

BEYOND THE OBVIOUS

This year's Stirling Prize shortlist has less of a heavyweight flavour about it – and is all the better for it, says **Hugh Pearman**

IN RECENT YEARS, the shortlist for the Stirling Prize has attracted accusations of being a bit of a club for well-known established architects. So it's refreshing that this year is the first time on the shortlist for five out of the six practices represented. Half of them are led by women – the first time the proportion has been so high – and two of these are based in Ireland. While by no mean new kids on the block, these are

generally smaller practices who represent a diversity of approaches.

Which one will win? Well, there's a clear favourite – with commentators and bookies alike – but if the history of the Stirling Prize tells us anything, it's that it can be a bit of a hoodoo to be the favourite, as Grimshaw found to its cost with the Eden Project in 2001, and Chipperfield with the Neues

Museum, Berlin, in 2010.

As with any high-profile award, the Stirling is often controversial, but let's be honest – would you really want to be without it? Though the era of mainstream TV coverage and national newspaper media sponsorship seems to be over, this year the Prize boasts a tie-up with BBC Online. So, here are the contenders in no particular order.



University of Limerick Medical School and student housing

Grafton Architects

An object lesson in how to make buildings and places on a very low budget, this contrasts the warm brick of the student housing with the cool grey of the largely concrete medical school (pictured). It has 'a generosity that verges on the heroic' and a very fine bus-shelter, say the judges. A relatively straightforward programme has produced a rich, theatrical place.



Astley Castle

Warwickshire

Witherford Watson Mann Architects

The ultimate one-off (above), this is a rare departure for the folly-rescuing Landmark Trust: a modern insertion into the shell of a 12th century manor. Done with subtlety and restraint, making the most of the ruin it inhabits and transforms, this has become as much of a must-rent with architecture buffs as Alain de Botton's Living Architecture holiday homes.

Bishop Edward King Chapel

Cuddesdon, Oxfordshire

Niall McLaughlin Architects

Our cover star from last month's issue is a thing of great beauty and originality, recognisably a place of Christian worship, referencing churches of the past and their symbolism, yet modern in a relatively timeless way. Everyone who sees this building is enthused by it, hence its position as clear favourite. But it's got strong competition.



Newhall Be housing

Harlow

Alison Brooks Architects

Known for her one-off houses and a joint Stirling winner in 2008 for her upmarket role in the Accordia housing development in Cambridge, Brooks here tackles the volume-built suburban home in a £12m, 84-unit scheme. Her trick is to increase volume by halving garden size, reinstating it in the form of roof terraces. This paid for desirable 'extras'.

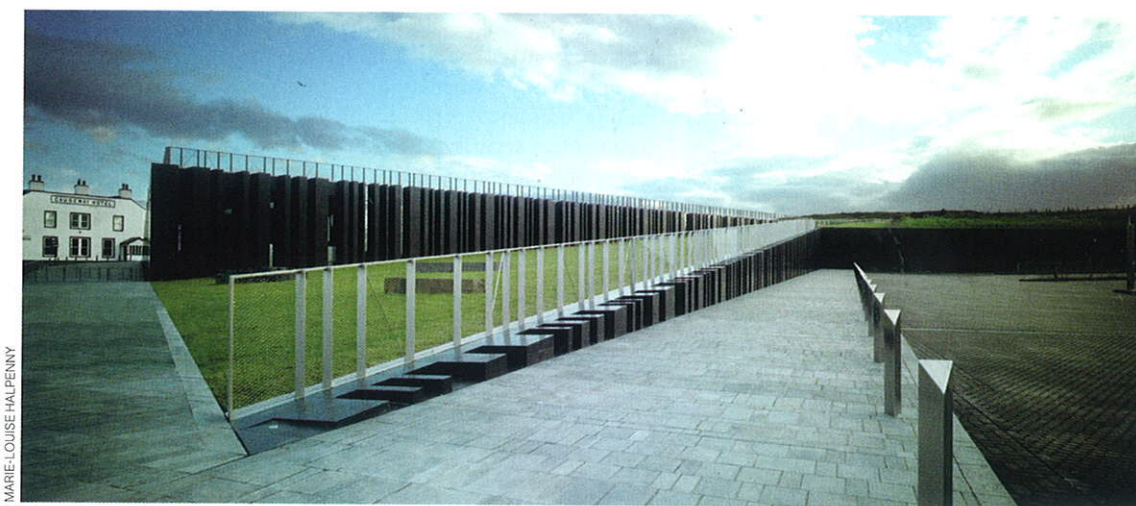


Giant's Causeway Visitor Centre

Northern Ireland

heneghan peng architects

A building conceived as a piece of land art acts as the interpretation centre for the famous coastal feature of basalt columns – which are reinterpreted to form the perimeter of the building. A shop, cafe and exhibition space that acts as a destination in its own right without forgetting that the real attraction is outside.



Park Hill Phase 1 housing

Sheffield

Hawkins\Brown with Studio Egret West

The opposite of Brooks' Newhall, this is the reinvention for Urban Splash of the famous high-density late 1950s council development. Criticised by some for the way it dispenses entirely with the original facade treatment of this Grade II* listed complex, and part-privatises what was wholly social housing, it is nonetheless a development of intelligence and verve when the most likely alternative was demolition.

