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What the LSE's Saw Swee Hock can teach us about procuring brilliant buildings

25 April 2016 | By Simon Carne

Saw Swee Hock: The Realisation of the London School of Economics Student Centre

Edited by Duncan McCorquodale | Artifice Books

Pulling off a coup like O'Donnell & Tuomey's Stirling finalist is not easy but the story is worth studying, says Simon Carne

The LSE is a world-famous education institution, its reputation built on its students and teachers who go out into the world often to change it. Might how it operates and develops also provide lessons on procuring buildings? This is not a textbook or instruction manual to pass on lessons in procurement, but it contains the seeds from which those lessons can emerge.

Julian Robinson, who takes the leading role in that process, has an enviable reputation for taking on and achieving special results, adding incrementally to the LSE urban campus. Whether purpose-designed, new-build or conversions, regardless of the brief and ambition, the call for designers attracts those with the highest reputations from the UK and abroad, which is only fitting for this most international of institutions.

Most recently the school has embarked on another development, the subject of an exhibition of shortlisted designs for the Paul Marshall Building overlooking Lincoln's Inn Fields on the key corner entrance to the campus. Six anonymous and very different designs from an international line-up were selected from a much longer long-list, with Grafton being named the winner last week. The process follows that successfully used for the Saw Swee Hock building, the subject of this book. A process described in detail and although no doubt the rough edges and conflicts were there for those in the know, the story is a fascinating tale.

The procurement of great architecture or design is a subject of endless debate and it is fair to say that the Robinson way seems to be one that succeeds.

First the brief – does it inspire the right people to put in their best efforts to win the job? The “project vision statement” on a single page written by Robinson fulfilled that for Sheila O'Donnell. The 49-page technical brief was essential but not critical. The challenge was architectural. Second, make sure the right people get on to the shortlist. In this case the question was, “Can O'Donnell & Tuomey do the job, are they big enough?” This is a lesson to all clients setting out on a design project. No project is risk-free. No practice, however large, can guarantee success. The stories are too numerous to mention. Quality can never be guaranteed, whatever the protestations of “on time and to budget”.

With that hurdle cleared and the O'Donnell & Tuomey team shortlisted it was on to the next critical phase – the one that the Marshall building has reached. Give the design team a reasonable time to prepare their first design and make sure things are going well with a client mid-session review in the architect's office in Dublin. Finally exhibit the shortlisted designs, seek the public's response – critical for the university developing a student building – and finally, with that response, select the winner. Only then look at the selected designer's financial proposal.

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The book draws on a number of essays to flesh out the story of the building. How can O'Donnell & Tuomey be considered unsuitable? Surely they are well known? In this case Robinson admits that his knowledge of the practice was limited. He raised his uncertainty with Ricky Burdett who counselled another look at the list. To any architect who has followed recent Stirling Prize shortlists they are not unknown. Following the Lyric Theatre Belfast 2012 and the Irish Language and Cultural Centre 2011 in Derry, it was no surprise to see Saw Swee Hock shortlisted for the prize in 2014.

If the practice was due to win with the LSE building, could the description of the processes and the story of the design be part of that assessment? And if so could it then come out on top? Would delaying the assessment for the buildings to be allowed to bed down also make a difference to the outcome? These are questions for those awarding prizes.

It takes more than a site visit and drawings to fully flesh out the depth of thought and rigour that this building has achieved. Oliver Wainwright considers the background, looking at the practice, their previous work and approach. Read the chapter "We're not interested in complexity for its own sake". Their approach to movement in the building says it all. Saw Swee Hock is an experience: "Circulation should be more than just a way of getting from one place to another", an urban design description of the building embracing activity within and in the wider campus.

Can there be more than one highlight? The conversation between Sheila and John, Julian and Duncan McCorquodale says as much in conversation as the Oliver Wainwright, Will Lingard and Mike Lowndes chapters. Gently interrogating the ideas, the processes, references and details without resorting to exaggeration, explaining the brickwork detailing, the process of concrete pours, the collaborative working with site workers all add to the enjoyment of the richness of the design.

The importance of other architects in their work, from Kahn through Shane de Blacam and the James Stirling office all play a part. The importance of colour in particular matters to Sheila O'Donnell whose watercolour sketches describe the design intentions and the referencing of the Paul Klee painting Architecture of 1923.

There are many points at which this can go awry: the loss of client nerve, the designer being led astray or losing the overriding concept. In procurement nothing is fool-proof. In this case the winner stood out as the proposal that best responded to the vision statement but also, in so doing, placed the decision firmly in the "very difficult" category.

But winning is only the start of a journey that can so often be undone by the challenge of the planning system. Will Lingard and Mike Lowndes describe in their chapter the challenges and potential pitfalls that as ex-Westminster planning and urban design officers were the stuff of dreams or perhaps nightmares. Their story of brilliant advocacy by the architects and the value of a stunning concept in convincing the council planners is a deserved part of the story; a welcome part of the narrative of the creation of a building.

For a tale so full of fascinating aspects, Robinson and his team have rightly included as many as could be accommodated in the book without losing the balance of interest. So there is a section from the student union president and the post-occupancy review and evaluation. The technical aspects both of construction and design consultancies are given space to briefly describe their contributions, with brick supplier and brickwork contractor, project manager and vitreous enamel contractors being to the fore.

The one aspect the book does not adequately address is the role of the technical consultants listed in the credits but not described in the text. A small criticism of what is surely a major achievement of which all involved should be proud.