

The big reveal – Hidden Door have found a new site for 2023

Hidden Door have found another hidden space in the city to hold a festival – and it is of course in plain sight.

The charity has just announced that the venue for 2023 will be the A-listed former Scottish Widows building at 15 Dalkeith Road. The largest open plan office in Scotland is the cleanest, most modern site that Hidden Door have ever taken over. Their previous sites on Market Street, on King's Stables Road, Leith Theatre, and the former Royal High School have all had a certain grimy, unkempt look. But this building has only been empty for two years, and is in relatively good condition. Creative Director David Martin said: "It is nice for us to have a building which is much more of a blank canvas than a broken canvas. We are looking forward to playing with that."

Lloyds Banking Group moved out at the beginning of the pandemic, and the five day festival with room for around 1,000 people at one time, will occupy only three floors of this huge building designed by architect John Hardie Glover together with the large landscaped garden to the rear. Hidden Door figure they have enough to do to transform the building into a space for an atmospheric festival without extending into the undercroft car park behind.



The venue for Hidden Door 2023 is the former Scottish Widows complex at 15 Dalkeith Road PHOTO ©2022 The Edinburgh Reporter Hidden Door fund each year's festival individually, and Martin was pretty honest with us that next year's festival might be a little more challenging.

He said: "I think these are challenging times and everybody in the arts feels that. But we really believe that people still need things to look forward to. A big part of what Hidden Door is about is supporting artists and creative people in Edinburgh. We create opportunities for them – they need opportunities through these hard times too. We want to keep going and the thing about Hidden Door is that the way we make it work is by people purchasing tickets and coming along, spending money in the bars.

"We fundraise and we get financial support through sponsorship and grants, but it is really people coming along that makes Hidden Door happen. So we want to encourage people to come and it is up to us to create something which is exciting enough that it will bring people together in a great way.

"People are going through some hard times Our prices will not be hyped up compared to last year – we are doing that for our

audience, so we hope that they will be able to find a way to come down and support us and have a great time for themselves as well – that’s what it is all about.”

The volunteers behind the charity have been eyeing up this building for about a year and a half now. David admitted that during the pandemic they went on a venue hunt, and now have a list of around 40 possibles listed on a secret spreadsheet.

It was only after a visit by Festival Manager, Hazel Johnson, that the building passed muster. When she saw the inside (and when you see the inside!) she realised there was definitely something there.



Aerial view James Duncan

The canteen in the middle of the floors will become a 500-person triangular music stage. This is the only place where the ceiling height is higher than 2.6 metres and is expected to become one of the two areas where people will gather at the end of the night.

There are two areas below this one creating their own spookiness and which might be used for projections and theatrical lighting – but also playing with the emptiness of

the spaces. But the basement and sub-basement will also be used for music performances in the second biggest programme in Hidden Door's history.



Plant room PHOTO Chris Scott



Canteen PHOTO Chris Scott

David Martin explained: “It’s all about the inside space, so this is going to be much more of an inside based event here. It is going to have less of a festival feel to it, but we are focusing on creating an immersive event inside the building.”

There are limitations on what Hidden Door can afford in the way of artists – all of whom are paid for their efforts.

“We are still operating in the same ballpark as before, but we know we have to be smarter about the kind of art that we show, and how we show it.

“There is a lot of magic in showing small things in big spaces to make the big spaces come alive. So we don’t stick anything on the walls – in fact there are no walls it is just windows floor and ceiling – that’s it!”

The festival will be held on three floors of the A-listed building. The ground, basement and sub-basement will be used for aesthetic reasons, as all of these floors are accessible.

The lifts no longer work so for anyone with mobility issues it would not have been viable if Hidden Door had taken any of the upper floors.



The loading bay at the venue for Hidden Door 2023 – the former Scottish Widows complex at 15 Dalkeith Road

PHOTO ©2022 The Edinburgh Reporter

The loading bay will be used for pop up food stalls and there will be access to the extensive garden grounds for sitting around eating or chatting to fellow festival goers.

David explained: “We are turning it on its head this year. Our model up till now has been about trying to drive ticket sales through booking certain acts which helps with our promotion. This year it is much more about creating an experience for everybody and we are trying to build something in the space that everyone will get to see.

“The problem Hidden Door has always had is that 5,000 people come, but they only get to see what is on that night – they have to pick and choose. With this venue because it is so big

we don't have any capacity issues. We can run things throughout the whole five days so it is almost more like putting together a theatre show than a music stage."



The venue for Hidden Door 2023 is the former Scottish Widows complex at 15 Dalkeith Road Photographed Creative Director David Martin in the basement where the caged spaces will definitely be put to use. PHOTO ©2022 The Edinburgh Reporter
The idea is to create a Narnia moment when people enter the first space and this will be an immersive event where each space will be filled by a different collaborative artistic group.

Last year at the former Royal High there was a need for generators but this year will be the greenest yet. David continued: "Hidden Door will be much greener this year – we are really big on that and the whole theme of these "environments" – we have a green theme if you like.

"Each zone will take on a natural environment – forest or desert and use artistry to invoke that But the subtext of that

is that they are looking at human impact on the environment.

“We are not going to become a campaigning organisation at all, but I think artists want a space to talk about this stuff

“I think we can bring more voices together It feels like an interesting opportunity to try.”

The festival will run from 31 May to 4 June 2023 and artists will be announced soon – and the process of a call for artists is still ongoing.

Hidden Door are working in partnership with Schroders Capital’s Real Estate team and Corran Properties, who are leading the redevelopment proposals for the site. Redevelopment of the property is planned with proposals to revitalise the building as a leading example of a sustainable urban workspace with new residential accommodation, set within a stunning landscape setting.

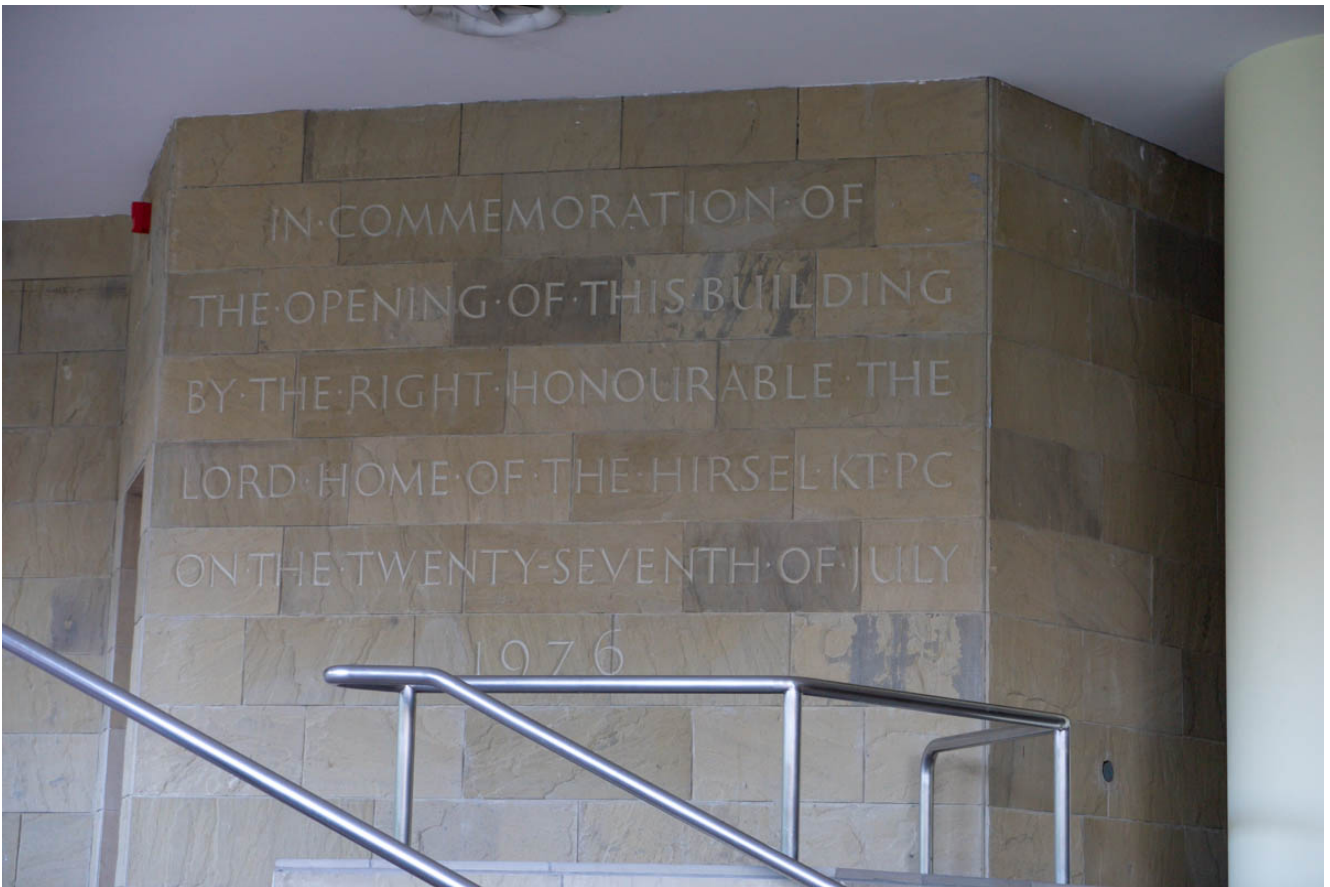
Rebecca Gates, Head of UK Asset Management, Schroders Capital’s Real Estate team, said: “Ahead of looking to breathe new life into this very important building, we are delighted to support Hidden Door Festival’s wonderful proposals to transform the vacant space into a temporary cultural arts venue which can be enjoyed by the public.”

A limited release of Early Bird Tickets are now available via hiddendoorarts.org/tickets or from Citizen Ticket. Once the full programme is announced, ticket holders will be able to select which days they would like to attend.

Hidden Door 2023 is supported by Baillie Gifford and other generous partners and sponsors.



Gardens at former Scottish Widows – PHOTO Chris Scott



The venue for Hidden Door 2023 is the former Scottish Widows complex at 15 Dalkeith Road which was opened by the Rt Hon The Lord Home of the Hirsel who was UK Prime Minister from 1960 to

1964 and Foreign Secretary from 1970 to 1974 PHOTO ©2022 The Edinburgh Reporter



The venue for Hidden Door 2023 is the former Scottish Widows complex at 15 Dalkeith Road Photographed Creative Director David Martin PHOTO ©2022 The Edinburgh Reporter

PLANNING MATTERS

Outline plans were submitted in May this year for a mixed use redevelopment of the Scottish Widows site which was followed by a public consultation on the £100 million development.

In late September final plans were submitted to the council for redevelopment of the site which will include partial demolition, the redevelopment of the office building and the addition of 194 houses in five blocks.

There will be 68 affordable homes included in that number, although Southside Community Council noticed that this was all to be contained in one block which they take objection to, and they have noted that most flats are smaller and not suitable

for families. Their biggest concern is that the planned development is shown as seven storeys high. The community council says that given that the building line will be nearer to the road, the blocks will be more intrusive to those living opposite who will lose a lot of daylight to their homes.

The last date for comments has passed and planning permission is due to be determined by 21 January 2023.

History of the Scottish Widows site

The move to the single site began in 1969 when the Board of Scottish Widows instructed a move from St Andrew Square. Surveyors Bernard Thorpe sought out the most suitable location within Edinburgh, but outside the city centre. Plentiful parking and easy travel were two main points in the brief.

This site extends to 2.5 hectares and was previously the home of Thomas Nelson's Parkside Works. Nelson founded a second hand bookshop at 2 West Bow and in 1839 he founded a publishing firm along with his two sons. This was at Hope Park near The Meadows, but was destroyed in a fire in 1878, making a move to the site which became Scottish Widows in 1976.

The printworks sounds nothing like the existing 1970s glass faced building. It was designed and built in ornate Scots baronial style with turrets, towers and crow stepped gables.

The Parkside works closed after the publisher merged with the Thomson Organisation in 1962. Developer Ronald Lyons bought the site and obtained planning permission for it. Scottish Widows bought it from him at a premium which was intended to make up for his loss of anticipated profit.



The venue for Hidden Door 2023 is the former Scottish Widows complex at 15 Dalkeith Road Photographed Creative Director David Martin standing in the former canteen area which will become the main stage PHOTO ©2022 The Edinburgh Reporter



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