

Bennetts Associates Looking to the future

Bennetts Associates are the architects who have designed the new Edinburgh Futures Institute.

And behind Bennetts Associates are the two founding partners, Denise and Rab Bennetts.



Denise and Rab Bennetts of Bennetts Associates outside the Edinburgh Futures Institute

This major project is in safe hands. These two studied at Edinburgh University, Rab's mother still lives here and with one of their three offices located in in the capital there is a strong connection to Edinburgh.

I visited the former Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh to find out what they are creating their for the University. It turns out that there will be a lot of modernisation along with much deference to the building's former life and a healthy respect for the building itself

Rab explained : "There will be a new series of lecture spaces in a new building. We are going to put back the old windows on

the main frontage which were similar on every floor. Some of them are still there and some of them are now missing but we will patch in salvaged stone.

“The major issue with the building is the great big flight of steps right up to the front door where the clock tower sits above. We wanted to bring the main entrance back into focus as the centrepiece of the whole scheme. Nearly everybody from Edinburgh would know it from the A&E entrance round the back as that was where you could get a vehicle, usually an ambulance, in.

“You can’t do that here because of these steps. So what we’re proposing is to bring in a new square which rises up, a bit like a ramp, so you can go up to the top step without having to go up the flight of steps. The steps will survive in the middle but the new square will make this place a complete transformation right from one side to another for events on top where people gather and then space underneath it as well.”



The university has in Rab’s view taken a very generous step in creating a civic square at the heart of the development. He continued : “This will very much be a public space. You will be able to walk in from Lauriston Place with no gates in the way The original gates have already been removed and you will

be able to walk up to the front door without obstruction. Yes, there will be some sort of security presence, but it will be open 24/7. The gardens on either side of the building left and right will be closed at night but the main space in the middle will be open."

A new grand staircase will be created from the 'ground floor' level at the top of the steps so you will be able to go down two floors to the ground level on the other side of the building. There is a two storey difference between the Lauriston Place entrance and the south side of the building and that gives the architects the chance to add a lecture theatre and event space underneath.

The University of Edinburgh now owns the building that once housed the surgical unit and in future it will be used as the Edinburgh Futures Institute.

Rab explained : "As the name suggests it is a little bit crystal ball gazing about how education and society might go in future. It will have a business school in it, there will be politics, social science, art and design – but all in one building. That is the thing that is really unusual. Previously, of course, you would have separate buildings for each of these functions. Here, they are all brought together and the idea is that people will be multi-skilled. It will be a multi-disciplinary teaching facility so that when you come out you are pretty much equipped for modern society and thinking ahead."

How has that affected the design of the building?

Rab replied : "The main thing is that it has to be adaptable. All the spaces in the old wards, plus the new spaces we are constructing, will all have to be adaptable in case the functions change over the time.

"20 or 30 years down the line we don't know what is going to

be in this building. The biggest issue we have with it is that the wards were all connected with corridors. But these corridors also separated everything and we want to join it all together. We are having to work very hard to make sure the corridors are double the width they are at the moment with very good connections between all the parts.

“Multidisciplinary education relies on people getting in contact with each other, so here they can naturally meet in a building originally designed to split people apart.”

This building like some of The Quartermile development behind it mixes old and new, and you have to look for the materials to do that. There is however plenty to hand.

Rab said : “We have quite a lot of salvage stone from bits that have been taken down. There is more than enough to use in the repairs needed and when it comes to the new elements there is quite a lot of glass involved in those to make sure it gets better daylight. But we are using pre-cast concrete on the outside which is sometimes called artificial stone. It will be a similar colour to the original stone. It shouldn't look alien and will definitely look modern, and will not be a complete contrast to what's here.”



Denise and Rab Bennetts of Bennetts Associates

outside the Edinburgh Futures Institute

Bennetts have done a lot of projects over the last 30 years and so have a lot of experience in these matters. Rab commented: "We have done some big conservation projects such as The Royal Shakespeare Theatre in Stratford upon Avon. We also did the Informatics Forum in Bristo Square where there is a new element, an extension to it called the Data Technology Institute so we have done quite a lot of new build projects as well.

"The thing about old buildings which is so thrilling is that you get the chance to interpret and adapt them and try to imagine how they were used and that forces you to think in a way that you would never do on a greenfield site with a brand new building.

"For a start it's definitely out going to feel like a 1960s or 1970s hospital because we are stripping out the post-war stuff which wasn't original. These rooms are just very elegant tall rooms. We are going to get the windows to open again and we will decorate them in an interesting way. Most areas will be carpeted with a timber margin around the edges so they shouldn't look clinical and we are going to hang light fittings down the middle instead of 1960s strip lighting. So it should look very different from what people remember."

There were many donor boards in this hospital which lined the walls of the entrance staircases but it is only possible to retain some of these since the building has been affected by dry rot over the years it has lain empty. Some of the lath and plaster has to be removed and a few of these boards are painted directly on to the plaster so they will be lost.

Rab and Denise explained that every single one has been photographed so they are preserved at least in digital format. They will be preserved around the entrances particularly the one with Queen Victoria's name on it. She donated £250 to the

hospital.

The six spires will be renewed and restored to the city skyline. At present three are missing so it will look a little different, but these are key to providing air to the building.

Denise is the 'other co-founder' of Bennetts. She and Rab met at university and have been married and business partners since they graduated.

There are now three other directors and seven associates and the practice has grown over the time with offices in Edinburgh, London and Manchester.

Denise said: "The practice has always been based on a very open and collaborative way of working. Rab and I met as students and even in those days we did actually share project work. We were each other's best or worst critic depending on how you want to put it. So we've always shared and critiqued the work and that's how we've developed the practice.

"You can't expect to work on all projects because we have some very good people who have to grow their own careers and take responsibility. So we have a system where we share design reviews periodically.

"That might be every week or two weeks in the early stage of a project, but slightly less frequently during the design stages and then picking up on technical reviews.

"So I am very much on the reviewing side but I don't have day to day responsibility for it. I do, however, keep in touch with what's happening in terms of the design, how information is being produced and coming in every so often to remind about original ideas and concepts and check on any apparent changes of direction.

"It is also important that you see the building as it progresses. I am Edinburgh born, bred and educated so am well

aware that the old Royal Infirmary is a building that like many people in Edinburgh I have known since I was a child. It is a case of knowing the building well but also wanting to come and see it as it is being unpicked, as its later accretions are removed to see that everything is proceeding as we anticipated.

“It is an exceptional building inside.”



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