

Podcast – talking about The Quaich Project

It is a number of weeks since we sat down with David Ellis the Managing Director of The Quaich Project and Cliff Hague the Chair of the Cockburn Association.

It felt inappropriate to publish the discussion of a topic which has been such a focus on social media over the last while, but which pales into insignificance in light of our current world situation.

But now that we have a captive audience, we are releasing the episode of our podcast which allows both men to explain their views on The Quaich Project in West Princes Street Gardens.

The Quaich Project is a public private partnership between the Ross Development Trust, a charity, and The City of Edinburgh Council to design, fund and build improvements in West Princes Street Gardens. It is overseen by the council's Culture and Communities Committee.

It surprised us quite a lot that they were not completely at daggers drawn, even over the need for the project. It is of course in the execution that they have different views. And the devil is in the detail.



The concept design

We began by asking Professor Hague whether he agreed some

improvement was needed in the gardens.

Cliff Hague said : “We’ve always said that you could improve the gardens. I think we all recognise that there’s been a long period of underinvestment, most particularly in the Bandstand, but also in the fountain. We welcome the philanthropic gift that kicked this off, and the work that was done on the Fountain.

“And we like other things in the project. We agree that what’s called the red blaises area in the West End, the sort of children’s play area bit over near St. Cuthbert’s Church – that could be improved.

“We agree that the shelters could be improved. We’ve widely supported quite a lot of these aspects.

“The difficulties for us are really two or three concerns. and they’re all interrelated. One is the the scale of the new performance area arena. I know David will say that this is for small performances, but my understanding is that it will more or less double the capacity of the existing Ross Bandstand.

“Linked to that is the intervention beneath Princes Street to create what’s been called the Welcome Centre. So together, we think there’s pretty major interventions, and they’re intrinsically disruptive. They’re going to take quite a long time to construct when there will be a mess basically, and they’re high end items that will require a lot of money and a lot of risk if you don’t raise that money or if you don’t bring in the income that you are anticipating.

“And our concern is that this then leads you into an overly commercialised solution, when what we think is that a pragmatic set of relatively small scale interventions could actually deliver an outcome that more or less everybody in the city would be supportive of.”

David Ellis has been Managing Director of the Ross Development

Trust since this project began five years ago. He mentioned how happy it made him to hear some of these comments.

He continued: "The whole project is about trying to make these the best public gardens they can be for the residents of Edinburgh, and we believe that a lot of the improvements that we're making are going to encourage more people to come in and spend a prolonged period of time in them.

"So if there's any concern that what we're trying to do here is to remove the availability of these gardens to the public, I want to 100% unequivocally assure you that that's absolutely not the case.

"Everything we're doing is aimed at making them more available to the public. Quite a few of your comments with regards to the size of concerts or the closing down of the gardens for private ticketed events – that's something that's not within our control.

"We are here to help advance design work and then raise the money to implement those designs to improve the gardens.

"In terms of the operation or how the events are run, the size of the concerts, the number of them closing down the public gardens to the public, that's not a situation that the Ross Development Trust can control. That is all the operational side of things, and that's a matter for The City of Edinburgh Council.

"So if those are your concerns, then they really need to be brought up with the with the council rather than with the Ross Development Trust.

"I just want to take it back to when this project started. When Norman and I first sat down and looked at how we were going to go about this and what we were trying to provide as a replacement for the Ross Bandstand, there were only two large events a year – one was the Festival fireworks and one was

Hogmanay.

“So when this project first started, these are the calendar of events that are causing all the controversy at the moment. They weren’t even in the gardens.

“Now, the bandstand that we’re providing is focused on being a space for small community, mainly unamplified performances. That’s what it’s always been about.”

So settle down and tune in to [Anchor.fm here](#) where the podcast is published. This is a long listen to keep you entertained during lockdown.

(We will add the text of the long podcast here when it is properly edited.)



Cliff Hague Chair of Cockburn Association and David Ellis of The Ross Development Trust PHOTO ©2020 The Edinburgh Reporter