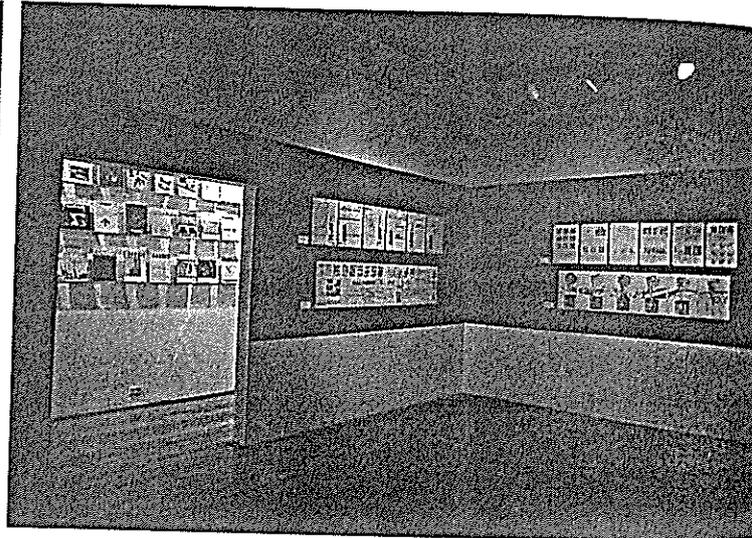
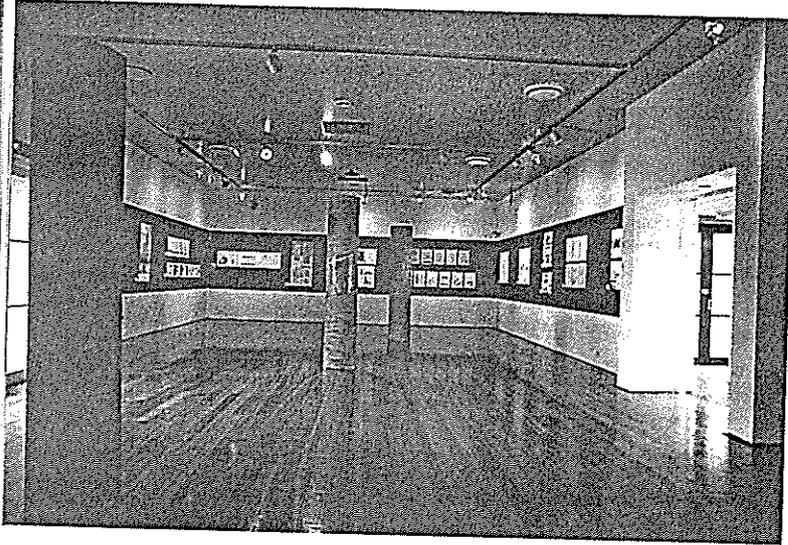


On April 4th 1991, a forum was held to discuss *Transition's* 'Companion City' competition. Over two hundred people attended. Geoffrey London and John Macarthur delivered brief papers. Conrad Hamann chaired discussion of the papers and competition.



Photographs: Damian Curry, 'Companion City' Exhibition at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, 20 March - 14 April, 1991.

# 'Companion City' Forum at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art

Geoffrey London

The architectural competition remains the most potent strategy for exposing a range of architectural ideas around a specific theme or, more broadly, testing the lie of the theoretical landscape.

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Recently, the notion of the architectural competition has been debased by sharp operators in the marketplace seeking a range of free design-and-fee package solutions from architects they know to be desperate for work. And most usually, the winning scheme is not the one that projects powerful ideas nor the one that tangles with architectural quality, but the one that is going to cost the sharp operator least and, at the same time, conform to understood commercial types. And the architectural profession hasn't yet shown itself to be capable of collectively resisting this debasement of the discipline. Solidarity has not been our hallmark. Such competitions become aligned entirely with the securing of a commission - exploration is positively discouraged.

But the brief in this, the *Transition* Companion City competition, was of a very different nature. It was to:

...seek to explore the future city through design. Of interest here is a design approach which develops a critical comparison or challenge to the existing city.

*Transition* is to be congratulated for maintaining the intent of the architectural ideas competition, uncompromised by the pressures of commercial performance, concerned only with the exposure and promotion of powerful ideas. Having said that, I have to go on to say that I don't believe that the competition has, in fact, exposed any such powerful design ideas which offer the critical comparison called for, nor are they in the form of a really effective challenge to the existing city. There are many clever and cultured proposals, there are some despairing propositions, and there are some schemes, apparently untouched by the critiques of architectural modernism of the past twenty-five years. The clever and cultured proposals display a good working knowledge of contemporary formal manipulations, of current theories of knowledge, and of the debates in the best architectural journals. But this expertise is, in the main, not transformed into other than virtuosic displays of generalised architectural skills.

My first thoughts on these submissions were recorded from what I was able to see published in *Transition*. When I had a long look at the competition entries as they hang here in the gallery, I felt more positively toward many of them. Perhaps it has to do with miniaturisation and the changes of sequence in layout that occurred. But it also has to do with the effect of looking at a single work on the facing pages of a magazine, as against the polemical strength of all the work seen hanging together. There is, in their total, a sense of confrontational energy that seemed to be lacking in the individually presented schemes. While that says something positive about the role of exhibitions in promoting architectural ideas, my initial views about the individual submissions remain in place.

When I first saw the entries that had been awarded prizes or honourable mentions, I thought that I may find myself in conflict with the assessor, Leon van Schaik. But this concern was tempered by a reading of his report, with which I am in substantial agreement.