

LIBRARY PLAN DISPUTE

ARCHITECTS MAY BAN COMPETITION

A DIFFICULT POINT

CITY COUNCIL'S ATTITUDE

Mr. J. S. Lewis, registrar of the Institute of South African Architects, presents the architects' case in regard to the new city library plans in the following letter to the editor of *The Star*:—

The architectural profession in South Africa view with regret misstatements that have recently been made in regard to the new city library, which, in their opinion, have unfairly misrepresented the position.

In the conditions of competition drawn up by the Library Committee the following contentious clause appears:—

"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."

"A VITAL PRINCIPLE."

There is a vital principle involved in this clause. Its adoption in the past has resulted in grave abuse. There have been many competitions in South Africa in recent years, promoted both by Government and municipal authorities, the results of which have caused very serious dissatisfaction in the architectural profession.

It has frequently happened that promoters of competitions have rejected all the designs submitted and have handed over the execution of the work to a non-competitor, or have carried out the work departmentally, as they think fit. It has also happened that many of the features contained both in the design and plan of the first premiated design have been embodied in the work thus carried out.

This is an abuse that the profession feels must be stopped. Because of their experience, architects are determined that they will not participate in any competition which contains a clause by which the author of the design placed first can be deprived of the opportunity of carrying out the work. Architects do not compete for the premiums offered; they compete for the appointment as architect for the contemplated work, and it is submitted that if competitors were aware that the premiums only were to be paid, many of the leading architects would not compete.

The City Council claim that by the insertion of this clause they protect themselves and the public, in the event of no architect of repute or experience taking part in the competition. The architects, on the other hand, claim that the insertion of such a clause is an undoubted deterrent to an experienced and reputable practitioner. If this clause is deleted there is no doubt whatever that every architect of repute in South Africa will participate in this competition.

NO PARALLEL ELSEWHERE.

The fact that, no such clause exists in the conditions of competition drawn up by the Royal Institute of British Architects and its affiliated societies in the Dominions, is evidence enough that it is not essential. If, however, the City Council are justified in assuming that the competition may be abortive owing to eminent architects not competing, the remedy lies in their own hands by adopting the proposals put up to them by the institute, viz.:—

(a) Inviting a limited number of architects, each of whom will be paid an honorarium, so that they also will participate in the competition; or

(b) Inserting a clause to the effect that if in the opinion of the assessor there be some valid reason for not accepting any of the designs, the promoters shall have the right to nominate their own architect, to collaborate with the author of the first premiated design, and to amend or if necessary to redesign the building.

The City Council appointed Mr. Vincent Harris and asked him to visit South Africa for the purpose of advising them as to the best method of providing ideal conditions for a modern library building. The institute submits that if Mr. Harris has embodied in the conditions of competition all the necessary technical requirements, the architects of South Africa will produce results comparable with those in any part of the world. It is claimed, therefore, that Clause 29 is not only unnecessary but unjust.

THE COST OF THE BUILDING.

Another element in the Library Committee's draft conditions which will definitely deter leading South African architects from competing is the refusal of the Library Committee to state, through its assessor or through its own technical advisers,

that the accommodation asked to be included in the new library building can be provided by the money allocated. No eminent architect will compete when a competition may so easily prove abortive.

The competition regulations as submitted by the architects to the City Council have been framed with the object not only of securing the best results to the promoters, but, by their scrupulous fairness, to afford inducement to all architects to participate.

It is a matter, therefore, of considerable regret that the Johannesburg City Council should have opposed a professional body in its endeavours to prevent the recurrence of abuses that have in the past caused so much dissatisfaction.

The institute is now unfortunately faced with the position of having to decide whether it will accept a clause which does not appear in competition conditions of any institute of architects in the world, or whether it will be compelled to use the powers vested in it by Act of Parliament to ban the competition, which will mean that it will be unprofessional conduct for any architect in South Africa to compete.

COUNCIL COMMITTEE'S REPORT

UNABLE TO DELETE CLAUSE 29

In its recommendations to the City Council at its meeting to-morrow afternoon the Library Committee states that it does not recommend the provision of accommodation for other municipal departments in the new library building, though temporary accommodation may be provided later. Mr. E. Vincent Harris has suggested that the ground floor be used for the lending, reference, children's and magazine rooms, the top floor for the geological museum and the Seymour collection, and the basement or first floor could accommodate the newspaper room.

The conditions of the architects' competition provide premiums of £500 for the first design, £300 for the second and £200 for the third. The contractor

is allowed a 10 per cent. margin over the architect's estimate in certain contingencies. Competitors are asked to pay special attention to heating and ventilation.

The report states that the Council has in mind an expenditure not exceeding £200,000 on the building, to include the cost of the steel book stacks in the stockrooms of the semi-basement.

The report goes into the history of the dispute with the Institute of South African Architects and gives that body's proposed amendments. These are: The deletion of clause 6, which is to the effect that the author of the first design shall carry out the work unless the assessor is satisfied that there is some valid objection to such employment, in which case the author of design No. 2 shall be employed under the same conditions—and a clause drawn up by the architects substituted. It is also proposed that clause 10 be deleted (the clause refers to the 10 per cent. margin which the competitor cannot exceed under pain of losing the contract). The deletion of clause 29, that the assessor or promoters shall state in the conditions that they are satisfied that the accommodation asked for can be provided by the money allocated. The deletion of clause 16, which deals with the appointment of a quantity surveyor and clerk of works and its replacement by clause 15 of the "model" conditions advocated by the institute. Information of the meaning of clause 18, which states, "The architect will be required to submit drawings and to support the scheme by evidence before any inquiry which may be held in respect thereto."

The Library Committee states that: "In the opinion of this committee the conditions as finally agreed upon with Mr. Vincent Harris are very fair and reasonable, but while we have made minor alterations to clauses 6 and 16 we are unable, after the most careful consideration, to recommend the Council to agree to the amendments submitted by the Institute of South African Architects."

From the Pretoria Representative

Representative architects in Pretoria oppose the idea of bringing Mr. Vincent Harris from England at a cost of £2,625 to advise upon the new Johannesburg Library.

Mr. Gerard Moerdyk, A.R.I.B.A., in an interview yesterday said: "I read the sub-leader in the 'Rand Daily Mail' in this connection, and with diffidence I wish to submit that all the points were not fully appreciated. It has to be remembered that the assessor is not the man who designs the library. He only selects a design from those submitted, and the successful architect designs the building, and he is therefore the man who should devote special study to library design."

Mr. Moerdyk explained that if South African architects knew that an overseas assessor was to be appointed, it would be a foregone conclusion that the building would not conform to South Africa's architectural principles, because local architects would immediately study the methods and past work of the assessor to produce a design likely to meet with his approval.

"It would be far quicker immediately to hold a competition, select the most promising man and allow him some time for special study while working on his design," Mr. Moerdyk suggested. "We would then have a library expert in this country to advise us in future."

"The 'Rand Daily Mail' exhorts us to place expediency before patriotism. We South Africans expect that in this case English patriotism is being placed before South African expediency, by calling in the help of an Englishman who himself had to be sent to America to study libraries. Three years ago Mr. Vincent Harris, who is now regarded as a library expert, but who was then a town hall expert, was asked to assess the Pretoria Town Hall. The design he selected has repeatedly been amended," declared Mr. Moerdyk.