

Collieston Community Centre Architectural Competition: Judges' report by Charles Rattray, Chairman of the Judging Panel

This report summarises the judges' comments in relation to the five schemes submitted in the competition for Collieston's new community centre. The judges were Bob Allies, Craig Leuchars, Tarla MacGabhann, Jack Page, Niki Tait and Angela Williams. The chair was Charles Rattray. They met, walked the village, and examined the submissions in Collieston on 15 December 2006. The schemes were identified only by a letter (as in 'Scheme A') and were judged anonymously.

The schemes had previously been exhibited in the village and the results of a questionnaire given to visitors to the exhibition had been provided to the judges in advance. The Quantity Surveyor's report on the project costings had also been given to the judges.

The judges were aware of the objectives in the briefing document. The comments below do not attempt to break down the performance of each scheme against these criteria, but they were given due consideration.

Attitude to the site

Schemes A and **D** occupied the highest part of the site. **Schemes C** and **E** were located to the south of the school, making a closer contact with the village and the road. **Scheme B** was located to the east side of the site and did not engage directly with the village.

One issue that arose in considering these different locations was whether a community building further away from the village and the road would encourage enough use and be convenient to use. This was especially the case for potentially lively spaces such as the café, where passing trade would be important in giving life, and the playgroup, where children would be dropped off. A second issue was that of increased servicing and landscape costs if the building were further from the road.

Scheme B retained the existing old school, but adjusted its boundary wall. The other schemes utilised the enclosure of the school to accommodate the required parking for 30 cars. Scheme B allowed parking for 18 cars.

With the exception of Scheme D, the proposals could be imagined in a form where the old school buildings were retained as the residential accommodation for each project if that were seen as important. The resultant VAT cost (new buildings are zero-rated) would be less important than the implications for discreet parking.

Outline descriptions

Scheme A

This was unrelated to the village in either form or location but, internally, the main spaces were well planned, with convincing relationships between the various uses. The location on the headland gave emphasis to the space between the parking and the building but this was under-resolved and

suburban in character. The dominant external feature of the three pitched roofs raised questions as to their appropriateness for Collieston. Of the three, two bore no relationship to the spaces below them which meant that their volumes could not contribute to any spatial pleasure the building might have.

Scheme C

This building orientated itself to the community and used the car park as a formal entrance court. The building had considerable clarity and consistency. Its rigour – in its controlled use of one material, for example – gave character to its component parts and sustained the treatment of the elevations. Nevertheless its rationality was also tough and not very welcoming. It was a blind object from the road, where the sheer wall gave no sense or views of internal activity, and not specific enough to its site.

Scheme D

This scheme had perhaps the strongest, purest and most consequential idea, namely to adopt the typology of a castle. The question arose as to whether the associations of the castle – supremacy and defence – were appropriate, but of more concern were the resultant compromises around the central hall, such as sitting rooms with no external view, and additional accommodation added to complete the wrapping form. The remote siting was felt to be ad hoc. The playgroup space, one of the busiest parts of the building, was treated as a secondary space in the building's plinth.

Scheme B (*finalist*)

This project was the most provocative proposal while also being attractive in its relative discretion. It was built into the land rather than placed on it. The standard views were eschewed, and specific natural elements (sky, sea, ground) emphasised. In this way the building abstracted the qualities of Collieston and the site and re-presented them afresh to the visitor. This was a brave response to the site that, if built, would provide constant surprise.

Concerns were expressed relating to the cost of the excavation, the congested entrance court, the arbitrariness of the North/South orientation, and the lack of engagement with the village, but the essential proposition was very strong.

Scheme E (*finalist*)

This building looked back to the village and was subtly engaged with the site rather than set upon it as an object. Its nearness to the community as well as its simple planning around the front court and the playgroup garden meant that it would give life to the village all the time and vice versa. The building itself would tell you if an activity was on by its transparency or by the way the windows would light up in the evening; the view of the harbour, day or night, would be very attractive. The building had the right scale, strong and enjoyable spaces, and a good relationship between practicality and formal invention.

Supplementary Report on the Judging Process
written by Craig Leuchars,
and endorsed by his fellow village judges Niki Tait and Jack Page

Preface

I took on my role as village representative seriously in a responsible impartial manner (as we all did). I recall prior to the judging, Niki's favourite was Scheme A, Jack liked C and I liked D. As none of these designs was either of the two selected finalists then this is testament to that.

The competition entrants were submitted anonymously so judging was unbiased with both finalists being selected on their merits alone. Indeed, when it was eventually revealed who had submitted each scheme, the professional architectural judges' previous assumptions regarding what practice may have designed each particular scheme was proven to be incorrect. There was a genuine feeling of surprise!

I read ALL of the comments received in the questionnaires to best understand the views of the respondents so that I could represent them appropriately. As these comments were anonymous there was no bias whatsoever on my part. All points raised by questionnaire respondents (although some misguided) were considered.

For example, due to the overwhelming adverse opinion towards Scheme C, it meant that as village representative I would have objected vociferously to this being short listed as one of the two finalists had the professional architectural judges deemed it to be a contender.

Having selected Schemes B & E as the two finalists, I re-read all of the comments submitted and still believe the judging panel to have made the appropriate choice.

Scheme Descriptions

Scheme A

Whilst results extrapolated from the questionnaires indicated this scheme to be the clear favourite, it was apparent this scheme polled particularly well owing to its pitched roof (as was reflected by the comments received). It is arguable that had any other scheme had a pitched roof of "traditional" appearance then it would have polled similarly well.

Although a pitched roof was considered a positive feature, the professional architectural judges shared similar concerns as expressed by the questionnaire respondents, that being scale (too high), inappropriate form (oast-house/ distillery appearance) and large roof void (wasted space).

Furthermore, the judges expressed serious misgivings regarding construction and interaction of the three pitched and one flat roof. Where each structure came together there would be a flat roof

section (or valley). This would inevitably be problematic. Indeed one judge commented that a completely flat single section roof would have been a better design for this scheme (in terms of a simple structure that would be less imposing, relate better to the building below and most importantly could be made watertight).

A large proportion of questionnaire comments relating to Scheme D expressed concerns regarding positioning of the building i.e. promontory, exposed and distance from the road, especially for the elderly or young particularly in inclement weather. Ergo the same can be said of Scheme A being situated in an almost identical aspect.

By listening to the concerns expressed by the experienced team of professional architectural judges regarding Scheme A, I feel that I would not have fulfilled my role as village representative had this scheme been selected as one of the two finalists.

Scheme C

The attributes of this particular scheme were discussed at great length by the panel where one could imagine it perhaps being situated in an urban context (e.g. Brussels or perhaps London), however, despite its many merits, this scheme was ultimately deemed inappropriate for Collieston. It was the least popular of the five schemes, with questionnaire respondents typically describing it as “ugly” in appearance.

Scheme D

The questionnaire respondents overwhelming concern regarding remoteness of this scheme was echoed by the judging panel.

This scheme prompted much discussion within the panel as to the desirability of self catering accommodation being incorporated within the main building itself or having it separate? On one hand tenants could be disturbed by activities ongoing in the hall, on the other, may find it rather eerie, staying in an otherwise large unoccupied “castle”.

Scheme B (finalist)

It was evident from questionnaire respondents there was a sense of attachment towards the existing community centre building. Retention or incorporation of the existing building into the new scheme was seen as desirable. It is arguable that Scheme B would have received far fewer votes from respondents had it chose not to retain the existing building.

The panel commented that much of this scheme’s super structure (i.e. the “light box”) was a superfluous feature and served no purpose other than as an extension to the already crystalline form of the building. Indeed, were this section to be removed the scheme would be less imposing on the skyline and likely to let more light into the courtyard area. It was also questionable how well the mix of old and new (between the existing community centre building and the proposed new building) actually interrelated?

Further comment was made that this was probably the least developed of all of the schemes i.e. more of a concept or impression than a final design, and that further discussion and development would be required accordingly were this to be selected as the winning design.

Once the scheme was chosen as a finalist and the architectural practice revealed to the panel, comment was made that if any practice could deliver such a vision then it would be this one, being the most established practice out of the five competition entrants.

Scheme E (finalist)

The panel agreed unanimously this was their favourite scheme out of the five competition entrants, and closest met the objectives set out in the competition brief.

The only criticism being perhaps the inappropriate choice of step design as detailed on the competition entry photomontage, which was a common theme amongst the questionnaire respondents.

Another concern of respondents was the apparent flat roof, however, whilst not obvious, the roof is actually on an incline pitched back toward the hillside. Indeed of the five competition entrant's only Scheme C had a completely flat roof structure.

Some respondents questioned the appropriateness of the windows, however, when the panel viewed (from Brae Head) this scheme's proposed location (on the Rivie), it was evident they were wholly appropriate. The windows complemented similar shaped windows of houses situated on the pier, including Buckies. This is also reflected in the artist's sketch of the village portrayed on the information poster submitted by this architectural practice. The blackened surrounds framed the "eyes" of the building like spectacles, however, this detail, I'm sure, could be omitted from the final design if opinion so decreed.