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Experiments in Strip Appeal

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Abstract

Strip Appeal (www.strip-appeal.com) was an ideas design competition intended to stimulate and showcase creative design proposals for the adaptive reuse of small-scale strip-malls. It was also a mode of experimentation both for the organizers, Patchett and Shields, and entrants and eventual winners, Davidson and Rafailidis. For the organizers, Strip Appeal offered the opportunity of experimenting *with* the competition as social research – a method for the generation rather than the mere collection/representation of knowledge, experience and materials relating to a much-maligned building type. For the entrants/winners it offered the opportunity of experimenting *within* the competition as practice - using a competition “brief” or question as a jumping-off point to explore, develop and test an architectural idea – in this case, the idea of architectural spolia – in a specific design proposal.

Following Bruno Latour (1999) the experiment can be understood as a transformative process – for the people as well as the materials involved. By staging a dialogue between organizers and entrants/winners in this paper we seek to question whether Strip Appeal was transformative in the ways - procedural, social, representational, political - intended? Moreover in offering the perspectives of both organizers and entrants we aim to make visible some of the opacities involved in practice – such as flows of organization/funding, mystifications of expertise and decision-making, barriers to engagement/implementation, and so forth – and thus stay alert to the dilemmas and limitations of experimentation both with and within the ideas design competition.

Keywords: Strip Mall, Matter of Concern, Design, Bruno Latour, Experiment, Competition

The Competition: An Experimental Tradition?

In this paper we reflect on our efforts at experimenting with and within Strip Appeal (www.strip-appeal.com), an ideas design competition intended to stimulate and showcase creative design proposals for the adaptive reuse of small-scale strip-malls. For the organizers - Patchett and Shields - Strip Appeal offered the opportunity of experimenting *with* the competition as social research – a method for the generation rather than the mere collection/representation of knowledge, experience and materials relating to a much-maligned building type. For the entrants/winners - Davidson and Rafailidis - it offered the opportunity of experimenting *within* the competition as practice – using a competition “brief” or question as a jumping-off point to explore, develop and test an architectural idea – in this case, the idea of architectural *spolia* – in a specific design proposal. By staging a dialogue between organizers and entrants/winners in this paper we seek to critically reflect on the complexities and complicities of experimenting with and within an ideas design competition. However before we do so, we need to understand how the “experimental tradition” informs not only the theory and practice of design competitions but the argument/methodology of this paper.

In describing architectural competitions as an “experimental tradition” Lipstadt proposed a radical break with traditional architectural history’s “affirmation of a historical association of competitions with great style-forming moments of innovation” (Lipstadt 1989: 9) and encouraged instead “the writing of a history capable of disempowering beliefs about competitions so that the competition could be studied as a practice characteristic of the architectural profession.” (Lipstadt 2009: 12). With the competition redefined to “emphasize its unsurprising regularity,” Lipstadt (ibid) paved the way for competitions research to focus on the process of competitions, their types and effects. Rather than the competition being an unquestioned producer of stylistic change, the competition is now researched as an architectural practice with its own imperfections and variations. While this refocusing of competitions research was an attempt on Lipstadt’s part to overturn an

“unquestioning faith in [their] benefits”, by describing the competition as an “experimental tradition”– in that it “predictably produced unpredictable outcomes” - she presents a limited understanding of the experimental processes and potentials of the competition. By comparison, we seek to develop a nuanced yet critical vision of (competition) experiments.

Developing a Critical Vision of (Competition) Experiments

“Architectural competitions are based on 3 fundamental presuppositions: (a) that drawing and visualisations may transmit credible knowledge and (b) that quality in architecture is something that may be seen and transmitted via images. And in a principle view, (c) that architectural projects is a practicable method for investigating the future and testing ideas.” (Andersson *et al* 2013:11)

Historians of science have traced the emergence of the concept and practice of experiment, mapping a gradual shift from Aristotelian to experiment-based empirical science. This shift was characterised by a commitment to empirical evidence as the basis for knowledge, a commitment to establishing truths about the world through the staging of experiments. The experiment thus became synonymous with scientific objectivity. However STS scholars, who have turned their critical attention to the experimental processes through which scientific knowledge produced, have troubled this view of the experiment. They have uncovered the heterogeneity of types of experimentation historically (e.g. Schaffer 2005), in turn questioning Sciences’ claims to “objectivity,” “certainty”, and “Truth”. However what perhaps remains the most notable thing about the shift from Aristotelian to experiment-based empirical science for competitions researchers was the commitment to making visible the processes by which scientific knowledge was established: “the notion of transparency of method was central.’ (Macdonald and Basu 2007: 4). The production of architectural knowledge through competitions, as the quote above illustrates, is similarly predicated on processes and techniques of “making visible”.

However, while it is important to acknowledge the experimental tradition of the long *durée*, particular importance for contemporary notions of experimentation in competitions research and practice can be accorded to the pragmatist tradition. For the American pragmatists of the turn of the 20th century, observation and hypothesis formation combined together with both experiment and individualism (e.g. Dewey 1934). Pragmatists aimed to test a priori concepts against empirical experience. They were convinced that this experimental apparatus would teach the body of knowledge appropriate for addressing real-life problems. It is for this reason that the pragmatist view of research has been favoured by design research and theory in recent times (e.g. Yaneva 2009) and has informed the competition approach of major architectural and design institutions like RIBA. For RIBA and their ilk the competition provides a practicable formula for responding to real-world design problems.

However, another tradition of experiment as play passes by way of the Frankfurt school theorist Walter Benjamin. His conclusion to “Toys and Play” “gives a positive definition of children’s play as an experiment with objects and rhythms, based on repetition, in which we ‘first gain possession of ourselves. ‘For a child repetition is the soul of play,’ Benjamin writes, ‘nothing gives him greater pleasure than to “Do it again!”.’” (Salzani 2009:186). In this understanding, experimentation gives rise to novelty and delight that emerges from a regular process of repetition. This celebratory reading of experimentation infuses recent writings that express the competition as a laboratory, a space for architects to “experiment, play and explore” (Cilento 2010).

However Lipstadt remains critical of any “affirmation” of the competition, but particularly by scholars. Citing the work of a Canadian team of scholars (Adamczyk *et al* 2004), who promote “the competition formula as a promising method for research and experimentation”, she questions these “disinterested” scholars ability to “reasonably question” the competition:

“Arguably, affirmation leads researchers to think as architects do. Like architects, scholars can ignore the unreasonable costs, history of deleterious outcomes, unfavourable odds and irrationality, or understand them as being far outweighed by the competition’s potential benefits.” (Lipstadt 2009: 15)

While it is certainly important to question the “disinterestedness” of scholars and how this might lead them to ignore the many disadvantages of competitions (and is indeed something we will address in this paper), Lipstadt manages to both represent architects as “unthinking” through her presentation of the relationship between architects and competitions as an affirmative one, whilst also suggesting scholars have nothing to learn from thinking like architects. Not only shall we demonstrate that scholars have much to learn from thinking like architects and vice versa, but scholars can practice architecture and architects can practice academia (we will come to argue both are designers). To return to Lipstadt’s argument for now though, her main criticism of the “affirmation” of competitions by scholars and architects is that “as long as it goes unrecognized and unavowed, it prevents our constructing the competition as a truly scientific object” (Ibid: 14). Yet as STS scholars have demonstrated, the very processes of “constructing” mean that there can never be a “truly scientific object”, even if this were desirable.

Science and Technology Studies of Experiment

To develop a critical vision of experiments, and experimentation with and within the design competition, we turn to Bruno Latour, the French sociologist and social theorist of actor networks. For Latour, the formal scientific experiment in which laws of nature are verified, stands upon the unacknowledged framework of oratory experiment as a social scaffold (Latour 1999). Where the pre-moderns saw nature and society as inseparable, modern, rational, Western society divided human from nature. This allowed the assumption and conceit that nature was manipulable without any implications for society. The modern asymmetry of experimentation holds that objects can be observed dissected and designed independently of the controlling

Subject (Latour 1993). This Subject is free to experiment with and to possess the world of objects (Strathern 1998: 121, 126). However, Latour points out, “findings” are often contentious as they rely on other equally contentious references that themselves rely on other references, and so on (Latour 1987). Experiments produce multiple hybrids of the social and natural including points of view on the object world that depend on certain cultural subjects as the observers. However as Haraway notes, critically, Latour does not acknowledge that “it is less epistemologically, politically, and emotionally powerful to see that there are startling hybrids of the human and non-human in technoscience [including in architecture]... than to ask for whom and how these hybrids work” (Haraway, 1997: 280).

The development of this critical vision of experiments allows us to understand that both social and natural arrangements are at stake in the (competition) experiment. We experiment as much with social relations as with the arrangements of matter, which is why Latour argues the experiment must be understood as a transformative process – for the people as well as the materials involved. Yet to “stay with the trouble” as Haraway asks us, it requires that we trouble any affirmative reading of transformation or, indeed, experimentation in this paper.

Staging an Experimental Dialogue

By staging a dialogue between organizers and entrants/winners of Strip Appeal in what follows we seek to question whether Strip Appeal was transformative in the ways – procedural, social, material, political - intended? Moreover in offering the perspectives of both organizers and entrants/winners we aim to make visible some of the opacities involved in practice – such as flows of organization and funding, mystifications of expertise and decision-making, barriers to engagement and implementation, and so forth – and thus stay alert to the dilemmas and limitations of experimentation both with and within the ideas design competition. In this way the paper is itself an experimental dialogue between organisers and entrants, and social scientists and practising architects. Although the social sciences and architecture

might have “distinct disciplinary origins, divergent practical objectives as well as different modes of operation,” (Jacobs and Merriman 2010: 219) a hybrid practice might offer the best way to not only understand but also enact the experimental potentials (and avoid the pitfalls!) of the competition.

Experimenting With I: The Strip Mall as “Matter of Concern”

“When things are taken as having been well or badly designed then they no longer appear as matters of fact. So as their appearance as matters of fact weakens, their place among the many matters of concern that are at issue is strengthened.” (Latour 2008: 4)



Figure 1 The Strip Mall as Matter of Concern. Image: Merle Patchett

Usually a single-storey, steel-framed building, from the 1930s the strip mall married street-front commercial construction with the aspirations to convenient automobile access. The idea took off in the 1950s as a smaller version of the suburban mall, where a set of shops linked two anchoring stores, such as a department store and a

large food store. As a business model, however, strip malls have suffered because they were unable to grow: chain stores tend to follow a logic of developing a clientèle, then integrating multiple stores into a single larger site at a more prominent location in the urban transportation network. Combined with covenants imposed on owners by these powerful chains to restrict the subsequent re-use of locations by would-be competitors, many strip malls have seen much of their most valuable shop spaces stand vacant. Today the building type is widely recognized as outdated, outmoded and failing.

At the City-Region Studies Centre (CRSC) we had identified the strip mall as a “matter of concern” for many groups as part of our research into the revitalisation of retail provision in Canadian suburbs. Here the policy focus has been on revitalizing heritage and downtown shopping cores (Gross 1996; Beck 2003), or on creating “town square” versions of power centres (including “lifestyle centres”) generally in newly erected suburbs (Southworth 2005). By contrast, the local strip mall, with a convenience-oriented mission but often not a particularly locally-responsive retail provision, has been overlooked and in decline: “many of them dying, bleak and waiting for reinvention.” (Ibid: 153) It was our contention that the social vitality and community sustainability of mature suburban neighbourhoods could be improved by reviving and/or re-purposing under-utilized strip malls. There was very little academic literature about neighbourhood strip malls beyond urban designers’ disparagement of the form, however, we recognised that perhaps users rather than academics or even designers might be better placed to address the problem(s) of the strip mall.

One of our mandates at the CRSC is to develop new forms of “public research” that position academia in new relations to diverse publics and professional communities. Our public research model is applied in both theoretical reflection and in the development of new models of participatory, community-based research and collective problem recognition. To address the strip mall as a matter of public rather than just academic concern, the design competition presented itself as a potential model for engaging practitioners and interested publics with the question of how strip

malls could be re-designed to reflect the needs of 21st century suburban communities. Although design competitions have been subject to very little critical interest in the social sciences, we recognised that this was an opportunity to experiment with the design competition *as* social research. Conventionally speaking, the social sciences are not thought of as part of the design professions. However social research has long incorporated elements of a design ethos and intentionality – to solve social problems by improving social spaces, exposing barriers to access and designing institutions as better vehicles for social, political and economic interaction (Shields 2002) Moreover, in his keynote address to the 2008 meeting of the Design History Society Latour highlights how our increasing need to redesign the things around us - “from the details of daily objects to cities, landscapes, nations, cultures, bodies, genes, and... {even} nature itself” (2008: 2) – has in turn highlighted that we need to work with and expanded concept of design.

Design, Competitions and Innovation

For Latour there are five advantages to the concept of design. The first is that there is a *modesty* to design which is missing from concepts such as of “making”, “building” and “constructing” (ibid: 9). This is because there is nothing “foundational” nor “terminal” in design according to Latour. The second is design’s alignment with the slow-pace and precautionary attitude of craft and skill through its “attentiveness to *details*”, which he argues is “completely lacking” in the “heroic” and “hubristic” modernist “dream of action” (ibid: 3). The third advantage is that “design lends itself to interpretation” and is therefore “unquestionably about *meaning*” (ibid: 4). As meanings become attached to artefacts they evolve from being “objects” to “things” and from “matters of fact” into “matters of concern” in Latour’s terms (ibid: 2). The fourth advantage is that because to design is never to create *ex nihilo*: “to design is always to *redesign*” (ibid: 5). Designing is therefore “the antidote to founding, colonising, establishing, or breaking with the past.” (ibid) Nor is there therefore a sole creator or originator as “all designs are ‘collaborative’ designs – even if in some cases the “collaborators” are not all visible, welcomed or willing” (ibid: 6). The fifth and

decisive advantage of the concept of design for Latour is that it necessarily involves an ethical dimension, enclosed in the evaluation of “*good versus bad design*” (ibid). This connects design not to not just to judgment but even morality, which for Latour offers a good handle from which to connect design to politics. We will return to the connection between design and politics in the conclusion. For now though we will emphasise the connection between design and experimentalism: instead of looking for an absolute answer or mastery, design, rather follows a cautious and therefore *experimental* process.

This cautious and experimental attitude framed our decision to *enact* the design competition *as* social research. We also saw it as a way of responding to the design challenge Latour (ibid: 12) identifies at the end of his address:

“How can we draw together matters of concern so as to offer to political disputes an overview, or at least a view, of the difficulties that will entangle us every time we must modify the practical details of our material existence?”

From our naïve perspective the design competition offered a method for “drawing together” the strip mall’s matters of concern – a method for the *generation* rather than the mere representation of knowledge, experience and materials relating to a much-maligned building type. Although we found there was very little practical instruction on how to enact an ideas design competition, we took seriously Lipstadt's (2006: 8) warning that organisers need to understand “how design competitions work and who they benefit” to implement best practices. We also wanted to avoid being “disinterested scholars” by unquestionably accepting their benefits.

Many arguments are put forward regarding both the advantages and disadvantages of competitions. The core belief in the value of competitions is “the correlation of competitions with innovation” (ibid: 10). Competitions are said to engender

innovation in four ways: when aesthetic and technical solutions are produced; when competitions “play a key participatory role in the definition of social values, in the context of a public sphere of debate”; when they grant “young firms... access to a public venue for their work”; and when they serve as a “source of critical and reflexive practices in architecture.” (Adamczyk *et al* 2004: 2,1) Competitions are also perceived to be advantageous due to their “democratic” nature. Intended as anonymous, they are said to offer entrants an equal chance to “win” the commission (Kazemian and Rönn 2009). This was important historically for the discipline of architecture, as competitions “release[d][designers] from their dependence on personal patronage.” (Ware 1899: 109)

However Chupin (2015), reflecting on two decades worth of international competitions in the Canadian context, states that competitions are not as common a democratic device as they should be. Strong (2013: 135) goes further to argue that competitions have become increasingly “undemocratic” thanks to the near disappearance of open competitions. With entry being increasingly restricted to 4-5 teams, the result is that that younger less experienced architectural practices are excluded. Even when competitions are open they demand a great deal of time, energy and investment from entrants and can also be costly in a monetary sense through entrance fees. This said, the prestige and publicity associated with competitions continues to attract designers and because they offer the opportunity for design development/experimentation “unfettered by client control.” (Lipstadt 2006: 11) As such competitions present designers with the opportunity to supplement their portfolios, helping them to build up a body of work beyond the limitations of commercial practice.

With these factors in mind, Lipstadt (*ibid*: 22) recommends that design competitions need to be “intelligently designed”, in order to better serve the interests of the competitors. Although Lipstadt qualifies that she is using the term “intelligent design” with a hint of irony and that “it abandons the notion of the “sole creator”, she rather contradicts this by arguing that the intelligent design of competitions would foster the

development of “*personal... design skill*”. Moreover, although Lipstadt argues design competitions have an obligation to demonstrate how they “serve the public realm”, this obligation rests on demonstrating how the competition responds to architectural, and therefore disciplinary, debate (ibid).

Rather than emphasise expert/disciplinary knowledge over ordinary know-how by “affirming the intelligence” of the design process, we propose that the well-conceived design competition is one that recognizes and works with an expanded concept of design, one that recognises the experimental, collaborative and modest nature of the design process. Whether we achieved this in practice with Strip Appeal is up for debate and is why we bring entrants/winners Davidson/Rafailidis into dialogue with us. Moreover this strategy also reminds us that Strip Appeal as a competition is not a “matter of fact” but is itself a “matter of concern”, a thing about which human concern has collected, be it harmoniously or controversially.

Experimenting Within I: The motivation to do competition work

Our practice is small – we are two principals and typically employ two interns. Competitions – particularly ideas competitions – are relevant to us because we both also hold academic appointments as part of our intellectual and design practice (as opposed to the common understanding of professionals' offices being “practices”). Competitions – even ideas competitions where deliverables are less strictly prescribed than competitions to win a commission – can be costly to enter. They don't really make sense financially, and the motivation is rarely the prize money. They are a way to establish a body of work and conduct research, a requirement of an academic appointment. Teaching architecture means spending time critically addressing architecture through the process of design with students. We ask questions and have no pressures or parameters from clients. This mode of working translates fluidly to ideas competitions, where the deliverables are often quite open. We fund our competition work – which we see as a form of design research – out-of-pocket. We

comb through competition calls when we have time, to see if there are any that align with our interests, and could be used as instruments to test some of our ideas. Sometimes, even if we find a competition call that appeals to us, we can't do it because we don't have the time (four weeks minimum is our rule-of-thumb) or the money.

Our built projects – although they yield commissions – have, until now, been small, and have not covered expenses like intern salaries, material samples and office supplies. Similar to the competitions in which we choose to participate, we take-on projects that “fit” with the architectural questions and aims that we're pursuing. In the end, we see the projects less as “jobs” and more as opportunities to test architectural questions through a full-scale building.

The model of our practice allows us to engage in competitions that do not lead to commissions. The generation of design research that emerges through the participation in ideas competitions is fruitful for us (even if the entry doesn't win) in several ways. Firstly, entering ideas competitions is a chance to generate a body of work and conduct design “research” in a specific area. This work can be used as a basis for the production of new academic papers, and exhibition work. Themes explored in one competition entry can be further developed in subsequent projects or competition entries. We took the idea that was at the core of our Strip Appeal entry, of material re-use in architecture, or “spolia,” and used it as the basis for a 2012 competition entry for a folly in the Socrates Sculpture Park in New York City. Our competition entry, called “Curtain Spolia” (named partly after the folly that had one the 2011 competition, “Curtain”) was a finalist.

The production of a body of work exploring a specific theme is a requirement for many academic appointments in architecture. Ideas competitions are important platforms helping to feed academic appointments. Academic appointments in architecture, simultaneously, feed these competitions because the entrants – like us –

are able to fund their entries through their teaching salaries. Our hybrid practice can be experimental and critical in contrast to a pure commercial practice that depends solely on client's fees. Our footing in academia is also mirrored by the Strip Appeal competition itself, whose organizers are based in a university (University of Alberta, Canada) and who used the competition format to outsource research on strip malls. The way in which CRSC tapped-into an architectural mode of production – the design competition - reminded us of Bruno Latour's 2003 essay "the world wide lab". In this essay, Latour describes experimentation that is not confined anymore to a single discipline, lab or institution, but rather, opened-up to the outside world. The competition format enlarged the research team to include all participants, and it also crossed borders of disciplines, merging teams from architecture, sociology, geography, the arts, and urban planning, among others. The medium of the competition is unique in being able to pull so many disciplines together and motivate a rapid output of work on a single theme.

For our Strip Appeal entry, we produced four panels and a stop-motion animation (see www.vimeo.com/32905022). Our process was very detailed and time-intensive, and we hired an intern part-time to help us with graphic production for around eight weeks prior to the submission deadline. Because the project was based on an existing site, and included details about infrastructure, we worked with the City of Buffalo to get infrastructure plans, and began the project with a detailed survey and material inventory of the building – the Central Park Plaza strip mall.



Figure 2 Central Park Plaza. Image copyright Davidson/Rafailidis

We paid our intern around \$2500 USD for her two months of part-time production work, and gave her one third of the \$1000 CAD prize money. In the end, it was a valuable experience for our intern to be part of a winning competition entry, but she left soon after the competition for a commercial office, since small “practices” can rarely offer solid incomes to interns. Paying our interns on an hourly basis is a personal choice that we make, and we are very committed to it. There are other models though, where practices don’t have to invest as much money. One approach, which I experienced as a fresh graduate, is to offer a fixed honorarium, which is often low, and might amount to \$4-5/hour. This approach might be combined with the additional incentive of a percentage of the prize money if the entry wins. Another approach is to offer authorship instead of money. This model is a collaboration – each team member shares authorship of the work; there is no author/employee divide. Yet another approach – and a very controversial one within the architecture community – is not paying at all.

Finding a competition call or brief that is a good “fit” for architectural issues or themes in which we’re interested is just one challenge in the world of competitions. Another challenge is assessing how legitimate the competition organizer seems – if it is a commercial entity trying to solicit free ideas, we avoid it. Yet another challenge is

putting together a team, and negotiating the terms of the team members – who will lead (normally one of us takes “ownership” of a design), who will work for us, how much we have to budget to pay the employee). Doing the work is the final challenge, and doesn’t always work out. Sometimes, even after two to three weeks or longer of work, we don’t have conviction in our project, and we drop it, or just fail to meet the deadline.

Experimenting With II: Redesigning the Design Competition

At the CRSC we initiated our ideas design competition to “reinvent the strip mall,” recognizing not only the potential of the ideas competition to produce speculative design visions for the rejuvenation of strip malls, but also that an ideas design competition can be an “indispensable medium for communicating such visions with the wider public” (Kiefer 2008: 22) This had already been successfully realized in a spate of online competitions addressing design problems associated with suburban development, such as Reurbia and How to Build a Better Burb. With the help of powerful multimedia campaigns, competitions like these transformed suburban planning and design issues “from boring to sexy in the public mind.” (Sagalyn 2006: 34-5) However some architectural commentators have argued that the increasingly speculative nature of competitions undermines the work produced, as the competition is transformed into “a purely event based situation,” rather than a vehicle through which theory shapes practice within architectural design (Adamczyk *et al* 2004: 2.)

Aware of this criticism, we decided to organise our ideas design competition around the notion of an “invisible college”. The term “invisible college” was first referenced in the 17th century by the natural philosopher Robert Boyle and referred to an informal group of intellectuals dedicated to furthering knowledge through experimental investigation (what would later become the formalized Royal Society of London). Today the term is used to refer to an informal communication network of scholars. For example, Friedmann (1995: 21) has described the multidisciplinary set

of authors mobilizing the concept of the “global city” as the “invisible college of world city researchers.” Developing on the invisible college tradition, we saw the potential for the ideas design competition to create an informal network of practitioners, scholars and interested actors dedicated to addressing the strip mall as a matter of concern through experimental investigation. As the realization of designs was outside the realms of our remit as a research centre, we therefore wanted our “invisible college” to be concerned with “charting various possibilities” rather than finding a single “best” solution (Kazemian and Rönn 2009: 178). However in order to avoid creating a network of “disinterested scholars” we wanted to ensure that the investigations could be carried out by, and be communicated to, wider publics. This required that we develop a “visible/accessible college”.

The first obvious step we took in this regard was to make the competition open to all. A less obvious step was not choosing a single strip mall site for designs to respond to. Instead, we asked entrants to choose a strip mall that was local to them. As almost everyone in North America knows of a strip mall in need of intervention/reinvention we hoped it would encourage non- professionals to enter. It also allowed international submissions based on building typologies that shared the same problems and forms as strip malls.

We did have some requirements for entrants to meet when choosing their strip malls, however. As our research focus was small-scale suburban strip malls – those usually attached to a community, we requested that selected sites be considered a “small box” retail centre, that is, a strip mall or mini-mall of roughly 5-8 stores. We also asked that the strip malls be located in mature suburban neighbourhoods, as the reorientation of the strip to community use was a central concern of the competition. However, we would accept strip mall sites from inner-ring suburbs (which may no longer be considered “suburban”) and outer-ring suburbs, recognizing that there is often a difficulty delineating where the suburbs begin and end when addressing the problem of sprawl.

By asking entrants to consider the situatedness of their strip mall sites, we wanted their redesigns to consider the relationship between architectural and non-architectural elements of the site and to respond to the needs of the surrounding community and built environment. In this way, it was hoped the competition and the entrants' contributions would connect to wider debates about how the suburbs can be redesigned into more urban, sustainable places. The suburban strip mall also presented itself as the perfect case study for examining and experimenting with approaches that have been proposed as ways of tackling the problems associated with suburban sprawl, such as retrofitting, infill and re-use (Dunham-Jones and Williamson 2009).

potential.

Through this process, our team identified over 200 strip malls as candidates for intervention.

Their reach blankets almost all of Edmonton's existing residential neighbourhoods within 400 to 800 m – a 5 to 10 minute walk.

The potential for the conversion of these strip malls into neighbourhood transportation hubs – and the corresponding densification that could result by freeing up space currently devoted to automobiles – extends to the whole city.

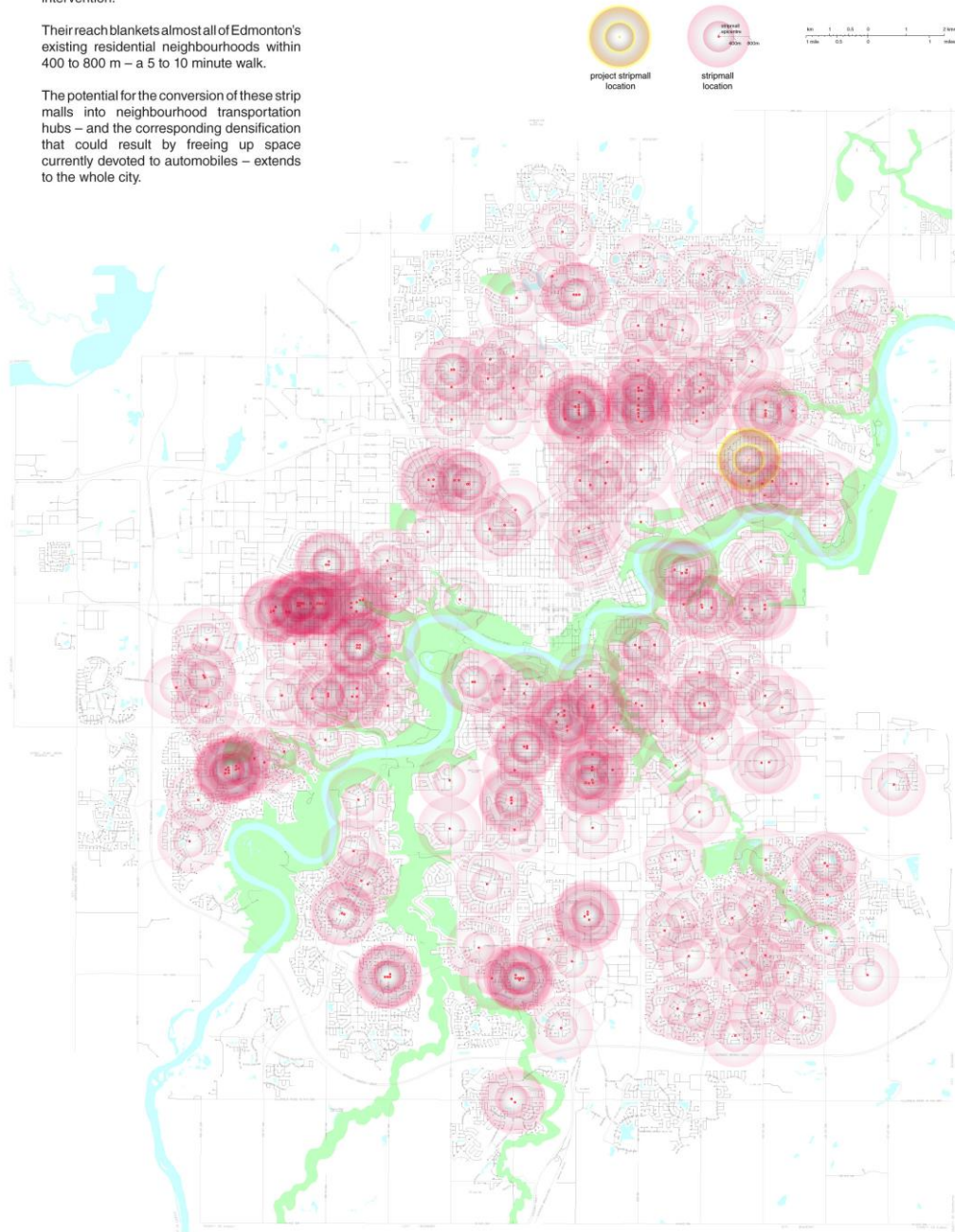


Figure 3 City of Edmonton map illustrating over 200 strip malls identified as "candidates for intervention" by Ziola NewStudio. Map copyright Ziola NewStudio

To maximize the openness of the competition to non-professionals, we made it free to enter and stipulated that responses and design ideas could be expressed using any medium, from architectural and graphic design to photography and video, or even a sketch or a doodle. In this way, the emphasis of the judging would be on the idea rather than simply on the visual appeal of the renderings. Entries were judged (in descending order) on:

/ clarity of idea,

/ usefulness and economy of design,

/ community appeal and relevance,

/ visual and aesthetic appeal of renderings.

Competitions remain poorly understood by potential sponsors. Our lack of outside sponsorship coupled with our decision to make the competition free to enter meant that we could only offer modest monetary prizes for our winners. We therefore aimed to make the competition appealing to design students and lay practitioners – who would not necessarily be put off by the small monetary reward – by making the main “prize” of the competition the opportunity to showcase their designs in a travelling exhibit and bookwork. Here it was hoped the process of “making visible”, as well as the brief, would be a compelling enough reason to enter.

After finalizing the competition brief, the first step in the process of making visible was to come up with a name that would grab attention. Strip Appeal was chosen as a play on the saying “curb appeal” and because the competition was an appeal for creative re-imaginings of strip malls. We also hoped that the name’s risqué connotations would help generate media and press attention around a planning issue and building type that is generally regarded as uninteresting and decidedly unsexy. We turned to online design competition forums like “Death by Architecture”, as well

as student design societies and more general interest design forums like Inhabit.com, to promote the competition and to encourage submissions from diverse parties. Recognizing that the design identity of the competition itself would need to catch the eye of design professionals and aficionados, we employed a student designer to create a logo and design identity for our website – www.stripappeal.com – where the competition brief was available to download.

Experimenting Within II: The Critical Design Proposal

The Strip Appeal brief was special for us because it hit on a research question at the core of our work, which is: How can we address the tension between the increasingly short lifespan of client briefs and business plans and the much longer life span of buildings? Retail building typologies are an especially good example of this friction between short use and long building life, as they change, on average, every ten years. The buildings, however, do not disappear after ten years; they often become vacant and neglected, and are razed because the spatial typology doesn't attract new users and they fall into disrepair. In our work, we ask: How can we create long lasting relevance for buildings in a global economy that focuses on the short term? The Strip Appeal competition challenge, to “reinvent the strip mall” was a specific design task in which we could explore our broader interest in building forms that outlive their intended use.

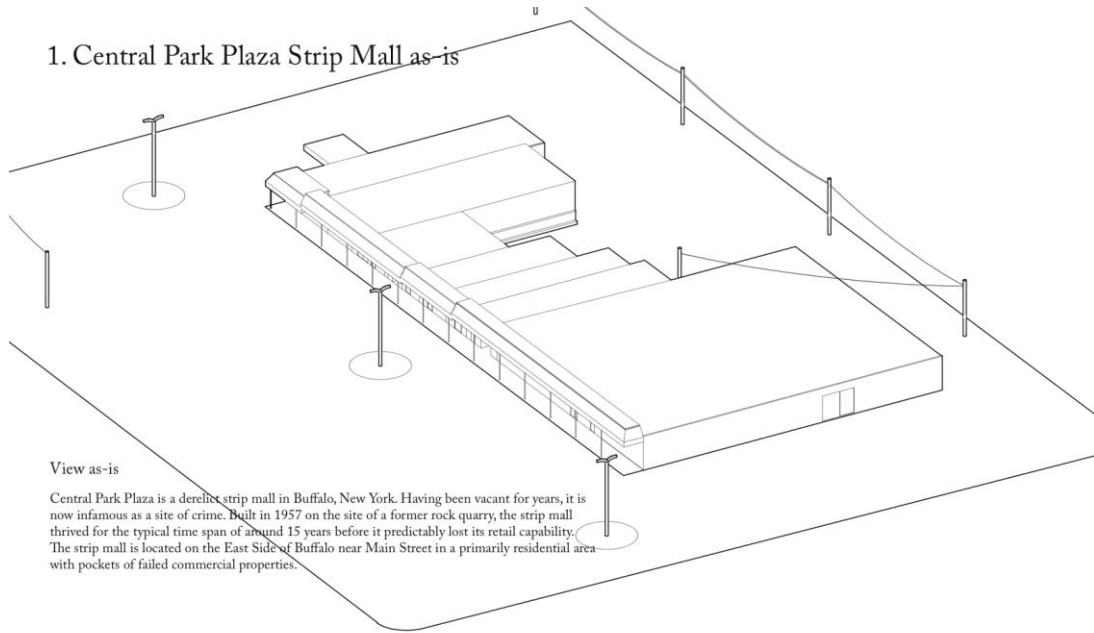
The issue of the mall as a redundant building typology was one that we'd explored some years prior to the Strip Appeal competition during our time teaching at the RWTH University in Aachen, Germany. There, the German shopping centre company METRO sponsored a student design studio, which also took the format of a competition, to tackle the issue of the dying mall typology. At the time, METRO explained that their malls were losing their all-important “anchor stores.” Without the anchor stores, smaller stores aren't able to draw enough customers to keep the mall complex viable. The design task, like the task for Strip Appeal, involved dealing with

a building that was structurally viable, but without any obvious use or purpose. Design proposals, also like the proposals for Strip Appeal, included many community functions like libraries, community centres, as well as theatres, schools and markets.

The organizing entity, from the point-of-view of the participant, is always very significant in a competition. Although we exploited our position as instructors in a university to tutor the proposals to the METRO competition, the company interest was always clear: METRO wanted, ultimately, ideas that they could implement to help save countless malls that were emptying at a rapid rate. The brief from Strip Appeal, which came from the CRSC, didn't have a commercial interest and seemed to rather be a call to assemble a kind of think-tank on how strip malls could be reinvented. The promise was that the entries would be exhibited and shared with the public more as thought provocations and less as concrete proposals that could move into execution.

In our entry to the Strip Appeal competition, "Free Zoning," we formulated a pointed and radical approach to dealing with a building typology – in this case, a strip mall – that has become obsolete long before it has been exhausted physically. The entry laid the groundwork thematically for other new projects, including our subsequent competition entry, "Curtain Spolia." Spolia is a term that refers specifically to the repurposing of building components to make a new building. The fact that the entry was also chosen as the winner of Strip Appeal let us see how much the idea, of critiquing the spatial quality and potential of the strip mall typology, actually resonated with people. In our practice, we do engage in the adaptive re-use of buildings. We think that it's a viable approach to actually question whether or not an existing building offers spaces that are worthy of preserving or re-using. In the case of the strip mall – Central Park Plaza, in particular – we concluded that the materials had more worth than the spaces, which, like most strip mall spaces, were sorely lacking in natural lighting and ventilation, and spatial variability.

1. Central Park Plaza Strip Mall as-is



View as-is

Central Park Plaza is a derelict strip mall in Buffalo, New York. Having been vacant for years, it is now infamous as a site of crime. Built in 1957 on the site of a former rock quarry, the strip mall thrived for the typical time span of around 15 years before it predictably lost its retail capability. The strip mall is located on the East Side of Buffalo near Main Street in a primarily residential area with pockets of failed commercial properties.

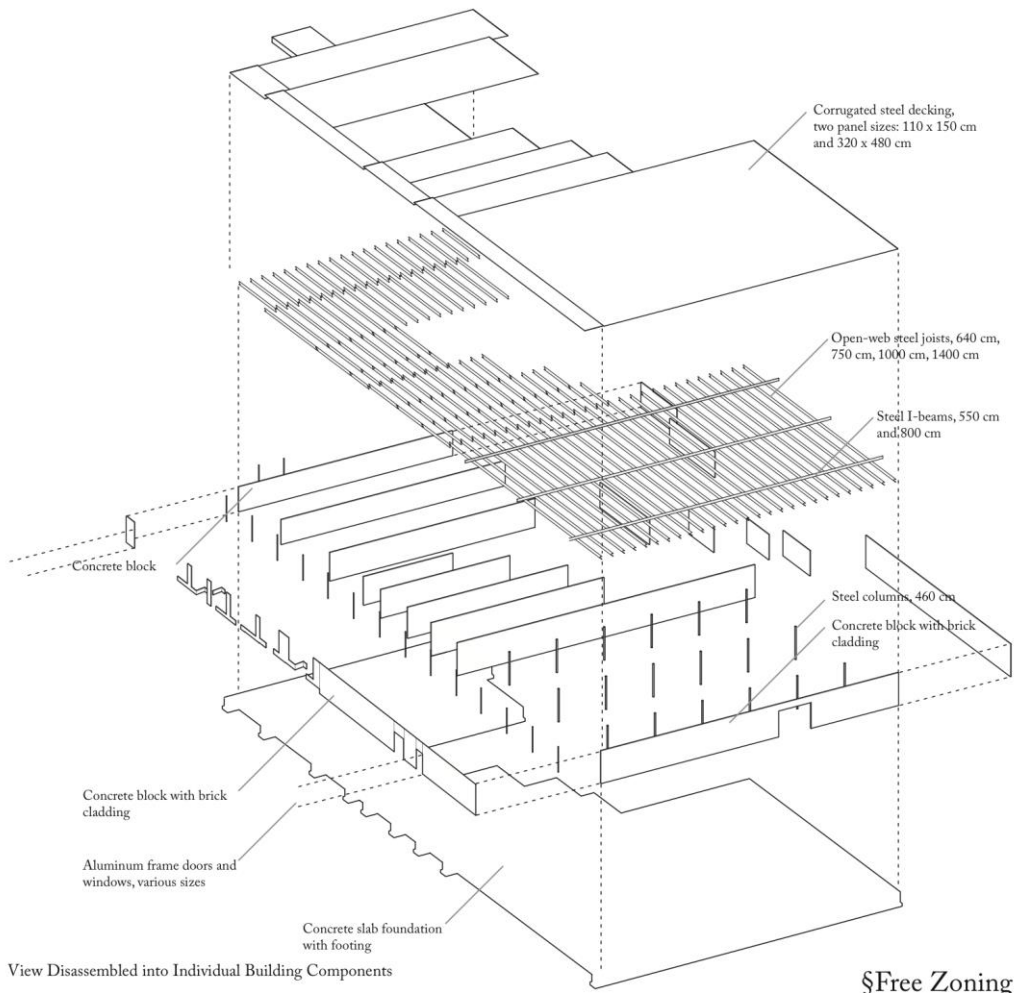
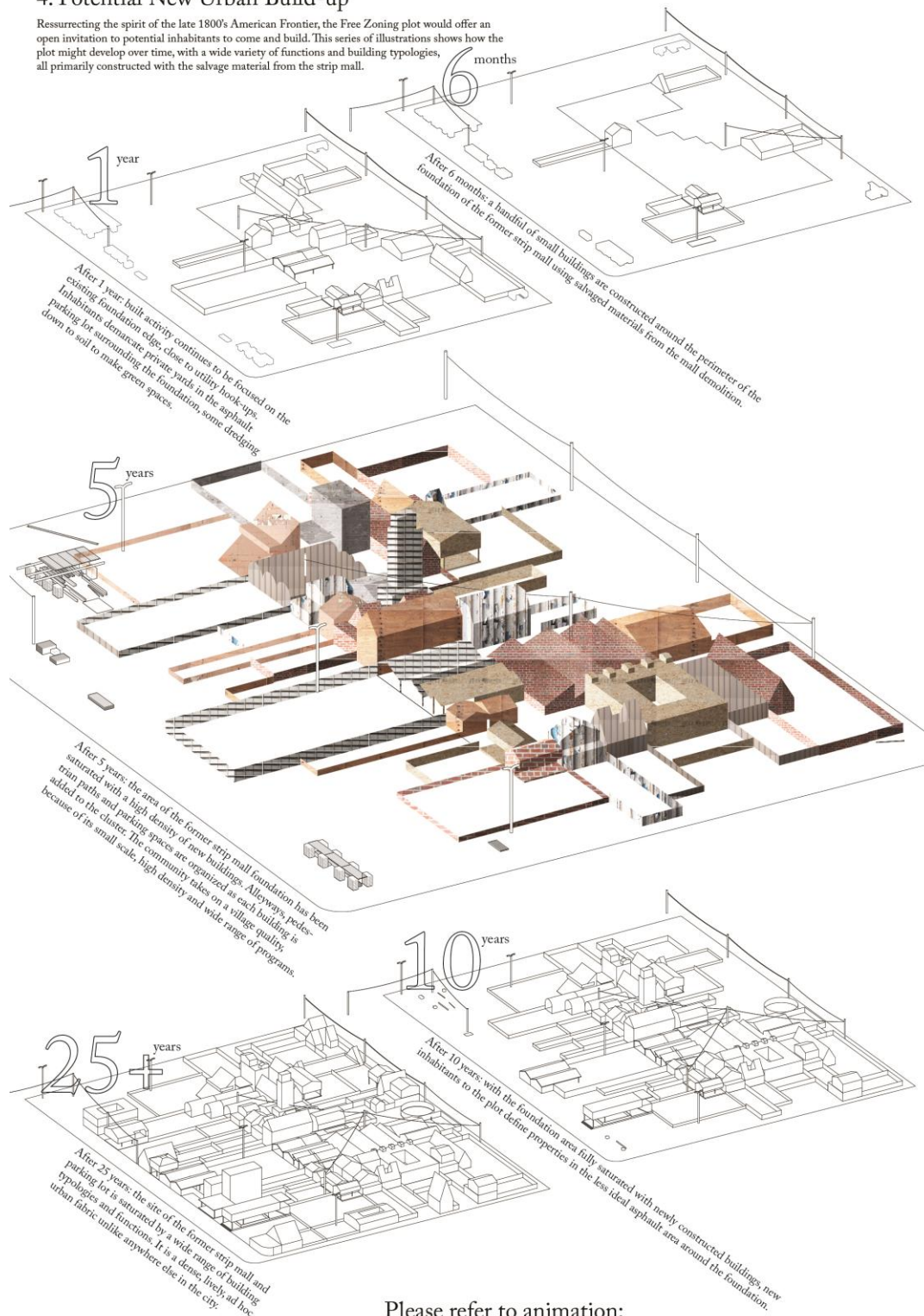


Figure 4 Central Park Plaza Disassembled into Individual Components. Image copyright Davidson/Rafailidis

4. Potential New Urban Build-up

Resurrecting the spirit of the late 1800's American Frontier, the Free Zoning plot would offer an open invitation to potential inhabitants to come and build. This series of illustrations shows how the plot might develop over time, with a wide variety of functions and building typologies, all primarily constructed with the salvage material from the strip mall.



Please refer to animation:
<http://vimeo.com/32905022>

§Free Zoning

Figure 5 25-year projections for rebuild of the site, primarily constructed by salvaged strip mall material. Image copyright Davidson/Rafailidis.

In “Free Zoning,” we also experimented with the graphic techniques that we used in our submission. Videos were encouraged as a submission format in the brief. The stop-motion animation that we made as part of the entry was the first of several that we’ve done since. It’s become one of our favourite graphic techniques to communicate time-based architectural designs – buildings or areas that evolve and change significantly over time.

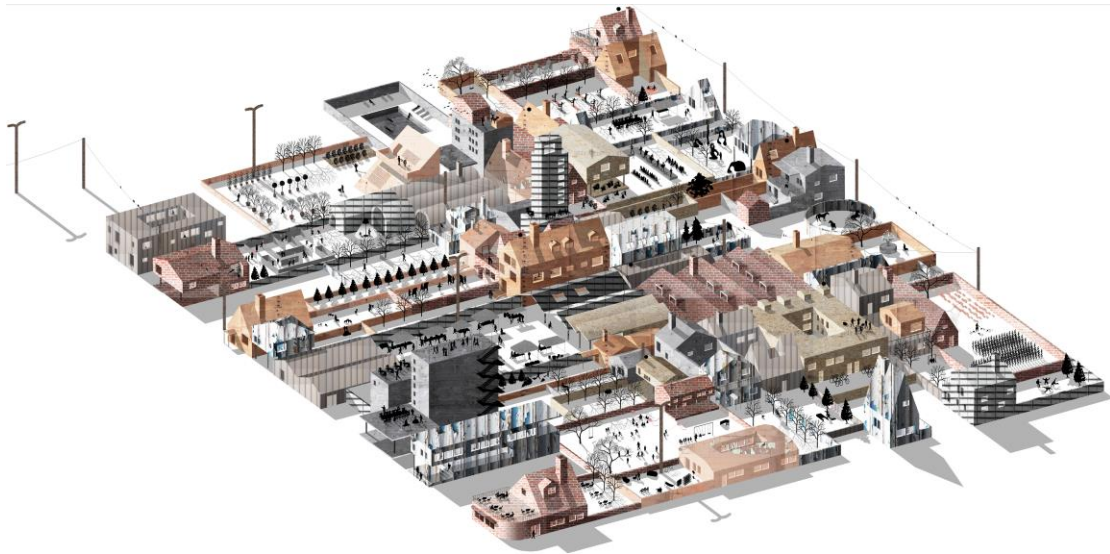


Figure 6 Central Park Plaza 25-years on: a dense, lively (sub)urban community. Image copyright Davidson/Rafailidis.

Competitions have great potential power in influencing not just content, but also the graphic techniques, in the architectural discourse of the competition world. We often say that in architecture, drawing is our language. Just like changes in how languages are used verbally and in writing, drawing styles and conventions also change. These changes are significant – they express attitudes that are held at certain times, within certain groups, in the architectural community. The big “reveal” when a winner is announced in a competition is interesting not just to see the winner, but also to see the styles of representation that were used for that particular competition/theme/issue. The Strip Appeal brief was particularly encouraging in this way because it didn’t prescribe much about the content of the competition panels.

Experimenting With III: Making Things Public

Our appeal to design practitioners and publics for submissions generated both local and national media attention, however, we were unsure exactly how many submissions to expect by the submission deadline. Strip Appeal wildly exceeded our expectations, as we received over 100 submissions from 11 different countries. The submissions proposed alternatives from community greenhouses to rooftop recreation spaces and from all-weather shelters for food trucks and their patrons to viewing the strip mall as a building quarry. While we were delighted by the level engagement and diversity of responses, the difficult task of reviewing the submissions and deciding on a shortlist now fell on our submissions committee, which included CRSC staff and key members from the jury. We had originally intended to limit the shortlist to 10 submissions; however, after reviewing the entries, we extended it to 20 in order to reflect the diversity of responses, approaches and ideas we had received.

The process then turned to disseminating the shortlist – or to making our “visible college”. However, as Sobreira (2015: 284) makes clear when discussing the politics of dissemination involved in design competitions, there is a tendency in design competitions to disseminate only winning entries, which he argues can often lead to “aesthetic cleansing”. While our decision to disseminate only the 20 short-listed designs may have reflected aestheticism, it also just reflected what was practicably possible by a small team of people working to a tight budget and timescale. We were committed to making the shortlist as a visible as possible, however. Recent commentators have highlighted how the digital revolution has had a real impact on making competitions not just more visible but more public. The online showcase of the Reurbia competition shortlist, where visitors could comment and vote on each submission, offered us an example of how a design competition can turn into what Larson (1994) calls a “discursive event”.

According to Larson, the discursive nature of competitions “can authorize new players to speak about and for architecture [and design].” (ibid: 472) While he is referring strictly to the entrants of architectural competitions, in our opinion, the public showcasing of designs online can also enable new “‘voices’ to enter fields of discourse” that were once limited to narrow disciplinary confines (ibid)x This was certainly the case on the Reurbia website, as each of the design submissions sparked numerous conversations, which although initially centring on the designs themselves, often broadened into wider discussions about suburban design and development. In this way, the designs themselves appeared to stimulate their own activity, opening up conversations about, and understandings of, their transformative potential.

As well as showcasing the 20 shortlisted designs on our website, we also displayed them in poster and digital form at the University of Alberta’s Enterprise Square Atrium Gallery. These showcases generated a great deal of press attention locally, nationally and internationally. With articles entitled “Rooftop Soccer, Outdoor Movies: the New Strip Mall?”, “Strip Malls Like You’ve Never Seen Before” and “Canada Rethinks Suburban Strip Mall Strategy” appearing in national dailies such as The Toronto Globe and Mail, The New York Times and The China Post and in online and magazine publications such as The Huffington Post and The Atlantic, the “discursive event” of our competition reached far beyond the local setting of Edmonton. The circulation of the competition’s design ideas in print and online form (thanks to enabling comments) spawned diverse conversations about, and awareness of, the potential of the submissions for re-imagining the use and importance of strip malls, locally and worldwide.

The viral circulation, reception and critique of the design ideas were, in part, thanks to the entrants choosing local strip malls to redesign. With selected sites as far away as the Netherlands, Brazil, Hong Kong, China and Australia, it was clear the problem of the strip mall was not a purely North American phenomenon or public interest story. In this way, following Larson’s observations, the competition helped to authorize new players to speak about, both for and against, strip mall redesign in the form of the

entrants, news media and geographically diverse publics. This, again, underlines the potential of design competition for “drawing together” and “making public” matters of concern.

To further encourage public participation, we added, along with the jury vote winner and runner-up, a public vote winner. The public were able to vote for their favourite submission either online, in person at gallery space. Overall, there were thousands of public votes, suggesting to us that the public had not only engaged with but also invested in the designs they had voted for. By staging a reception and press announcement for the jury winners and the public vote winner, we initiated another round of press coverage, and in turn, communicated and stimulated conversations around the outcomes of the competition.

The jury process was the only aspect of Strip Appeal that remained an “invisible college”. Our jury was made up urban designers, architects, artists, a public arts director and relevant university faculty. Although the majority of the jury were living in Edmonton at the time of the competition, they were chosen because of their strong international links and experience. Although there is very little critical reflection on the judging process in the competition literature, some have questioned effective role of judging criteria and methods. For example, Svensson (Andersson *et al* 2013: 17) has questioned the effective role of quantification as part of the judging process. Although quantification “conveys a picture of objectivity”, a point-based system still reflects the interests and bias of the jury who often represent different interests, parties and professions. Aware of the criticisms of quantification we took a combined approach, asking the judges to award points according to the criteria detailed on the brief and then discussing the notable and problematic aspects of each submission in turn. In the end a clear consensus on the winner and runner-up emerged from both the points awarded and the discussions.

On reflection, evident bias in the selection of the shortlist and winners can be identified. Firstly there are a disproportionate number of submissions focusing on Edmontonian strip malls in the shortlist. While this partly reflects the proportionately high number received, in turn reflecting the local situatedness of the competition itself, it is also a result of the selection committee's own bias towards local submissions. However the decision to extend the shortlist was in part an attempt to at least recognise if not mitigate this. Moreover although the "visual and aesthetic appeal of renderings" was supposedly lowered in the hierarchy of judging criteria, the fact that the winner, runner-up and public vote were all rendered by professional architectural designers underlines how aesthetics can have persuasive appeal not just on a representational but affective level (see O'Sullivan 2010).

Experimenting Within III: The value in participating in competitions (even if one doesn't win!)

Competitions are incredibly labour intensive and potentially expensive, depending on the model of work-production that the team sets-up. Juries are unpredictable – anyone with experience entering competitions knows that it is impossible to predict the outcome. Still, as designers, we have an appetite to solve architectural design problems, to develop responses, proposals – this is what we're trained to do, and this is what we love to do! But the motivation to participate in architectural competitions is also driven by the specific model of practice described earlier. As a practice depending on multiple forms of engagement – academic, client-based and self-funded – it makes sense for us to participate in ideas competitions which have strong links to wider and current architectural discourse. These competitions make sense for us – or benefit us – in indirect ways, through garnering attention, choreographing online presence, producing "tenure and promotion material," various forms of peer-review that creates a stream of further citations and general academic and architectural interest. We see the competition format as a way to have a conversation within the discourse of architecture.

The format for worthwhile ideas competitions is often tied closely to contemporary networks with which practices like ours are typically associated: The current (North American) system of tenure-track or other forms of junior appointments at universities, and new models of publications in the online world of architecture or architecture-related discourses. Client-based commissions, for us, are then gained through reputation-building as an “international’ and “award-winning” practice. Whether outcomes of ideas competitions are worthwhile depends, for us, on how well the outcomes can play a role in keeping the networks described above afloat. We depend on these networks – universities, clients, competitions, publications – intellectually as well as financially. The Strip Appeal competition is an example of a successful investment from our side. The outcome, in various forms of online presence, peer reviewed publications, presentations and continuing exhibitions, has been substantial and valuable.ⁱ

The Strip Appeal competition brief made it clear that selected proposals would be published in a catalogue (Patchett and Shields 2012), and that a traveling exhibition would be organized. Knowing that the work would likely achieve some form of public exposure was an extra incentive to participate in that competition. For the “Strip Appeal” exhibition stop here where we live, in Buffalo, NY, we paid out-of-pocket for the production of a 3d-printed model, a further-developed and highly-detailed drawing, and the drawing plots and backing. The architecture department at UB sponsored the opening reception, and the UB Anderson gallery covered the costs for backing, mounting and hanging all of the work. It’s difficult to put a monetary value on the public exposure of our work. But in that case, the additional \$1000 USD that we spent to produce the exhibition work was necessary, in our minds. We wanted to push the design and the representation (of the final 25+ year build-up scenario) further, to show the strongest possible work that we could to our colleagues and our community here in Buffalo.

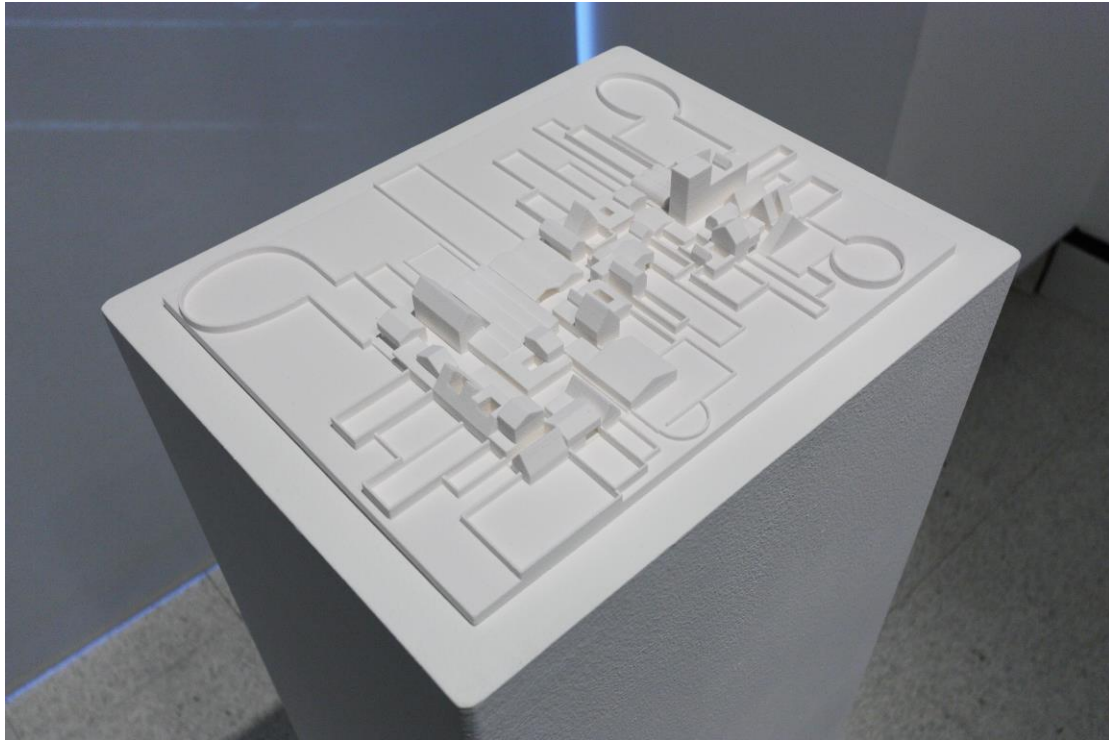


Figure 7 Model of rebuilt Central Park Plaza site produced for Anderson Gallery exhibition of Strip Appeal. Image copyright Davidson/Rafailidis.

The culture of competitions – competitiveness in general – is traditionally intrinsic to the practice of architecture. But it is also enlarged by the contemporary model of a “free” globalized architectural scene, where it seems possible to make an impact on a large stage while ever more exploiting one’s own time and resources. Contemporary “success” or notoriety is incredibly short in the online attention span, while doing architectural competitions and realizing buildings still take the same time (months for a competition, years for a building). There are countless highly-skilled, talented practitioners in architecture. Why certain ones snag commissions and win competitions seems, in a way, random. But still, competitions are necessary in architecture, particularly at a time when there are so few options for *how* to practice. The most common model of practice has become the large commercial “firm,” particularly in North America. Large firms typically take only large projects that generate large commissions; they are viable businesses, and their contribution to an architectural discourse is questionable. The types of projects and types of activities with which one engages in these offices, is, we’d argue, very limited. But then, also in North America, organizations like Blank Space have emerged. Blank Space describe

themselves as “an online platform for architecture – through competitions, publications and events we uncover the true power of architecture.”

(www.blankspaceprojects.com) Blank Space has coordinated a few competitions by now, each of them culminating in a book of selected entries. Like Strip Appeal, the impetus to join in Blank Space competitions comes both from their briefs or prompts, which always encourage experimentation, and from the prospect that one’s submission will be included in their publications, which have, so far, showcased many compelling, graphically-inventive projects.

Ultimately, in our view, a great potential of architectural competitions is to lead to a building commission or built work of some kind. Although ideas competitions don’t have the chance to realize a building as the prize (like more “traditional” architectural competitions in Western Europe where many schools and libraries are commissioned through open competitions), we would argue that the contemporary ideas competition format can ALSO lead to building commissions, but in the more convoluted, labyrinthine and indirect ways we describe above.

(Experimental) Conclusions

By staging a dialogue between the organizers and entrants/winners of Strip Appeal one of the goals of this paper was to make visible some of the opacities involved in the practice of competitions. Doubtless there will be aspects of the process that remain opaque in our respective tellings. However, by offering our separate perspectives we hope to have complicated understandings of experimental potentials and pitfalls of design competitions. By drawing together our voices in this conclusion we seek to question whether our experiments with and within Strip Appeal were transformative in the ways – procedural, social, material, political – we have represented them to each other and our readers.

From Patchett and Shields' perspective the ideas design competition offered a method for transforming the problem of the strip mall from "matter of fact" to "matter of concern" in not just academic and architectural debate but the public imagination. This transformation is evidenced in the discursive event that accompanied the exhibition and circulation of Strip Appeal design ideas online, in the news media and in the catalogue and exhibition. Yet what became clear to them through curating the competition and subsequently working with Davidson/Rafailidis on the touring exhibit and this paper is that the designs appear to stimulate their own subsequent transformations, which are not just discursive but also material. For example, Davidson and Rafailidis have evidenced how the production of designs for competitions can lead to material construction and outcomes, albeit in indirect ways.

Collaboratively we hope to have contributed to the transformation of the design competition from "matter of fact" to "matter of concern" in in both research and practice. Moreover by reflecting on experimenting with and within the design competition as social *and* architectural research method, we seek to transform academic/architectural engagement with competitions from "disinterested" contemplation/practice to critically reflexive implementation/practice. In this way we seek to actively engage in the **redesigning** of design competitions. While Lipstadt has argued the design competition needs to be "intelligently designed" in order to better serve the interests of the competitors, we propose that the well-conceived design competition is one that recognizes and works with an expanded concept of design, one that not only recognises design's modesty and attention to details, but that nurtures a cautious, collaborative, anti-establishing and therefore *experimental* design process. These could be called **experimental design competitions**.

Yet how successful was Strip Appeal as an experimental design competition? Well from the documented experiences of Davidson/Rafailidis (a small sample size to be sure!) – the openness of the competition and brief enabled them to experiment further with their research theme of spolia, but also experiment with the graphic communication of this design approach. Latour (2008:13) has argued that new

innovation in graphic communication is “absolutely necessary if we are to adequately represent the conflicting natures of all the things that are to be [re]designed”, going as far to issue the following design challenge at the end of his address: “where are the visualization tools that allow the contradictory and controversial nature of matters of concern to be represented?”. While an experimental design competition could (and probably should!) be initiated to directly respond to this challenge, even a modest competition like Strip Appeal generated the transformation of visualisation tools (as evidenced by Davidson/Rafailidis’s animations) to better represent the strip mall’s matters of concern.

While Strip Appeal might have been experimental and therefore transformative in positive ways for the organisers and winners, it is important to ask for whom and how Strip Appeal worked beyond us? and therefore connect design to politics. It is clear from our critical reflections that Strip Appeal largely worked to benefit academic and architectural research(ers) and was thus largely exclusionary to the practical knowledge of ordinary inhabitants/users of strip malls. Moreover while Latour argues his expanded notion of design, which includes meaning and morality, should “challenge capitalist modes of production,” the rise of experimentalism in design has been linked to “the cultural logic of late capitalism”. For example Cummings and Lewandowska (2007: 143), have highlighted that “[i]n these “new’ economies the artist[designer] or enthusiast is an ideal employee; astonishingly self-motivated, endlessly creative, flexible, enthusiastic, resourceful and, financially, poorly rewarded’”. Given that even the experience of the winners of Strip Appeal reflects the precarious labour the competition depended upon, it underlines to us that the experimental design competition should not be exempt from critique. As Macdonald and Basu have cautioned, there is “always a risk that the experimental is co-opted to support that to which it might direct its challenge” (2007: 20). To make sure the experimental design competition is expanded to be both meaningful *and* moral it requires that we continue not only to remain alert to, but make visible, its dilemmas and limitations.

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ⁱ For example, we used our entry to “Strip Appeal” as the basis for a paper delivered at the Atmosphere Symposium (University of Manitoba, Architecture Dept., 2014), a paper published in the architecture journal *Bracket: at extremes* (Actar, 2016), a paper published at the Reclaim + Remake architecture conference (The Catholic University of America, Architecture Dept., 2013), a contribution to the international architecture festival *eme3* in Barcelona, Spain (2011), and a contribution to the “Strip Mall: Architecture in New Suburbia” exhibition at the Harbourfront Centre in Toronto, Canada (2014).