

The Scotsman 3rd October 07

By Tim Cornwell

Our best building? You may just be living in it

A HOUSING development is a surprise contender for the title of Scotland's best building, it was revealed yesterday.

The Princess Gate estate in Edinburgh, whose 17 terraced houses and six flats overlooking the Pentland Hills were designed along straight, modernist lines by leading Scottish architect Malcolm Fraser, is on the shortlist for the 2007 Andrew Doolan Award. An arts centre in Orkney, a school for disabled students in Glasgow and the Maggie's cancer centre in Fife, designed by Zaha Hadid, are also in the running.

The competition, organised by the Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland (RIAS), is usually won by showcase buildings commissioned for businesses, local councils or the arts. The Scottish Parliament is among past winners.

The £2.37 million Princess Gate development, built by Bryant Homes on the site of the former Princess Margaret Rose Hospital, is a response to a long-standing complaint that housing developers have relied on unimaginative or uninspiring designs.

"We were surprised and delighted," Mr Fraser said yesterday. "I hope this shows other housebuilders that there is monetary as well as architectural value in trying hard, making interesting modern architecture. "They have sold, and we have heard that some of them have resold well after less than a year."

The shortlist for the annual £25,000 prize, awarded in honour of the late Edinburgh architect Andrew Doolan, who designed the Point Hotel, also includes several of the biggest names in Scottish architecture.

The black and glass Maggie's Centre in Kirkcaldy, with its angular roof and walkways, is typical of the style that has made Ms Hadid an internationally famous figure. It is utterly unlike the Maggie's Centre in Inverness, the ship-shaped building set in swirling gardens that was last year's winner on a unanimous vote.

The shortlist ranges from the Hazelwood School for disabled students in Glasgow, designed by Gordon Murray and Alan Dunlop, to the stone-clad sixth-form centre and residence at Fettes College in Edinburgh, designed by Page/Park Architects.

The Bridge Arts Centre, designed by Gareth Hoskins Architects, connecting two existing buildings on different levels, has become a busy hub for Easterhouse in Glasgow, as well as the head office of the National Theatre of Scotland.

Douglas Read, the chairman of the RIAS jury, said: "Although you have this building in the middle of Easterhouse, not the most predictable place to put an arts centre, it is extremely busy in a way that shows the cultural strength of the country."

Nick Barley, director of Glasgow's Lighthouse centre for architecture and design, said: "It's one of the strongest shortlists in years. It's full of great buildings of very different types and a cross-section of Scotland's best architects. At least five or six of these buildings could be winners."

One favourite will be the Pier Arts Centre in Orkney, by Reiach & Hall. The Scottish firm is also listed for the new arts faculty building at the University of St Andrews.

The architect Richard Murphy, who sits on the jury, said it was a strong and varied list. However, he had just returned from judging a similar competition in Ireland, where the number of "wonderful" buildings had been "embarrassing".

"Compared to Kazakhstan, we are doing well, but compared to Ireland, we have a long way to go towards catching up," he said.

"We have got plenty of talented architects in Scotland. What we need to do is foster an architectural culture, from clients like local authorities, universities and banks, and get them interested and excited and ambitious and aspirational for architecture."

'JUDGES ARE SPOILT FOR CHOICE'

PENNY LEWIS

I DON'T envy the judging panel for this year's Andrew Doolan Award. Unlike previous years - when the organisers have struggled to find buildings of sufficient complexity - this year's jury is spoilt for choice.

The list includes some of Scotland's most ambitious designers and the international "star-architect", Zaha Hadid.

Whoever picks up the prize, it's bound to be contentious, politically and architecturally. The list has established names but also a number of emerging architectural practices, the former Young Turks of the trade.

Hadid's Maggie's Centre at Kirkcaldy has been likened to a lump of coal. Her first UK building, it is highly sculptural and has been criticised for being too architecturally expressive and "clinical".

The Hazelwood School for children with multiple disabilities by Gordon Murray & Alan Dunlop Architects, nestles among the trees on the edge of Bellahouston Park in Glasgow and its warm, timber interior glows like a Halloween pumpkin in afternoon light.

Glasgow City Council decided not to take the public-private partnership procurement route for Hazelwood and the result is a beautiful school that highlights the poverty of design ambition in the authority's PPP projects.

malcolm fraser architects **north bridge studios**

The inclusion of Malcolm Fraser's Princess Gate housing development on Edinburgh's southside will also be contentious. These radical suburban homes for Bryant, the volume house builder, have glorious south facing living rooms, clever plans and stained black timber cladding. Fraser's houses represent a challenge to both the marketing departments of the big house-builders (they argue that the people want traditional houses) and architects' conventional wisdom on good place-making.

The journey to visit Reich and Hall's extension to the Pier Arts Centre in Stromness, Orkney, could prove to be a decisive factor.

The centre is a subtle and abstract response to the urban grain of the port, the existing gallery and the fabulous, world-class Margaret Gardiner Collection. It's a joy to be there - but, depending on the conditions, crossing the Pentland Firth can be a challenge.