

#Edinburgh2050 Bennetts' view

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Rab

As a teenager growing up in Edinburgh I recall the horror of seeing the St James' Centre being constructed. Nothing, I thought, was as precious as the skyline of Edinburgh but here it was being destroyed through brutal, insensitive development by a government department that ought to know better.



Rab Bennetts co-founder of Bennetts Associates

The experience influenced my subsequent attitudes as an architect; knowing when architecture has to play a background role to the urban backdrop or when it's right to be more assertive. In Edinburgh, the primacy of its landform and townscape makes it one of the most thrilling cities in the world to arrive in, to walk around and to absorb the lessons of history. But this also makes it an extremely difficult

city to design in, as there is a constant tension between retaining its essential historic qualities and the need for any city of its size and importance to renew and adapt to changing needs. Nowhere is the quality of modern architecture more important.

Having worked all over the UK and a little in Europe I'm struck by the differences between cities and how they tackle the same problem. Amsterdam, for example, has a very clear vision for development and design proposals are examined by what is known as 'the beauty committee', which advises the council directly and has an ongoing role in detailed design approvals. In Milan and in Hamburg there are permanent exhibitions in the central commercial areas for people to see architectural models and displays of the city's history. In London there is a gallery in the west end called New London Architecture that is a busy forum for debates and exhibitions.



Demolition of St James Centre

Is it possible to envisage something like this in Edinburgh? A large model of the city centre would captivate tourists and locals alike and could be the central exhibit in a display about the city's origins, its geology and landform, its

historic development beyond the medieval core to the Georgian 'new' town and distinguished inner suburbs. It would be the vehicle for debate about how the city should develop and for a proper understanding of proposals for change, placed in the context of a city-wide view. Located somewhere, say, near the Fruitmarket Gallery or the City Art Centre opposite, it would quickly become an immediately accessible 'meeting room for Edinburgh'.

Had there been such a place in the '60s, the original St James' Centre would surely not have been built but, now that it has gone, I also wonder if it could have influenced its replacement. Perhaps there could also have been a debate about the former Royal High School site before it became a battleground. There is so much more for the agenda at Edinburgh's meeting room; how to accommodate the growing 'tech' quarter between the University and Fountainbridge; how to further develop the areas east and west of Leith; what to do about the impact of Airbnb or too many hotels; how to accommodate new offices in the centre, now that the poorer quality business parks are going out of fashion.

2050 might seem a long time away but in the development of a city it's no time at all. What Edinburgh could achieve by 2050 is a greater public understanding of the city's strengths (and weaknesses), a self-confidence about what makes good architecture for Edinburgh and a sense that the permanent tension between old and new can be harnessed in a way that benefits one of the most wonderful cities on the planet.

Rab Bennetts is Founding Director and Architect, Bennetts Associates, who have been appointed architects for the Edinburgh Futures Institute, a remodelling of the former Royal Infirmary.