

William Henry Playfair. Architect of Edinburgh's Cityscape

Drawings from the architect will go on display in a new exhibition at the City Art Centre.



Around 50 , rarely seen, drawings from William Henry Playfair's practice, including plans for some of Edinburgh's most famous landmarks complemented by images made by 19th Century painters showing some of his most well-regarded buildings have been gathered from the University of Edinburgh's Department of Architectural History and its Centre for Research Collections, Historic Environment Scotland and the City of Edinburgh Council's permanent collection to create this exhibition.

Playfair (1790 – 1857) is considered one of Scotland's most prolific Georgian architects. His contribution to the architecture of early 19th century Edinburgh is found in many of the city's most famous buildings, including Old College and New College, Donaldson's School, George Heriots, the Scott Monument, Surgeon's Hall, the Royal Scottish Academy and the City's Observatory on Calton Hill.

Through his career Playfair addressed some of the key ideas around aesthetics, classics, society and politics, and their relationship with architecture and the urban realm.

His move from neo-Classical to neo-Gothic buildings demonstrates how Playfair and his architectural practice were engaged in shaping Edinburgh as a developing, working city as it entered the rapidly industrialised Victorian age, signifying his vision and ambition for Edinburgh as a place of

significance within the British Isles.




The show is curated by Dr Kirsten Carter McKee and John Lowrey from the University of Edinburgh's Department of Architectural History. It runs from 11 November 2017 to 25 February 2018 and entrance is free.

Councillor Donald Wilson, Culture and Communities Convener, said: "Almost anywhere you turn in Edinburgh, look up and you are likely to see Playfair's magnificent monuments, domes, spires and structures scattering the skyline. "Drawing on his designs and the artwork in the Council and University archives, this free exhibition maps Playfair's built and unbuilt ideas and the impact he had on Edinburgh.

"It is thanks to his vision that Edinburgh earned its 'Athens of the North' title, with his breath-taking City Observatory one of his earliest projects. See the architectural drawings at the City Art Centre, as we work with the Collective to return the building to Playfair's original design."

The exhibition coincides with the ongoing restoration of one of Playfair's most iconic designs, the City Observatory on Calton Hill. This exciting project, undertaken by Collective Gallery in partnership with the City of Edinburgh Council, will see the building restored to Playfair's original design, the creation of a new contemporary gallery space, and a restaurant overlooking the city.

 Dr Kirsten Carter McKee, Curator of Playfair and the City and Research and Teaching Fellow in Architectural History at University of Edinburgh said: "It is through Playfair's understanding of the broader context of the city landscape that the true mastery of his skill becomes apparent. Playfair and the City explores this through the layout of Edinburgh's Third New Town to the north of the city, which includes the

urban parkland of Calton Hill. This vision and ambition in both Playfair's architecture and his exploitation of the city landscape aimed to place Edinburgh as a city of style and significance within the British Isles. Playfair's role as an architect of significance in the 19th century therefore extends outside of Edinburgh, and places him within the realm of the British architectural greats of the late Georgian period."

David Patterson, Curatorial and Conservation Manager with Museums and Galleries Edinburgh commented: "this is a unique opportunity to see the work of one of Scotland's most influential architects. Without doubt William Playfair left his mark on the appearance of Edinburgh in a way which no other single architect had done previously or has done since."

Image credits: View of the Mound, 1854, oil on canvas, by William G Herdman. City Art Centre; Museums and Galleries Edinburgh