

Assembly Rooms Debate Continues

✘ When the Council meets on Thursday of this week the future of the Assembly Rooms is on the agenda. Principally they are going to discuss which contractor they will appoint to carry out the renovation works to the flagship building. The report to the council is shown below. It is a lengthy document but it sets out the procedure for a successful tendering process in the £6.7m project. One of the principal points that the council make in this paper is that they can only pay for the refurbishment from the capital programme if it results in “the improvement or enhancement of an asset.” The money cannot be used from the capital budget if the work is only repair or maintenance.

Meanwhile the [online petition](#) to save the ground level of the Assembly Rooms from becoming a George Street shopping area has attracted over 6500 signatures in support of their opposition to the Council approval of the renovation scheme, as well as more than 3500 ‘likes’ on [Facebook](#).

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Organisers of the campaign the [Assembly Theatre](#) which is registered as a charity do not dispute the fact that work is required to renovate the building which was first built in 1784. What they take issue with according to their [website](#), is that the Council’s £9.6 million plan converts the space, where 68, 588 people saw shows in 2010, into three shops and a restaurant.

Comedian Jo Brand and actor Simon Callow ask whether Edinburgh really needs another high-class shopping area in a video made to highlight the cause.

[Assembly Rooms](#) from [Riverside Digital Productions](#) on [Vimeo](#).

Businesses at the East End of Princes Street (Waterstones, Boots and Burger King) are reportedly being closed at the end of 2010 to make way for other boutiques and a hotel, and this is being used in the campaign as one of the main points against further retail development at The Assembly Rooms.

“There’s been a worrying number of venue closures this year, with the Roxy, The Lot and The Forest Café all closing down,” says Rose McConnachie of local band [Kid Canaveral](#). “This is already creating a problem for the Edinburgh music scene, and when next year’s Fringe rolls round, there’s going to be a dearth of reasonable performance spaces – they already use some fairly borderline venues!”

But the venue is not only used during the Fringe. Edinburgh resident Dieca Cumming posted this comment on the campaign website:-“It is not only about the cultural events that take place during the Festival, important as they are. The building is used all the year round for Antique Book fairs, Craft Fairs, public meetings, weddings and private functions, ceilidhs, balls, concerts and many more.”

The council, meanwhile, points out that the plans have been available since 2006 and have met with no opposition. They maintain that the changes will transform the Assembly Rooms “into a premier events venue, fit for the 21st century”. Edinburgh’s Culture Leader, Councillor Deidre Brock, dismissed all of this as “dangerously misleading” claiming instead that the Council’s ambitious plans for the historic Assembly Rooms, would transform it into a premier events venue fit for the 21st century.

The Council has been working for five years on the refurbishment plans, which were approved by the Development Management Sub-Committee on Wednesday 8 December 2010.

The council believe that the plans will see the beloved Georgian building restored to its original use, with retail

units occupying the rooms on either side of the main doors and the elegant Supper Room being transformed into a 'destination' restaurant. Brock believes that this is in keeping with the history of the building as captured in the venue's Conservation Plan.

These alterations will, it is claimed, largely finance substantial and historically sensitive refurbishment of the Assembly Rooms' events rooms – the Ballroom, Music Hall, Crush Hall and the East and West Drawing Rooms – which are all in need of modernisation and repairs.

Cllr Brock said: "There are some dangerously misleading claims being made just now and it's crucial that people understand what the real situation is. The simple truth is this: the Assembly Rooms are now in desperate need of refurbishment, with parts of the building crumbling into disrepair (as evidenced by the partial collapse of the Ballroom ceiling last summer). Indeed, the Assembly Rooms will have to close altogether if they are not restored urgently.

"Our plans, exhaustively discussed with heritage bodies and other stakeholders, will revitalise this beautiful building, thus ensuring that our historic events venue can continue to host fairs, ceilidhs, gala evenings and concerts all 52 weeks of the year.

"The Assembly Rooms belong to the people of Edinburgh, and have done since they first opened in 1787. We are committed to ensuring that they continue to be enjoyed as a wonderful events venue by the people of Edinburgh for many generations to come.

"The refurbishment plans have won the unequivocal support of such prominent bodies as VisitScotland, Creative Scotland, the Edinburgh Chamber of Commerce and the Edinburgh Convention Bureau, as well as interested companies such as Heritage Portfolio, Primark and Radio Forth.

“It’s true that Assembly Theatre Ltd’s previous three-week usage of the building’s ground floor during the summer festivals period will be affected by our plans, as we will be restoring these parts of the venue to their original retail and dining use. This is essential if we are to finance the vital structural repairs to the principal events spaces upstairs, including the Music Room and the Ballroom.

“However, we are certain that far from diminishing the Assembly Rooms as a festival venue and cultural hub, this refurbishment will in fact enhance them. Indeed we already have notes of interest from a number of promoters and producers who recognise this and who want to take the venue on during the summer festivals period, as well as during the rest of the year.

“There is also strong interest in the revamped venue outwith the festivals period, from existing hirers and new business.

“Time and again we have challenged critics to provide us with a properly costed, detailed business proposal. This has not happened so we must assume there is in fact no genuine, realistic alternative.”

[The Evening News](#) reports that appeals are being made to Historic Scotland to intervene.

On the [Save the Assembly website](#) it is claimed that the business proposal suggested by Councillor Brock cannot be prepared:-“Assembly Theatre has proposed a simpler plan to improve the building and run it on a year round basis. A business plan has not been submitted for this project as the requests to the Council for figures to provide the basis of plan have been ignored. Nonetheless we stand by our offer to run building on a year round basis as presented to the Council on the 19th November, which can be found in the documents on this site.”

The Scotsman has a range of articles on the subject including

letters from former Council leader Donald Anderson [here](#) and the founder of the Assembly Rooms as a Fringe venue, William Burdett-Coutts, has applied for the right to be heard at the council meeting on Thursday. This is called a deputation which allows ten minutes for a case to be put to the council, usually followed by some questions. Burdett-Coutts also wrote in The Scotsman last week which you can see [here](#).

It remains to be seen whether the results of this campaign will sway the council when they are meet on Thursday.