



Architecture, Planning, Engineering and Construction

Churchill Revisited Architectural Competition

On 1st May, CULS APEC held its second event of the year, a debate to relive the 1959 architectural competition for the development of Churchill College Cambridge. The backdrop for the debate was the effortlessly sophisticated modern offices of Pilbrow and Partners, Clerkenwell, who played host for the occasion.

It was a gathering of the great and the good putting those with an architectural background and interest alongside the usual professional suspects of surveying etc to debate the finalists of the famous design competition for Churchill College, the first college of the modern era.

The crowd was greeted with a very warm welcome including fine refreshments. Under the glow of stage style lighting, the audience rubbed shoulders with one another enjoying pre drinks in Pilbrow's concrete exposed building.

Chaired by Paul Finch, director of the World Architecture Festival, and editorial director of the Architects' Journal and Architectural Review, each scheme was vividly brought to life in a presentation by distinguished architect-presenters to an erudite panel of four critics with an audience of over one hundred guests. There was an air of ambience and enthusiasm as Dr Mark Goldie, informal historian of Churchill College, took to the floor to give the key note address. Goldie spoke with gusto explaining how the modernist architecture zeitgeist expanded to include academic buildings led by the development of Churchill College.

Elain Harwood presented Chamberlin Powell & Bon's (CPB) scheme. Harwood spoke vividly, illustrating how the CPB scheme would have resembled CPB's London's Barbican had it been built.

The panel's verdict on Chamberlin's scheme was mixed. Spencer de Grey's comments carried great weight as he had been an undergraduate at the College. He commented that CPB attempted to address context by considering its neighbours - the two other college proposals on adjacent sites. Overall the panel thought the CPB was the only scheme that had any master planning.

Second to take the stage was Stirling prize-winner Alison Brooks presenting Howell Killick Partridge & Amis' proposal. Brooks demonstrated how HKPA took a 'plastic sculptural' approach to their designs for the college. The scheme took a play on the monastic quadrangle for the 'pure joy' of experimenting with form and mould as a sculptor with clay.

The panel were not convinced by this proposal, feeling the scheme was far too ambitious and could not have been built at the time. Another member frankly remarked it was 'intellectual expression gone mad' and simply 'ugly'. Overall the panel felt the HKPA had been unrealistic about how the designs would have been actualised in concrete.

Third, to present Stirling and Gowan's scheme, was Patrick Lynch. His presentation was a visually rich display of a succession of photographs showing the buildings which possibly could have influenced the original proposal. He highlighted that the original Stirling and Gowan scheme was possibly lost because it only had one poor image of how the scheme would have been! He explained how the proposal was a rare example of truly original modernist English design rather than a 'pastiche of other European projects'.

The panel found the Stirling and Gowan scheme provocative. Lynch argued that Stirling and Gowan had attempted to design Churchill as a new neighbourhood based on a city. The panel disagreed. One member of the panel remarked it was a 'masterpiece'. Overall the judges thought the proposal was a true post-modernist building but had no idea how it would have finally looked.

Last to take to the stage was Takeshi Hayatsu who presented the winning design, the Shepherd Robson scheme. He touched on his current development plans for more accommodation, and described in detail how the new designers, 6a Architects, will use elements of the old to design and shape the new.

The panel were in agreement on the merits of the winning proposal. It won because of its 'safe' treatment to the revered form of the Oxbridge court yards/quadrangle. However, the scheme in itself wasn't exceptional in design. Spencer de Grey gave us some insight as he relived his undergraduate days. He spoke of Churchill as being a lively place with a strong sense of community but simply it 'wasn't the architecture's fault!'

Peter Carolin agreed, chiming that Churchill has a remarkable sense of atmosphere. He also highlighted that architectural competitions for Oxbridge colleges were all about courtyards. Another panel member felt the scheme was logical but not honourable. Overall the judges felt the community made the building rather than vice versa.

Dr Goldie ended the evening concluding on the achievements of Churchill College as a piece of architecture. He explained how it was a 'traditional college in modern dress'. Mark drew parallels between the architectural proposal process of the past and the current development proposals of the West Cambridge site.

Overall the evening was a resounding success, and a night for the architectural buffs to come out of the woodwork, with the CULS network and dialogue providing rich insight into the politics and processes behind architectural competitions. The resounding note was an encore for a similar styled debate on other influential historic competitions.

Sara Basemera

Assistant Planner, Newnham 2012

