

As published by Competitions Editor and International News Writer Merlin Fulcher 2018

The Grace Arts Centre has launched an international contest for an urban street shade in Fort Lauderdale, Florida (Deadline: 5 November)

Q&A with David Benjamin and Clare Vickery

The professional adviser and Grace Arts Centre director discusses his ambitions for the competition

Why are you holding an international competition for a new urban sunshade connecting a bus station to Fort Lauderdale's civic hub?

Fort Lauderdale attracts a wide range of international travellers and residents to its busy air and sea port. Many visitors spend time downtown before cruises or travelling to South Florida destinations like Miami. The return of passenger services to the historical Florida East Coast railway and the opening of Brightline Miami-Fort Lauderdale-West Palm Beach regional travel includes a new Fort Lauderdale stop that opened in 2017 constructed near the bus station designed by Laurinda Spear (Arquitectonica 1988). It's surrounded by low lying buildings and scattered, undeveloped lots, two city blocks north of the county offices, main library and art museum 'hub' and just west of the city hall. Substantial homeless groups surround the rail and bus stop and there is a 'camp' across the street from the hub.

In addition to proposing solutions for urban shade, entrants should suggest innovative solutions to engage the public to finance chronic homeless solutions as they use and enjoy the structure and its features. Such solutions for the homeless population of the city will be separate from the shade structure but the Sponsor considers homeless conditions and poverty to be an integral part of urban life and a concern to many residents and visitors to the city. This urban shade structure should result in the highest quality urban design and socially responsible solutions for neglected populations, a worthy blend of architecture, engineering, and social services in a growing metropolitan area of the sub-tropics.

We met with groups of marketing, design and engineering stakeholders who lamented the resiliency malaise that affects Florida officials unable to address design and sustainability issues adequately in codes and development approvals. As we discussed 'big ideas' and 'regional' containment of water and climate impacts, we realized perhaps a competition to address basic 'shade while walking' and 'pedestrian safety' for two city blocks could capture how sustainable principals can impact daily life. We also knew that the city was wrestling with pervasive chronic homeless issues.

An urban shade project that is both beautiful and affords protection from nature - a recycling 'machine' using rain, sunlight and wind to power lighting at night and manage water for landscape elements and drainage- could share tangible examples of resilient design. A design that inspired contributions for the maintenance of the structure and homeless services emerged from our discussions about practical costs of managing installations and fostering a sense of community.

What is your vision for the new sunshade?

We are looking for ideas that are 'out of the box' not driven by local agendas or politics. It's also a great way to capture the imagination of locals when others take notice of Fort Lauderdale and offer design solutions and opportunities to collaborate on pervasive issues such as homelessness and mental illness often associated with chronic homeless individuals.

Bright colours and beautiful lighting at night; movement of pedestrians and bicyclists together (but not mingled), providing areas for rest and gathering to eat at all times of day, mingling in a public space under an exhilarating covering. We encourage proposals to suggest changes to roadways, creating a public square where needed.

The two city blocks are super blocks with under-utilised lots open to the weather elements. The Broward Boulevard and Andrews Avenue intersection is hard to navigate, homeless people and camps are on both blocks day and night.

Design innovation is what we are seeking; the structure should create a compelling 'pathway' for safe travel into the heart of the city and to the hub – including the museum of art, restaurants and other attractions within a few blocks of the rail station nearby. Sustainable design is the heartbeat of the project.

We hope ideas are so compelling that Funders will be standing in line to participate. We plan on a vernissage in 2019 to provide winning entrants with an opportunity to present their ideas in more detail to officials and potential funders. When we get to the installation phase, we'd like to pair international with local talent of high regard.

A downtown mobility plan has been offered by the county and other links can be found on the Grace Arts Center web page for entrants to download or read about other projects happening in the project vicinity. This design competition sponsored by a non-governmental organisation and non-profit art centre is unusual. We hope to work with county and city officials to review other innovative, artistic ideas that will draw people to the downtown.

A variety of organic and formal artistic installations are being considered for other cities that incorporate other elements such as murals and street furniture and utility 'art' among other public art into a plan to create distinctive sense of place. Yes, we are actively looking at new grants for the next stage and have funds for the planned vernissage in 2019

What sort of architects and designers are you hoping will apply?

We hope to receive a range of submitted ideas from non-design and design professionals from all areas of the world. A previous entryway design competition for the Grace Arts Center resulted in proposals from all around the world in 2012 suggesting innovative sustainable wall treatments and landscape options that are common sustainable solutions.

Are there any other recent urban sunshade projects you have been impressed by?

When producing a theatre or exhibition project (which is what Grace Arts Center does as part of its programming), we strive to identify the best local talent and reach out to others across the globe. It's a natural progression to assume the same approach will lead to better design and products. Shade structures we like include Metropol Parasol in Seville Spain, and Tel Aviv, Israel's recent competition winners for shade at various junctures in the city. Locally, a 2018 'umbrella sky' installation in Coral Gables by Portuguese 'SextaFeira' created a great economic benefit for a small shopping district in need of a boost. The [Metropol Parasol](#) is also impressive.