

University team asks Brutal or beautiful?

A team from Edinburgh Napier University is encouraging members of the public to view brutalist buildings in a different light – through the use of music and design.

The University's SituLab Research Group – which consists of musician, composer and academic Katrina Burton and design academics Sam Vettese and Katharina Vones – have used their passion for post-war architecture to shape their ongoing project into how the public respond to modern architectural heritage.



As part of the recent 3 Harbours Arts Festival, the group opened the doors of St Gabriel's RC Church in Prestonpans and invited members of the public to visit the building.

Built in 1965 and designed by George Kennedy and Michael Landon of Alison and Hutchison and Partners, the striking Catholic church is one of the best examples of modernist architecture in Scotland, with its white rendered walls

and unique design contributing to its distinct look.

In an effort to get attendees thinking about the various parts that make-up the church, a musical composition by Dr Burton was performed at various points throughout the day event.

Inspired by certain attributes of the building, including the side windows that cast beams of light over the altar, the dappled effect of the stained glass and the sweeping waves that envelop the building, Bachelor of Music (BMus) students Joanna Stark (cello) and Caitlin Monaghan (percussion) performed the piece to attendees across the duration of the event.

Dr Burton's composition for St Gabriel's follows a similar piece inspired by Craigsbank Church in Costorphine for last year's Doors Open Day. She most recently presented her music at the Barcelona Pavilion during Barcelona Architecture Week in May.

Dr Katrina Burton said: "Some site-specific composers explore the acoustics of a space but my aim is to create a work that, when performed in situ, complements the architect's aesthetic and enhances the public's engagement with the space. The informal nature of my in-situ performances stimulate dialogue about music and architecture and break down the usual barriers between the composer/performer and the audience. Conversing with the public is one of the most enjoyable and rewarding aspects of these events for me.

“Having the freedom to explore a building as performances are taking place really encourages a closer connection to the corresponding musical textures. Some people come for the music and leave with a newfound interest in architecture and vice versa. It’s great to involve Edinburgh Napier BMus students in my research and I’ve really enjoyed working with Caitlin and Joanna.”

Alongside the event’s musical offering, attendees were also able to take home a unique souvenir of the day – a 3D printed model of the church.

Designed and produced by Sam Vettese and Katharina Vones, the limited edition models were accompanied by a range of digitally printed badges that, like the musical composition, were directly inspired by the architectural elements of St Gabriel’s Church.

A musical model, which contains excerpts of the music, was also present at the event. Broken down into five sections, attendees could build the model and control the order in which they heard sections of the composition depending on how they re-built it. This specific model was designed by Katharina Vones, with Edinburgh Napier PhD student Denise Allan instrumental in designing its electronics to allow the piece to be heard.

Dr Sam Vettese said: “The musical 3D printed souvenir continues along the lines of previous research, where the public can recreate

their own
personalised version of the building's shape and remembrance
of their musical
experience. This is a more complex version of our previous 3D
printed souvenirs
with the addition of electronic components that trigger
excerpts of Katrina's
site-specific musical composition.

"There was also digitally printed, handmade fabric badges
featuring little pieces of Katrina's musical score
and photographs of St Gabriel's church. These were given away
in an unexpected act of 'guerrilla kindness'."