

ARCHITECTS TO TAKE A REFERENDUM

REPLY TO COUNCIL'S REFUSAL TO AMEND LIBRARY COMPETITION

SHALL BAN BE IMPOSED?

ALLEGATIONS IN REGARD TO OTHER CITY BUILDINGS

A resolution will be submitted to the Council of the Institute of Architects, a body drawn from the four provinces, that a referendum be held of every registered architect on the question whether the Institute shall ban the City Council's competition for the new library plans.

In an interview to-day Mr. Howden detailed instances of competitions held by the City Council in which the Institute alleges the terms of the competition were abused. He criticised Mr. Crocker, of the Council's Library Committee, for making self-contradictory statements in presenting that committee's point of view.

THE COMMITTEE AND THE ASSESSOR

"If the conditions admit of a fair competition, every eminent architect in South Africa will participate in the hope of securing an engagement which will mean to him in fees something like £12,000. It is strange that one should have to stress so obvious a point," said Mr. R. Howden, immediate past president-in-charge of the Institute of South African Architects, in the course of an interview to-day on the position that has arisen as a result of the Johannesburg Municipality's decision not to delete clause 29 from the conditions of the competition for the design of the new city library.

The clause objected to by the architects is:

"29. The assessor may, in his discretion, decide to recommend to the Council that no scheme of sufficient merit for adoption has been submitted, and in that case the competition shall be cancelled and the premiums paid to the authors of the designs placed first, second and third in order of merit. The Council in that event shall be free of all further liability whatever in the matter of this competition."

"In addition," said Mr. Howden, "have we not suggested that by the municipality itself selecting five or six South African architects, and offering them an honorarium of say £100 each, they will then have the guarantee desired by Mr. Crocker that eminent architects will compete?"

Mr. Howden drew attention to certain grave abuses which architects throughout the world had suffered as the result of unfair competitions, and said that in spite of all these facts the municipality had the audacity to resuscitate an obsolete, unjust condition, banned by every institute of architects in the world, and to demand that the architects of South Africa should submit to it. He declared that, according to an admission made by Mr. Crocker, this objectionable clause was inserted, not by Mr. Vincent Harris, but by the Council's library committee,

Mr. Howden, in dealing with the objections by the municipality to the withdrawal of the clause 29, pointed out that Mr. Crocker had said, "without it the Council is in a defenceless position, and even if only one design was submitted the Council would have to accept it." Later he said that "without this clause the Council might have to accept something in the nature of a factory design."

A responsible public man, in Mr. Howden's opinion, should not make such statements, when the architects had in their own conditions clearly put up to the municipality a clause stating that, if in the opinion of the assessor there be some valid reason for not accepting any of the designs, the promoters should have the right to nominate their own architect to collaborate with the author of the first premiated design, and to amend or, if necessary, redesign entirely the building.

Mr. Howden stressed the point of view that the Institute of South African Architects was dealing with vital principles affecting not only the architects of to-day, but the architects of the future, and any precedent established as a result of this competition would mean the fair protection—they sought nothing more—or the failure to protect, the younger architectural generation.

With regard to the insinuations that the institute was in the hands of a few, and not representative of South African architectural opinion, there was one simple, yet complete reply to Mr. Cordell and Mr. Crocker. The central council of the institute was composed of 12 members: four from the Transvaal, two from the Cape, one from Natal, one from the O.F.S., two quantity surveyors, and two Union Government nominees. At a full council meeting on April 26 the Library Committee's conditions were thoroughly gone into, and the central council passed a unanimous resolution thereon.

"What are the possibilities of the Institute of Architects banning the library design competition?" Mr. Howden was asked. He replied:

REFERENDUM TO BE TAKEN.

"In view of the very strong representations made to me personally, while president-in-chief, by a recent South African Congress, and during a presidential tour of South Africa, to ensure that all future competitions shall be fairly conducted, it is my intention at the first opportunity to move in the central council that a referendum of every registered architect in South Africa be taken as to whether or not the Johannesburg library competition, with its unfair conditions, should be banned."

Mr. Howden asked whether the municipality offered architects any measure of protection if they agreed to Clause 29 remaining? Or were they expected, remembering previous experiences in Johannesburg, to entertain towards the City Council a simple trust that the result of this competition, unlike others, would be a fair and satisfactory one?

In giving a resume of the negotiations which led up to the present impasse, Mr. Howden said that on the arrival of Mr. Vincent Harris in Jo-

hannesburg he invited him to meet his committee to discuss with them the general conditions of competition laid down as a basis for all future competitions in South Africa—based almost entirely on the prevailing practice in Great Britain and the Dominions. Mr. Harris said he was the guest of the municipality, and felt he should obtain their permission. This permission the Library Committee refused him.

"The municipality were quite aware of the principles involved in our conditions of competition because they had, without demur, accepted the same only a few weeks previously for their new fire station competition, which is at present under way," said Mr. Howden.

CLAUSE NOT IN EXISTENCE ELSEWHERE

"Nevertheless, they forwarded us a draft of their proposed library competition conditions totally at variance with what they had just accepted for the fire station, their new draft conditions containing most contentious and objectionable clauses which do not exist in any competition conditions in any part of the world."

The executive immediately met and considered these draft library building conditions, and Mr. Howden was requested to convey the institute's representations to the library committee. The registrar and he duly met the library committee and conveyed these representations. Mr. Vincent Harris, who was present at this meeting, offered no comment whatever either for or against these representations, while they were there, being placed in a most difficult position by the library committee's refusal to permit him to see the architects before that meeting.

"REASONABLE" COMPROMISE.

"On the draft conditions prepared by the library committee, no less than 12 comments were made by me, one half of which were suggestions for tightening up the conditions in the Council's interests, the remainder pointing out distinct disabilities to the competitors from the architects' point of view," said Mr. Howden. "The library committee adopted the six suggestions in their own interests, but on the point of reciprocity, granted not a single request in the interests of the architect. Yet this is what Mr. Crocker publicly refers to as a reasonable compromise."

Mr. Howden declared that the architectural profession, previous to registration, was more or less at the mercy of any person, institution or public body which cared to take a mean advantage of its members. One of the first grievances that architects as a registered body, decided to tackle, was this question of competitions. They resolutely decided that for the future the profession was not to be exploited in competitions.

As an illustration of the treatment by public bodies Mr. Howden referred to the attitude of the Johannesburg Municipality in some previous competitions. The Town Council called for competitive designs for the abattoirs at Newtown—the competitors fully anticipating that the author of the design placed first would be employed to carry out the work. The Town Council duly received competitive designs, several leading architects competing. Nevertheless, the Council took advantage of a clause similar to clause 29, threw out all the designs, and did the work departmentally. It was for the municipality to state the extent to which it did or did not incorporate in this work the ideas contained in the competitive designs.

THE FIRE STATION PLAN.

"Later on the Council decided to have a competition for the fire station on Von Brandis Square, and nominated a well-known architect, who was also a councillor, as assessor," Mr. Howden continued. "This assessor selected an outstanding design, the author of which was one of the leading architects in South Africa. This design was acknowledged by the assessor and the profession as being a brilliant architectural achievement, yet, to the utter amazement of the profession, the municipality deliberately threw over the assessor's award and gave the work to another architect."

Still more recently a competition was held for the layout of the western end of Market Square. In this instance the Council compromised with the author of the winning design, and did the work departmentally.

These were but a few instances of what architects termed the grave abuse from which they had suffered in competitions. In fact, in Great Britain and the Dominions it had been found necessary to demand that in no present-day competitions should there exist any clauses which contained loopholes to permit of such abuse recurring.

There were present at the above interview, in addition to Mr. Howden, Mr. F. Williamson, a member of the central council of the Institute of South African Architects, and Mr. J. S. Lewis, registrar of the institute.