. The organizers begin the process by issuing an invitation describing the general tasks of the competition, the evaluation criteria on which the choice of candidates will be based, and the documents to be included with the application. Architect firms wishing to partake in the competition respond to the invitation by sending in an application. A group of experts at the organizer, a selection committee, examine the applications and select candidates for the competition. Usually three to six architect firms/teams are selected. This is a short description of prequalification for restricted competitions organized by municipal and governmental organizers.

Why is it of interest to study how candidates are chosen for restricted competitions? In my opinion there are five important reasons for examining prequalification.

- There is the lack of knowledge about how architect firms are selected for restricted competitions. Architects and their employers need empirical research findings about prequalification to use as a basis for developing best practice, the systematic transfer of experience feedback to the building sector. From an organizers' point of view prequalification may be looked upon as a question of client competence.
- An invitation to a competition and the evaluation of candidates paves the way for future negotiations of architectural services. A first prize-winner may count on further assignments. Architect firms that do not proceed to a competition do not have a

chance. That is the fate of 88 % of the candidates in this study. Nevertheless, the architect firms still have their internal costs for drawing up their applications.

- Competitions are dealing with economy, architectural quality and regulated by the national Public Procurement Act. This regulation is based on the idea that competition results in a more efficient use of tax money. Public organizers must advertise their competitions and make the assignments available in Europe. But it can be too many competing design teams for the same mission.
- The requirements set forth by the organizer in the invitation to prequalification determine to what extent the competition system generates renewal. The organizers may entice both young architects and new firms, reject candidates or reward established architect firms by strict demands for references. There are obvious risks that the organizer's desire for security has a conservative effect, which limits the possibility for the competition to contribute to renewal and development of innovative design solutions.
- The invitation is issued at an early phase of the planning process, before the competition goals are specified in the competition program. At the same time there are long term consequences that are difficult to foresee when the candidates are chosen. The competition results in buildings, which are situated in public spaces and shape how the environment will be experienced in the future. From that point of view, prequalification is a judging process of strategic importance in the built environment.

Research Field

In spite of the importance of prequalification there are surprisingly few studies, which focus on how architects are chosen for restricted competitions. However, prequalification has been studied in Holland and Denmark. Leentje Volker (2010) recounts how public developers in Holland procure architectural services. There is a great deal of dissatisfaction among architects in Holland about the bureaucratic and costly application requirements demanded by public clients (Kroese, Meijer & Visscher, 2009). Volker and Lauche (2008) note in a case study that the selection of architects is based on personal experience, reputation and references.

The Danish survey on prequalification in architectural competitions was made at the Copenhagen School of Economics by Kristian Kreiner and Merete Gorm 2008 and 2009. The study from 2008 describes the perspective and experience of promoters. This survey is based on a questionnaire, which was answered by 98 informants. Of these, 60 % were public promoters and 40 % private. My informants work at municipal and governmental arrangers, who, as opposed to private promoters, must select firms/teams in accordance with the Public Procurement Act. This law is based on a European regulation (Directive 2004/18/EC).

Architectural competition is a *field of knowledge* that is important to architects and the clients who procure architectural services. Also the public and end-users are important players in competitions. As a field of knowledge, the competition process may be divided into eight typical phases in Sweden, following a specific order, from the planning of the competition task to the choice of the winner and negotiations if design service (Rönn, 2011 and 2012):

- *Preparation:* In the first phase the organizing body prepares the planning for the architectural assignment, investigates the needs and the preconditions for carrying through the competition. Included here are the decisions about the form of competition after consulting the Swedish Association of Architects, the language to be used, the competitions economy, and the number of firms/teams to be invited to the competition after the prequalification.¹

- *Invitation:* In the second phase the organizer works on the invitation and advertising. The invitation contains a descriptive summary of the competition assignment and financial remuneration, the required documents to be submitted with the application, information about the reviewers and summary of the criteria for choosing the candidates.
- *Application:* The third phase is the drawing up and submission of the application by the architect firms. The architect firms/teams who wish to participate compile the requested information about the company's financial status and suggestions for the project organization, CV for the key persons, reference projects and contact information for the reference persons for these projects.
- *Evaluation:* In the fourth phase the organizers decide upon the firms/teams for the competition. The organizers selection committee reviews the applications on the basis of the "must requirements" and the professional merits of the candidates for the task. Evaluation criteria in the invitation focus on the abilities of candidates to combine quality, creativity and functional demands with an aptitude to cooperate on the project.
- *Competition program:* In the fifth phase the organizer develops a program for the competition; description of the competition assignment, drawing up requirements, goals and criteria for judging the competition proposals and the select jury members from the organizing body. In this phase the jury is supplemented with a member appointed by the Swedish Association of Architects if this is not already the case.
- *Design process:* The sixth phase is the production of ideas and design of the competition task. The competing firms/teams analyse the competition program, formulate the essential design ideas and visualize the proposals for the competition task.
- *Quality Judgment:* In the seventh phase the jury tests the quality of the entries, choose a winner and draw up the jury statement. The merits and deficiencies of the proposals are analysed and evaluated. The jury's task is to identify the best total solution for the assignment. The architects on the jury are usually asked to present the proposals to the representatives from the organizer.
- *Implementation:* The eighth and last phase is the implementation of the winning proposal. The competition now becomes a question of negotiating architectural services and planning. In the invitation to the competition the organizer states that the winner may count on the assignment on condition that the project is carried out.

Aim and Research Questions

This article is present results from a study about how public organizers in Sweden select architect firms into restricted competitions. Of central interest are the (a) *invitation*, (b) *application* and (c) *selection*. The organizer initiates the process by extending invitations for prequalification. Architect firms who wish to participate in the competition respond by sending in their application. A basic assumption is that the organizers select candidates who have attractive professional profiles. Either the organizer tries to find a suitable mix of candidates with varied profiles or applicants are chosen on their individual merits. Since there are many more applications than number of places in restricted competitions the organizer must make an evaluated selection. Some candidates must be seen as better than others. Here lies the study's

fundamental research problem. My intention is to highlight prequalification with the support of the following five questions:

- *Why are restricted competitions organized?*
- *Who drew up the invitation and formulated the application requirements and criteria for evaluation?*
- *Did the architect firm meet the organizer's need for information?*
- *How was the evaluation organized and carried through?*
- *What are the organizer's experiences from choosing candidates for the competition?*

Theory and method

The study has a theoretical frame, which includes inventory, case studies, document review and interviews. The collection and processing of data is based on:

- *Inventory:* The study began with an inventory of the Swedish Architects Association's home page for competitions. Competitions approved by the association were listed here. The inventory was limited to public competitions for the period 2007-2009. Mapping was used to choose competitions that highlighted important traits of prequalification.
- *Case Studies:* Five municipal competitions and five governmental competitions were chosen as case studies. From the Swedish Architects Association's home page I downloaded the following documents from the competitions: Competition program, competition proposal (site plans, facades, sections, illustrations and descriptive text) and jury statement (www.arkitekt.se/tavlingar).
- *Document review:* To access additional competition documents the person who represented the organizer was contacted. I made a written request for minutes from the meetings, background material for the decision, protocol and the invitation to prequalification. These documents show the formal side of the process. The documents have been used as background material for case studies, for identifying members in the selection committees and for developing the interview guide.
- *Interview of key persons:* Members of the selection committees have given information how they experience the evaluation of candidates in five competitions. These are all persons who played an active role in prequalification as reviewers of applications submitted by the architect firms. The interviews were open questions about the background of architect competitions, competition form, invitation, judging process and reviewers' experiences from prequalification. The informants wrote the answers to the questions directly in the interview guide. The answers communicate personal experiences and give a deeper picture of the selection from the organizer's point of view.

Selection of cases

The search for cases began with a review of The Swedish Association of Architects' homepage. There were 29 competitions shown for the period 2007-2009 approved by the association and carried out in Sweden (Table 1).

Table 1: Number of competitions 2007-2009 at the homepage.

Competition type	Governmental	Municipal	Private
Open competition: 9	1	7	1
Restricted competition: 20	6	14	
Total: 29	7	21	1

There are 20 restricted competitions during that period 2007-2009 and ten have been chosen for case studies. Five organized by governmental clients (County Administrative Boards, The Swedish Environmental Protection Agency or The National Property Board Sweden) and five arranged by municipals promoters. The five architectural competitions organized by a governmental body's are:

- 2009 competition for an exhibition building in a national park (Laponia)
- 2008 competition for an exhibition building at Lake Vänern (Victoria House)
- 2007 competition for an exhibition building at Lake Tåkern
- 2007 competition for an exhibition building for nature reserve (Stendörren)
- 2007 competition for a new entrance to national park (Skuleskogen)

The following municipal competitions are:

- 2009 competition for Stora Torget (Main Square) in Visby town
- 2009 competition for housing at Västra Kajen in Jönköping town
- 2008 competition for Cultural Centre in Vaxholm town
- 2007 competition for exhibition building for wetlands in Kristianstad
- 2007 competition for a new Music & Theatre in Jönköping town

Informants

There are totally 19 experts representing three municipal and two governmental organizers who described their experiences in the interview guide. The response was very good. 19 of the 21 persons who participated in the selection committees answered the questions in the interview guide. The informants are an experienced group of referees.² A majority are over 50 years. Most have at least 20 years professional experience (13 of 19 informants). There is an equal division of informants with regard to gender. Architects make up the dominant group among informants. Project leaders and purchasers of services account for an almost equally large group. Their professional merits are of an inter-disciplinary nature with a base in architecture and the built environment as well as procurements. Thus, there are no grounds for questioning the competence of the selection committees.

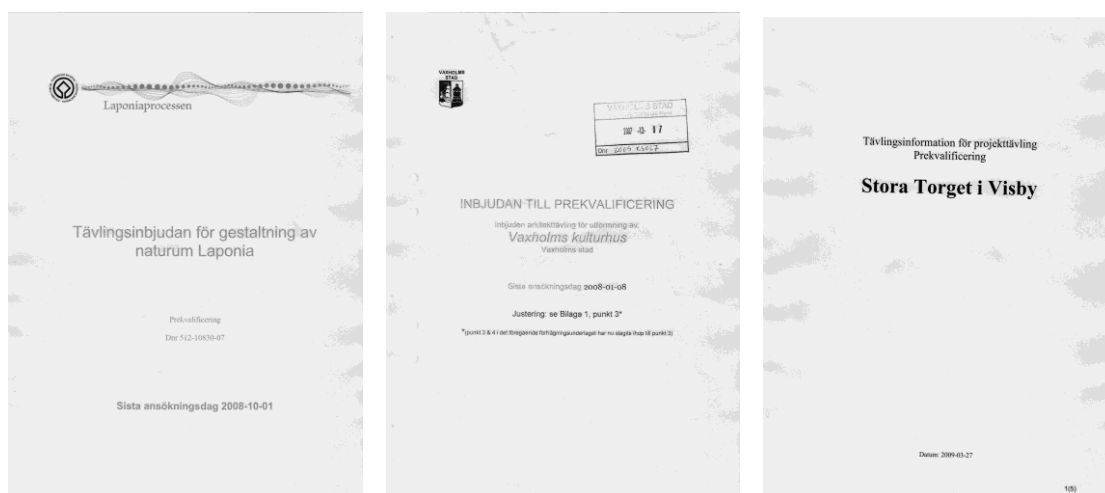


Figure 1: Front page to invitations in three prequalified competitions; Exhibition building in Laponia (2008), Culture building in Vaxholm (2008) and the Main square in Visby (2009).



Figure 2: Front page to prequalified competitions for Exhibition building at Lake Tåken (2007) and at Lake Vänern (2008) to the left. To the right, Jury report 2007, front page from the prequalified competition for a new music and theatre in Jönköping.

Result

This section presents the opinions of the informants on prequalification in five areas: competition form, invitation, need for information, judging process, and experience from selection of design teams. The accounts contain some quotes from the interview guide. These quotations are used to give a more realistic picture of the reviewers' experiences. In this account I have made some minor language adjustments; abbreviations have been fully written out and everyday oral expressions have been transposed into written language.

Table 2: Governmental competitions 2007-2009.

Competition	Applicants	Invited candidates
2009 competition, Laponia	54	6 (11%)
2008 competition, Victoria House	51	5 (10%)
2007 competition, Lake Tåkern	35	4 (11%)
2007 competition, Stendörren	22	6 (27%)
2007 competition, Skuleskogen	9	4 (44%)
Total: 5 Restricted competitions	171	25 (15%)

The five governmental competitions generated 171 applications (Table 2). 25 design teams (15%) have been invited. The chance of becoming a participant varies from 10 to 44 %. In four of five competitions the winning design teams is a joint venture of two firms. Wingårdh Arkitekter, which is a very well known firm in Sweden with good reputation, has been very successful in these restricted competitions. In 3 out of 5 governmental organize competition Wingårdh Arkitekter is part of the invited design team as a key player.

Table 3: Municipal competitions 2007-2009.

Competition	Applicants	Invited candidates
2009 competition, Visby town	38	3 (8%)
2008 competition, Jönköping town	42	5 (12%)
2008 competition, Vaxholm town	33	3 (9%)
2007 competition, Kristianstad	29	4 (14%)
2007 competition, Jönköping town	62	5 (8%)
Total: 5 Restricted Competitions	204	20 (10%)

The five municipal competitions have attracted 204 applicants (Table 3). 20 Design teams (10%) become invited. The chance of taking part varies from 8 to 14 %. Also in the municipal organized competitions well-known architect firms in Sweden have produced the winning design proposals.

All together the ten competitions generated a total of 375 applications. Of these, 315 (84 %) come from Swedish architect firms. The number of applications varies from 9 to 62 per competition. Some invitations are clearly more attractive than others. 45 firms/teams (12 %) were invited to the competitions. The remainder (88 %) was eliminated during prequalification. The organizers' chose 3 to 6 candidates per competition. 40 of the 45 invited firms/teams (89 %) are Swedish. This empirical result shows that young architects, new businesses and foreign architectural firms outside Scandinavian have difficulty in being successful in restricted competitions in Sweden.

Competition Form

Prequalification is not an isolated activity for organizers but part of a planning process with preparation for the competition. As soon as the invitation to prequalification is made public, the competition is established as the work method for the project. This decision is based on a need, an aesthetic ambition and preparation for a detailed development plan, which regulates how the site will be used. The competition is motivated because of projects are seen as challenging and put high demands on the architectural quality. Some informants refer to this aesthetic ambition as the organizers' desire to create a profile building that stands apart from the ordinary. The building "should be an attraction in itself", as one project leader expressed it.

The selection committees have a very positive impression of competitions. Architectural competitions are seen as an experimental arena, which promotes the development of quality in a project. The reviewers' experience coincides with how the Swedish Association of Architects promotes their competition service on their homepage (www.arkitekt.se/tavlingar). Organizers use competitions to (a) identify new ideas and innovative proposals, (b) develop good solutions that meet high demands for architectural quality and function, (c) reflect openness towards the local community, as well as the interested parties, (d) negotiate qualified architectural services and (e) get away from the preconceived notions and traditions of the promoters.

Competitions appear to be an answer to the complex strategic aim of organizing body. In spite of the fact that three of the winning competition proposals were *not* implemented, the selection committees are positive towards prequalification. One project leader disappointedly noted that the competition was not well anchored politically since the municipality "did not

go further after the winner was selected.” Criticism against the competition form comes from only one experienced informant, who noted that restricted competitions have a tendency to favour established and well-known firms with good reputations in the field.

Even with the ambition to include someone from an untried firm it’s hard to find out which one it should be. That may be a disadvantage with restricted competitions: that certain firms become successful, get even better references and greater chances for invitations in an upward spiral where less-known firms have few chances of getting in. (Architect, interview 2011)

The fact that the informants are attracted to the competition as a work method does not explain the competition form. Why did the organizers decided to have competitions with limited participation and not open competitions? The answer is not so clear-cut. Some organisers see the restricted competition as a compromise between great ambitions and limited economic resources. Two answers that shed light on this dilemma are:

(Organizing body had) a positive attitude towards competition as a form of negotiating architectural services... Besides, this was a prestigious project... At the same time it was a rather small project with a rather strained economy. A restricted competition with 5-6 participants was judged to be what the project could afford. (Architect, interview 2011)

Since, in spite of the attention, it is a small place in a small municipality, and also a small purse, we chose to have a restricted competition with prequalification. That is because our resources both for judging and competition remuneration were limited. We thought that many firms would be interested and we would not have the personnel to handle an open competition. (Project leader, interview 2011)

Several informants maintain that the attitude of collaborators and contacts with the Swedish Association of Architects were crucial for decision on the competition form. “The restricted competition was chosen on the advice of the Swedish Association of Architects”, one project leader replied. The arrangers were several organizations and interested parties collaborated on the project. Thus governmental organized competitions presume that there is a wide range of support for the project on the national, regional and local levels.

At an early stage the work group contacted the Swedish Association of Architects, which was the competition administrator during the work with the competition. It was decided that to get an outstanding building a restricted competition would take place. The Swedish Environmental Protection Agency chose the restricted competition form as the procedure for the design of the new visitor’s centre. (Client, interview 2011)

Invitation

In the invitation the organizer sets forth the general conditions, submission requirements and the criteria, which will be used as the basis for evaluating the applications. The information in the invitation determines the interest potential participants show in the competition. The *general conditions* in the invitation to prequalification are:

- *Competition form*: Restricted project competition (selected cases).
- *Number of invitations*: 3 - 6 companies (architectural firms/competition teams).
- *Remuneration*: 100 000 - 200 000 SEK per design teams after submission of approved design proposal in the competition.
- *Language*: The application should be in Swedish, which is the competition language.

All the ten organizers express quality objectives. The aim of the competition is that it should result both in building suggestions with a high level of architectural quality and an architect firm to carry out the project. Three to six design teams are invited. The winner is promised to get the assignment on condition that the client implements it. The general terms are formulated in the same way by the public organizers. The invitation reflects the established praxis of the profession rather than strategic considerations in the planning process by the organizers. The conditions have been decided in consultation with the Swedish Association of Architects and after comparison with other similar competitions.

Four firms were considered appropriate for the project. That was decided in consultation with the Association of Swedish Architects. The choice of competition language was Swedish out of consideration for the local support for the project and the handling of the politically steered organization that the municipality is. The financial remuneration was decided in consultation with the Association of Swedish Architects. (Planner, interview 2011)

Generally, the informants pointed out that the invitation was drawn up in consultation with the Swedish Association of Architects. The choice of language was motivated by practical arguments. “Swedish was most natural for this type of competition”, was a typical reply. The requirement facilitates checking out the references and future communication with the winner. This demand limits the number of applications from foreign firms and results in the competition culture taking on a national character with a Nordic overtone. The number of invited design teams is seen as a product of economy and the desire for a broad competition. The organizers’ remuneration for the competing architect firms is 100 000 – 200 000 SEK, which is considered “normal” for the task.

Application requirements and criteria for evaluation

The specific conditions in the invitation are a combination of “tough” must-requirements and “soft” criteria for evaluating a candidate’s merits. The organizer specifies which documents the architect firms must include in their applications. Candidates who do not fulfill the requirements are immediately eliminated. Toughness lies in the measurable effects and apparent precision of the requirements (Sällström, 1980). Evaluation criteria have a completely different character and put the professional profile of the applicant in focus. There is softness in their evaluation role, the search for a suitable candidate. To use these criteria the organizer needs access to experienced persons with good judgment. The selection committees evaluate the design team’s professional profile with regard to the competition task.

Must-requirements

The organizer uses the application requirements and criteria in the invitation to convey to the potential candidates how their applications will be examined. A certain number of must-requirements and criteria reappear all the time. Architect firms wishing to participate in competitions must send in applications, which meet the following requirements:

- *Curriculum Vitae*: CV for responsible architects, their education and professional qualifications for the competition assignment.
- *Reference project*: 3-5 reference projects relevant to the competition assignment. Usually 2 out of 3 projects should have been carried through.
- *Personal references*: Contact information for reference persons of the clients mentioned in the projects (promoters and entrepreneurs).
- *Project organization*: A plan showing how the assignment should be carried out and how the necessary areas of knowledge/professions should be coordinated for the project.

- *Quality system and environmental policy*: Statement of the firm's internal quality system and environmental policy.
- *Finances and taxes*: Documentation of company's financial situation and taxes paid in. This information should not be more than two months old.
- *Contact information for the company*: Company's registration number including the name, telephone number and e-mail address of the contact person.
- *Affidavit*: An affidavit signed by the legal representative stating the firm has not filed for bankruptcy, is not under court administration or committed any grievous error in the practice of the profession.

Finally, the application should be signed by the firm's accredited persons and submitted on time. These must requirements is a combination of professional practice and law regulations (public procurement act) that makes it possible for organizers to exclude companies that may considered to be unsuitable for the task because of their lack of professional experience, small finance resources or tax problem. The demanded document is an expression of administrative security, financial security and competence for the competition task. The project organization gives the client a preliminary idea about how the architect firms view the assignment. The reference projects facilitate contact with promoters and entrepreneurs.

Evaluative criteria

Reviewers use soft evaluation criteria to judge the professional merits and references of the candidates. Again, a clear pattern appears. The same design criteria are found in the organizer's invitation. The suitability of an architect firm is examined considering:

- *Architectural quality*: How has the architect applied the concept of "good architecture" in the reference project?
- *Creative ability*: How has the architect developed innovative solutions to the architectural and functional problems of the reference project?
- *Collaboration*: How has the architect cooperated with the client and the contractor on the reference project?
- *Competence and resources*: Does the competition team have the professional competence and the resources asked for to fulfill the assignment?

All organizers include these four evaluation criteria in the invitation. They are professional founded and expresses the contemporary practice in architecture. In some cases the organizer has included criteria about how the architect solved environmental aspects and accessibility in the reference project. The criteria have an open nature that is typical for architecture. By directing questions to the references the reviewers acquire knowledge about the candidates professional qualifications and suitability for the assignment. The decision about who will be invited to participate in the competition evolves from a dialogue-based evaluation. The references respond to the questions by providing information about the candidate's qualities.

Municipal and government organizers have the same application requirements and evaluation criteria. However, the way in which the invitation is formed varies. Some arrangers have hired an external consultant for the task. Others have an in-house expert, who drawn up the proposal for application requirements and evaluation criteria. But both methods have in common that the final versions were drawn up in consultation with the Swedish Association of Architects.

Many of the must-requirements were formalities... that the procurement officer provides. Requirements to show the suitability for the task through, for example, professional qualifica-

tions, availability of resources and routines for environmental guarantees are also... standard. Reference objects and projects were the most important and I remember we were very careful to give the minimum and maximum number... We had earlier experiences where interested architects sent in their entire portfolio instead of selecting the most suitable references. (Architect, interview 2011)

The work group prepared the must-requirements and evaluation criteria... Together with the competition administrator they went through the competition invitation where it became evident that there should not be more must-requirements than necessary and that the most important was an assurance that the architects were not involved in any faulty financial situations and had the capacity to carry through the assignment. Other evaluation criteria discussed were among others experience... environmental profile, and ability to create something exciting and innovative. (Client, interview 2011)

Information needed

According to the informants the invitation resulted in the required information from the architect firms. There was no need for further written documents. Nor was there any risk of additional bureaucracy and administrative expenses due to over-extensive demands for accounting. From the organizer's perspective the application requirements and evaluation criteria fulfilled their needs for information. The selection committees had access to all the documents they needed to identify suitable candidates. It is only towards the end of the judging process, when there are just a handful of favourites' remaining, that the reviewers required more information about the candidates and contacted the reference persons.

All firms were well-known and had excellent references. It was decided that further inquiries were not necessary. (Project leader, interview 2011)

I thought that there was enough information in the applications... For the last five "finalists" the promoter's reference persons were contacted and the competitors were chosen taking these into consideration. (Project leader, interview 2011)

References were checked; otherwise the reference project itself was used as a statement of how the firm related to a complex urban design assignment. (Architect, interview 2011)

Thus far the picture is unanimous. But when the informants comment on how the applications should be evaluated the answers vary. Some informants think the evaluations should be based only on the applications themselves. Their arguments are:

We received the necessary reference material in the applications. We found it important to consider only the material the applicant decided to send in and the reference objects they chose in order to make an objective evaluation based on impartial grounds. (Planner, interview 2011)

A somewhat opposite opinion is also expressed in the study:

A discussion arose about how our earlier knowledge of a firm should be weighed in the evaluations, or if we should be strictly limited to the material submitted. Inevitably our general knowledge about the firm influenced the evaluation. (Architect, interview 2011)

The importance of the information about the candidates varies during the selection. At the end of the prequalification the selecting committees sought additional information about the candidates from promoters and entrepreneurs. The architect firm's professional profile, good reputations in the field, earlier experience in designing similar buildings, are usually references

of extra high informative value. In this study, organizers asked the architect's clients about their personal experiences. This is an extra follow-up in final phase of the prequalification, which creates a feeling of security in an insecure situation.

... our telephone conversations with the clients/promoters were very fruitful. We found out if the planning went well, if the budget and time schedule were met and if the final result was good and functioned. (Project leader, interview 2011)

The project leader contacted several architectural firms for additional information. We called the municipalities where the firms had completed projects. Myself I called... (Architect, interview 2011)

References were, as expected, most decisive. Both the choice of what one deemed to be "comparative objects" and how they were actually realized and described were important for the evaluation. Which persons should work with our project was also important. (Architect, interview 2011)

Judging process

Candidates are selected in a judging process with two distinct phases. First, it is established if the must-requirements have been fulfilled. Then the professional merits of the candidates are investigated. The result is a judging process which changes focus from the review of documents based on "hard" must-have requirements to the evaluation of qualifications based on "soft" criteria (Sällström, 1980). Most architect firms have sound finances, administration, and references and submit complete applications. However, two competitions show a deviant pattern where many candidates were eliminated already in the initial stage. Apparently there are "strict" organizers with selection committees who make harder controls of applications than others. The "liberal" organizers allow all candidates who have sent in the required documents to proceed in the competition. In both cases, the end result is that 88 % of the design teams are eliminated. The majority of organizers prefer to delay the elimination in order to benefit from the architectural critique evaluation of the candidates' professional references.

The selection committees usually need to meet several times. The number of meetings varies from two well-prepared whole day meetings to eight meetings. The judging process has a collective nature. There is a committee, usually three to six persons, who select candidates to restricted competitions. The final choice is characterized by consensus. A decision develops. With little difficulty the reviewers in the selection committees have been able to agree upon which architect firms are most suitable for the competition. How is the ranking made?

All organizers make the ranking in the second phase of the judging process. The reviews in the selection committees use three methods to identify suitable candidates. Architectural critique evaluation is applied afterwards to justify the choice. The informants describe the first method as a breakdown of applications into different categories. The selection committees are looking for ***qualitative differences*** between applications to explain the ranking. The candidates are categorized as "very interesting", "interesting", or "uninteresting" depending on reference project, personal qualifications, reputation and professional competence. A mix of candidates is then selected. The second method involves the reviewer recognizing the ***subjective character*** of the evaluation and choosing firms with an attractive professional profile. Design, references and expectations are coordinated into a whole assessment. The reviewers make a balance sheet of the desired qualities. Their preferences will be crucial for the outcome. In this case, the professional experience and good judgment of the reviewers in the selection committees gives a sense of security to the organizers. The third method involves pinpointing a ***rational ground*** for the selection. Here the selection committees draw up tables and give quantitative numerical values to the applications. The points are based on the evalua-

tion criteria in the invitation. By means of scoring some architect firms will appear to have more merits than others, which both motivate and legitimize the choice.

Selection committees who seek qualitative differences describe the judging process as the progressive elimination of candidates. In the end only the favourites remain. This method of selecting architect firms is described as follows:

The judging group had 3-4 meetings where we sat for a rather long time and went through the applications. I recall that at the first meeting we divided the applications into four groups (best-poorest). The rest of the meeting was devoted to passing the applications around among these four groups until there were five applications remaining... (Architect, interview 2011)

Selection committees who focus on the subjective nature of the selection rely on their professional experience and ability to see the qualities in the applications. The fact that evaluations are subjective is not a hinder but rather a “necessary” consequence of the task. Some candidates must be pointed out as being better than others. Knowledge, consensus and coordination of individual preferences in the evaluation process become a guarantee for a good end result.

The work group met and selected those who should continue to the restricted competition. We individually rated the documents and made our own personal judgments. When we later compiled them it turned out that the members of the work group had amazingly similar opinions about the selection; there were only one or two proposals where there was a little discussion, but it was surprisingly simple and easy to agree upon who should continue. (Client, interview 2011)

Selection committees who look for a rational reason for their choice of architect firms score the applications. The evaluation criteria in the invitation are given a numerical value, usually 1-5 points. The candidates who fulfill the must-requirements are scored according to how their applications describe (a) architectural ability, (b) competence and (c) experience and resources for the task. The final selection of architect firms for the competition is made from the candidates with the highest grades. Reviewers who used this model say the following:

We drew up a form, which was gradually filled in as the evaluations took place. There were clear instructions as to how the evaluations should be made for the respective evaluation criteria. Competence and experience were relatively easy to grade fairly... Architectonic expression was more difficult since it is a relatively subjective evaluation; here the various group members had to think based on their own professions. In the end we were wholly in agreement anyway about who should continue. (Project leader, interview 2011)

Organizer's experience

The selection committees are made up of three to six persons competent in architecture and urban design, project management and procurement. Some organizers have completed the group with representatives for end-users. Politicians may be included in municipally organized competitions. The composition of the committee reflects the competition's multidisciplinary tasks. One or two members from the selection committee continued to participate in the project but now as representatives for the organizer on the competition jury.

The informants have a positive image of prequalification. The encounter with the application documents is characterized by curiosity and expectation. The selection committees have been able to nominate an architect firm/team for the competition without any complicated negotiations. They describe the evaluation of the candidates' professional merits as a difficult, pleasant and instructive task. To choose architects for competitions can be seen as a “wicked problem” (Churchman, 1967) in a future oriented context, which holds the promise of an exciting sequel. This is how the informants described their experiences:

I am not used to architectural competitions. But compared with the procurements I do in other areas there were unexpectedly many applications. (Project manager, interview 2011)

I thought there would be more complicated rounds, but with support and very good information about the work procedures I felt very comfortable in this context. (Client, interview 2011)

I have myself partaken in many competitions, won some or was rewarded, but this was the first time I joined in choosing the participants for a restricted competition. (Architect, interview 2011)

Since the informants describe prequalification as such a good experience it raises the question as to why competitions are not used more frequently. In spite of the fact that the reviewers in the selection committees are accomplished experts with long professional experience in architecture and urban design they have only participated in prequalification a few times. There is no criticism in the interviews either that could explain the limited use of competitions. On the contrary, even for organizers where the planning process stopped after the jury appointed a winner, there was a positive image of prequalification.

Only 3 out of 19 informants had negative comments about the competition process. The first informant criticized the fact that restricted competitions tend to favour established architect offices, which makes it difficult for new firms and young architects to be chosen. That, on the other hand, is the result of the organizer's requirements set forth in the invitation. The second informant was disappointed that the architectonic quality of the design proposal in the competition was not as high as expected. The third informant complained about the lack of political support, which resulted in the competition ending after the winner was appointed. But these voices are exceptions. Most members of the selection committees have only good experiences of prequalification. Several reviewers noted with surprise the wide interest shown by architectural firms in Europe. Since all of the organizers required Swedish as the competition language these applications were seen as a pleasant surprise.

Conclusions and discussions

There are two fundamental principles municipal and governmental organizers may use for steering the competition process: ex-ante and ex-post. Ex-ante means that organizers try to control the competition process "ahead of time" through the competition task, the competition conditions and the choice of competing architect firms. Ex-post means that the competition is steered "afterwards" by the design and the jury's assessment of the competition design proposals. I am trying to understand how this steering "ahead of time" works. That is why I am interested in prequalification. My aim with this study was to investigate how prequalification appears from the organizer's point of view. I have done this by investigating selection committees and their experiences from choosing design teams to restricted competitions.

The study has two limitations, which should be commented upon before the conclusions are drawn. The first limitation concerns the perspective in the study. There are two parties acting in prequalification - organizers and applicants - each with their own point of departure. This study focuses only on the organizer's viewpoint. The other limitation is in the selection of informants. I have looked for members of the selection committees with first-hand experience of prequalification. Informants judge their own actions. It can be assumed that their positive opinion about the competition influences how they describe prequalification. The replies from reviewers should be considered in the light of this prior attitude towards competitions as an arena for quality development in architecture and urban design. The answers on the research questions in the study may be summarized in five parts:

- *Competition:* The most important reason for organizers choosing competition as a work form is that the task is seen as complicated and the project is aimed at high-quality architecture. The importance of the site generates aesthetic ambitions for the organizer. Competitions are the exception in daily practice and reserved for some especially important projects for municipal and government promoters. The informants describe the restricted competition as a compromise between great ambitions and limited resources. Advice from the Association of Swedish Architects has had significant influence on the decision. Municipal and government promoters perceive the choice of competition form as a practical question rather than a strategic consideration for renewal and promoting innovation.
- *Invitation:* The organizer's invitation evolves during negotiations with the Swedish Association of Architects. The general regulations for competitions as well as the application requirements and evaluation criteria of the architectural firms are part of a regulation in law and professional praxis, which explains why invitations look so similar in the cases. This invitation favors well-established firms in Sweden with a good reputation and impressing professional profile who had the time to create a portfolio of implemented projects, relevant of competition task. An experience informant noted that the requirements in the invitation hinder renewal in the competition system. Candidates, who lack reference projects that have been carried out, relevant to the assignment, are eliminated. In spite of Swedish being the required language of the competition, 16 % of the applications are from foreign architect firms. A possible explanation is that architects work in a European market and get to know about competitions via electronic negotiating systems and home pages. Another explanation is that there are Swedish-speaking architects in European firms.
- *Need for information:* Prequalification fulfills the organizers' need for information. The replies from architectural firms give the selection committees a good picture of the candidates' professional profiles and merits for the task. It is only when making the final choice of candidates that the reviewers need additional information and contact the reference persons. At this point, it is the developers and entrepreneurs' experience of the firm that the organizer tries to investigate through dialogue with the architects' employers. The final selection is based on a combination of new oral information from the reference professional merits in written documents, descriptions and representations of the reference project (photos, drawings, illustrations, facades and plans).
- *Judging process:* The organizers select candidates using a judging process, which has two typical phases. The first phase is the control of the application for the must-requirements in the invitation and is followed by a second evaluation phase. The judging process moves from the "hard" must-requirements to the evaluation of the candidates based on "soft" criteria. The process usually requires three to four meetings. A committee of reviewers competent in architecture, urban design, project management and procurement of services points out the appropriate candidates. They use three methods to identify three to six firms/teams for the competition task. The first method is ranking according to the *qualitative differences* among the applicants. The candidates are divided into groups according to their professional profile and how interesting they appear to the organizer. The second method affirms the *subjective moment* in the selection. Reviewers choose the candidates they like after a collective appraisal of

their merits, references and their professional reputations. The third method is a search for a *rational base* for the selection. In this case the reviewers set up tables and score the candidates. The firms with the most points are invited to the competition. The organizers use architectural criticism in order to justify their choices.

- *Experience from the selection of candidates:* The informants relate two important experiences from prequalification. First, the selection of candidates is described in positive terms. It was challenging, exciting, educational and difficult, but enjoyable. Several reviewers were pleasantly surprised by the number of applications, which is interpreted as a sign of significant interest on the part of architect firms. Second, the response shows that the informants, despite long experience working with architecture and urban design, had only participated in a few cases of prequalification. For many it was the very first time. Competitions are a one-time event, a work method only used for unique projects with extra high demands for architectural quality. The low competition frequency is in sharp contrast with the reviewers' good experience of prequalification. Possible explanations for so few competitions being arranged are the lack of resources in the form of time, knowledge and money. Planning takes time, competent experts are needed and finances are necessary to administrate the competition process, and to remunerate the competing firms and external jury members. Other factors, which could be considered as limiting the competition is the conservative effect of the traditional planning, pressed time schedules, and an unwillingness to be steered by competition regulations. Further, the lack of architectonic ambitions on the part of clients, urban planners, consultants and entrepreneurs contributes to architectural competitions being viewed as unnecessary. But the positive experiences from prequalification still remains and could contribute to a renewal of the competition culture.

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¹ The Swedish Association of Architects shall sanction architectural competitions in Sweden. Then it becomes an approved competition according the national competition rules. In this case competitions organized has to follow both specific competition rules and the law for procurement.

² Their professional profiles may be summarized as follows: *Gender*: 9 women and 10 men. *Age*: 13 of 19 informants were over 50 year. *Number of years in profession*: 13 of 19 had at least 20 years' experience. Of those, 7 had more than 31 years of experience. *Professional background*: 8 informants are architects, 3 are engineers, 2 are biologists, and 1 is a planner. The remaining 6 answered "other" professional fields. *Work*: 8 informants work with architecture and town planning. They are architects. 7 work as project leaders and purchasers of services. They are engineers, biologists, and persons with "other" capacities. 3 have management control as their main occupation. One informant replied "other".