



# Making the grade

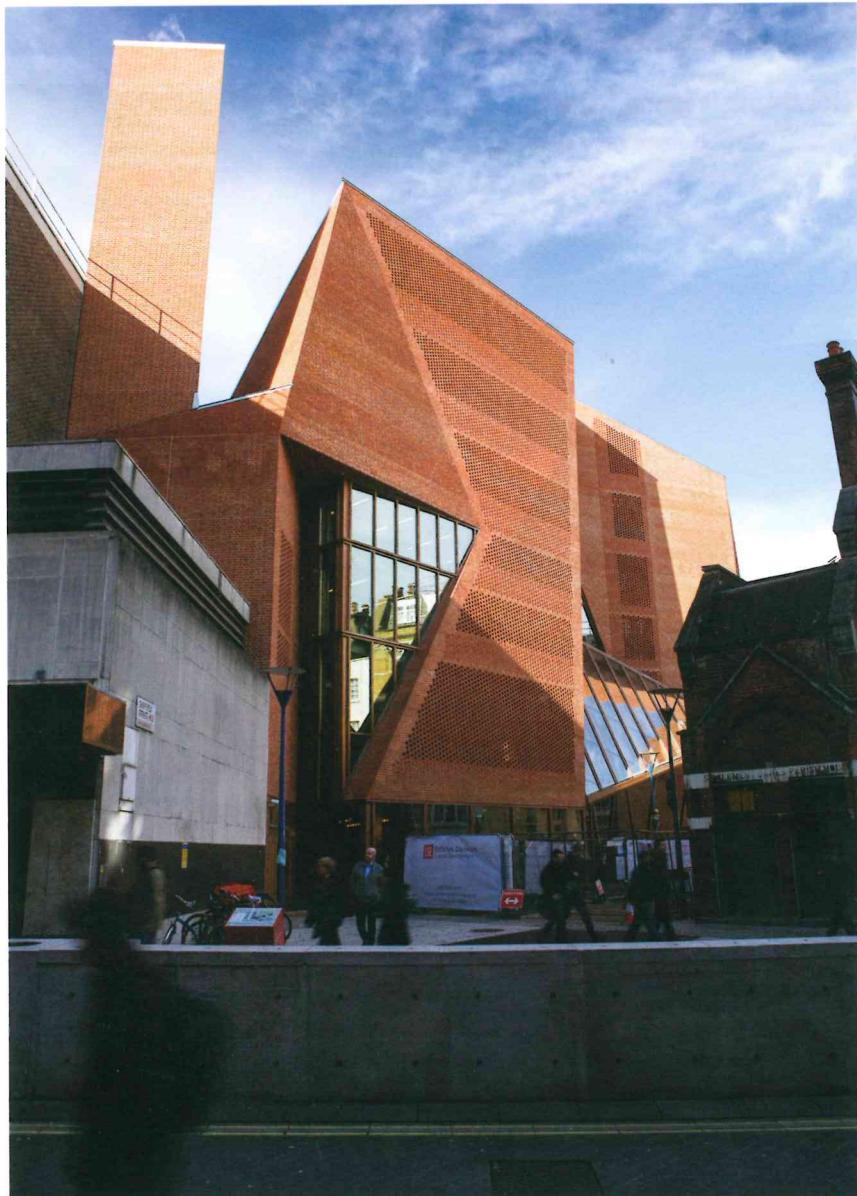
Peter Murray looks at competitions as they have affected two projects on different sides of the world

I recently took part in two very disparate speaking engagements which turned out to have a common thread. The first was chairing a discussion at a conference held at the London School of Economics (LSE) in the wonderful new Saw Swee Hock Student Centre designed by O'Donnell Tuomey. The subject was the organisation of architectural competitions organised by the Higher Education Design Quality Forum (HEDQF).

The second engagement was at Arup in Fitzroy Street where the firm was opening the exhibition *Building the Sydney Opera House*, staged to mark 40 years since the opening of Jørn Utzon's masterpiece. I had been invited to speak because I wrote a book called *The Saga of Sydney Opera House* which revealed new evidence on the relationship between Utzon and the engineers and of Utzon's inability to complete his design.

Utzon's problems stemmed directly from the open design competition held in 1956. He was selected on the basis of a sketch – a brilliant idea that ignored the boundaries of the site and showing an innovative structure designed without the assistance of an engineer. The winning design couldn't be built and it took some years to find a solution that could – and which met Utzon's own dream of perfection. As the sail-like shells were completed, Utzon found it impossible to fit the number of seats into the main hall that were necessary for its viability.

We have learnt from the mistakes made in competitions over the years; now the process has reached such a level that Julian Robinson, director



Winning design: O'Donnell + Tuomey's Saw Swee Hock Student Centre



Built up aria: Utzon's Sydney Opera House

of estates at LSE and deputy chair of HEDQF, was able to announce at the start of the conference that 'we think we have perfected design competitions. Other universities have asked us how we do it, and we thought we would share some of our secrets.'

So LSE's Ken Kinsella talked about the process for the selection of O'Donnell + Tuomey for the striking building in which the conference was held, as well as the new Global Centre for Social Sciences building recently won by Rogers Stirk Harbour. 'Running a competition is a creative process', he said. 'It generates variety, international talent and it is fun.'

He saw the composition of the jury panel as a key element. 'If the balance isn't right you can have a disaster on your hands.' Workshops halfway through the competition process with each of the practices is a key and novel part of the LSE process, as is the public exhibition where students and staff are invited to vote on their favourite proposals. 'I cannot emphasise how important the brief is', he said. The LSE splits the brief in two – one for the competition and one for the design.

John Tuomey gave the view 'from the other side'. 'Since we started the practice 25 years ago we have never been given a commission for a public

building – every one we have done is the result of a competition.' Initially suspicious of the LSE's workshop, he said he had become a convert: 'The trouble with competitions is that you can so easily take the wrong tack.'

**'Architects should not be selected for their credit rating but because they are demonstrating creativity'**

Tuomey talked about some of the buildings the practice had designed as a result of competition, three of them Stirling Prize hopefuls. He advised the audience, made up of higher education clients as well as designers, that architects should not be selected for their credit rating: 'they should be selected because they are demonstrating creativity'. They should not be selected for their corporate structure: 'if you've got 100 people in the practice or six people in the practice, you will be working with a team of four to six architects. If you pick an office with four to six people in it you will be working with the directors. If you pick a large firm you don't know who you will get out of the 100.'

'Pick architects because they show some ambition – not because they have a quality assurance system. Lots of technical detail just isn't necessary – whatever BIM or detailed programme is put on the table at the competition stage is makey-uppy. The real one will be done when the team is appointed.'

For good measure, he added that clients should 'avoid the hazards of design and build', that clients should set the fee and not open it to negotiation, that value engineering was a 'lie' and that they should select architects who were fresh to the type of project, not ones that had done 20 similar buildings before. 'The best buildings we have done, we have done for the first time.'

Some of Tuomey's comments go against the grain of those who seek a more efficient and de-risked competition and building process – but there was no doubt among those seated in the auditorium of his building, surely a Stirling Prize winner this time – that the conjunction of LSE's exemplary system and O'D + T's ambition had created a brilliant building that, just as the Sydney Opera House had become an icon of Australia, would be an international symbol for the LSE's expanding urban campus. **■**