

# Does a healthy competition inspire imagination and deliver better design?

Interviews by Kathlyn Loseby

Evolution of design is the result of experienced teams working together on a common purpose, having the creativity and skills to bring that vision to life. So, in the spirit of collaboration and to discuss the merits of design competitions, we reached out to those involved in the 505 George Street project to gain their perspective. While views shared were individual, sentiments about the value of design competitions tell us that, yes, they are worth it, win or lose.

Here is what several participants of this particular competition had to say about the advantages and disadvantages of design competitions, lessons learned and ideas to enhance the process.

## WHAT ARE THE ADVANTAGES OF A COMPETITION?

**Client:** In our case, holding an international design competition allows us to tap into talent from all over the world and Australia and gives us the greatest opportunity to have a world class design. It motivates a variety of diverse responses and identifies opportunities for the project that may not have previously been thought of.

For example, we now have creative solutions for site constraints. That may not have happened outside that competition environment. This project is a significant contribution to the city's skyline and therefore it should be considered a genuine collaboration between the City of Sydney and the proponent.

Pascal Bobillier  
General Manager Development,  
Coombes Property Group

Dominic Hunt  
Senior Development Manager, Mirvac Group



**Planner:** Design competitions genuinely seek to deliver design excellence for the future users and the urban fabric of the city, benefiting the private and public domain. One of the key benefits of a competitive process is that it's more likely to deliver a quality architectural outcome. This is not to say that other approaches don't; just that it is more likely. Perhaps this is because a competition gets the creative juices of the participants flowing more.

Competitions also result in a true collection of ideas being put forward. Alternate approaches can also deliver exceptional outcomes but can be more dependent on the creative wealth of a single architectural firm – a competition is about getting the best of the best from the domestic and international architectural community.

Competitions also generate rigorous testing of the planning framework – indicating where there may be flexibility but also where constraints are curtailing good outcomes. This often results in the generation of insights and ideas that are outside the scope of the initial brief.

James Harrison  
Director, Ethos Urban

Jim Murray  
Associate Director, Ethos Urban

*'You only need to look around Sydney to see the positive outcome of design competitions. Both Mirvac and CPG support the City's competitive design policy.'*

– Pascal Bobillier (Coombes) and Dominic Hunt (Mircac)

*‘Working collaboratively with an international partner provides great insight into different design process and culture. If the process is truly collaborative then the process can be rewarding. Certainly in the case of 505 George Street there was a mutual respect and openness between SOM and Crone to achieve a positive outcome.’*

– Greg Crone (Crone)

## Participating architects

**Architectus and Ingehoven:** Design competitions help to foster creativity in an industry that thrives on innovation.

When you have some of the best architectural minds collectively focusing and competing you create innovative ideas that otherwise may not have been put forward, so the client ultimately gets the best design outcome for the site and the public offering is maximised.

Design competitions also give architects the freedom to respond to briefs imaginatively, creating what they really believe is the best outcome for the site. Providing a rational but imaginative response to the brief can challenge the preconceived ideas for the site and offer the client alternative opportunities to explore.

An example of this is our response on 505 George Street – not only did it respond to the brief and the site constraints, but we extended our ideas beyond this to present further opportunities.

Gary Henighen

Associate, Architectus

**Bates Smart:** The 505 George Street design excellence competition was extremely professionally run. My comments are in relation to competitions in general.

There are advantages for both the client and the architect. The client gets to see five or six different design responses in a relatively short period of time, and for a relatively small cost. There is also a design education purpose, whereby clients get to sit in on and understand the issues around design excellence being discussed by a jury. Finally, while there is no commitment from a council for approval, the advantage for council is that they also have a ‘buy-in’ to the process, and an understanding that a design excellence process has selected the best scheme.

From the architect’s perspective design competitions are a condensed and intense period of creativity; when the maximum amount of ideas and concepts are tested in the shortest possible time – often leading to innovative results.

There is also the ability to explore ideas outside what may be possible when working with clients. Finally, there is a sense of common agreement to the design approach with the client after a design has been selected through a competition.

Philip Vivian

Director, Bates Smart

**FJMT:** The comparison of very different design concepts and ideas developed within an intense period ... fast and imaginative.

Richard Francis-Jones

Design Director, FJMT

**SOM:** Competitions reinforce the idea that the city is a public trust. They establish a transparent and competitive forum to evaluate fresh perspectives on the public realm. They allow the design and development community to have a critical voice in the decision-making process and bring public discourse to the development of the city, making those choices more community-oriented and deliberate. The community is able to see and decide what will be in the context of what could have been.

Adam Semel

Partner, Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM)

**Crone:** Competitions can be a great experience and continue to strengthen and evolve the design culture within our practice. They teach us to cut through a lot of information quickly and provide the framework for architects to be recognised for their creativity, storytelling, strategy, interpretation beyond just yields and floor space ratios.

Greg Crone

CEO and Chairman, Crone Architects

*'At an industry level financial investment is also a hot topic when it comes to design competitions. For architecture practices the large competitions involving collaborations and myriad consultants can see costs rapidly add up. In some cases, collective costs can be as high as \$1 million per entry, and it falls to the architecture profession to wear this cost.'*

– Gary Henighen (Architectus)

## WHAT ARE THE DISADVANTAGES OF A COMPETITION?

**Planner:** Competitors are often working with restrictive built form controls, which can hinder opportunities for landmark architectural statements. So, it's a matter of finding a balance between giving sufficient direction in a brief to ensure that entrants come up with commercially viable and approvable schemes, without unduly constraining creativity.

On this site there was a tightly-defined envelope within which to design an iconic tower. Interestingly, when you look at the schemes that were put forward there was quite a degree of difference in the architectural expression and the way each scheme responded to the brief. Competitions do also add time and cost, but this has to be balanced against the fact that every building is a lasting landmark and there is a responsibility to get it right. *James and Jim (Ethos Urban)*

### Participating architects

**Architectus and Ingehoven:** At Architectus we love to collaborate with our clients to come up with the idea that exceeds their brief – understanding what a client wants and then interpreting it. Using our expertise to bring originality and new insights to the client's brief is what architecture is all about. In a design competition, this element of collaboration is taken away, creating a risk that the client's brief may be misinterpreted. *Gary (Architectus)*

**Bates Smart:** Often competitions are conflated with risk management by developers, resulting in inflated deliverables including public art strategies, planning summaries, structural and services analysis and reviews by the developer's consultants. Ideally the competition process would refocus on being about the design concept rather than resolution, reducing deliverables and emphasising architecture.

The other issue is the payment of consultants whose input is required by the brief. Typically competition fees aren't enough to pay consultants, and so engineering consultants are providing free advice. We recommend that if a consultant input is required one of the following occur:

1. An amount be nominated in the brief
2. The proponent's consultants be nominated and paid for by the proponent
3. A clear spatial brief be provided by the proponent's consultant. *Philip (Bates Smart)*

**FJMT:** The limitations of a brief and the critical lack of collaboration with stakeholders and clients. *Richard (FJMT)*

**SOM:** There are disadvantages. First among these is the way design teams are siloed from having any meaningful interaction with the owners, city officials and members of the architectural community during the design process. These are such important voices in the design process, and the competition format excludes them from the actual development of the design solutions. While this is important in maintaining a fair and transparent competition process, it means that designers are left working somewhat in a vacuum. By contrast, projects that are developed outside the competition process can offer significant interaction between the design team and these other groups. The resulting outcome is highly influenced by that engagement.

It must also be mentioned that design competitions come with a tremendous cost and this burdens the design teams tremendously. *Adam (SOM)*

**Crone:** Competitions are a gamble. We sometimes second guess ourselves – *Is this what the City [of Sydney] or the client would want?* – because we don't have the same level of access to these stakeholders as we may have outside of a competitive design process. That said, we put forward what we believe is the right outcome for the site while balancing what we know about the needs of all stakeholders.

The time commitment required to work collaboratively with international partners and to educate on the complexities of Sydney planning controls, such as apartment design guides and competition processes, is onerous. On the flip side, this type of collaboration offers a fresh set of eyes on the city that can result in more innovative, unexpected outcomes.

*Greg (Crone)*

# 505 GEORGE STREET, SYDNEY COMPETITION ENTRIES

Not shown is the entry from WilkinsonEyre and Foster and Partners



Architectus and Ingehoven – winning entry



Bates Smart



Crone and SOM



FJMT

*‘Successful competitions rely on cooperative relationships between the council and proponent, a clear brief and passionate architects – all of which we had at 505 George Street.’*

– James Harrison and Jim Murray (Ethos Urban)

## ARE THERE ANY LESSONS LEARNT?

**Client:** A competition denotes a significant investment for the proponent and competitors. We recognise that, and it is our responsibility to take a disciplined and organised approach to the competition; it needs to be a fair and efficient process for all.

Part of that comes down to the brief and ensuring you have spent adequate time on preparation and that the brief achieves a balance between clearly defined design and commercial outcomes.

It is also important to make sure you have the right people in place with a strong team of technical advisers supporting you – reviewing the submissions is a complex and timely process. The information prepared by technical consultants must be concisely and clearly presented to the jury. *Pascal (Coombes) and Dominic (Mirvac)*

**Planner:** We continue to refine the way we support clients through the competitive design process.

The competitive process needs to reflect the circumstances of the site – its location, prominence and size. 505 George Street was a very significant site. The resources needed to support a competitive design process where international architects have been invited should not be underestimated, nor the timeframes within which you need to provide advice. There were some tight timeframes where we had to put in some long hours. It's often an unavoidable part of the process but must be considered from the start. *James and Jim (Ethos Urban)*

### Participating architects

**Architectus and Ingehoven:** One thing that we find to be invaluable at Architectus is rigorously testing all our design iterations through physical models and 3D modelling, and this is certainly something we found worked well on this project. Analysing the physical models against the existing urban context provides the team with a firm understanding of the site's constraints and allows for the design concept to flourish as a product of its environment. *Gary (Architectus)*

*'One area where the Sydney process falls short is that the technical requirements tend to be very high, but from what we have seen the technical execution does not significantly influence the jurors' evaluation. This approach is part of what makes them such an investment of time and resources, but a lot of the effort doesn't contribute directly toward the evaluation.'*

– Adam Semel (SOM)

**Bates Smart:** We recommend that competitions adopt the following:

- A minimum 50% Australian architects as entrants in any competition with the principal design practice as being equitable
- Establish the principle that design competitions are about the 'ideas' for a building not the resolution
- Superfluous DA-type requirements that don't contribute to the architectural idea should be discouraged. For example, public art strategy, planning controls summary and landscape design (in some cases)
- Allow enough time for competitors to present, relative to the competition complexity
- An architect with experience in the building type is included on the jury
- As a rule of thumb allow a minimum competition fee of \$12.5k/week excluding consultants
- That following the competition the competition organiser will allow each competitor to review the other schemes and be debriefed
- If engineering consultants are unpaid, there should be a requirement that they will proceed along with the winning entry. *Philip (Bates Smart)*

**FJMT:** It's important to be critical, to generate ideas but then step back and get some distance from the work. But also to try to save the baby from the bathwater that inevitably gets thrown out. *Richard (FJMT)*

**SOM:** A collaborative, multidisciplinary design approach is the hallmark of our practice, and we enjoy the process of teaming with local designers and specialists to enrich the design process and the result. We will continue to explore teaming relationships that result in creative collaboration and great design outcomes. *Adam (SOM)*

**Crone:** Brief requirements and deliverables can be quite onerous if translated literally. We have realised that strict adherence to deliverables isn't always the best use of time and it is ultimately the team's responsibility to determine what information is relevant to present a scheme most effectively. Crone is open to the idea of reducing deliverables and placing more value on concepts and innovative principles as a model to reduce pressure on staff.

For the 505 George Street competition, we had staff from Crone and SOM working together in Chicago and Sydney for a period of time. This proved to be a far more effective way for us to collaborate with international partners as communication across different time zones can be challenging. It also makes for a 24-hour office in rotating shifts.

We valued our post-competition debrief with Mirvac. It was refreshing to receive detailed feedback on our proposal. Crone supports public exhibition of competition proposals beyond a jury report, which typically features only a single image and short paragraph about each scheme. *Greg (Crone)*

*‘We are impressed with the rigor and transparency of the Sydney process. The stated objectives and evaluation criteria are always clearly spelled out, so we feel that all submissions will be evaluated fairly.’*

– Adam Semel (SOM)

### **ANYTHING YOU WOULD DO DIFFERENTLY IN THE NEXT COMPETITION?**

**Client:** There is always the opportunity to learn and the benefit of hindsight means there are always things we will consider for next time. For example, the complexity and diversity of technical responses from the competitors means that more time to review following the final submissions from architects and before the jury deliberations would be beneficial.

In the future we may look to provide more details in the brief to ensure the design response is consistent with the intended commercial positioning and operation of the asset. *Pascal (Coombes) and Dominic (Mirvac)*

**Planner:** I don’t think there is anything we would do differently in the next competition. We have made some minor adjustments to the Ethos Urban competition manager software, which is used to support competitions as part of our commitment to continual improvement, but otherwise no. *James and Jim (Ethos Urban)*

#### **Participating architects**

**Architectus and Ingehoven:** 505 George Street was an excellent result for Architectus and Ingehoven, and I wouldn’t change anything fundamental about our design process. It is essential for anyone participating in a design competition to continually refer to the original concept for the project. It may be one single idea that differentiates your project with a competitor’s project. If you dilute your design through the process to make things easier or quicker, you can lose what made your idea innovative and unique. *Gary (Architectus)*

**FJMT:** Yes of course, every site, every brief is different, so the next one will be different. But also architectural ideas are explored, developed and deepened across projects realised or not. *Richard (FJMT)*

**SOM:** We will continue to engage collaborative teams to put forward our very best design ideas to make for a more humane and sustainable public realm and innovative architectural design and engineering. *Adam (SOM)*

**Crone:** Our process is contextually specific and we don’t have any preconceived ideas about how an architectural response should emerge. While designing a complex tower is the combination of many factors – ground plane, tower form, sustainability, value for money, materiality – there is usually an overarching theme that ties a proposal together. This theme will vary from competition to competition. But is important to distil something that is multifaceted into something that a jury can grasp very quickly. *Greg (Crone)*

#### **Congratulations to Architectus and Ingehoven who were the successful competitors.**

**Thank you to all the contributors for sharing their perspective as we examine the value of design competitions. Having this healthy discussion is one of the many ways we can collectively improve the competitive process and achieve the designs of the future.**

Kathlyn Loseby is the chief operating officer of Crone and the NSW Chapter president of the Australian Institute of Architects.

#### **PROJECT COMPETITION – 505 GEORGE STREET, SYDNEY**

<b>CLIENT</b>	<b>ARTICLE CONTRIBUTIONS</b>
Coombes and Mirvac	Pascal Bobillier, General Manager Development, Coombes Property Group and Dominic Hunt, Senior Development Manager, Mirvac Group
<b>PLANNER</b>	
Ethos Urban	James Harrison, Director and Jim Murray, Associate Director
<b>ARCHITECTURAL GROUPS</b>	
Architectus and Ingehoven	Gary Henighen, Associate Architectus
Bates Smart	Philip Vivian, Director
FJMT	Richard Francis-Jones, Design Director
Crone and SOM	Greg Crone, CEO and Chairman of Crone and Adam Semel, Partner of SOM
WilkonsonEyre and Foster and Partners	WilkonsonEyre and Foster and Partners were invited to respond, but chose not to