

QC has clear plans for The Quaich Project

We met the newly appointed chair of The Quaich Project, John Campbell QC, to talk about his new role and the ambitions for West Princes Street Gardens.

The Quaich Project began with the creation of The Ross Development Trust, a charity set up in 2016 when businessman Norman Springford made a philanthropic gesture to the city of some £5 million to start things off.

Springford started with a view that the Ross Bandstand and the gardens in general could and should be made better for everyone.

ROSS FOUNTAIN

Since the project was first set up, the most visible part is the Ross Fountain which was completely overhauled, and which has become a focal point once more in the gardens.

Mr Campbell is full of praise for the former chair. He said: "It's important in looking at the way in which this project has grown, to understand that it stems from the extraordinary altruism and generosity of Norman Springford, who made money in business and decided for himself that he wanted to do something for the city.

"It was his initiative that led to the fountain being disassembled and taken to the Midlands, and then re-made and re-assembled at about twice the price that they estimated

because the base was rotten as well.

“Now, that generosity has continued, and although Norman has retired to spend more time with his grandchildren, he continues to honour the pledges that he’s given to provide a flow of funds to the Ross Development Trust.

“The whole idea of this project is to try and make the public space better and nothing more or less than that. It’s a pretty simple idea.”



The Ross Fountain in West Princes Street Gardens was reopened in 2018 after a £2million refit.

VISION

Campbell, who has been a trustee for the past two years, is straight-talking, but considered.

He said: “It’s very simple really – it is about the provision of better public space in the city of Edinburgh for the residents of Edinburgh.”

His main message is this: "I'm qualified to do this, I want to work as hard as I can to correct misunderstandings about the ambition and the enterprise and the altruism of this project, and to say nothing but good about the city of Edinburgh because the city of Edinburgh has got the will, it has got the political heart for this, and it needs it.

"People don't come to Edinburgh automatically. They're not coming in huge numbers, because it just happens to be a convenient place. They're coming because it's got spectacular qualities. And we just want to make them more spectacular."

He is also quite clear as to his new leadership position after election by his fellow trustees. He said: "My role is to take the lead in trying to improve understanding of this project and to correct misunderstandings.

"It is quite wrong to say that this is a commercially driven project being being pushed forward for private interest.

"I can't emphasise that strongly enough, and if that is the best that the opposition to this can do, then we will succeed because it is completely wrong and quite unprovable."

SOCIAL MEDIA

He refers to recent discourse on social media, admitting he himself is not on Twitter, preferring to leave that area to others.

Some have expressed a view in that arena that the project is only being run to allow large donors to 'own' the gardens and then determine their future. Others have criticised the way that naming rights were being offered in return for donations. Campbell thinks there is nothing wrong with the possibility of donors being rewarded in this way.

He explained there are already good examples of it in Edinburgh, including the Ross Bandstand itself, the Cockburn

Association and Cockburn Street, and the Usher Hall.

He said: “Why is it called the Usher Hall? It’s called the Usher Hall because the brewery family, the Ushers, put money into its construction, the same is true of the McEwan Hall. And it’s a long time since Scottish & Newcastle brewers were a force in the city, they’ve moved on.”



Edinburgh Hogmanay 2019 Fireworks from Edinburgh Castle
COMMERCIALISATION

Talking about possible commercialisation of the gardens is when John Campbell becomes most emphatic, and dare I say it, lawyerly, explaining succinctly the ownership structure of the gardens and how it might preclude any of that.

(Campbell has been a Scottish advocate since 1981 and took silk in 1998. He has rights to practice throughout the UK, with a specialism in planning law and environmental law, and a particular interest in listed buildings and natural heritage issues. He is also Chair of the Scottish Historic Buildings Trust.)

He set the ownership scene for us: “Throughout Scotland, the ancient royal burghs all hold, or held, common good assets. Some of those were land, some of them are other kinds of assets like buildings, and when local government was reformed in the early 1970s, the common good funds of the former royal burghs were kept separate from the assets of the local authority, for example, assets from council tax and rates and other forms of taxation like parking.

“A common good fund is, as it were, a funded reserve capital, which may take a number of forms. Common Good Funds are managed by the local authority, but separately and distinctly from the local authority’s other assets.

“Now I believe it to be the case that West Princes Street Gardens is a part of Edinburgh’s Common Good Fund – which is not to say that it’s exempt in any way from planning policies.

“It’s right in the middle of the World Heritage Site and it is, of course, a public space.



The Gardener’s Cottage in Princes Street Gardens
FUNDRAISING

Norman Springford pledged £5 million and the city council has promised to match fund that, leaving around £15 million to be raised. There is a public fundraising campaign ongoing which we asked Mr Campbell about.

He said: “There’s a gap and the money has to be raised. Now, it is virtually impossible to raise money from the private sector, unless there is a project. And there isn’t a project until there’s a planning permission. So, what donors and philanthropists are saying to us is, we like your project, we’d like to be part of it, we’d like to make a donation to it, but we wouldn’t be prepared to do that, until two things have happened.

“The first is that we can see clearly that you have the consents necessary to achieve the construction, and the second is that we are satisfied that you have a robust mechanism in place for running the gardens in the future.

“Donors will say I will not put money down if I don’t know how my money is going to be used in the future, and that’s particularly true of large donors. And so a mechanism has to be devised for running the gardens in the future.

“Now, this ball is firmly in the court of the council, our partners, and whilst we can make suggestions, and we have done

that, (plus we can suggest governance structures which seem to work well enough elsewhere) we haven't yet got to a point where we have a firm solution.

"Ultimately, this will be a political decision. And if you think of this as a spectrum of choices, at one end, you have a completely council controlled operation as it is right now.

"At the other end, you have a completely privately controlled operation. Both of those extremes would be unacceptable to some people. Some would say it's a good thing the council is completely in charge some would say, no the council can't manage this, it should be private.

"But somewhere in the middle, as ever in life, somewhere in the middle, there's room for a management organisation, I think, precise form, not yet determined, but probably along the lines of a Scottish Charitable Trust. That would have council representation, private and operator representation, a board of directors, a conventional board of directors, a disinterested Chairman, who's not got any axes to grind but with experience of being a chairman. It's very important that.

"It would need good access to the financial services industry, good access to the building industry, good accesses to politics and in the council.

"There'll always be politics around a place like this. And we can just see what's happened in the east gardens to see that one little example of that. And I think there's room for devising a corporate structure, which could work, could work well and could be an exemplar for other places.

"It has been discussed, but no conclusions have been drawn. And, you know, we all have our own ideas. But if we look, I mean, let's just take a couple of examples across the country. Look at the Perth Theatre which is brand new and magnificent. Perth Theatre and concert hall is wonderful – run by a trust,

with council participation.

"I know that Glasgow City Council under the guidance of Bridget McConnell has got many successful quasi commercial venues which provide different forms of entertainment.

"It's only a garden, okay, this is not rocket science. It's a garden with two principal components, an amphitheatre and a Welcome Centre. We're not building a town here. It's not Central Park which is surrounded by, you know, 50 million people."

GOVERNANCE

The Quaich Project is a public private partnership between the Ross Development Trust and the council.

Campbell explained what he thinks about the future running of the gardens and the buildings in it. He said: "In any public/private partnership, funding is essential because you cannot build or run a much improved public facility without money. And so thinking ahead to when it's complete, it's The City of Edinburgh, it's their project just as much as it is the Ross Development Trust's project. And they have to decide how they want to run it. Now they have said that there would be a limited number of events and that seems to be consistent with public opinion. Public opinion doesn't want too many events.

"The council has said 15 event days a year which include the Hogmanay festival, the fireworks concert at the end of the Edinburgh festival, our summer festival. And this has nothing to do with what happens in the other gardens at Christmas time.

"This is a programme which may evolve, but it's up to the city to evolve it.

“The city has a director of cultural events, and the city has to decide what it wants to happen in the amphitheatre or the Welcome Centre. If the children of South Morningside Primary School want to come and hold a carol concert for an afternoon then I dare say that might not be counted as one of the 15 days when entertainment takes place.

“One can see Santa Claus up there, one can see Easter bunnies, one can see genuine community events sponsored by Community Councils or schools taking place there and why not?

“I think it’s unlikely if, if the city is going to spend millions of its hard-earned pounds i promoting this new facility in this world class venue, they’re not going to turn away small children’s carol concerts and they certainly shouldn’t do.

“Remember that The Ross Bandstand when it was first built, bands played there 200 days a year, four or five times a day, because it was part of civic life.

“People walked everywhere not looking at their phones, they walked everywhere. Now, what the city is saying is that for 350 days of the year, there would be no major events. But in this amphitheatre there could be events on 15 days – there **may** be if we get promoters, if we get artists, if the public wants it.

“I don’t think it’s much to ask actually.”



The concept design

PLANNING

As to planning and the process behind any development in the gardens, Campbell is also well able to clarify how that will work.

“To get to planning we have planning consultants, engineers,

quantity surveyors and project managers who are – that's our design team. We've also, I'm happy to tell you, set up a project board with the City of Edinburgh Council. Paul Lawrence, the Director of Place, who's been very helpful to us, has at very short notice, provided me with the names of two of his more senior officials to sit on that project board and our first meeting is next week. I'm very excited by that because for the first time, we will now have a joint cooperative working party to monitor progress.

"The planning consultants have got to a point where they have written some but not all of the Environmental Statement. They have done their policy analysis, done all their photography and photo montage work. The design is not quite frozen, but it is moving towards crystallisation. And I'm expecting that all of that material will be ready by April.

"On the way to that point – that's the point of submission of the planning application, pre-application discussions at quite an intense level are going on with the City of Edinburgh's senior planning officer, more or less on a weekly basis.

"The design team meet with the city, the city tell the design team what they're more or less happy with. The design team then go away and work on that. So by the time we get to presentation, we hope we have a planning application which is almost certain to be accepted."

Campbell explained in detail to me that this particular planning application will also be subject to a rigorous process called an Environmental Impact Assessment. (Something he described as a bit boring but a very necessary process.)

Suffice to say that the project's planning consultants after discussions with Historic Environment Scotland, Scottish Natural Heritage and the Architecture and Design Panel produce a document called an Environmental Statement. This looks at all kinds of impacts on the site, including a do nothing

option and it is presented with the planning application.

He also clarified that there had already been consultation with the council, The Cockburn Association, Historic Environment Scotland and community councils who all contributed. to the brief produced for the international design competition.

The way it might look is still being finalised but looking down from the castle there would be a lot of grass, including a grassed roof on the proposed building nearest to Princes Street. Campbell is clear that by removing the Ross Bandstand and the auditorium area in front of it (which are closed to the public unless there is an event on) will mean that more of the gardens is opened up more of the time.

IMPROVEMENT IS NECESSARY

Campbell concluded: "I've been on civic bodies since I first came to live in Edinburgh in 1981 in one form or another, including the council of the Cockburn Association, and the Scottish Historic Buildings Trust. And I know that a properly presented planning application with a rigorous heritage analysis can always win through.

"It's absolutely clear that these gardens need improvement.

"If we do nothing, they will just continue to deteriorate and ultimately, performances won't happen because performers won't go there, the public will become increasingly disenchanted and they will point the finger at the Council, which would be wrong.

"Every councillor we speak to, every senior official we speak to seems to be behind this project. They will tell you in private how enthusiastic they are about the project, and how glad they are that private interest is standing up to help the

city.”



Photo: Martin P. McAdam www.martinmcadam.com