

Plans approved to turn iconic landmark building into music centre

Work is set to begin to bring one of Edinburgh's most iconic buildings back to life after scaled back renovation plans were given the nod.

After sitting empty for decades Calton Hill's Old Royal High will be transformed into a new 'National Centre for Music' with auditoriums and rehearsal spaces for orchestras, choirs and bands.

A public garden and café will also be opened as part of the run-down site's ambitious revitalization.



Old Royal High. Image: google.

The council granted planning permission on Monday, July 22 in

a major milestone for the project, which had to abandon its bid to turn the council-owned building into a new home for St Mary's independent music school after costs more than doubled to around £110 million last year.

However a £45m cash injection from the Dunard Fund revived hopes of returning the 19th-century neoclassical landmark – once mooted as a potential Scottish Parliament – to its former glory.

With the funds, the Royal High School Preservation Trust (RHSPT) went back to the drawing board and scaled-back blueprints for the building, re-imagining it as a National Centre for Music instead, for people to “come together to experience music across a broad spectrum of styles and disciplines”.

The new application removed the previously mooted performance space foyer at lower ground level within the main building and classroom extensions along the northern boundary.



Music centre designs. Image: Montagu Evans /Royal High School Preservation Trust.

The Trust said this “allowed for extensive public realm and landscaping to be achieved, creating a public garden and a more suitable setting for the listed buildings”.

Plans said: “The new application aims to return the main

building closer to its original setting on site.

“The ambition is to transform a building designed for learning into a national beacon for music and a fitting home for Scotland’s National Centre for Music.

“The new National Centre for Music will become the main tenant of the former Royal High School, and manage it as a cultural institution, which as much as possible will be open to the public.

“The NCM will seek to build on and energise the performance, audience and learning opportunities the revitalised buildings will make available. It will create cultural and educational partnerships, manage concerts and outreach programmes and seek to celebrate and build on the rich tradition of music and performance throughout Scotland.”

The Trust’s aim is to ensure architect Thomas Hamilton’s building was “seen as originally intended”

“The proposals ensure a new life for this architectural masterpiece, with the creating of a National Centre for Music on Calton Hill a golden opportunity to reinvigorate this important site within the city and further enhance Scotland’s musical reputation,” plans added.

Giving the go-ahead, the council said: “The proposed development will preserve an iconic listed building in Edinburgh’s historic core in an enduring and sustainable use.

“The scheme is conservation-led and the proposed interventions are informed by thorough research of the building and its historical development.”

By Donald Turvill Local Democracy Reporter