

Re-development of George Square, Glasgow Design Competition

Background

RIAS Consultancy was engaged in autumn 2012 to undertake the management and delivery of a competition to re-design the landscape of Glasgow's main civic space. At a meeting with the Council Leader, Councillor Gordon Matheson, he emphasised his very strong desire to remove all the statuary from the Square, except the Cenotaph which, understandably, is considered sacrosanct.

The Incorporation's initial bid was to undertake all the work associated with the competition. However subsequently the Council's Development and Regeneration Services team indicated that they would prefer to undertake the initial PQQ process in-house, given their experience and expertise. The Incorporation subsequently reduced its proposed charge to the Council and agreed to provide only an advisory service to the first stage of the competition.

The original (subsequently aborted) PQQ was prepared by Glasgow City Council Procurement without reference to RIAS and was lodged without our knowledge. We had great difficulty accessing the PQQ and even the Council's own officials were unable to do so on our behalf. It was almost a month before we were able to review the PQQ and advise the Council of its deficiencies. At this point it was withdrawn by Glasgow City Council, the official responsible for it removed from the project (he has now left the Council's employ) and RIAS Consultancy invited by the Council's Head of Procurement to assist in re-drafting a new OJEU Notice, PQQ and supporting documents describing the process. The PQQ was subsequently re-launched, compliant per RIAS advice.

This significant delay and continuing pressure of time resulted in a shortlisting of the six practices to be invited to bring forward design proposals in mid-December for a submission in January. Unfortunately, but inevitably, this required the shortlisted architects to work through Christmas. It has subsequently been reported to the Incorporation that some of them managed to spend only Christmas day with their families, such was the volume of work required.

The Judging

From the outset the Council Leader, Councillor Matheson, was most insistent that he would be among the judges of the competition. In addition, David Mackay of MBM Architects, Barcelona, Professor Andy MacMillan OBE, David Harding OBE, the renowned sculptor and community artist and Geoff Ellis who directs one of Scotland's most successful events companies (responsible for the annual 'T' in the Park Festival among many other musical and sporting events) were invited to judge.

Pre-Judging Briefing

The original proposal by the RIAS was that David Mackay should serve as chair of the judges. At the preliminary briefing meeting on Friday 11th January 2013 however Councillor Matheson indicated that, as the idea for the competition was his and this project would be one of his most significant endeavours as Leader, he would chair the process.

First Judging Meeting (Monday 14th January)

The judging convened on the afternoon of Monday 14th January. The RIAS representative, the Incorporation's Secretary, Neil Baxter, suggested that perhaps the best way to start the process of reviewing the design submissions would be to review each submission in isolation from the others and have a general discussion about the pros and cons of what each proposed. He

indicated that in his extensive past experience of similar judging processes, this early open discussion has proven helpful in starting the process of putting the submissions in order of priority in terms of the three prerequisites (addressing the brief, deliverability and design quality – each scored at 30% with a 10% mark for the financials to follow after the conclusion of the quality judging process).

Councillor Matheson indicated that he would prefer not to proceed as Neil Baxter suggested but rather to indicate his own thoughts to the judges. He proceeded to re-emphasise the importance of the competition for Glasgow and as key to his own agenda as Leader and pointed out that, although there had been much public comment on the submissions (which had been put on display despite reservations from the Incorporation about the suitability and appropriateness of public exhibition during a OJEU compliant process), this should not influence the judging process. He then proceeded to indicate that in his view scheme no. 6, coincidentally the public favourite, was by far the best submission. He also indicated, at some length, his personal frustration at what he felt was the extremely poor quality of submission no. 2 which he felt was disrespectful to Glasgow. Neil Baxter pointed out that, from the evidence of the submissions, it was apparent that all of the competitors had put in a huge amount of work and that there was no question that scheme no. 2, which included photographs of a model of George Square which did not look to have been computer generated, was undoubtedly comparable in effort and expenditure to the other proposals.

Councillor Matheson had indicated at the outset of proceedings that he was required at the Council's budget meeting and therefore left the judging meeting to go to the City Chambers. As agreed, the rest of the judges spent the remainder of the afternoon carefully reviewing each submission towards producing a schedule of questions for the interviews which would be undertaken by Council officers to maintain the required anonymity of a European compliant Design Competition.

Second Judging Meeting (Wednesday 16th January)

When the judging process reconvened on Wednesday 16th January, there was a lengthy and detailed presentation on the interviews which had taken place on the Tuesday. As noted above, because the Council had determined that the process should be a Design Competition (as described in European procurement rules), the anonymity of the competitors had to be maintained throughout the judging process. Thus, the schedule of questions prepared on the Monday by the judges had been incorporated in interviews conducted by officers of the Council (note – the technical assessments and interviews undertaken by the Council's technical staff were observed by Brian Moore on behalf of RIAS Consultancy, who considered them to be robust and compliant). The "Chinese walls" in both the Council and RIAS held up well and at no stage in the judging process was there any indication that any judge was aware of the identity of any entrant.

After the lengthy exposition on the interview responses there was a short break. Thereafter the RIAS scoring forms were distributed by Neil Baxter. David Mackay suggested that, while a maximum of 30% was allowable under each of the three agreed criteria, it would focus the process if the judges gave scores of 0, 10, 20 or 30 under each criterion. This would also facilitate the clear differentiation between the ranking of each submission. This procedure was agreed and adopted.

Predictably, when the judging sheets were submitted, the judge's scores indicated a spread of predominantly 10s and 20s with a few 0s and very few 30s under each heading. Councillor Matheson, despite the reasoning of his co-judges and the weight of evidence from the interview

process, stuck to his guns and gave full marks to scheme no. 6 and marks varying between 0 and 10 on all the criteria for all other entries. At the conclusion of this process, scheme no. 2 emerged as well ahead of the pack. At this stage, scheme no. 6 stood in fifth position.

What was required of the judging process was that the judges should reach a consensus. Unanimity was not required, simply that all the judges would sign off on the favoured scheme. It was suggested at this juncture that signing off on scheme no. 2 seemed appropriate. However Councillor Matheson, who had been increasingly agitated during the course of the day, indicated at this point that he had to leave as a major issue requiring his urgent attention had arisen at the Council Chambers. He then departed, rendering the judging process inconclusive.

The Council had issued invitations to a press launch to announce the George Square decision. The rescinding of this invitation brought a flurry of press speculation, perhaps most notably an article in the Glasgow Herald on Friday 18th January which indicated that it was unlikely that any of the submissions for the competition would be selected. The article did not quote any specific source for this speculation. An Evening Times article on Monday 21st January also surmised that the project would not be proceeding, suggesting that the negative public response to the removal of statuary and greenery from the square had resulted in a re-think on the part of the Council. Again no specific source was given. It is worth noting that if the source for either of these pieces was the Council itself, such speculation, before the formal conclusion of the judging process, would be a breach of European procurement rules which disallow a client from publicly speculating about an outcome in a way which might influence a judging process which was still in train.

Final Judging Meeting (Monday 21st January)

On the Monday afternoon, the judges re-convened with David Mackay joining them by telephone from Bristol where he was undertaking work on behalf of the new Mayor. The scorings from the previous Wednesday were reviewed and it was concluded that scheme no. 2 was the clear winner in the quality assessment process. All of the judges agreed to sign off this conclusion which allowed for the opening of the envelopes revealing the identity of competitors and their financial bids. After the scores were adjusted, comprehending the financial bids, scheme no. 2 was still well ahead and scheme no. 6 had risen to no. 4 in the rankings.

There was a general sense of relief on the part of the judges and the various others present that a satisfactory conclusion had been reached. However, at this point, Councillor Matheson indicated that his administration would not be proceeding further with any of the designs submitted through the competition process.

Conclusion

This was a well-run competition. While the hiccup of the PQQ process was unfortunate, the competition brief and the process were correct and sufficient. However, from his initial comments at the first judges meeting onwards, it appears that, for whatever reason, Councillor Matheson had selected his own winner at the outset and reasoning by a very experienced group of judges did not persuade him otherwise. His abandonment of the judging process at the conclusion of the Wednesday meeting led to much negative press. Unfortunately because they were still involved in a confidential process and they are all consummate professionals, the judges were unable to give their side of the story, even though one press cartoon depicted them wearing dunce's hats.

It has been widely reported that the cost to Glasgow City Council of this competition was around £90,000. This sum included awards of £5,000 to the unsuccessful competitors and £10,000

(originally predicated as fees on account but ultimately as an award) to the 'winners', John McAslan & Partners. The RIAS' fee for its work was £19,500. There has been no calculation of Council officers' costs in the process which, in total, must have exceeded £40,000. However the most substantial cost which has not been comprehended in all of this is the very significant abortive costs of all of those who submitted a PQQ in the first instance and the six practices which worked through the Christmas period to produce very complex and highly finished submissions in the competition. Given that there were 35 submissions to the PQQ and that these could reasonably be quantified at costing at least £2,000 of senior staff time in all cases, that gives a total of £70,000. The six shortlisted entries would have cost, in time and direct outlays, at least £25,000 each. Even if the honoraria to the six shortlisted competitors are subtracted from the total, the abortive cost of the competition is significantly more than £300,000 of public and private investment.

As the above report demonstrates, Glasgow City Council established an appropriate and auditable process, ultimately fully compliant with European Legislation and engaged the Royal Incorporation to work with them to ensure that fairness was observed and that the competition was properly operated within the complex legislation governing such procedures. The competition proceeded to a proper conclusion. The subsequent decision to breach the promise inherent in any such process, albeit arguing that this was in the "public interest", resulted in a very significant waste of public and private resources. This competition brought the judges, the profession, the Incorporation and the City of Glasgow into significant disrepute.