

Plans for luxury hotel at old Royal High knocked back



Planning officers are recommending to the councillors on the Development Management Sub-Committee that the application for converting the old Royal High to a 147 bedroom hotel should now be refused.

The proposal to turn the old Royal High School into a world-class hotel is led by local partners Duddingston House Properties (DHP) and the Urbanist Group. Leading an institutional group of investors, they have raised in excess of £55m for the project.

Detailed plans for the luxury hotel envisaged for the building, which has lain empty for some considerable time, and is on the Buildings at Risk register, were lodged in [September 2015](#). The council now say it is a 'highly sensitive' building. They also assert that any benefit by bringing this back into use is not outweighed by the 'very significant harm to built heritage and landscape of the city'.

[tweet_box design="default"]The plainest sentence in the report is this: "Put simply, too much building is being proposed for this highly sensitive site."[/tweet_box]

The council officials cite a number of planning regulations which they believe the proposals do not comply with, and go on to say that there is no justification for demolishing the gymnasium and lodge which were later additions.

They finally opine that the development is detrimental to the New Town Conservation Area. Of course none of this will be in any way meaningful unless the councillors agree to refuse the application next week. The plans were based on the hotel

company leasing the buildings from the council over 125 years and when operational the hotel was expected to create 640 local jobs and contribute around £27million to Edinburgh's economy.



When the committee meets next Thursday they will discuss only this planning application during what is expected to be a full day of discussions. There will be contributions from New Town/Broughton Community Council, Edinburgh World Heritage, the Cockburn Association, Architectural Heritage Society of Scotland and a representative of the Regent, Royal, Carlton Terraces and Mews Association.

They will also be addressed by Gordon Dewar CEO of Edinburgh Airport who we expect will say that another five star hotel is needed, and Graham Birse of Edinburgh Napier University will give the councillors his point of view.

Previously Gordon Dewar, chief executive at Edinburgh Airport and board member of VisitScotland, said that he believes that having a new world-class hotel in Edinburgh would be a game-changer for Scotland's tourism market: "A Rosewood hotel in Edinburgh will allow us to market Edinburgh around the globe. We are constantly competing with many other European airports to attract investment into Edinburgh as both a market and a destination. A world-class hotel will attract a new level of interest and economic activity that will benefit everyone with a stake in the visitor economy."

As far as elected representatives go, the committee will hear from Councillors Karen Doran and Alasdair Rankin who both represent the city centre. They will also hear from MSPs Alison Johnstone and Sarah Boyack.

This is a £75 million development. There are alternative proposals, most notably from St Mary's Music School who want to acquire the building and use it as a school and concert

hall in the form of the Royal High School Preservation Trust.

The body wishes to move St Mary's Music School to the former Royal High School designed by Thomas Hamilton to provide additional teaching and performance space, which will allow them to offer Saturday classes for Edinburgh children too.

Plans were unveiled earlier this week showing how the Trust intends to create a concert hall within the buildings.

The Trust will submit its detailed planning application to the City of Edinburgh Council sometime soon.

The finance behind the Trust is from the Dunard Fund and they say it is fully funded, allowing them to create three new public performance spaces which will include a 300 seat concert hall in the debating chamber. They are founding their proposals on the fact that this will open up the building to the public rather than closing it to anyone who cannot afford to stay in what will be a five star hotel.

Urbanist Hotels announced earlier this year that they had secured [Rosewood Hotels](#) as the occupier. The group owns the very fancy Carlisle Hotel in New York, and it is clear that any hotel on this site would be of the utmost luxury status.

David Orr, co-founder and chairman of Urbanist Hotels said at the time of submitting the plans for the hotel that attracting a brand of Rosewood's stature is a major coup for Edinburgh and Scotland.

He said: "Rosewood is a truly world-class hotel operator combining their ethos of local engagement with their hotels of international standing, a commitment to excellence and a proactive approach to building skills and professional careers. By bringing Rosewood to Edinburgh we will be able to showcase our beautiful capital city and Scotland's creative and cultural talents to a new global audience. The full restoration of Thomas Hamilton's masterpiece will create a new

accessible destination for the Edinburgh locals and visitors alike.”

In the Trust’s plans a new, grand, but highly contemporary foyer will be created beneath the concert hall for ticketing, bar and cloakrooms. When not in use by the public, this could also serve as a multi-function space for the school, avoiding the need to constantly re-configure the main hall.



Royal High School Preservation Trust’s proposals

Stairways or lifts on either side of the foyer would rise beneath original cupola to the fully restored main hall, which will feature flanking stairs as per Thomas Hamilton’s original designs. The concert hall, itself, will be fitted with the very latest hydraulic seating to achieve a range of configurations for full orchestral performances through to more intimate recitals.

A new public entrance, grand terraces and the addition of new and near invisible school buildings to the east and north protect both the integrity and setting of the Hamilton masterpiece.

William Gray Muir, Chairman of The Royal High School Preservation Trust, said: “The Trust believes that the former Royal High School should return to its rightful position at the cultural heart of Edinburgh and we are simply delighted with the designs prepared by Richard Murphy Architects. These not only give us three new public performance spaces and a state-of-the-art new home for St Mary’s Music School but they also ensure that the building’s dramatic setting is both protected and enhanced.

“Our plans are focused on both preserving this exceptional building while bringing forward progressive, innovative designs to give it a modern and sustainable use.”

He added: "We fully recognise that the City of Edinburgh Council is not currently in a position to accept our offer due to its existing commitment to a commercial development. However, we have consulted widely and believe that our plans satisfy the need for conservation, public access, a culturally suitable and economically sustainable use. Therefore, if the commercial application were refused, the Trust is poised and ready to enter any new competitive process to acquire the building for St Mary's Music School. Such a process could be completed in a matter of months."

Dr Kenneth Taylor, Headteacher of St Mary's Music School, said: "This is an exciting and wonderful opportunity to further develop St Mary's Music School with its unique position as Scotland's only independent specialist music school. Moving to the former Royal High School building would provide us with the performance and rehearsal space we aspire to and would enable us to broaden and extend the outreach activities we currently offer to the wider community.

"The new site will allow for future expansion and a high-profile location will make the school more visible in Scotland, the UK and internationally. It will provide a concert hall of historic importance for the school, external concerts and as a potential venue in the Edinburgh International Festival.

"We are conscious that this will only succeed if the local authority opts to reject planning approval for an alternative commercial proposal for the site. We are confident that the RHSPT's proposal provides a far closer match with the architectural and cultural significance of the unique site and are hopeful that councillors will agree."

So where does that leave the wonderful Thomas Hamilton building now? It has been empty since 1963. It is on the Buildings at Risk register. The council have used it for storing ballot boxes between elections.

Do we just leave it to crumble its way down Regent Road, or are the councillors brave enough to plump for something which might enhance the city's economy?

The City of Edinburgh Council reacquired the buildings from the Scottish Office in 1994 and despite various other suggestions for cultural uses, such as a photography or military museum, the A-listed building has lain empty for 46 years.

In 2010 Duddingston House Properties won the City of Edinburgh Council competition for a 125 year lease on the buildings which it plans to restore as a world-class hotel.

It is of course open to them to ask for certain conditions to be met, or revisals made, even at this stage. Or perhaps they prefer the outline proposal to move St Mary's Music School into the building?

What do you think?