

Capital Coffee – The MF Coffee Project at Summerhall

Summerhall has, since 2011, established itself as one of Edinburgh's leading cultural venues. For its Director, Robert McDowell, Summerhall is a place where 'Festival addicts' can 'shoot up' all year round, culture coursing through their veins for twelve-months – not just August. It is a clear manifestation of the Festival's continuing cultural legacy for Edinburgh.

One reason why Summerhall has embedded itself so well in the city is that it provides a *variety* of reasons to visit; concerts, exhibitions, gigs, films etc. With The Royal Dick pub and the café, it also provides a place to meet, eat and drink. The café at Summerhall has always been a popular destination but has now been substantially revamped. With this revamp comes a substantially improved coffee 'offer'.



[The MF Coffee Project](#) has taken over the café and the coffee they serve is a major upgrade. In terms of flavour profile, what I've tasted has been nicely complex but balanced. The MF Coffee Project also manifests a key aspect of the specialty coffee scene in that it focuses not just on the quality of the product but *also* on the conditions of the producers.

MF is a 'small collective comprising farmers, processors, and roasters, facilitating connections between specialty coffee

producers in Northern Malawi and conscious coffee consumers in the UK.' In short, the aim is, through 'forging a direct link to the coffee's origin and the farmers behind it', to skip some of the 'middlemen' of the coffee industry and ensure that the growers receive a higher percentage.



As a measure of the popularity of the new café, it took me three visits until I could actually secure a seat. It's clearly doing something right. The place is consistently full of people studying, chilling, and meeting. The range of seating, from desks to sofas helps to accommodate these different reasons for being there. Particularly prized by students, are the seats at the window side. These provide a

nice lap-topping or writing space plus a cracking view out towards the fringes of the Meadows. On my last visit, bright sunshine battled with torrential bursts of rain and sleet – four seasons in one hour.



Many cultural types meet here – the place is abuzz with interesting conversations on artistic themes. That creates a real sense of energy about the place, which is ideal for cultural cross-pollination. On a recent visit, I was sitting next to a group discussing a theatre production they were collaborating on. On the next table, a pair were sharing ideas about illustration for a book cover. Though it's constantly busy, the high ceiling prevents the place from becoming claustrophobic or stuffy. The walls have been painted particularly attractive dark green and the wooden tables give the place a natural warmth.



While specialty coffee culture has spread across the city, our cultural institutions have largely failed to embrace this. Too often, the coffee served at such places is stuck in the late 1990s; vaguely drinkable but hardly something that would encourage you to visit just for the coffee.

On a recent trip to London, I was very pleasantly surprised by the fantastic coffee I was served at the British Library. Origin Coffee runs the coffee bar there and have now also made their way to Edinburgh, taking over Brew Lab's old venue on South College Street. Hopefully, Summerhall's new seriousness about coffee is a prelude of things to come. People are increasingly expecting something good for their money. It's also an example of the way that good specialty coffee has gone mainstream; it's no longer just the preserve of the cognoscenti.

MF Coffee is another reason to visit Summerhall, even when there were no specific events on. Other reasons include the

regular exhibitions in various parts of the building, including corridors with fascinating fragments of the [Richard Demarco Archive](#) (his 'gesamtkunstwerk', his total work of art), much of which is housed in Summerhall. The MF Coffee Project is an interesting example of the further penetration of specialty coffee within the city. There are *more and more* places to drink good coffee, with mediocrity slowly fading away.



This black and white image shows Richard Demarco with Joseph Beuys © Demarco Archive Trust Ltd/Demarco Digital Archive.