

Meeting Rab Bennetts

Here in Edinburgh we can be quite obsessed with its buildings and what is done with them to develop and put them to good use in the 21st century. It is perhaps a bit of a comfort to know that one of the major firms of architects involved with several big projects in the capital has many Edinburgh connections.

Not only does the company have a base here, the firm was co-founded by Rab Bennetts OBE in 1987 with his partner Denise after they studied together in Edinburgh.

Mr Bennetts now provides overall design direction to the firm which employs around 80 people here and in offices in London and Manchester. He is involved in research projects, is a member of many professional committees and is interested in construction education outside the firm. A co-founder of the UK Green Building Council, Rab is also a trustee of the Design Council and a director at Sadler's Wells Theatre in London. In Edinburgh they were commissioned on the Astronomy Technology Centre at the Royal Observatory, Potterrow, the FloWave Test Facility and two significant buildings at Edinburgh Park. They are also working on the Bayes Centre for the University of Edinburgh.

In 2005 the firm was commissioned to transform the Royal Shakespeare Company's home at Stratford-upon-Avon and here in Edinburgh the University of Edinburgh has long been a client.



Rab Bennetts OBE

I met with Rab to find out about his work in Edinburgh which now includes the refurbishment of the former Royal Infirmary Surgical Hospital which is to become the [Edinburgh Futures Institute](#).

Our meeting took place in the relatively small and unobtrusive office which the firm occupies in Boroughloch Square where the atmosphere was one of concentration and collaboration. He apologised that I was not seeing the office on a busier day, as it was just ahead of Christmas when people were starting to go off for the holidays, but it looked busy enough to me!

Rab explained the beginnings of the firm : "The business was set up in London in 1987, but it wasn't long before we got offered a job here in Edinburgh which was our home town. It wasn't long after Edinburgh had bid for the Year of Culture which of course Glasgow won.

"But it gave us a taste for working in Edinburgh again. So we have had an office here since 1994, and it was nice to come back. The job that got us here was a new HQ for John Menzies out at The Gyle as it was called then. Now it's called Edinburgh Park of course!

"That was swiftly followed by another job for BT. Both of these came about as a result of winning design competitions, and we set up an office here hoping we could make it through. One person manned the office, Jane Burridge, a very good architect who stayed with us for around 12 years. She soldiered on for the first three years here, and suddenly we had more work. Now we have 15 people working here in Edinburgh where the atmosphere is usually buzzing.

"Our work is now all over the UK, in the Midlands, London and all three offices can share the load. Our Christmas party was held in London this year and we all had a great time. It had been quite a difficult year economically, largely due to the effects of Brexit.

"Commercial developers and others are easing off their decision-making so we were prudent this year. This time last year we all went to Milan.

"Normally we have two big office trips during the year, one on

home ground and one abroad. There is a good reason behind that – it is to try and bind people together. These Continuing Professional Development trips get people being friendly with each other, get them talking and discussing buildings together.”

THE FUTURE OF EDINBURGH

I was a bit surprised that someone like Rab had not been asked for his views on the City Vision 2050 as yet, and while this will form part of a future article, he admitted it is a difficult city to make long term decisions in.

He explained why : “The congestion charge was turned down, the tram was made to happen after a tremendous fuss and a lot of expense, but public transport is vital. In London, where I have lived for 40 years the biggest single change has been transport, and I think that is critical to where Edinburgh will be in the future too. The buses in London are now so good and the Tube so efficient, even running all night sometimes, meaning that we don’t use a car in London any more.

“Our one car has been moved up here to Edinburgh so that I can do trips to see my mum!

“In London the congestion charge was part of a joined up strategy linking to the improvements needed in public transport. I don’t think that congestion here is such a problem outside the two commuter times at either end of the day.”

EDINBURGH PARK

I suggested to Rab that some of the buildings at Edinburgh Park and elsewhere might have shorter lifespans than some of our other buildings across the city which he didn’t really agree with.

He said : “There are buildings up and down Britain which are

now being replaced rather quicker than people thought, mainly because development values have moved on and it suddenly becomes economic. Often it means demolition of an existing building and replacing it with something about three times the size, which would never have been possible before. But the building we were involved with at Edinburgh Park has been in place since 1995 now and it looks in mint condition still!

“To be fair to John Menzies they trusted us completely with the building and they were delighted with it when it was finished.”



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EDINBURGH FUTURES INSTITUTE

The firm is now involved with the refurbishment of the former Royal Infirmary Surgical Department, which is the huge building opposite George Heriot's School. Bennetts admits it took a while before that kind of work came along. He said : “The first building we designed in the town centre was The Potterrow development in 2003, but we are thrilled to have the new contract for the Edinburgh Futures Institute. This is a huge job and we are really proud to be involved in it.

“The building is the last piece of Quartermile that has not yet been properly developed, although there are a couple of vacant plots for residential development in the centre of the site. This part is the major hospital building on Lauriston Place, the very famous one with the big clock tower in the middle. We took a leaf from a London project at King's Cross.

The thing that made that one work was having a college just behind it with 5,000 people going to and fro with a diversity of people. This is what this will be in Lauriston Place. There will be around 3,000 or so students there bringing life to Quartermile, which until now has been a bit monocultural. Its got some housing offices and shops with a little square in the

middle but not much else.

“The impact that a university building will have here is that it will complete it. It will have a sense of buzz and youth and will help the area hugely. It is perhaps not what the original intention for the building was. Originally the developer thought this might be a hotel or more flats but I think it will be much better for the overall scheme and for the city.”



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Bennetts explained that the work on the former hospital is already underway as planning permission has already been granted. He said : “What people will see at the moment is stripping away all the bits that were added by the National Health Service, some of it was pretty awful! We are getting rid of some dry rot and asbestos, demolishing some extensions which were in the way of other things. The main contract to build new in amongst it and refurbishing the old wards and so on doesn’t start till the end of summer 2018. Then it is a three year contract and we aim to have it finished by summer 2021 so that it is ready for the new term.”

I asked if it would still feel like a hospital ward when the new offices are formed. We all have memories of the former wards with their lofty windows and polished floors.

Rab replied : “Well we all know it from the A&E entrance at the side. At the moment if you peer through the gates all that you see is a big flight of steps which is not politically correct at all as you can’t get disabled access up to the main door of the building.

“What we are doing is putting a ramp in at the main entrance on Lauriston Place, getting rid of the gatehouse to open the view up. That will be a new public square big enough for events and gatherings during the festival and other times.

Because it rises up slightly there is a huge events space underneath which will accommodate about 500 people. So in terms of its perception as a hospital it ought to feel like a building that has its own new character, particularly at the entrance and in the central assembly in the building.

“When it comes to the wards, they will always have the shape of hospital wards, but we are definitely not trying to make them clinical. We are taking out the old ceilings that the NHS put in which had some air conditioning above. This will open the wards up to their full height again, opening the windows so that the offices can be naturally ventilated, and just allowing the spaces to be themselves. They won’t be divided up too much as they will be open plan. So they will be recognisable as hospital wards, but these will be beautiful spaces.

“We are now two-thirds of the way through the architectural process but we have an oversight of the project after that.

“There was already planning permission in place for a hotel and then we had to change this with all the high standards for a Category A listed building like this. Some of the new buildings will be fitted in around the older parts and they will fit in very well.”



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BENNETTS ASSOCIATES – The future

The firm just celebrated its 30th anniversary in 2017 which Bennetts is understandably proud of.

He said : “From the beginning we were always trying to collaborate with other architects and friends. We are not egomaniacs, that’s not our style! There are several people who

have been with us since the early nineties and we took the decision recently with regard to succession in our firm.”

Bennetts wrote about the lack of ego in a book (Bennetts Associates Five Insights) published to coincide with the anniversary. He explains there : “Based on collaboration and to some extent containment of ego in favour of team spirit, we have an increasing conviction about a method which is far less reliant on individualism and is more in tune with the notion of architects as leaders, orchestrators and generalists within a complex process that is increasingly reliant on multiple specialists. Our architectural output depends on high levels of creativity of course, but it isn’t necessarily dominated by one individual; indeed it is the creative spark between a number of key people that allows us to punch above our weight as the cliché goes.”

The succession to the firm is already set out : “We already know who is going to be running the company after us when we decide to swan off into the sunset at some distant point.

“We have formed an employee trust which means the whole company is owned by a trust on behalf of its employees. This makes it difficult for the company to be taken over or sold. If some other firm bought our company it would have different values, people would hate it and they would leave. What would be the point of that?

“So now Denise and I, having set this business up, no longer own it. It’s owned by everybody. I think that is massively important. Some other firms of architects have done this. We used a firm called Baxendales here in Edinburgh as our advisers. This firm has a strange history as it was originally a fireplace shop in the Grassmarket and they are now a specialist firm on employee ownership!

TECHNOLOGY

As with every other business the technological advancements principally with computer networking has affected Bennetts Associates but Rab thinks it is for the better. He said : "The biggest change in the last 15 years is that owing to technology we can share projects at the same time across a couple of offices with one computer model. Previously the workflow might have ebbed and flowed in Edinburgh much more than in London, and that was really difficult to manage. Now it is a lot easier.

"There is a king-sized housing crisis in London and the consequences of that are that some younger people are beginning to wonder what they will do in their thirties. They can't buy a house and start a family.

"So, among our staff a couple of them have moved to Manchester, a couple have moved to Edinburgh and are still working on projects all over the place. I think that is quite interesting, and it offers quality of life to people who work here.

"In Edinburgh they can at least afford a flat!"

POLITICS

But the final word has to be about the current political state here in the UK. Bennetts is emphatic about that. He summed up : "Brexit is affecting London, and it is affecting commercial property here now too. We have a mix of projects and depend on our commercial work, but investors in that area are holding back. The building industry is officially in recession right now. People are leaving the UK and going back home. This is a real shakedown which people are keeping quiet about it but it could be very significant.

"Property and the construction industry as a whole is about two and a half million people. It is one of the biggest industries We have a serious problem if the construction industry is in recession."



Rab and Denise Bennetts