



RIBA Competitions Guidance for Competition Entrants

2021

RIBA 
Architecture.com



“RIBA competitions provide a great opportunity for Architects to demonstrate their skills and ideas for potential work on a level playing field. We have entered two RIBA Open Competitions and were fortunate to have won both. On each occasion we found the process set out by RIBA Competitions to be well organised with the brief, timetable and other terms for entries made clear from the outset. Competitions are an enjoyable way for us to come together as a practice and to use our collective talents to produce imaginative proposals for real clients.”

Mark Wray
Mark Wray Architects

Prescot Market Place
by Mark Wray Architects
© Knowsley Council

Introduction

The Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) established a dedicated competitions department in the 1970s, having supported the principle of architectural competitions since 1871. The RIBA is now the UK's most widely recognised provider of competition services and its involvement in a competition is an indication that the client is committed to an open, fair and transparent process. All RIBA-managed competitions follow best practice principles and are independent and impartial, bearing no allegiance to a particular design team or method of procurement. An integral characteristic is that they involve an experienced Competitions Architect Adviser who provides impartial support and guidance to the client team throughout the process.

We all know good design can bring immediate and lasting social, economic or environmental benefits. Truly great design becomes possible when the aims and aspirations of client and architect are well communicated, clearly understood and mutually aligned from the outset. The use of architectural design competitions can be an excellent way of achieving just that.

This RIBA competition guidance for entrants sits alongside complementary guidance for clients – because excellent and innovative design should bring fair opportunity for designers and also serve clients. Establishing a balanced and beneficial relationship between the two parties from the outset is the key to a successful project.

This guidance aims to help **competition entrants** understand the different types of competition processes and their relative merits, and sets out some of the key considerations when entering a competition.

Guidance for Competition Entrants

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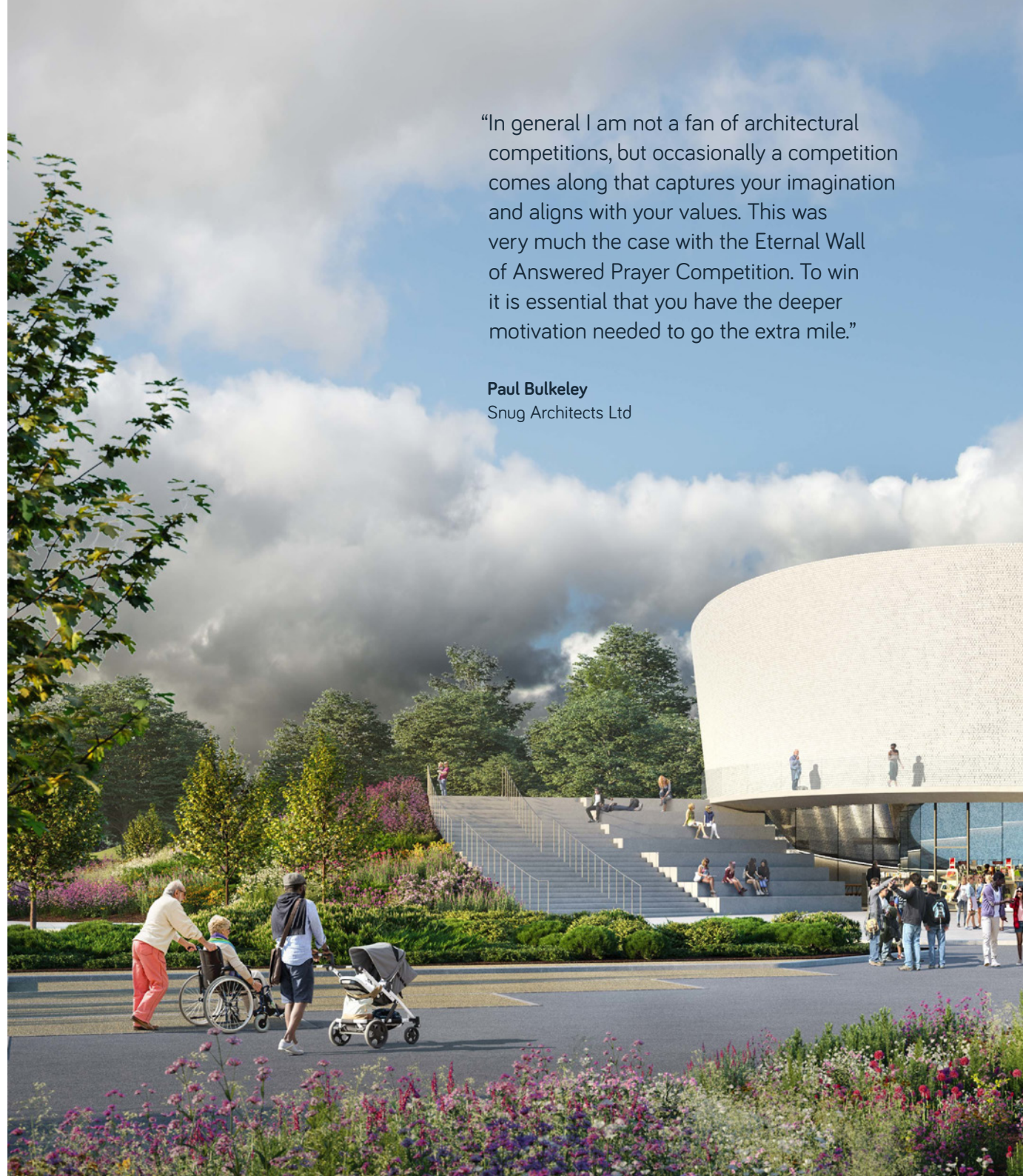
What is a design competition?

'Design competition' is the collective term for any process inviting architects and other related design professionals to compete against each other for a commission or prize, ranging from a simple interview, with sketches, to a detailed design proposal. Design competitions can open up opportunities to designers who otherwise might not have been considered for a particular commission. They encourage creativity and have been the foundation of some of the finest and most treasured buildings around the world.

The investment of time can be significant, but good competitions can raise profile, create new business opportunities and provide valuable experience for the team. Exposure through winning or being shortlisted for a competition could be the launch pad for a successful career and can be extremely rewarding professionally.

"In general I am not a fan of architectural competitions, but occasionally a competition comes along that captures your imagination and aligns with your values. This was very much the case with the Eternal Wall of Answered Prayer Competition. To win it is essential that you have the deeper motivation needed to go the extra mile."

Paul Bulkeley
Snug Architects Ltd



Eternal Wall of Answered Prayer
by Snug Architects
© Renderloft



Competition aims and objectives

“My client was initially sceptical of the value of using the RIBA for an ideas competition but was very impressed by how quickly the Competitions Team understood what we wanted for The Heath Park Project and how they could assist us to achieve it. They helped us gather a world class assessment panel and develop an excellent brief for the two-stage competition resulting in the attraction of intriguing entries from around the world. The winning scheme (as well as others shortlisted) exceeded my and the client’s expectations and now provides the foundations of the Project going forward. Throughout, RIBA Competitions has performed efficiently and professionally and we heartily recommend their value to anyone considering using their talent.”

Terry Rogan
Architect, Heath Park

Most competitive processes that lead to a design commission by the client are held over two phases, where entrants are shortlisted at the end of the first phase and a winner is selected at the end of the second phase.

Clients will choose a competitive process that best meets their objectives and delivers the outputs they require. Some will shortlist on the basis of the entrants’ track record, primarily because the project requires specialist knowledge and competence. Others will invite design responses from the outset because they are looking for entries that bring excitement, innovation and creativity to the project.

The fundamentals of a good competition are a brief with a clear vision, an evaluation panel comprising relevant expert design professionals, and a strong client commitment.

Goldsmith Street by Mikhail Riches
© Tim Crocker

“Mikhail Riches are always delighted to see a new RIBA competition coming out, as we know it will be fair and well run. An RIBA competition is also a clear sign that the client is ambitious for their project, the most important ingredient in any successful piece of Architecture.”

David Mikhail
Founding Director, Mikhail Riches

GOLDSMITH STREET

What will you gain from entering a competition?

There are many different reasons for entering a competition, all of which should be carefully considered before making any commitment. Winning shouldn't be the only driver – entering a competition can be also about exploring an idea, beginning a new journey or building new design relationships.

In the right circumstances, competitions can produce projects of exceptional imagination and vitality. Competitions prioritise good design and bring the highest quality of thinking to a project.

Well-run competitions can provide opportunities for architects and designers and ultimately produce an outcome that is better than anticipated by a client.

The various competition formats appeal differently to entrants depending on the nature of the project, the opportunity available and the potential value to the project team.

Before committing to entering a competition consider whether the project is of value and the requirements align with your interests/experience and also if your participation is going to be worthwhile for reasons beyond the possibility of winning.

Other than the potential to secure a commission, design competitions bring many other creative and business opportunities, including:

Raising your profile

The exposure and publicity that can come from being shortlisted is a great way to gain recognition, particularly if you are recently qualified, or a small or recently established practice.

Contributing to your portfolio

Participating in design competitions helps build your portfolio and can be helpful in pitching for future work.

Demonstrating your capabilities

Even if you don't win the commission, being a shortlisted finalist brings you to the attention of the client (and other clients) and can lead to other opportunities.

Developing your business

Competitions can help you gain experience and break into a new sector, and act as a springboard for moving onto larger projects.

Advancing your design ideas

Competitions support continuing professional development and provide an opportunity to explore your ideas and get involved in projects for different building types.

Encouraging team work

Competitions encourage team work and can help forge partnerships between disciplines when consultants come together to work on a submission. They can be a great way of bringing on more junior members of staff or integrating recent joiners into a team.

It is not always about winning ...

A modern two-story brick house with a dark grey roof, balcony, and garden. The house features red brick walls, dark grey window frames, and a balcony with a dark metal railing. The roof has two skylights. In the foreground, there is a wooden fence and a small garden with green plants and purple flowers. The sky is blue with white clouds.

Taylor Wimpey Project 2020
by Openstudio Architects
© Richard Davies

“The competitions process has not only been a way to win new work, but has also provided an opportunity to make new connections, work with new people and collaborate outside our regular networks. It has enabled us to reach out and expand our interests and our studio into new areas in the longer term.”

Jennifer Beningfield
Openstudio Architects Ltd

Is the competition right for you?

“RIBA competitions provide a fantastic vehicle for architects to experiment, explore new ideas and trial innovative techniques. Schemes may not always generate a winner but they can have a long life and find homes in other projects in unexpected ways many years down the line. Our own practice has been built upon success in RIBA competitions and it’s a pleasure now to occasionally work alongside the team as an RIBA Adviser and watch other practices make their way through this fabulous medium.”

Hugh Broughton
Hugh Broughton Architects

Before you decide to enter a competition, realistically appraise your ability to fulfil its requirements and to meet the client’s expectations.

Be selective. Ideally, only enter competitions for projects that really interest you or fit well with your business strategy.

The chances of being shortlisted or going on to win a competition might be slim, particularly in the case of popular competitions. Gauging the number of potential entrants you may be up against is always difficult. The number of entries is typically influenced by the competition format, project/client profile, sector, scale of opportunity, state of the economy and number of other opportunities available.

Carefully weigh up your chances of success against your investment of time, work and effort. Review the brief to consider the amount of work that is required at both phases of the competition.

Open Design and Open Ideas Competitions

Open Design and Open Ideas Competitions allow a client to receive a wide variety of design solutions in response to a project brief, with the potential to generate fresh, exciting and innovative designs.

They involve an anonymous initial design phase, from which a winner can be selected (single phase). Alternatively, there could be a second phase where anonymity is lifted and shortlisted teams are invited to develop their design approaches and/or present them at interview.

The Open Design format generally leads to a design commission, with the client selecting both a concept design and the team to deliver it. If you can't demonstrate enough experience, clients may require you to team up with another practice to deliver the project.

In the Open Ideas format, the project does not carry a firm commitment by the client to commission the winner. This type of competition can be used as a design exercise to stimulate ideas and encourage innovative thinking.

The Open Competition processes are a fantastic opportunity for practices to test out ideas, skills and professional expertise with a structured brief. They provide the opportunity to build relationships with clients and other professionals that you may not normally work with, as well as expanding your portfolio beyond your usual scope.

Key Characteristics

- Shortlist selected on the basis of design response rather than track record and can be a good way to unearth fresh talent / designers not necessarily known for working in a particular sector.
- Can attract extensive publicity in the trade, regional, national and international media.
- Can generate a significant number of entries – for example, previous RIBA competitions have attracted anything between 30 and 250 entries.
- Prize money is awarded to authors of the best design ideas, or equal honoraria payments made to each shortlisted team. The client should expect to pay an honorarium which is a reasonable reflection of the work requested.
- Typically a 6–8 week design period at both phases of the process is sufficient and likely to be more cost effective.

Invited Design Competitions

Invited Design Competitions generally involve an open expression of interest and application phase, where entrants are required to demonstrate track record and experience of delivering relevant or similar projects in response to a briefing document.

From the initial applications a shortlist of practices are invited to prepare design proposals in response to a project brief. This ensures those who are invited to take part in the design phase have the experience, expertise and track record to deliver the project. This type of competition commonly concludes with a clarification interview with the evaluation panel before the selection of the winner.

Key Characteristics

- Shortlist selected on the basis of track record and relevant experience with no design work required at the initial phase.
- Provides reassurance in terms of an entrant's experience in delivering projects, particularly where the project requires specialist knowledge.
- Equal honoraria payments are made to each shortlisted entrant, at a level which reflects the amount of work required.
- Typically a 6–8 week design period at the design phase of the process is sufficient and likely to be more cost effective.

“The RIBA promotes two stage competitions that allow for proper pre-assessment of design teams, detailed briefing of client requirements and carefully considered proposals to be put forward in a well organised, friendly and design focused process. It is especially rewarding for Hawkins\Brown to know that we have been selected through an RIBA competition on the merits of our attitude and design approach, rather than a perfunctory procurement process.”

Roger Hawkins

Founding Partner, Hawkins\Brown

Competitive Interviews

Competitive Interviews are predominantly used to select a designer or team at the very early stages of a project. They can be the preferred choice where the client needs help in defining the project and the details need developing in conjunction with the right design team.

Competitive Interviews generally have an open expression of interest phase with designers submitting examples of previous work and relevant experience in response to a briefing document and/or questionnaire.

Shortlisted designers are then invited to outline their initial thoughts, understanding of the project requirements and possible approach at interview, before a winner is selected.

This process enables the client and the designer to evolve the design solution together. It is particularly useful in projects of a complex and sensitive nature and can also ensure that the working relationship is right. It can have a shorter time frame than other competition processes and can be more cost effective as detailed design proposals aren't required.

Key Characteristics

- Shortlist selected on the basis of track record and relevant experience.
- Can have a shorter timeframe than a full competition as significant design work isn't required.
- An equal payment is always made to shortlisted teams to cover time and expenses to attend the interview.

Well-managed competition processes – what to look for

**All RIBA-managed competitions follow best practice principles.
As a guide, well-managed competitions should include the following:**

A clearly stated objective and post-competition commitment

Is the competition is a call for ideas only, or will it lead to a design commission for the winner? Is the commission subject to the client securing funding or planning permissions?

A comprehensive brief, clearly defined competition structure, rules and programme

This should include an outline of the work you are required to do at the different competition phases, together with the criteria against which the entries will be assessed. It should include an opportunity to visit the site (if applicable) and a fair system for asking questions and receiving answers about the brief.

A commitment to protect your copyright

Clarity that your work will not be used without your permission and is in accordance with the UK's Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988. The client may request the use of images for promotional purposes associated with the competition.

An honoraria payment or prize money for shortlisted entrants

In design competitions it is accepted practice that clients should make a contribution towards the cost incurred by the shortlisted teams in preparing their design work and commissioning other consultants. The amount of honoraria or prize money should be stated at the launch of the competition so that an informed decision can be made on whether to enter. The honoraria payment should reasonably reflect the amount of design output required, and the time frame allowed for design, but should not be compared to a standard fee payment.

A nominated evaluation panel listed in the briefing information

As a minimum, this should at least include the organisations from which representation will be sought. The panel should comprise professionals with relevant industry or sector experience as well as key decision-makers from the client body and should include at least one architect. If the panel's decision will be subject to ratification – for example by a governing body – this should be stated.

Anonymous display of design proposals

In Open Competitions, anonymity reduces the chances of judges being unfairly influenced by factors other than design quality and the competition criteria.

Fee proposals (where required) to be considered in isolation from the assessment of the quality of the design response

It is recommended that the marks awarded to the fee proposal should be no more than 30% of the overall marks available.

A mechanism for unsuccessful entrants to request feedback about the process and their entry

Not only is this good practice, it will help you to improve over time. RIBA Competitions always provide feedback.

“For as long as I have been an architect the RIBA Competitions team has been supporting clients in opening doors for talent, whether an as established or a new practice. I have enjoyed being an entrant to their well run competitions; an occasional judge and on a few occasions a winner even! Long may their important work continue.”

Simon Allford
Director, Allford Hall Monaghan Morris

How to improve your chances of success

The initial Open Design phase

Understand the rules

This includes checking the deadline for entries and required format. If hard copies are required allow sufficient time for postage and if in digital format allow time for any internet connection issues. Note the submission requirements, particularly with regard to anonymity, and any specified constraints such as the order of design boards, orientation of the boards and the scales at which plans and drawings should be presented. Be aware that any additional information submitted that isn't requested won't be considered by the panel.

Edit and lay out your response to the brief clearly

Describe the design concept clearly and explain the drivers behind your proposed approach. Try to avoid complex technical descriptions. Ensure all illustrations are clear and legible particularly where schemes will be on public display and the evaluation panel includes people who are not design professionals.

Do not ignore key constraints in the brief ...

such as a site boundary, as it could lead to disqualification.

Whilst a bold design concept may make your submission stand out from the crowd ...

competitions leading to a design commission invariably involve an interview element where you will also need to convince the evaluation panel that your proposals are viable and can be delivered within the project budget.

Whilst a completely 'off-the-wall' submission might not make a shortlist ...

it can sometimes receive a commendation, be featured in a gallery of noteworthy submissions or picked up by the media.

Resist the temptation to develop the scheme too far at phase one ...

particularly where the shortlisted entrants are to receive feedback giving valuable clues about what the panel is looking for at phase two.

The Invited Design

Review the documentation

Carefully review the briefing paper and any submission forms or questionnaires which are provided to assess your ability to meet the necessary requirements.

- Confirm what the process is seeking to do. Is it to select an architect or an architect led team? Is it restricted to practices in the UK only, Europe or Worldwide?
- If you intend to team up with another practice and the rules allow it, clearly outline your respective areas of responsibility and explain how the partnership would benefit the client, project and add value.
- Check to see if there are any minimum requirements in respect of turnover, levels of professional indemnity insurance cover, or any restrictions in terms of consultants not being able to be included within more than one team.

Avoid submitting generic practice profiles unless specifically requested

Carefully tailored responses help to demonstrate to clients that their competition is not just another project for the practice or team.

Make sure you have relevant experience

If you are struggling to find examples of relevant projects in your portfolio, it is likely that the evaluation panel will too.

- Directly comparable projects are not always required. Check that the evaluation criteria allows to have evidence from similar issues on a different type of project.
- Outline the relevance of included projects and don't assume the panel will be able to draw these conclusions themselves.
- Check that you are allowed to include experience gained from projects outside of your current practice. If so, clearly outline your specific role in the design and delivery of those projects.
- Check the time limits within which project examples need to have been delivered, and whether they need to be fully completed on site and/or occupied to comply.

Make a clear distinction between built projects, computer visualisations of ongoing projects, and those that are competition submissions

When using images ensure that they are relevant and tell a story about the strengths of the project in relation to this competition.

Where a multi-disciplinary team is being sought ...

clearly indicate who did what; evaluation panels can be frustrated by a lack of clarity, particularly when they see the same project included in other competition entries.

Treat the return submission form like a job application or exam

It can be hard to stand out from the crowd when the Standard Questionnaire (SQ) form and format are all standardised. Tailor your responses. Address the project aspirations and evaluation criteria succinctly and select supporting imagery carefully. Images should be relevant, clear and of good quality.

Review and edit the final document

If you have utilised content from previous competition submissions, double check for irrelevant or leftover material, especially in project or client credits.

Submit the required number of pages in the given format by the stipulated date

Make sure that you have not exceeded any word or page limits for individual sections or the overall document.

Clarification interviews

Consider the composition of the panel evaluating your presentation

and the skillset they cover when preparing for an interview.

Choose carefully which team members you take to the interview

Only take those who are best able to answer the panel's questions, which are likely to be about your proposed design approach, cost plan, team structure, resourcing and delivery. The panel invariably want to meet the individuals who will be directly involved in developing the proposals if you win and the team can account for a significant % of the marks. They can be wary of figureheads who, no matter how charismatic, they suspect might not be very involved in the project going forward.

Respect limits on the maximum number of attendees

Avoid bringing too many people to the interview. Only take the team who are involved in presenting the proposals and fielding questions.

Rehearse the presentation before the interview with your whole team

A disorganised presentation, unfamiliarity with the proposal, or cutting short your presentation because you have run out of time all create a poor impression. If showing slides, be realistic about how many can be shown during the allotted time. If you like, hold some in reserve to illustrate answers to questions that the panel are likely to ask.

Rehearsing helps by presenting to colleagues who have not been involved. Ask them for critical feedback. The majority of interviews are timed so when practising ensure that you keep to time. Brainstorm likely questions, particularly any areas that you know to be relatively weak or where further explanation might be required.

Familiarise yourself with the interview format

Ensure you know what you have to do, your allocated interview time, what IT equipment is available, and whether you are able to bring any additional supporting material (e.g. physical models, material samples, etc.).

Turn up in plenty of time for your allocated interview slot

Ask whether there is a twin interview room system (where the panel moves between a pair of similarly set up rooms). This offers the advantage of being able to sort out any IT glitches ahead of the formal presentation.

Digital Assessments ...

are now becoming more common place whether this is on Teams, Zoom or another platform.

- Check and test your connection speed and bandwidth in advance.
- Have a practice run using the video conferencing software.
- Rehearse screen sharing your presentation.
- If you are not presenting turn your microphone and camera off .

Contact Us

Please get in touch if you would like further advice:

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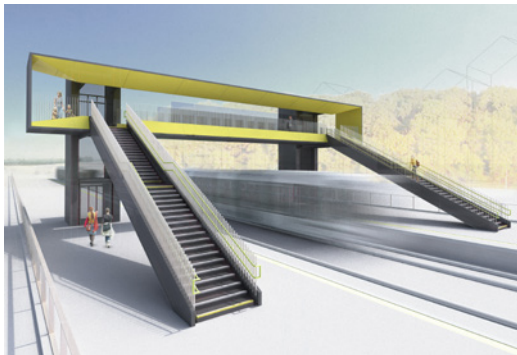
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“As a start-up it really provided us with the launchpad we needed. Winning the RIBA Re-imagining the Garden City competition was our debut project as a newly formed practice. We could not have thought of a better way to kick-start an architectural design practice!”

Prachi Rampuria
EcoResponsive Environments



With thanks to the following architectural practices and projects that originated through the RIBA Competitions process

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