



Social venture 'Shift' launches architecture competition for a New World Wonder to spark climate action

Throughout history, humans have created landmarks – from pyramids to cathedrals to skyscrapers – to unite communities, showcase progress, and spark inspiration. Now, Shift, a new social venture founded by Dutch entrepreneur Don Ritzen, aims to construct a landmark specifically designed to inspire climate action and which looks to attract over 1 million annual visitors. To turn this ambitious vision into reality, Shift is launching an international architecture competition on January 15, 2025 with a total prize pool of €250,000.

Supported by a network of Dutch strategic partners and impact financiers, the first Shift landmark will be in the Netherlands, where 55% of the land is at risk of flooding due to rising sea levels and river flooding. From architects and activists to scientists and entrepreneurs, Shift envisions a dynamic space where stories of passionate climate and sustainability pioneers converge, aiming to inspire its visitors on a large scale. *"While 75% of Europeans are concerned about climate change¹, only 10% are taking meaningful action²,"* Ritzen points out. *"We want to create a space of wonder, hope and possibility that inspires everyone to take action."*

Within this new space, a permanent program curated by Shift will encourage and nurture sustainable behaviors. Using immersive experiences, it will highlight the authentic stories of climate and sustainability champions. The ambition is to build landmarks across the globe.

In their [brief to architects](#), Shift emphasizes that the landmark should envision the next level of sustainable architecture. The first phase of the competition is open to architects worldwide. After the first phase, five architectural firms will be selected for the second phase where they will develop their concept in more detail. The five

¹ [European Commission: Citizen support for climate action](#)

² [PBL Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency](#)

finalists will receive €40,000 each and the winning concept will receive an additional €50,000.

Two of the five finalist spots will be firms Shift has approached directly - one globally renowned architecture firm and one innovative smaller firm. This way, Shift wants to signal the range and caliber of desired talent to its key stakeholders.

The remaining three spots will be chosen from an open international competition overseen by DVDL, a New York-based agency of cultural planners and competition advisors, and a jury drawn from the fields of architecture, impact investing, biodiversity, academia, real estate and the cultural sector: Aric Chen (Nieuwe Instituut), Astrid Leyssens (We Are Impact Collective), Ben van Berkel (UNStudio), Clemens Brenninkmeijer (Redevco), Géke Roelink (Nemo), Dr. Lewis Akenji (Hot or Cool institute), Lodewijk Hoekstra (NL Greenlabel), Mireia Luzárraga (TAKK), and Nicole Maarsen (Social Value foundation).

Once shortlisted, the five finalists will extend their team with behaviour, sustainability and other experts to create an immersive and inspiring climate change experience.

The competition has light submission requirements and maximum freedom for creativity of participating teams. Furthermore, the intellectual property of the non-selected teams remain with the architects. With the competition, Shift's founder Ritzen hopes to bring inspiration and innovation to the architecture, engineering and construction field.

At his previous company Rockstart, Ritzen invested in over 250 startups with bright commercial and sustainable ideas with the aim to scale globally. In addition to the landmark, Shift will also unveil a digital platform designed to inspire people every day through engaging storytelling, initiatives and practical tips for embracing sustainable change.

"While innovation and public policy are vital components in the climate transition, there is also huge potential for impact through individuals taking responsibility for their own choices. I've always been fascinated about how to create the ideal environment for people to get outside their comfort zone and learn and discover new things, because that's where the magic happens. Unfortunately, when you look at the global climate crisis, the majority of people are still silent, feel paralysed or

are still in 'talk mode'. We urgently need more action. Shift invites people to embark on this journey of discovery, from a starting point of positivity and wonder," Ritzen explains.

Aric Chen, member of the Jury: *"At the Nieuwe Instituut, we have initiated the Zoöp organisational model to make the interests of nonhuman life part of organisational decision making and increase society's focus on ecological regeneration. I believe Shift has a complimentary and bold ambition to become a new destination for climate action, something that is direly needed. I am excited to see how architects will respond to Shift's innovative briefing to architects and the outcome of the competition."*

Ben van Berkel, member of the Jury: *"UNStudio's mission is to design for lasting impact and little impact on the planet, a goal close to my heart is to contribute to the societal challenge of climate change. So when Shift asked me to use that knowledge to help them judge designs for a "new world wonder" for climate action, I was intrigued and eager to share my experience to help realise their important vision."*

About Shift

Shift is a social, steward-owned enterprise founded by entrepreneur Don Ritzen. Ritzen believes that behavioural change is one of the biggest challenges when it comes to climate change and that it is overlooked because of the controversy. That is why he set out to find an approach that could inspire millions.

Shift is one of only 80 Dutch companies to have passed the accreditation process of the Social Enterprise Code, which means impact comes first.

Before starting Shift, Ritzen co-founded Amsterdam-based accelerator Rockstart, which has offices in Bogota, Copenhagen and Amsterdam. Since its founding in 2010, Rockstart has invested in more than 350 early-stage startups, including many impact-oriented companies such as Peerby, Sympower and Hubs. Today, the Rockstart companies combined are worth EUR 1.7 billion.

Factsheet Shift Architecture Competition

Key dates	January 15: Competition Launch March 5, 5pm EST: Final Submission Stage One April 17: Announcement Shortlist Finalists September 10: Final Submission Stage Two October: Public Pitch Event November: Announcement Winning Team
Jury members	Aric Chen , Director, Nieuwe Instituut Astrid Leyssens , Founder, We Are Impact Collective Ben van Berkel , Founder, UNStudio Clemens Brenninkmeijer , Head of Sustainability, Redevco Géke Roelink , Director, NEMO Science Museum Dr. Lewis Akenji , Executive Director, Hot or Cool Institute Lodewijk Hoekstra , Ambassador and Presenter Mireia Luzárraga , Co-Founder, TAKK Nicole Maarsen , Adviser & Board Member Stadsgoed
Prize Money	€250,000 in total; five shortlisted firms will receive €40,000 each, with a winning concept receiving an additional €50,000
Competition Advisor	DVDL , a New York-based agency of cultural planners working on visitor experience, placemaking, cultural strategy in North America, Europe and the Middle East
Competition Host	Don Ritzen, Shift (Amsterdam)
Website	https://competition.shift.world/
Press images	https://media.shift.world/media_kits/234061/

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Frequently asked Questions

1. About the Competition

What is the process around the prize purse?

We have a total prize purse of €250.000. The final 5 selected teams will each receive €40.000. They will be granted €20.000 upon entering Stage Two; the other €20.000 immediately following the end of the competition. The winning team will receive an additional €50.000, right after the announcement of the winner by the jury. Our goal is to offer the winning team a contract to finalize the design of the Shift landmark (contingent on the development of various project elements).

Why are you shortlisting two firms to enter Stage Two in your competition?

While our original intent was to select all five shortlisted firms from an open international competition, we ultimately opted for this hybrid approach due to the following: In our discussions with Dutch municipalities, it is imperative that we demonstrate that we can deliver on the ambition of our project. Demonstrating that one globally renowned architecture firm is already in the running helps to achieve this end. Similarly, a second shortlisted, smaller sustainable firm will illustrate that we are setting the bar high in terms of sustainability. Our choice of shortlisted firms also indicates to entrants the quality and caliber of talent and experience we are looking for. Traditionally, architecture competitions of this nature and stature exclusively invite large and established firms to enter. We opted to shortlist two different types of firms. The first is a large practice with a strong track record of creating extraordinary architecture and a commitment to furthering its sustainability profile. The second is a smaller practice with a strong sustainability track record and the ambition to scale up. Both firms must demonstrate their commitment to reimagining what constitutes a modern-day icon in the sustainable context. While two spots are indeed fixed, we hope that a great diversity of established, emerging and up-and-coming practices will participate and that our competition setup and hybrid approach encourages innovative ideas and unorthodox entries.

Why did you decide to run an open architectural competition, rather than a closed one: for example, inviting ten pioneering sustainable architecture firms to participate?

We consciously opted for an open competition with the goal to kickstart both a creative process and conversation about the future of architecture and the need to design radically more sustainable buildings that ignite massive climate action. We truly believe that the most groundbreaking concepts can come from anywhere. We acknowledge and respect that time and resources are required to enter these types of competitions. We have therefore intentionally kept the requirements for Stage One relatively light and have a vision for IP that we believe is architect-friendly.

Do architects retain IP ownership on entries not selected?

We believe it is going to take nothing less than a “new Wonder of the World” to inspire humanity to take climate action. This is a key motivation behind this competition. If we can inspire the brightest minds in architecture and design to present their visions, we hope to spark a new age of environmentalism. In this spirit, for all those who submit their ideas and are not shortlisted, we sincerely hope you will find a way to realize your sustainable vision and will not stand in your way to making this happen. Stronger still, should you succeed we will be first in line to applaud your success. Why? Because it will be good for humanity. For this reason, the IP of all designs not selected remains with the architects. We only ask for permission to publicize your designs as part of sharing our journey and learning processes at future conferences and so on. One of the aims of this project and competition is to accelerate sustainable practices across the entire field; we believe our open approach to IP helps realize this ambition.

2. About the Landmark

Why a landmark?

We believe that transformation happens in the real world, and it starts by visiting a place that inspires you to see the world in a different way. Shift currently exists as a digital platform, but for real impact, it also needs to exist in the physical world. As physical destinations, landmarks have the ability to empower people in ways digital platforms simply cannot – in our case, to transform the dominant narrative from denial and powerlessness to hope and action. A landmark for sustainability – the Shift landmark – is key to this mission. Check out this video for more information about our vision.

Is calling for a “new Wonder of the World’ not a tad bit pretentious?

We don't think so, and here's why: Clearly, the ambition for this landmark is high. This is because the climate stakes are equally high. That said, we are fully aware of the legacy and connotation of World Wonders and hope firms considering participating are able to distinguish between the megalomaniacal structures then and what we are trying to achieve now. At the end of the day, we are looking for a physical location that millions of people will want to visit, a place that is special, that garners media attention and that inspires awe. The word “Wonder” has a broader meaning, which involves curiosity and questioning – wondering how things are done or can be done better. For us, wonder is a necessary bridge to inciting meaningful change. Quite honestly, we have ignored the signs of climate change for so long, and the world is now in such a dire state, that it is literally going to take a wonder to turn things around. And yes, by wonder we mean a miracle. Orchestrating the greatest comeback in the history of the planet isn't impossible, but clearly, it's not going to happen by itself.

Why build something new at all? Why not re-use?

It is possible that the winning design could in fact propose the re-use/retrofitting of an existing structure, or a hybrid solution consisting of both existing and new elements. Due to the great ambition of the project and the wide number of entries expected, we wanted to remove all obstacles to the imagination and not disqualify any ideas from consideration. It is up to the competition teams to present the most profound and impactful path to the future.

Why start the competition without a fixed location?

We began with a vision, not a location. From the project's inception we knew we were stepping into the unknown. Similarly, Stage One of the competition is about presenting a vision that is not tied to a specific location. We believe this is the best possible approach to unlocking the imaginations of participants and for us to end up with the best possible location. Our conversations with municipalities are validating this approach.

Once the first Shift landmark arises, do you plan to build more?

We plan to build a series of Shift landmarks that span the globe – one on each

continent. The effects of climate change are indiscriminate and impact everyone; the more people we incite to action, the greater our chances of survival. If our landmark indeed has the profound impact we hope and expect it will have, then the more landmarks the better.

3. About Shift

Who is behind this?

Shift was founded by social entrepreneur Don Ritzen. Don believes that behavioral change is the biggest challenge to overcoming climate change but is overlooked because it is controversial and confronting. That is why he set out to create an approach that could inspire millions. Before starting Shift, Don was the co-founder of Amsterdam-based accelerator Rockstart, which has offices in Bogota, Copenhagen and Amsterdam. Since its founding in 2010, Rockstart has invested in 350+ early-stage startups to date, of which many are impact-oriented companies such as Peerby and Hubs. Together, these companies are now worth EUR 1.7 billion. The founder, Don Ritzen, has personally invested almost the entirety of his financial resources into Shift and has worked exclusively on the project for several years with no pay. While he has no personal financial stake in the project, he is putting his money where his mouth is and is leading by example.

Is Shift a foundation or a business?

Shift is a steward-owned startup which means that the mission comes first and is embedded in the legal structure. The Shift World BV legal entity is 95% owned by a foundation, Stichting Shift World, with the remaining shares owned by impact investors and crowdfunders who receive a limited upside of 5% return per year. This allows Shift to make a profit in the future and re-invest these profits into the mission. The founder and Shift team are deliberately not shareholders in Shift to ensure their only purpose is to advance its mission: to help solve climate change. Want to read more about Steward Ownership, check out this website.

What are you trying to achieve with Shift?

We spent many years researching climate change psychology, behavioral change and social tipping points. The main lessons learned: we need 25% of people to live a truly sustainable lifestyle in order to set a new normal and inspire the "early majority"

to live within planetary boundaries. We are currently at around 10%. Our mission is to create a movement of millions of people to help reach the social tipping point of 25%. Our research shows that when people first take individual ownership and action, they also start to influence the people, organisations and companies around them. This is how we move from individual change to systemic change.

Who else is involved? Who are your partners, advisors and investors?

Shift is currently funded by a group of Dutch investors, private individuals and families amongst which De Hoge Dennen, Erik Schut (investor in Hardt Hyperloop, Sympower and many others) and Alef Ahrendsen (founder New Motion). As the project enters the next stages of development, we will increase this number via our personal relationships with 300 private and institutional investors, e.g. pension funds and banks. It is sufficient to say we have access to the necessary funding and resources to transform the winning design into reality.