

Robin Spence

Born 1938. Architect.

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1. Tributes to Robin Spence



The following chapter was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the website of the RIBA Journal at www.ribaj.com. The article, by Robin Webster, was published on 4th May 2018.

Robin Spence 1938 - 2017. Co-founder of Spence and Webster, principled architect, artist and tango-dancer who cherished honesty and integrity in buildings.

Robin Spence of Spence and Webster was a principled and talented architect with a clear design philosophy. He was educated at Bedford School and briefly followed his father's footsteps in the RAF before deciding his talents lay in the arts, leaving for art college and then studying architecture at the University of Cambridge.

After graduating he travelled in the USA, working for a while at Skidmore Owings and Merrill in Chicago, before returning to the UK. He then worked for Douglas Stephen, and for Spence Bonnington and Collins, while also designing two remarkable steel framed houses in Hunstanton and Cambridge.

Then came fame, accompanied eventually by disappointment. In 1971 he entered and won the international architectural competition for the New Parliamentary Building in Westminster – as important a competition in its day as the roughly contemporaneous Pompidou Centre competition in Paris. On the strength of the win he set up Spence and Webster.

This project proposed a large covered public space in which debates could be relayed, with offices for MPs arranged in galleries around it, but although it passed two separate votes in the House of Commons, it was quietly dropped by the government in 1976. Much later Portcullis House by Hopkins was built on broadly the same site.

The practice however continued with various different projects, including a housing scheme in Central Milton Keynes, Ross Hall Hospital in Glasgow, and a pair of elegant steel-framed courtyard houses in Belsize Park Gardens, where he and his business partner Robin Webster lived for several years.

Spence and Webster regularly entered architectural competitions, and won some more, although major entries that were not selected included Northampton County offices, the new Australian Parliamentary Building at Canberra, and the Paris Opera. All these proposals showed Spence's enormous talent in organising large and very complex briefs into clear and simple plans that worked really well.



Housing scheme in Central Milton Keys by Spence + Webster.

He received many tributes from clients who enjoyed living or working in his buildings, saying that his designs had greatly improved their quality of life.

He was greatly influenced by Mies van der Rohe, and strongly believed that architecture should be the honest expression of a building's structure, materials and construction.

Had he not been so principled, Robin might have built more, but he declined to work for clients who were not interested in 'proper architecture'. He felt the quality of his work was self evident, and was not

interested in self-promotion. He was a patient and clear thinking teacher, and one of his greatest legacies was generously passing on his passion and enthusiasm for honesty and clarity, qualities that he applied not only to design but to his life.

He practised until recently as Robin Spence Architects, working from Shoreham by Sea, where he was also an active member of the Shoreham Society.

Among his later work were brilliantly designed residential schemes in Cornwall and West Sussex: these all illustrated his clarity of vision and ability to compose buildings that led one client to describe him as ‘the master of light and space’. Peter Palumbo also praised him as ‘one of the most gifted architects of his generation’.

Robin was also a talented artist, and produced many luminous coloured pencil drawings of holidays in Greece and Crete, as well as more abstract watercolours. He was an enthusiastic windsurfer, and latterly also gave lessons in tango dancing, which he perceived as another serious art form. Indeed, when he and his wife Delia moved to Shoreham by Sea later in life, he converted their house beautifully to be suitable for tango dancing and parties.

He is survived by Delia, and by a son and grand-daughter by a previous marriage.

Glenn Howells (right) adds:

I started working for Robin Spence in 1987 in Belsize Park Gardens. Robin was recommended to me by Adrian Gale, my professor at architecture school, whose advice was to work with a talented architect who had integrity, principles and was passionate about design. Robin was all of these things, and as I found out, much more.

Robin provided me, and many others at S+W, with an apprenticeship you just couldn’t get at university. What Robin gave you was a complete and incredibly clear approach to design. An approach that allowed us to consider the smallest part at the same time as the whole project. An integrated approach, way ahead of its time, that made you consider materials, energy and structure before you even considered the form or shape of a building. An approach based on craftsmanship where the project was born from a deep consideration of making and construction.



But the main design thing for him was truth; if it wasn't honest he wouldn't do it.

Robin's knowledge of buildings and architecture provided a history of architecture we were never taught. His knowledge was encyclopaedic, he loved old buildings as much as modern ones, he would connect Ely Cathedral to the modern movement in a way that made it clear that architecture was about structure and materials and order – never about style. And all this took place in his house in Belsize Park Gardens, itself an essay in everything he was teaching us.

The other thing people have noticed about Robin was his vision, a special vision that allowed him to see things with unusual clarity, the ability to see through artifice/complexity. This was something he also did in life.

Robin couldn't resist hiring people, even at times when we had limited work. If someone came in with energy and enthusiasm, and were open to learning (especially if they were German!), he hired them. It was this way I met great people in Robin's office in the late 1980s, like Reinhold Schmaderer, David Henderson and Ian Butler. It's no surprise that we are still working together and carrying on the same approach – or that the first buildings we designed when we left Robin have lots of Robin in them.

In the last 10 years Robin came and worked with us in our office as an external critic. I really enjoyed this for two reasons; first, the excellent design advice he gave which changed many of our buildings for the better. Secondly, the younger people in our office learned what a really tough critic was like, he made me look like a pussycat! When Robin got an issue between his teeth he would never, never let it go... but he was always kind, never aggressive and was always seeking the best solution.

From my first day with Robin I was struck by the extraordinary generosity of both him and his wife Delia. They shared meals, parties, yoga, even made sure we had beds if we were working late. Robin never treated us differently to himself: if we worked late so did he. He was not proud – he would draw, make models and make the tea.

When his own practice faced deep recession in the 1990s he encouraged us to branch out and enter competitions. He offered guidance and let us work from his office – he even helped with the drawings.

We are fortunate to have been enriched by knowing Robin. He had a love of life, truth, beauty, and people – especially Delia. For someone so serious about architecture, he took his enjoyment seriously and had a great sense of fun and humour. He really lived life in full colour. Greek food, BBQs in the snow with lamb and octopus come to mind - the Christmas meal of 1988 held in his garden is still talked about!

Robin also loved other art forms including drawing, music and dance which he continued to enjoy with Delia until the end of his life. He was also messianic about windsurfing, even providing an office windsurfing rig, and regularly insisted on exposing us to appalling weather conditions teaching many of us to sail...but in many cases not how to turn and come back!

Robin has left a legacy of beautifully judged, lean buildings but he has also left another legacy to those fortunate enough to spend time with him. This was a unique approach to design and life. Never a week goes by in our office where those of us who worked with him don't stop and think, if not say, 'That is what Robin would have done'. He remains our enduring conscience.

2. Parliamentary Building Competition



The building was to be hung from the roof structure, creating this unobstructed open space at ground floor level, intended to be open to the public. The roof structure was supported by four concealed service towers, avoiding the underground lines below.



A spectacular glazed roof garden was to be created within the volume of the structural roof frame.

The following account of the competition for the new parliamentary building, won by Robin Spence and Robin Webster, was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the Ian Visits website at www.ianvisits.co.uk.

In the early 1970s, plans were announced to demolish a cluster of old buildings opposite Big Ben and replace them with a vast monolith covered in bronzed glass.



The need for the building then was the same as for the current building which was eventually built, to offer more space for MPs in Parliament.

An architectural competition, organised by RIBA was held in 1972, and of the 246 entries submitted, one by Robin Spence and Robin Webster was the winning design, earning the two architects a handsome £8,000.

The design would have cost £7 million to build (in 1972 prices) and was described as a squat construction clad in bronze and glass and a - radical for its time - computer designed roof lattice.

The building would have been suspended from the roof structure, and supported by four concealed service towers which would have straddled the District and Circle lines, while the main office floors were raised up above a covered square in the centre of the building.

Plans to open up the ground floor area to the public were swiftly dropped and a bomb-proof glass wall added to the design. However, the top would have been a “secret room”, with a roof garden and views across London.

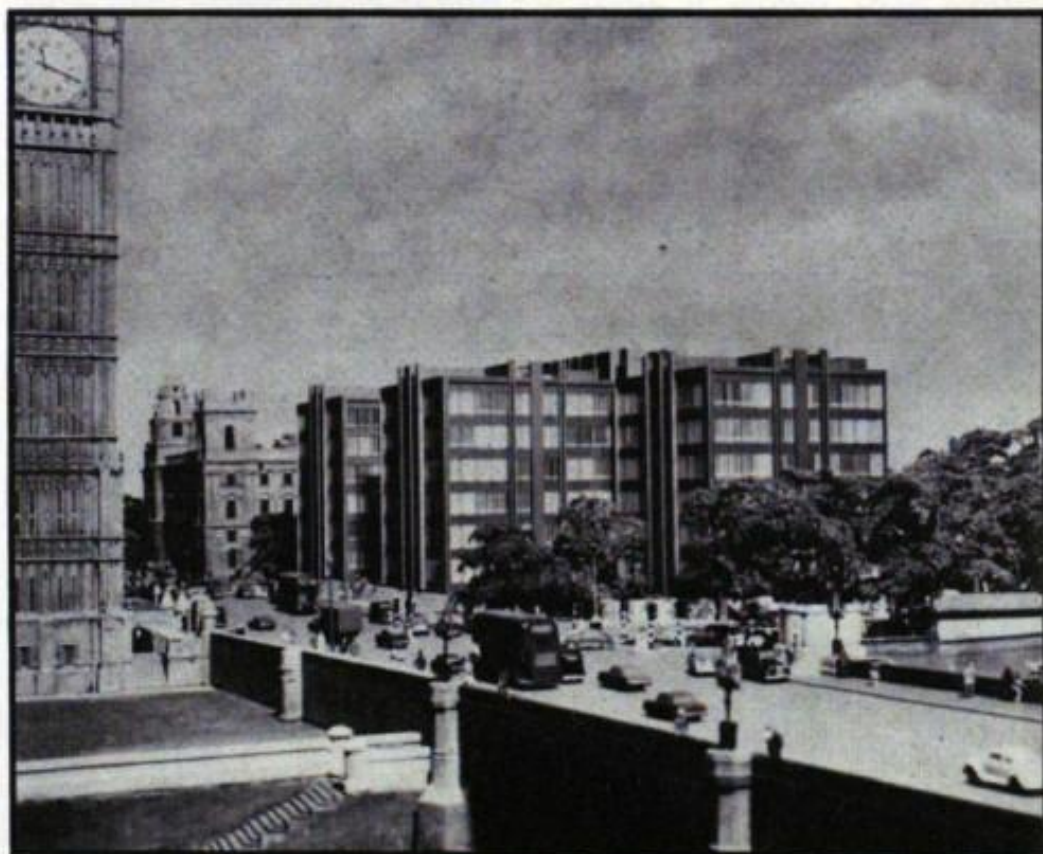
When shown off to the public, nearly 14,000 people visited an exhibition of the designs, although it was noted at the time, that fewer than half of the MPs visited the exhibition — which was after all about a new office for their convenience.

The GLC started expressing doubts about the design and various amendments were made to assuage their rising concerns. However, by the following May, even MPs were starting to get cold feet about the design.

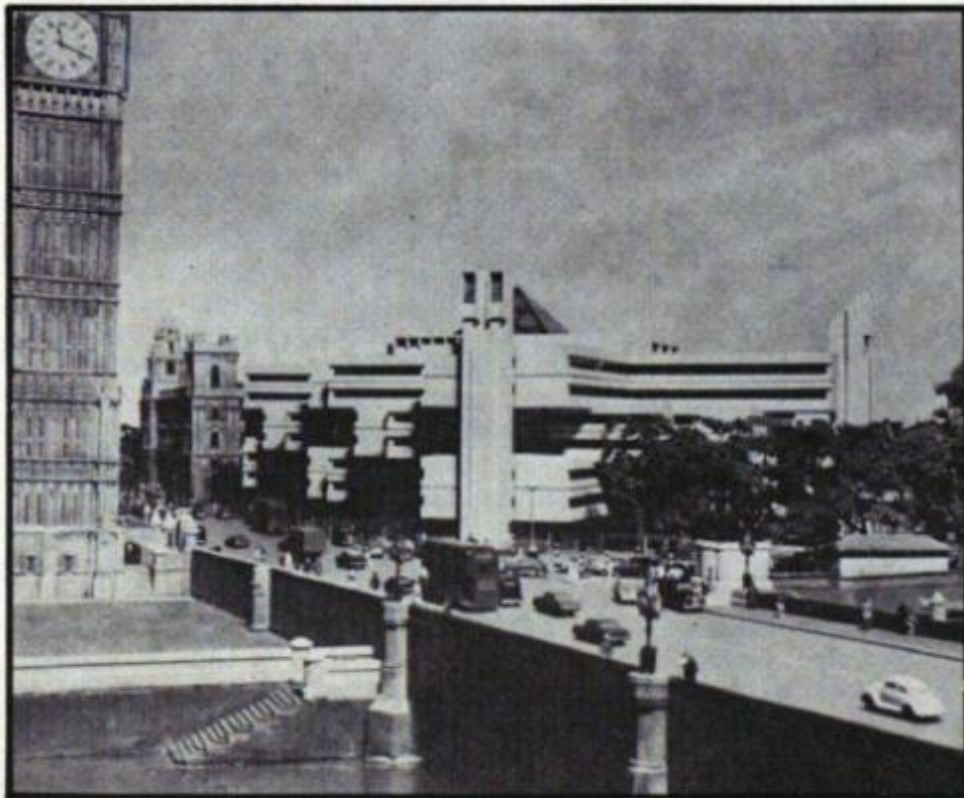
Later it was alleged that the government misrepresented the design to MPs in an effort to get more on side for a plan to quietly ditch it. Despite that, in June 1973, MPs approved plans to to build the new bronzed slab next to the river.

However, although the architects carried on developing the scheme, construction never started, and an economic downturn made starting it even harder. Eventually, in July 1975, the plans were dropped as costs soared from the original £7 million to £30 million (excluding the cost of the land).

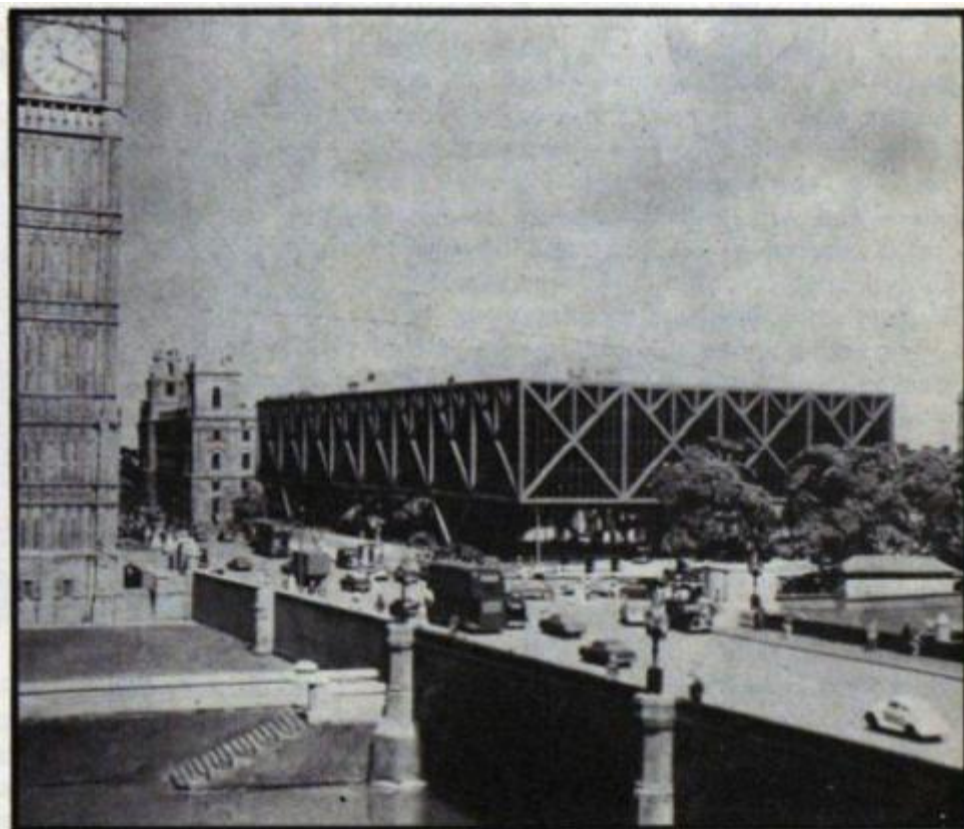
The runners up in the competition (from the Illustrated London News, April 29, 1972 & November 25, 1972) were:



Winner of the second prize is Triad, Hancock's design, with towers rising from a main concourse level and strong vertical emphasis.



Two designs shared third place. Philip Black and Andre Bisztyga's block has two separate floor plans stacked in layers and interpenetrated.



Joint third is Pafford Keatinge-Clay's structure whose bronze clad trusses bear on pyramidal supports. Windows are of bronze glass.

3. Parliamentary Debate

The following House of Commons speeches on the Spence + Webster design for the new parliamentary building were archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from Hansard at the www.api.parliament.uk website.

NEW PARLIAMENTARY BUILDING

HC Deb 09 August 1972 vol 842 cc1830-401830

§4.38 p.m.

Mr. Sydney Chapman (Birmingham, Handsworth) I regard it as a great privilege to have the opportunity to raise in the last debate before the Summer Recess a matter which is of more than domestic importance to this House. I refer to the new parliamentary building. I do so because, if it is built, it will be sited on what must be considered an important and most historic site.



The House of Commons Services Committee in the Session 1967–68 recommended that a new parliamentary building should be built on the north side of Bridge Street. It was decided in 1970 that an architectural competition should be held to promote a design, the competition to be open to any architect or architectural firm in the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth. It was proposed that the competition should be in two stages. Nearly 1,000 architects or firms expressed an interest in the first stage of the competition, and 246 of them put in schemes.

The second stage came when some were selected, and those contenders were asked to develop their schemes which had 1831 been submitted in sketch form. Last December it was announced that the assessors had nominated a winner. However, before any announcement was made, my right hon. Friend the Minister for Housing and Construction very properly thought that models should be built of the seven leading schemes and an exhibition staged in Westminster Hall. In March of this year it was announced that in the opinion of the assessors the winners were two young architects named Robin Spence and Robin Webster.

The Services Committee of this Session met to discuss and to meet and question the people concerned with the winning design and others. It reported at the beginning of last month, on 4th July. It said that the House should adopt the winning design with relatively minor modifications and, perhaps even more important, that the construction should be started as soon as possible.

Under questioning, the Lord President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons said that there must be a debate before a decision could be taken whether to proceed with the construction of this new parliamentary building. I am disappointed that time has not been found for a full debate before the Summer Recess. I appreciate the difficulties of the legislative programme that the Government have faced and I concede that there was no definite commitment that there would be such a debate before the Summer Recess. I realise that my hon. Friend who is to reply to this short debate is not in a position to give any assurance, but I hope he will communicate with the Leader of the House and try to seek from him an assurance that there will be a debate on this important topic before the end of this Session, which I understand means before the end of October, and that, whatever the Government's attitude may be towards this winning design, the Motion for the debate should be on the proposition that the winning design should be accepted with the modifications and that we should give the go-ahead for the work to proceed.

In the very few minutes available to me I do not intend that this should be a debate on the merits or demerits of the winning design, though, for reasons which I am prepared to explain, I am a strong 1832 supporter of it. I should like to concentrate on the administrative problems and other matters arising from a decision on this new parliamentary building. After all, if the winning design is accepted, as I hope it will be, the detailed designs have to be drawn up, planning permissions have to be sought and given, the existing buildings have to be demolished, and I should think there would have to be further foundation testing, particularly in relation to the four towers of the proposed winning design. The project will then have to go out to tender and building contractors will have to be appointed. All this has to be done before the work can commence.

I should like clarification basically on three points regarding this project. First, I should be grateful if my hon. Friend would confirm that all the land, the subject of the site of this new parliamentary building, is in the ownership of the Government. I have heard rumours, which I hope are not true, that there is a parcel of land that is not yet in the ownership of the Government. I understand that that parcel of land might have a site value of approaching £2 million. I should be grateful if my hon. Friend would clarify that point. If not, I hope that very quickly that land will be within the ownership of the Government.

Secondly, it is important that we demolish the existing buildings and that the necessary excavation work preparatory to the sub-structure, let alone the superstructure, of the new building should be undertaken as soon as possible.

I say that for three particular reasons. First, it is of tremendous importance that if the building proceeds it should not be delayed by archaeological finds that may be discovered under the land. One only has to recall the archaeological remains that were, and are being, found when excavation work started on the underground car park in New Palace Yard to realise that it is more likely than not that important discoveries will be made. Therefore, if the excavation work could be done as soon as possible this would be less likely to cause delay in the construction work.

Secondly, although test borings must have been taken on the site, I think there will be a need for more comprehensive test borings, if only in the vicinity of the 1833 foundations of the four towers which are proposed to form the construction basis of the new building.

Thirdly—I am rather surprised about this—I understand that it is not known exactly where the Underground goes under the site of the proposed new building. We know it is there, and we know roughly where it is, and it is critical to the design. Speaking to the architects the other day, I discovered that every six inches counts, and it would therefore be a good thing to find out exactly where this public conveyance of the metropolis runs.

The third point on which I would like clarification is that if there are—I hope there are not—what I can euphemistically describe as conflicts between the Department of the Environment on the one hand and the Greater London Council on the other, I hope these will be resolved speedily. I am thinking particularly about if there is disagreement about the proposed line of the building with Bridge Street, or whether Bridge Street should become a pedestrian way or continue to be for motor vehicles.

I have one final and, I believe, critical point to make about the new building. When the House takes a decision about the building and about the important site on which it is proposed to build it, there should be a simple choice. That choice should be either to have the winning design, with modifications, and to build it as soon as possible, or not to have that design because we do not think there should be a new parliamentary building. I do not suggest there has ever been a commitment upon the Government that they should necessarily accept the winning design. But it would be going against the grain morally if we were to say that another new parliamentary building should be designed for that site.

After all, there is at least an implicit commitment because the competition was open to any architect in the United Kingdom or the Commonwealth to put forward plans if he thought he could do so, and, therefore, we must accept, as did the assessors, that we have the best design of those submitted. I feel very strongly about this point but I believe we would be reneging on a moral commitment and we would be throwing into the whole cauldron of political discontent and 1834bring into disrepute the whole principle of international competitions. Two young architects have won this design competition, and I believe they won it convincingly. Surely it is a controversial solution but it has been accepted by the assessors, who said it Quite clearly came out on top". It has also now been accepted by the large majority of the members of the Services Committee. I believe it to be a distinguished and distinctive contribution to 20th-century architecture on the Embankment.

Mr. Patrick Cormack (Cannock) Rubbish.

Mr. Chapman I believe that, rather like Coventry Cathedral, there will be initial public hostility which will turn to acceptance, and when the building is finished it will be the subject of open admiration.



Mr. Cormack (right) Rubbish.

Mr. Chapman I say to my hon. Friend, whose views I sometimes agree with, that if one looks back at the great architectural competitions one sees that they have produced the greatest architecture in this country and invariably the architects at that time were unknown people. Take, for example, Harvey Lonsdale Elmes, who was in his 20s when he won the design for the St. George's Hall in Liverpool accepted as one of the greatest neo-classical buildings. Barry was only in his early 40s when with Pugin, then in his 20s or 30s, they designed this august building. Christopher Wren was in his 30s when he designed St. Pauls and Inigo Jones was in his early 40s when he conceived the Banqueting Hall, Whitehall. I say this in support of this House coming out to give a clear lead and inspiration to architects in this country by accepting the winning design.

§4.50 p.m.

The Under-Secretary of State for the Environment (Mr. Reginald Eyre) I must congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Handsworth (Mr. Sydney Chapman), whose interest in architectural matters is well known, on raising this important matter today. I shall speak as briefly as possible because I know that my hon. Friends the Members for

Cannock (Mr. Cormack) and for Ipswich (Mr. Money) and the hon. Member for Dagenham (Mr. Parker) hope to contribute to the debate.

The provision of a new parliamentary building is of the greatest importance to us all if we are to carry out our duties efficiently. We do our best now; and I do not think the public, our constituents, can seriously complain about the service we give them from what is, particularly for Private Members, often cramped and unsatisfactory accommodation which would not be tolerated in commerce,

industry or the professions. It has, however, for long been recognised that something better is wanted, not only for ourselves but also for our very hard-working staff, if that service is to be maintained in conditions appropriate to both the efficiency and the dignity of this House.

I am, of course, aware that some hon. Members are not entirely enthusiastic about the winning design which has now been endorsed in a modified form by the Services Committee. The issue is debateable and it will no doubt be debated at length in the autumn when we consider the Committee's report and recommendation. The actual timing of the debate must rest with my right hon. Friend the Lord President of the Council, though I will certainly ask him to consider my hon. Friend's request. We do not, however, have to reach a decision today, and I propose, as my contribution to this preliminary canter, merely to run over some 1836 of the considerations which the House will wish to bear in mind when it comes to a decision, and to mention what we shall be doing to help this to be done against a sufficiently informed background.

What worries most hon. Members who have criticised the winning design is its external appearance. This comes out clearly in the record of evidence presented to the Committee, and in the observations of my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol, West (Mr. Robert Cooke), ably supported by my hon. Friends the Members for Maidstone (Mr. John Wells) and Cannock (Mr. Cormack) when we last debated the matter, though in a wider context, on 24th July.

I do not think that there will be any disagreement if I say that whatever the House decides to commission for the Bridge Street site must be worthy of its setting, which is one of the most important not only to this country but in the world. Whatever is built there must not be mean or gimmicky, nor, conversely, need it be grandiose, but it must be able to take its place



appropriately, though not perhaps without the modesty befitting a newcomer, alongside its magnificent neighbours. Fortunately, as my right hon. Friend the Minister for Housing and Construction said in evidence to the Services Committee, it is the rôle of the Royal Fine Art Commission rather than of my Department to form a view on the aesthetics of the matter. Its views are expressed in the memorandum which it submitted to the Committee and in its evidence as recorded in the report.

Hon. Members will be able to form their own views whether the Committee's summary in paragraph 4 of its Report—that the winning design would be a good neighbour to the existing buildings in Parliament Square—is sufficient answer to the critics' doubts, or whether greater weight should be given to the other considerations which some of my hon. Friends proposed unsuccessfully to incorporate in an amendment.

The Services Committee itself has gone some way towards meeting the criticism of the height of the proposed building in relation to the Palace of Westminster and the buildings on the other side of Parliament Street. Its proposal that the height of the proposed building should be reduced by about 1½ metres to bring it level with the top of the balustrade above 1837 the main cornice of the Treasury building should improve matters considerably from this point of view. There will probably also be general agreement with its other proposed modifications if it is eventually decided to accept its report that the winning design be adopted.

The proposed alignment with the Treasury building in Great George Street seems to have merit whatever the shape of the eventual buildings in Bridge Street. I realise that this is not quite enough for our friends across the water at County Hall, who would like us to set our building line even further back in order to incorporate another traffic lane in Bridge Street. Their views as highway authority for the area, must clearly be treated with respect, though I doubt whether they will find much support for another traffic lane in Bridge Street from any quarter of this House.

I expect that if it is decided to go ahead with this building we would welcome the provision of shops—subject, of course, to the committee's concern for retaining as much natural light as possible for the offices. Similarly I think that we would all agree that the vertical lines of the building need emphasis as a contrast to its rather massive, horizontal lines, that experiments should be tried with lighter colours and that more consideration should be given to security.

I emphasise that the decision is of course for the House. Just as my right hon. Friends do not presume to be arbiters of taste, so their general rôle is to give effect to the will of the House by providing the accommodation it requires. We shall, however, do our best to enable the House to reach the most satisfactory solution by providing hon. Members with whatever

information and material is available. My right hon. Friend the Lord President has already said that the architects of the winning design, Mr. Robin Spence and Mr. Robin Webster, have agreed to participate in an illustrated lecture on their proposals. We for our part are incorporating the Services Committee's modifications of height and alignment into a model of the area so that hon. Members may see for themselves what this will mean in visual terms.

Hon. Members will no doubt wish to know what would happen by way of delay in providing this much-needed accommodation if the House were to reject the winning design and call for a new one for this important site. My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol, West made such a suggestion on 24th July and proposed that we should commission further sketch plans for the House to look at alongside the winning design. He rightly said that if the House adopted the latter there would be no delay; if, on the other hand, the House preferred an alternative, the delay would not be very long.

This course has its attractions. However, there are also difficulties, as my hon. Friend the Member for Handsworth made clear. The most important is that the Services Committee has now recommended that the design as modified be adopted and it would not seem right for my right hon. Friend to commission yet more drawings until we, the House, have decided whether or not to accept that recommendation. There is also the point that we have the other six second-stage designs as well as the 239 which did not go beyond the first stage. Some hon. Members may feel that we should consider these before going any further.

It is, of course, true that, so far as we know, a number of the most eminent of our present day British architects did not enter for the competition. But we have no guarantee that their designs would be any more acceptable than those that we have; and to start afresh would naturally take longer than to go ahead with what we have. There is, of course, also the question how we would judge the respective merits of a number of fresh alternative designs. My hon. Friend the Member for Handsworth is expert in these matters. However, most of us are not and I imagine that we should need some formal method of adjudication. The assessors in the last competition have already delivered their verdict.

However, these are issues for the House to consider at a later stage. In the meantime we are doing what we can within the Department to ensure that if the House were to decide that the winning design should be adopted so that the extra accommodation may be ready by 1978, its wishes should not be frustrated by any lack of urgency on our part. With this in view we have issued notices to treat in respect of all the existing buildings on the site which are not yet in Government ownership. We are also on the point of issuing notices under Section 57(2) of the Landlord and Tenant Act,

1954, informing those concerned of the proposed change in use of the premises. This is to enable all statutory processes to be completed and demolition to begin during the first half of next year.

I take note of the point my hon. Friend raises with regard to possible archaeological finds, and a constant watch will be kept in this respect by my Department's Chief Inspector of Ancient Monuments. We are also conducting useful preliminary negotiations with London Transport about the reprovision of the Underground railway station, but I understand that the line will continue as before.

§It being Five o'clock, Mr SPEAKER adjourned the House without Question put till Tuesday, 17th October, pursuant to the Resolution of the House yesterday.

4. Hunstanton House

The following was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the Mid Century Magazine website at www.midcenturymagazine.com website.

Coastal Modernism: California architecture in Norfolk

All photographs courtesy of Tino Tedaldi.



Tucked away down a private lane in the Norfolk seaside village of Old Hunstanton lies an architectural gem of a bungalow designed by Robin Spence in 1971 as a tribute to Californian Modernism. Bought and renovated by Tim and Hannah Bent, ‘Bramley’ is available to rent for holidays and short breaks and sleeps up to six people – a treat for any fan of Modernism, as well as for those who simply appreciate an abundance of light and space. Forget any preconceptions you may have about seaside bungalows – this single-storey space challenges the traditional notions of how a coastal retreat should look.

The bungalow was Architect Robin Spence’s second UK commission and he took his inspiration from the steel and glass framed homes that had sprung up across California in the 1950s, having returned in 1969 from a period working with Myron Goldsmith in Chicago. The building has a simple structure. Hung from three steel 32ft I-beams that run along its length, the external aesthetic is provided by the floor-to-ceiling sliding windows set in bronze anodised aluminium. The strength of the beams renders internal supports unnecessary, instead the robust white wooden panels that clad the walls are used to separate the bedrooms and bathrooms from the living space. Sourced by Robin Spence from Scandinavia, these

give the interior its own distinct character. The flat roof is constructed from one piece of fibreglass, with several well-positioned skylights that flood the kitchen and bathroom with yet more natural light.



The generous living space consists of an open-plan kitchen, a dining and sitting area with a snug, which can be separated by a sliding door to create another bedroom. There are two well-proportioned double bedrooms, a bathroom and second toilet, plus a games room in the garage complete with table tennis and pool table, and the all-important place to dry your wetsuits. A warm-air heating system installed at floor level keeps the place feeling

snug and the natural cork tiles throughout the living area are a homely touch.

The couple created the generous communal space with views to both front and back by removing the original galley kitchen wall to unite it with the living space. Hannah explains, “We tend to congregate with friends and extended family when we come here and the open-plan design really works, the external sliding doors remain open most of the time.”



Tim reveals, “Everything in the place was 40 years old when we bought it. We started out thinking that all it needed was a lick of paint but once we’d opened up the kitchen, it was difficult to stop!”. And there are indeed plenty of concessions to contemporary living, with a state-of-the-art power shower, Bosch utilities, sizeable flat screen TVs in every room, and of course wifi.

The place has been beautifully furnished with a successful mix of mid-century pieces and crisp contemporary design. It is clear that the nostalgia Tim and Hannah feel for the area has played its part. “It’s the memories that these objects evoke, the way they take you back to your childhood and it’s an opportunity to introduce the kids to some of the simple pleasures that we enjoyed growing up in the 1970s and ’80s. We try to provide our guests with the ingredients for a good old-fashioned hands-on holiday.”

The Newton’s Cradle and Snoopy memorabilia certainly proved to be a talking point for us! It is perhaps this sense of nostalgia that explains the predominance of British furniture. Ercol, G-Plan, Conran and Anglepoise, it’s all here. Hannah admits that the refurbishment has allowed her to indulge her passion for swivel chairs and textiles. There is plenty of

evidence of this, with cushions by Elsie Dodds, a sumptuous selection of Welsh blankets, and a vivid turquoise Ercol sofa that has been recently reupholstered in Bute fabric. She says, “It’s very calming living with white walls – the light makes the space feel quite serene”. And she’s right. This certainly feels like a retreat – I took the opportunity to do some writing at the 1970s Marc Berthier desk in the peace and quiet of the bedroom; looking out beyond the garden, I could even catch a glimpse of the sea.



In ‘Bramley’ Tim and Hannah have created a real home from home, largely because it is just that. They have designed the space with the needs of their own family in mind and as such it works very successfully. And I can’t help feeling that it’s generous of them to share it with us!

With William and Kate rumoured to have spent their wedding night down the road, this area certainly ticks the boxes in terms of romance. You can sit beneath the big Norfolk skies or take a stroll along the dunes, in fact it’s the only beach on the North Norfolk coast where you can watch the sun set. You could visit nearby Holkham or see the seals at Blakeney Point, but chances are, once you arrive you won’t want to wander far. With the beach a mere five-minute stroll away, you can take the kids crabbing in the rock pools, try your hand at kite-surfing or land-surfing, or simply hunker down with a book from Tim and Hannah’s well-stocked design library. There are a multitude of excellent pubs in the locality and Hunstanton’s very own Michelin starred restaurant, The Neptune, is just down the road. Or you can do what we did and head to the excellent beach café for a cheeky fry up.

5. Belsize Park Houses

The following was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the Wowhaus website at www.wowhaus.co.uk.

Something very different on the market, although going off the beaten track with this 1970s steel-framed house in Belsize Park, London NW3 isn't a cheap option. Not least, because of its location.



This is one of a pair designed in 1978 by architects Robin Spence and Robin Webster for their own use, each a single-storey steel-framed house, radical in its day and still outside the norm in the current era.

The profile is low so that the house is invisible from the street. Perhaps so the residents of the nearby Victorian mansions didn't kick up a fuss. Enter via a gate to find plenty of off-street parking and that structure, covering around 2,422 sq ft.



The house originally had five bedrooms, but is currently used with three bedrooms plus a large second reception or study, a dressing room, two bathrooms, cloakroom and kitchen. There's a basement too, for the ventilation plant and heating system (the original gas-fired warm-air heating), as well as plenty of storage space.



The central section of the house is open to the sky, with double-glazed roof-lighting, while the rear is an ‘oasis-like garden’ with mature bamboo. All of which sounds very tranquil, even if it does give the impression of a greenhouse at times.



Sadly, it costs more than your average greenhouse, with an asking price of around £2,500,000. See more images at the Zoopla at eBay site or at the Modern House website.
