

# Fairground Distraction – whimsical W Hotel fails to aspire

Rab Bennetts, OBE, founded the architectural practice [Bennetts Associates](#) in 1987. Recent projects include the Bayes Centre and Futures Institute for the University of Edinburgh. He chairs a working group that is promoting a publicly accessible architecture and environment centre in Edinburgh. He casts an expert eye over the soon-to-open St James Quarter development.

“When the St James Centre was completed in the early 1970s it felt like a permanent stain on Edinburgh’s skyline, but the brutalist complex only lasted 40-odd years before it was demolished, vacant and unloved. The new St James Quarter repairs much of the 20th century damage but this latest iteration can’t resist adding to the skyline too, acquiring the unfortunate nick-name “Golden Turd” along the way.

“Putting aside the skyline, an elegant crescent forms the basis of a masterplan that should ensure a far better retail environment than before and the mixture of other uses should avoid the monocultural feel of most shopping centres.



Rab Bennetts, OBE, Bennetts Associates Architects.

(Photograph: MAVERICK PHOTO AGENCY)

“It must have been fiendishly difficult building around the John Lewis store, but the cliff-like view up Leith Walk doesn’t appear to have changed much as a result, such is the combination of bulk and topography. If only there was room for another building to mitigate the change in scale!

“Perhaps Abercrombie’s post-war plan for an opera house facing “the Top of the Walk” was not such a bad idea after all. Leith Street also feels little changed since 1960s road planning turned this most engaging of streets into a canyon, but the car park bridge has gone, the pavements seem wider and some additional shops will add some precious activity.

“Even in its original 18th century form, the area felt like the backlands to the first New Town, so the compositional idea of placing a prominent building at the heart of the new development makes some sense, as it strikes up a formal visual connection with James Craig’s George Street axis.



W Hotel at St James Quarter under construction.

“Early perspectives showed a simple cylindrical building which, with a cool hand, could have been fine, but this W Hotel seems to have morphed into a cry for attention, with a bulbous shape and shiny cladding “crafted from a winding steel ribbon” to quote the architects. I’ve got nothing against spires or landmarks on the skyline in principle, but they need an elegant silhouette and convincing symbolism rather than whimsy. By comparison, the sculpted rooftop feature at the National Museum of Scotland has a sense of purpose and gravitas.

“There is something of the fairground about the hotel’s skyline at St James Quarter; a sense that it might be moving on soon. I wonder if it will still be there in 40-odd years’ time?