Top architects vie to break design mould

Jelly version of Foster's wobbly bridge stars in strange competition to raise money for charity

by Amelia Hill

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The Millenium Bridge was a significant British building blunder and a humbling moment for the biggest name in architecture, the aptly monikered Wobbly Bridge has become such an iconic part of design history that its creator Norman Foster has decided the time has come to reclaim it.

The pedestrian bridge spanning the Thames between St Paul's Cathedral and Tower Bridge was unveiled in 2000. Within days, it had developed an alarming wobble as crowds surged over it, and had to be closed. Alterations cost £5m and added more than a year's delay.

It was a moment that most architects would strive to forget but, in what must be one of the most surreal competitions in history, Foster is to revitalize his claim to the wooden spoons for design misfits.

In July, the London Festival of Architecture - which starts this weekend - will climax in a competition in which 10 of the most famous designs in the world are re-created in jelly. The announcement of the winner will be followed by the unveiling of an enormous jelly installation moulded in the successful design and a banquet in which all the jelly will be consumed.

The competition, in support of the Festival's disaster relief and development charity, Article 25, has created a sensation, attracting more than 100 designs from around the world, including entries from Foster, Lord Richard Rogers, Sir Nicholas Grimshaw and Will Alsop.

'It has been a fun challenge for all of us,' said Foster. 'With this most wobbly of materials the association with the one-time Wobbly Bridge was irresistible. Like the design of the bridge itself - which pushed the boundaries of technology - designing with jelly is another structural first.'

Like many light-hearted charitable projects this competition has a more serious agenda, he added. 'The money raised will go towards Article 25 and if our jelly bridge is successful in raising awareness and furthering that cause, its brief lifespan from moulding to eating will have been worth every jelly-tampering effort.'

Foster and Partners' entry, called 'Top Secret Jelly', was praised by the judges for its self-deprecating humour and has reached the shortlist of 10 designs. At the banquet on 8 July, it will be judged against Rogers Stirk Harbour and Partners' Barajas Airport jelly, SMC Alsop's design, simply called Jelly, and Grimshaw's design, which re-creates the domes of his famous Eden Project design in Cornwall.

'The idea of the project itself is to find the necessary inspiration. But once I had made the jelly, I realized that there is a genuine relationship between jelly and architecture. It's to do with the spaces between buildings, the jellyified urban fog of a city. It's about creating without destroying what's already there.'

There's not enough fun in architecture at the moment. There's a lack of imagination and variety. I've given up reading the architectural journals and would rather lie than live in any of the buildings they celebrate.

Ivan Harbour, a senior director at Rogers Stirk Harbour, was project director for the original Barajas airport project in Madrid, which was awarded the Stirling Prize in 2000. Architects create space, he said. 'It's a specific sort of space in a space that you experience from within. This means that designing in jelly is a fascinating experience for us in doing exactly the opposite to what we usually do. This might be a slightly tongue-in-cheek competition but there's a seriousness behind it: a seriousness in the response we are trying to elicit in the observer and in the building itself.'

Each entry, said Stephen Gane, professor of innovative technology at University College London and one of the judges, will be assessed for innovation, aesthetics and the so-called 'jelly factor'.

'As babies, we first learn about our world by touching it and putting bits of it in our mouths,' he said. 'Part of our subconscious appreciation of shape may well be a basic memory of how it might feel in our mouth. Thus, a dense insouciant and costly satisfying, while a potential building is like a sharp and dangerous little jelly architecture returns architecture to the mouth, where we can once again taste it.'