Alsop’s 20-flavour housing

Ellis Woodman was among the jurors looking at the submissions for New Islington’s Tutti Frutti scheme.

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I am traipsing across the wasteland of the vast New Islington site, being pelted by rain and listening to Urban Splash director Nick Johnson talk about confectionery. This area, he explains, was once Manchester’s Little Italy and therefore the centre of the city’s ice cream production. The Penny Lick and the Hokey Pokey were both floated as names for the latest project to emerge within SMC Alsop’s masterplan for New Islington but, in the end, Tutti Frutti won the day.

In a name that neatly captures the central ambition of the project – the creation of the most architecturally various street in Britain. On completion in a couple of years time, Tutti Frutti will be a terrace of 26 houses fronting onto a newly created canal. What makes it remarkable is that every house will have been commissioned by a different client to a bespoke design by an architect of their choosing.

It is an idea with an obvious precedent in the West 8-planned Borneo Sporenburg development in Amsterdam’s docklands but, in Britain, it is without parallel.

The competition to choose the designs worthy of inclusion has attracted over 180 expressions of interest, and BBC2 has commissioned a six-part series which will follow the project from start to finish.

Energizer bunnies

Today is judgement day. That is why I and my fellow jurors, members of Will Alsop, Griff Rhys Jones and Peter Saville, are braving the elements and pontificating to camera with varying degrees of conviction. Griff Rhys Jones and Peter Saville manfully perform like a couple of Energizer bunnies but, thankfully, the moment when Will Alsop realizes that I was the man responsible for a less than faithful review of his Goldsmiths building is not caught on camera. I fear I am in imminent danger of being pushed into a canal.

Back at Urban Splash’s offices, judging begins. There is just one problem. Each entrant had to line up financial backing before their submission, and for many this has proved a stumbling block. Only 20 schemes have been submitted. The judges’ role is, therefore, two-fold: to weed out any truly awful projects, and to arrange the houses into a street.

As each of the 150 models gets paraded out, I am struck by the essential commonality of many of the plans and sections. Given the demanding nature of the plot dimensions – each is 15m long, with no opportunity to admit light on the side – most employ some form of central lightwell. Roof terraces are another recurring feature, a product of the limited opportunities for making a garden at ground level. The houses face a canal towpath to one side and green space on the other, but none of the projects interprets these conditions as reason to make a distinct front and back.

From house to house, however, the facades are startlingly various. Seemingly in the belief that Aarhus is a suburb of Los Angeles, a number of brave souls have submitted exercises in Farnsian glass and steel. Their neighbours, however, are variously faced in orange GRP cladding, undulating metal mesh and full-height planting.

The sight of all the models lined up makes for a compelling snapshot of the private fantasies of the British public, although the absence of a neo-Georgian or Tudor house within the row is surely cause for regret.

The plots vary in width, the narrowest costing £160,000 and the widest, £220,000. Most entrants have responded with projects of four storeys, but some are as low as three and others as tall as six. The proposed construction methods are often far from conventional, and include one that is envisaged as two amorphous prefabricated pods to be lowered into place behind walls of sheer Okalux. I rather fear for the economic wisdom of more than one of the schemes.

Sensible arrangement

Eventually, however, we decide to accept them all, which just leaves the question of putting them in a sensible arrangement. Will Alsop and I find ourselves agreeing that they look pretty good in the random order in which they have come out of the box. However, we try out a number of more purposefully composed layouts before plunging for one that looks entirely random but spares anyone too traumatic an encounter with their neighbours.

The plan now is to put the six unchosen plots on the open market and then bookend the whole assembly with a couple of larger buildings – one a pub, the other the vestry of the local vicar. Once they are completed, the entrant whose house is judged to be the best will be reimbursed the cost of the land. Before then, I suspect the film crew will have no difficulty in finding all the dramatic footage they could hope for.

DETAILS OF THE 20 SCHEMES

at www.bdonline.co.uk
Chance de Silva's entry, dubbed "the rubbish house" by the jury.