Review

CAA student competition

The ninth CAA student competition considered how the world’s growing ageing population will shift approaches to architecture, reports Catherine Slessor

The world’s population is ageing. According to the United Nations, this is without parallel in human history, precipitating a demographic shift that will have profound economic and cultural implications for society. Currently, the fastest growing age group in the world is those aged 80 or over, as advances in medicine and healthcare conspire to extend the limits of human mortality.

Yet architecture only fitfully addresses this changing landscape. Seen more as a chore than an opportunity, housing and other facilities for the elderly tend to suffer from lack of resources and lowest-common-denominator thinking. This only serves to ingrain a sense of marginalisation and isolation.

For the ninth Commonwealth Association of Architects (CAA) International Student Competition, students were asked to design an environment for an ageing population. Rather than focusing on conventional gated retirement communities or nursing homes, the aim of the brief was to consider the broader context of family and community, and how relationships between different age groups could be strengthened and enhanced. In physical terms, this could take the form of a house for an extended family, or a multi-generational precinct. It might also encompass planning strategies to accommodate changing family structures, or housing for unusual demographic mixes. Entrants were free to select their own site.

The jury met in Dhaka, Bangladesh prior to the opening of the triennial CAA Conference (p27). The jury comprised Ashvinkumar Kantial (architect, Ong & Ong, Singapore), Peter Rich (architect and educator, South Africa), Rachel Sayers (partner, Feilden Clegg Bradley Studios, UK), Shamsul Wares (Dean, School of Environment and Design, University of Asia Pacific, Dhaka, Bangladesh) and Catherine Slessor (AR Editor).
This scheme creatively confronts the challenges of demographic change and the pressures on rural life exerted by China’s breakneck urbanisation. As young people leave for the rapidly-expanding cities, the elderly are left behind in decaying villages. This thoughtful and beautifully presented proposal aims to restore a sense of rural community life by creating a new village based on existing structures in the surrounding area. The hope is that a new settlement will attract people back to the countryside, reversing the population drain and reconnecting the marginalised elderly populace with a community of all ages. The jury especially admired its incisive analysis of the social, economic and demographic issues and its imaginative response to place, context and topography. Drawing on vernacular precedents, the proposal seeks to evolve an authentically regional yet modern architecture that sits lightly in its dramatic hillside setting. Moreover, through its resonant articulation of context and culture, and its potential for genuine social transformation, it also acts as a paradigm that can be imitated elsewhere.
In a similar vein, this project for Qingchuan village in rural China aims to improve the quality of public space and social life in a small rural settlement abandoned by the young and populated mainly by elderly people. The complete absence of street lighting inhibits the ageing residents' capacity to socialise and take an active part in the community, so the solution is to distribute a series of 'illumination cubes' around the village and along the surrounding valley floor. Within the village these light cubes are implanted in existing redundant buildings, coaxing them back to life. Thus abandoned spaces and structures are reinvigorated and the social fabric of the village reconstituted through a relatively simple and economic strategy. The jury thought this a highly impressive project that responded with great sensitivity to a complex and challenging set of social factors.
THIRD PRIZE

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Set on a backland plot in London’s Aldgate district on the edge of the City, this proposal explores an edgier and more expressive urban alternative to the default suburban lifestyle that tends to be foisted on people as they grow older. Colonising the voids between existing blocks, the idea of sheltered housing is given a new twist, as the surrounding urban blocks provide a ‘protective jacket’ around housing, a chapel/gallery, shops and a public courtyard. Residents are within easy reach of amenities and the buildings and spaces are intended to create an informal network of care that encourages and sustains intergenerational interaction. The jury admired the scheme’s evident social and urbanistic ambitions expressed through its beautifully sober, reticent architecture. The sophisticated presentation brought the proposal vividly to life.