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Participation in design competitions

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The gross of the footbridges designed by our office is the result of a design competition. In design competitions, several designers compete for a commissioning responding to the same problem according to a defined set of rules where an independent panel of experts, usually called jury, evaluates the entries and selects the winner. The last decade civic participation in all its forms became more and more popular. It is therefore not surprising that participation can be found in all different stages of the procurement process for a new footbridge.

This article will discuss different ways of civic participation in the design process, more particular the competition phase. Prior to the launching of a design competition the client can organise a consultation round. Hereby he aims to involve the local citizens and get feedback and ideas to incorporate in the competition brief. Civic participation can also be found within the assessment/judging process. Some design competitions involved a public voting, so everybody becomes reviewer not only experts. The outcome of the voting can influence in different ways the eventual outcome of the competition; some clients attribute a minimal weight to this voting, others attach far more importance to this voting. Other moments of participation can occur after a designer was assigned or one of the design proposal was selected based on the brief's criteria. Civic participation can continue during the design process for example by workshops to give input to the designers or by a call for public submission for a name of the new footbridge.

The participatory mechanism incorporated in a design process can be an added value, but not at all times. The influence of civic participation on the design and even the outcome of a competition will be illustrated. Good and bad examples of participation in the design competition and process will be discussed.