



WHAT IF? WHAT NEXT?

SPECULATIONS ON HISTORY'S FUTURES

SESSION 2B

ROUTES TO THE PAST

**Authentic? History, Heritage and Matters of
Veracity and Experience**

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THE CITY THAT LOST ITS SOUL: WORLD HERITAGE, DEVELOPMENT, AND CONTEMPORARY ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN IN EDINBURGH'S OLD AND NEW TOWNS

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The Old and New Towns of Edinburgh have long been a popular destination, but the sense of uncontrollable inundation by visitors is a phenomenon of recent decades. While many have claimed the tourist boom is positive and to be further encouraged, residents have decried the loss of their city's soul. The debate about 'over-tourism' in Edinburgh has become a common topic in the local press: the pro-tourism side argues that the city is a living, evolving entity that cannot be locked in a museum case, while the anti-tourism campaigners allege that Edinburgh is quickly falling victim to 'Disneyfication'.

This threat of a loss of 'authenticity' is particularly important in the context of Edinburgh's historic built landscape, as the Old and New Towns precincts have been a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1995. They were listed because of the global significance of 'a remarkable blend of the two urban phenomena: the organic medieval growth and 18th and 19th century town planning' (UNESCO, 1995). Indeed, Edinburgh's distinct townscape and architectural appearance is a significant factor in its tourism success: millions visit each year to see Edinburgh Castle, the medieval and 18th century tenements of the Royal Mile, and the Classical Revival New Town. The conservation of existing structures and the introduction of new architecture is, in theory, strictly controlled to maintain heritage values. In practice, however, there have been numerous examples of developments that have challenged Edinburgh's architectural status quo. This paper will explore two recent examples of contemporary architecture in hotel developments within Edinburgh's historic centre that have attracted a range of reactions from the public and press. In doing so, the increasingly irreconcilable needs and outcomes of tourism, community management, urban planning, architectural design, and heritage conservation will be highlighted.

Introduction

Edinburgh has long been admired for its picturesque streetscapes and views, dominated by the 16th-19th century Old Town (Fig. 1) and the 19th century neoclassical rigour of the New Town (Fig. 2). This architectural heritage is commonly cited as the reason tourists visit the Scottish capital, and it has been claimed the historic cityscape is worth between £1.2-1.4 billion to the city's economy.¹ In 1995, the Old and New Towns of Edinburgh were inscribed on UNESCO's World Heritage (WH) List. The inscription noted the significance of the city's architectural and planning heritage:

The contrast between the organic medieval Old Town and the planned Georgian New Town provides a clarity of urban structure unrivalled in Europe. The juxtaposition of these two distinct townscapes, each of exceptional historic and architectural interest, [...] creates the outstanding urban landscape.²

In the years since, periodic management strategies have further reinforced the centrality of Edinburgh's architectural identity to its WH status.



Figure 1. (Above) Looking over to the Old Town across Waverley Valley, from Princes Street in the New Town. Source: Author, 2013.

Figure 2. (Below) Looking over to the New Town across Princes Street Gardens, from Edinburgh Castle in the Old Town. Source: Author, 2013.

Edinburgh's popularity as a destination has grown since its WH Listing, helped along by the city's heightened status as the centre of Scottish Government after 1997, and an expansion of Edinburgh's renowned festivals. A study of the city's tourism industry in 2016 found that almost four million people visited that year (and spent over £1.45 billion).³ The City of Edinburgh Council

(CEC) acknowledges that WH status is a major drawback, but also stresses that Edinburgh is a 'living' city and not a museum, and must be allowed to grow. A significant part of this growth over the past two decades has been geared towards attracting more visitors, and the CEC's development strategies have identified a need to increase the supply of hotels and retail within the WH Site. The number of year-round residents in Edinburgh has grown too: between 2009 and 2019, the population increased from 463,000 to an estimated 520,000.⁴ All of these changes have been cause for concern among residents' interest groups and heritage campaigners, as has the more recent proliferation of holiday lets like Air BnB.⁵ Over the past five years, the media have fuelled residents' sense of frustration towards tourists and inner-city development, with claims that Edinburgh has become one of the most 'over-touristified' cities in the world.⁶ It is against this increasingly 'anti-tourist' and 'anti-development' backdrop that discourse about new architecture within Edinburgh's WH Site must be considered, particularly as many of these projects have been tourist-focused. In this paper, debate around two recent mixed-use developments – SoCo (completed 2014) in the Old Town, and the St James Quarter (due for completion in 2022) in the New Town (see Fig. 3) – will be examined in order to highlight the complex and contradictory dialogues around architectural heritage, inner-city development, and contemporary architectural design in Edinburgh's WH precinct.

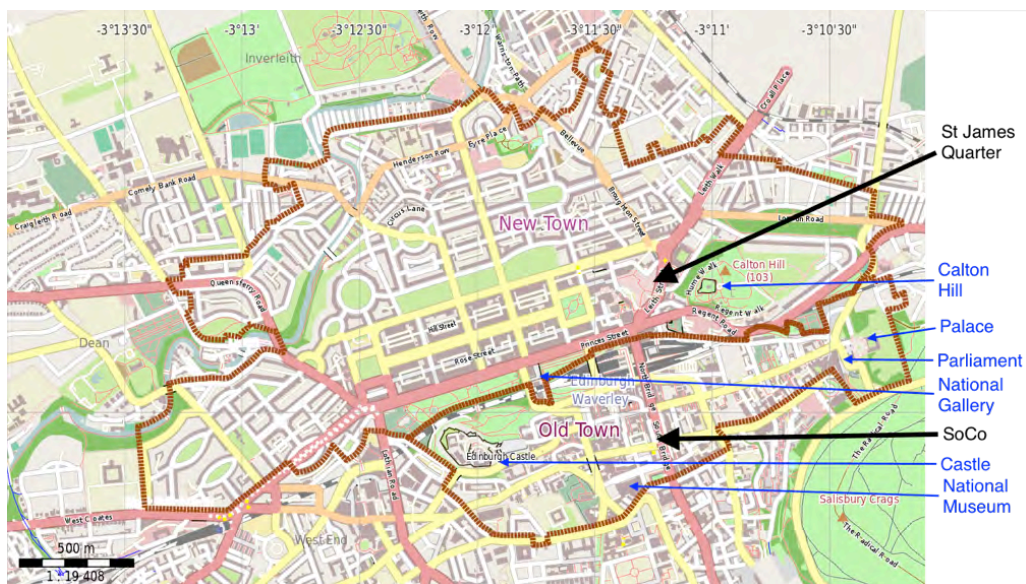


Figure 3. Map of Edinburgh's Old and New Towns, with SoCo and St James Quarter projects – and prominent tourist attractions – indicated. Source: Wikimedia Commons, 2013 https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Edinburgh_Old_Town_Boundaries_with_New_Town.svg with Author additions, 2020.

Edinburgh's architectural legacy

The architectural approach to the slopes of the Old Town has for centuries been to build 'tall'. As population pressure forced greater numbers of people into these tenements in the 18th-19th centuries and slum conditions took hold, many of the wealthier residents looked for an opportunity to relocate. This came in the form of James Craig's planned New Town, constructed across the Waverley Valley on land that was comparatively flat and closer to Edinburgh's port, Leith. The New Town offered everything that the Old Town could not: wide thoroughfares, sunlight and air, and a uniformity of architecture that appealed to the educated elite. The neglected Old Town was subject to slum clearances in this period, and urban 'improvement' projects were undertaken throughout the 19th century. This saw the raising of street levels and construction of bridges as well as the removal of the most dilapidated tenements, but most of the prominent landmarks remained. The philosophies of noted urban conservationists such as Patrick Geddes became popular, and by the 1890s the Old Town was regarded as a landscape that needed to be saved and revived.

This fledgling conservation movement was reignited when post-World War II modernisation efforts saw the demolition and replacement of entire city blocks with brutalist concrete forms. Some of the heritage campaigners that emerged went on to found organisations such as the Edinburgh New Town Conservation Committee (1970) and Edinburgh Old Town Committee for Conservation and Renewal (1986); these merged to become the Edinburgh World Heritage Trust (EWHT) in 1999.⁷ The EWHT has funding provided by the CEC and the Scottish Government's heritage authority, Historic Environment Scotland.⁸ While it cannot overrule planning decisions, the EWHT's feedback is formally sought on development applications within the WH Site and it has proven to be an effective voice on heritage issues. The EWHT, as well as the long-standing Cockburn Association, and local community councils, are often depicted as one side of the 'heritage versus development' battle. On the other side of this conflict stands the tourist industry, property developers, the Chamber of Commerce and the CEC. Despite the portrayal of the EWHT and Cockburn Association as 'anti-development', both organisations claim to be supportive of growth and Edinburgh's need to evolve.⁹ The tension between the pro-heritage and pro-development camps is undeniable, however, with a wealth of evidence in the press, in development-related submissions to the CEC, and in communications released to the public and amongst supporters. It is from this material that the present paper draws to more closely examine the conservation and architectural design debates over the SoCo and St James Quarter developments.

South Bridge & Cowgate (SoCo)

The SoCo project came about after a fire in December 2002 badly damaged and destroyed buildings at 1-3 Chambers Street, 207 and 235-237 Cowgate, and 77-79 South Bridge in the Old Town. Fire crews struggled to control the conflagration which spread through a rabbit warren of 19th and 20th century structures that were stacked upon and around one another. The properties that were destroyed were not remarkable architecturally, but served as a vibrant location for the arts and entertainment sectors. As architect Neil Gillespie noted, "The biggest loss is the mix – a soup of uses which has been built up over the decades."¹⁰ The fire-affected buildings were also in close proximity to a number of heritage-listed structures (Fig. 4) including Adam House (1954, Category B-listed), and the University of Edinburgh's Old College (1789-1827, Category A-listed). Moreover, the precinct was near major landmarks and tourist attractions, and was therefore highly visible within the WH Site. In the aftermath of the blaze, UNESCO expressed concern that a significant part of the WH Site might have been damaged, and two State of Conservation audits were completed.¹¹ These determined that the destroyed structures were of minimal contribution to Edinburgh's WH significance, though UNESCO did continue to monitor the SoCo development afterwards.

Once the burnt remnants had been cleared, the challenges in finding a suitable replacement became apparent. In 2003 the CEC issued a design brief with expectations that included: a mixed-use scheme that would prioritise residential units; prominent entrances on the Cowgate and South Bridge levels; public thoroughfares through the site; views to major landmarks and the Royal Mile, and a design befitting of its WH location.¹² The brief made a point of allowing the reproduction of a neoclassical improvement scheme for the area from the 1780s (referred to as the Kay Scheme). The Kay Scheme was itself based upon earlier unrealised designs of renowned Scottish architect Robert Adam, and while the Kay Scheme was completed, it was essentially destroyed by renovations in the 1930s.¹³ The CEC also indicated there was:

...an important opportunity to demonstrate the best of design, which this era can contribute, with a contextual very high quality contemporary solution. Any design approach should draw on and be inspired by key elements of this formal classical street [South Bridge] and its relationship with the wider townscape.¹⁴

Looser applications of historical motifs would not be permitted because the CEC believed this would risk the overall design being an inauthentic "pastiche", though no specifics were provided on where the line between historical inspiration and pastiche might be drawn.¹⁵



Figure 4. View of vacant SoCo site from the Cowgate level, with the Category A-listed dome of the University of Edinburgh's Old College in the background. Source: Tom Parnell, Flickr, 2009.

The CEC published the submissions it received on the draft design brief when it released the final version of this brief in 2003.¹⁶ These submissions reveal divergent views not just between heritage and commercial interests, but also within the heritage lobby itself. Among a number of points of contention, it seems that the EWHT initially argued that the development should *not* attempt a replication of the Kay Scheme, as this would be a falsification of history. Other heritage groups strongly encouraged the replication of this scheme, however. It was alleged in a subsequent Heritage Report issued by the site's owners, Whiteburn Projects, that the EWHT eventually conceded that parts of the Kay Scheme might be acceptable.¹⁷ Drawing from these disagreements about historical authenticity, the Whiteburn Projects' Heritage Report interpreted the CEC's design brief and the various heritage submissions against a range of conservation conventions. It concluded that replicating the Kay Scheme would – counter to the views of the heritage bodies, though in line with the EWHT's initial view – be inappropriate. The Heritage Report instead endorsed the CEC's other option – a contextual and high quality contemporary design – and recommended that it should acknowledge all eras and evolutions of the site, and not just the Kay Scheme with which the heritage lobby was concerned.¹⁸

Whiteburn Projects submitted the first development proposal to the CEC in September 2008.¹⁹ While the 2003 design brief had strongly encouraged the incorporation of residential units, these were left out of the 2008 scheme due to difficulties in achieving an appropriate level of amenity.²⁰ This was disappointing for community groups who had pushed for increased residential options in the city centre, and had expressed fears that the site would be used for more licensed venues, of which they claimed there were already too many.²¹ While the 2003 brief encouraged retail spaces and entertainment venues of a similar nature to those lost in the 2002 fire, the brief did

not identify a hotel as a suitable use – yet the 2008 proposal was based upon a hotel as the anchoring business for the complex.²² The CEC planning sub-committee accepted this, and in a remark that highlights the CEC’s preoccupation with the tourism sector, it noted:

Although a hotel use is not mentioned as a specific use [...] the inclusion of a hotel and restaurant facility will generate activity along a main section of the South Bridge frontage. The hotel will make a positive contribution to the vitality and viability of the South Bridge.²³

Residences for locals were thus disregarded, and ultimately replaced by accommodation for tourists. Despite divergences such as these, Whiteburn Projects’ 2008 proposal *did* address many of the CEC’s requirements. They proposed a fragmented design for the Cowgate, for example, in which the façade was broken into several distinct sections faced with stone. This was claimed to be a suitably modern interpretation of the surrounding Georgian architecture, and also enabled the insertion of a glass walkway and public staircases with views to the Royal Mile (Fig. 5).²⁴ The South Bridge façade offered a rather more tame interpretation of Georgian architecture that echoed the fenestration patterns and overall heights of the neighbouring buildings, and this too was in line with the 2003 brief’s general parameters.²⁵



Figure 5. Completed Cowgate elevation of SoCo development, showing fragmented façade approach and glass walkways. Source: Google Street View, 2014.

The CEC unanimously approved this planning application in January of 2009, but the design did not eventuate.²⁶ One of Whiteburn Projects’ major partners, Hoxton Developers, sold their stake to Janson Properties in 2011, which in turn replaced Hoxton’s Allan Murray Architects with its own hire: ICA Architects.²⁷ Revisions were made, and design consultations were undertaken with heritage stakeholders in mid-2011. According to documents held by the CEC, draft designs shown at this stage appeared to present a stronger handling of classical proportions and rhythm on South Bridge, and a more confident treatment of the modern architectural elements on the Cowgate. Heritage bodies seemed broadly supportive of these changes.²⁸ When the new planning application was formally submitted to the CEC for consideration in late 2011, however, the design had been altered again: many of the stylistic elements had been removed or drastically simplified. It emerged that CEC planners had advised that these features pushed the scheme into the unacceptable realm of pastiche, something that had explicitly been forbidden.²⁹ This view ran counter to the opinions of the various heritage groups, who unanimously supported these proposed inclusions. The EWHT noted that it had reviewed the official planning submission – altered *after* it had endorsed the draft design – “with surprise and hence disappointment”; the revised designs showed, it claimed, “an apparent loss of nerve on the part of the applicant.”³⁰ The Cockburn Association went further, stating the designs were “wholly inappropriate for the setting” and could threaten the WH Status of the precinct.³¹ Media coverage indicated a general sense that the designs were “bland and uninspiring”, though the CEC maintained that the approved scheme would achieve a “high quality of design” sympathetic to its surrounds.³²

It was with this endorsement that construction of SoCo was able to begin, and it was completed by 2014. The finished product was much as the 2011 scheme had outlined (Fig. 6). While the Managing Director of Jansons Property, Andy Jansons, suggested that the development “looks all at peace with the rest of the street”, noted Edinburgh architect Malcolm Fraser described the finished elevations as “disappointing”.³³ An Urban Realm review observed that while the simplified 2011 design “matches the scale and materiality of its neoclassical” streetscape, it “brings little else new to the table.” Moreover, the review suggested,

If the Cowgate [development] serves to focus minds on breaking the planning logjam and stifling architectural straightjacket for future builds then it may have been worth these long years of waiting. Otherwise it simply fills a space, and leaves you feeling somewhat unfulfilled at that.³⁴

From the perspective of ICA Architects, the plainness of SoCo was intentional: it had sought to produce something “contextual, seeking neither a fashionable or iconic outcome but a building that has a truthful and timeless quality.”³⁵ Such an ambition was informed by the belief that this approach was the most suitable for a WH precinct, and doubtless the EWHT and other heritage bodies would agree that a contextual and sympathetic appearance for new architecture within the Site is important. What the SoCo example shows, however, is that there is no consensus as to what ‘contextual’ and ‘sympathetic’ design actually looks like in practice. This lack of clarity has been exacerbated by the differing opinions of key heritage bodies, which – in the case of SoCo – led to contradictory messages that ultimately gave the developer the opportunity to discredit or disregard key pieces of conservation advice.



Figure 6. South Bridge elevation of completed SoCo development, with the bridge over the Cowgate and Cowgate façade shown in right of image. The Category A-listed Old College dome is visible in the background. Source: Google Street View, 2017.

St James Quarter

The second development of concern, the St James Quarter in the New Town, is currently under construction, and as such it is not possible to examine it to the same extent as SoCo. Nevertheless, the planning phase (2008-2015) of the Quarter is useful as it further highlights the incompatible nature of the tourism, retail, residential, and conservation interest groups within Edinburgh’s WH Site, and the manifestation of this tension in debates about architectural authenticity and contemporary design. The Quarter did not result from fire, but instead from a near universal dislike for the 1960s-1970s brutalist St James Centre (Fig. 7) that occupied the prominent site until it was demolished in 2016. This Centre was designed as a shopping precinct, hotel and office block complex by Ian Burke, and was initially celebrated as an important modern contribution to the city in the post-war period.³⁶ Over time, however, commentators came to view the Centre as a blight on the landscape; an unsympathetic concrete monolith that dominated the eastern end of the New Town and disrupted views from nearby Calton Hill.



Figure 7. The former St James Centre rising above the New Town in 2014. It has since been demolished. Source: Tom Parnell, Flickr, 2014.

As part of the UNESCO WH listing process for the Old and New Towns in 1995, the Centre was identified as a detrimental feature to the surrounding historic Georgian planned town, and the CEC and various heritage bodies openly expressed an eagerness to see the area transformed through a more engaging, sympathetic design.³⁷ This opportunity arose when Henderson Global Investors bought the property in 2006, and announced plans to undertake an £850 million redevelopment.³⁸ There was minimal resistance to the demolition of the post-war structures on site, and the initial masterplan for the new development, issued in 2008, was also accepted by heritage organisations including the EWHT.³⁹ The real point of contention emerged in 2015, when the first designs for St James Quarter's 'Building C' – which had been earmarked as a feature hotel – were released for comment. While there have certainly been other concerns raised about the Quarter's design as this has evolved with subsequent planning stages, it is the hotel structure by Jestico + Whiles that has continued to attract the most criticism, and thus will be considered here.

The CEC issued a design brief for the Quarter in 2007 that indicated acceptable parameters for building heights, materials, accessibility and uses; the approved outline designs by Allan Murray Architects further confirmed these elements.⁴⁰ This gave only a vague idea of the feature hotel, however, because Henderson Global Investors intended to appoint different architects for this structure following an international competition. This was finalised in 2015, when Jestico + Whiles' proposal for a bronze ribbon-encased teardrop-shaped building was chosen. The architects claimed that the ribbon – which wrapped unevenly from the ground floor public square around the hotel to form a spire at the peak – was intended to represent spools of paper, in a nod to the site's history as a location of printing presses.⁴¹ Commentators were quick to liken the design to a range of less savoury objects, however: a 'walnut whip', a 'golden turd', a 'Mr Whippy ice-cream cone', and "the bastard child of Dr Martens and Christian Louboutin."⁴² Aside from a general feeling that the hotel's exterior clashed with its neoclassical surrounds, heritage bodies and community groups objected to the intrusion it would make on the historic skyline, with the spire set to project 19 metres above an agreed 'General Characteristic Height' of the Quarter.⁴³ While the architects claimed this was within the parameters established by the CEC's design brief and approved masterplan, critics questioned the necessity of this feature.⁴⁴ Adam Wilkinson of EWHT claimed that the planned restaurant and entertainment spaces on the hotel's upper floors, which were promoted as having 360 degree views of the city, were another sign of the prioritisation of tourism and hospitality sectors over locals' needs.⁴⁵ UNESCO expressed concern over the hotel design, and fears arose that the development would put Edinburgh's WH status at risk.⁴⁶ Interestingly, the CEC's development sub-committee agreed with many of the criticisms made about the hotel's ribbon façade, its overall height, and the use of potentially inappropriate

materials, and it made numerous attempts at advising the architects on design amendments.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, CEC planners eventually recommended refusal of the hotel plans due to adverse impacts on the skyline and the WH Site.⁴⁸ But in a direct rejection of the advice of their own planners, the CEC's councillors ignored the recommendation and approved the hotel for construction.⁴⁹ Much of the Quarter is due for completion by the end of 2020, though COVID-19 has likely impacted this timeline.

Conclusion

The ongoing debate about the ribbon hotel design within Edinburgh's St James Quarter echoes some of the key points of conflict seen during SoCo's development: disparate views on architectural taste and the appropriate ways in which to address the surrounding heritage landscape; contradictory or overruled recommendations from heritage and planning authorities; and a tendency to approve tourist-friendly developments that may be detrimental to locals. In the limited confines of this paper it has only been possible to outline two examples in this vein, but there are many more, including the Missoni Hotel (Old Town, 2005-2009), the Caltongate New Waverley development (Waverley Valley, 2006-ongoing), the Advocate's Close development (Old Town, 2006-2014), and the proposal to convert Thomas Hamilton's Old Royal High School into a luxury hotel (New Town, 2010-ongoing). As with SoCo and St James Quarter, these other developments were – or still are – mired in conflict over design, conservation, uses, and potential impacts on Edinburgh's WH status. Tourism is inextricably caught up in these debates because all of the developments mentioned here are intended to service the city's visitors. As noted conservation architect James Simpson observed in 2016, Edinburgh is now at risk of killing the goose to get the golden egg: by catering to increasing numbers of tourists by allowing more developments within the WH area, it is damaging the very reason those tourists come to Edinburgh in the first place.⁵⁰

But there is also an undercurrent of resistance to change that is apparent in debates over these developments, whereby architects are expected to produce ambitious, high quality contemporary designs that are neither boring nor unnecessarily flashy, and that also respond in a sympathetic way to their historic contexts. This often results in what architect Malcolm Fraser once described as a mentality of 'box-ticking', in which the ambition to create a design that pleases everyone ultimately ends up satisfying no one.⁵¹ This tall order is further complicated by frustration among locals towards the tourism sector, such that any development that is proposed – regardless of the suitability of the architectural approach – is bound to attract criticism because it represents the forces of commercialisation that threaten city-centre neighbourhoods. And then there is the perspective that the recent failures of Edinburgh's planning system and the lack of innovation shown in architecture are a betrayal of the city's legacy in both fields – and, indeed, of the reasons the city was given WH status.⁵² Notably, the opinion that Edinburgh's WH status is hindering the city's growth and is more trouble than it is worth has also emerged in recent years, and some have suggested that the status should be revoked.⁵³ It is the combination of these issues that have led commentators on both sides of the heritage-development divide to suggest that Edinburgh is in danger of becoming a "hollow museum shell" or a "stage set".⁵⁴ Is Edinburgh frozen in time and rendered inauthentic by an inability to reach consensus over the role that conservation, tourism and contemporary architecture should play in the city's future?

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