RIBA Stirling Prize shortlist announced: Bookies favour Niall McLaughlin chapel

For first time, half of Stirling Prize shortlisted firms have women directors

AWARDS The AJ can reveal the six contenders shortlisted for this year’s RIBA Stirling Prize – the most prestigious accolade in British architecture.

It is the first year in the prize’s 18-year history that half of the shortlisted firms have women at the helm: Alison Brooks Architects (ABA), Grafion Architects and Heneghan Peng. ABA founder Brooks is also the only architect to have been on the list before. The Canadian-based ABA was shortlisted last year for the ground-breaking Accordia housing development.

This year she has been nominated for her b:neNew housing scheme in Harlow, which had already picked up a number of awards, including Supreme Winner at the Housing Design Awards.

b:neNew is a joined by Grafion’s Limerick Medical School, Heneghan Peng’s Giant’s Causeway visitor centre, Witherford Watson Mann’s revamp of 12th century Castle in the sky estate by Hawkins’ RIBA Award winners.

The shortlist is completed by Niall McLaughlin’s beautifully crafted Bishop Edward King Chapel – which bookmaker William Hill’s favourite at 9/1.

The six were chosen from this year’s 52 RIBA Award winners. Among its most significant commissions is the 52 RIBA Award winners.

Among the surprise omissions are Zaha Hadid’s Pietroconvito scheme in Montpellier, France, and Hackett Hall McKnight’s MAC in Belfast.

RIBA president Angela Bracy said: "The Stirling Prize is awarded to the building that made the biggest contribution to the evolution of architecture, and nowhere is that need for fresh thinking needed more than in housing. The UK is blighted with unimaginative, poor-quality houses that people don’t want to live in but have little other choice, so I am delighted to see two projects that have high original housing projects on this year’s shortlist.

These projects show how, when talented architects and clients work together and focus on quality affordable and desirable, new homes can be created. They shine a light on what the future of UK housing can be."

The winner of the RIBA Stirling Prize will be announced on the evening of Thursday 30 September at the British Society for the History of Architecture in London.

This year’s judges are: RIBA President Angela Bracy; Sheila O’Donnell and O’Donnell + Tuomey; Paul Williams of Stanton Williams; philanthropist and chair of the Clore Duffield Foundation, Vivien Duffield; and journalist and broadcaster, Richard Wair.
Stirling Prize

COMMENT ON THE STIRLING SHORTLIST

Murray Fraser, Professor at the Bartlett School of Architecture, UCL
Favourite Bishop Edward King Chapel

If there is anywhere where cooks should be popping at the announcement of this year’s Stirling Prize shortlist, it is University College Dublin (UCD). It’s an architectural school I know and admire, and it was the training ground for three of the shortlisted practices – Shelley McNamara and Yeosun Farrell at Grafton Architects, Niall McLaughlin, and Rosin Heneghan. And this is after UCD graduates and tutors Sheila O’Donnell and John Tuite were Stirling-shortlisted in the previous two years, and could be yet again for their forthcoming LSE student building.

Why might this be? There is certainly a tradition of serious thought at UCD about the craft of planning and constructing, which perhaps has better weathered the recession by being able to deliver real quality with relatively little materials. It is remarkable that all this year’s shortlisted buildings, including those without Irish connections, are such austere projects, possessing less architectural flash, but also greater internal consistency of detailing than in other years. Notably, two projects are architectural conservation.

Who should now win? I may be biased, since I was a good friend and part-time colleague at the Bartlet, but Niall McLaughlin’s chapel (guessed) in Ordrinshin is the scheme which looks monstrously magical, lifting that little bit higher over others. It is a Templeton for our times.

Joseph Rykwert, critic
Favourite: ‘They are all winners’

A great list this time – thoughtful, inclusive and various. Two of the six are Irish, and that is a tribute to their position on the British scene; two other projects are not for new buildings, but rehabilitations of existing ones – a ruined Elizabrahet manor is the occasion for a brave and very sensitive operation; another is a private gallery (and famous post-war public housing scheme in Sheffield). Those two listings are a necessary tribute as well as a proof to both public and professional attention, reviving us of the importance renovating the existing building stock must play in the future – something that the developers of the Sheffield flats have pioneered.

Another exemplary housing project is the new town, backed by another developer, comes as no surprise among Stirling nominations, but is most welcome as distinguishing not only the architect – the only independent women’s office among those selected – but also as an architectural enterprise to the community of the Venerable theological college.

It takes the form of an oval stone, thick-faced and timber-framed and freestanding; it is the formal innovation witnessed to the collaboration of architect and patron.

Though it’s an apple and orange situation (and I have my favourites, of course), I feel sure that whoever wins this year, any one of the six deserves the prize.

Edwin Heathcote, critic
Favourite: the Financial Times Favourite: Bishop Edward King Chapel

This has to be the lowest profile Stirling Prize shortlist for a decade. No blockbusters, no museums and not a single London building. It’s not bad though, the list mostly contains serious buildings by thoughtful architects, and there is a slowly refreshing lack of Hadid, Foster and Rogers.

It is extremely encouraging to see two re-use schemes (surely the future of architecture), Park Hill and Astley Castle, both of which have an almost medieval mass, albeit in radically different contexts. If there is a surprise, it is a kind of mid-century revivalism. You can’t help seeing Louis Kahn in Grafton Architects’ project, Eero Saarinen in Bishop Edward King Chapel or a mid-century, chancy revivification of Park Hill’s original grey Brutalism.

There are some surprises. Hackeny Hall McKeough’s MAC in Belfast isn’t here, although it was perhaps the most impressive building on the longlist and, despite myriad schools on this list, none have come through. Sometimes we find that a recession is good for the quality of architecture, filtering out the unnecessary headlines and pointless, over-engineered high-tech silly structures the Brits can’t seem to grow out of. But wouldn’t it have been good to see new social housing, public space and the rest? It all seems a bit disconnected; moments of quality, which we must be grateful for. But remember, they are only moments.

Cathy Shewen, editor of the Architectural Review
Favourite: Bishop Edward King Chapel

No icons, no starchitects and no London projects. This year’s Stirling Prize shortlist is a monument to modest ambitions and serious architecture, but it also has a strong Irish infection. Yet, as with all Stirling Prize shortlists, it is like trying to judge a volume of poetry against a cookery book, as former AJ editor Isabel Allen once remarked.

The bookies’ favourite is Niall McLaughlin’s exquisite jewel box chapel in Oxfordshire, the most obviously and self-consciously poetic project of the group, but Wetherford Watson Mann Architects’ remodelling of Astley Castle is also a delicate and elegant piece of surgery. Compare those with the revamping of Park Hill by Hawkins/Brown and Studio Egger West, which echoes a Brutalist classic for the 21st century, and Alison Brooks’ Hackeny Hall, which celebrates the beauty of the ordinary and proves that housing can escape from the shackles of banality and pastiche.

You get the point. Equally, how do you fathom a solid, sober medical school by Grafton Architects, stars of the Venice Biennale, against Heneghan Peng’s rousingly topographical Visitors Centre for the Giants Causeway, which might have been the clear home banker but the RIBA stuck to their original plan of staging the ceremony in Derry/Londonderry. So that leaves the most open field for years. The ‘coold win is Hawkins’ Brown and Studio Egger West, and the ‘should win is Niall McLaughlin.’