Digital Presentations for
Landscape Architecture Competitions

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1 The Basics

Competitions represent a laboratory for new ideas and an important discussion forum for landscape architecture. Planners convey ideas to competition organisers in a ‘transmitter/receiver relationship’ using various graphic representation techniques (or simply ‘graphics’).

For landscape architects, competitions also represent an indispensable medium for communicating with the wider public, as well as with the experts, because the tasks for which competitions are held tend to be of particular public interest.

1.1 Transmitter/receiver Relationship

While expert jury members are in a position to read and understand plans, sections and technical details, lay members often need reference images or spatial perspectives if they are to be able to interpret the ideas of the design. Good competition graphics serve the needs of both groups without betraying the principles of good design or transgressing the bounds of taste. All the same, a certain degree of populism is needed, because ultimately the idea has to be ‘sold’ at the concluding press conference.

Every decision for or against a particular means of graphic expression is always also a decision about the statement one wishes to make. Without an idea the graphic remains an end in itself, a mere illusion, a collection of graphical elements devoid of meaning. Cheap showmanship without any unifying concept was at its worst in the early days of computer applications, and gave a bad name to sophisticated graphics.

In the meantime, fortunately, this wave of public displays of programming skills (or showing off) has ebbed away. An experienced competition jury quickly identifies and rejects entries of that ilk, although lay members are sometimes impressed by graphically overloaded contributions that actually fail to properly address the task.

1.2 Brands

The growing necessity to market projects and acquire funding is reflected in a general tendency towards symbolic stylisation of projects, especially in architecture. Impressive images – generally photomontages, renderings or other perspectives – are used to brand the project in the viewer’s memory as an indelible landmark. The designs for public buildings in Hamburg’s HafenCity development, Herzog & De Meuron’s Elbphilharmonie Concert Hall and Rem Koolhaas’s Science Centre, are up-to-the-minute examples of this trend. Landscape architects, too, attempt to anchor ‘their’ project in the public mind, although due to the lack of objectivisation of the designs they have a much harder time of it than the architects.
1.3 Abstraction and detail

Beyond the above considerations, the decision-making process from screening to jury meeting recommended in the ‘Principles and Guidelines for Competitions’ and the particular dramaturgy associated with that also give a special place to graphics, especially in open competitions where the participants remain anonymous.

At the beginning, for the viewing, where the plan must be self-explanatory and make an impression within just a few minutes, a pithy representation of the main idea is needed. But at the same time, assuming it is short-listed for the final round where it will be studied much more closely, the plan requires depth of detail to demonstrate its spatial viability. The jury then speaks of a proposal that is ‘well thought-through’. It is the planner’s art and risk to find that balance between a certain level of abstraction and the required precision of detail.
In many cases too much precision in working through the brief and presenting the proposal is actually counterproductive. Maintaining a certain openness leaves room for the viewer’s own interpretations and later provides freedom for adaptations. Especially in cases where there is controversy within the jury, a relatively abstract plan can offer the possibility of finding a consensus that allows different standpoints to coexist. The disadvantage is that this postpones the resolution of conflicts to a later stage in the planning process.

### 1.4 Loss of scale

Doing drawings computers in fact makes it a great deal more difficult to get the right trade-off between abstraction and detail. Vector-based drawing programs force us to work exceedingly precisely, so in relation to the scale of the printout the drawing is much too detailed. Just as an example, when we draw a rectangle the ends of the sides have to meet exactly if the rectangle is subsequently to be filled with a structure or a colour. When working so meticulously we can easily lose sight of the overall impression – quite literally lose the overview. In pre-digital times the plan was on the table in its final size, shape and scale from the very beginning, and the necessity of every step – and its overall effect – could be checked directly.

When drawing on the computer, on the other hand, the unavoidable process of zooming in and out leads to disorientation in relation to scale. This ‘loss of scale’ often leads to a situation where all the printed plans of a design possess almost the same level of detail. These days if a distinction is made between scales it generally takes the form of increasing or decreasing the number of CAD layers.

In old-fashioned analogue work important structures were often drawn out of scale and enlarged for emphasis in the plans. Producing that kind of accentuation is very complex in vector-based applications, and contradicts the internal logic of the program, because the computer demands ‘true’ dimensions.

### 1.5 WYS/WYG

Another difficulty of computer-aided design lies in assessing the appearance of the paper printout that will ultimately be presented. For one thing, the screen only shows a small piece of the plan, which is actually much larger when printed for submission.

For another, there is a world of difference between the image on the computer screen and the quality of the paper printout. Many programs are still a long way from the ideal of ‘what you see is what you get.’

### 1.6 Natural textures

Most vector-orientated programs are still unable to satisfactorily represent vegetation fractals such as trees, grass, fields, etc. The available structures are generally too regular to convincingly represent the variation of natural forms, or else the quantities of data are too large to be handled without technical difficulties.

Mostly it looks ‘more natural’ to scan a photograph or a drawing of a plant and integrate this into the drawing than to use computer-generated structures. So with its imperfection
and imprecision the analogue drawing technique is actually better at simulating these natural forms; but of course it unfortunately does not represent a three-dimensional data structure that could be transferred to spatial representations.

Furthermore, it is still also a complicated matter to generate freely curving and amorphous – in other words ‘natural’ – forms. Emulating the elegant sweep of freehand drawing on a computer still requires a great deal of work.

Fig. 2: 2008, Cooperative urban planning competition for Heidestrasse Berlin, AS&P GmbH and Büro Kiefer, Rendering: Pure Rendering GmbH

1.7 The medium of paper

All these shortcomings of the computer as a drawing instrument lead to a situation where every step has to be checked by means of frequent printouts – especially for competitions, where perfect presentation is vital. This results in a resource-intensive working methods consuming large amounts of paper.

All the same, there is no alternative to presentation on paper for competitions, where plans and other graphics have to be presented to a larger group, such as a jury, and it is necessary to be able to directly compare all the submissions directly.

Two- and three-dimensional plans in different scales are still the indispensable medium for planning, and of course in landscape architecture they are especially extensive.

1.8 Data

My intention with these observations is not to discredit computer-based drawing, but it is useful to know precisely the limits and problems. Of course the computer offers many advantages too. In comparison to analogue drawing it allows us to draw clean lines in the truest sense of the word, and recurring elements can simply be copied within the drawing (an advantage from which architects profit even more than landscape architects).
One of the greatest benefits is that it is so much easier to exchange data. Today it is no longer the exception for geographically distant landscape architects and architects to work together on joint projects, whereas in earlier times generally only firms in the same city or region did so.

It has also generally become easier to transfer site plans. These days it is a matter of course for the competition specifications to be provided in digital form. However, the quality is often poor or the form unusable, with the result that getting the plan ready for working on the presentation is about as much work as analogue tracing. Because each participant has to do this work, the provision of inadequate site plans represents a waste of resources that organisers would be able to prevent with minimal effort. Additionally the supposed ease of working with CAD leads to the widespread vice of demanding the submission of even more plans and different types of graphic and thus placing excessive demands on the planner’s time and resources.

Whereas with analogue graphics it was possible to learn a kind of ‘craftsmanship’ with a bit of practice, today specialist technical skills are required in order to properly master the programs, and certainly for dealing with computer problems. Rare is the firm that has never had the computer crash or the plotter jam just before a deadline. Admittedly, in the old days the blueprint shop might have gone on strike, or simply have finished work and gone home for the day. But in the pre-digital era there was still the possibility of hiring students to help out if time was running short, or in an emergency to submit originals or freehand drawings.

1.9 Trends

During the late 1970s and early 1980s the so-called postmodern style emerged, especially in architecture. The post-war model of the structured city with plenty of open green spaces and separation of functions became subject to growing criticism. This went along with a rediscovery of historical urban and landscaping structures and a return to traditional stylistic elements. After the rehabilitation of formal design, competition entries once again became richer in images and graphic expression. In landscape architecture, the 1982 competition for the Parc de la Villette in Paris represented an important milestone and a starting point for these developments.

In the subsequent period these developments were amplified by the advent of computerisation and there was a clear tendency for absolutely cluttered computer renderings and image overload in competition entries. One refreshing exception were the graphic and conceptual innovations of the Dutch in particular (West8, Bureau B+B), who were at the cutting edge with their ‘exploded drawings’ and very colourful style.

At the beginning of the new millennium – as the world economy cooled off following 9/11 and the dotcom crash – the limited nature of funding available for landscape architecture projects became painfully apparent. In Germany this effect was amplified by the simultaneous end of the post-reunification construction boom. Increasingly, the opulence and playfulness of the 1990s had to be reduced back to the bare essentials. In combination with the growing calls for sustainability emanating from the climate discussion, this brought about the rise of a ‘new modesty’, which bears neo-classical traits in some respects. Perhaps that is the reason why a ‘realistic style’ now prevails in visual materials, with a lot of pastel shades: vegetation is green, water blue.
Fig. 3: 2005, Landscaping competition for the Nebra Sky Disc site, 1st prize, Club L 94

Fig. 4: 2007, New design of the surroundings of the festival hall Frankfurt, 1st prize, RMP Stephan Lenzen Landschaftsarchitekten

Fig. 5: 2006, Marienhof redevelopment, Munich, 1st prize, bbz Landschaftsarchitekten
2 Experience as Jury Member

One of the great privileges of being invited to be a competition juror relatively often is that one has the opportunity to follow the latest discussions and decisions at first hand. A professional jury’s first duty is always to the actual design quality of the submitted work. Nonetheless, graphic presentations also always say something about the fundamental attitude of their creators, and this sometimes contradicts the personal views of jury members. Furthermore, overly individualistic or abstract styles often run the risk of not being properly understood or appreciated by the lay jury members.

Although the jury discussions themselves are subject to confidentiality, I am able to present here two examples that I believe clearly ‘squandered’ an opportunity of a better placing through their presentation choices.

Fig. 6: 2003, Nöldnerplatz Berlin, 2nd prize, designed by _scapes Jorg Sieweke with Anne Fenk, Christopher Strein and Bernrieder Sieweke Lagemann Architekten

Excerpt from the competition entry:

*How the pig came to Nöldner Platz ...*

This proposal is based on the belief that a conventional improvement of the square by enhancing the quality of the substance will not be enough to solve its socio-spatial and planning problems.

We propose dividing the square into two zones, one more rural, the other more urban, reinterpreting and defining it as the heart of the neighbourhood. To start with, the square’s
village-like character will be accepted and emphasised. The whole zone will be treated as productive agricultural land.

**Rural (grazing pigs)** In order to credibly implement this agricultural character, about five domestic pigs will be kept on this piece of land for the first years. The pigs require spatial separation, sufficient room to move about and a variety of environmental conditions (open land, tree shade, wallowing). The presence of these free-roaming animals is initially startling and bewildering. But after a moment’s reflection their presence actually seems legible and ‘normal’ on many levels. Different kinds of bond between people and these animals develop through everyday encounters. The pigs become collective pets.

**Urban (pocket parks)** Stamped into the rural field are compact islands with urban characteristics, which appear as fascinating negative figures. The edges of the square extend to the streets, forming broad pavements. The directed structure of paths and axes is abandoned. A new hierarchical structure is established. The decentralised structure consists not of one square but of ten. Like in an English landscape park, moving through and pausing in the individual pocket parks produces countless panoramas that fuse together to form an overall impression.

The submitted proposal was very abstract and even a person experienced in interpreting plans required time to understand it. In combination with its comic-like style, this initially suggested it might be an ironic entry, and that impression burdened the proposal right through to the final decision.

Fig. 7: 2006, Länsisatamanpuisto Park, Helsinki, 2nd prize SLA A/S, Copenhagen (DK)
Excerpt from the competition entry:

'Remember how the water shaped the sand, and how we built great landscapes with fantastic shapes of wet sand as children? In Länsisatama, SLA suggests a park that is a cultivation of the water’s plays with the sand. A cultivation that shapes the public space in the same way as the underlying sea floor is shaped by water and wind through centuries.

In Länsisatama Park, the urban nature mimics the processes of natural nature using the materials of the city. The aim with the shape of the park is to give space to all. Space for children to play and practice their motoric skills in the hilly landscape, space for the city’s elders to relax, space to stroll through the trees and water bodies with views towards the city, and space for self organized sport such as joggers or mountain bikers. There is also space for sunny days on the urban beach, and space for sledding on the snow covered winter landscape.

The park becomes a living organism in the city, a place where the interaction of matters is made visible: Rain water is being collected in detention ponds, and with varying water levels and rush vegetation, the experience of the park is constantly changing. Local plazas, resting areas and playgrounds are placed freely like islands, floating on the undulating surface.

In Finland, students are allowed to enter competitions too. This led to a discussion in the final round about the level of competence that could be expected of one particular entry. Although the content of the perspectives and the atmosphere matched the brief perfectly, the use of purely two-dimensional plans made many of the jury members sceptical. The lack of shadows and thus of any sense of space and the lack of distinguishable topography – which was at the same time central to the design concept – led to the assumption that this might be the work of an inexperienced firm. The courage to take such a risk was lacking, and the astonishment accordingly great when the envelopes were opened.

3 Experience as a Participant

As a participating firm you have to decide anew before each competition how much effort to put into the final presentation. Even if it can be assumed that the jury will comprehend and appreciate the quality of the design concept, ultimately one is selling an image, a brand. Over the years every firm involved in competitions accumulates a stock of graphic resources that can be more or less modified and expanded to suit the task at hand. Alongside the submission requirements, the composition of the jury is a major factor in deciding how much additional energy is required to present one’s concept. For jury members who share the basic values with the entrant the final graphic presentation is much less important than for jurors who have to be convinced of the philosophy behind the design. Equally decisive, at least where participation is by invitation, are naturally the other competing firms. Of course at the start everyone makes their own assessment of the strengths and dangers of the opposition.

Once these strategic parameters have been thought through and the idea for the proposal developed, the long process of deciding what is to be brought to paper, and how, begins. There is always soul-searching, whether the brief defines very precisely what is to be
submitted right down to fixed hanging arrangements, or allows too much freedom and leaves one caught between the worry that anything superfluous could distract from the basic idea and the anxiety that too restricted a selection could be taken to imply a lack of interest in the brief. In an age where two-stage competitions are commonplace it is often difficult to decide how much detail the jury expects in the first stage. And if one is fortunate enough to proceed to the second stage the uncertainty continues. Was the level of abstraction actually decisive for the entry’s success or is it now time to go into a bit more detail?

In the end, the well-known firms that crop up regularly in competitions can often be identified by their submitted graphics and proposals (at least after the decision has been made; beforehand no jury member is allowed to entertain such thoughts). Although in one sense digitalisation makes that more difficult, in another it becomes easier because the structures used often allow one to identify quite clearly the origins of the participant.

Fig. 8: 2002, Glattpark, Zurich-Opfikon, 1st prize, Büro Kiefer in partnership with Kai Vöckler, Carola Schäfers, Start Media, Müller-Kalchreuth

The colours used in the graphics and plans produced by BÜRO KIEFER vary depending on the brief and context. The submitted plans attempt to convey the spatial dimension of the design through sophisticated shadowing, although where the topography is more complex they are simply suggested in the 2-D drawing (e.g. Glattpark, Opfikon) rather than
generating precise digital shadows. Perspective is a must, and to give a proper impression of the atmosphere, especially large-scale sections are also used. Our presentations always feature thorough explanations by means of diagrams or pictograms. This makes them easier for jury members to understand, but also helps the designer to keep to the point. As a fundamental rule, if you cannot explain the concept in a few diagrams then it is too complicated.

Excerpt from the competition entry:

'The Glattpark is located in the middle of the area between Kloten airport and downtown Zurich, in a continually changing and growing structure comprising urban islands and green spaces. The plan focuses explicitly on the specific and also conflicting qualities of the location, above all working with the potential of the free space in-between. The existing spatial quality of a hybrid urban landscape is outwardly expressed via a concentrated integration into a likewise heterogeneous park space and converted into a stable overall form. This fundamental and unambiguous statement on the location and the wider Zurich region highlights the authentic, unique qualities of the location.

A strategy of diversity serves to develop the heterogeneous nature of the given spatial identity and reorganise the existing wealth of contrasts. The spatial structure is the basis on which the park’s open spaces are developed, augmented and configured via connecting lines of sight and paths.

The plan’s clear structural arrangement merges modified man-made and natural elements to form an urban/rural park whose powerful spatial imagery formulates the location’s identity. The wandering promenade touches the new city edge and fulfils the need for an urban quality; the technology/forest archipelago represents a recuperation zone and the desire for the picturesque; both elements are connected via the expanse of the middle, which becomes a place of transition. The objective of the plan is to define a landscape in transition, a hybrid open space that promotes a sensitivity to the ”picturesque” in today’s way of life.'

References


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