



thecockburnassociation

Edinburgh's Civic Trust

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Gareth Hoskins & David Orr

23 February 2015

Dear Gareth & David

Re: Proposals for the Old Royal High School

Thank you for the time you have spent on a site visit, guided tour of the exhibition, presentation to our Cases Committee and further information provided explaining your proposals for the Old Royal High School site.

Our Cases Committee members have given careful consideration to all this and here is the Association's feedback at this stage.

At our site visit the following concerns were noted:

- the proposed windows in the portico appear to be fundamental to the concept of the hotel foyer and a spectacular arrivals space. The great achievement of Hamilton was to create a Greek temple composition without any windows, something which his contemporaries were very rarely able to do. This is the essence of the Greek revival, which followed a century of baroque playfulness when invention and wit took precedence over any attempt at historical accuracy. Related to these windows and door was the issue of patrons being able to come out onto the portico to enjoy the view. This would imply, inevitably, some kind of safety railings and then the usual hotel detritus of bistro chairs, tables and umbrellas, etc., all portable items and thus beyond any planning control. Rather than patrons enjoying the view, the point is they would be the view, and centre stage. These issues are irreconcilable. Whilst much is made of the ceremonial door used at graduations, the grandiose internal architrave around this, since removed to Barnton, dates from the early 20th Century. There are photographs of it without this frame from an earlier date showing two symmetrical stairs up to the galleries around the hall.
- the proposed flight of stairs up to the portico, we can see no justification for these alterations to an accomplished design and are not convinced that the steps would be used by more than a tiny percentage of guests as the main traffic would be to the city centre, not Abbeyhill.
- we are disappointed to see the delightful entrance lodge being demolished. This is not by Hamilton, but a very skilful and accomplished design in its own right which works very well within the set-piece design. It features pediments and has a front-on-all-sides approach contributing to the position at the foot of the hill access road and ties into the railings like Hamilton's front pavilions on Regents Road. It could be saved and worked into any scheme or might have a use unrelated to the main site occupier, such as a history centre for the Royal High or interpretation centre for Calton Hill.
- the interior spaces of the Royal High are dull but well-preserved by the PSA remodelling in the 1970s. The pitch pine doors and architraves look like original pattern mouldings. The repair work does not look extensive, with only a handful of incidences of water coming in and these might simply be a sign of choked downpipes, rather than serious structural work. It was a thorough conservation job in the 1970s, befitting a parliament.

Presentation to Cases Committee - 10th February:

- the new pavilion blocks are too high in relation to the centre building. They would feature a lot of glass, for patrons to enjoy the view and at night when lit this would disturb the whole idea of the dominant temple on a wild hill. Hamilton's building would be reduced to the lesser part. We accept that there is not much detail at this stage but the idea of four storeys within as low a building as possible means that the window proportions will be much less than on the neighbouring Regents Terrace, where floor to floor heights are about 4m. This then is a question of scale and although this could be disguised somewhat by the elevation treatment it follows that at night, with individual rooms lit up, the scale would be clear.
- We understand what Gareth Hoskins said about his design, such as canting the wings, which is what the Greeks would have done, unlike the Romans they didn't believe it was ideal to align classical buildings, and the symmetry. However, the result of that is a composition that sits very uncomfortably on the site. We note Historic Scotland's view that the western terrace should remain undeveloped so as to afford a side view of Hamilton's building. It would be more than a great shame if this was lost. We agree with Gareth Hoskins that a higher building on the eastern terrace does not look right, but this does not mean that to build on the west terrace is acceptable. We did not see the new elevation of the building's approach side from the Scottish Office but conclude that it is impossible to put anything here without weakening the superb spatial arrangement between all of these buildings, including Tait's "ocean liner" St Andrews' House.
- Hamilton's building already includes end pavilions terminating his composition. To put modern pavilions beyond these pavilions is quite unbalancing. The problem with any set piece of this type is that it was conceived perfectly and is a complete design that doesn't lend itself to extension.
- There was so much open space originally around Hamilton's design, this is a remarkable opportunity to remove all that surplus and low quality accommodation to the rear and show the building in its original setting. Other uses have been proposed for the building, some of which require public subsidy, but the building which needs saving is very modest and reducing the estate in this way would greatly assist in lowering future maintenance costs and thus the economic viability of such proposals.
- Our conclusion on the new design proposals is that Gareth Hoskins has done the scoping exercise, which probably should have been done years ago, which proves that a viably-sized hotel does not work spatially and compositionally on this very special site.

Related planning questions:

- the proposal is for a six star hotel. In planning terms there is no such thing, there is hotel use which covers hostels, B&B apartments and so on. There is no guarantee, nor could one be given by anyone involved that the operator will be a six star hotel.
- the notion that the site could accommodate hotel use has been untested in capacity terms until now. Just because the Economic Development Committee wrote a report that made these recommendations and councillors agreed to it, does not mean that it necessarily works in spatial and architectural terms. Alternative uses may well be more successful and have yet to be adequately evaluated.
- the application involves very little conservation and restoration because the PSA broadly did a very good job in the 1970s in this regard with a brief that was undemanding on the building. Whilst the application would involve repairs and ongoing maintenance it also includes many intrusive changes which are not balanced by gains elsewhere in conservation terms.
- the main benefit of the proposal and its primary justification is in safe-guarding the building from further damage. The mechanism for exercising this safe-guard is the enforcement process, in which our confidence must be at an all-time low. Not only does the council not enforce on others, it also fails to 'serve notice' on itself and maintain its buildings such as this one in a reasonable state of good repair. The primary justification for this scheme therefore is in reality a false notion.

- many high category listed buildings in the city have been altered recently in order to safe-guard their future, only to find that the alterations have had the opposite effect, been quoted as weakening the buildings' value and used in some cases to justify demolition. For this reason we can have little confidence that changes of the sort proposed here do offer any long-term security for the building and we must question if mothballing it intact would not be a safer option.
- the fairly large and unimportant ancillary buildings on the site could be brought into short-term viable use as something like a back-packers hostel without any detrimental impact on the Category A building, providing an income stream to support ongoing maintenance. Something benign of this sort which also benefits the city could be proposed until a public use is found for it which is worthy of its status and location.
- to have any integrity, the site appraisal looking at other viable uses should be carried out by independent third parties

Hamilton's High School is carefully conceived in relation Calton Hill and the other monuments around the hill. The elevation of the High School itself is symmetrical, the overall composition of buildings and monuments around Calton Hill is asymmetrical. This group forms Edinburgh's Acropolis: The Athens of the North. It is thus an important part of Edinburgh's World Heritage designation.

The location of the High School was deliberately placed between the New Town and Old Town to serve the whole town; yet set in arcadia, is not immediately of either. The dynamic composition of Calton Hill and the High School as standalone temple forms a green break between the terraces of Waterloo Place and those of Regent Terrace. This arrangement would be compromised with the addition of wing buildings at either side, making Hamilton's building part of a larger staggered horizontal terrace. With the proposals, views of the profile of the hill as it steps up from east to west will also be compromised. The proposed new blocks will not only be higher than central High School building, but will be also be considerably higher than Playfair's adjacent Regent Terrace.

Significant concern exists regarding the proposals in undermining the integrity of the High School building which is acknowledged to be of international importance, being one of the most noted examples of European neo-classical architecture. As a 'temple to learning', limited fenestration to Regent Road contributes to the purity of the building. The sculptural quality of this elevation makes adaptation to hotel very difficult, without undermining and compromising its important features.

A hotel is not a public building, access depends on management policies, which can change. This will not be a public building. The presumption will be that visitors will be consumers. Whilst an exclusive hotel serving patrons could bring economic benefits to Edinburgh, given an understanding of the history of how the High School, as a school serving the whole city, this is not an appropriate use for this civic asset. As an exemplary work of art, the design and purpose of the High School should be seen in its cultural context. After the reformation, the intention was to make knowledge accessible across Scotland, through establishing schools in every parish. From an enlightened nineteenth century perspective the meritocratic intent of this institution, embodied as a work of art, sows early seeds for an egalitarian society. Edinburgh's High School building, as a temple to learning, is the architectural pinnacle of this enlightened policy. Rather than physical changes to its elevations, 'accessibility' for this landmark civic asset is about the overriding purpose of the building.

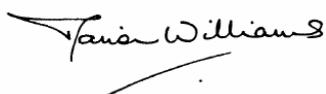
Youngson's 'The Making of Classical Edinburgh' (p.157) quotes the contemporary view of a councillor in 1823 regarding the establishment a new school at Canonmills for the New Town financed by considerable fees: *'The effect would evidently be to create a separation between the different classes of the Community, thereby destroying what has heretofore been one of the proudest Characteristics of the Scottish beneficial kind, both to persons of all ranks individually, and to the general character of the Nation'*. Following this a Town Council report of 1823 noted that to site a new school near Canonmills would be *'most exceedingly inconvenient for the inhabitants at large'*. The High School site was selected as it could serve both the whole city.

In summary, there is a fundamental discord in the adaptation of a building with no windows to the view into a hotel, it will also result in significant modification to the south facade of the school, the very thing that the whole scheme has been devised to protect. The High School building is protected as an internationally important example of architecture.

The original brief for the developer was initially untested. Having now been worked through, the tabled proposals undermine the building's important relationship with its context. The volume of accommodation which is stated to be required indicates that the use of the building and site for a hotel is not appropriate.

An alternative use which is compatible with this unique A listed building within Edinburgh's World Heritage Site should be brought forward. It is important that the Old Royal High School and the site are protected for current and future generations of Edinburgh's citizens and visitors.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Marion Williams". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping underline.

Marion Williams
Director

CC: Cllrs Ian Perry, Frank Ross, Andrew Burns, Donald Wilson
David Leslie, Greg Ward
AHSS, EWHT, ICOMOS UK