

# **Royal High School – trust ditches music school plan**

**The former Royal High School will not be used as a site for St Mary's Music School in a major change to plans by the Royal High School Preservation Trust.**

The trust has announced major changes to their intention to protect the public use for the Thomas Hamilton building. The trust had entered into an agreement to create a National Centre for Music with the St Mary's specialist school at the heart of the £45 million project.

Increases in cost have been cited as the main factor and as a result it has been decided that to progress with the major building works required to adapt the building – which was a school until more than half a century ago – into a home for the Music School would “no longer be practical”.

The council-owned property has a long planning history with opposing plans to convert it into a Rosewood Hotel thrown out by the council and on appeal. The main issue was the glass fronted wings to either side of the front of the building which the planning convener at the time shared with The Edinburgh Reporter were the main stumbling block. Without those on the original plans the convener said there was every likelihood the consent would have been granted. Instead, the hotel group Urbanist Hotels and developers DHP held an option from the council to take a long lease over the property, but could not progress that due to the lack of planning consent. Planning applications, appeals and hearings ensued with all

the expense that entails and hours of work on all sides.

Meantime Richard Gray Muir intervened with an opposing application to convert the school into a new home for the 70 pupil music school which already has a huge building in the West End.

**This application was granted, and the ink is barely dry on the lease which obliges the tenant to “convert the buildings into a centre for performance and education for the public benefit” and also allows the tenant to use the buildings as a national centre for music, and as the principal place where St Mary’s Music School will be based, or alternatively as a place to educate or perform classical music with a restaurant or café, gallery or visitor centre, public garden, and short term residential use.**

Now, in the latest turn of events, the developer has admitted they cannot get the numbers to stack up even with the original sum of £45 million bankrolled by philanthropist Carol Grigor and the Dunard Fund (the same funding source which is paying for the new concert hall just off St Andrew Square). Further

sums for the running of the school were also promised.

William Gray Muir, Chair of the Royal High School Preservation Trust, and a Director of the various companies making up Sundial Properties, said: "In light of the changing economic backdrop, the Trust's professional team has undertaken a detailed feasibility study which regrettably has concluded that creating suitable new facilities for a specialist music school, in new buildings adjacent to Thomas Hamilton's original school is simply not possible within our existing budget.

"We have collaborated with the board and management team at St Mary's Music School along with our key funder, Dunard Fund, on alternative plans for the school's future premises.

"Despite this disappointment the board of the Trust is confident that it can successfully fulfil its purpose of protecting and restoring the building for a public, cultural and sustainable use within our existing funds.

"Although different to our original plans, the new vision for the refurbished Royal High School is genuinely exciting with greater public access and even more significant public benefit. Details are still being finalised; however we hope to be able to share our new vision in the coming months of how this wonderful building will once again be a thriving presence in the city."

John Reid, Interim Chief Executive of St Mary's Music School, said: "Obviously we are very disappointed with the news, however we are investigating a number of other options and are confident we will have an alternative capable of delivery within the timescale originally envisaged for the Royal High School renovation. The options we are looking at not only have comparable facilities but also have the added advantage of our being the sole occupier."

Taco van Heusden of Urbanist Group which pursued the

permission to use the former school as a luxury hotel said: "Scottish Ministers ruled against what we believe to be the only viable way to redevelop the Old Royal High School. It's now up to the owner and leaseholder to deliver to the community a suitable solution for this remarkable building. It's been 56 years since the school vacated the premises.

"The creation of a new entrance and foyer to solve the much-debated visual impact issues to Calton Hill was always going to be exceptionally expensive.

"It is a shame it took the Royal High School Preservation Trust eight years to come to the same conclusion.

"The trust and its backers campaigned vigorously for the right to redevelop this grade-A listed building of international significance and we look forward to seeing the next iteration of their plans."

Council Leader Cammy Day said: "We are aware of the proposed change to the scheme and remain supportive of a project which will preserve a key historical building in the city.

"Officers were informed of these changes last week, this isn't returning to the drawing board, it's about preserving the refurbishment of the building for public use. The dropping of the music school element of the project is primarily a matter for the Trust and the Music School. Our key aim is and was to bring the building back into public use.

"The Council's lease agreement with the charity is not affected and there will not be a new process to seek potential new uses for the building. The Council has not been asked to fund any of the proposed redevelopment of the building."

Only a couple of years ago Hidden Door Festival opened the doors of the former Royal High allowing the public in to see the dilapidated condition of the interior of the building during the four or five days of the festival.



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