

Best in show

The winners of this year's Riba awards range from a primary school in Japan to a butterfly house in Surrey. **Jay Merrick** reports

Will he or won't he? Lord Foster of Thames Bank, Britain's most redoubtable architectural technocrat, really must think that 2004 is his year. Spurned of late for the coveted annual Stirling prize by the Royal Institute of British Architects – the brilliant but bouncy Thames bridge, an elegant but eerily vacuous Great Court of the British Museum – surely there can be no competition for Foster and Partners' triumph of structural triangulation, the Swiss Re building in the City of London, popularly known as the Gherkin.

The prospect is hard to argue against, only days after Riba's announcement of more than 60 award-winning buildings in the Stirling prize longlist. Foster has taken structural precepts set out by one of his heroes half a century ago and delivered something unequalled in terms of form.

When Buckminster Fuller invented the structural system that produced the geodesic dome, he could not have imagined it would be used with such perfect upward mobility. Swiss Re is less architecture

informed by an interesting structural arrangement, and more the demonstration of a hugely refined structural system with dramatic architectural connotations. It's a humdinger, whichever way you look at it, and whether or not you think that Foster's palette is getting so reductive as to be peculiarly self-effacing. His buildings are becoming objects whose drag coefficients would interest Formula One streamliners.

But could there be a fly in the ointment of Foster's apparently assured Stirling prize victory later this year? Not a fly, exactly – more of a giant blue grub. And in Graz, Austria, at that. It is indeed possible that the Swiss Re building will be upstaged by architecture by Peter Cook and Colin Fournier that has its roots in Sixties pop art.

Cook and his anarchic Archigram collective launched a hundred "fab" architectural riffs as teachers at London's Architectural Association, but they never actually completed a building; no need to, for they became famous as architectural guerrillas. The Kunsthaus in Graz is Cook's first building and, like Swiss Re, it is stunning, though in an utterly different way.

The Euro factor seems quite significant in this year's list of 69 Riba awards, and if one were able to include the entries from the worldwide award section – which are not eligible for the ultimate imprimatur of the Stirling prize – Swiss Re would face the very sternest competition.

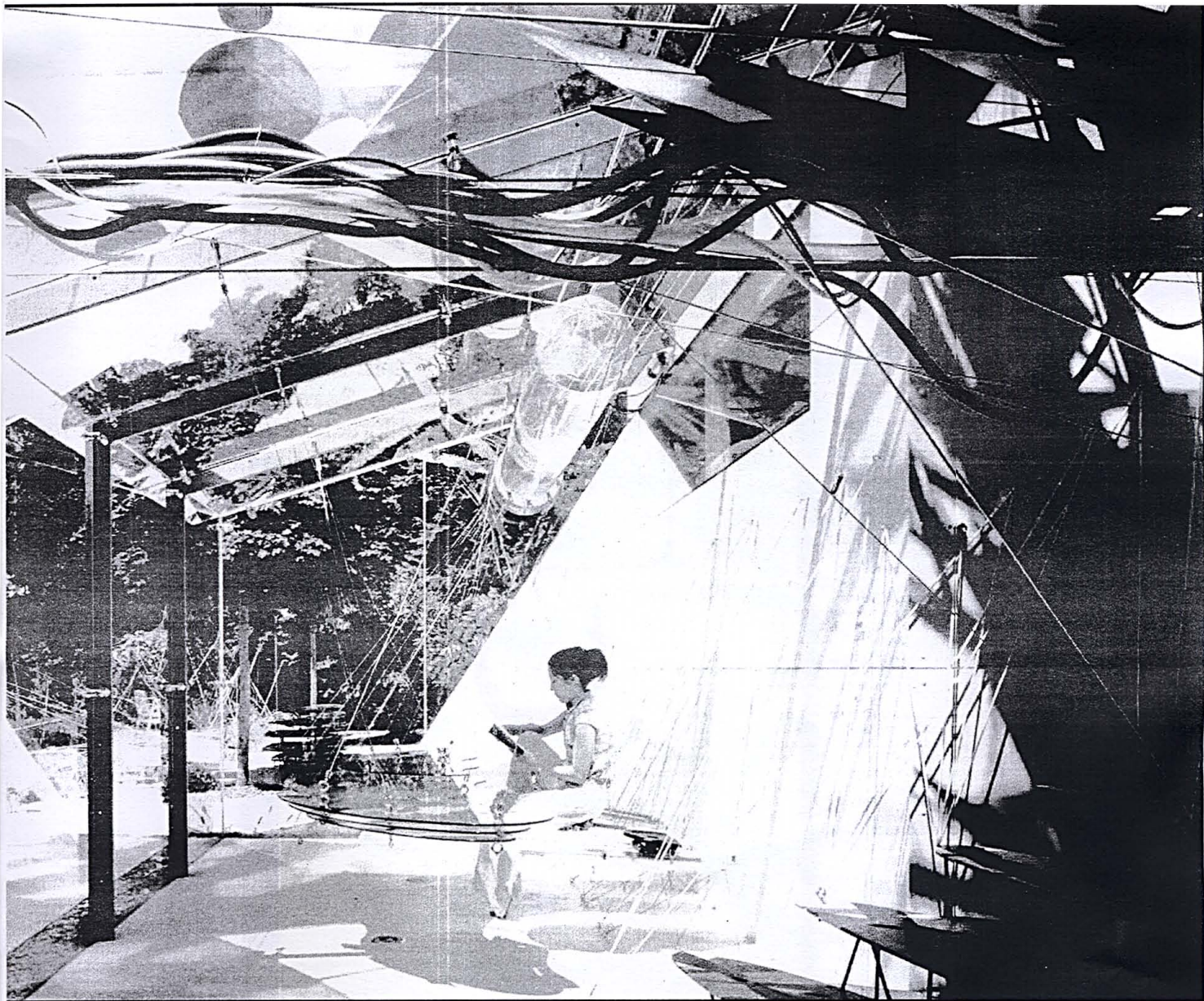
The aerial adventure of Will Alsop's Ontario College of Art & Design building in Toronto, featured in these pages last week, would front up to Swiss Re with confidence. So would Zaha Hadid's "folded" Rosenthal Center for Contemporary Art in Cincinnati; ditto Foreign Office Architects, whose Yokohama Ferry Terminal has edged them into the inner sanctum of the fluid, post-millennial architectural discourse dominated by practices such as Herzog & de Meuron and Rem Koolhaas's OMA studio.

Another project – in Japan, by the Richard Rogers Partnership, deserves to be highlighted. Though not as obviously riveting as the other buildings in Riba's international award category, it has clearly been designed to elevate the spirits of the Minami-Yamashiro Elementary School, many of whom won't forget its airy grace.

But what other eligible Big Architecture might be in Swiss Re's league? Again, we look to Europe, and Behnisch, Behnisch & Partners' extraordinary building for Norddeutsche Landesbank. It really does have the feel of a giant, slightly dystopic space station that fell to earth in Hanover. Its functional form – like Lego jammed together in a hurry – seems momentarily to recall Sixties brutalist architecture. Like Swiss Re, this is bold stuff, unlike Swiss Re, the Landesbank offers up its structure nakedly and ruggedly – nothing svelte here.

Such buildings are statements, brand marks. The bulk of the Riba awards, though, go to architecture that's rather less than that. Less, and therefore often more significant. The "ordinary" newer buildings we see around us are a better litmus test for architectural standards in Britain. It's in our byways and urban infills that architectural creativity, fuelled by less than lavish budgets, either delivers or stumbles.

Toothache or a cracked filling is certainly one route to fine architecture in Chelmsford. There, Richard Mitzman Architects have turned the Advance Dental Clinic into



a tour de force on a pretty horrid site. Mitzman, of course, had a signal advantage: he practised as a dentist for a decade before deciding it would be more interesting to extract architectural fees than crumbling molars. And, in this case, good design clearly pays: since the completion of the dental clinic, with its skylight views of the sky above the treatment chairs, the practice has increased its patient roll by more than 500.

Other projects are designed not to pay, but to surprise. The Riba awards list invariably throws up a micro-project so gripping that it makes the Stirling prize shortlist. Three on the longlist will be looked at with particular care. Simon Conder Associates' Vista chalet at Dungeness, covered in glued-down black rubber sheeting, is one; Wilkinson Eyre's beautifully contrived twist of geometry, the Bridge of Aspiration, linking the Royal Opera House in Covent Garden with the Royal Ballet School, is an even stronger contender. Maggie's Cancer Caring Respite Centre in Dundee, by Frank Gehry, will be in the mix.

But if pure wonder and strangeness are the issue when it comes to choosing an

architectural googy for the Stirling prize shortlist, the Butterfly House by Laurie Chetwood would be the frontrunner. Chetwood has taken an ex-Ideal Home demonstration house which was reassembled in a quiet Surrey lane in 1948, and wrapped what amounts to an art installation around its core.

The result is almost indescribable, yet highly gripping – a mess that is anything but a mess. Furniture made from glass, including a table hung on a mix of elasticated and rigid ties; 2km of bungee rope; 50 carbon-fibre fishing rods for handrails; 100 metres of fibre-optic cable, which electrifies Chetwood's demesne at night. A grand experiment, in other words, in which materials were deliberately put to unexpected uses. The Riba judges were divided on this project: architectural fantasias are, after all, soft targets.

Back in the big league, Future Systems' Selfridges department store in Birmingham will be closely considered, not least because of the extraordinary level of publicity it generated. The case for it has another hook: this is the only major building in Britain in

Eyes on the prize: Riba's winners include (clockwise from above) Butterfly House in Surrey; Norddeutsche Landesbank's offices in Hanover; the Advance Dental Clinic in Chelmsford; and the Minami-Yamashiro school in Japan

Edmund Sumner; Roland Hasbe; Nicholas Kane; Katsuhisa Kida

which genuine architectural avant-gardism has produced a glitzy souk that looks like a shimmering blue girdle fighting to keep an over-generous midriff under control.

The Imperial War Museum North and the Graduate Centre of London Metropolitan University in Holloway Road, north London, both by Daniel Libeskind, are also interesting. The museum is conceptually excellent and well made. But is it gripping? The graduate centre is, in a sense, the reverse – rather poorly made (budgets, no doubt) and conceptually inscrutable. What has the constellation, Orion, whose geometry informs the building, got to do with London's grungy Holloway Road?

The building, it must be said, has three wonderfully affecting spaces, where Libeskind is at his best. But how did he come up with such a meanly compressed entrance foyer? And how could the Riba jurists have suggested – even ironically – that from one of its jutting-shard balconies, “presumably heroic philosophical or political statements could be declaimed”.

The Riba awards, and the Stirling prize, are an essentially exclusive affair. Far less

exclusive is the organisation's Architecture Week, which has just started and runs until Sunday. There is a wide variety of events, some of them linked to the Clerkenwell Architecture Biennale, but the meat of it is in the “open building” list, which allows the public access to quite a range of interesting architecture.

The Butterfly House is available for inspection. So too is the Ercol factory in Princes Risborough, Buckinghamshire. The latter is a complete surprise: again, fine architecture has transformed a typical workaday environment into something humane. And the transformation of St Paul and St Mark, Old Ford in St Stephen's Road in London – quite a concentration of saints! – is a must. Here, an art gallery in the shape of a wooden hull has been suspended above the pews. The drama of the structure, designed by Matthew Lloyd, is balanced by wonderful detailing – the 19th century and the third millennium fused together with great charm.

For Architecture Week details, go to www.architectureweek.org.uk