Exapting the Design Competition

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ex·ap·ta·tion (ĕg'zăp-tā'shən) n. *Biology*
The utilization of a structure or feature for a function other than that for which it was developed through natural selection.[1]

> Since first conceptualizing the initiative in early September 2005, Global Green
> envisioned 'adopting a neighborhood', where the organization would take responsibility
> for ensuring the sustainable design and construction of key assets in an impoverished
> neighborhood: a school; a house of worship; affordable housing; and possibly other
> buildings. To date, the resources and challenges to fully embrace the concept have been
> insurmountable. Through helping unleash the power of ideas through this design
> competition, the goal of 'adopting' a neighborhood is within our grasp.[2]

The above statement is from the letter to registrants that opens the Sustainable Design

Competition for New Orleans: Advancing the Sustainable Rebuilding of New Orleans and the Gulf

Coast, as written by Matt Petersen the President and CEO of Global Green USA, the primary

competition sponsor. It represents a profound shift in the conception of the design competition

and its value. The vehicle of the design competition has been used as a means of reinforcing the

values of the field of architecture; determining what is commendable design, theory and

approach, and awarding the winners credibility and social capital. The Sustainable Design

Competition for New Orleans exapts the vehicle of the design competition to promote its own

agenda - a purpose outside the field of architecture. The appropriation of use of the competition is

valuable in reassessing the way competitions construct the illusio of architecture for individuals

within it, and for the field itself.

The mythical model of design competitions is described by Magali Sarfatti Larson: "architectural

competition clouds the line between 'art' and 'commerce,' contributing to the 'denial of economics'

characteristic of markets where symbolic capital are bought and sold."[3] The emphasis on

symbolic capital within the field of discourse of architecture is important. This self-constructing,

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[1] exaptation. Dictionary.com. *The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition.*
   Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004. http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/exaptation (accessed: April 28,
   2007).

[2] Matt Petersen, *Sustainable Design Competition for New Orleans.* Global Green U.S.A. (May 23, 2006): i.
[3] Magali Sarfatti Larson, "Architectural Competitions as Discursive Events", *Theory and Society* Vol. 23, No.
4 (Aug. 1994): 472

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self-defining mechanism that establishes the field is discussed by Hélène Lipstadt, interpreting

Bourdieu:

> Which leads me to identify the entire competition, institution and behavior, as an acting out of the illusio that gives architecture its specificity as a field. It is at once evidence and cause of the belief in individual creativity that have sustained architecture to the great advantage of architects, who sometimes do prevail on the basis of their specific capitals and give the 'world of architecture…something it needs.'[4]

If one diagrams the mythical model of design competitions, as described by Lipstadt and Sarfatti

Larson, we see that the competition is integral to the illusio of architecture as a field. The cyclical

pattern that has been created, defining architecture by competing, and defining competitions as a

measure of its skills and value as a field, in the mythical model, exists theoretically outside the

market within which architects work as producers of economic goods.
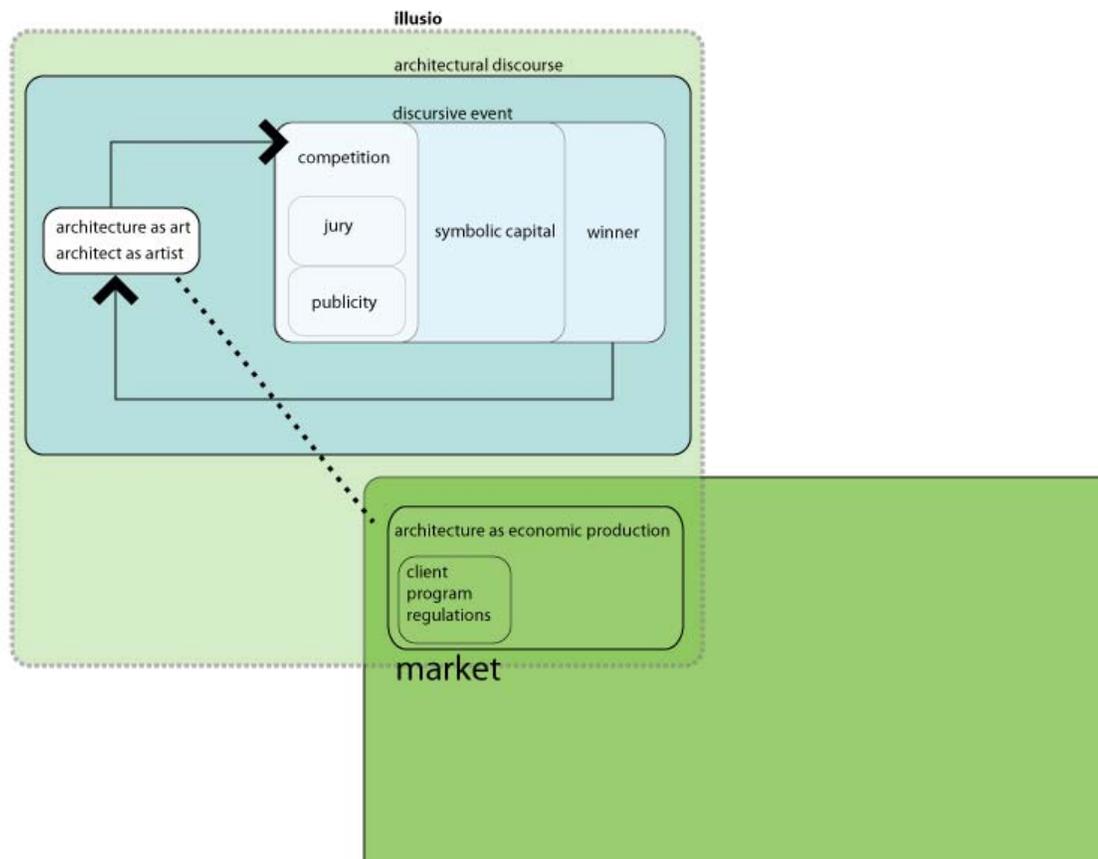
It is the same mythical model of competitions that Matt Petersen recalls in his charge that the

design competition "unleash the power of ideas". The Global Green competition for a Sustainable

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[4] Hélène Lipstadt, "Theorizing the Competition," *Thresholds* v.21 (2000)

New Orleans ostensibly operates as a traditional design competition. The competition organization was advised by Casey Jones and Reed Kroloff of Jones|Kroloff Design Services, based in New Orleans. Reed Kroloff was also involved in the Architectural Record/Tulane University sponsored competitions "Designing the Future of New Orleans" – two ideas competitions that were held simultaneously: High Density on High Ground, and New Orleans Prototype House. Both Kroloff and Jones have extensive connections and networking capacity within the field of architecture. Kroloff had assumed the Deanship of Tulane's architecture program around the time that Hurricane Katrina hit the area, prior to moving to New Orleans, he was Editor-in-Chief of *Architecture Magazine*[5]. Casey Jones was formerly a senior staff member in the US General Services Administration's Design Excellence Program, and is the former Associate Director of New York City's Van Alen Institute.[6] Their combined reach of influence and expertise in organizing competitions helped to establish the perception of social capital within the field for this competition.

In order to codify its place within the illusio of the field of architecture, two juries of architects with social capital in the field were established for each phase of the two-stage competition – one was a Design Jury, the other a Technical Jury. There were more than twenty members between the two juries. The Design Jury included notable architects and educators (what Sarfatti Larson refers to as "cognoscenti"[7]): Thom Mayne, Walter J. Hood, William Morrish, Yolanda Daniels, Marion Weiss, David Orr, Bob Berkebile, Julie Eizenberg, and Ray Huff. The Design Jury also included representatives from the local community: Lauren Anderson, Pierre André Senizergues and Pam Dashiell; as well as a developer: Keith Butler. Despite all of the notable architects and designers selected to sit on the jury, the Design Jury Chair was Brad Pitt, a co-sponsor of the competition, and Matt Petersen from Global Green USA was also a member.

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[5] Reed Kroloff CV, Tulane School of Architecture website: http://www.tulane.edu/~tsahome/faculty/kroloffcv.pdf (Accessed April 28, 2007).
[6] Casey Jones, "Architect Selection", *Competitions Magazine* http://www.competitions.org/pages.cfm?ID=13 (Accessed April 28, 2007).
[7] Magali Sarfatti Larson, "Architectural Competitions as Discursive Events", *Theory and Society* Vol. 23, No. 4 (Aug. 1994): 473

The Technical Jury was smaller, and included representatives from the US Green Building Council, Global Green USA, and architects and designers: Bruce M. Hampton, William D. Browning, Bob Berkebile, E. Eean McNaughton and Susan Maxman. The chair of the Technical Jury was Walker Wells, Rescue Program Director of Global Green USA.

With the social capital firmly established within the field of architecture, the competition was held. It was a two-stage open (to Architects, Landscape Architects, Urban Designers, Engineers, Industrial Designers, Artists, and Students) international design competition, and received approximately 3000 registrations, and 126 entries. The discrepancy between registrations and entries is important to note: it appears that somewhere in the process, the interest of participation was lost for the majority of registrants. Perhaps this is related to the illusio of the field, and the role this competition has in it. The 126 entries were narrowed to 6 finalists: Eskew + Dumez + Ripple, an established architecture and urban design firm from New Orleans; Metro Studio, a New Orleans architecture firm founded after Hurricane Katrina; Drew Lang Architects, a young New York firm; Schwartz Architecture, an established New York firm also working on the UNOP plan for New Orleans; Workshop/APD, a New York-based residential design firm; and Brininstool and Lynch, and established Chicago architecture firm. None of the finalists comes from outside the field of architecture: lending credibility to Sarfatti Larson's assertion that, "The historical record indicates that the 'anti-establishment' potential of competitions is more ideology than fact…architect selection by contest rests on the bourgeois ideology of art. This specific ideology also supports the market for architectural services and the calculated use of competitions by business sponsors."[8] The competition is a self-supporting system that reasserts the field of architecture as valuable, primarily within the field.

The ideological model of competition, as anonymous contest that is able to rank talent differently than the established market profession, is perpetuated in the selection of the winning team: Workshop/APD. The designers, Andrew Kotchen and Matthew Berman, had no prior experience

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[8] Magali Sarfatti Larson, "Architectural Competitions as Discursive Events", *Theory and Society* Vol. 23, No. 4 (Aug. 1994): 472

with sustainable design until participating in competitions in New Orleans (they won this competition, and received an award in the High Density on High Ground competition sponsored by Architectural Record and Tulane University). Their professional work experience included primarily small residential interiors, and remodels – and in this competition they were able to generate a winning design for the 12-unit apartment complex with 30-child daycare center and 6 single-family homes that were required by the brief. The illusion of the field of architecture that competitions can give rise to new talent was upheld. The benefits to the winning designers include the social capital conferred by winning the competition, but in this case, the value of this capital has taken a different form than in the mythical model of competitions.

> The structure of design competitions implies that the architect can express his or her singular vision in abstract conditions of creation. Yet established professional wisdom that "good architecture evolves from a tussle between program, client and architect" contradicts it. The sponsors undoubtedly take advantage of the weak market power of the architectural profession, but do they expect that the competitive situation will spur the architects to give their best?

> My argument is that the clearest value of competition to the sponsors lies in the myths, based in the ideology of art, which surround the whole process.[9]

Sarfatti Larson understands why Global Green promotes "unleash the power of ideas through this design competition". The underlying value embedded in Matt Petersen's statement is that ideas generated through design competition have value and power. The interesting aspect of this competition, however, is that the realm in which Global Green needs power and influence is not in the field of architecture – the field in which design competitions are considered valuable and field-forming, but rather in the larger market of the city of New Orleans, and the nation of the United States of America. Global Green exapts the system of design competitions as a tool to generate public interest in its environmental initiatives.

In the particular form of exaptation selected, Global Green must have identified that the field of architecture alone is not sufficiently influential in the larger market to sway public opinion or garner interest – the key aspect of their strategy for public influence is the use of media, and media personalities – in this case, Brad Pitt. The actor is known for his interest in architecture,

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[9] Magali Sarfatti Larson, "Architectural Competitions as Discursive Events", *Theory and Society* Vol. 23, No. 4 (Aug. 1994): 478

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and described as being involved in the initial conversations that developed the idea of the

competition, a month after Hurricane Katrina landed.[10]

Although, as I've previously identified, the competition was held ostensibly as a traditional design

competition within the illusion of the field of architecture – the way it manifested was quite

different than the mythical model. If I diagram this model:
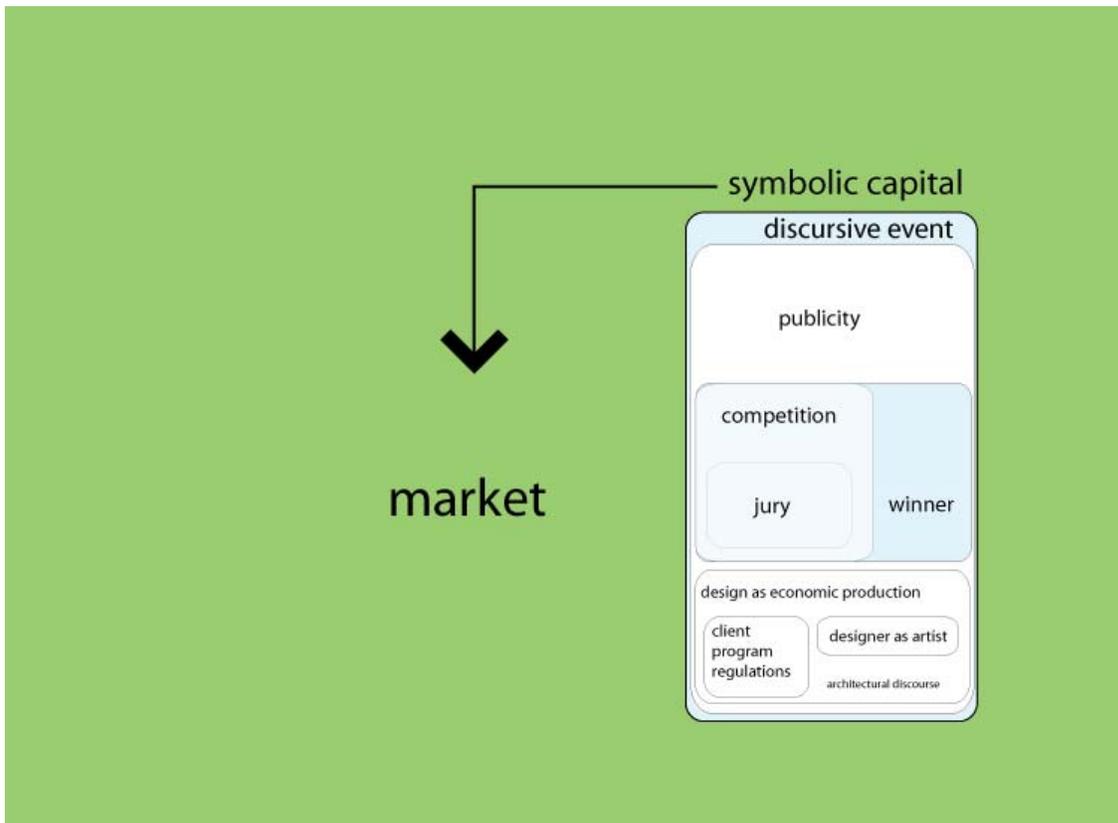
The Global Green model is not market avoidant like the traditional illusio of architecture, but

market driven. It utilizes the function of a design competition as a discursive event to generate

symbolic capital for the agenda it promotes within the larger market. The competition is held as a

device to promote their ideology, as well as a means to obtain design ideas for the development

of an example project in New Orleans. The new model capitalizes on media coverage to gain

access to a much larger public.

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[10] Matt Petersen, *Sustainable Design Competition for New Orleans.* Global Green U.S.A. (May 23, 2006): i.

The success of their approach, using a competition to generate media interest and coverage to promote their sustainable building agenda, is gauged by the coverage they received:

General Coverage:
Newspapers and Magazines in:
Sydney, Australia
Vancouver, Canada
Toronto, Canada
Ottawa, Canada
Manitoba, Canada
Melbourne, Australia
Atlanta, GA
Salt Lake City, UT
Memphis, TN
Albany, NY
Augusta, GA
Madison, WI
Bismarck, ND
Washington Post
Charleston, WV
Chicago, IL
Los Angeles, CA
San Diego, CA
San Francisco, CA
St. Petersburg, FL
Detroit, MI
Turkish Daily News
Times-Picayune (New Orleans)
Associated Press (International News)
Reuters, New Orleans

Television:
NBC News – *Today Show*
07.14.06 – 2:50 minutes
07.17.06 – 5:56 minutes
07.18.06 – 3:55 minutes

Google Search Results:
"Brad Pitt" "New Orleans" = 606,000 results

"Brad Pitt" "New Orleans" "Competition" = 99,900 results

"Brad Pitt" "Global Green" "New Orleans" = 16,200 results

"Architectural Record" "New Orleans" "Competition" = 16,100 results

"Workshop/APD" = 2,820 results

Design Professional Coverage:
Architecture/Design-related publications:
Contract Magazine (351 words)
Architectural Record (500 words)
Architecture Magazine (320 words)
Bauwelt

Architecture/Design-related web publications and blogs:
Treehugger
Inhabitat
Architecture Week
Plenty Magazine

Rebuilding a better, greener New Orleans

Global Green and Brad Pitt join forces to help bring housing to the Gulf Coast region. Check out the eco-conscious designs and video

TODAY
Updated: 3:40 p.m. ET July 18, 2006

To help encourage environmentally-friendly building, Brad Pitt, along with Global Green, announced a sustainable design architectural competition for the areas of New Orleans devastated by Hurricane Katrina. It drew 3000 registrants from all over the world, six finalists were chosen. Check out the designs below, and watch video of Pitt, the "Today" show's Ann Curry, and Matt Petersen, president of Global Green USA, discuss the finalists.

NBC VIDEO

Ann Curry: By some estimates, something like half — 50 percent — of this city is still abandoned.

Pitt: Yeah, it's shocking. In one of our greatest cities. But you see it, it's house on top of house on top of car. And this is a story you'll find street after street.

Imagine going through the trauma of this, of watching everything you own be swept away, maybe loss of life, and then sitting in this limbo for a year. Wanting to get your life back. But not knowing whether it's even possible. Are there gonna be schools here? Are the hospitals gonna be up and running? Are your neighbors gonna be back here?

To this shattered city, *Pitt is bringing a new idea called green design* — that is, a way to rebuild using materials that are less harmful to the

Pitt: Right now 45 percent of our pollution comes from the creation of our buildings and the operation of our buildings, which is a staggering number.

Joining the non-profit group Global Green, Pitt announced an architectural competition to green design a 12-unit apartment complex. It drew 3,000 registrants from all over the world, now narrowed down to six finalists.

Curry: Not only are you talking about it, you also put some money into this project?

Pitt: Yeah, sure, I'm sponsoring this competition. I'm invested in this competition.

Curry: About $100,000?

Although there was widespread national and some international coverage of the competition within traditional public media outlets (city newspapers, Reuters); there is a discrepancy between the national coverage, and coverage within design professional media – a conflict between the general market and the architectural illusio. The general articles and television pieces focus on Pitt's involvement in the competition, and Global Green's initiatives proponing green design. The technological aspects of the finalists' sustainable designs are discussed, but not the process or architectural features. The designer is seen as technological component organizer. Competition result discussions focused on the technology that can achieve more efficient buildings: minimal energy use (geothermal heat pumps), on-site water treatment, traditional techniques (cross-ventilation and louvers) for climate control, and end-of-pipe design for easy consumption. Although the competition title and brief suggest larger ambitions – in the media coverage, there was no discussion of larger systems necessary to achieve Sustainable Rebuilding of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast – things like the relationship to transportation, services, schools, commercial spaces the other elements necessary to achieve sustainability.

The competition was designed to capitalize on the format of media presentation, and scaled appropriate to be quickly understandable. The duration of just over 2 months, much less than the previous High Density on High Ground and New Orleans Prototype House competitions, which were both ideas competitions – whereas this competition was intended to be realized, was scaled to the media attention span, and desire for the results of the competition and initiation of the project to act as a catalyst for development prior to the 1-year anniversary of the Hurricane. By incorporating both single-family residential and apartment units in the program, though the area in which the competition site was selected was primarily single-family residential and had a high amount of homeownership, the competition program was able to relate to a large portion of the country's populace. It modeled something anyone could do – something many people can relate to, to push Global Green's agenda.

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The market-influenced position of the competition led to a new definition of the role of the designer in the stage I competition brief:

> The competition seeks visionary, yet practical responses to the challenge of sustainable development. By providing specific examples of the how a thoughtful and environmentally responsible rebuilding could take place, the competition hopes to lead New Orleans to a position of prominence in the area of sustainable development and thus help recapture its reputation as a place of innovation and leadership.
>
> Competitors are urged to think outside the box, but to remember that the box must still be buildable at an affordable price.[11]

The traditional illusio of the mythical architecture competition separates market forces, the economic production aspect of architecture, from the designer-as-artist conception of the art of architecture. In the Global Green competition, however, the two are merged. This simultaneous artistic and practical architectural designer is identified in the stage II brief as well:

> It is our highest hope that your ultimate solution is one that will be celebrated by the Holy Cross community, New Orleans, the jury and the broader design – including at large and green design – world. The task before you is formidable, requiring not only your skills as a designer, but also as a communicator, community planner, and an innovator. The goals of this competition are lofty, and a national spotlight is upon you.[12]

Although the brief emphasizes the value of the architect as designer/artist and pragmatic practitioner, the role of the designer in the media campaign was minimal at best. The winning designers and finalists were not interviewed as part of the Global Green/Brad Pitt media campaign: Brad Pitt did most of the public-relations work, with Matt Petersen of Global Green participating occasionally. The winning designers, Workshop/APD, were interviewed on the blog Inhabitat, but not in the traditional architectural media. The coverage of the winning designers in architectural media was limited to brief articles with headlines like that below from *Architecture Magazine* (where Reed Kroloff, a competition advisor, previously served as Editor-in-Chief):

> Brad Pitt Picks Matthew Berman, Andrew Kotchen
> Workshop/apd wins New Orleans housing competition

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[11] Global Green U.S.A., *Sustainable Design Competition for New Orleans.* Global Green U.S.A. (May 23, 2006): 4.
[12] Global Green U.S.A., Stage II Competition Brief, *Sustainable Design Competition for New Orleans.* Global Green U.S.A. (July 26, 2006): 3.

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The architectural community clearly did not adopt the new form of competition as defined by Global Green as part of its illusio. It appears that the manifestation of this competition was too far a field of the illusio that architectural competitions create and reinforce. The social capital traditionally convened upon competition winners has not manifested in the same way for the winners at Workshop/APD. Although they were able to obtain symbolic capital in the larger market, obtaining instant green expert status and large exposure, and benefits like keynote speaking positions at the Green Brooklyn Conference in November 2006, and hosting sustainable design workshops in the Hamptons in April, 2007. Workshop/APD did not receive social capital within the illusio of architecture. Sarfatti Larson suggests:

> Architectural competitions are discursive events because they have the potential of changing (more indirectly than directly) authorized notions of what architecture is, for those who listen to the specialized discourse of architecture.[13]

In the case of the Global Green competition, the audience was the larger public, not only those privy to the specialized discourse of architecture – and the architectural illusio fought back, by refusing to admit the results into the discourse in any significant way. Rather than rejecting the exaptation of the competition – I suggest that we learn from the methods used by Global Green, and that the field of architecture could benefit from rethinking competitions as means of promoting the value of architecture in the larger market.

In both the mythical model of competition and the Global Green model, the architect's role is passive participant. As Sarfatti Larson identifies, we are in a position of market weakness. This allows us to be both exploited by the competition organizers, and complicit in that exploitation. Lipstadt says "only architects, among professionals, enter competitions; all others merely compete."[14] Is it possible to exapt the tool of competition, as Global Green did, to reposition the field of architecture in the larger market, giving us a stronger market position? A key aspect of their strategy was the incorporation of media personality to draw attention and get airtime for the

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[13] Magali Sarfatti Larson, "Architectural Competitions as Discursive Events", *Theory and Society* Vol. 23, No. 4 (Aug. 1994): 472
[14] Hélène Lipstadt, "Theorizing the Competition," *Thresholds* v.21 (2000) 32.

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agenda they promoted – the illusio of architecture could learn from the opportunity that media

personality creates, and adopt a similar model – promoting the field of architecture. If we stay too

self-referential, if our illusio is too tight to allow for acknowledgement and integration of market

systems, we will always maintain a weak market position. A new diagram should be generated,

using the competition as a device to generate symbolic capital in the larger market:
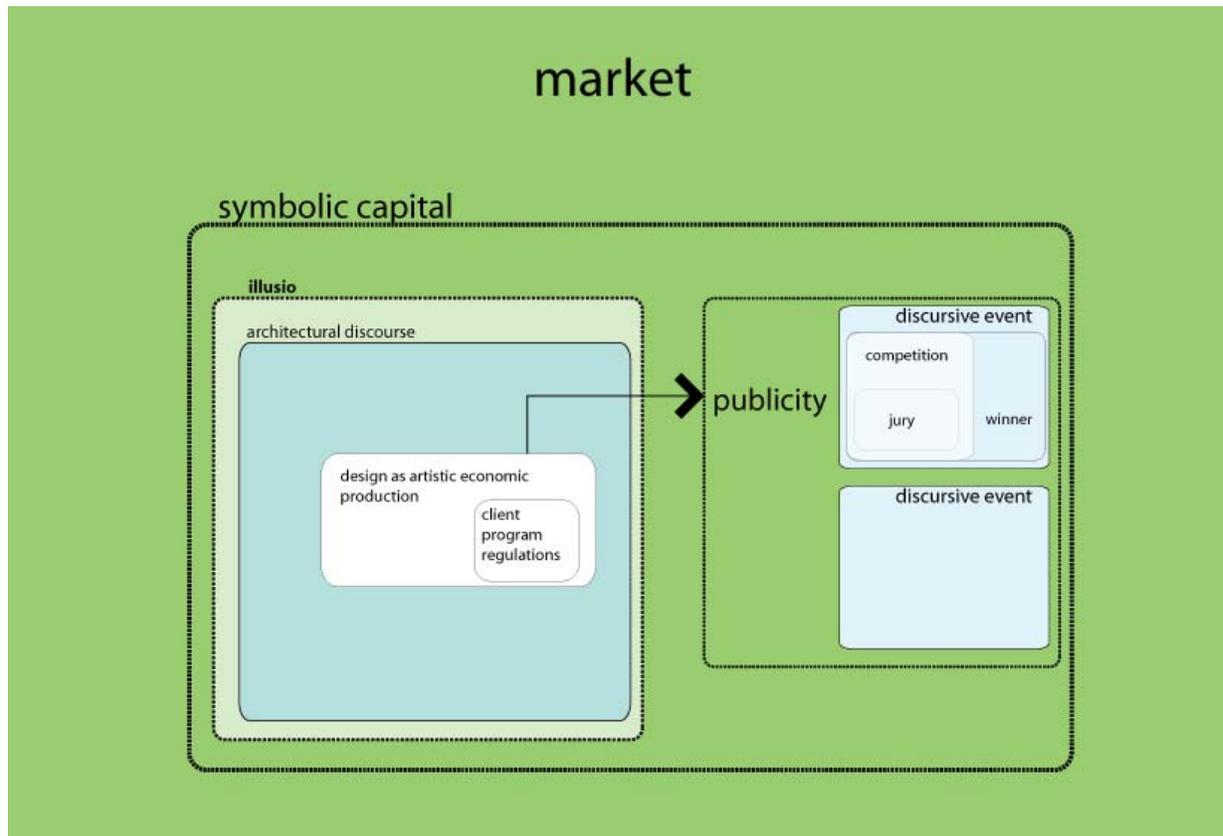
We must restructure the competition as a means to gain publicity and transmit knowledge

beneficial to our field into the larger public arena. There could be a strong alliance between our

nation's thirst for competition (simply look at our television programming for proof of this, let alone

our national athletics obsession) and the field of architecture's desire to hold competitions. The

Sustainable Design Competition for New Orleans provided one example of the exaptation of

competition; there are undoubtedly more. A resource exists here that has been untapped, it would

be to the benefit of the field of architecture to rethink the ingrained notions of architecture as art

form, and retool its relationship to the larger market.