



AHSS
THE ARCHITECTURAL
HERITAGE SOCIETY
OF SCOTLAND



Councillor Frank Ross
Lord Provost of the City of Edinburgh
City Chambers
253 High Street
Edinburgh
EH1 1YJ

August 29th 2017

Open Letter to the Lord Provost

Dear Lord Provost,

The Former Royal High School, Regent Road, Edinburgh
Applications for Planning Permission and Listed Building Consent
Nos 17/00588/FUL and 17/00588/LBC

The pending decision on the planning application to build a hotel around the old Royal High School will resonate not just across the city. To approve this application would damage the city and the Council's reputation for stewardship of its unique built environment, in Scotland, the UK, and internationally. Therefore, we write jointly as the Chairs of four of Scotland's leading heritage bodies: the Architectural Heritage Society of Scotland; the Cockburn Association; the Edinburgh World Heritage Trust; and the Scottish Civic Trust. To our knowledge, this is the first occasion on which all four bodies have combined to write collectively - such is the importance of the matter.

The Council's planning officers and the experts at Historic Environment Scotland have scrutinised the application and both recommend that it be rejected. There is an overwhelming case to respect their judgement on this highly sensitive site. As your own planning officers state unequivocally, "the application does not comply with the Historic Environment Scotland Policy 2016, the development plan or Edinburgh planning guidance." To disregard these policies would destroy Edinburgh's credibility for stewardship of its World Heritage Site.

We reiterate the fundamental point that has been made many times and by many of the over 3,000 objectors: the setting of the Grade A listed school building would be irrevocably damaged by the scale and mass of the buildings for which planning permission is sought. The weight of public opinion on this matter is overwhelming - 94% of representations received by the Council are objections. That opinion should be respected.

We recognise the Council's ambitions to promote growth and jobs in Edinburgh, and that the applicants make ambitious claims in this respect. However, the recent study by London Economics demonstrates that those claims are derived from a flawed methodology and a set of implausible

assumptions. At best the economic benefits seem likely to be half those claimed, and to make a relatively insignificant contribution to the economy of the city. It would be a “game changer” only to the extent that it would damage for ever the Conservation Area and the World Heritage Site; a World Heritage Site whose status encompasses the very values that attract visitors and which do so much for the city’s quality of life and its economy.

The Royal High School is recognised as being one of the most important buildings in Edinburgh (your own officers describe it as “one of the most significant category A listed buildings in Scotland”) for the contribution it makes to the northern skyline. It is one of the most important examples in Europe of the Greek Revival style of architecture, and has survived far more completely than many of its rivals on the Continent. The contribution it makes to Edinburgh’s Acropolis on Calton Hill is profound. Its scenic and cultural significance as a visual stop at the New Town’s east end balances the Castle’s role at the west end of the Old Town. This balance would be severely damaged by the proposed hotel.

At the time of the earlier application, which the Council rejected in 2015, it was argued that the old Royal High School had been neglected for some years and the proposed hotel was the only hope for securing its future. There is now a viable alternative in the St Mary’s Music School proposal, to which your Council has already granted planning permission and listed building consent, and which is generously funded by an Edinburgh philanthropist. The argument that the hotel is the only future for the building therefore falls.

This, together with the depth and breadth of evidence presented, the number of objections and the recommendations of your officials, lead us to call on the City Council to decisively and unambiguously refuse planning permission.

Yours sincerely,



Martin Robertson

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