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**Architectural competition and its values at the London University,  
1825–6**

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## **Architectural competition and its values at the London University, 1825–6**

*William Wilkins's neoclassical building for the London University (later known as University College London) is a landmark in Bloomsbury, with its dome and decastyle Corinthian portico (Ill. 1). Wilkins was the winning entrant of an architectural competition that took place in 1825–6. Despite the familiarity of the successful design, the competition has not previously been researched in detail. New research has focused on documentary records within and beyond the institution to reconstruct the planning and progress of the contest.<sup>1</sup> This essay examines the organization, processes and dynamics of the competition to consider the significance of issues such as fairness, professional status and institutional identity in practice.*

### **Foundation of a 'great London University'**

University College London traces its beginnings to a group of progressive thinkers. The idea for the university was promoted by Thomas Campbell, the poet and writer. Campbell was inspired by universities in Scotland and on the Continent, where institutions were non-residential and tolerant towards different faiths. In contrast, Oxford and Cambridge had a system of religious tests that obstructed non-Anglicans from obtaining degrees. Tuition limited to classics and mathematics also lacked relevance for men who wished to obtain a practical education to prepare for careers in commerce and manufacturing.<sup>2</sup> Campbell's plans evolved with encouragement from his circle of acquaintances. Isaac Lyon Goldsmid introduced Campbell to Henry Brougham, the politician, lawyer and educational reformer. In February 1825 Campbell published an address to Brougham in *The Times*, outlining his idea. His 'great London University' was designed for the 'youth of our middling rich people'. As a non-residential institution, the university promised affordability and avoided an active role in the religious lives of its students. According to Campbell, 'all that would be

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<sup>1</sup> This research was undertaken for the author's doctoral study: Amy Spencer, 'University College London: an architectural history, 1825–1939' (PhD thesis, University College London, 2021).

<sup>2</sup> H. Hale Bellot, *University College London, 1826–1926* (London, 1929), pp. 1–59; William Whyte, *Redbrick: A Social and Architectural History of Britain's Civic Universities* (Oxford, 2016), pp. 35–40.

necessary would be to have some porticos, and large halls independent of the lecture-rooms, to which [students] might resort for relaxation'. The enterprise was to be funded by subscription and, at £50 per ticket, was no more than the 'price of the periwigs of our forefathers'.<sup>3</sup> Shareholders (or proprietors) were ultimately required to invest £100 in the university, which operated as a joint-stock company.<sup>4</sup>

Campbell's idea met with opposition from conservatives, reflecting anxieties around educational and social reform. The Tory press attempted to undermine the university, focusing on its progressive values and administration. A satirical cartoon by Robert Cruickshank poked ridicule at Brougham, depicting him canvassing for subscriptions at Lincoln's Inn (Ill. 2). Garbed in lawyer's robes and a wig, Brougham presents a model of the 'London College' and advertises shares in the spirit of a market trader. A list of shareholders and a money-purse swing from his shoulders, while he drags a toy horse ridden by a peasant. Despite such derision, the university managed to win support from a variety of quarters. Brougham infused the project with Whig support and backing from many Scots, while a group of Baptists relinquished their own plans for a Dissenters' university. Goldsmid enlisted utilitarian thinkers and the slavery abolitionist Zachary Macaulay. The project was also endorsed by the educationalist George Birkbeck. In June 1825, the supporters appointed a provisional committee to oversee the university's affairs, including the acquisition of a site and designs for a building.<sup>5</sup>

### **The Bloomsbury site**

The university acquired a freehold site comprising 7½ acres at the north end of Gower Street (Ill. 3). The site had been earmarked for Carmarthen Square, a residential development that was originated in the 1790s by the banker and merchant William Paxton. The square would have harmonized with the character of buildings in the vicinity, but failed to be realized due to the economic depression after the Napoleonic Wars.<sup>6</sup> In November 1824, the land was sold by Paxton's executors to the banker David Bevan. His ownership was fleeting due to losses in the banking crash of 1825, which precipitated

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<sup>3</sup> *The Times*, 09/02/1825.

<sup>4</sup> Bellot, pp. 14-34; Whyte, pp. 53-4.

<sup>5</sup> Rosemary Ashton, *Victorian Bloomsbury* (New Haven and London, 2012), pp. 21, 25-57.

<sup>6</sup> The National Archives, C12/666/11, Paxton vs Mortimer (1795): London Metropolitan Archives, O/020/003, Lease (1796): Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (New Haven and London, 2012), pp. 327-71.

another decline in the building trade.<sup>7</sup> By July 1825, the university was in negotiations for the land. In the following month, Brougham reported that he had ‘arranged t’other day when in town for taking the ground (Carmarthen Square) & advertising immediately for the plans’<sup>8</sup>

The acquisition of the site secured a promising location for the university. Campbell had envisaged a central position within reach of students across London; the New Road had been earmarked as a ‘convenient locality’ from an early stage.<sup>9</sup> Brougham had perceived that a site near to chambers would be convenient for apprentices to lawyers and medical men. Gower Street was also close to the residences of the ‘middling rich’, the strata of society from which the university aimed to enrol its first students. Despite such advantages, the site attracted criticism from the university’s opponents. In December 1825, the weekly newspaper *John Bull* reported the ‘large space of mud and nastiness’ purchased by the ‘Joint-Stock Carmarthen Street University’.<sup>10</sup> The university was the subject of a series of satirical verses, acquiring the nickname ‘Stinkomalee’.<sup>11</sup> By stressing the swampy condition of its site, critics insinuated that the university stood on an uncertain footing.

### **Organization of an architectural competition**

Brougham’s allusion to ‘advertising immediately for the plans’ indicates that an architectural competition was intended from an early stage.<sup>12</sup> Competitions were ‘no new device’ by the 1820s, but not yet the conventional process for obtaining designs for public and institutional buildings.<sup>13</sup> In the early years of the nineteenth century, contests were held for significant projects such as the rebuilding of the Theatre Royal in Drury Lane (1811), the completion of Old College in Edinburgh (1815–16), and the rebuilding of the General Post Office (1819–20). The university competition predated the contest at the Travellers Club (1828–9), which involved many of the same individuals and repeated some procedures. Closer regulation of competitions developed in the 1830s, with scrutiny over the processes of obtaining designs for the Houses of Parliament (1835–6) and the Royal

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<sup>7</sup> Ranald C. Michie, *British Banking: Continuity and Change from 1694 to the Present* (Oxford, 2016), pp. 47, 67; Leslie Hannah, ‘Bevan, Robert (1809–1890)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004, online edn): *Morning Post*, 05/10/1824.

<sup>8</sup> Brougham, cited by Bellot, p. 34.

<sup>9</sup> *The Times*, 09/02/1825; *Morning Chronicle*, 04/04/1825.

<sup>10</sup> *John Bull*, 25/12/1825.

<sup>11</sup> Ashton, pp. 38–9, 99, 109.

<sup>12</sup> Brougham, cited by Bellot, p. 34.

<sup>13</sup> M. H. Port (ed.), *The Houses of Parliament* (New Haven and London, 1976), p. 28.

Exchange (1839).<sup>14</sup> The handling and arrangement of the university contest reflect the fairly rudimentary nature of procuring designs competitively, along with the practical consequences of concerns about professional status and institutional values.

Architectural competitions were usually organized by committees, which often included professional and pragmatic men who prized value for money. Michael Port has observed that ‘competition was their way of life, and they looked to it to produce the best results in architecture too.’<sup>15</sup> Committees represented larger bodies of shareholders who funded the enterprise. The university and its administration conformed broadly with this pattern. The provisional committee formed during the summer of 1825 was probably too cumbersome to manage the project decisively, comprising forty-seven members. In December 1825 a Council was formed with twenty-four members, followed by subcommittees tasked with specific objects.

The building committee included businessmen, educationalists and politicians, namely James Abercromby, Alexander Baring, George Birkbeck, Thomas Campbell, George Eden (Lord Auckland), Henry Waymouth and Thomas Wilson. Henry Petty-Fitzmaurice (Marquess of Lansdowne) joined in Spring 1826, when the designs were considered. Abercromby, Birkbeck and Campbell’s attendance was irregular, while Baring did not attend any recorded meetings. Wilson, a philanthropist and founder of Congregationalist chapels, promised a wealth of building experience. Auckland, a barrister and politician (Ill. 4), and Waymouth, a Baptist involved with the deserted scheme for a Dissenters’ university, were the most reliable and longstanding attendees.<sup>16</sup>

By organizing a competition, the university emulated public institutions such as Old College and the General Post Office. The spirit of competition also evoked democracy, fairness and accountability, which chimed with the progressive values of the university. In reality, competitions were less idealistic. In the committee room, attendance at meetings fluctuated and influence was dispersed unevenly. There was also a lack of regulation,

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<sup>14</sup> John Summerson, *Georgian London* (New Haven and London, 2003 edn), pp. 241–2; M. J. Wells, ‘Relations and Reflections to the Eye and Understanding: Architectural Models and the Rebuilding of the Royal Exchange, 1839–44’, *Architectural History*, Vol. 60 (2017), pp. 219–41; John Martin Robinson, *The Travellers Club: a bicentenary history, 1819–2019* (London, 2018), pp. 47–50; Edward Gillin, *The Victorian Palace of Science: Scientific Knowledge and the Building of the Houses of Parliament* (Cambridge, 2017), pp. 23–8; Nick Haynes and Clive Fenton, *Building Knowledge: An Architectural History of the University of Edinburgh* (Edinburgh, 2017), pp. 60–4.

<sup>15</sup> Port, p. 28.

<sup>16</sup> UCL Special Collections, Archives and Records (UCL/SC), College Collection, Miscellaneous Committee Minutes, Vol. 1, 16/02/1826, *passim*; Council Minutes, Vol. 1, 22/12/1825, *passim*; Bellot, p. 22; Alexander Gordon and Mark Clement, ‘Wilson, Thomas (1764–1843)’, *ODNB* (2004, online edn).

provoking accusations of jobbery. Architects were often reluctant to invest time and money on a project with no definite reward, especially with the prospect of embarrassment in the event of failure. Notably, the university did not offer a premium for the successful design.<sup>17</sup>

### **Selection of the competitors**

The competitors were mostly settled by the end of 1825, but not without complication. In December, a proprietors' meeting heard that invitations had initially been delivered to four architects, but that number had been extended to six.<sup>18</sup> An explanation for the adjustment lies in a letter written in the previous month by John Davies, who appealed to Auckland for 'the opportunity of fair and honourable competition'. Davies explained that he had been requested to prepare plans by 'some Gentlemen of the [Provisional] Committee' at an early stage. His sketches met with approval from 'several of the committee'. Davies was later informed that his name had been suggested as 'one of a limited number of Architects' to participate in a competition. Next, he discovered that the number of competitors was to be restricted:

The reason assigned for this limitation and for my exclusion was even more mortifying than the fact itself – it was represented to me that these four Gentlemen (undoubtedly men of high reputation and splendid abilities) declined to compete with any but 'men of their own standing'.

Davies asserted that 'if such a precedent be established it would be a death-blow to all exertion'. The decision to extend the number of competitors implies that Davies's complaint struck a nerve. After all, Davies had hinted that the decision conflicted with the 'liberal and enlightened principles' on which the university was founded. Davies presented his concern as a matter of principle, admitting that he was a 'humble individual' complaining 'for the sake of the rising members ... of the profession'.<sup>19</sup> At twenty-nine years of age, Davies lacked experience and distinction. His first major commission, Highbury College for Dissenters (1825–6), was still under construction, but perhaps advanced enough to win support from Wilson, Waymouth and other Dissenters connected with the university. Notably, Wilson

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<sup>17</sup> Port, pp. 28–30; Joan Bassin, *Architectural Competitions in Nineteenth-Century England* (Ann Arbor, 1984), pp. 1–15; John Summerson, *John Nash: Architect to King George IV* (London, 1949 edn), pp. 103–4; J. Mordaunt Crook, 'The Pre-Victorian Architect: Professionalism and Patronage', *Architectural History*, Vol. 12 (1969), pp. 62–78, 66.

<sup>18</sup> *Morning Chronicle*, 20/12/1825.

<sup>19</sup> UCL/SC, College Correspondence, No. 2, Davies to Auckland, 16/11/1825.

was treasurer of Highbury College and later commissioned Davies to design several Congregationalist chapels.<sup>20</sup>

Similar concerns were circulating within the university's own ranks. At the meeting in December, a proprietor raised objections to a limited competition:

If the object ... really was the advancement of youths, of all sorts, in the Fine Arts, and the general improvement of the mind of man, he ... was not a little astonished to discover that the Patrons and Supporters of this noble scheme ... endeavoured to tie up the natural and ambitious competition that might be expected on such a subject, in the hands of six Architects. Surely it would not be pretended that all the architectural and building genius of this great Empire was concentrated in the six persons whom the Provisional Committee might happen to pitch upon in their choice. He trusted that there would be no such stain on the very first action of the Company, but that the competition would be thrown open to all.

The speech provoked cries of 'hear, hear' and 'ballot, ballot'.<sup>21</sup> The proprietor insinuated a direct connection between institutional values and the organization of the competition, pressing for an open contest to reflect ideas of fairness and meritocracy. A limited competition evidently produced an uneasy feeling of elitism that seemed incongruous with the university's founding values.

A contrasting perspective of the politics of the competition, along with allusions to the reasons for its restriction, is presented in the diary of Charles Robert Cockerell (Ill. 5). During an evening at the Athenaeum in November 1825, Cockerell had heard that Brougham had 'asserted that the best architects would not compete'. Cockerell's analysis of the situation was insightful: 'it was clear that an open competition is in fact no competition because the first [best architects] are excluded'.<sup>22</sup> One of the voices in support of a limited contest was Wilkins, who raised the matter with Auckland only a few weeks before Davies's appeal. Wilkins reflected that it was 'only on particular occasions' that he wished to engage in a competition:

In the present instance whence my name is associated with those of men who bear the highest character in the profession, I must readily and cheerfully accept the offer. The names of the architects which have been mentioned to me are sufficient to

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<sup>20</sup> Howard Colvin, *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects, 1600–1840* (New Haven and London, 2008 edn), pp. 301–2.

<sup>21</sup> *Morning Chronicle*, 20/12/1825.

<sup>22</sup> RIBA Library, Diary of C. R. Cockerell, CoC/9/6, 21/11/1825, p. 94.

inspire emulation and confer honour on the contest, and the noble names connected with the proposed institution are a sufficient pledge of the upright intentions of the committee.<sup>23</sup>

Wilkins's suspicion towards competitions reflects contemporary distrust among distinguished architects about their organization.<sup>24</sup> Despite the support towards an elite contest, the university was placed in an awkward position by Davies's complaint. For fear of worsening the injury to Davies or turning away eminent architects, the committee invited designs from a select group: William Atkinson, Davies, Cockerell, John Peter Gandy (later Deering), Jeffry Wyattville and Wilkins. Of the competitors, Davies's credentials were by far the most modest. The other architect at a disadvantage was Atkinson, whose invitation to join the competition in February 1826 suggests that he was an afterthought. It is possible that the university was still searching for another competitor at the time of the proprietors' meeting in December, or that an architect dropped out unexpectedly.

### **Ambitions, ideas and specification**

Several vague ideas for the building were contemplated before practical steps were made towards its construction. In February 1825, Campbell reflected that the university could require 'roomy, and therefore expensive premises.'<sup>25</sup> At a public meeting in July 1825, the Baptist minister F. A. Cox evoked the idea of a 'palace for genius.'<sup>26</sup> Campbell looked to models on the Continent for inspiration. In 1820 Campbell had admired the University of Bonn; 'a fine pile of a building' with an impressive library.<sup>27</sup> During a visit to Berlin in October 1825, Campbell noted that its university was 'just such a building as I would wish for the London one' and took dimensions of its rooms.<sup>28</sup> Both universities were based in former palaces that supplied grandeur, magnificence and credibility.

The first glimpses of a specification are found in records relating to the competition. In November 1825, Cockerell wrote in his diary:

Lord Auckland called to give me the plan of the ground for the new college ... Thought that the ground to be spared at the sides might be reserved for buildings necessary to the college ... or

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<sup>23</sup> UCL/SC, College Correspondence, No. 1, Wilkins to Auckland, 01/11/1825.

<sup>24</sup> Port, pp. 28–30; Summerson, *Nash*, pp. 103–4.

<sup>25</sup> *Times*, 09/02/1825.

<sup>26</sup> Cox, cited by Bellot, p. 27.

<sup>27</sup> Campbell, cited by William Beattie, *Life and Letters of Thomas Campbell*, Vol. 2 (London, 1855), pp. 109–110.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 173.



might be let ... 15 or more lecture rooms to hold 400 persons. Had written a good letter on the subject.<sup>29</sup>

This note hints that each architect was initially supplied with a site plan and a letter of instructions. Cockerell subsequently composed a 'long letter ... to Playfair asking his advice'.<sup>30</sup> This decision reflected a sense of camaraderie between Cockerell and William Henry Playfair (Ill. 6), who had recently collaborated on the National Monument in Edinburgh.<sup>31</sup> Cockerell was also savvy, presumably trying to garner advice from Playfair's experience as architect for Old College in Edinburgh. Robert Adam's monumental design for a university set around a double courtyard was commenced in the 1780s but foundered in 1795 due to limited funds. The project was revived in 1815–16 with a competition for completing the university 'on a reduced scale'.<sup>32</sup> Playfair submitted the successful design, compressing Adam's scheme into a single quadrangle. Cockerell was evidently aware that Old College presented a contemporary model for a purpose-built university (in that respect, more pertinent than the palaces at Berlin and Bonn), designed to hold lectures for a non-residential student body.

Cockerell was not alone in seeking Playfair's advice. Two letters written from Playfair to John Archibald Murray, an Edinburgh barrister in Brougham's circle, offered practical hints and details about the planning of Old College.<sup>33</sup> The first letter (written on 2 October 1825) contains a description of Old College and the second letter (6 October 1825) provided a list of classrooms, including dimensions and capacity. Playfair also offered insights into the realities of universities, advising that the lecture timetable should be organized to prevent students from coinciding on the staircases: 'a great source of delay and confusion'. 'Good strong water closets and plenty urinals should be provided', and 'all the parts of the building should be made strong and as indestructible as possible'.<sup>34</sup> Playfair advised that a 'broad principle' was 'to remove all petty incitements to levity or disorder', with seating within the sight and hearing of professors, wide corridors, and heating through ventilation systems instead of open fireplaces.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> RIBA Library, CoC/9/6, 04/11/1825, p. 89.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 07/11/1825, p. 90.

<sup>31</sup> Colvin, pp. 813–16.

<sup>32</sup> *Reports &c. Relative to the Completion of the College Buildings* (1816), cited by Haynes and Fenton, p. 60.

<sup>33</sup> UCL/SC, College Correspondence, No. 1167/13, Playfair to Murray, 02/10/1825 and 06/10/1825; Gordon F. Millar, 'Murray, Sir John Archibald (1778?–1859)', *ODNB* (2004, online edn).

<sup>34</sup> UCL/SC, College Correspondence, No. 1167/13, 02/10/1825.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 06/10/1825.

In January 1826, the Council requested the architects to halt their preparations.<sup>36</sup> An education committee was tasked with determining the number of rooms required for twenty-nine subjects. In February, the committee specified that the university required twelve lecture halls, examination rooms and ‘retiring rooms’ (or offices) for professors.<sup>37</sup> Soon afterwards, William Atkinson was invited to join the competition. Atkinson was advised that the building should be ‘perfectly adapted’ to its purpose and cost no more than £70,000. As to its external appearance, ‘the building should be handsome from its extent, solidity and outline than from much decoration.’<sup>38</sup> Atkinson was also supplied with an extract of letters from Playfair. The precise excerpt is unknown, but seems likely to have been derived from the letters to Murray. The building committee furnished the other competitors with a report by the education committee and instructions for modifying their plans to meet the new specification. The deadline was now a month away, falling on 17 March 1826.<sup>39</sup>

### **Assessment of the competition entries**

The designs were examined by the building committee in March and April 1826. At the first meeting, the committee viewed the plans and arranged for them to be exhibited to Council members. Subsequent meetings included interviews with the architects. The minutes of the committee indicate that the principal concern was to comprehend the cost of each proposal, which was usually the only point of elaboration.<sup>40</sup> A broader picture of the considerations is provided by a large comparative chart, entitled ‘Analysis of Plans’ (Ill. 7). This unusual survival reflects the pragmatic approach adopted by the committee towards evaluating the entries.<sup>41</sup> The chart was prepared at an early stage, probably before Cockerell supplied his estimate in March 1826. The competitors were listed in alphabetical order, while the details of each design were distilled into sixteen columns. The chart signals a strong interest in evaluating the projected cost of each scheme. The first column, titled ‘extent [of the] roof, including arcades’, was concerned with economy, while the last column listed estimates provided by the architects. Another column indicated an interest in preserving parts of the

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<sup>36</sup> UCL/SC, Council Minutes, Vol. 1, 14/01/1826.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., Appendix 2, 04/02/1826.

<sup>38</sup> UCL/SC, College Collection, Letter Books, Vol. 1, Coates to Atkinson, 16/02/1826.

<sup>39</sup> UCL/SC, Miscellaneous Committee Minutes, Vol. 1, 16/02/1826.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 18/03/1826, 27/03/1826, *passim*.

<sup>41</sup> UCL/SC, College Correspondence, No. 1167/15.

site for a 'garden or houses', perhaps for speculative development. Most of the intervening columns contained notes about the principal rooms of the university, with calculations of floor area and ceiling heights indicating the space offered by each plan and the value for money.

Only one column, titled 'Access and Arcades', invited comments on the exterior designs. These notes offer insights into the entries prepared by Atkinson, Davies, Gandy and Wyattville, for which no detailed drawings survive. Atkinson proposed a building with a six-columned Ionic portico leading to a great hall, a library and a museum. An astronomy observatory was placed under a central dome to preserve the symmetry of the design. Atkinson provided twelve lecture rooms with retiring rooms, complying precisely with the instructions. His estimate of £104,360 was among those at the lower end of the scale, yet considerably above the budget of £70,000.<sup>42</sup> Davies provided a similar estimate of £103,658, along with separate costings for a 'front' block with a six-columned Ionic portico, north and south wings, and an east colonnade. These fragments suggest that Davies proposed a main range fronting Gower Street with two rear wings. The front block accommodated a great hall, a museum and a library, while the rest of the building contained thirteen lecture rooms, thirty-eight examination rooms and a medical department.<sup>43</sup>

Gandy estimated that his scheme would cost £75,000 (or £85,000 if executed in stone). An explanatory letter indicates that Gandy prepared two designs, adapting his first scheme to the revised instructions. Gandy explained that he had tried to 'adapt the same quantum of material' at Old College 'to greater architectural and practical advantages', while emphasizing 'economy of space', practicality, and provision for future enlargement. Gandy also arranged the university around a quadrangle with a neoclassical screen along Gower Street. He reserved three acres for speculative development, noting that its value would 'advance with the success of the establishment'.<sup>44</sup> The design made an impression on Auckland, who later remarked that he had 'always considered Mr Gandy's as the only one practicable and eligible and in which economy is rather considered than display'.<sup>45</sup>

Wyatville's design, prepared with his cousin Lewis Wyatt, was more daunting from a financial perspective. Wyattville proposed to build in stages, eventually covering the whole site at a cost of £250,000. The plan offered extensive accommodation, including two

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<sup>42</sup> UCL/SC, College Correspondence, Nos 1167/15, 1168–1172, Atkinson to Coates (n.d.).

<sup>43</sup> UCL/SC, College Correspondence, Nos 1167/15.

<sup>44</sup> UCL/SC, College Correspondence, No. 1167, Gandy to building committee, 17/03/1826.

<sup>45</sup> UCL/SC, College Correspondence, No. 17, Auckland to Coates, 20/09/1826.

libraries, two museums, thirty-two lecture rooms and staff residences. Five lodges would contain a council room, staff offices and student halls. These buildings were configured around an entrance court with a six-columned portico and side ‘ambulatories’.<sup>46</sup> Auckland later explained that Wyattville proposed ‘to occupy the external boundary of our ground with detached buildings connected by colonnades, enabling us to contract for and complete such buildings only as would be wanted for our objects, as they arise and increase’.<sup>47</sup>

The fragmented information in the chart relating to Cockerell’s design is supplemented by his diaries and several presentation drawings.<sup>48</sup> Cockerell devised a plan for a central block and side wings with curved recessions, set around a quadrangle divided into courts and gardens. Front blocks were joined by a screen with a Doric propylaeum (Ill. 8). The central block would contain a great hall, a library and a museum on the principal floor, along with lecture rooms on the ground floor. The unusual shape of the side wings produced teaching rooms of varying dimensions, including classrooms and lecture theatres, while the front blocks provided residences for the librarian and the secretary. During his interview, Cockerell supplied an estimate of £160,000.<sup>49</sup> In his diary, Cockerell remarked that the committee was ‘polite and obliging’. He also confessed to feeling reassured. Since the other competitors ‘had adopted more magnificence than myself’, the cost of his design ‘would be less’.<sup>50</sup>

Cockerell failed to imagine that his estimate would be undercut significantly by Wilkins, who presented an estimate of £70,000. This sum precisely matched the budget stipulated in the instructions. The chart indicates that Wilkins’s design offered the greatest value for money as well as being the cheapest option, combining the lowest estimate with the largest area devoted to teaching spaces. The chart is supplemented by printed illustrations, drawings, and an elaborate explanatory letter. Wilkins devoted much attention in his letter to ‘the external architecture’, emphasizing archaeological sources and the accuracy of the proportions. Wilkins arranged the building around three sides of a quadrangle, with a screen and Doric propylaeum on Gower Street (Ill. 9). The focus of the central block was a decastyle Corinthian portico based on the ‘magnificent portico of the Olympium at Athens’, with a dome rising to a lantern (Ill. 10). The side wings were adorned

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<sup>46</sup> UCL/SC, College Correspondence, No. 1167/15.

<sup>47</sup> UCL/SC, College Correspondence, No. 18, Auckland to Coates, 22/09/1826.

<sup>48</sup> V&A, E.2091-1909–E.2097-1909, C. R. Cockerell, competition drawings (1826).

<sup>49</sup> UCL/SC, Miscellaneous Committee Minutes, Vol. 1, 27/03/1826.

<sup>50</sup> RIBA Library, CoC/10/1, 27/03/1826, p. 27.

with tetrastyle porticoes inspired by the Choragic Monument of Thrasyllus. The principal floor of the central block contained a great hall, projecting into the quadrangle to avoid 'the commonplace appearance of [the portico] being an appliqué to the main building'. An octagonal vestibule beneath the central dome opened to a library and a museum; double-height, galleried rooms with top-lighting (Ill. 11). Wilkins thought the specification was 'insufficient' in its requirements for teaching spaces and suggested twenty-six lecture halls, forty-nine examination rooms, and a large medical department. There were also extensive facilities for students, including assembling rooms, cloisters 'for exercise', and a library 'for amusement and employment'.<sup>51</sup>

The committee was not readily distracted from the projected cost of the building. On 13 April Wilkins was 'particularly questioned on the correctness of his estimate', which he increased to £87,000.<sup>52</sup> Wilkins was asked to reconsider this, a task that he viewed with reluctance. On 14 April, Wilkins stated his 'firm conviction' that the costs would not exceed £87,000, though it was 'wholly impossible' to provide a reliable estimate without working plans. Conversely, he assured the committee that his calculations 'may be relied upon with perfect safety'. Wilkins also declared that 'if it were consistent with my professional character I should have no hesitation in giving a distinct pledge to execute the works for the sum of £87,000', but also declined to make any promises on the basis that 'an architect ought never to be concerned with the executive part of building'. Wilkins eventually concluded that his design would not exceed £83,000.<sup>53</sup>

### **Selection of Wilkins's design**

The building committee decided to seek advice from Joseph Henry Good, a respected individual who was engaged as architect and surveyor for several estates and institutions, including the Church Building Commission.<sup>54</sup> On 18 April 1826, Good was requested to examine Gandy's and Wilkins's estimates – a decision that probably did not reflect a preference for their plans, only that their estimates were the lowest.<sup>55</sup> It was also clear that Wilkins's calculations were liable to change. Good provided separate estimates for brick and stone frontages, calculating £87,600 or £94,980 for Wilkins's design, and £91,800 or £102,850

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<sup>51</sup> UCL/SC, College Correspondence, No. 1167/10, Wilkins to building committee, 03/1826.

<sup>52</sup> UCL/SC, Miscellaneous Committee Minutes, Vol. 1, 13/04/1826.

<sup>53</sup> UCL/SC, College Correspondence, No. 1167, Wilkins to building committee, 14/04/1826.

<sup>54</sup> Colvin, p. 433.

<sup>55</sup> UCL/SC, Miscellaneous Committee Minutes, Vol. 1, 18/04/1826.

for Gandy's proposal. These calculations exceeded both architects' original estimates of £70,000 and £85,000. Unfortunately, Good realized within a few days that the statements upon which he had based his calculations were 'exceedingly erroneous'.<sup>56</sup> He pointed out the error, explaining that the roof extent of Gandy's building was considerably less than what had previously been calculated. Gandy complained that 'the error Mr Good had been led into amounts to little less than £30,000'.<sup>57</sup> This claim was probably exaggerated, and failed to deliver much of an impact. Despite the mistake, this component of the competition was considered successful enough to replicate in 1828 at the Travellers Club, where Good was requested to provide estimates on a similar basis.<sup>58</sup>

At their next meeting, the building committee examined another letter from Wilkins. He still claimed that it was 'no part of his business to furnish an estimate in detail', which he deemed to be a role for a 'skilful valuator'.<sup>59</sup> Wilkins now suggested phased construction, sketching a ground plan showing the central block and portions of the side wings (Ill. 12). Wilkins also offered to reduce certain elements of his design, and advised the university to sell the portion of the site lying on the west side of Gower Street. Wilkins's preparedness to pare down his design appears to have alleviated the committee's financial concerns. In a final estimate Wilkins calculated that the scheme would not exceed £86,000.<sup>60</sup>

The committee set out the merits of Wilkins's design in a report dated 22 April. The report explained that the scheme presented 'advantages in beauty and in convenience of arrangement which entitle it to a preference over the other plans'. The rest of the report focused on 'the important subject of expense' and practical matters, determining upon phased construction.<sup>61</sup> The committee reached its decision by 1 May 1826, when the unsuccessful competitors were advised that Wilkins's plans were 'the best adapted to their views'.<sup>62</sup> Wilkins was requested to produce working plans and specifications to inform a detailed estimate of the building. The projected cost was evidently still the primary concern.

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<sup>56</sup> UCL/SC, College Correspondence, No. 1167/9, Good to Coates, 22/04/1826.

<sup>57</sup> UCL/SC, College Correspondence, No. 31, Gandy to building committee, 29/04/1826.

<sup>58</sup> Robinson, p. 50.

<sup>59</sup> UCL/SC, College Correspondence, No. 30, Wilkins to Auckland, 24/04/1826.

<sup>60</sup> UCL/SC, Miscellaneous Committee Minutes, Vol. 1, 29/04/1826.

<sup>61</sup> UCL/SC, Council Minutes, Vol. 1, Appendix 3, 22/04/1826.

<sup>62</sup> UCL/SC, College Collection, Letter Books, Vol. 1, 01/05/1826.

## Conclusion

For all the efforts to control the cost of the building, Wilkins's design was eventually revealed to be prohibitively expensive. Building tenders obtained in September 1826 ranged from £107,800 to £128,200, prompting fleeting ideas about returning to the drawing board before Wilkins's plan was reduced considerably. Cockerell's private reflections on the merits and drawbacks of competitions, scribbled in his diary around March 1826, encapsulate the story with remarkable foresight:

The advantage of a competition to the employer is that it furnishes him many ideas and put[s] the competitors to the best of their ability and induces great effort on their part. But it has its disadvantages – the competitors think rather of the contest than the object and in the desire not to be outdone consult much less the real purpose and interest of the employers – some of them in showing what they can do quite overlook the main question and run into all sorts of extravagances, proposing many things for glory's sake which in sober judgement they would not have thought of.<sup>63</sup>

The processes and dynamics of the competition reflect the significance of professional status and institutional values in procuring designs competitively. The contest is an early example of its kind, predating closer regulation from the 1830s. The complications of the early stages of the competition, such as the difficulties in establishing the number of competitors, seem to reflect the unconventional nature of this mode of obtaining designs and anxieties surrounding reputation and institutional identity.

There were differing ideas, such as open competition, a limited contest, or engaging an architect who was already familiar. The final selection of architects reflected the debate, with the inclusion of Davies after his complaint that the handling of the competition was at odds with the progressive values represented by the university. The restriction of the competition was prompted by the demands of elite architects, who sought an honourable contest with 'men of their own standing', avoiding the embarrassment of losing to an architect of lower rank. Brougham's hands were tied, since eminent individuals would not join an open competition with the kind of 'rising members' of the profession represented by Davies. There is also evidence of sensitivity concerning the professional responsibilities of an architect, with Wilkins's claims that a 'valuator' should provide estimates. As

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<sup>63</sup> RIBA Library, CoC/10/1, p. 27.

Cockerell contemplated, architects did seem to think more of the contest than the commission.

The building committee had greater control over producing a specification and evaluating the designs, focusing on practical objects such as circulating advice from Playfair. Another pragmatic decision was to appoint Good to check the estimates, an attempt to safeguard against optimistic or inaccurate calculations. The importance of fairness, transparency and practicality is reflected in the university's records, where 'sober judgement' pervades minute books, reports and the comparative chart. In sources from beyond the institution, there are glimpses of complications, prejudice and aspirations towards status and glory.



## List of Illustrations

1. The Wilkins Building at University College London, view from the north-west in 2011. (UCL Media Services, photograph by Mary Hinkley)
2. Satirical print depicting Brougham canvassing for subscriptions at Lincoln's Inn. (The Trustees of the British Museum, 1868,0808.8662)
3. Carmarthen Square, c.1825. (British Library, Maps Crace Port. 14.50)
4. George Eden, Earl of Auckland, engraving by James Thomson (Thompson) after Lowes Cato Dickinson. (National Portrait Gallery, NPG D7441)
5. Charles Robert Cockerell, watercolour by Alfred Edward Chalon, c.1825-30. (National Portrait Gallery, NPG 5096)
6. William Henry Playfair, portrait c.1815. (RIBA Collections, RIBA13269)
7. 'Analysis of Plans' chart. (UCL Records Office, College Correspondence, No. 1167/15)
8. Perspective and plan of the principal floor by Cockerell. (V&A, E.2094-1909)
9. Design adopted by the Council, 1826. (RIBA Collections, RIBA68959)
10. Design for the west front. (UCL Art Museum, LDUCS-4393)
11. Design for the great library or museum, unsigned and undated watercolour possibly by Frederick Mackenzie. (UCL Art museum, LDUCS-4113)
12. Sketch showing Wilkins's proposal for phased reconstruction, 24 April 1826. (UCL Records Office, College Correspondence, No. 30)