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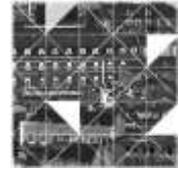
An entrepreneurial countryside? Imagining competitive futures in the architectural contests of Finland's periphery

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Abstract

Architecture and urban design are central selling points in globalized models of urban development, advocated by city strategies to boost competitiveness. In particular, architectural competitions are frequently leveraged as a tool for public engagement and design innovation in complex urban projects. While competitiveness has been framed as an apparent quality of successful cities, the mobilization of spatial design in the pursuit of competitive advantage is not limited to metropolitan sites. Even provincial towns and declining municipalities engage in design competitions to improve their status. Nevertheless, the competitive aspirations of these peripheries have rarely received scholarly attention. Examining documents from recent architectural competitions in the stagnant and declining regions of Finland, this study explored how peripheral localities approached architecture and urban design in pursuing their urban aspirations. The analysis of competition documents focused on the ideas and meanings of competitiveness evoked in the competition briefs, architectural proposals, as well as the juries' evaluations, with a particular focus on the winning projects. Rather than innovative designs or iconic buildings, the peripheral design competitions conveyed more subtle development aspirations. Moreover, contradictions emerged between the mainstream solutions put forward by participating architects and juries' ideas of what was appropriate in the design context. The emphasis on modest improvements rather than growth points towards alternative imaginations of urban futures. The findings offer a distinct contribution to the ongoing debates on urban competitiveness and the role of design by reinserting the periphery into the picture. The outcomes invite further inquiries on design strategies beyond the hegemonic models and sites of urban production.

Keywords: urban competition, periphery, architectural competition, evaluation.

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Introduction

Architecture and urban design are commonly advocated in urban regeneration as a boost to competitiveness. While competitiveness tends to be seen as a natural part of 'city-ness' (Wachsmuth, 2014; Robinson, 2002), the mobilization of design for competitive advantage is not limited to growing urban centres. Even provincial towns and municipalities experiencing population decline initiate design competitions to pursue urban regeneration. Indeed, this 'periphery' of urban competition invites inquiry as a dynamic site of urban imagination and agency, rather than a mere recipient of globalized policies (Peeren, Stuit, & Van Weyenberg, 2016; Simone, 2010).

In this article, I concentrate on the competitive imaginaries produced in recent architectural competitions in the lagging peripheries of urbanizing Finland. Finland has an active tradition of architectural competitions as a practice of spatial regulation and modernization that continues to engage different types of localities. More specifically, I approach the architectural competition as a research site on which place-based identities, spatial histories and development ambitions intersect.

This paper is structured as follows. First, I situate the study within previous literature on the role of architectural and urban design in urban competition and in the Finnish research context, before reporting the methods used in the study. Next, I present the findings in two parts. I start by discussing what kinds of urban aspirations were evoked in the architectural competitions, before addressing the ways in which the competitions mobilized the local context in framing the future imaginaries. I then discuss the interpretations within the frame of urban competition and the role of design. The paper ends with an invitation for future inquiries on urban competition to shed light on the diverse realities, experiences and struggles outside of the hegemonic sites of urban production.

1. Architectural competitions in competitive urban strategies

The role of architectural and urban design in inter-urban competition has shifted in the past decades since the 1990s. If high-quality urban spaces were previously seen as the consequence of a thriving economy, scholars now argue for the reverse: that spatial design has been instrumentalized to foster positive economic development and competitiveness (Biddulph, 2011; Gospodini, 2002; Hubbard, 1996). In effect, architecture and urban design projects are being used as 'catalysts' to kick-start or accelerate market-oriented urban regeneration (Davis, 2009). In particular, star architecture and iconic flagship buildings (Alaily-Mattar, Ponzini, & Thierstein, 2020; Ponzini, 2014; Sklair, 2010) and spectacular, innovative or avant-garde urban designs (Gospodini, 2002; Hubbard, 1996) have been foregrounded in discussions of competition by design. Furthermore, the architectural and urban designs in urban regeneration projects also mark dynamic social, cultural and symbolic struggles and aspirations that entwine with the spatial and aesthetic interventions (Bell & Jayne, 2003; Chu & Sanyal, 2015; Grubbauer, 2014; Phil Jones & Evans, 2012; Julier, 2005; Kaika, 2010; Lee, 2015; Weber, 2010; Yeoh, 2005).

Seen as public-facing processes geared towards finding an 'ideal' design and designer, architectural contests have gained remarkable popularity in competitive urban development (Andersson, Bloxham Zettersten, & Rönn, 2016; Bern, 2018). Dating back to the Italian Renaissance, the contemporary design competition practice has integrated the artistic competition tradition emphasizing creative experimentation (Lipstadt, 2003, 2009) with the procurement of architectural services in the EU (Volker & Meel, 2011). Moreover, in recent decades, the design competition has been rediscovered as a useful public relations opportunity especially in controversial or complex urban projects (Larson, 1994; Sagalyn, 2006; Till, 2018). Architectural competitions constitute discursive events translating social and political imaginations into spatial projects (Gottschling, 2018; Van Wezemael, 2011). The architectural proposals produced in competitions can thus showcase enticing promises of possible futures (Smitheram, Nakai Kidd, & Meekings, 2018). However, like all urban imaginaries (Johansson, 2012), the visions typically remain partial, dominated by elite sensibilities, and subject to contestation (Paul Jones, 2020).

Literature interrogating design in the context of competitive urban development has often drawn on studies of cosmopolitan urban centres, such as Barcelona (Julier, 2005; McNeill, 2006), London (Davis, 2019; Kaika, 2010) and Berlin (Colomb, 2012), or cities struggling with long-term deindustrialization, such as Liverpool (Biddulph, 2011; Paul Jones, 2015), Birmingham (Hubbard, 1996; Pollard, 2004) and Roubaix (Colomb, 2011; Rousseau, 2009). In other words, existing work has often been situated in the urban geographies of the UK and Western Europe, even though the field of urban competition is understood to be globalized (Cochrane, 2011). Gospodini (2004, p. 234) has argued that "innovative design of space appears to be a key factor of economic development in all categories and groups of cities in Europe", yet we know little about how localities outside of the dominant geographies might use architecture and urban design to navigate inter-urban competition. Framing these places as 'peripheral' in relation to the centres of urban knowledge production, I attend to this gap by examining design competitions organized in the lagging municipalities of Finland in Northern Europe. In this research, the periphery of urban competition is thus utilized as generative space of difference to destabilize and diversify established narratives of urban competitiveness.

2. Finland as a research context

Finland represents a topical site of inquiry as a northern borderland of Europe that has experienced a drastic socio-spatial transformation in recent decades: a coupling of urbanization and competition-oriented restructuring (Ahlqvist & Moisio, 2014; Moisio, 2018; 2012). Two events are often foregrounded in the recent history of Finland's urban structure, the economic crisis in 1990–1993 and entry to the European Union in 1995.

Firstly, the economic recession facilitated a break from the 'social and spatial universalism' of the welfare state, in which the socioeconomic and spatial cohesion of the state territory constituted a national objective (Ahlqvist & Moisio, 2014; Antikainen & Vartiainen, 2005; Moisio & Paasi, 2013, Moisio, 2012). The crisis then paved way for a project of social, spatial and economic restructuring to build a knowledge-based economy focusing on the major urban regions (Ahlqvist & Moisio, 2014; Mattila, Purkarthofer, & Humer, 2020; Moisio & Paasi, 2013, Moisio, 2012). In contrast, smaller localities characterized by public sector employment or industrial production would suffer from the public sector restructuring and budget cuts intended to enhance cost-efficiency and thus economic competitiveness (Antikainen & Vartiainen, 2005), and to transform inherited models perceived as 'outdated' (Ahlqvist & Moisio, 2014). The EU membership, on the other hand, brought on planning reforms to integrate Finland with the EU Cohesion and Regional Policy, and its growth-oriented and competitiveness-seeking rationality highlighting the role of differentiated regions (Mattila et al., 2020; Moisio & Paasi, 2013). Together, these shifts facilitated the spatial concentration of resources and growth in the name of national competitiveness, rather than seeking to redistribute them across different municipalities and regions.

As an outcome, urbanization has become a major force of transformation in the society. A new spatial imaginary has emerged with the main cities and urban regions overwhelmingly dominating discourses and visions of Finland's future, and more specifically, the country's international competitiveness (Luukkonen & Sirviö, 2019; Moisio, 2018). Urbanization and the resulting growth of regional inequalities in Finland thus appear to be largely underpinned by the strategic choices and policies of powerful actors (including the state, cities and companies) prioritizing economic profit and growth (Ahlqvist & Moisio, 2014; Koste, Lehtovuori, Neuvonen, & Schmidt-Thomé, 2020). Meanwhile, in national policy discourses urbanization is often framed not only as an unavoidable force of nature, but also as a positive megatrend that can benefit a small state such as Finland (Ahlqvist & Moisio, 2014; Koste et al., 2020; Moisio, 2018; 2012).

In light of the advancing regional polarization, researchers have concluded in a recent report titled *Unequal Finland* that "one of the most developed welfare states in the world provides fairly uneven results to its inhabitants" (Fina et al., 2021, p. 16). Between 1995 and 2017, the population of metropolitan regions and major university cities increased by 25 % and 16 %, as the number of people living in small towns, sparsely inhabited regions and rural areas drastically declined by -10 %, -16 %, and -18 % respectively (Tervo, 2019). While the growth of a few major urban regions is seen as a question of "national survival" (Moisio, 2018), the declining regions are expected to

reinvent themselves for success in the globalized economy (Hartikainen, 2016), like in many other parts of Europe (González, 2011).

However, even as many Finnish municipalities may be disempowered in negotiating the societal drivers of urbanization, they do have a distinctly autonomous role in managing local urban development. In Finland, the responsibility of and control over land use and spatial planning rests at the municipal level (Hytönen & Ahlqvist, 2019; Puustinen, Mäntysalo, Hytönen, & Jarenko, 2017). Individual municipalities can thus seek to improve their position by engaging in local development initiatives (Koste et al., 2020). In terms of urban development contexts, built environments in Finland are overwhelmingly modern, as over 80% of buildings were produced in the past 70 years. In fact, modernization of the society proceeded hand in hand with the advancement of modern architecture and planning in the 20th century (Nikula, 2006).

If the Finnish state was thus materially constructed with the help of a modern planning regime and its emerging class of experts in architecture, planning and geography (Moisio & Paasi, 2013; Moisio, 2012; Till, 2006), there is a particular practice that early on became associated with forward-looking design: the architectural competition. The first design competition in Finland was organized by the precursor of today's Finnish Association of Architects (SAFA) in 1876 for the Bank of Finland (Huotelin, 2003). Ever since, architectural competitions spanning from urban planning and urban design to building design have been prominently used to reconfigure spaces for domesticity, education, labour, culture, and governance (Moisio, 2012; Nupponen, 2000; Saarikangas, 1993). For example, in the post-war period, architectural competitions were organized to design towns halls as landmarks of government in the newly formed municipalities across the country (Vanhakoski, 2009). In addition, new model housing types were created in design competitions to articulate ideal domestic forms for modern nuclear families (Saarikangas, 1993; Nikula, 2006). In the 1950s–80s, the welfare state emerged physically in the architectural competitions for residential neighborhoods and public buildings, such as schools, libraries, health centres, and government offices (FHA, 2020; Manninen, 2018; Vartola, 2018). More recently, some of the most prominent design competitions have featured cultural buildings, including the unrealized Guggenheim Helsinki project (competition 2013–2014), Helsinki Central Library (competition 2012–2013, built in 2018), and the extension to the National Museum of Finland (2019, in progress), all of which attracted hundreds of participants internationally.

Nevertheless, architectural competitions in Finland are by no means limited to these flagship urban projects, or even the greater Helsinki Metropolitan region. Municipalities with declining population trends also undertake design competitions to pursue their development aspirations. Moreover, as an urban-rural reordering is underway given the rapid urbanization trajectory, architectural competitions can render visible the tensions and ambitions of competitiveness emerging from the margins of the urbanizing Northern Europe.

3. Material and methods

This qualitative study explored competitive development aspirations in the Finnish architectural competitions organized outside of urban centres. The competitions illuminated the aesthetic, symbolic and spatial pursuits of 'peripheral' communities involved in a variety of urban development projects. In selecting the competitions for the study, I categorized localities in which the local population was declining or stagnant as peripheral. This idea of peripherality was informed by, firstly, the centrality of particular geographies and thriving urban locations in the scholarship on urban competitiveness, and secondly, by the discourses in Finland foregrounding the role of the growing urban centres, especially the Greater Helsinki Metropolitan Region, in Finland's future.

Using this strategy, I identified 15 competitions completed between 2015 and 2019 as topical for the analysis. A total of 98 architectural competitions were completed in cooperation with the Finnish Association of Architects (SAFA) in this period, which indicated that the majority of the competitions were organized in growing urban areas. The data included both ideas competitions and architectural design competitions, invitational and open competitions, and projects ranging from urban planning to building design. Key features of the competitions are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Architectural competitions in the dataset

Year	Competition	Format	Type	Scope	Stages
2019	Sastamala town centre	Open	Ideas	Urban design	1
2019	Pori Aarre Museum extension	Open	Design	Building design	1
2018	Laitila Parish house	Invitational	Design	Building design	1
2018	Raasepori Museum	Invitational	Design	Building design	1
2018	Lappeenranta City hall site	Open	Ideas	Urban design	1
2018	Sammonlahti school	Open	Design	Building design	2
2018	Kouvola Sakaristonmäki area	Open	Ideas	Urban planning	1
2017	Heinola high school	Invitational	Design	Building design	1
2017	Europan14: Tornio-Haparanda	Open	Ideas	Urban planning	1
2017	Ylivieska church	Open	Design	Building design	1
2016	Pori Puuvilla extension	Invitational	Design	Urban design	1
2016	Myllykoski church	Open	Ideas	Building design	1
2015	Pietarsaari Siikaluoto area	Open	Ideas	Urban planning	1
2015	Kouvola central blocks	Open	Ideas	Urban design	1
2015	Kouvola Pioneeripuisto area	Invitational	Ideas	Urban design	1

Source: Own creation based on data retrieved from the competition archive of Finnish Association of Architects (SAFA) in November, 2021. The archive is accessible online at https://www.safa.fi/kilpailut/arkisto/ (Finnish only).

In the data, each competition was represented by two documents: a competition programme and a jury report. According to the SAFA competition rules, the competition programme "shall clearly and unequivocally set out the objectives, the [background] information, the (…) design principles, the evaluation criteria (…), [and] the instructions for drawing up the entry" (SAFA, 2008, p. 3). The jury panel is obliged by the conditions set in the programme in evaluating the proposals. Once the evaluation process is complete, the jury report shall "[include] a description of the competition task, a general evaluation of the competition, entry-specific evaluations of all competition entries, a decision on the distribution of prizes and reasons for the decision (…), and essential pictorial and textual material relating to the entries" (ibid, p. 4). In the jury reports, I focused on the general evaluation and the evaluations of the awarded entries to focus on the schemes interpreted as the most purposeful by the jury.

I studied the texts of the competition documents using thematic analysis as method (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In interpreting the materials, I approached competitiveness broadly as a relational concept, suggesting the aspiration to be 'as good or better' as any relevant group of comparison. I thus focused on how ideas of future place-based improvement were evoked in relation to the present conditions in exploring the meanings and ideologies of urban development in the data. In addition, I analysed how the winning projects were distinguished from the rest by the juries. These two objectives guided the analysis and led to the formulation of two main themes: *urbanity as an aspirational sensibility* and *reinterpretation of history into future schemes*.

The analysis was informed by my background as a trained architect with experience of participating in Finnish design competitions. While this expertise was critical for my analysis of documents pertaining to specialist terminology and professional and cultural norms, it also required me to maintain a critical and reflexive stance throughout the analysis and to ground the interpretations rigorously in the original data.

4. Peripheral imaginaries of urban competitiveness

4.1 'The urban' as an improvement sensibility

Urbanity emerged as an affective sensibility rather than a form of development in the peripheral localities seeking to improve their status. Indeed, the forms of development typically associated with the pursuit of urban competitiveness, such as spectacular or iconic architectural forms or large-scale redevelopment plans were often explicitly deemed unfeasible by the organizer or the jury. Rejected schemes included high-density or high-rise building types (Kouvola Sakaristonmäki), large volumes of commercial property (Kouvola centre), hybrid buildings combining housing with other uses (Sastamala centre, Siikaluoto), and traffic solutions prioritizing pedestrian mobility, such as limiting land use for free ground-level parking (Europan14: Tornio-Haparanda, Sastamala centre). Indeed, the 'urbanity' that the localities aspired to intertwined affective aspects, such as atmosphere, experience and image. This sensibility was found in the competitions for Sastamala centre and Europan14 Tornio-Haparanda, among others:

> "The aim is to enhance the vitality of the centre and the attractiveness of the area as a place of services, living and leisure. The centre should express its beautiful location by the lake better than today. The architecture and the composition of [building] volumes should strengthen the urban and efficient ambiance."
>
> Sastamala centre competition, Competition programme, p. 11. Translated from Finnish by author.
>
> "Extending the city block structure up to the highway, removing roundabouts and adding trees are effective ways of adding a more urban image."
>
> Europan14: Tornio-Haparanda competition, Jury report, p. 15.

Some more conventional urban regeneration strategies were also represented in the data set. For example, the town hall site competition in Lappeenranta, a municipality of 72,000 inhabitants, articulated ambitions to render the centre area more competitive and to foster growth with commercial developments and urban density. In several cases, however, contradictions between market-oriented "competitive" strategies and perceived local realities were made explicit by the competition organizer or the jury. For example, in Kouvola, a municipality of 81,000 inhabitants, the jury of Pioneeripuisto competition lamented that "many of the proposals would have worked in a more urban and city-like environment where the prompt and comprehensive realization of the plan could be ensured" (Jury report, p. 7). Similarly, in the Kouvola Sakaristonmäki competition, the jury disapproved of the majority of proposals applying "concepts developed for centres of intensive urban growth where the primary aim is high building density, even without concern for the existing environment" (Jury report, p. 12). Instead, the jury was looking for "subtle construction and improvements executed with minor interventions in the cityscape" which "could be achieved by empathizing with the current condition of the area (…). An urban environment can also be created using modest means." (ibid). These responses suggest an alternative to the established ideas of urban competitiveness: an approach to regeneration underpinned by contextual empathy and subtle changes, rather than grand interventions. Moreover, I found the translation of local history and heritage into aspirational future imaginations to distinguish the winning proposals. Next, I turn to these aspects in more detail.

4.2 Reinterpreting the past to envision the future

Integrating the architectural proposals in the local history and architectural context appeared as a key to success in the competitions. Fitting in with the surroundings and respecting the historical landscape were dominant themes running through the evaluations of winning proposals. However, not all layers of history were considered equally meaningful. What 'history' and 'context' would entail emerged through an active reinterpretation and sense-making regarding the competition site. While some parts of the built environment were distinguished as valuable

representations of history, other aspects were excluded, and instead deemed as outdated or in need of transformation.

In many of the competitions (yet not without exception, e.g. Pori Aarre), buildings particularly from the 1960s and 70s were found to be in 'poor condition' and unworthy of repair. Redevelopment of the sites in question was already set out in the competition programmes. In contrast, buildings and landscapes from the 19th and early 20th centuries were in particular seen as uniquely valuable to the project and the foundation for future improvement. A case in point was the Lappeenranta town hall block competition, where the starting point of the brief was to replace a parish building from 1978. The following two quotes from the competition programme manifest the active interpretation and selective narration of what constituted the valuable historical context:

> "The [parish centre] building has survived completely unchanged in terms of its form and detailing, yet there is evidence of corrosion and poor condition in the façade. In terms of cityscape, the building (…) was designed to complement the other buildings in the historically valuable block. The building will be demolished in the coming years, because it does not respond to the current needs of the parish. (…) Due to the renovation costs and the changed spatial needs the renovation of the building has not been considered purposeful. The parish has decided to give up the (…) space as part of its spatial optimization efforts."
>
> Lappeenranta Town hall site competition, Competition programme, p. 24. Translated from Finnish by author.

> The competition seeks a new building [to replace the parish centre] that fits in with the cityscape and the unique characteristics of the nationally significant site of architectural heritage (…). In particular, the designs must pay attention to attributes of the cityscape and the connection to the Raatihuone park and the outdoor spaces of the block. (…) The competition site is located in one of the most historically valuable blocks in Lappeenranta, where the architectural layers from different times are clearly on display.
>
> Lappeenranta Town hall block competition, Competition programme, p. 6; 20. Translated from Finnish by author.

Adherence to the particular interpretations of valued history favored by the organizer and the jury was rewarded. Winners were generally commended for their subtleness, offering a 'natural fit for the environment' with a balanced quality, as well as individual gestures complementing the existing urban landscape. In other words, the winning schemes did not represent iconic landmarks or disruptive innovations, but more modest improvements that aligned with the ideas and ideologies of the organizer and the jury.

5. Discussion

Instead of mimicking the widely publicized urban strategies of big and powerful cities, many of the peripheral localities in Finland explored modes of urban development that would be more empathetic to their local context. In response to Gospodini's (2002) discussion on how peripheral localities in Europe might apply the regeneration models popularized in urban centres, these findings suggest that less empowered actors and communities are likely to deliberate different approaches drawing on their local conditions in the competitive aspirations. In many of the cases analysed here, the localities did indeed 'consolidate a new form of localism' as hypothesized by Gospodini. This 'localism', however, for the most did part not mobilize spectacular or 'innovative' urban interventions like in the Bilbao model, but rather negotiated curated narratives of the local context with subtle spatial improvements into competitive place-based imaginaries.

The reinterpretation of place-based experiences and histories into singular narratives of what belongs (and what does not) appears to evoke the role of elite imaginations and the 'culture of consensus' shaping architectural competitions (Bern, 2018; Rönn, 2009). Seeing as the winning proposals were predominantly commended for their adherence to the specific sensibilities, the competitions did not represent spaces where the hegemonic narratives

could be contested or subverted. Nevertheless, the conflicts and struggles of reimagining the urban spaces could foster dynamic processes of self-reflection and 'self-transformation', as proposed by de Frantz (2005), or generate 'impetus for alternative practices' (Chu & Sanyal, 2015). In their current form, architectural competitions may not invite public contestation as part of the process, yet critical mobilizations could still take place prior to, in parallel with, or as an outcome of the competition, as exemplified by the rejected Guggenheim Helsinki project in Finland (Alshawaaf & Lee, 2021; Ponzini & Ruoppila, 2018; Ritvala, Granqvist, & Piekkari, 2021).

It is important to note that the consideration of history does not in itself suggest an alternative to the entrepreneurial paradigm of regeneration. Heritage and allusions to history have been frequently capitalized and commodified in cities small and large seeking competitive advantage with entrepreneurial urban strategies, as discussed by Hubbard (1996), Biddulph (2011), Rousseau (2009) and Gospodini (2002, 2004), among others. Rather, what in my view may point towards an alternative mode of improvement is the sidelining of urban growth as a lead motive. This proposition concurs with Lauermann (2018) who has proposed a more nuanced view of entrepreneurial 'municipal statecraft' beyond the 'hegemony of growth agendas'. In several competitions, the jury denounced concepts that they associated with spaces of urban growth: high-density or high-rise constructions, flagship hybrid buildings with integrated parking, and so forth. Evidently, these types of urban interventions are remarkable investments, and without external capital they might not find resonance in the municipal imaginaries. Nevertheless, while the grounds for such rejection could at least in part be seen as practical – a small town can only fit so many retail spaces and new-build apartments – the reports also hint at issues of identity and culture. There may be pride taken in modesty.

The contradictions between the designers' proposals and the local needs suggests some points of critical reflection: why were design solutions developed for places of urban growth advocated for contexts where more subtle strategies were called for? Biddulph (2011) has previously studied the attitudes of urban designers involved in regeneration, finding them genuinely motivated to improve the local public spaces. However, it may be that the reproduction of globalized architectural forms in peripheral competitions is a symptom of the architectural competition process. As Till (2018) has argued, the competition easily distances participants from the social context of design, for example by delimiting the opportunities for interaction with the organizer. Architectural competitions may thus end up producing 'spatial utopias' that have little to contribute to the social imaginaries they are meant to engage with (ibid). Socialized into the competition culture often already in their education, many architects (who are predominantly trained and employed in urban centres; see Khachatryan, 2020) may struggle to empathize with places that remain relatively unaffected by the dominant entrepreneurial aspirations, or at least the ambition of urban growth.

6. Conclusions

Following the aim to take the peripheries seriously as sites of urban agency, the findings extend the literature on urban competitiveness by foregrounding its margins. This research strategy pointed towards alternative aspirations for urban futures from places typically sidelined in competition discourses. Moreover, the current literature remains predominantly rooted in North America, Western Europe and the UK, yet if we understand entrepreneurial urban governance and urban competition as a globalized system, extending the geography of knowledge production calls for new spaces of critical research. The Finnish case offered a generative research context, as the design competitions represented a wide range of architectural and planning projects and urban development sites.

The outcomes of this study suggest opportunities for future cross-country comparative research and further case studies pursuing the wide-spread use of design competitions. In particular, expanding the international comparisons and case studies geographically would contribute to the systematic evaluation of competition practices, which are internationally widely codified, yet draw on particular architecture and planning cultures and local conditions. Nonetheless, while design competitions as a research object enable the productive analysis of urban development programmes and proposals, they essentially leave out the dynamic and multiple interpretations and social meaning-making processes underpinning any image-building and urban transformation project.

In the past, Grubbauer (2014) has questioned the persistent focus on flagship design (and designers) in scholarship on competitive urban development, foregrounding instead "the role of architecture in strategies of urban regeneration which is not centred on the architectural icon" but "everyday buildings" and their embodied "social and economic functions (…) without necessarily being spectacular or remarkable" (p. 338). This study included both 'everyday' landscapes and more unique urban projects, aligning with the call to diversify and expand ideas and models of competitiveness in urban research. As I have argued in this article, the role of urban design and architecture in urban competition is more complex than the focus on iconic and avant-garde developments may suggest, promising fertile ground for critical scholarly engagement in the future.

Acknowledgements

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