# Hassell explores AI-powered creativity with innovative internal treehouse design competition



Hassell, the international architecture and design firm, has embarked on an innovative initiative to integrate artificial intelligence (AI) into its creative workflows through an internal competition. The challenge, which focused on designing a treehouse at Kew Royal Botanic Gardens in London, invited architects and designers across various disciplines to experiment with AI tools and explore new creative directions. This competition took place over a year ago and involved nearly 60 participants from the firm, including architects, landscape architects, and interior designers.

Xavier De Kestelier, Principal and Head of Design at Hassell, explained the motivation behind the competition in an interview with Architecture & Design. He noted that as AI technologies—especially image-generating tools—were becoming increasingly accessible, the firm wanted its teams to actively engage with these tools through a dynamic, hands-on format. “Rather than simply offering a training session—which felt a bit dull—I thought a competition would be a more engaging way for people to self-train and experiment,” De Kestelier said. The choice of the treehouse brief stemmed from an earlier Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) competition, providing an established framework but also appealing broadly across the firm’s core disciplines.

The competition saw a notably strong response from landscape architects, a group that traditionally faces challenges in producing high-quality visualisations in their field. AI-driven tools facilitated this by enabling the rapid creation of photorealistic imagery, which many participants found valuable. De Kestelier highlighted this as particularly important, commenting that AI “helps generate photorealistic imagery more easily and quickly, which can be a real asset.”

One intriguing insight from the competition was how participants used AI prompts to steer the image generation process. De Kestelier revealed that the top submissions rarely included the word “treehouse” in their prompts, as doing so often resulted in clichéd and fantasy-like designs that drew on common online imagery. Instead, successful entrants focused on original ideas first, crafting bespoke prompts that reflected their unique concepts. This emphasis on creative prompt engineering underscored the evolving role of human creativity in guiding AI outputs.

Submissions were evaluated against five criteria: sustainability and regenerative design, visual quality, originality, concept execution, and the coherence between concept description and visual representation. The judging process was rigorous, mirroring standards applied in real-world design competitions. Sustainability emerged as a consistent and central theme across almost all entries, reflecting Hassell’s commitment to environmentally conscious design.

The competition also revealed interesting trends in adoption of new technology across different experience levels. De Kestelier observed that AI tools were embraced not only by younger team members but also by senior associates and principals—highlighting the accessibility of AI tools that rely on natural language prompts rather than complex software skills. “AI is accessible because it’s based on language rather than complex software skills. It’s reinvigorating the value of hand sketches and written concept descriptions in the design process,” he said.

Within Hassell, the competition has encouraged informal experimentation with AI, with participants independently selecting and subscribing to various platforms such as Midjourney, DALL·E, and Stable Diffusion. Rather than imposing specific tools, the firm provided a budget allowance, allowing designers to explore freely and discover which technologies best suited their creative workflows.

Among many imaginative entries—including some fantastical designs like floating pavilions—the winning concept stood out for its simplicity and strong rationale. The winning design proposed repurposing discarded festival tents, such as those left behind at the Glastonbury music festival, as hammocks suspended among tree branches. At the heart of the concept was a small music event, anchored by minimal material use and a clear narrative, which was successfully captured in the final image. This entry also exemplified the competition’s approach to prompt creation by avoiding stereotypical descriptors.

Looking ahead, Hassell is considering further competitions and experimental projects to continue integrating AI and other emerging technologies into design practice. De Kestelier mentioned the potential for future challenges involving AI-generated video, as the firm’s innovation team explores how these tools might be harnessed. “Future competitions might look very different—but they’re definitely on the horizon,” he said.

This initiative marks a significant step for Hassell in blending traditional design disciplines with cutting-edge technological tools, fostering an environment where creativity is augmented by AI rather than replaced, and where cross-disciplinary experimentation is actively encouraged.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

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