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Accommodating Change
Innovation in Housing

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Speculation, in Building Design magazine on its completion, that “in 10 years time, Donnybrook might be remembered as a significant turning point in the culture of British housing provision”.

Looking back perhaps we might also consider the competition itself as an exemplar. Firstly as an ‘open’ competition its main, stated purpose was “to explore the creation of new house plan typologies – in effect ‘plans for living’...” ignoring tried and tested norms to encourage architects not previously involved in housing to take part. Secondly, beyond its primary purpose to secure a high quality innovative winning design that would be built, the Accommodating Change initiative set out to raise awareness about contemporary issues in housing design. To achieve this the project included a second ‘ideas’ competition for students, a touring seminar programme, an exhibition, a website and – detailing the whole process – a publication as a permanent record (figure 14.5).

The Brief

The brief for Accommodating Change makes clear that whilst it is intended to build the winning design, entrants are challenged to carry out “action research into the field of innovative housing where we hope all competitors will challenge assumptions about how people live, and will continue to live, in homes of the future”.

‘Circle 33 attaches great importance to good design, and to the contribution it makes to the quality of life of those for whom we provide homes...’
Jane Blom Cooper, Circle 33, Client

The challenges of this architectural competition are wide ranging and it is a unique opportunity; for it is our aim that the winning design is built in a significant central London location...”
Paul Grover, The Architecture Foundation

The Donnybrook Quarter scheme won in the Accommodating Change competition is widely considered as the “breakthrough” project that established Peter Barber’s architectural practice. We might even agree with Ellis Woodman’s insightful
Flexibility, or the ability to ‘accommodate changes’, was a key requirement related to a re-examination of the static notion of the ‘family’, and open spaces both private and shared had to be included. Density was under review at the time and – extraordinarily – competitors were invited to “define the schedule of accommodation” themselves. The usual density for the site (then 247 habitable rooms per hectare) would result in ‘around 23 units’ but the planning department had agreed to waive their guidelines, allowing densities of up to around 50 units on the site.

The invitation to ignore all precedent and be critical about planning guidelines in order to think about new design ideas was appealing to architects, and resulted in approximately 10 entries, a large number for a housing competition.

**Student Competition**

Following the professional competition a separate ideas competition for students was launched with a similar very open brief on a nearby site. The aim was to encourage university courses and students to consider working in the housing field and to ‘offer a unique opportunity for students to challenge assumptions as to what makes for good housing design, as well as contributing fresh ideas for the future’ (Jane Blom Cooper) acknowledging the potential difficulty in tackling a fully resolved project, students were encouraged to focus on one of four key themes: Typology, Sustainability, Density and Technology. Architecture schools then hosted a series of seminars based on these themes which attracted contributions from some well-known architects and other notable housing professionals.

**Dissemination: Exhibition, Website and Publication**

The culmination of the entire process was captured in an exhibition held at the Architecture Foundation gallery in Central London and online through a dedicated website. But it is the book, intended as a “model for debate on housing in the twenty-first century” published by the client and the Architecture Foundation at the same time that has remained a lasting testament, revealing the detailed processes of the competition as well as the winning design. Alongside the images of his winning drawings and models, Peter Barber was invited to contribute a contextual essay that expands on his approach to housing “based on the idea of the street as central to successful urban design”.

The book, which is still referred to on many of the participating architects’ websites and is still available through RIBA bookshops, captures the ‘mood’ of the time, the key issues being discussed – flexibility, density, sustainability – and a flavour of the kinds of projects.
to come. Information submitted for the competition was used to describe the schemes selected for publication, which are loosely grouped by urban typology, and scale drawings of the site plans and unit plans inside the covers were especially made for ease of comparison. Will Alsop, then Chair of the AF, contributed the foreword and Jeremy Till, Sarah Wigglesworth and Pierre D’Avoine provided essays for a section on history and context.

The Donnybrook Quarter housing project is now considered an exemplar and is regularly used to illustrate innovation in housing design (figure 1.2-1., 1.6, 1.7). The architect Peter Barber has gone on to design and complete many other innovative housing projects.

There can be no doubt that the client Circle 33’s Jane Blom Cooper played a key role in the success of all aspects of this competition. Commissioning London’s Architecture Foundation and its then director Lucy Musgrove meant trusting their belief that a competition without the usual constraints and guidelines would attract high quality, innovative and buildable results. The Accommodating Change initiative was certainly optimistic and relied on many committed individuals to make it a success. The Donnybrook Quarter and the book demonstrate that their confidence was not misplaced.
PROJECT DATA

Name: ACCOMMODATING CHANGE, INNOVATION IN HOUSING
Location: Donnybrook, Eden Way, London E3 2JD
Country: ENGLAND
Year: 2001

PROJECT DESCRIPTION
Type: 48 Mixed tenure housing units
Size: 2,848 m²
Budget Cost: £4.5m

COMPETITION DESCRIPTION
Client: Circle 33 Housing Association (Now Clarion Housing)
Programmer/Agent: The Architecture Foundation
Public/Private: Public
Procedure: A Design Contest
Procedure Reference: Directive 2004/18/EC, Article 66 (equivalent)
Stages: 2
Project Intention: An intention to build

COMPETITION FACTS
Timescale:
- Registration: 18 May 2001
- Submission: 15 June 2001
- Q & A session: 18 July 2001
- 2nd Stage submission: 31 September 2001
- Judging & Award: 24 – 25 September 2001

Submission Required:
- Stage 1: 2 x A1 panels and an 8 page A4 report (unverified estimate only)
- Stage 2: 4 x A1 panels and a report (unverified estimate only)
Announcement: 25 September 2001

Number of Entries: 139

Jury Numbers: 7
Jury composition:
- With a deliberative role:
  - Jane Bloom Cooper, Circle 33
  - Anne Lacaton, Lacaton and Vassal Architects
  - Walter Menteth, Walter Menteth Architects
  - Bruce Robertson, Tower Hamlets HAP
  - Ian Ritchie, Ian Ritchie Architects
  - Professor Edward W Soja, UCLA
  - Roger Zogolovitch, Lake Estates
- With an advisory role:
  - Jamie Campbell, Circle 33
  - Hilary French, Royal College of Art
  - Margaret Hays, HAP resident, Tower Hamlets
  - Brendan Ritchie, Wilcom Shown
  - Neil Squibbs, Buro Happold

Number Shortlisted: 6
Winner: Peter Barber Architects Ltd
Runners Up:
- Circus Architects, London UK
- East Architecture, Landscape, Urban Design, London UK
- Poppit/Strabager, Germany
- Robert Ian Barnes Architects, London UK
- White Design Associates, Bristol UK

Prizes & Awards:
- Shortlisted entries were each awarded £6,000 (£6,850)
- Student winner was awarded £4,000 (£4,560)

Conclusion of Process:
- Construction design commission
- Project Completion: Completed January 2006

FURTHER INFORMATION
- The project team included: Paul Grover, Project Coordinator; Kerr Noble, book, exhibition and website design; Hilary French consultant to the Architecture Foundation to contribute to the brief writing, curate the exhibition and prepare and edit the publication.
- Peter Barber Architects Ltd www.peterbarberarchitects.com/donnybrook-quarter (accessed 27 March 2018)
- Housing Design Awards, 2004
- Royal Academy Summer Exhibition, Highly Commended, 2004
- RIBA Stirling Prize, Listed 2006
- AIA Excellence in Design Awards, 2006
- RIBA Award Winner, 2006

Nota: Circle 33 became Circle Anglia in 2005, one of the largest housing associations in the UK. It merged with Affinity Anglia in 2016 and was renamed Clarion Housing.