

arts

Barely room to swing a stolen traffic cone

Halls of residence made up half the shortlist for this year's bad architecture awards. Why are students being routinely failed, asks **Jonathan Morrison**

The colours are bright enough to set your ears ringing. The designer himself admits that the long corridors remind him of *The Shining*. Inside the 13sq m rooms there is barely space to stack, let alone swing, a stolen traffic cone. Welcome to Scape in Shoreditch, east London, one vision of the future of student accommodation. Along with plentiful communal facilities — mini-cinema, table tennis tables, launderette, gym and outdoor barbecue area — the tiny rooms somehow make room for cooking equipment and an en suite bathroom. There is just about enough space to squat at the bottom of the bed to study or dine on ready meals. This is university life brought to you by people who think battery hens have a lovely time. And despite the £240-a-week price tag, there is already a waiting list.

It's fair to say that there's something rotten in the state of student accommodation. Scape operates at four locations and is planning to expand rapidly, including to Australia. In layman's terms that means there is simply not enough accommodation to go round. There are more students and rents have doubled in the past ten years, according to the National Union of Students. Across the country, universities are building new halls of residence at a ferocious rate. And all too often what is being produced is simply bad architecture and bad design.

For this year's Carbuncle Cup, awarded annually by *Building Design* magazine to Britain's worst building, three of the six shortlisted designs were accommodation developments

by some of the country's foremost seats of learning. Particularly unappealing were the University of Southampton's City Gateway, which has an elliptical tower nicknamed the "fag butt" on account of its ochre tip, and Woodward Hall in North Acton, owned by Imperial College London, which provoked one local resident to stand for parliament in opposition.

Previous masterpieces to have attracted the ire of the competition's judges include, in 2013, the Castle Mill development beside Port Meadow, Oxford. It ruined views across one of the city's most beautiful landscapes, aroused the ire of the author Philip Pullman, triggered a judicial review and was described by one opponent as "like building a skyscraper next to Stonehenge". Another enraged local complained: "For an institution steeped in culture, heritage and learning, [Oxford University] have proved themselves to be a bunch of crass, money-grubbing philistines."

The winner that year was 465 Caledonian Road, a halls of residence built by University College London, where the lucky students were initially charged £730 a month for their cell-like rooms. It was frequently compared to HMP Pentonville, farther along the road. "This is a building that the jury struggled to see as remotely fit for human occupation," was the verdict of the Carbuncle Cup judges. "As the first intake of students move into their dark and far from private rooms next month, they might be forgiven for wondering why the prisoners have been provided with the better view."

Part of the blame for this — certainly in the case of 465 Caledonian Road —



Above: University College London's halls at 465 Caledonian Road, which won the 2013 Carbuncle Cup. Right, above and below: Scape in Shoreditch

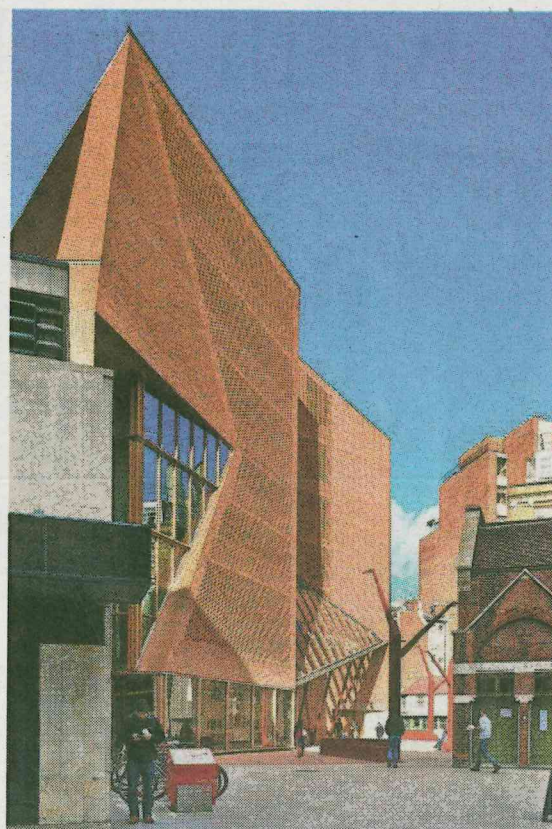
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is down to planning regulations. Thanks to their limited occupation, halls are exempt from many of the codes and standards that govern residential dwellings, from the amount of daylight required to acoustics. In fact, they're treated just like hotels. Unfortunately, the resemblance doesn't end there.

"The market has become so competitive for universities that they find themselves in the same boat as hotels," Gary Collins, the principal director of Berman Guedes Stretton, explains. "Why do hotels all look the same? Because the architect ends up with a limited palette of materials and volumetric construction because it meets the budget and can be delivered rapidly. If you build that way, you can soon guarantee that all first-years get a room, which is a big factor when students are choosing where to go.

"You're getting a series of room-sized pods [constructed off-site] — often with their own bathrooms, because that's what overseas students





demand — and it's the same sort of footprint as a hotel. You'll get simple windows because everything's designed for speed, and fixtures and fittings are then brought down to the lowest common denominator. You're shaved at every turn. For the architect, options start to narrow rapidly."

Some in the profession are less understanding. Will Alsop, the Stirling prizewinner who has been commissioned by the likes of Goldsmiths and the University of Cambridge, is uncompromising. "Many of the people who design these

things are not real architects. How they qualified, ^{****} knows. Architecture is building plus something special: not just building any old rubbish.

"At the end of the day, good clients create good buildings. Universities want to build cheaply and it's made easy for them: they're exploited by commercial developers who have ready funding and sites and they whack it up as quickly as possible. Then they can advertise that they can accommodate all their students. There's some sense in this: staying in halls of residence allows you to get to know other people and make

friends. But the fact that most move out after a year tells you a lot."

Shahriar Nasser of Belsize Architects, who is building a series of low-rise pavilions on a sensitive site in north Oxford for University College, thinks this may be a cause rather than a symptom. "Why is accommodation so bad? Partly because there's a shortage and partly because the student is prepared to live anywhere for a short time, then move on."

Research conducted by the LSE, which has won awards for its new Saw Swee Hock Student Centre and is now planning to enhance its estate with a £100 million redevelopment of a recently acquired site in Lincoln's Inn Fields, seems to confirm this. Only 25 per cent of university applicants were concerned by the provision and

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condition of the accommodation; academic reputation was usually the deciding factor. After arrival, however, that increases to 75 per cent.

The LSE is unusual in being cited frequently by architects as an example of a university that does build well. Why is that? "We always run competitions," Julian Robinson, the director of estates, explains. "We look for design quality and all competitions have student input, with students on the panel of judges and online voting for the six shortlisted schemes that emerge. That vote is used as a guide, but students are the people who use, live in and socialise in our buildings, so why would we not involve them?"

"Probably in the past, residential buildings weren't seen as part of the core offer so weren't invested in that much [by universities in general]. The temptation is to build as cheaply as you can if it's not part of the core of what you think you do, but most universities would now say that their residential offering is essential for maintaining a competitive edge.

"At the end of the day, the quality of the architecture depends on the vision

of the people at the top and their support. After that it's a question of having the means and wherewithal, which we do. We have to set the bar high because we're one of the main custodians of this part of town. We've put roots down, we've been here for 150 years and we will be here for the next few hundred years."

That sense of responsibility to future generations may be one of the main factors that divides the good builders from the bad. London's great property estates — the Howard de Walden, the Grosvenor, the Cadogan — justify their continued existence as aristocratic fiefdoms by their emphasis on preservation. The Howard de Walden Estate says it "takes its responsibilities as a guardian of Marylebone's rich heritage extremely seriously". It adds: "For buildings to provide a return over the long term they must exhibit excellent design that will stay the course." Hugh Seaborn, the chief executive of Cadogan Estates, Knightsbridge's foremost landlord, elaborates: "Stewardship is about managing something for the benefit of future generations, while ensuring they meet the needs of the present generation."

Whether or not you agree with single families having owned large portions of the capital since Tudor times, there is an important lesson. Universities need to incorporate into their policies the idea that they are custodians of historic sites and they need to build sympathetically. Too often they forget the importance of our shared architecture heritage. Only this summer King's College London seemed taken aback by the public outcry when it attempted to demolish an eclectic group of late Georgian and Victorian houses in the Strand to make way for a new £50 million scheme. The Macadam Building, the grey concrete monster next-door, built in 1974, shows only too eloquently why universities and their schemes should be feared.

Gary Collins agrees. "They've been scratching the itch, not thinking of legacy. These are great institutions undergoing rapid expansion and they need to stop and take stock. Possibly in 20 years' time they'll be thinking more like the great estates, which consider legacy first. It's a better way of operating. It's certainly worth them having that debate."

Top: the LSE's award-winning Saw Swee Hock Student Centre. Above: the Macadam Building, King's College London