

Richard Murphy on 'unlocking' the Old Royal High School

Since the school vacated the building in 1968, finding a new use for the Old Royal High School building on Calton Hill has been a major subject of public controversy. Widely seen by architectural historians as the finest Greek revival building in the city, it has been mothballed for most of the period since.

Public debate over the Royal High School was brought to a head with the attempts to turn the building into a hotel. This project was finally and unanimously rejected by councillors in 2017, having been opposed by heritage groups including the Cockburn Association.

A suitable new use for this fine old building has now been found. The building will now be used by St Mary's Music School and the National Music Academy, with major musical events also taking place there. The architect leading the project of bringing the building back into use is Richard Murphy.



Dr Kenneth Taylor (head teacher of St Mary's Music School) and William Gray Muir (Chairman of Royal High School Preservation Trust) outside the Royal High School in 2015

Pic Peter Devlin

In an engaging and enlightening talk to the [Architectural Heritage Society of Scotland](#) on 9 January, he spoke about the 'transformation' of Thomas Hamilton's Royal High School for use by the music school and the creation of public performance spaces.

Murphy said he was honoured to be by working on this project, in conjunction with the [The Royal High School Preservation Trust](#). He felt something of 'a culmination of a career', building on previous projects. However, he emphasised that the project was 'quiet' in architectural terms in that the building would still be mainly Thomas Hamilton's: "it's Hamilton's gig not Murphy's". Murphy is part of a lead team of 10 who are working "intensively" on the project. It was an exciting time for the project as the first steps are being made. Some initial demolition work will start very soon, with building work beginning in earnest after the summer.



Royal High School. Photo: © 2022, Martin P. McAdam
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Murphy began his talk by setting the historical context. For him, it is Calton Hill which is a far more interesting centrepiece for the city than Castle Hill. As Iain Gordon Brown, has outlined in his new book [Auld Greekie](#), the physical character of Calton Hill, with its resemblance to the Acropolis, was one important inspiration for the idea of Edinburgh as the 'Athens of the North'. Within Calton Hill the Royal High School Building had an "ambiguous position", not fully on the hill itself, but still sitting above Edinburgh. It was, as Murphy put it, "a world of learning floating above the city", which sought to emphasise the prestige of the school and its pupils, many of whom went on to play leading roles in the British Empire.

Though Calton Hill is often compared to the Acropolis in Athens, the building itself was modelled on the Temple of Hephaestus, a short distance away. In terms of the architectural features of the building, the lack of windows in

its front was notable and posed some challenges. Murphy wished to emphasise that the building had changed over time; his remodelling was not the first. This he illustrated with a series of photographs of the main debating chamber since the First World War.



Students of St Mary's Music School in front of the Old Royal High in 2017



Murphy's own plans for the north and south elevations

The chamber has gone through a series of remodellings over the decades. The most significant changes occurred when mooted as the debating chamber of a future Scottish Parliament in the 1970s. For Murphy, this would have made a better debating chamber than Enric Miralles' rather "strange", "low-density" chamber. The one at the Royal High School would, argued Murphy, have been better suited for 'the cut and thrust' of political argument. The plans for the main performance spaces will result in them become highly adaptable, with seating and staging easy to rearrange. They will be appropriate for all performances right up to full orchestra concerts.

Murphy then examined the hotel 'saga' of the last decade and the designs drawn up by the late Gareth Hoskins. Murphy was sympathetic to some of the designs believing that they included some "very interesting" proposals. The way they framed views of Arthur's Seat was impressive. Ultimately

though, the proposals were an “ill struck balance” which “destroyed the essence of Hamilton’s original”.

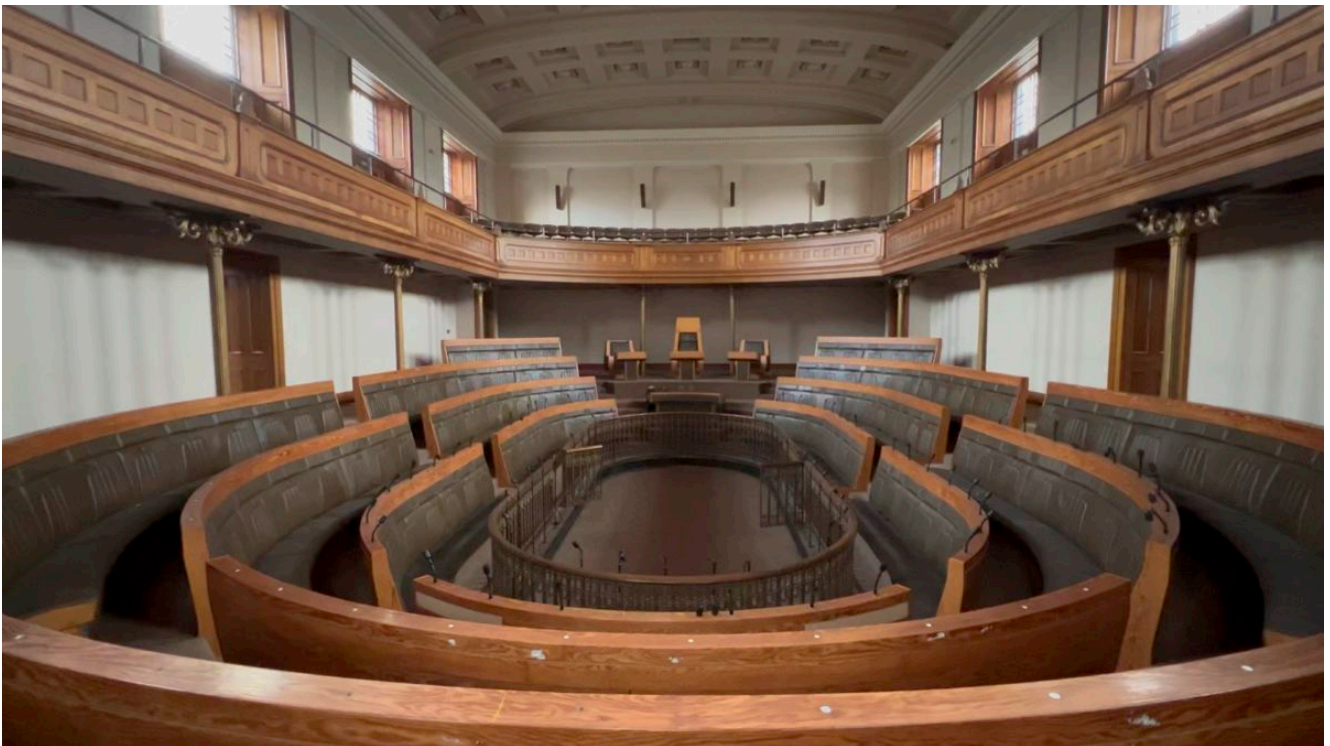
In terms of his own proposals for the site, there were two elements. First was about restoring and adapting the original building, making it more accessible. The second element of the project was a series of new buildings to the east of Hamilton’s. These have been designed for use solely by the school, as teaching spaces, a library, and accommodation.

The main issue with the original building was the “lack of circularity”. In short, it’s very difficult to move from one side to another without going through the debating chamber or one of the other large performance spaces. Murphy’s solution to this is to create a foyer for the building as the main public entrance, with a hidden walkway enabling access from either side of the building. This would include direct access from a new public garden and café which will be created on the west side of the building. This walkway has been designed so that it can’t be seen from Regent Road at the front of the building and generally won’t affect views of the building.

Others have commented that, with this move, Murphy has successfully ‘unlocked’ the building. The new entrance foyer will create a significant new public space in the building, with access through “a glazed slot” in the portico which will bring natural light in. Access from this foyer to the higher levels will be via new staircases. The design of these have been a major focus of Murphy’s, requiring a number of rethinks and revisions. More generally, the plans are constantly being tinkered with as practical issues emerge (“architects always have to make compromises”). Murphy aims to show how intervening in a historic building can actually help “show it off” and reveal qualities which have long been concealed. This, in Murphy’s view, is what any work on significant old buildings should do. Revealing and opening up the building is what has inspired the project.

Work on this aspect of the restoration and reconfiguration is due to start within the next six weeks. The building work will require digging down and there is still some uncertainty about exactly where the natural rock lies. At present he could only speculate. Inherent in any such project on such a complex site was a degree of uncertainty.

Murphy believed that the “weird and wonderful” uses of the building by the [Hidden Door](#) and [Pianodrome](#) has given a glimpse of the potential of the building. However, they had also shown how difficult the building was to navigate as well as its deteriorating condition. These two aspects would require substantial effort to ameliorate. Simpson & Brown Architects, partners in the project, are in charge of restoring and cleaning the stonework.



The central chamber PHOTO ©2022 The Edinburgh Reporter

The new section will be built on an area to the east of the main building. Clearing the site requires the demolition of some Victorian buildings which were part of the school, including the old swimming pool building. While Murphy admitted that the buildings were not without architectural merit, they could not be compared to Hamilton’s original

building in historic or architectural value. The new sections will include 'pepperpot' practice spaces connecting the corridors leading to the classrooms. The classrooms and accommodation blocks will have fantastic views out towards Arthur's Seat. The school will have a separate entrance at the rear to help ensure security. The building will have a clear demarcation between the public and private, with the main performance spaces between the two. Murphy emphasised that, in marked contrast to the hotel proposals, the 'peripheral' buildings will become smaller than they are at present. With turfed roofs they will blend into the hill, ensuring that the original building is the only eye-catching aspect of the site. Murphy is confident that the plan will open up the original building while maintaining its visual unity and "horizontality".

The Hidden Door and the Pianodrome last summer gave us a glimpse of the potential of the Old Royal High School. The plans outlined by Murphy hopefully herald a full revival of this long overlooked architectural gem.



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The first Pianodrome in Leith under construction