

12th February 2018

Victoria and Albert Museum
Cromwell Road
Kensington
London
SW7 2RL

To Whom It May Concern

V&A East Collection and Research Centre Design – Open Letter

We have assessed the V&A East tender, and with deep regret have decided we have to decline to submit an expression of interest. Furthermore we really need to highlight how the approach the V&A has taken to appointing architects is unreasonably costly to the competing parties, part of a growing trend in public procurement.

The EoI requirements are actually very simple and the V&A is to be applauded in cutting out the endless screeds of meaningless writing required by so much of current public procurement. It is however the second stage of the process, should we be selected, that is so deeply problematic. Our track record of this type of facility is very strong, which should make us ideal candidates. However the cost of bidding and risk involved related to the reward is just too high.

The brief for the second stage is a draft, but in essence three things are clear:

1. There is no maximum number of competitors in the second stage, but we are told *at least 5*. Of course there can only be one winner, so each entry has a 20% chance of success at best, even less if more are invited. Those are poor odds for teams already selected at the first stage on expertise.
2. The work required is broadly equivalent to RIBA stage 2, complete with presentation boards, sketchbook, report, a scale model and perspectives of each public space. We know from experience of many design competitions, that the cost to us of preparing a high quality bid would not be less than £50,000 excluding the costs of consulting engineers. That is a likely collective cost to the profession of well over 1/4 of a million pounds, none of which is money spent on a solution that has been derived from meaningful client briefing or collaborative consultation. When that consultation happens in stage 2 proper, the design will inevitably change. The honorarium to losing teams is £5000. The minimum honorarium for such a competition needs to be many times higher.

It should also be noted that the submission requirements rely on the goodwill of engineers and other consultants supporting us, also spending thousands, who in reality have little chance of being taken on. That's an expensive lot of collective goodwill.

3. Although the appointment is in theory from stage 0-6, in reality the bulk of the commission is stage 2-3 after which, it is stated that there will probably be a design and build procurement. The following stages may be after a year or so according to the published programme, and the extent of the architect's role in this is unclear at this stage. The fee/resource submission also forms part of the competition assessment, worth 30% of the mark, meaning the job will need to be heavily resourced and the fee sharp to win. This being the case, the money spent at competition can only be recouped by wiping out any profit margin in stages 2-3. If you suppose we enter five such 20% chance competitions, and win one, the losses we would incur would be substantial.

We are a design practice. We have previously been shortlisted for the Stirling prize. We have built award winning archives and visitor facilities for prominent public institutions. We thrive on design challenge and the subject matter in the V&A project is perfectly aligned with what we do and do very well. It pains me greatly to walk away from this type of project. But we are also a business, and the cost of competing for this job is just too high.

The V&A has decided it wants to shortlist on track record. That is a good way to go, but a final selection for this particular job could be done by interview with a short presentation on an approach and big ideas. The reality of the full competition approach on this particular project is wasteful on so many levels. The V&A of all organisations should be valuing good design - not pushing design into a marginal loss-making corner, only able to be carried as a loss leader by larger commercial companies. Of course many will enter regardless and that is their commercial decision, and we are sure you will get the outstanding facility you envisage. But we thought you should be aware of the economic implications of this process.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'P Inglis'.

Peter Inglis
Practice Leader
For and on behalf of Cullinan Studio