

Liverpool School of Architecture

As the jury assesses the six finalists, Marco Iuliano and Alan Berman describe the process of choosing an architect for the new architecture school building

Can an architectural competition identify not only the best professionals, but also allow them the opportunity to question the brief? More generally, by exposing and making the academic community react to the proposals of imaginative practices, can we initiate a rethink of the potential of architecture in today's society? These were the questions set at the beginning of our journey to choose an architect for the new University of Liverpool School of Architecture. We wanted to challenge some current preoccupations of the architectural profession, and also suggest a redefinition of architectural education for the twenty-first century. We aimed for a new building respectful of tradition, but ambitious enough to anticipate future directions in architecture, and how it might be taught.

The school — the first to be accredited by RIBA, and where Max Fry, William Holford, James Stirling and Colin Rowe studied — needed a thoughtful reorganisation of its existing accommodation as well as new space, so an innovative vision was developed with the university's estates department, which is responsible for the masterplan strategy.

The school aspired to use the competition to achieve excellent architecture and serve as a learning opportunity for students. The selection procedure has been structured not — as is too often the case — by the imposition of an architect from above, but through an inclusive process of debate, assessment and selection by the school community and a panel of eminent judges. This route is appropriate for a school of architecture, which will gain wide benefit from the process, ensuring a coincidence of approach between architect and users.



Above
Proposal by Haworth Tompkins, who plan "a space for making noise, for displaying work, for fabrication, for inviting the public in".

Right
Proposal by Carmody Groarke, who emphasise the role of architecture as a social and practical art, "given discipline by the physical processes of design and making".

Below right
Proposal by Grafton Architects, who envisage the new building as a "place of discovery, a laboratory of the imagination".

A winner will be selected from the six finalists by a jury comprising Tate director Maria Balshaw, professor Kenneth Frampton, architect Juhani Pallasmaa, and Michael Wilford, former partner of Liverpool alumnus James Stirling and visiting professor.



It also avoids the potential pitfalls of a process run by an outside consultant which might deliver an architect with whom the client and users have little sympathy. It is a model that any university could follow, regardless of the intended use of the building.

A long list of 18 practices was drawn up, in three categories to ensure architects with diverse experience and backgrounds would have a chance to compete: internationally established (including Pritzker Prize, EU Mies Award and Royal Gold Medal winners); those with a strong background in building for education or in historic contexts; and younger upcoming architects. To allow students and staff meaningful involvement, all first round submissions were presented at an all-school meeting. Everyone then voted to select the nine practices that went forward.

The students could see that even the most successful architects need to communicate their ideas in public and are subject to critical review. A similar process was followed by the school and university to select the final six – two from each category – to present their proposals at a public event in June. The six are Carmody Groarke, 6a Architects, Grafton Architects, O'Donnell & Tuomey, Haworth Tompkins and Eric Parry Architects.

Established in 1894, the school moved into its current premises in the early 1930s when head Charles Reilly and colleagues designed the Leverhulme building, attached to several Georgian townhouses on Abercromby Square, at the heart of the campus. In 1988, tutors and practising architects Dave King and Rob McAllister completed a further addition, currently housing the main teaching and studio spaces.

Thirty years later, the competitors have responded with respect to this history. Along the way, in the second stage, we asked them to articulate the architectural qualities of their previous work, to allow critical analysis of their appropriateness for this demanding project. We chose five 'quality indicators': attention to place, context and scale; the capacity to generate space with character and atmosphere; the production of tectonics, materiality and tactile experience; the organisation, articulation and detail; and environmental responsibility and weathering.

In the third and final stage they have fully embraced the challenge, producing proposals far beyond the assignment while remaining realistic about feasibility and budget. The jury faces a difficult choice, but the school is already benefitting from the architects' efforts, well before the scaffolding goes up. **A**



Above

Proposal by O'Donnell & Tuomey, who focus on "civic purpose, material presence, and poetic potential, aspiring to an architecture of useful beauty".

Left

Proposal by 6a Architects, who see the process of constructing the building as an educational activity to empower and challenge students.

Below left

Proposal by Eric Parry Architects, who intend to form a collaboration with students and staff in the delivery team.



Credits

Jury

Maria Balshaw, Kenneth Frampton (chair), Juhani Pallasmaa, Michael Wilford

Competition committee

Soumyen Bandyopadhyay, Fiona Beveridge, Marco Iuliano (director), Nicholas Ray

Advisory board

Alan Berman, Andy Brown, James Jones, Terry Leahy, Ian Ritchie, Roger Stephenson

Collaboration

Alex Dusterloh, Peter Farrall, Jane Moscardini

Estates department

Alex Beedle, David Harding, Andy Murphy, Steve Taylor

Consultants

Fusion (Gareth Jones, Adrian Vickers)