

Guggenheim vs. Helsinki. Two Competitions for a Museum

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On June 4, 2014, the Guggenheim Foundation launched the competition for the construction of its new building in Helsinki. Through an open call, an unusual event for the American institution, architects from all over the world were invited to participate. The goal was no less ambitious: a museum for the 21st century. Three and a half months later, the participation figures were released. A total of 1,715 proposals [Fig. 01] from 77 different countries had been registered in this first stage of the competition, only six of which would reach the second one.

For the Finnish architect Juhani Pallasmaa, such an avalanche of projects submitted could be explained as a direct consequence of the means used to publicize the competition. If the call for entries was open, a high participation legitimized the decision. Furthermore, Pallasmaa emphasized in his article “Back to the Starting Line” the enormous responsibility assumed by the organizers to specify the type of the competition based on the objectives sought. In other words, he unequivocally linked the outcome of the proposals received to the parameters defining the conditions of the competition.

But despite this huge success in terms of participation, the landing of the American foundation on the shores of the Baltic Sea sparked an intense debate among the inhabitants of Helsinki. The Guggenheim was a city model geared towards tourism and globalization. So much so that on September 9, 2014, the independent organizations Checkpoint Helsinki, Terreform and Global Ultra Luxury Faction (G.U.L.F.) presented the alternative competition The Next Helsinki with the aim of questioning the implementation of the Guggenheim Museum. The call invited architects, environmentalists and poets to reflect on the concept of art linked both to the city and to the everyday life of its inhabitants.

From the Guggenheim Helsinki as a case study, not only two opposing museum projects emerge, but also two different ways of understanding the city – economically, politically and socially– that crystallize through architecture. And the competition stands as the tool of analysis with which the discipline is endowed. For Professor Luis Rojo, competitions are necessary “because they kick-start a predictably complex project not as a solution to a problem, but as a way of

thinking about a problem through the lens of architecture and its resources”².

From this perspective, it can be hypothesized that only The Next Helsinki invited its participants to a reflective process in a broad sense. And were it not for the fact that both calls coincided in time, this deep and speculative debate could have been a reasonable starting point.

Throughout the following sections, the open call for the Guggenheim and The Next Helsinki will be addressed in their complexity. Both competitions cannot be understood separately as they are part of a multilevel discussion that transcends even the architectural projects presented. Beyond the proposals selected in each of them, the instrumentalization of both competitions serves to highlight the underlying issues surrounding cultural institutions and the contemporary city.

Methodologically, the proximity in time of the object of study offers the opportunity to directly question the main actors involved. Thus, the interview emerges as a research tool with which to approach the consultation and collection of first-hand sources.

Economic, political and social context [January 2011-December 2016]

The Helsinki harbor as a backdrop. In front, the group of five people destined to negotiate the future of the city posed for the photo. On January 18, 2011, the City of Helsinki commissioned the Guggenheim Foundation to explore the feasibility of a new museum for the city. The image staged the agreement between the two institutions. In it, together with Mayor Jussi Pajunen, Richard Armstrong and Ari Wiseman, Director and Deputy Director respectively of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, Janne Gallen-Kallela-Sirén, Director of the Helsinki Art Museum, and Deputy Maryor Tuula Haatainen, appeared [Fig. 02].

A year later, the Finlandia Hall in the Nordic capital hosted the presentation of the “Guggenheim Helsinki Concept and Development Study”. The report recommended locating the 12,000 m² museum in the Katajanokka district on the city’s waterfront. This decision also implied replacing the Kanava port terminal building, which had been disused for a few months. On the economic side, the cost of building the new museum was estimated at 130 million euros, a tax-exempt amount. But beyond these figures, the most controversial section of the study estimated the Guggenheim license at 30 million dollars in exchange for exercising the right to exploit the brand for 20 years.

And the initial enthusiasm turned into apathy. In addition to the already significant outlay of public money that the construction and management of the new museum would entail, there were the austerity measures implemented by the Finnish government due to the economic crisis that was beginning to affect the country. So, in this context of

financial uncertainty and only five months after the presentation of the document, only a quarter of the population of Helsinki supported the project³. The final setback came in the spring of 2012 when eight of the 15 members of the Helsinki City Board rejected the report. But this setback did not prevent Richard Armstrong from coming back with a new proposal after a year and a half and a municipal election in which Jussi Pajunen was reelected mayor.

On September 24, 2013, the Lume Media Centre at Aalto University was the venue chosen for the presentation of the “Guggenheim Helsinki Revised Proposal”. According to this new study, the site –18,500 m² occupied by the disused Makasiini maritime terminal building– would be located on the western flank of South Harbor between the Kaartinkaupunki and Ullanlinna districts. On an economic level, the report proposed a mixed financing model between private investors, the Government of Finland and the City of Helsinki. In addition, it was estimated that the Guggenheim would be able to generate an impact of 41 million euros per year on the country’s economy, as well as creating between 103 and 111 direct jobs and between 340 and 380 indirect jobs.

In the article “Case Guggenheim Helsinki”, architect Kaarin Taipale analyzed the conditions for the construction of the museum. While the Finnish public institutions would bear a large part of the cost of the operation, the American foundation would secure an annual income of at least four million euros from the Guggenheim license fee, the museum’s governance fee and the fee established in exchange for the transfer of the works of art for the exhibitions. In addition, the feasibility study ignored the 36 to 60 million euros that the City of Helsinki would lose by giving up the parcel for the construction of the building⁴.

The Guggenheim Foundation acknowledged a lack of sensitivity in their initial approach to Helsinki due to the cultural distance between American and Finnish societies. At the outset, they overestimated Mayor Pajunen’s ability to influence the decision-making of the 85 representatives of the Helsinki City Council. For his part, Richard Armstrong admitted that he was not fully aware of the political implications of needing public funds to implement such projects. The foundation’s budget at its New York headquarters was mostly private⁵.

Nevertheless, the architectural competition for the new Guggenheim took place between June 2014 and June 2015. The controversy surrounding it did not prevent it from being a resounding success in terms of participation: a total of 1,715 projects were registered in the first stage. But it would still take a year and a half before the decision on the construction of the museum was debated in the local parliament.

On November 30, 2016, the city was immersed in the kind of tense calm that precedes any transcendent moment. Supporters and opponents of the museum gathered in bars

and cafés to follow the live broadcast debate of the members of the municipal parliament. Finally, after a five-hour plenary session in which several deputies had to be replaced after declaring a conflict of interest⁶, the 85 members of the Helsinki City Council overwhelmingly rejected –with 32 votes in favor to 53 against– the American institution’s proposal to build its new museum in the Finnish capital.

Guggenheim Helsinki Design Competition [June 2014–June 2015]

On June 4, 2014, Richard Armstrong presented the Guggenheim Helsinki Design Competition at the Restaurant Palace Hotel, through whose windows those attending the event could see the plot of land selected as the competition site. The following day, Armstrong would publicize the call for the construction of the new museum at the Peggy Guggenheim Collection at the opening of the 14th Venice Architecture Biennale.

And just three and a half months after that announcement, the American foundation made the competition’s participation data public: 1,715 projects with 1,715 texts of 500 words each, 3,430 representative images and 6,860 A1 panels from 77 different countries were waiting to be evaluated at the former headquarters of the City Art Museum in Helsinki. Given the magnitude of the figures, statistics seemed to be the most appropriate discipline to approach the complexity of this architectural exercise.

In this context of overwhelming documentation to be analyzed, the figure of Troy Conrad Therrien, Curator of Architecture and Digital Initiatives at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, emerges. For him, it was a unique opportunity to process with digital tools the huge amount of information submitted to the competition. An architectural archive with 1,715 ideas applied to the same city and from the perspective of a common program. An opportunity that Conrad would define as “the most architectural intelligence in our history at precisely moment we’re able to handle things like big data”⁷. An approach that implied reformulating the nature of the discipline itself⁸.

Barely a month after the publication of the participation data, on October 22, 2014, the Guggenheim Foundation offered the possibility of consulting on the competition website two representative images and a brief 150-word text of each of the 1,715 projects submitted. The online gallery was overwhelming. A grid of 20 columns and 85 rows of images made up an enormous mosaic in which its tiles seemed to never end.

In the article “Square Roots”, David Huber recounts his experience after several hours of surfing through the images in the gallery. For Huber, the widespread use of both social networks and smartphones over the last decade was creating visually saturated societies, which inevitably implied questioning the connection between the image and the architectural object represented. If a few years ago, the image

of the building served to help establish a more precise link with the place in which it was to be located, now that relationship was nonexistent. The virtual magma in which online images used to float meant the loss of their capacity to mediate with the world they were supposed to depict. Images were shown as “media objects whose performance is evaluated within their virtual environment”⁹.

On December 2, 2014, the Guggenheim Foundation published the six finalist proposals destined to participate in the second stage of the competition: “Art in the city” by Moreau Kusunoki Architectes (Paris), “Helsinki Five” by HaasCookZemmerich STUDIO2050 (Stuttgart), “Guggenheim Commons” by SMAR Architecture Studio (Madrid, Western Australia), “47 Rooms” by Fake Industries Architectural Agonism (NY, Barcelona), “Quiet Animal” by Asif Khan (London) and “Two-in-One Museum” by agps architecture (Zurich, Los Angeles).

Architect and jury member Juan Herreros reflected on the competition selection process:

“In the package of the 20 or 21 finalists, what occurs –quite naturally– is a certain grouping of the proposals by types of architecture or by ways of confronting this question of the museum of the 21st century. And the six finalists are sufficiently different from each other to, in a certain way, represent or have become like leaders of their kind. [...] I think that there was also a certain satisfaction with the different types of proposals and, evidently, even in those six finalists it is clear that there are some that are more of a museum as a cultural center, with many activities and very involved in the social, and some others are more of a museum as a container of works of art whose main ritual to relate to it is the visit”¹⁰.

Three months later, at the opening of the “Guggenheim Helsinki Now” exhibition at the Kunsthalle Helsinki, the Guggenheim Foundation presented the results of this second stage. A collection of models, plans, images, texts and panels awaited visitors’ approval in the exhibition hall, while the jury deliberated on the winning project. And finally, on June 23, 2015, Mark Wigley, Jury Chair of the competition, announced the winning proposal: “Art in the City” [Fig. 03], by the Paris-based Moreau Kusunoki Architectes practice. Days later, both architects would present their project at the Peter B. Lewis Theatre at the foundation’s New York headquarters.

The Next Helsinki [September 2014–April 2015]

As a result of a joint effort between the organizations Checkpoint Helsinki, Global Ultra Luxury Faction (G.U.L.F.) and Terreform, The Next Helsinki platform was launched on September 9, 2014. The competition was created with the aim of asking its participants whether the construction of the Guggenheim was the best option both for allocating public funding and for using the privileged parcel in the city’s seaport where the museum was intended to

be located. It was an open call addressed to architects, urbanists, landscape architects, artists, environmentalists, students, activists, poets or politicians in which the scope of intervention was left to be defined at the will of its participants.

But The Next Helsinki was also a provocative act to engage the inhabitants of the Finnish capital in debates about the future of cities based on issues such as sustainability, mobility or urban edges. In the competition’s press release, the American architect and Jury Chair Michael Sorkin stated that the concept of art should be linked to the collective, everyday activity carried out in cities. For this reason, he considered it anachronistic to congregate the artistic pieces in a single building.

Along the same lines, British sociologist Andrew Ross understood the construction of an iconic museum as a marketing operation aimed at publicizing the brand of the corresponding foundation. Finnish visual artist and Checkpoint Helsinki member Terike Haapoja appealed to the “social responsibility in art” while vindicating existing local organizations. Moreover, Finnish architect Juhani Pallasmaa regretted that the homogeneity with which art institutions operate in a globalized scenario was detrimental to the cultural uniqueness of the territory in which they were established¹¹.

Meanwhile, on December 2, 2014, the Guggenheim Foundation unveiled the six finalist proposals from among the 1,715 registered. In the press release, the organizers of The Next Helsinki identified all of them as iconic buildings with little or no connection to the urban fabric of the city. Pallasmaa was more forceful. In the article “Back to the Starting Line”, he criticized the competition rules, considering the requirement to use wood in the building as absurd. He also went so far as to call the winning project “alien” because of the lack of harmony between its dark facades and the white neoclassical buildings in the center of Helsinki. For this reason, he considered that the winning proposal could be used as an argument for not building the museum¹².

In the article “The Guggenheim Helsinki Competition: What Is the Value Proposition?”¹³, American architect Peggy Deamer analyzed the reasons why an architectural firm would enter this type of competition despite the low probability of success. Deamer estimated that at an average of 80 hours per project and \$50 per hour, the Guggenheim Foundation would have received the equivalent of \$6.8 million in volunteer hours. These figures serve to highlight the inherent precariousness of a profession in which many of its workers are immersed in a kind of architectural gambling addiction that prevents them from devoting their time to activities with immediate productive returns.

While in the late 1970s the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard identified –in the essay “L’Effet Beaubourg”¹⁴– the recently inaugurated Pompidou Center as a kind of black hole destined to devour the

growing mass of people it attracted to its interior, now that phenomenon seemed to have reached the architects. And the open call for the Guggenheim Helsinki –with its record participation– was proof of this. Even Rem Koolhaas would define architectural competitions as a kind of “torture” due to the low probability of success¹⁵.

The controversial note was added by Sorkin when he openly invited to participate in The Next Helsinki the more than 1,700 architectural teams whose proposals had been rejected by the Guggenheim Foundation in the first stage of the competition. For Sorkin, a museum of the 21st century had to transcend the limits of the mere building in which the works were placed, transgressing its physical walls in favor of a system capable of disseminating artistic information¹⁶.

On April 20, 2015, Michael Sorkin announced the results of the alternative competition The Next Helsinki. As an architectural manifesto on the contemporary city, the jury had decided to select eight proposals out of the 219 submitted from a total of 37 different countries.

The project “Helsinki Polybrids” [Fig. 04], by Thomas Kong and Susan Seah, proposed using the stops of the city’s streetcar network to incorporate interactive panels, shelves for the free exchange of books or showcases with lost objects. Milja Hartikainen’s “Visions for Helsinki” understood the seaport as a neutral place devoid of productive exploitation. The “MUUSA” project, by draftworks* architects, sought to reclaim the presence of the nearly 80 museums scattered throughout the Finnish capital. Through a grid structure capable of bringing together the participation of 16 of them under the same theme, the aim was to promote a summer festival of art. In addition, “Baltic Tale of Nothingness”, by Constantinos Marcou and Costas Nicolaou, understood the museum as a ship adrift in search of stories that deserve to be remembered.

Competitions as “essays”

Beyond the specific outcome to which they were driven, what is certain is that both the official competition –Guggenheim Helsinki Design Competition– and the alternative competition –The Next Helsinki– reveal the relevance of the deliberative process in which the architectural discipline operates. Competitions are the starting point, the “essay” in the words of Professor Alejandro Valdivieso, to which a set of “reflections on problems through architecture”¹⁷ can be postulated. And as an instrument designed to formulate the question to be resolved, competitions are not neutral. The nature of the question guides the possible answers.

In this regard, Juhani Pallasmaa points out that even the client for whom a museum is designed is inherent to the architectural categorization within which the project is framed¹⁸. If the agents involved in the operation change, so will the results. “In a liberal society where the service provided by the architect is seen as a commodity,

the competition process benefits the promoter”¹⁹, add Professors José Manuel Falcón and Carlos Domenzain in the article “Institutionalization of the Exception: The Competition as Search and Process”. Moreover, architect and jury member Juan Herrerros, referring to the competition for the Guggenheim, states:

“It is quite evident –those who have seen the proposals, because at least the renderings have been published in their entirety– that surprisingly there is quite a lot of homogeneity in the responses. [...] one must be fair, critical, and express that, in that sense, the competition was perhaps not very successful because the participants were all –or if not all, they were in a significant majority– to make a Guggenheim. There was, I think, a bit of subliminal or psychological radiography of a legion of architects who wanted to make a grand gesture and build a building that would possibly be one of the last opportunities to do”²⁰.

Although it is true that the open call for the Guggenheim Helsinki was drawn up based on the specific conditions set out by the American foundation, the strategic line that made it possible had been drawn up previously. The public representatives of the Nordic capital, in their commitment to the Guggenheim as a cultural institution, claim its model. Something that in practice –and implicitly– implies accepting a certain type of museum, management and economic conditions. And in this sense, the projects of the competition participate of a certain restriction.

But The Next Helsinki, in its desire to represent an antagonistic position to the official competition, formulates a broader question. The American architect Michael Sorkin wonders “whether a big foreign institution is the most logical way to prompt the arts to flourish at the community level”²¹. And this uncertainty as a starting point opens the debate, so much so that even the location of the competition is left up to the participants. From this perspective, The Next Helsinki provides a deeper process of reflection about the cultural model for the city. And were it not for the fact that the official and alternative calls overlap in time, this extensive and even controversial debate could have been understood as a first approach to a –then more specific– second competition. The “competition contest” in the words of Professor Eduardo Prieto²².

While The Next Helsinki claims a cultural model linked to the city and its inhabitants, the Guggenheim as an institution implies a commitment to globalization and tourism. While the open call for the alternative competition is an invitation to reformulate the concept of art as an expression of the human being that in her daily experience is detached from a certain elitist connotation, the official competition situates the idea of the museum as part of the international exhibition circuit, in what could be understood as a contemporary reformulation of Baudrillard’s “hypermarket of culture”²³. In fact, the new Guggenheim is not expected to have its own funds.

But this dispute over the city model for Helsinki arose a few years earlier, with the inauguration of the Vuosaari Harbor in November 2008. This new infrastructure frees up some 250 hectares of waterfront for commercial and residential use, marking the biggest urban restructuring in the city. Then, Mayor Jussi Pajunen –in office between June 2005 and June 2017– decided to place Helsinki on the international cultural scene. He understands that the Guggenheim Foundation is the right institution to prosper in an “interconnected” –globalization– and “competitive” –neoliberalism– world²⁴.

This vision that connects economic and cultural models is confronted by The Next Helsinki. The Finnish architect Kaarin Taipale argues that under the current neoliberal doctrine “cities are compared to companies or products that have to compete with each other on a global market”²⁵. And, in this context, the building as an icon participates in the marketing campaign²⁶. It is not surprising, therefore, that the main sponsors of the Guggenheim Helsinki respond to a conglomerate of companies with economic interests in the tourism sector, ranging from airlines to shipping companies, as the American sociologist Sharon Zukin points out in the article “A Black Museum for the ‘White City’”²⁷.

As has been argued, the Guggenheim Helsinki case study –with its double aspect in the form of an official and an alternative open call– brings to the surface the conflict not only between two opposing cultural paradigms but also between two opposing visions of the city and its economic, political and social conditions. The global is opposed to the local. And this struggle is settled through architecture.

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