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So, the competition was to design a des res for a few hundred flying midge munchers, but the results were revelatory – and strangely important for all of us...

Consider the bat

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A couple of weeks ago, I judged a competition. But this was no ordinary architectural competition. First, it was to design a structure not for humans, but for bats. Now bats don't have a great image. They are, in my view, not particularly cute to look at; they have fangs, they are furry, with pointy ears and they have weird wings. Typically they are thought of as scary, blood sucking vampires. Bats are clearly in need of a bit of rebranding.

Second, this competition was commissioned not by a developer or a client, but by the Turner Prize-winning artist Jeremy Deller. Deller is a very serious artist who happens to love bats. He set up the competition as a way of fusing his interest in bats and ecology with his artistic interest in public participation. To give some context to Deller's work, one of his exhibitions at the Barbican last year was an assembly of folk objects, reconfigured and curated by Deller but not created by him.

In this project the bat house, although designed by someone else, will be his "work". This in itself is an interesting idea as it touches on the issues of authorship, identity and recognition that often dominate architectural debate.

As with all well-organised competitions, the jury was a balance of individuals, each representing a different view. There was Deller the artist, myself the architect, Rowan Moore, the architectural critic, a trustee of the London Bat Group, the bat expert and the director of Wetlands Trust in Barnes, where the structure will be sited.

A winner was selected from each of the three entry levels: architects, the general public and children, with a single overall winner whose scheme will be built. The jury conversations became heated as we decided on who made the shortlist. Although the project is microscopic in scale – like 2m tall – the issues were the same as in any competition: how to reconcile the demands of function, artistry, ecology and client need.

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What was most fascinating about the process was the architects' response. Almost without exception they produced miniature buildings. There were a few twin towers, a couple of Libeskind's, and a preponderance for Mies. I'm not sure what this says about architects, other than they missed the point or were unable to rise to a brief that demanded an alternative way of looking.

The kids' entries were charming, although choosing the winner for that category proved the most contentious decision. The bat experts argued for a thoroughly worthy but boring design that was most probably assisted by an adult. However I argued strongly in favour of the pink Bat Barbie Castle. And why did a major artist, a highly respected architectural critic and a Stirling Prize winning architect choose that? Because it had several well thought through environmental features, it was beautifully executed, it was uncompromising but above all it embodied the unbridled passions of the designer. And the winner of that category was the 10-year-old Inderjit Mehroke – go, girl, go!

Interestingly, the overall winner came from the general public section: a poetic response to the brief, merging digital technology with natural materials without architectural

hang-ups and meeting the complex needs of bats. Complex because as forests have been felled, bats have been denied their natural habitat, so like all intelligent mammals they have adapted, taking up residence in dilapidated buildings whose chimney flues and rafters mimic the tangle of tree branches and provide the kind of tight fly-through spaces that bats enjoy. Bats are demanding clients and they will vote with their wings if things are not quite right. So if we want to avoid the seemingly absurd conservation laws that have the power to halt new developments in the name of bats, we need to give serious consideration to alternative habitats.

And perhaps we should take the lead from Deller who has turned a modest brief and budget into an architectural opportunity and in doing so has changed our perception of bats in one fell swoop. Did you know, for example, that bats eat 3,000 midges a day, the very insects that spread the bluetongue virus and the like? We need bats and I hope this inspired work, which is as much about human contemplation as it is about animal inhabitation, will help give bats the reputation they deserve.