

# Letter from Scotland



Re-designing Dundee Photo ©Hufton+Crow

As a general rule, I don't like modern buildings, especially public buildings. To me, they are giant slabs of concrete and glass which jar with their surroundings and aim to shock rather than please. And then I go inside and discover they are surprisingly entertaining and technically impressive.

And so I hope it will be with the new V&A Museum of Design in Dundee which opens this weekend. It has cost £80m (almost double the original estimate) and was designed by the Japanese architect Kengo Kuma. He says the layered concrete walls are inspired by Scotland's sea-cliffs but to others the structure looks like a ship about to slice its way through Captain Scott's "Discovery" which has been the symbol of Dundee's wished-for renaissance for the past 26 years.

The idea is that the museum will reignite the development of Scotland's fourth largest city. A £1bn rebuilding programme is under way along the waterfront, with a new railway station and office blocks, new housing and gardens and a redevelopment of the harbour. There is even heady talk of an opera house for the city.

The museum itself is an offshoot of the famous V&A in London and tells the story of Scottish "design" from luxury steamships built on the Clyde, to the Paisley shawl. The centrepiece is a re-construction of Charles Rennie Mackintosh's tea-room, saved from Miss Cranston's Willow Tea Rooms in Sauchiehall Street in Glasgow in the 1970s. It all sounds a bit of a hotch-potch to me but no doubt it will be entertaining, even astonishing. Like the building outside, its shock value will be continued inside.

Another Scottish building caused a shock this week, the national football stadium at Hampden Park in Glasgow. I can't believe there was a plan to move the home of Scottish football to Murrayfield, the home of rugby, in Edinburgh. But apparently, the decision by the Scottish Football Association was close. It was only the generous intervention of Lord Willie Haughey which saved Hampden for the nation. He gave half the £5m required to buy the stadium from Queen's Park Football Club which has owned it since 1903. The club will now use the money to develop its own ground,



The V&A Dundee Photo ©Hufton+Crow

The SFA is now looking for the funding to pay for a much-needed upgrade at Hampden. Fans are not happy with the facilities there. The stands are too far from the pitch (to accommodate a running track) and they are not raked enough to enable fans at the back to see. Since that disastrous “upgrade” 20 years ago, the famous “Hampden Roar” has been muted. Let’s hope it will soon echo again across the nation that invented football in 1867 at Queen’s Park (though other nations may have thought of it first...claims stretch back to the Han Dynasty in China around 200 BC.)

Yet another building caused alarm this week. A sparkling new school campus in Dumfries had to be closed just days after opening because of building faults. The £28m building was

closed by the Council when a series of minor incidents occurred – a leaking sprinkler valve, a door which came off its rail and bruised a pupil and a smart screen which came off the wall when “excessive force was used” and struck a pupil.

Closing the school seems an over reaction to me but I suppose Council officials panicked when they thought of the 17 newish schools in Edinburgh which were discovered to have building faults after a wall collapsed. The trouble there was that no one seemed to be checking if the building work had been done properly. We are waiting to see what the inspection system was like in Dumfries. Meanwhile the pupils, from two primary schools, a special school and a secondary school, have had to be moved into temporary accommodation.

And the last building on my list this week is the five-star Gleneagles Hotel in Perthshire, a splendid mock-Victorian country house opened in 1924. One day in June last year, guests and staff in the lobby thought they were being attacked by terrorists. In fact, it was a gang of armed robbers who smashed their way into display cases containing dozens of Rolex watches, worth half a million pounds. The raid lasted less than three minutes but the gang were careless.

Their get away car was eventually traced. They left clues at earlier house robberies in nearby St Andrews. And they were seen several times on CCTV. The police tracked them down to London addresses and this week one of the gang was found guilty after a jury trial at the High Court in Edinburgh. Another pleaded guilty. But the third member of the gang remains at large and the watches have still not been recovered.

You may be asking which building I prefer, the hotel, the school, the stadium or the museum ? None of them encapsulates Scotland for me. My list of favourite public buildings includes: Marischal College in Aberdeen, the Portrait Gallery and Balmoral Hotel in Edinburgh, Glasgow City Chambers, and

the Caird Hall in Dundee. And if I have to include a modern one, I would go for the stone and slate headquarters of the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park at Carrochan near Balloch.

But then I have not yet seen, in person, the new V&A and maybe, just maybe, it will change my mind.