

Designing Procurement

The Case for Competitions

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JOINT CENTER FOR
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Abstract

The most widespread forms of competitive bidding for city- or state-owned land are requests for qualifications (RfQs) and requests for proposals (RfPs) directed at developer-led teams. The award criteria generally prioritize a developer's experience and financial standing over the quality of an architectural proposal. This has several downsides: only large and already established development and design firms can afford the lengthy and uncompensated process, excluding emerging talent; the lack of incentives to foreground innovation and quality in design leads to the replication of existing housing types; and the often untransparent awarding of contracts decreases trust in government-led processes.

Design competitions are a different way to procure design services for housing. Competitions are directed at architects independently of the search for a development partner. The process allows for the comparative evaluation of urban design and architectural proposals based on their merit. Competitions create opportunities for smaller firms, higher quality due to competition and choice, and capacity in the public sector, which is tasked with writing a binding bid document as the basis for the competition.

The paper first outlines the shortcomings of RfQ/RfP processes and recent architecture competitions in Atlanta, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York, based on interviews with architects, developers, and public officials. It then looks at how public entities in Zurich, Vienna, and London organize their procurement of development and design services, and what municipalities and states in the US could learn from their experience. Establishing design competitions as a real procurement process will mean creating binding guidelines, tweaking public procurement laws, and incentivizing or mandating competitions, whether through predevelopment financing, density bonuses, or accelerated permitting.

Introduction

In light of the dual crises of affordability and development, the public sector is seeking ways to accelerate housing production. It can do so through the indirect provision of public resources, including tax abatements or tax credits, or through the disposition of public land. States and municipalities are also again directly investing in and co-developing permanently affordable housing, sometimes under the name “social housing.”¹ At this juncture, it is critical that the public sector work transparently and efficiently. This requires engaging various stakeholders, taxpayers, and future residents to make the case for this expenditure of public resources; public- and private-sector capacity to implement the plans; and ways to foster high-quality urban design and architecture while ensuring that projects actually serve current needs and desires. Yet current procurement processes often complicate these goals.

The most common forms of competitive bidding, for instance in the disposition of public land for housing, are requests for qualifications (RfQ) and requests for proposals (RfP). RfQ/RfPs are generally directed at developers. Developers assemble their team, including an architect. The awarding of the land generally prioritizes a developer’s experience and financial standing over the quality of the design proposal. The process has several downsides. First, the developer must front predevelopment costs, allowing only large developers and their architects to participate. Second, since the award emphasizes experience over the quality of the proposal, RfQ/RfPs disincentivize design exploration, leading to the repetition of already established building types. Finally, public engagement often happens only after the award of land, leading to retroactive negotiations around community benefits to be provided by the developer. These downsides complicate the timeline of the entire process and limit its transparency.

Architecture competitions are a different way to procure design services. They are directed at architects, not developers, and an award is made on the basis of the quality of a proposal, not the experience of the team. If cities and states want to increase the quality of the housing they co-create, and make sure it will serve current and future generations, architecture competitions should find their way into the repertoire of public procurement. While such competitions are established practices in many other countries, the US does not have a solid process for their use in housing. When cities have organized design competitions in recent years, they have been uncompensated “ideas” competitions, resulting in little more for the winning architects than short-lived media attention; they have not been awarded a commission for

¹ For a discussion of the range of social housing programs emerging around the US, see Susanne Schindler, “From Seattle to Atlanta, new social housing programs seek to make homes permanently affordable for a range of incomes,” *The Conversation*, July 7, 2025. <https://theconversation.com/from-seattle-to-atlanta-new-social-housing-programs-seek-to-make-homes-permanently-affordable-for-a-range-of-incomes-255097>

design services. Separating the procurement of a developer from the procurement of design services is one way to rectify this problem. Doing so would frontload public engagement in writing the competition brief and build trust in the process; build public- and private-sector capacity, including among young architects and emerging developers; and ensure high-quality buildings.

Based on interviews with architects, developers, and public officials and on the analysis of recent land-disposition initiatives for housing in New York, Chicago, Atlanta, and Los Angeles, the paper first outlines the shortcomings of RfQ/RfP processes and recent architecture competitions in the US. It then looks at how Zurich, Vienna, and London organize the procurement of development and design services in the realm of housing. It closes with a recommendation of next steps for US cities and states. First and foremost, cities and states, when supporting housing, whether directly as in the case of public land, or indirectly through tax abatements or other incentives, should separate the selection of a development partner from the selection of an architect. Doing so will mean establishing binding guidelines for architecture competitions; tweaking aspects of public procurement laws; establishing predevelopment financing; and incentivizing or mandating competitions by connecting them to financing, accelerated permitting, or density bonuses.

1—Public Land for Affordable Housing: The Problem with RfPs

Rules of Engagement

Using public land to accelerate housing production has been a key element in cities' strategies for decades, with states and the federal government joining the mix in recent months.² The disposition of public assets, whether through an outright sale or in a land-lease agreement, is governed by procurement rules. While these differ from jurisdiction to jurisdiction, they generally involve a competitive bidding process to ensure transparency and avoid unfair dealing.³ Often, this bidding takes

² There are many examples. To cite but a few: In 2022, Boston launched a "Citywide Land Audit" with housing production as its primary goal (<https://www.boston.gov/departments/housing/citywide-land-audit>, accessed September 26, 2025). In 2023, Massachusetts established a "State Land for Homes" initiative as part of the implementation of the state's "Affordable Homes Act" (<https://www.mass.gov/info-details/state-land-for-homes>, accessed September 26, 2025). In March 2025, the Department of the Interior and the Department of Housing and Urban Development signed a memorandum of understanding to create a taskforce to "explore and implement strategies" for using federal land for housing development. To date, the memorandum has not been implemented. For an overview of scale and challenges, see Hannah Jones, "It Will Take More Than Federal Land to Solve the U.S. Housing Crisis," *Realtor*, July 22, 2025, <https://www.realtor.com/research/federal-lands-report-2025/>. In early September, the president considered declaring a national housing emergency, in part to be able to dispose of this land.

³ Research on the public procurement of private-sector services, also referred to as "public contracting," tends to focus on its role in industrial policy; on its use as a tool toward achieving certain social aims, like environmental

the form of a request for proposals or a request for qualifications, both addressed to developers. RfQs look at a team's past work; RfPs asks for site-specific solutions for the task at hand. To get there, RfPs can be written in different ways: some are deliberately open, leaving it to respondents to pitch what is feasible, not even outlining the criteria for evaluation.⁴ Others are prescriptive, listing specific goals in terms of affordability levels or additional community benefits to be provided.⁵ The key metrics in awarding the land, however, are almost without exception maximized unit count, minimized additional public subsidy, and the team's experience and financial strength. Governmental entities, under pressure to deliver housing while rarely themselves in a position to develop it directly, want to know that the bidder can deliver.

The “what” of the housing to be built—the architecture and urban design, apartment types and sizes, or offerings beyond what is strictly residential—tends to have little weight in the awarding of land. The evaluation criteria of the City of Chicago's Missing Middle Infill Housing initiative are a case in point.⁶ Launched in 2024, its goal is to make small, vacant, city-owned sites available for developers to build mid-scale, middle-income housing (**Figure 1**). The Program Guide accompanying the Request for Applications (**Figure 2**) from developers encapsulates the city's priorities: “relevant experience,” “financial capacity and feasibility,” and “proposed density” combined will fetch you up to 80 out of 100 points; “design quality” and “community engagement” are each weighted with 10 points only. In this initiative, design quality is defined as “address[ing] local context and culture,” and then further broken down into five points each for “context and design diversity” and “building materials quality.”⁷

standards, innovation, or gender equality; or on the challenges of misconduct and corruption. For a history specific to the United States, see James F. Nagle, *A History of Government Contracting*, 2nd ed. (Washington, D.C.: George Washington University, Law School, Government Contracts Program, 1999). For a discussion of global examples in the context of a general privatization of public services, see Thomas Klassen, Richard, Denita Cepiku, and T.J. Lah. *The Routledge Handbook of Global Public Policy and Administration* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

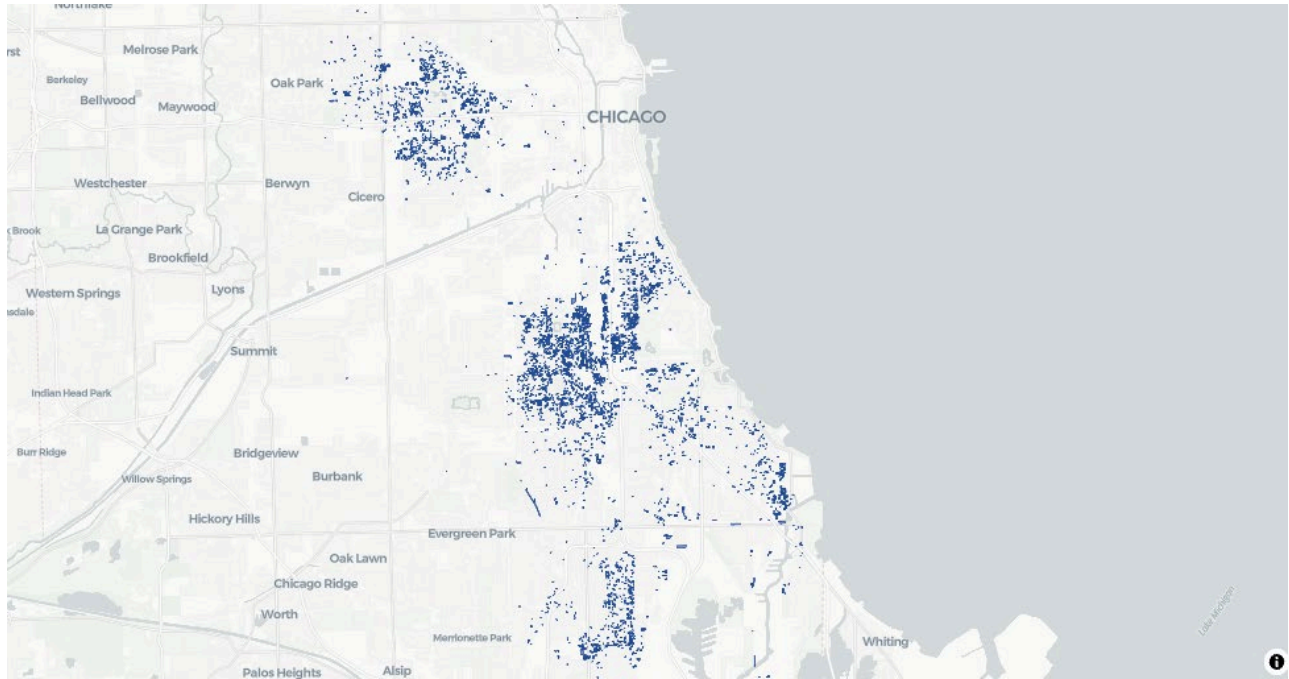
⁴ An example of a deliberately loosely written RfP, which specifies neither types, numbers, or price points of apartments or uses but merely requests that the proposed development “provide a mix of affordable and market-rate housing and commercial space” was issued in early 2025 by the City of Central Falls, Rhode Island for two city-owned, vacant, formerly industrial sites. City of Central Falls, “Mixed-Use Housing Development in Central Falls, RI,” March 25, 2025, 1, <https://www.centralfallsri.gov/purchasing/bids-rfp/rfp-bid-no-2025-0011-mixed-use-housing-development-central-falls-ri>, accessed July 25, 2025.

⁵ An example of a more prescriptive RfP is City of Boston, West End Library (Housing) with Public Assets. For a history of the process as well as a documentation of the seven proposals, see <https://www.boston.gov/buildinghousing/west-end-library-housing-public-assets>, accessed July 25, 2025.

⁶ City of Chicago, Department of Planning and Development, “Missing Middle Infill Housing,” <https://www.chicago.gov/city/en/sites/missing-middle/home.html>, accessed July 22, 2025.

⁷ City of Chicago, Department of Planning and Development, *Missing Middle Infill Housing. Request for Applications*, April 2025, 6, https://www.chicago.gov/content/dam/city/sites/missing-middle/Missing_Middle_Program_Guide_April2025_FINAL_links.pdf, accessed July 22, 2025.

Figure 1: City of Chicago, Map of Vacant City-Owned Land, Chi Block Builder, screenshot, October 2025



Chicago’s Department of City Planning and its Department of Housing manage almost 7,000 lots. Roughly two-thirds of these are between 2,500 and 4,999 square feet in surface area, corresponding to the typical 25-foot-wide parcel fronting on a street and alley.

Source: City of Chicago, Chi Block Builder, <https://chiblockbuilder.com/city-owned-lots/>.

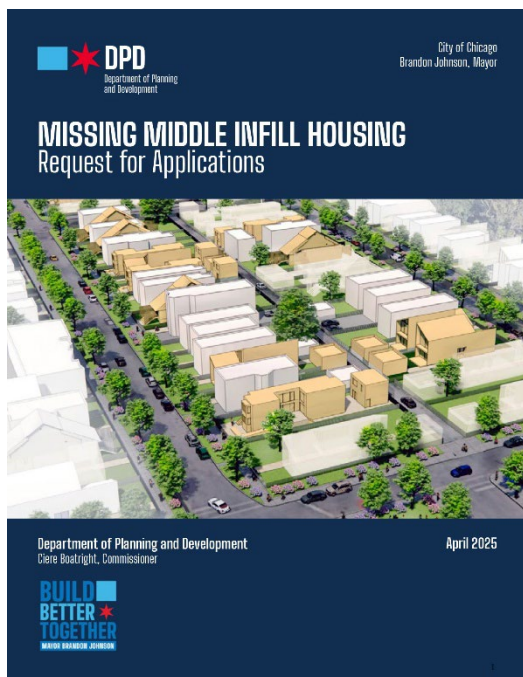


Figure 2: City of Chicago, Missing Middle, Request for Applications, cover, April 2025

This RfA is one of several that have been issued to developers for clusters of vacant city-owned sites.

Source: City of Chicago, Department of Planning and Development.

Such framing of “design” prioritizes a building’s external appearance. There is no incentive to evaluate layout or use (does what is labeled as a bedroom actually have a window?), how a building’s organization will fare over time (can the apartment be easily modified to accommodate a live-in caregiver?), or maintenance (where do the trash, recycling, and yard waste cans live?). Even when an architect sits on the review panel, many RfQ/RfP’s lack of precision in terms of desired design outcomes makes it hard to guide a conversation around what matters in design. And with only one-tenth of possible points allocated to design, those points, even if maxed out, will hardly tip the balance. If the idea of an RfQ/RfP is to provide a transparent and competitive procurement process to choose the best response, the evaluation criteria for these processes mean that “best” generally refers to a developer’s experience and financial standing. Concerns about a developer’s ability to deliver a project on time and on budget are legitimate, but the outsized weight given to these concerns comes at the cost of exploring what is possible, instead reinforcing established housing typologies.

Developer as Conduit

There are other reasons why RfQ/RfPs disincentivize design exploration. Most fundamentally, they are directed at developers, who remain the conduit for all contracts, finances, and the selection of consultants. Designers—whether architects or landscape architects—serve at the developer’s discretion. There is no incentive for developers to look beyond the architects they already know. As a well-seasoned New York architect put it:

Developers are not interested in finding new architects to work with. Typically, they’ll sniff around a little bit and go back to tried-and-true. They choose an architect who doesn’t push the boundaries and plays ball and understands there is little room for inventiveness or innovation when the margins are so small.

The developer carries the risk. As RfQ/RfPs in affordable housing rarely reward design excellence, why go out on a limb?

As a result, architects are often paid a fraction of what it costs them to contribute to an RfQ/RfP. This work can take several hundred hours. A developer who has successfully bid in various housing RfPs in New York explained that architects bill around \$20,000 for the design services involved. When he tried to woo globally well-known architects to work with him, they politely declined; for the required work they would typically charge a client ten times that amount, or \$200,000. The city’s guidelines set

architectural and engineering fees as a percentage of development cost, and architects I spoke to consider them to be fair. But even if a team is ultimately awarded a contract, those fees are not paid until the project's closing. This can take years, meaning that only the most solvent or idealistic architects can afford to participate in an RfQ/RfP.

New York's New Infill Homeownership Opportunities Program (NIHOP) shows what this can mean in the extreme. Launched in the mid-2010s by the Department of Housing Development and Preservation during the administration of Bill de Blasio, and often combined with the terms of another program, the Neighborhood Construction Program (NCP), NIHOP pursues goals similar to those of Chicago's Missing Middle initiative, discussed above: to use small, vacant, city- and privately owned sites for the new construction of housing, ideally affordable to area residents.⁸ Toward that end, NIHOP solicits developer-architect-contractor teams to bid on clusters of sites through an RfQ process. In 2018, a cluster of sites in the Bronx was awarded to one such team, for a total of 60 new apartments. The project could not close, however, until both the local community board and the city council had approved the disposition of public land, the Department of Buildings had issued a permit, and the financing was lined up—in this case through city-issued tax credits, a time-sensitive and unpredictable process. In this case, the process took seven years. To get these approvals requires substantial work on the part of the architect: drawings must be at the “design development” stage, which means at a minimum fully worked-out floor plans, building sections, and elevations.⁹ Over the course of these seven years, however, the architect was paid only a small fraction of what was due; a loan kept the office afloat. “As long as developers are at the helm,” this architect summed up, “architects will have to continue to beg for their money.” Or, as a colleague put it: “When architects have to act as the bank, the system is broken.” Blaming bureaucracy and democratic process for this situation would be easy to do, and worth a separate conversation. The real problem with regard to aiming for a higher quality of design and construction in housing, however, lies in the assumption that development and design professionals can afford to work for free.

For a public entity, organizing a land disposition process in this way has the advantage of receiving an all-in-one response, where the financial feasibility and the design proposal have hopefully been

⁸ New York City Department of Housing Preservation and Development, Designated RFP Project Details, “NIHOP and NCP RfQ,” <https://www.nyc.gov/site/hpd/services-and-information/designated-rfp-project-details.page?request=NIHOP%20and%20NCP%20RFQ&type=RFQ>, accessed October 21, 2025.

⁹ For a basic description of the five main phases of an architect's design services, see AIA, “Defining the architect's basic services,” November 30, 2023, <https://www.aia.org/resource-center/defining-the-architects-basic-services>, accessed September 26, 2025.

internally vetted by the developer’s team. But outsourcing feasibility studies and quality control is also a downside of the RfQ/RfP process. As a senior official in a state housing finance agency succinctly described the problem,

[the public sector] looks to do the necessary homework on the back of developers. The whole system is set up to have the developer be the only one who talks to the two sides: getting the massing study from the architect, getting the proforma to the bank.

Getting mediocre outcomes is due in part to the lack of available funding for predevelopment, as described above. But it is also due to the public entity itself being unwilling or unable to invest in the process of articulating the public benefit to be achieved, testing its financial feasibility, and overseeing the quality control of the product.

Limited Choice

At a moment when the public sector is again directly developing housing, often as co-investor and long-term co-owner, this process poses a dual problem: a lack of institutional capacity in the public sector, and a narrowing field of architects and developers to partner with. In the Boston area, two large firms—locally based ICON and nationally operating CUBE 3—seem to be the architects of choice for many affordable housing developers. In New York City, the list is longer, but dominated by around one dozen firms, including Dattner Architects, Magnusson Architecture and Planning, Curtis + Ginsberg, SLCE, and GF55 Partners.¹⁰ In Atlanta, the city’s housing authority, Atlanta Housing, has for years received responses to its RfPs for HOPE VI or Choice Neighborhoods redevelopment projects from two developers only, each working with its preferred architect.¹¹ While conditions are distinct in each city, and the cited firms are all experts in the field, the concentration of expertise means that there is no

¹⁰ For a sense of the projects supported by the New York City Department of Housing Development and Preservation, see NYC Housing Preservation & Development, “Featured Projects,” <https://www.nyc.gov/site/hpd/about/projects.page>.

¹¹ The two firms are Columbia Residential and The Integral Group. They have been responsible for all of Atlanta’s HOPE VI and Choice Neighborhoods redevelopment projects. One may argue that this has to do with the substantial paperwork and regulatory hurdles involved in any federally funded public housing initiatives. For an overview of Atlanta Housing’s development activity, see <https://www.atlantahousing.org/real-estate/development/>. It is important to point out that since 2023, Atlanta Housing has made concerted efforts to build capacity among smaller developers to address this issue, in part through mentorship programs between emerging developers and established players.

pressure for firms to up their ante, resulting in a repetition of construction methods, unit types, and material palettes.

In Atlanta, the work of the Atlanta Urban Development Corporation (AUD) provides one example of this tendency to repeat. AUD was founded in 2023 by Mayor Andre Dickens to expedite mixed-income housing on the city's sizable portfolio of public land, much of it large contiguous sites (**Figure 3**). AUD was incorporated under the state's housing authorities' law as a subsidiary of Atlanta Housing, the city's housing authority, which gives it significant freedom in terms of procurement, as well as substantial powers, including tax exemptions and bond issuance. However, AUD has to date missed the opportunity to explore design options or to engage a broader array of design expertise. Its third and largest RfQ to date, launched in 2024, involves building 700 new homes on the 44-acre former Gun Club Park.¹² The RfQ included an urban design plan by Atlanta-based urban design firm TSW (**Figure 4**). The firm was commissioned by the city's Housing Innovation Lab under city procurement laws prior to the establishment of the AUD. The plan was the outcome of a yearlong public engagement process, led by the Housing Innovation Lab itself. And yet it resembles many plans the firm has already realized, aggregating three existing housing types and parking around the site's key amenity, a public park. The RfQ encouraged respondents to make "best efforts ... to develop the plan shown here."¹³ Rather than vet three, five, or ten urban design firms before deciding on a design partner for the public engagement phase, rather than communicate in the RfQ that the outcome was not a fixed plan, but rather a feasibility study, AUD had run with what seemed the safest option in terms of urban design: reproducing what was already known.¹⁴

¹² Atlanta Urban Development, "Working with us," <https://www.atlurbdevco.com/working-with-us>, accessed July 23, 2025.

¹³ Atlanta Urban Development, *Gun Club Park Request for Qualifications*, December 2024, 11, https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/657ad30f1454198c9d8e1d97/6765f99aa7cec6d6a898df65_AUD-GunClub-RFQ-Final_reduced.pdf.

¹⁴ This was reflected in the RfQ's scoring criteria: "Teams" (50 points, with "experience" mentioned twice); "Project Vision and Narrative" (30 points, with loosely defined subcategories of "creativity" and "viability"); and "Ability to Execute" (20 points). Atlanta Urban Development, *Gun Club Park Request for Qualifications*, 45.

Figure 3: City of Atlanta, map of publicly owned land used for housing development, 2024

INVEST ATLANTA + CITY OF ATLANTA			
1	Cooper Street	4	143 Alabama
2	2 Peachtree	5	104 Trinity
3	184 Forsyth		

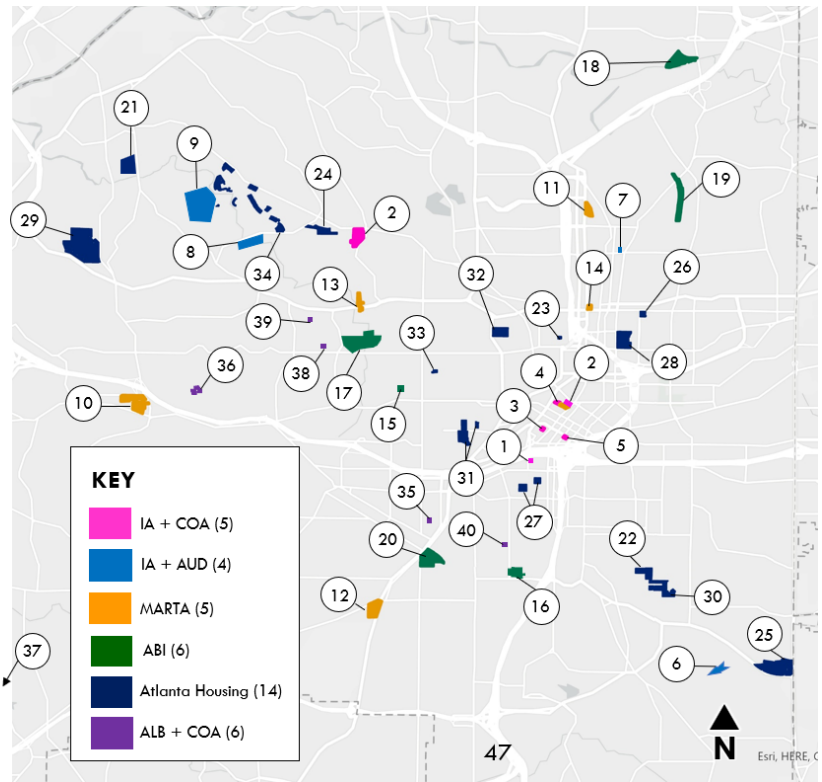
ATLANTA URBAN DEVELOPMENT			
6	Thomasville	8	Johnson Rd/Proctor Creek
7	Midtown Fire Station	9	Gun Club

MARTA			
10	H.E. Holmes Transit	13	Bankhead Transit
11	Art Center Transit	14	North Ave Transit
12	Oakland City Transit		

ATLANTA BELTLINE INC			
15	350 Chappell Road	18	579 Garson
16	Pittsburgh Yards	19	Amsterdam Surplus
17	425 Chappell Road	20	Murphy Crossing

ATLANTA HOUSING			
21	Hollywood Courts	28	Civic Center
22	Englewood #2	29	Bowen Homes
23	Palmer	30	Englewood #1
24	Johnson Road	31	Scholars Landing
25	Thomasville Heights	32	Herndon Square
26	North Avenue	33	Magnolia
27	Mechanicsville	34	West Highlands

ATLANTA LAND BANK + CITY OF ATLANTA			
35	879 White Street	38	Hasty Place
36	Verbena Gardens	39	340 Holly
37	Barge Road	40	1029 McDaniel



The map was first created in 2023 with the kickoff of Mayor Andre Dickens's Affordable Housing Strike Force to coordinate public land development efforts. It shows active projects involving both vacant land and existing structures, to be developed as affordable housing in the respective public agency pipelines.

Courtesy: Housing Innovation Lab, City of Atlanta.

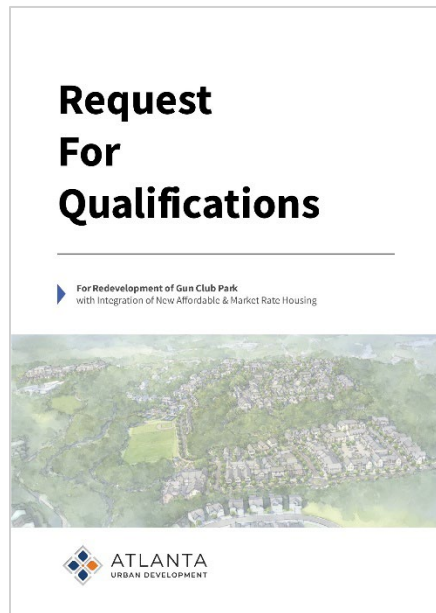


Figure 4: Atlanta Urban Development, Request for Qualifications, Gun Club Park, cover, December 2024

The cover features a rendering of the framework plan developed by the planning firm TSW for the 44-acre site, which respondents were expected to follow.

Courtesy: City of Atlanta.

The problem is not only a dried-up pipeline of developers and architects for public entities to choose from. The problem is that public procurement processes as run to date reinforce the existing advantages of established players. This is not only unfair. It is a wasted opportunity. Architecture and real estate programs churn out hundreds of graduates a year, some uniquely talented, some with significant work experience, dedicated to making a difference. Yet how many can take a stab at these calls for applications? As the New York developer who shared what he pays architects summed up: “A lot of architects who were able to break out early had family money. The same goes for real estate. You need access to capital.” If the idea of RfQs/RfPs is fairness in public procurement, they often produce the opposite outcome.

Having to calibrate competing goals in the disposition of public land is nothing new. In 1961, Grady Clay, an astute urban design critic, observed how federal urban renewal dollars were changing land markets and local politics across the country. He articulated a key problem in how authorities were awarding land to private developers by soliciting both financial and architectural proposals: “The difficulty of ‘mixing dollars with design’—i.e., permitting developers to bid against each other’s price, as well as to compete with designs—was by now obvious.”¹⁵ Referring to one particularly problematic process, he made the following recommendations:

Architectural advisors should be brought into the decision-making stream more directly than [they] had been; loose language in bid documents should not be permitted; strict formality in proceedings is vital; verbal promises are worthless.¹⁶

Developers in the 2020s, in contrast to the 1960s, tend not to be bidding for the land. They tend to receive public land for a set, symbolic price in exchange for building affordable housing. But Clay’s observation that there is a problem in “mixing dollars and design” still holds: a developer’s financial standing and experience will almost without exception trump the quality of the design proposal. But perhaps even worse, the RfQ/RfP set-up leads to mediocre buildings because there is no incentive to invest in design.

¹⁵ Grady Clay, *Competition for Urban Renewal Land* (Cambridge, MA: Joint Center for Urban Studies, 1961), 9. This is an unpublished summary version of a longer book project. Clay’s contribution to urban design criticism was rediscovered and contextualized, in particular in its relevance vis-à-vis Jane Jacobs, by Alison Isenberg in “The Competition for Urban Land: Grady Clay’s Lost 1962 Manuscript,” in idem, *Designing San Francisco: Art, Land, and Urban Renewal in the City by the Bay* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 276–99, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400888832-010>.

¹⁶ Clay, *Competition for Urban Renewal Land*, 9.

2—Housing Competitions in the United States: “Replicability” Misunderstood

Competitions’ Promise

Competitions, in contrast to RfPs, are directed at architects. Architecture competitions, also known as design competitions, can take many forms. They can be open, or invitation-only, or organized on the basis of a prequalification round, and jurors may or may not know the identities of the competitors. The competition sponsor—whether a public entity, or a developer, or a partnership—might set limits by geography or on whether architects need to be licensed, or they might incentivize teams comprised of established and emerging firms. A public entity can launch a call for the developer prior to an architecture competition in order to develop the competition brief—the program of uses and overall goals to which architects respond—together with the developer. It can also organize a competition and then find a development partner. The key point is that organizing the procurement of design services separately from the procurement of a development partner allows for an evaluation of proposals based on their design merit, not based on other terms.¹⁷

The practice of inviting architects to submit proposals for a given task, having a jury determine the best design, and then awarding a commission to the winner goes back to antiquity. The process was also central to many important civic buildings commissioned in the United States.¹⁸ Since the twentieth century, competitions have been embraced as a tool to create excitement for a shifting set of institutions, from city halls and state offices in the 1960s, to private art collections in the 1990s, to university research hubs in the 2000s. Among private sponsors, competitions are key to enhancing not only the institutions’ reputations, but their donors’ cultural cachet. To architects, competitions promise their own type of cultural cachet. Buildner, a US-based organizer of competitions worldwide, advertises that cachet thus: “Discover the transformative power [architecture competitions] can have on your

¹⁷ For recent guides on how to organize competitions, all drawing on European practices, see Benjamin Hossbach, Christian Lehmhaus, and Christine Eichelmann, *Fundamentals of Competition Management: Preparation and Organization of Design Competitions* (Berlin: DOM Publishers, 2024); Maria Theodorou and Antigoni Katsakou, *The Competition Grid: Experimenting with & within Architecture Competitions* (London: RIBA Publishing, 2018); Ignaz Strebel and Jan Silberberger, *Architecture Competition: Project Design and the Building Process* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

¹⁸ For a not so recent, but rich and still applicable discussion of the meaning and history of competitions from a US perspective, see Paul D. Spreiregen, *Design Competitions* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979). Spreiregen traces the history of competitions all the way back to the Acropolis War Memorial in 448 BC Athens. See also H  l  ne Lipstadt, Barry Bergdoll, and Architectural League of New York, *The Experimental Tradition: Essays on Competitions in Architecture* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1989).

career—from igniting creativity and turning designs into reality, to gaining international recognition.”¹⁹ While the hope of actually winning a commission is small, many architects see competitions as a space for developing ideas outside of clients’ demands, and they feel that having a design be evaluated by peers is of particular value.

At the same time, skepticism about competition abounds among architects. As is the case with RfPs, they are not paid for their work unless they have been invited, and often prize moneys are symbolic at best. There is often no clarity about intellectual property, or about what is to occur with the proposals post-competition. Even in the best cases, when implementation moves forward, winning proposals are often redesigned beyond recognition, or the proposal is handed to another firm to implement.²⁰ Other times, it is hard not to see jury members’ partiality or to believe that proposals are truly judged anonymously.²¹ And even the cultural capital promised by competitions is fickle. It plays out largely via media consumed by peers and co-competitors, not among those in positions to hire an architect. This is also true for the many student competitions organized by industry groups, their value in terms of collaboration and networking notwithstanding.²² Architecture groups have repeatedly called on their profession to reject unpaid labor and avoid underbidding in fees.²³ But the numbers of submissions in recent open competitions suggest that not everyone agrees.

¹⁹ Buildner, “Top 3 Reasons Why You Should Enter Architecture Competitions,” <https://architecturecompetitions.com/top-3-reasons-why-you-should-enter-architecture-competitions>, accessed July 30, 2025.

²⁰ “Growing Urban Habitats” was an open competition held in 2005 for the redevelopment of a manufactured home community in Charlottesville, Virginia, co-sponsored by Habitat for Humanity of Greater Charlottesville and the Charlottesville Community Design Center. After the competition, the first- and second-placed teams were asked to jointly create a new site plan, combining elements of their plans. The actual commission to build housing, very loosely based on that proposal, was then given to a local firm with no further involvement of the competition winners. Christopher Genter and I were the first-placed team. For the competition proposals, see Bill Morrish, Susanne Schindler, and Katie Swenson, *Growing Urban Habitats: Seeking a New Housing Development Model* (San Francisco: William Stout, 2010).

²¹ “Architects’ Housing” was an open competition for housing for the elderly in Trenton organized by the New Jersey chapter of the AIA in 1979. The winning team was, in fact, awarded the contract and the built result is exceptional to this day, and yet it was odd that the winner was also one of the competition’s original organizers. Susanne Schindler, “When Architects Run Your Building,” *Urban Omnibus*, April 27, 2016, <https://urbanomnibus.net/2016/04/when-architects-run-your-building/>.

²² These include HUD’s Innovation in Affordable Housing (IAH) competition, the Federal Home Loan Bank of Boston’s Affordable Housing Development Competition, and the Urban Land Institute’s Hines Student Competition.

²³ For over a decade, The Architecture Lobby has been on the forefront of pushing for fair labor practices in architecture, including through unionization. In the summer of 2025, Boston Society of Architecture board president Hany Better Barraza posted a call on LinkedIn demanding an end to free labor. This in turn prompted The

And then there are the particularities of housing competitions. With a few exceptions, public entities and affordable housing developers do not believe in, or have the money for, design competitions. When they do, commentators have pointed to the inherent contradiction of letting a jury of experts decide the quality of a proposed design while excluding the future users of those homes from having a voice. Over thirty years ago, Bay Area architect Michael Pyatok published an essay on the “ambivalent role of design competitions” in housing.²⁴ His reflections are still relevant. While he calls out the elitist premise of juries, of which residents are seldom a part, he also makes a convincing case for competitions: they have allowed his practice to explore innovations, which, in turn have informed the firm’s commissioned work. His ultimate argument for competitions is thus quite different than the one advanced by Buildner: “The rationale for entering a housing competition,” Pyatok writes, “is not self-promotion, but self-education and advocacy for the cause of affordable housing.”²⁵ In other words, housing competitions improve the quality of architects’ work and can thereby also demonstrate that a better future is possible.²⁶

The Search for Prototypes

In the quest to articulate a better future, competitions for art museums or university campuses prioritize uniqueness; the focus of virtually all recent US housing competitions, in contrast, has been on replicability. On the surface, this makes sense. Housing is the most ubiquitous and non-negotiable of building tasks: we all need to live somewhere. It is also the most constrained, squeezed between the regulatory demands of life safety, minimum dimensions and basic amenities to be provided, and financial considerations. Accordingly, if and when a design competition is organized for housing, especially when in conjunction with public land, the hope has been to generate prototypes that can be replicated on as many other sites as possible. Given the sitelessness and lack of commitment of this

Architecture Lobby to issue “TAL—Boston Statement Against Unpaid Design Labor,” October 13, 2025, <https://architecture-lobby.org/news/tal-boston-statement-against-unpaid-design-labor/>, accessed October 21, 2025.

²⁴ Michael Pyatok, “Housing as a Social Enterprise: The Ambivalent Role of Design Competitions,” *Journal of Architectural Education* 46, no. 3 (1993): 147–61, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10464883.1993.10734551>.

²⁵ Pyatok, “Housing as a Social Enterprise,” 148.

²⁶ Pyatok is a realist. He situates his discussion of competitions in the context of the country’s “profound moral crisis” and growing socioeconomic inequality and concludes: “design competitions can only suggest what things might be like if our government were to behave more representatively and redirect the nation’s wealth to a broader public good” (“Housing as a Social Enterprise,” 160). In other words, as visionary as proposals might be, unless there is the political will to implement the vision, competitions are for naught.

approach, most of these competitions result in short-lived media buzzes, but no built work, let alone a commission for the prize-winning architects.

Chicago's Missing Middle Initiative, mentioned at the outset, is a case in point. In advance of its call for applications among developers in 2023, the city organized a design competition called "Come Home" in 2022. Mayor Lori Lightfoot and Commissioner of Planning and Development Maurice Cox launched the competition as part of their INVEST South/West initiative and efforts to elevate design in housing and public space. Cox's team invited forty-two firms from across the US, and some from abroad, to propose "innovative ways of reimagining Chicago's [housing] to better meet modern living."²⁷ Specifically, the task was to revisit three traditional Chicago house types—the rowhouse, the six-flat, and the single-family house—for vacant, city-owned sites. Winning designs were to be pre-approved as construction drawings and made available to developers for a licensing fee. In 2023, four proposals to Come Home were awarded prizes, traveled around the city in exhibition form, and were subsequently published as a Design Catalog (**Figure 5**).²⁸ In parallel, Lightfoot's successor, Mayor Brandon Johnson, launched a Call for Applications to developers. However, of the five developers who were awarded sites in North Lawndale in January 2025, not a single one partnered with a firm that had been selected in the competition.²⁹ The intentions to foster talent, build capacity, and elevate design discourse had been big, yet there was no mechanism in place to ensure that winning architects would have to be part of developers' teams. As Anjolie Rao anticipated in her astute piece on Come Home, published almost two years *before* the call for applications: the US tends to understand competitions as a "bunch of ideas"—fine to share on Instagram or to be exhibited on walls—but invariably soon turned into "a whole bunch of foamcore heading toward the dump."³⁰

²⁷ Quote from the teaser on the Chicago Architecture Center's website. "Missing Middle Infill Housing," <https://www.architecture.org/online-resources/missing-middle-infill-housing>, accessed July 25, 2028.

²⁸ The Chicago Community Trust provided funding and the Chicago Architecture Center organizational support. Further information and the Design Catalog can be found at Chicago Architecture Center, "Missing Middle Infill Housing," <https://www.architecture.org/online-resources/missing-middle-infill-housing>, accessed July 25, 2028.

²⁹ City of Chicago, "Selected Proposals," <https://www.chicago.gov/city/en/sites/missing-middle/home/selected-proposals.html>, accessed July 22, 2025. The city has made the vague promise that it "intends to work with selected architects to further refine their designs to be pre-approved for future Missing Middle application rounds." City of Chicago, Missing Middle Infill Housing. Request for Applications, 7.

³⁰ Anjolie Rao, "Forty-two Finalists Announced for Come Home, a Housing Ideas Competition in Chicago," *The Architect's Newspaper*, March 24, 2023, <https://www.archpaper.com/2023/03/forty-two-finalists-announced-for-come-home-a-housing-ideas-competition-in-chicago/>, accessed July 22, 2025.

Figure 5: Come Home competition, Chicago, overview of selected designs, 2022



Source: Chicago Architecture Center, *Missing Middle Infill Housing: Design Catalog*, 2023.

The irony is that Cox conceived of Come Home to avoid just that fate. In 2019, Chicago had organized the “Disruptive Design” competition which had aimed, just like Come Home, to “address the challenges associated with designing and building affordable, owner-occupied housing” by building on city-owned sites scattered across disinvested neighborhoods.³¹ The well-structured, three-phase competition was set up by a coalition of local housing organizations, the developer Related Midwest, and the American Institute of Architects (AIA) chapter, and supported by the city. Greg Tamborino, a young architect moonlighting from his day job in a large firm, was awarded first prize for a structure that could easily be reconfigured from a single- to a two-family home (**Figure 6**). Tamborino received an award of \$20,000 and ample attention in the media—a dream for any young practitioner. The design was to be built on two city-owned sites. But then things changed: unforeseen site conditions, a pandemic, the withdrawal of the developer-sponsor, a change in mayoral administrations, and rising construction and borrowing costs mean that six years later, nothing has been built. Tamborino has not given up hope, however. A new sponsor might yet emerge, and in the meantime, he notes,

³¹ AIA Chicago, “Disruptive Design: New Solutions for Affordable Homeownership,” <https://aiachicago.wixsite.com/disruptive-design>, accessed July 28, 2025.

I'll be biking around the city and see strikingly similar homes going up. And I'm sort of proud, happy that the ideas get broadcast out into the world. ... That's my gift. If you can apply this to the neighborhoods that most need it, that's great.³²

In some ways, the Disruptive Design competition achieved its goal: a good idea was replicated, by builders, through the percolation of ideas. It's not a way to build a career as an architect, however.

Figure 6: Disruptive Design competition, Chicago, winning entry by Greg Tamborino, competition board, 2019



Courtesy: Greg Tamborino.

New York City's "Big Ideas for Small Lots" competition had an eerily similar set up and an eerily similar fate. The competition was launched in 2019 by the administration of Bill de Blasio in consultation with the local chapter of the AIA for a series of small, irregular, city-owned sites.³³ Five architectural firms

³² Greg Tamborino in conversation with the author, July 25, 2025.

³³ New York City Department of Housing Preservation and Development and AIA New York, "Big Ideas for Small Lots NYC. Housing Design Competition," <https://urbaninfilldesigncompetition.cityofnewyork.us/>, accessed July 24, 2025.

were identified through a two-phase process; they were subsequently to be partnered with developers to get homes built. As in Chicago, there was a lot of media, and the AIA’s Center for Architecture organized an exhibition (**Figure 7**). Six years later, however, not a single site has been transferred, not one project built. Looking back, the lead project manager at the city’s Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD) at the time reflected on the faulty premises associated with launching an architecture competition in the first place. HPD launched an architecture competition to “find a solution to a problem that hadn’t yet been clearly defined.”³⁴ In other words, HPD knew these lots that were too small, too irregular, or located in locations with low-market values to use in the NIHOP/NCP program mentioned earlier: developers considered them economically unfeasible and would not bid on them. Architects, the hope was, might generate excitement and give insights into how to make these sites buildable. Instead of doing the financial and regulatory homework in house, HPD “conflated architectural replicability—or the idea that a particular design innovation can be deployed across different sites—with administrative, regulatory, and financial replicability—or the goal of maintaining a uniform process for disposing city-owned land.”³⁵

Figure 7: Big Ideas for Small Lots competition, New York City, exhibition at the Center for Architecture, 2019



Courtesy: Samuel Lahoz / Center for Architecture.

³⁴ Josh Saal in conversation with the author, August 5, 2025.

³⁵ Saal, in conversation with the author.

The same could be said of Boston’s “Futuredecker” initiative.³⁶ The idea was to reimagine Boston’s most ubiquitous housing type—the three-unit, three-story, wood frame tripledecker built a hundred years ago to accommodate a growing immigrant population—as missing middle housing for the twenty-first century, with “missing middle” understood in terms of both scale and household income. After an extensive three-year public outreach and visioning process, in 2024, the City of Boston’s Housing Innovation Lab launched what it called a “design competition,” in reality a one-phase, developer-led RfP. Six developer-architect teams submitted proposals for one of two city-owned sites. None managed to deliver on the RfP’s goals related to development cost and using modular construction methods without reliance on additional public support. Had the city not done its homework with regards to financial feasibility, or had it not communicated its goals clearly enough to developers? The city elected to reject all proposals and use the learnings to inform a new initiative—Welcome Home Boston Phase 3—focused on delivering affordable market-rate homes without the need for public dollars beyond the discounted land.³⁷

Hurdles, Perceived and Real

Where is the disconnect between municipalities’ interest in using competitions and the reality of translating award-winning ideas into actual homes? Public entities are eager to use competitions to increase the quality of design or to create excitement for their programs. They are also eager to expand the pool of local contractors, developers, and architects to work with, especially on smaller sites. And yet there seems to be a series of perceived hurdles to making design more central to public procurement. Some of these perceptions are deeply rooted and self-reinforcing. Many elected officials and decision makers expect competitions to be just about ideas, divorced from reality and hence costly. The head of a housing authority put it this way:

I think good public design can help people understand public housing as a true public good ... [But] the housing authority isn't really in a position to burn a bunch of time on ideas that we can't afford to have anyone build.

³⁶ City of Boston, New Urban Mechanics, “Co-Creating the Future-Decker,” <https://www.boston.gov/departments/new-urban-mechanics/housing-innovation-lab/future-deckers>, accessed July 24, 2025.

³⁷ City of Boston, Planning Department, “Welcome Home, Boston—Phase 3,” <https://www.bostonplans.org/planning-zoning/planning-initiatives/welcome-home,-boston-phase-3>, accessed October 1, 2025.

The official acknowledged the power of good architecture to make the case for public investment in housing but was unable to see that a competition can generate real alternatives, not just “ideas” too expensive to build. The head of a state housing agency rejected the idea of competitions outright: how could you possibly “expect a developer to work with an architect the developer had not chosen?” The developer, the head of the agency seemed to say, always knows best.

Even architects who despise RfPs wondered aloud how you can ensure winners bring the necessary experience: “How would [a developer] have confidence that the [awarded] design will financially perform?” Another mused: “Architects in the US are notoriously bad at costs and budgets. ... So just relying on a design competition without the cost-controlling aspect could be a nightmare.” None of these perceptions are new. In 1979, Paul D. Spreiregen dedicated his entire book *Design Competitions* to dispelling “three myths”: “1. Competitions cost more money; 2. Competitions cost more time; 3. Competition designs never get built.”³⁸ Spreiregen’s compilation is as inspiring as it is sobering: it includes a Chicago small lots competition, very much premised on the same notions of the ones discussed in the paper, but this one organized in 1969 (**Figure 8**). Both the myths and the attempts at dispelling them seem to have extraordinary staying power.

But there are also *real* hurdles to using design competitions. Massachusetts serves as an instructive example. The disposition of public land and procurement of design services are broadly governed by two laws: the first is Massachusetts General Law 7C, Section 54 (“Adoption of written selection procedure prior to award of contract for design services”),³⁹ the second, Massachusetts General Law 30B (“Uniform Procurement Act”), which governs disposition of land, but is also used for procurement.⁴⁰ When public entities directly contract for services, the law requires a bidding process if the contract’s value exceeds a certain dollar limit; in Massachusetts, this kicks in on any design fee over \$30,000, or total construction cost of \$300,000. According to MGL 7C, the main criteria for selection in a bidding process are qualifications, not price; in fact, submitting price information is prohibited as part of MGL 7C. When architects are retained as consultants or in other capacities, however—say, to rewrite a zoning code—competitive bidding kicks in at only \$10,000. In these processes, the selection criteria are

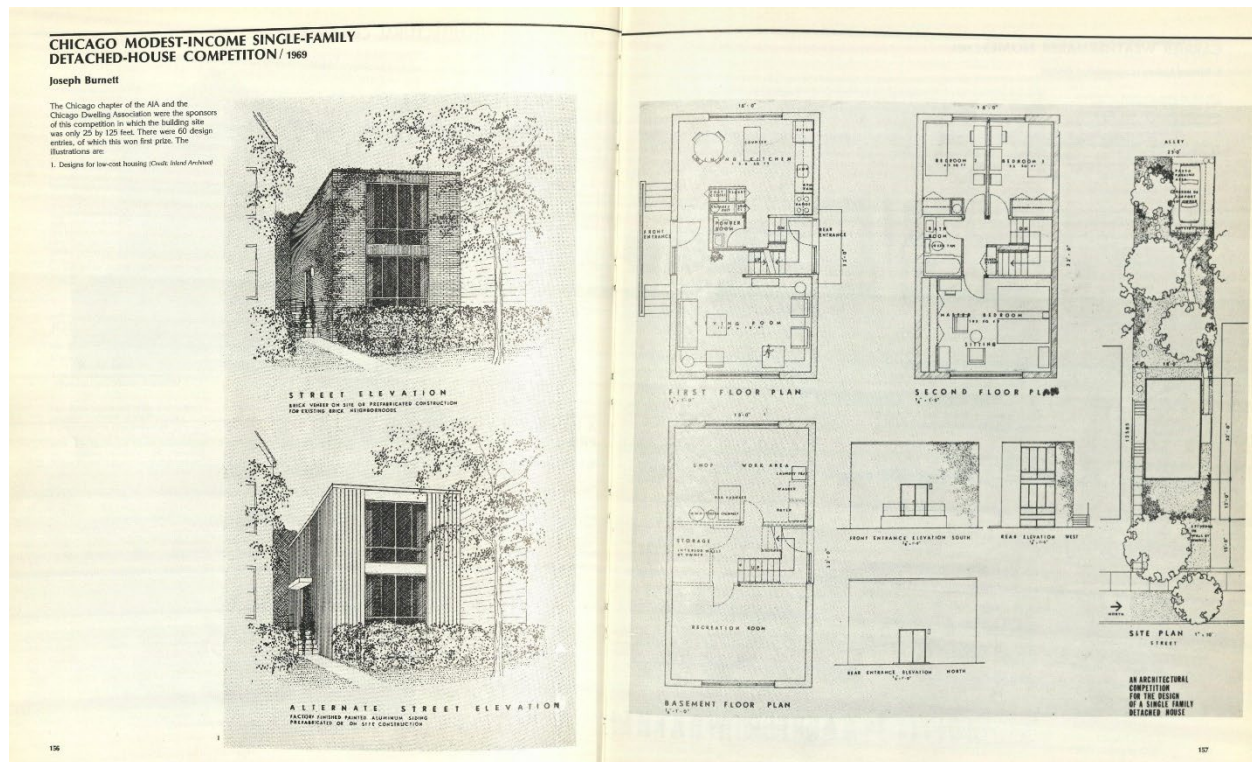
³⁸ Spreiregen, *Design Competitions*, 25.

³⁹ Commonwealth of Massachusetts, General Laws, Part I, Title II, Chapter 7C, Section 54, <https://malegislature.gov/Laws/GeneralLaws/PartI/TitleII/Chapter7C/Section54>.

⁴⁰ Commonwealth of Massachusetts, General Laws, Part I, Title III, Chapter 30 B, <https://malegislature.gov/Laws/GeneralLaws/PartI/TitleIII/Chapter30B>. The Office of the Inspector General Public Procurement has a technical support team dedicated to Chapter 30B and provides various guides and services, <https://www.mass.gov/oig-public-procurement>

not qualifications, but the lowest bid. Design competitions fall in the cracks between the logic of these two laws: as a procurement process, they constitute neither contract nor consultancy. There seems to be no way to pay for organizing a competition, including compensating jurors and providing prize money to participants, if that costs more than \$10,000.

Figure 8: Chicago, Modest-income Single-family Detached-house competition, 1969



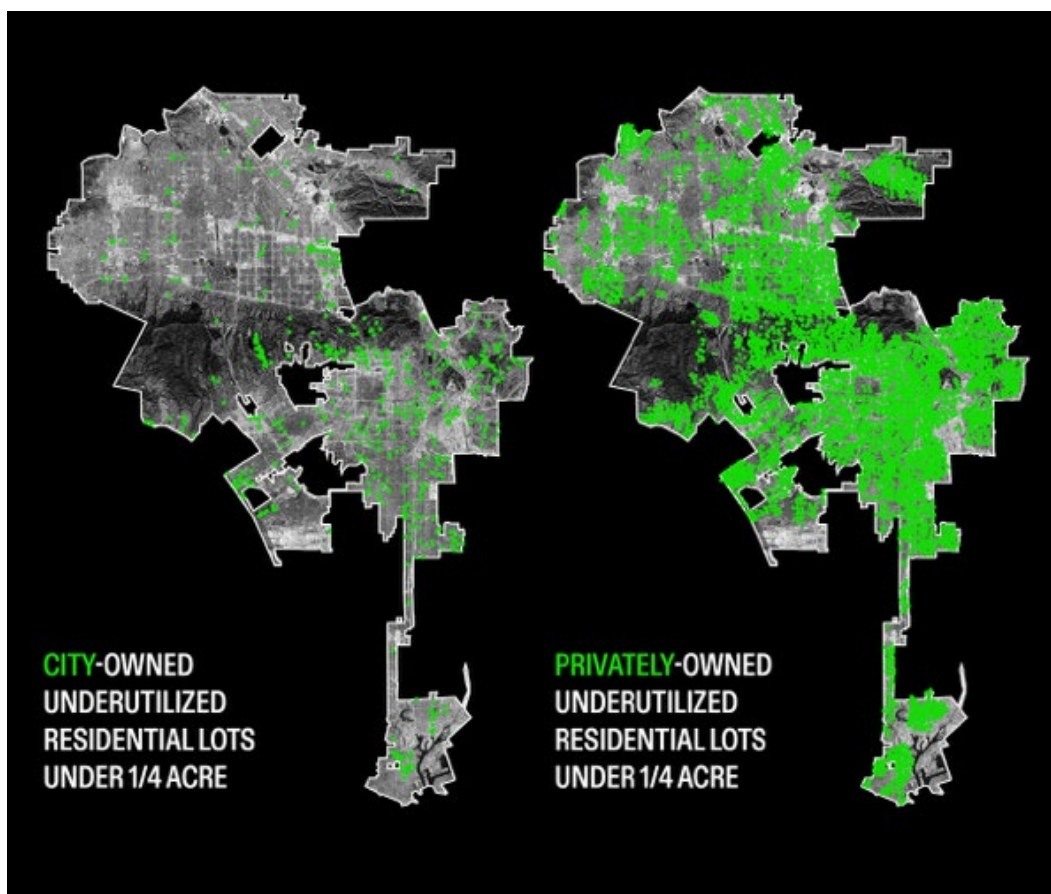
Architecture competitions for affordable homes on typically sized urban lots, using offsite construction, are nothing new. It is unclear whether this winning design, selected from among 60 submissions, was ever built. Source: Paul Spreiregen, *Design Competitions*, 1979, 156-157.

Procurement laws have also seemed to hamper efforts in other parts of the country. In February 2025, for example, the City of Los Angeles launched an initiative, in collaboration with UCLA’s cityLAB, called “Small Lots, Big Impacts” (Figure 9).⁴¹ Again, just as in many of the initiatives already discussed, the idea was to find ways to build housing on small, irregular sites, and to use selected city-owned parcels to demonstrate how the private market could also do so on privately owned sites. The organizers structured a two-part process, similar to the one in Chicago’s Come Home initiative: a design

⁴¹ cityLAB UCLA, “Small Lots, Big Impacts,” <https://www.smalllots.citylab.ucla.edu/>, accessed July 24, 2025.

competition first, an RfQ for developer-architect teams second. In order to connect the two, the idea was to give a boost in the RfQ evaluation criteria to developers working with architects awarded a (non-monetary) prize in the first phase. Existing procurement rules, however, determined that this was not possible: each process must be run separately in order to remain fair. Therefore, in the second phase, scoring criteria were written to value an architect's overall design excellence, which could be demonstrated through competition awards.

Figure 9: Small Lots, Big Impacts competition, maps of publicly and privately owned small, vacant sites in the city of Los Angeles, 2025



Courtesy: cityLAB UCLA.

Figure 10: Small Lots, Big Impacts competition, selection of prize-winning proposals, 2025



Courtesy: UCLA cityLAB

Small Lots, Big Impacts drew 350 submissions; the jury awarded twenty-one prizes to professional firms, six to students, and gave special recognition to fourteen others (**Figure 10**). Following this competition to determine possible “schemes” for the new housing, cityLAB organized a series of in-person events to match winning architects with interested developers according to the mantra of “teams, not schemes.” The organizers stress that the focus on schemes prior to, and independently of, the selection of teams has been critical to generating the energy to move the process forward politically, and that it has created possibilities for developers and designers who otherwise would not have had access to city-owned land. cityLAB has also taken steps to pre-solve for some of the development hurdles that have hampered previous initiatives, crafting a process aimed at turning the strong competition ideas into high-quality built work.⁴² Time will show whether these efforts to clear land titles, secure funding, and promote team-building will result in commissions to the architects awarded prizes in the first phase.

It also remains to be seen whether UCLA’s Small Lots, Big Impacts can avoid being hindered by a factor that has impacted many of the other initiatives discussed here: the timeline of electoral politics.

⁴² Emmanuel Prousaloglou, cityLAB Co-Director, in an email exchange with the author, October 1, 2025.

When Christopher Hawthorne was Chief Design Officer of the City of Los Angeles from 2018 to 2022 in the administration of Eric Garcetti, he launched two initiatives to elevate the quality of design in housing. In the first, the “ADU Standard Plan” program, a group of invited architects worked with the City to develop designs that could “stress-test” a new accessory dwelling unit program before it was launched.⁴³ The program generated pre-approved plans and remains open to any interested architect or builder.⁴⁴ The second initiative, “Low-Rise: Housing Ideas for Los Angeles,” was a competition to generate ideas for introducing density on a range of sites.⁴⁵ Neither initiative sought to commission architects directly; the goal was to “change the conversation” around multi-family housing.⁴⁶ Hawthorne acknowledges that he would have liked to change the procurement process itself, but that this takes more time than the electoral calendar allows. So on the one hand, he “was encouraged by the ... results ... which helped to inform other work that was happening.”⁴⁷ On the other, he was discouraged that the subsequent mayoral administration of Karen Bass took down the website of the Low-Rise competition. Not even the cultural cachet and media attention promised by an ideas competition seem to last.

There have, of course, been housing design competitions that have pushed the boundaries of design and realized awarded projects. In 1973, a time when housing authorities were still actively developing public housing, staff members at the Massachusetts State Department of Community Affairs (DCA) realized that local authorities were using the same architects for all of their work. “Clearly,” Spreiregen writes in his review of this process, “the public was not getting anywhere near the design advice available.”⁴⁸ The DCA, working with the local AIA, organized what would be four competitions for new elderly housing. Each received around 100 submissions. But then, members of “the old guard”—the housing authorities’ standing architects—brought a lawsuit against the initiative and brought it to a halt. When the court reopened the process, it was discontinued due to financial reasons. The four projects, however, all designed by young firms without prior experience in housing,

⁴³ Shane Reiner-Roth, “Los Angeles Launches AUD Program to Combat Housing Shortage,” *ArchDaily*, March 15, 2021, <https://www.archdaily.com/958498/los-angeles-launches-new-adu-program-to-combat-housing-shortage>.

⁴⁴ City of Los Angeles, Department of Building & Safety, “ADU Standard Plan Program,” <https://dbs.lacity.gov/adu/approved-standard-plans>, accessed October 1, 2025.

⁴⁵ Henry Grabar, “Los Angeles Has a Plan to Disarm the NIMBYs,” *Slate*, May 17, 2021, <https://slate.com/business/2021/05/los-angeles-low-rise-contest-housing-crisis-affordability-missing-middle.html>.

⁴⁶ Christopher Hawthorne in conversation with the author, March 6, 2025.

⁴⁷ Hawthorne, March 6, 2025.

⁴⁸ Spreiregen, *Design Competitions*, 263.

were realized. Spreiregen concludes: “While [the Massachusetts story] did not last long enough to produce a permanent change, the old system *was* dislodged ... Design performance has improved.”⁴⁹ Spreiregen’s main argument for design competitions is that they tap into the “wealth of unused talent” and constitute the single most important way to improve the quality of housing design.

In more recent years, perhaps the best-known and most-cited building to come from a deliberately designed procurement process is Via Verde, a 222-unit mixed-income, mixed-typology, mixed-tenure project in the Bronx completed in 2012 (**Figure 11**). It resulted from the “New Housing New York Legacy Project (NHNY)”, an ambitious RfP launched in 2006 with the explicit goal of leading to “affordable, sustainable, replicable housing design.”⁵⁰ The site had been cleared decades ago as part of an urban renewal project and was now being developed as part of the Bloomberg administration’s housing efforts. The RfP was addressed to developer-architect teams, as is typically done, but the evaluation criteria proactively weighted design. Many commentators have suggested that the project was realizable only due to the political will at all levels of the Bloomberg administration, which stuck with the project by making exceptions to rules and tolerating higher-than-expected costs. Michael Kimmelman revisited the project ten years after completion, wondering whether this stand-out example had in fact modeled a better process for housing development.⁵¹ He quotes Richard Dattner, one of Via Verde’s architects, who thinks it has: “Architects grumbled that the project got special treatment but they should be thanking us now. Now better architecture is a requirement.” Kimmelman disagrees: “You wouldn’t necessarily know it ... from much of what still gets built. Design quality has slipped as a priority.” Even if observers disagree to what extent the process that led to Via Verde has been replicated, I would argue that the process led to a realized project because the developer-architect competition was for a specific site, in a particular location, and with very clear goals. It was not about generating a replicable product. This is precisely what redesigning procurement should entail: to rethink “replicable” as being about a process firmly anchored in procurement law. That process can be tailored to the task at hand: a multi-acre

⁴⁹ Spreiregen, *Design Competitions*, 265.

⁵⁰ The process is documented in Lance Jay Brown, Mark Ginsberg, and Tara Siegel, *The Legacy Project: New Housing New York: Best Practices in Affordable, Sustainable, Replicable Housing Design* (Hong Kong: Oscar Riera Ojeda Publishers, 2017). Interestingly, NHNY, too, was preceded by an “open ideas competition” in 2004 for three different sites. While it hardened the resolve of the organizers to secure a site for which to have an actual RfP, none of the winning teams of the ideas competition was involved in the more consequential project. See Brown et al., *The Legacy Project*, 16-39.

⁵¹ Michael Kimmelman, “New York Reimagined Subsidized Housing. What Happened?” *New York Times*, February 7, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/07/headway/nyc-subsidized-housing-via-verde.html>.

development as in Atlanta demands an urban design competition; a single large site as in the Bronx requires an architectural approach; smaller infill lots like in Chicago may not be suitable for design competitions at all. What must be common to any competition is a commitment to the process and the outcomes it yields.



Figure 11: Via Verde, New York, seen from the south, shortly after completion, 2012

The building was the result of an RfP process that valued the partnership between architects and developers. It involved architectural firms Dattner and Grimshaw and developers Jonathan Rose Companies and Phipps Houses.

Courtesy: David Sundberg/Esto / Dattner Architects

3—Learning from Elsewhere: Zurich, Vienna, London

There is no single way to advance the quality of housing design as part of land disposition processes. Zurich, Vienna, and London separate or combine the procurement of design and development services in different ways. As distinct as they may be, they all adhere to clear rules and evaluation criteria and link financial and regulatory incentives to their competition processes. US states and cities can learn from them.

Zurich⁵²

The country with perhaps the purest form of competition is Switzerland. Competitions have been part of the public procurement process since 1870, when rules outlining key components were written by the Swiss Society of Engineers and Architects (SIA). In essence, whenever public funding is involved in infrastructure or other building tasks—whether through land or direct financial support—there must be an architecture competition. Since the early 1990s, the city of Zurich has made remarkably effective use of architecture competitions in promoting housing, which has led to a rich and diverse landscape of projects. When public land is involved, typically through a land lease, not outright disposition, this happens in a two-stage process: the first is a call for concepts from developers responding to a general idea of what the city wants to see on a certain site; the second is a competition among architects on the basis of a brief—the program, the ask—developed jointly by the city and the developer.

It cannot be overstated that a clearly defined project brief is the most important part of this process: it must contain not only qualitative project goals, but a specific, quantifiable program—that is, a precise description of the project’s uses, rooms, their sizes, perhaps preferred relationships between spaces or particular qualities—that has both been vetted internally, politically, *and* gone through a rigorous financial feasibility study. Writing a competition brief thus requires finding consensus internally as to overall goals for the housing to be developed, but also externally, with regards to other stakeholders, including but not limited to neighbors and potential future residents: who is this project for and what type of design would best meet their needs? what does the surrounding neighborhood need besides apartments? The expertise of managing this outreach and vetting a competition brief can be provided by the city or by specialized private firms. This precise vetting is what makes a brief binding.

⁵² This section draws on research and arguments published in Anne Kockelkorn, Susanne Schindler, and Rebekka Hirschberg, *Cooperative Conditions: A Primer on Architecture, Finance and Regulation in Zurich* (Zurich: gta Verlag, 2024); the chapter “The Competition” (261-86) was co-authored with Sebastien El-Idrissy and Kana Ueda. The book is available open-access at <https://doi.org/10.54872/gta/4654>.

Equally important is the evaluation of the submissions by an independent jury (**Figure 12**). According to SIA rules, a jury is comprised of a majority of experts in the relevant disciplines, whether architecture, landscape, or planning (*Sachpreisrichter*) and a minority representing the client, municipality, residents, or other stakeholders (*Fachpreisrichter*). In addition, experts in matters such as sustainable construction methods or social services support the jury but have no voting rights. The key point is that a majority of jury members have no financial stake in the project, represent neither the developer nor the municipality, and are not affiliated with any of the competitors, if their identity is known. To make this work, the criteria by which to evaluate the proposals must be established at the time the call is announced, and the jury must have approved those criteria. Swiss competition guidelines require publishing the submissions as well as the jury's rationale for its decisions. This competition culture is built on a belief in the value of expertise, both at the level of a proposal's author and at the level of the jury. This is not considered to contradict the notion of public participatory processes given that the brief reflects, at least ideally, earlier citizen input. In other words, a competition is considered one part of a longer planning process, one worth investing in.

Organizing a competition requires expertise and money. Zurich boasts an ecosystem of private consultants, often with backgrounds in architecture, planning, and real estate, many having at some point worked at the city's in-house office of competitions. Funding for the competition is generally assumed to be around 1 percent of total development cost and considered part of predevelopment. For nonprofit developers like cooperatives, Zurich offers no-interest predevelopment loans, repayable only once a project is occupied and generating revenue. How architects are compensated depends on the type of competition process. In open, anonymous competitions, only awarded projects receive a monetary prize; in invited competitions, all participants are compensated.

The benefits of Zurich's competition culture are far-reaching. First and foremost, and perhaps most visibly, it is thanks to many open competitions that the city boasts well-known developments that have tested new typologies, mixed-uses, and the integration of community facilities. Many are cooperative housing developments. A prominent example is Kalkbreite, a center-city courtyard building home to 250 residents that includes a range of apartment types and sizes to accommodate everything from singles to extended households, accessory dwelling units within the building, ample commercial space, and a public park built on the roof of a tramway garage. Another is Mehr als Wohnen, a new neighborhood built on a former industrial site on the city's periphery consisting of thirteen buildings for roughly 1,200 residents and 150 jobs; the project prioritized diverse household formations, ground-floor commercial uses, and

novel construction methods. Through open, anonymous competitions, these projects selected designs by young, emerging professionals who have since established successful practices.⁵³

Figure 12: A jury evaluating proposals for a new public-school complex in a competition organized by the City of Zurich, 2017



Courtesy: Juliet Haller, Stadt Zürich.

⁵³ More on the Kalkbreite competition process, much of it in English, is available on the cooperative's website at <https://kalkbreite.net/en/kalkbreite/>. The process of Mehr als Wohnen at Hunziker Areal is well documented in English in Margrit Hugentobler, Andreas Hofer, and Pia Simmendinger, eds., *More than Housing: Cooperative Planning—a Case Study in Zurich* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2016). More information can be found at <https://www.mehralswohnen.ch/hunziker-areal/das-areal> (in German only).

Second, land-lease and architectural competitions have built capacity, not only among emerging architects but among other actors as well. The municipality has learned to navigate constituents' competing demands, increasingly demanding lower-rent housing and resisting redevelopment. Emerging developers—Kalkbreite and Mehr als Wohnen were initiated by newly formed cooperatives—have learned how to be clients of design services: how to assess needs and desires, structure the process, navigate competing interests, and test financial realities. But the visibility and results of mandated competitions have also prompted established developers to voluntarily engage in exploring what is possible through competitions. Third, these competitions have led to new partnerships. Koch Quartier is a former industrial site purchased in 2013 by the city for a new mixed-use development. After a comprehensive public engagement process that informed the ask, a consortium of two cooperatives and one private developer won the bid. The site was subdivided into four parcels with a public park at its heart (**Figure 13**).

Figure 13: Koch Quartier, axonometric showing the four parties involved in the redevelopment

DIE VIER BAUFELDER

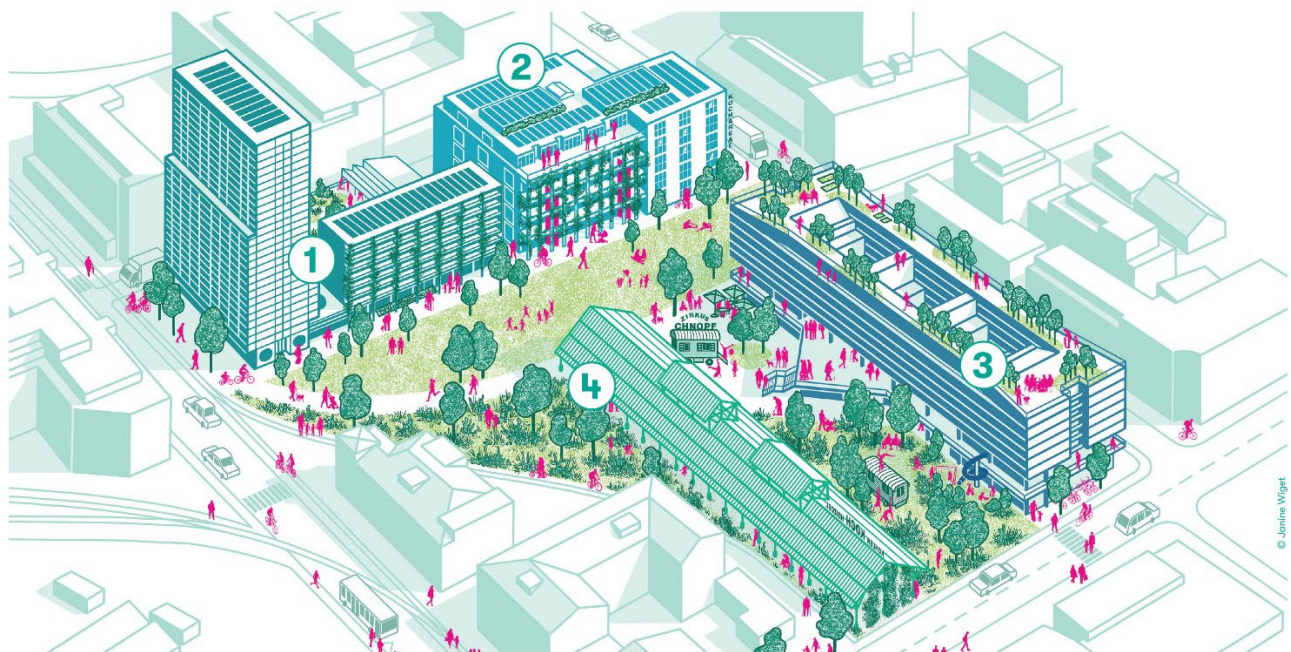
- ①
Wohn- und Gewerbebau der ABZ


- ②
Gewerbebau «MACH» von Senn


- ③
Wohn- und Gewerbebau von Kraftwerk1


- ④
Quartierpark mit Kohlenlagerhalle von GSZ

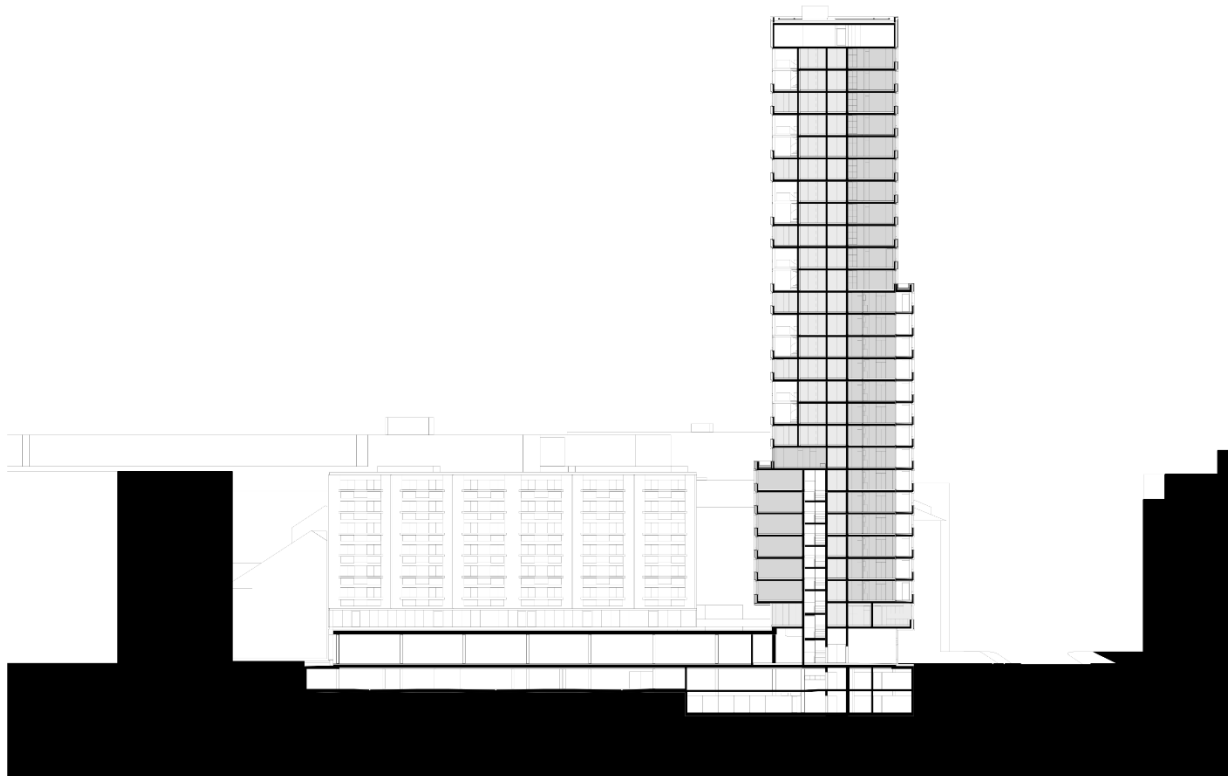




Courtesy: Janine Wiget.

The city then organized four separate competitions—three for the buildings, one for the park—as part of a single, coordinated process. To limit the number of proposals, ten firms were selected in a prequalification phase for each competition. To ensure that the four distinct projects would result in a cohesive neighborhood, four jurors were present on all eleven-member juries. When Koch Quartier fully opens in 2027, it will offer 360 apartments and ample commercial space in three distinct buildings, including Zurich’s first residential midrise complex built using a hybrid concrete-wood structural system and a residential high rise with apartments ranging from studios to four bedrooms, each with an individual exterior space (**Figures 14, 15**).⁵⁴ Finally, competitions have built capacity among the general public to assess and debate what the architecture and urban design of housing can be and do.

Figure 14: Koch Quartier, cross section of the 85-meter residential high-rise and its mixed-use podium



ABZ, developer; Enzmann Fischer Architekten, architects.
Courtesy: Enzmann Fischer Architekten, Zurich.

⁵⁴ A timeline and detailed documentation on the process and outcomes can be found at “Kochquartier,” <https://kochquartier.ch/> (in German only).

Figure 15: Koch Quartier, residential high-rise, visualization of the multi-level shared spaces, each serving three levels of apartments



ABZ, developer; Enzmann Fischer Architekten, architects.
Courtesy: Enzmann Fischer Architekten, Zurich.

Of course, there are downsides to Zurich's competition culture, as to any system. In recent years, for example, the list of requirements for submissions has become longer and longer in an attempt to ensure that proposals will stay on budget. These requirements make participating in competitions even more costly for architects, possibly stifling the necessary exploration they might otherwise enable. Similarly, the city has ever-greater asks in its competitions for land lease, including the percentage of low-rent housing to be provided. Developers are finding it increasingly hard to meet all of these goals. Despite these challenges, Zurich remains unique in its commitment to using competitions for public land and housing. For US cities, it provides a workable example of how to leverage land via a land lease competition to find a development partner first, to then jointly organize a design competition in a second step.

Vienna

If Zurich has become a poster child for cooperative housing, Vienna is lauded for its sustained commitment to social housing. For over a century, the Austrian capital's proactively searching for new urban and architectural design solutions has been key to this success. For the past thirty or so years, a

US-style RfP process has been at the heart of this. Since the mid-1980s, the city has been buying land and marking it down for development of social housing; since 1995, it has used a developer competition (*Bauträgerwettbewerb*) to award this land in conjunction with access to low-cost financing to developer-led teams. Robert Temel, a Vienna-based consultant who specializes in organizing procurement processes, subsumes Vienna's process under a broader term, "concept tendering": the best idea, not the highest bid, wins the land.⁵⁵ The briefs are prescriptive in terms of relative percentages of homes at different price points, as well as certain community amenities. The specific number of apartments and their sizes, however, as well as the provision of additional uses, is left up to developers.

To ease the balancing of "dollars and design" in the evaluation, the city sets a clear limit to development cost and uses four equally weighted evaluation criteria—architecture, economy, ecology, and social sustainability.⁵⁶ The jury is independent and its decision is binding. Wohnfonds Wien, the city's housing and urban renewal authority, receives between sometimes only one and six proposals per call from a field of established developers, most of which are nonprofits given the targeted rent levels and the 40-year loan terms, working with designers. The system seems to work and deliver results that are both solid and innovative (**Figure 16**). Wiesen Süd is a great example of this dual quality. Located on the city's southern periphery, it is a mid-rise apartment complex with a generous, open ground plan that integrates landscape and shared uses, combined with efficient apartments above (**Figures 17, 18**).

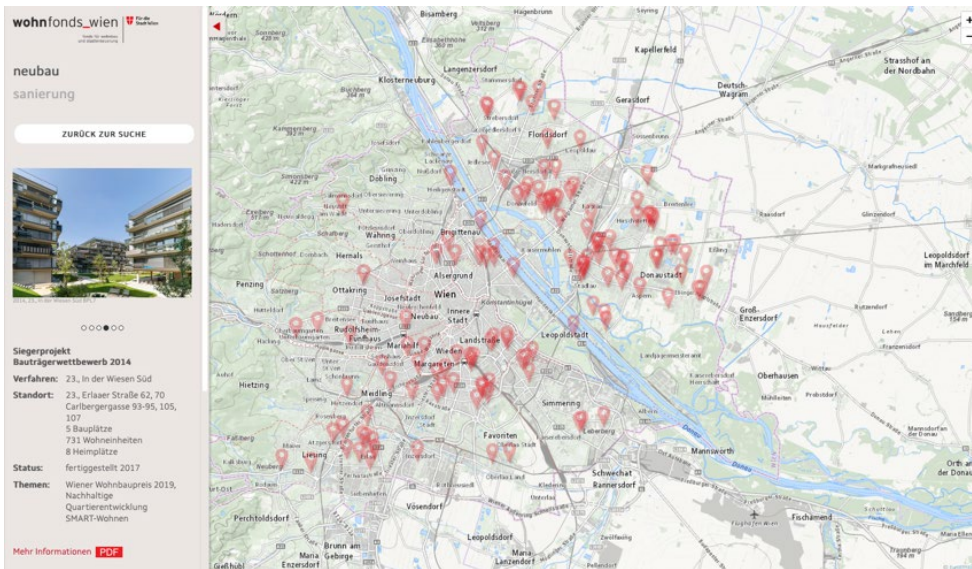
Vienna's process, of course, also has its downsides. Young architects are more reticent to form their own architectural practices, whether for economic or other reasons, meaning that rather than promoting their trajectory, established firms increasingly have come to divide the commissions amongst themselves. There are only five firms specialized in ensuring "social sustainability," meaning that here, too, there is a consolidation, rather than expansion, of expertise. Finally, while proposals are often awarded on the basis of unique offerings in addition to the homes, there is little oversight—beyond the quality and price point of the apartments—as to whether what was promised is actually implemented.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Robert Temel, "Concept Tendering," <https://temel.at/en/urban-design/concept-tendering/>, accessed July 31, 2025. Temel provides numerous examples of processes he has assisted, as well as reports on other cities' processes prepared for EU and German government entities.

⁵⁶ The "four-pillar model" was first explained for a US-readership in 2013 by Wolfgang Förster and William Menking in a traveling exhibition and a book: see <https://www.vienna-model.at/en/publikation/> and Förster and Menking, eds., *The Vienna Model: Housing for the Twenty-First Century City* (Berlin: Jovis, 2013). The book was reissued in 2018 as *The Vienna Model 2: Housing for the Twenty-First-Century City* (Berlin: Jovis). Wohnfonds Wien, the city's entity in charge of land and financing for housing, describes its process at Wohnfonds Wien, "Verfahren," https://www.wohnfonds.wien.at/btw_verfahren (German only).

⁵⁷ Rebekka Hirschberg in conversation with the author, October 10, 2025.

Figure 16: Wohnfonds Wien, map of new construction projects, screenshot, 2025



Source: <https://www.wohnfonds.wien.at/mapneu>

Figure 17: In der Wiesen Süd, Vienna, completed 2017, exterior view



Heimbau Gemeinnützige Bau-, Wohnungs- und Siedlungsgenossenschaft, developer; Dietrich Untertrifaller Architekten GmbH, architects.

Courtesy: Bruno Klomfar.

Figure 18: In der Wiesen Süd, Vienna, completed 2017, ground floor and typical floor plans



Heimbau Gemeinnützige Bau-, Wohnungs- und Siedlungsgenossenschaft, developer; Dietrich Untertrifaller Architekten GmbH, architects.

Courtesy: Dietrich Untertrifaller Architekten GmbH.

Nonetheless, two aspects of Vienna's procurement approach are particularly relevant for US actors. First, the public entity, working with stakeholders and local organizations, develops a clear idea of what kind of housing it wants on a particular site: is it a focus on large families? housing for singles? live-work opportunities? intergenerational households? The city, representing the public interest, engages in planning, not just incentivizing. It does not do its homework "on the backs of developers." At the same time, the developer-architect teams have some freedom in how they translate those goals into a project. Second, by winning a competition, a developer is granted access not only to land, but to low-interest loans. In other words, the *Bauträgerwettbewerb* encourages design exploration in part by guaranteeing a project's financing, with permitting virtually assured. This avoids long delays such as those discussed in relation to the disposition of land in New York City's NIHOP/NCP program.

London

London's recent shift toward prioritizing design quality in all publicly funded investments, including in housing, provides another illuminating case study for the US. The history of the UK's council housing resembles the trajectory of US public housing: both countries saw a post-1945 expansion, followed by a Reagan-Thatcher-era shift of housing provision to the private sector as well as nonprofit organizations, known in the UK as housing associations. While some US public housing authorities are reengaging in development, current funding programs force partnerships with private investors, blurring their roles as owners and operators of the resulting homes. In London, in contrast, in parallel to the nonprofit

associations, councils have again been acting as stand-alone developers, a role made possible in part by legislation that allows them to take on debt.⁵⁸ After having outsourced development and design decisions to private partners and housing associations for years, councils wanted to regain control over what they were funding and would be owning and operating. As Paul Karakusevic, a leading architect in this new generation of council housing development put it, they “wanted to be in the room and be the decision makers on design team selection.”⁵⁹ In response to the often-heard concern that competitions mean more time and money, he says: “That’s a crumb when compared to the cost of development and the running costs of a building. Team selection is crucial to get the best design, a robust specification, and overall value. It is a complete no-brainer to invest up front.”

Toward this end, London’s councils and associations choose an architect first, and then contract with a developer/contractor to get a project built. To do so, councils have had to relearn how to be clients, including how to write a program and do the necessary feasibility studies. Since the early 2000s, the mayor’s office has been supporting this work to make “it quicker and easier ... to commission high quality expertise.”⁶⁰ It created a series of thematic “lots,” or lists of prequalified architects for different building tasks, from which councils or associations can choose. Lots include “Small Sites Housing” and “Housing & Mixed Use,” but also “Transport and Infrastructure” and “Landscape.” Each lists up to twelve practices, and the selection is revisited every four years. Depending on the size of the project, councils and associations either contract with an architect directly or invite architects within the relevant lot to take part in a competition. The mayor’s office and the Greater London Authority (GLA) provide guidance throughout this process (**Figure 19**). In parallel, the mayor’s office has developed binding housing design standards which translate the goals of the 2021 London Plan into detailed guidance on the design of the public realm, shared facilities, and private dwellings in all housing development.⁶¹

Projects are evaluated by the council or association together with a member of the GLA design team—not an independent jury—on the basis of criteria set by the mayor’s office: 70 percent quality

⁵⁸ A compelling and richly illustrated comparative history of these parallel developments from the late nineteenth century into the present as manifest in the countries’ largest cities is presented in Paul Karakusevic and Mike Althorpe, eds., *Social Housing in London and New York* (London: RIBA Publishing, 2025).

⁵⁹ Paul Karakusevic and Paul Althorpe in conversation with the author, March 13, 2025.

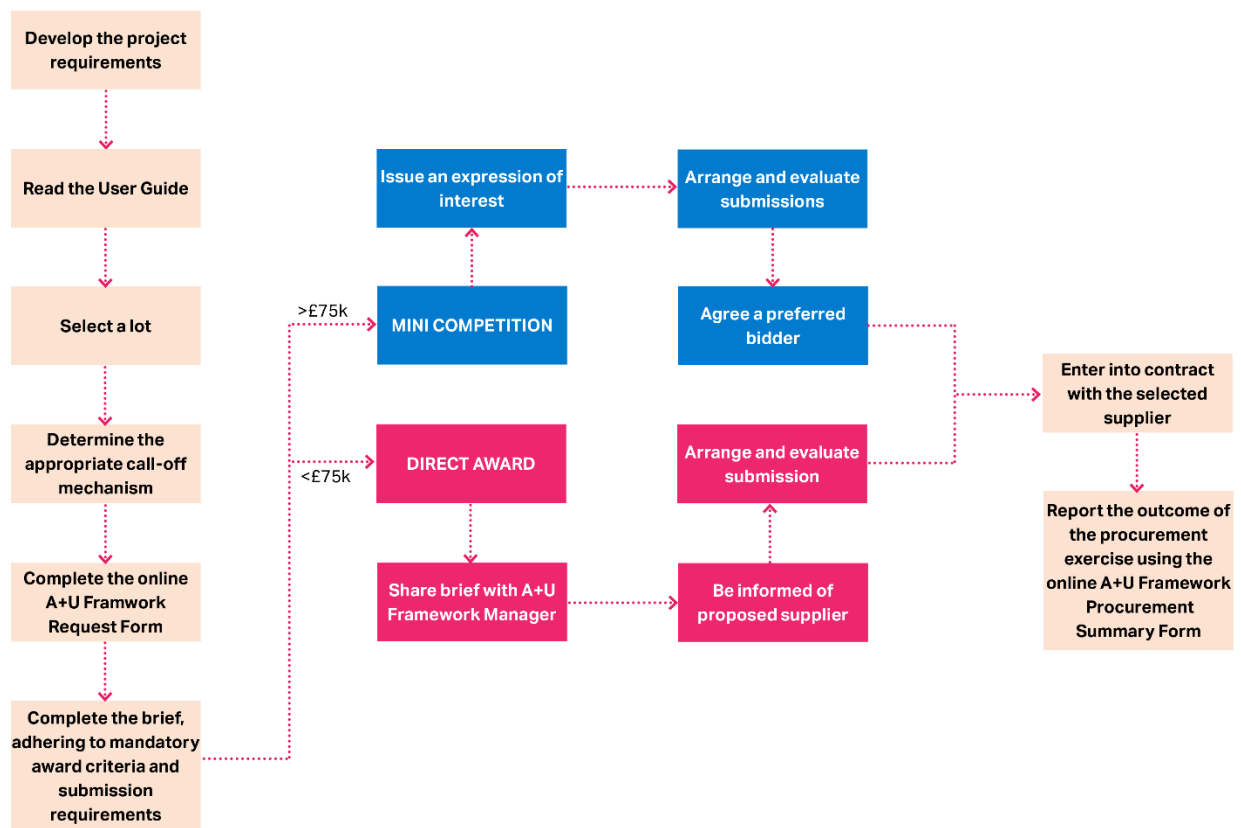
⁶⁰ Mayor of London, “Procurement: Architecture + Urbanism Framework,” <https://www.london.gov.uk/programmes-strategies/shaping-local-places/advice-and-guidance/procurement-architecture-urbanism-framework?ac-166089=166101>, accessed July 24, 2025.

⁶¹ Mayor of London, “Housing Design Standards LPG,” June 2023, <https://www.london.gov.uk/programmes-strategies/planning/implementing-london-plan/london-plan-guidance/housing-design-standards-lpg>.

(including design approach for the particular task and track record); 10 percent social value and diversity, equity, and inclusion (team composition); and 20 percent professional fee (how much the team will charge for its services). Once a team is commissioned, it takes the design to the equivalent of 50 percent construction documents. The project is then tendered to a building contractor as a design-build contract at an agreed-upon budget.⁶² Most of the housing that has been built in London in the last two decades has resulted from this process. An excellent example is Hackney Council’s redevelopment of Colville Estate, which involved substantial public engagement and a series of competitions from the contract for master planning and public engagement to those for the individual buildings (Figures 20, 21, 22, 23).

Figure 19: London’s pre-procurement process used for all public projects, explained in a flowchart

4.1 Pre-Procurement - Framework Overview Diagram



Source: Mayor of London, “Procurement: Architecture + Urbanism Framework,” n.d., 48-49.

⁶² This is similar to “turnkey” processes which were used in US public housing between the mid-1960s and mid-1980s.



Figure 20: Colville Estate masterplan, London, public engagement, c. 2011

Karakusevic Carson was first appointed in 2009, via a competition process, to develop a mixed-used masterplan for the 4.1-hectare site, replacing 438 existing homes with 935 new apartments for a range of households, tenures, and incomes. Architects for individual buildings were selected via additional competitions.

Courtesy: Karakusevic Carson Architects.



Figure 21: Branch Place, Colville Estate, London, completed 2019, exterior view

Hackney Council, developer; Karakusevic Carson Architects. The new four-story block is organized around a generous courtyard. It includes single-story flats and duplex apartments.

Courtesy: Peter Landers / Karakusevic Carson Architects.

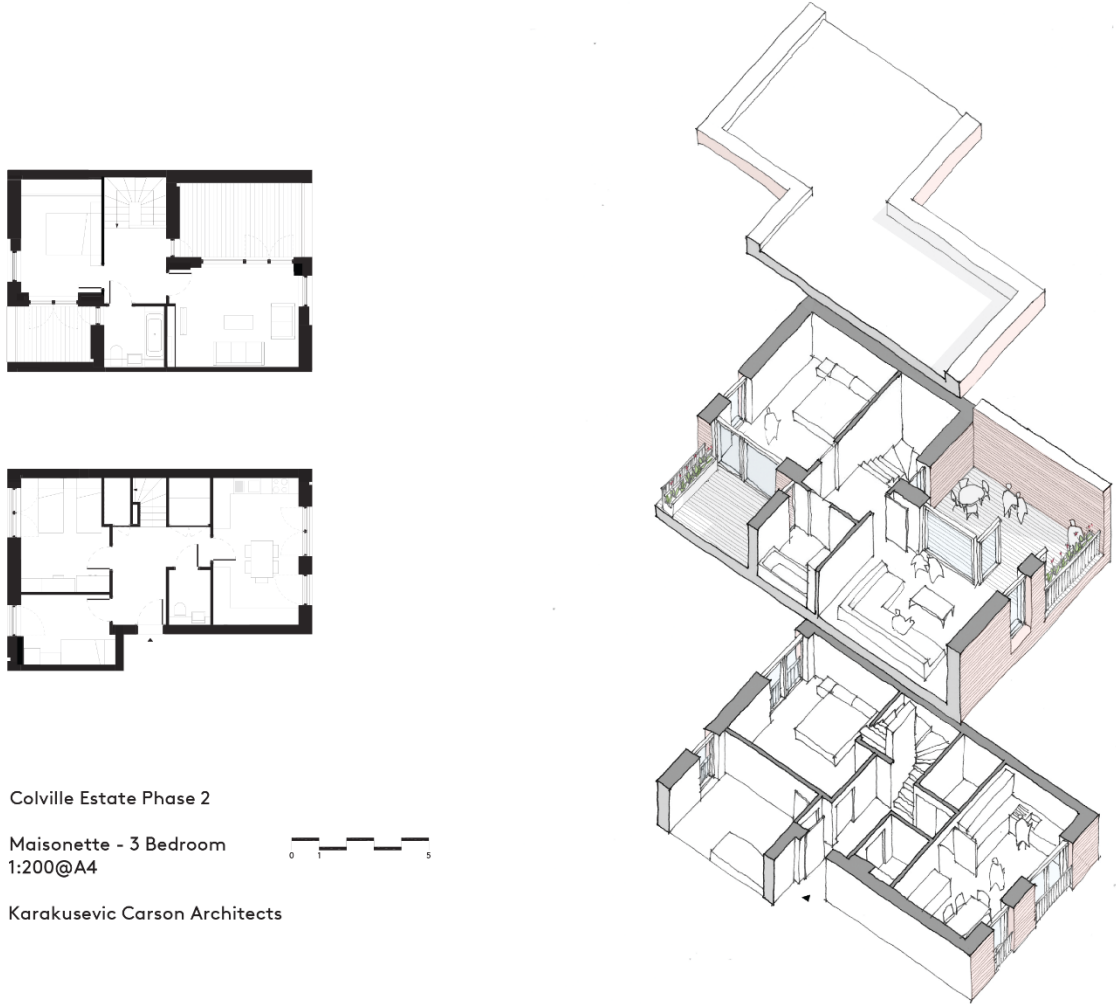


Figure 22: Branch Place, Colville Estate, London, 2019. View from the living room of a three-bedroom duplex

Hackney Council, developer; Karakusevic Carson Architects.

Courtesy: Peter Landers / Karakusevic Carson Architects.

Figure 23: Branch Place, Colville Estate, London, completed 2019. Floor plans and exploded axonometric of a three-bedroom duplex



Hackney Council, developer; Karakusevic Carson Architects.
Courtesy: Karakusevic Carson Architects.

Two key strategies from London are low-hanging fruit for US jurisdictions to adopt. First, establishing a list of pre-vetted architects is a practical, yet flexible way to secure quality in design while hopefully receiving a substantial number of proposals to evaluate. Lists can be crafted to include both established and emerging firms. Working with pre-vetted architects creates middle ground between open, anonymous architecture competitions in which the proposal is the deciding factor, and direct commissions, where an architect’s experience is what counts. Second, having a single entity—in this case city hall, but it could be a state-level entity—preselect the architects, establish the evaluation criteria, and provide guidance to councils and associations including through easy-to-understand design

standards and best practices, streamlines the process and creates feedback loops concerning what works and what needs to change. The wheel does not need to be reinvented by every council or association for each project.

The professional cultures, politics, and policy frameworks in the three cities discussed are distinct. Zurich is committed to architecture competitions as part of the municipality's long-term perspective on both land and housing. So while developers are private actors—both nonprofit and for-profit—the city actively guides and also financially supports housing development towards its goal of “strengthen[ing] a sustainable building culture.”⁶³ In Vienna, too, the majority of housing is developed by non-state actors; “securing quality” in housing is achieved by ensuring long-term, low-interest financing and strict maximum construction cost limits amidst a strong field of competitors.⁶⁴ In London, in contrast, in addition to the housing associations, the public sector is again acting as developer and can thus directly call an architectural competition. Creating a limited list of preapproved architects to work with, but also incentivizing the inclusion of younger firms in their teams, is a workable way to “encourage fresh thinking.”⁶⁵ All three cities use their procurement processes toward specific goals. US cities and states can do the same. Whatever those specific goals might be, competitions are a powerful way to create more diverse forms of housing that meets actual needs and desires; ensure private-sector capacity among both architects and developers; and build trust in the public sector through a transparent public engagement and procurement process.

Conclusion: So What Would It Take?

What would it take to design a procurement process for architectural services that would further design exploration and the quality of the built environment; build capacity in the public and private sectors; and lead to public engagement and excitement about what publicly supported housing can be? In what

⁶³ “The architecture competition strengthens a sustainable building culture in Zurich.” (Der Architekturwettbewerb stärkt die nachhaltige Baukultur in Zürich.) Stadt Zürich, “Architekturwettbewerbe,” <https://www.stadt-zuerich.ch/de/planen-und-bauen/projekte-und-ausschreibungen/hochbauvorhaben/architekturwettbewerbe.html>, accessed October 21, 2025.

⁶⁴ “New construction projects that receive support from the City of Vienna must go through quality-securing processes.” (Neubauprojekte, die Förderungen des Landes Wien beanspruchen, müssen qualitätssichernde Verfahren durchlaufen.) Wohnfonds Wien, “Qualitätssicherung,” <https://www.wohnfonds.wien.at/qualitaetssicherung>, accessed July 24, 2025.

⁶⁵ “In order to deliver the low-carbon, sustainable and inclusive recovery that London needs we need to encourage fresh thinking for design and building projects in London.” Mayor of London, “Procurement: Architecture + Urbanism Framework,” <https://www.london.gov.uk/programmes-strategies/shaping-local-places/advice-and-guidance/procurement-architecture-urbanism-framework?ac-166089=166101>, accessed July 24, 2025.

follows, I outline five things that need to happen in order for design competitions to be transformed from generating “just ideas” into a robust procurement process leading to built work.

First, create clear protocols as to when and how to use architecture competitions. In most countries, these are written by professional organizations and then referenced by public bodies. In Switzerland, for instance, the Swiss Society of Engineers and Architects (SIA) is responsible for this task. It has not only written the guidelines for procurement but provides technical assistance and consulting services.⁶⁶ In the US, neither governments nor the American Institute of Architects (AIA) have set such overarching guidelines. Of course, state-level or local rules for procurement exist, but as we have seen, they often complicate or outright make impossible the use of design competitions. To advance both the narrative for, and practicality of, competitions, I suggest that the AIA at the national level develop a set of guidelines. These should outline different types of competitions (open, invited, single- or two-phase); what should be included in a brief to make it a binding, and yet not stifling document; how and where to advertise the competition and publish both results and the jury protocol; the relative responsibilities and fair compensation of participants, jury members, and organizers; how to avoid conflicts of interest and address appeals; and clear guidelines as to intellectual property concerns, or who “owns” the awarded designs. Toward these ends, the AIA should also set up entities to provide regulatory guidance and technical assistance.

Second, tweak the regulatory framework that governs procurement of design and development services for any housing receiving public support. In the case of the public sector, a first step would be to allow public entities to pay for a competition by increasing the cut-off of what a city planning department or redevelopment authority may pay without a bidding process. Public entities could then more easily pay for the preparation of a competition brief, including public outreach, zoning, and feasibility studies. They could also adequately compensate participants and jury members for their time. In parallel, states and cities, banks, and philanthropies should create predevelopment funds that allow for or even mandate design competitions. As Zurich shows, it is possible to set up low- or no-interest predevelopment loans precisely for this purpose, to be repaid only once a project is generating revenue. It would also be easy to build on and expand existing programs. CEDAC, a state-level, quasi-public community development assistance corporation in Massachusetts, provides predevelopment grants to

⁶⁶ Swiss Society of Engineers and Architects, “Procurement,” <https://www.sia.ch/en/cms/topics/procurement>, accessed September 26, 2025.

small nonprofits, albeit limited to \$15,000.⁶⁷ In New York City and California, philanthropies have recently set up funds that provide no-interest loans to cover predevelopment costs, including design services.⁶⁸

Third, mandate or incentivize design competitions. A state’s Qualified Allocation Plan (QAP), the basis for the allocation of tax credits and other public funding in housing, could be tweaked to give a significant boost to any project that has been developed through a design competition. Coordinating the land disposition process with the awarding of funding would be even more powerful. In other words, when a state or city puts a piece of land up for sale or lease, the award would be coupled with access to financing. In the realm of zoning and permitting, competitions could be mandated for projects over a certain size or for projects seeking a zoning variance. Such projects are often held up in public process and design review. A competition, by having sought public engagement in advance, could replace these often unpredictable and politically fraught processes and ensure a project’s permitting. Finally, competitions could be linked to incentives like density bonuses: if a developer commits to organizing a design competition according to established guidelines, additional floor area will be allowed in the competition brief. Making design competitions a central component of development will happen only with sticks and carrots.

Fourth, piggyback onto proposed or already passed housing legislation. Over the last two years, states and municipalities have approved substantial funding for new forms of public investment in affordable housing. Many bills make an explicit allowance for a “social housing” development pilot. For example, United to House Los Angeles, a real estate transfer tax, was approved by voters in late 2022 to fund the city’s 2021–29 Housing Element, which wants to (among many other things) “prioritize public land for new models of affordable housing development and control, including ... social/public housing.”⁶⁹ Massachusetts’ Affordable Homes Act, passed in late 2024, authorizes over \$5 billion over five years, and includes an allowance of \$250 million for “a mixed-income social housing pilot

⁶⁷ CEDAC, “Affordable Housing,” <https://cedac.org/housing/affordable-housing/>, accessed July 31, 2025.

⁶⁸ Sarah Holder, “To Fuel Affordable Housing, This Innovation Fund Targets Predevelopment Costs,” *Bloomberg CityLab*, April 23, 2025, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2025-04-23/new-york-s-20-million-housing-innovation-fund-targets-predevelopment-costs>.

⁶⁹ Initiative Ordinance ULA, Ordinance No.187692, adopted by voters on November 8, 2022, page 2, available at Los Angeles Housing Department, “United to House Los Angeles,” <https://housing.lacity.gov/ula>, accessed July 23, 2025.

program.”⁷⁰ Rhode Island voters, around the same time, approved a \$120 million bond measure that allows \$10 million for “a new program for public housing development.”⁷¹ These programs say nothing about what this new social housing will look like or how to get there. Architecture competitions provide a powerful way to clarify these goals, test possibilities, and communicate outcomes. Programs that have already been established, like Atlanta’s AUD, should redesign their procurement processes toward these ends.

Fifth, hire capable people and lease rather than sell public land. These two things may not seem to have anything to do with each other. But if part of the broader goal of any competitive bidding processes for public resources such as land is to ensure trust through transparency, the public sector must be equipped to run these processes. This means hiring and paying for staff who bring the expertise of various fields, including architecture and real estate, in order to do everything from public outreach to conducting feasibility studies. If the goal is to maximize the use of public resources, perhaps states and municipalities should also reconsider whether a public asset like land should be sold off at all. Land leases would allow states and cities to maintain a long-term public stake and voice in the housing to be developed.

Despite the unfortunate outcomes of the Disruptive Design and Come Home competitions, Chicago serves as proof that these ideas are neither outlandish nor impossible to implement. While he was the city’s commissioner of planning and development, Maurice Cox introduced variations of these approaches. Come Home was only one small piece of a broader strategy to elevate design excellence in affordable housing. Cox’s own trajectory as a young architect had been jumpstarted by the opportunities afforded to him by Europe’s competitions. Seasoned through his subsequent career in public office in the US, however, Cox realized that “competitions in America scare public entities; RfPs, they know what they are.”⁷² In Chicago, he thus largely focused his energy on “tweaking” the RfQ/RfP process. First, to make it easier for developers to work with new architects, his team set up a list of thirty-two pre-qualified “design services teams” (out of 200 that had applied) from which developers

⁷⁰ Commonwealth of Massachusetts, “The Affordable Homes Act: Smart Housing, Livable Communities,” <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/the-affordable-homes-act-smart-housing-livable-communities>, accessed July 23, 2025.

⁷¹ Wheeler Cowperthwaite, “What Will RI’s New \$120M Housing Bond Actually Do? Here’s What We Know,” *Providence Journal*, November 8, 2024, <https://www.providencejournal.com/story/news/politics/elections/2024/11/08/voters-approved-a-120m-housing-bond-for-ri-heres-how-it-will-be-spent/76092785007/>, accessed July 24, 2025.

⁷² Maurice Cox in a conversation with the author, July 17, 2025.

submitting to RfPs could choose. Second, to encourage smaller and minority developers to submit to RfPs, he enticed the Chicago Community Trust to create a predevelopment fund; the program awards three finalists shortlisted in a prequalification phase a \$25,000 stipend to develop actual proposals. Third, he worked closely with the city's commissioner of housing, Marisa Novara, so that an RfP's winning proposal would be well-positioned to be successful in the highly competitive state-led tax credit award. Despite these significant steps in centering design excellence in public procurement, in retrospect Cox mused:

If I had to repeat the process, I would disaggregate the search for developer and designer. They are apples and oranges. ... Most developers are really, really good at what they do: getting things financed and built. They are not educated as to what constitutes good design. ... Sometimes we had to choose a developer with a better track record of delivery over a really innovative design with an inexperienced developer.⁷³

As Clay put it sixty years earlier: mixing dollars and design is a tricky thing to do.

So: a simple first move to centering design in US housing programs today—not only those involving land disposition—is to separate the selection of a developer from the selection of an architect. Using design competitions is an excellent way to do so. Competitions can be organized after a developer has been selected, so that the public entity and developer together craft a competition brief. They can also be organized in reverse order: the public entity writes the brief and organizes the competition, then finds a developer to build the selected project. Separating dollars from design will not only generate higher-quality architecture. It will reinvigorate moribund public engagement processes, build trust in government, and create opportunities for both talented architects and emerging developers.

⁷³ Cox, July 17, 2025.

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