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## **ALISTAIR FAIR**

### **‘AN OBJECT LESSON IN HOW NOT TO GET THINGS DONE’:**

#### **EDINBURGH’S UNBUILT ‘OPERA HOUSE’, 1960-1975**

*This article examines the proposals of 1960–1975 for a major new theatre in central Edinburgh. Popularly known as the ‘opera house’, the proposed Castle Terrace Theatre (which was never built) was a regular fixture in the local press, with frequent reports of delays, funding crises, architectural debate, and concerns about the designs themselves. It is argued here that the real issue, however, was that, despite claims of an expansive cultural policy, central government funding for such major projects as the ‘opera house’ was less forthcoming than was the case for the many smaller theatres that were successfully built across Scotland and Britain during this period.*

In 1960, the Lyceum Theatre in Edinburgh’s West End was put up for sale.<sup>1</sup> After many years in the ownership of Howard and Wyndham, a firm which operated a circuit of touring theatres, it was purchased by a developer, Meyer Oppenheim of Argyle Securities. His proposals for the replacement of the theatre and the other buildings adjacent to the Usher Hall were published in

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<sup>1</sup> National Records of Scotland (hereafter ‘NRS’), ED61/72, ‘Memorandum on the Edinburgh Lyceum Theatre/Castle Terrace project’, 18 November 1966.

1961.<sup>2</sup> A new theatre would be screened by slab blocks containing a hotel and offices. The theatre, which was to be sold to Edinburgh Corporation and run as a civic venue, was to have 1700 seats, and mention was made of its use for grand opera. Oppenheim's plan was endorsed by the city authorities in 1962, but collapsed in December 1963 amid rising costs.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, the idea of a new theatre dedicated to large-scale operatic and dramatic productions did not go away. The Lord Provost, Sir Duncan Weatherstone, immediately expressed his support for such a project, and it was reconceived as a civic scheme, to be led and funded by Edinburgh Corporation as a key Festival venue. Its scale meant that claims were increasingly also made for its national significance, in part in recognition of Edinburgh's 'capital city' status but also pragmatically, in the hope of securing central government funding. It would be a National Theatre for Scotland, a counterpart to the National Theatre then being designed for a site on London's South Bank. The next twelve years saw a series of designs by two of Scotland's most prominent architects, William Kininmonth and Robert Matthew.

The 'opera house' (as the proposed Castle Terrace Theatre was typically described) was conceived during a period in which the landscape of theatre in Scotland and Britain changed significantly.<sup>4</sup> Whereas professional theatre before 1939 had operated on an essentially commercial basis, the situation after 1945 was different. The Arts Council of Great Britain was founded that year, forming a way for funding for central government to be channelled to the arts (at 'arm's length'); it had a devolved 'Scottish Committee', which became the Scottish Arts Council in 1967. The Local Government Act of 1948 went further in allowing local authorities to support not only the practice of

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<sup>2</sup> 'Edinburgh Civic Theatre Plan Disputed', *Scotsman*, 2 May 1961.

<sup>3</sup> 'Lyceum Development Plan Falls Through', *Scotsman*, 10 December 1963.

<sup>4</sup> A full discussion of post-1945 theatre architecture in Britain may be found in Alistair Fair, *Modern Playhouses: an Architectural History of Britain's New Theatres, 1945-1985*, Oxford, 2018.

the arts but also the buildings in which the arts were housed, paving the way for the emergence of 'civic theatres'. In 1965, the Arts Council's budget was significantly increased after the election of a Labour government under Harold Wilson, and a dedicated 'Housing the Arts' fund was set up by the country's first Minister for the Arts, Jennie Lee, to part-fund building projects. She sought to stimulate local action, for although there had been some notable early developments, such as Coventry's Belgrade Theatre (1958), few local authorities had yet really embraced the possibilities of the 1948 Act. During the 1960s and 1970s, new theatres were increasingly built. In Scotland, the key examples include Eden Court, Inverness (1976), Pitlochry Festival Theatre (1981), and Dundee Repertory Theatre (1982), as well as smaller venues in such places as Dumbarton (1969) and Musselburgh (1971).

Public funding for the arts was never total. In 1970, for example, it was reported that regional theatres typically recovered 75% of their costs from ticket sales, with subsidy and other income covering the remaining 25%.<sup>5</sup> The construction of new theatre buildings, too, typically was supported by several sources of funding, including local-authority support, 'Housing the Arts' grants, and local fundraising.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, the advent of subsidy had significant effects. Commercial touring circuits like that of Howard and Wyndham declined because public funding favoured non-profit 'Repertory' theatres (as well as the major London venues such as the Royal Opera House). Such theatres embodied three general assumptions. First, provision for the arts in London was to be balanced (at least in theory) by a focus on the English regions, Scotland, and Wales. Second, the professional was to be supported rather than the amateur. Third, within the professional sphere,

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<sup>5</sup> Arts Council of Great Britain, 'The Theatre Today in England and Wales: the report of the Arts Council Theatre Enquiry', London, 1970, p. 35.

<sup>6</sup> Roderick Ham, *Theatre Planning*, London, 1972, p. 249.

populist, commercial entertainment was often deemed to be of less cultural value than the mixed programmes presented by the Repertory companies.<sup>7</sup> In this respect, theatres emerged as a kind of public amenity, embedded in broader debates: the place of culture and leisure in an increasingly affluent, modern Britain, for example, or the potential for a new theatre to contribute to narratives of civic pride.

The Edinburgh ‘opera house’ remained unbuilt. Had it been constructed, it would have been one of the most significant examples of the post-war theatre-building boom, taking its place alongside the contemporaneous and similarly unexecuted Cultural Centre proposed for central Glasgow.<sup>8</sup> In 1967, the *Scotsman* described the recent history of the Edinburgh project as a ‘saga’; in 1975, the year in which the scheme was formally abandoned, it deployed a similarly literary metaphor in referring to a ‘farce in five acts’ which offered ‘an object lesson in how not to get things done’.<sup>9</sup> In the *Architects’ Journal* in 1974, the Edinburgh-based architect Ian Appleton likened it to the ‘Loch Ness monster [...] part of local mythology’.<sup>10</sup> What went wrong? This article draws on contemporary records to present an initial discussion of the ‘saga’. Its conclusions are preliminary: more work could productively be done on such areas as the local politics that were involved. Here it is suggested that the failure of the project needs to be understood within a broader context, namely the major programme of theatre-building which took place across Scotland and Britain between the late 1950s and the early 1980s. In this respect, the

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<sup>7</sup> Lawrence Black, “‘Making Britain a Gay and More Cultivated Country’: Jennie Lee, the Creative Economy, and the 1960s’ ‘Cultural Revolution’”, *Contemporary British History*, vol. 20/3, 2006, pp. 323–42.

<sup>8</sup> For Glasgow, see Fair, *Modern Playhouses*, and Florian Urban, ‘Glasgow’s Royal Concert Hall and the Invention of the Post-modern City’, *Journal of Architecture*, vol. 18/2, 2013, pp. 254–96.

<sup>9</sup> ‘The Opera House: a Farce in Five Acts’, *Scotsman*, 3 May 1975.

<sup>10</sup> ‘Edinburgh’s Opera House’, *Architects’ Journal* 160 (24 July 1974), pp. 200–201.

story of the 'opera house' allows us to refine our understanding of cultural politics in post-war Britain.

### **'CREDIT AS A FESTIVAL CITY': KININMONTH'S DESIGNS, 1960-71**

Meyer Oppenheim's proposals of 1961 for a new theatre adjacent to the Usher Hall were not the first for this site. Patrick Abercrombie and Derek Plumstead's *Civic Survey and Plan* of 1949 had proposed the construction of two 'festival centres' for the newly established Edinburgh Festival, one at St James' Square and one on Lothian Road.<sup>11</sup> During the 1950s, architects including Alan Reiach produced designs for the latter.<sup>12</sup> The perceived need was a venue for large operatic productions. In 1962, for example, Lord Harewood noted that in early days of the Festival, Glyndebourne and German productions could fit in the King's Theatre, but now the Germany companies were increasingly moving into larger, new opera houses and so to play in Edinburgh would force them to restage their productions.<sup>13</sup>

That the proposals of 1961 were made by a developer is unusual in view of the fact that the vast majority of Britain's major new theatres in the 1960s and 1970s were part-public funded. However, several theatres in London, including the New London Theatre (1971) were similarly conceived by developers, while some local authorities worked in partnership with development firms: new theatres in Derby and Leicester, for example, were built within shopping centres. Such partnerships were partly pragmatic, reflecting the extent to which subsidy was not provided as a blank cheque. In addition, restrictions on local-authority expenditure were frequently imposed by central government. In Edinburgh, the support of the Progressives for the

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<sup>11</sup> Patrick Abercrombie and Derek Plumstead, *A Civic Survey and Plan for the City and Royal Burgh of Edinburgh*, Edinburgh, 1949, p. 57.

<sup>12</sup> 'Plan Clears Way for Opera House', *Scotsman*, 9 March 1968.

<sup>13</sup> 'Opera House a Must for the Festival?', *Edinburgh Evening News*, 5 September 1962.

Oppenheim scheme demonstrates both a more general Tory scepticism of excessive state involvement in funding the arts as well as the Progressives' anti-interventionism.<sup>14</sup>

Oppenheim's architect was William Kininmonth of Rowand Anderson, Kininmonth and Paul (RAKP).<sup>15</sup> The firm was retained after 1964, when the project was essentially taken 'in-house' by the Corporation,<sup>16</sup> apparently without consideration of alternatives because of his friendship with the Lord Provost.<sup>17</sup> Kininmonth had been a fixture on the Edinburgh architectural scene since the 1930s, when he had practised with Basil Spence. In parallel with the 'opera house', his office was working on designs for the Brunton Theatre and municipal offices at Musselburgh.

In July 1965 it was stated that the Castle Terrace project would deliver 'a large theatre in which grand opera can be staged in such a way as to bring credit to Edinburgh as a festival city'.<sup>18</sup> Below a 1600-seat auditorium would be a smaller 800-seat theatre described as an 'arena' whose rejection of the hitherto dominant proscenium-arch layout reflected a growing search for alternatives that might promote greater contact between actor and audience and which might suggest the uniquely live, three-dimensional nature of theatre. There was also to be a 120-bedroom hotel, to be operated by Scottish and Newcastle and designed by Andrew Renton,<sup>19</sup> while the theatres' 'ample foyers' would include a restaurant. The scale of the scheme was presented as a coup for the

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<sup>14</sup> 'The Odds Favour Oppenheim', *Scotsman*, 24 July 1962: Labour and Liberal politicians opposed the Oppenheim scheme.

<sup>15</sup> 'City to buy Proposed Theatre', *Scotsman*, 15 September 1961.

<sup>16</sup> 'Theatre Architect Appointed', *Architects' Journal* 140 (23 December 1964), p. 1481.

<sup>17</sup> The allegation was attributed to a Corporation official in NRS, ED61/86, Sir Norman Graham to I.M. Robertson, 17 August 1972.

<sup>18</sup> NRS, ED61/70, Press Statement, 29 July 1965.

<sup>19</sup> 'Astragal: Poor Man's Festival', *Architects' Journal* 144 (31 August 1966), p. 506.

city and a major expression of civic pride: Magnus Magnusson, for example, commented that 'Edinburgh has once again snatched the lead from Glasgow in this field of large-scale cultural planning'.<sup>20</sup>

Kininmonth toured opera houses in continental Europe, writing in detail on the West German examples that he saw (though favouring the 'lighter' styles he saw elsewhere).<sup>21</sup> From 1965, he was also assisted by a panel of specialists in the technical side of theatre design. This group was led by the experienced theatre director Norman Marshall, who had been a member of the panel that appointed Denys Lasdun to design the National Theatre in London and subsequently was co-chair of the National's infamously fractious Building Committee.<sup>22</sup> The Renton/Kininmonth proposals of late 1966 (**fig. 1**) accommodate the hotel in a boldly massed tower which in plan stepped regularly outwards, while the theatre is set within a block that looks not unlike Le Corbusier's monastery of Sainte Marie de La Tourette (1956–60). Internally, the 'opera' theatre recalled recent West German examples in such details as the 'sledges' of seating at either side of the auditorium that projected forwards from the rear balconies.<sup>23</sup> However, a redesign was soon necessary. Scottish and Newcastle claimed that factors including the introduction of Selective Employment Tax made the hotel unviable, and they withdrew in 1967,<sup>24</sup> while the city authorities had concerns about the cost of the theatre.<sup>25</sup> The next design of 1968 moved the hotel to the opposite side of

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<sup>20</sup> 'The Pound Barrier is Broken At Last', *Scotsman*, 30 July 1965.

<sup>21</sup> 'Report on Continental Theatres', *Architects' Journal* 141 (30 June 1965), pp. 1525–1526.

<sup>22</sup> NRS, ED61/82, Ronald Mavor to Lord Goodman, 18 April 1969; Barnabas Calder, 'Committees and Concrete: the Genesis and Architecture of Denys Lasdun's National Theatre', Ph.D. thesis, University of Cambridge, 2007, pp. 46 and 52.

<sup>23</sup> NRS, ED61/72, Rowand Anderson Kininmonth and Paul, 'Lyceum/Castle Terrace Redevelopment, Edinburgh', 16 November 1966.

<sup>24</sup> NRS, ED61/72, I.M. Robertson memo, 18 August 1967.

<sup>25</sup> 'Poor Man's Festival', p. 506.



Lothian Road,<sup>26</sup> while the theatre abandoned the Corbusianism of the previous scheme (**fig. 2**). Its horizontal windows and stepped-back terraces evoke Lasdun's contemporaneous designs for the National Theatre in London, though in rather more symmetrical form.<sup>27</sup> At the centre of the Cambridge Street front, a series of 'columns' suggest a classical portico filtered through an Art Deco lens. The auditorium, the design of which was based on an outline functional brief developed with the input of the technical advisory panel, seemingly lost its 'sledges' and ended up as a rather unexciting four-tier space with straight sides.

Storm clouds were brewing, however, with the *Scotsman* referring in December 1968 to 'Despondency at Opera House Delays'.<sup>28</sup> The issue was the amount of funding from central government that the project might attract. With a cost estimate of £3 million in 1966,<sup>29</sup> it would be hard for the local authority to fund through the Local Government Act, and it was also significantly more expensive than was allowed for by the routine 'Housing the Arts' scheme, which allocated £250,000 to the whole of England, Scotland, and Wales in 1965, and £500,000 in subsequent years.<sup>30</sup> The limited nature of the 'Housing the Arts' allocation and the practice of awarding between 15% and 25% of capital costs meant that there was an upper limit on the value of eligible schemes.<sup>31</sup> What were described as 'monster projects' were considered as special cases,<sup>32</sup> with funding being largely dependent on the extent to which they were projects of 'national' significance. As a result, the Edinburgh

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<sup>26</sup> 'Plan Clears Way for Opera House'. There were also concerns about the height of the 1966 hotel, which prompted the development of a High Buildings Policy for the city.

<sup>27</sup> NRS, ED61/83, Drawings of October 1968.

<sup>28</sup> 'Feeling of Despondency at Opera House Delays', *Scotsman*, 30 December 1968.

<sup>29</sup> "'Squeeze' Will Hit Lyceum Plan' *Evening News*, 15 July 1966.

<sup>30</sup> Patricia Hollis, *Jennie Lee: a Life*, Oxford, 1997, p. 268.

<sup>31</sup> For the percentages: V&A Theatre Collections, London, ACGB/120/9, HTA minutes, 25 June 1975.

<sup>32</sup> NRS, ED61/82, 'Major Capital Projects for the Arts', 10 April 1970.

'opera house' was now increasingly presented as a project of 'national' importance rather than a venue for the festival alone. Indeed, by the mid 1970s, it was proposed that a 'National Theatre of Scotland' company would be based there.<sup>33</sup>

In December 1966, the Lord Provost and other members of the Corporation met Jennie Lee, Lord Goodman (then Chairman of the Arts Council of Great Britain), and Scottish Office staff.<sup>34</sup> Lee and Goodman felt doubtful that the Arts Council would be able to find the £2 million that was requested, but proposed that the Arts Council write to the Department of Education and Science (which oversaw Arts Council funding) to make Edinburgh's case. The following summer, further pressure was applied by William Ross, Secretary of State for Scotland:

in view of our stated intention to increase the cultural opportunities for those living outside London, it would be impossible to justify refusing assistance to the Lyceum project when we have decided to meet half the estimated cost of the £7.5m for the National Theatre.<sup>35</sup>

In late 1968, the Corporation was informed that further information was required if its request was to be formally considered, including an assurance of Scottish Arts Council support and an indication of running costs.<sup>36</sup> It was speculated that government wanted the Corporation to develop the project to the stage where it could be put out to tender, something which would cost £150,000 and which the Corporation was reluctant to do without a reasonable guarantee that the project would proceed.<sup>37</sup> It seemed that an impasse had been reached. In 1970, the new (and famously musical) Conservative Prime

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<sup>33</sup> E.g. NRS, ED61/59, Castle Terrace Theatres: Scheme Design. City of Edinburgh District Council Architect's Department, 10 September 1975.

<sup>34</sup> NRS, ED61/72, I.M. Robertson memo, 2 December 1966.

<sup>35</sup> NRS, ED61/72, Drafts and final copy of letter, summer 1967.

<sup>36</sup> 'Edinburgh Decision on Opera House Shelved Until After Festival', *Scotsman*, 17 July 1969.

<sup>37</sup> 'Feeling of Despondency at Opera House Delays'.

Minister, Edward Heath, was reportedly keen, but his Minister for the Arts, Lord Eccles, was not to be rushed.<sup>38</sup> During this hiatus, design work essentially stopped, although Kininmonth presented a slightly revised model at the Royal Scottish Academy's 1971 show.<sup>39</sup> The rooftop restaurant now sported a low dome, intended to complement the adjacent Usher Hall in views from Princes Street. The flytower above the stage gained an odd, vaguely Soaneian dome, as appropriated by Giles Gilbert Scott for the classic 'K2' and 'K6' telephone kiosks. The upper part of the building also acquired a regular series of narrow vertical windows, not unlike RAKP's Scottish Provident Institution building (1961).

In August 1971, the Corporation was offered either 50% of an agreed final capital cost, or £2.25 million, to be revalued according to the Department of the Environment's index in order to take account of changes in building costs between the date of the offer and a point midway through period of construction.<sup>40</sup> Given the amount of time that had elapsed since the essentials of the design had been determined, a round of consultation was proposed in order to reappraise and develop the outline functional brief,<sup>41</sup> and to that end, attention was given to what the potential 'users' of the building might want.<sup>42</sup> 'Policies' were presented in May 1972, with a detailed design brief being intended to follow. However, by then, RAKP's position had been called into question.

## **'A LENGTHY WHINE PUNCTUATED BY DARK REFERENCES TO "PLOTS": THE DEPOSITION OF KININMONTH**

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<sup>38</sup> 'Give Us Our Opera House', *Scotsman*, 18 July 1970.

<sup>39</sup> NRS, ED61/84, Meeting minutes, 14 June 1971.

<sup>40</sup> NRS, ED61/85, IM Robertson to Town Clerk, 20 August 1971.

<sup>41</sup> NRS, ED61/85, Alexander Dunbar to I.M. Robertson, 26 October 1971.

<sup>42</sup> Edinburgh City Archives [hereafter 'ECA'], Lord Provost's Committee files ['LPC files'], Castle Terrace folder 17, Note by the Town Clerk, 16 November 1972.

In September 1971, Ian M. Robertson, Under-Secretary in the Scottish Education Department (SED) with responsibility for Higher Education and the Arts, reported on a meeting with the Scottish Development Department (SDD) Chief Architect, Bruce Beckett, and surveyor, Brian Drake. They were, he noted

concerned that the building on which we are about to give grant should be a worthy one both architecturally and functionally. They do not much like the exterior appearance of the sketches and models so far prepared by Mr Kininmonth and I think they feel that if a satisfactory building is to result Mr Kininmonth's firm will need to be supported by a good deal of expert advice.<sup>43</sup>

They were not the first to criticise the design. However, their views would prove to have significant consequences. In autumn 1972, RAKP was dismissed.

In press comments, Kininmonth alleged that he was the victim of a plot.<sup>44</sup> Certainly the Scottish Office files bear out the idea that efforts were made to encourage his dismissal. One civil servant, for example, recorded in April 1972 that 'it is useful that the City Architect should have injected into the minds of the Lord Provost Committee [sic] that no-one should be thirled to the present draft brief for the Castle Terrace development'.<sup>45</sup> In the same vein, a draft minute of August 1972 noted one councillor's view that 'officials had been dissatisfied with Sir William and they were trying to get the elected members of the Corporation to take responsibility for dismissing Sir William.'<sup>46</sup> In another note, the recently appointed City Architect, Brian

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<sup>43</sup> NRS, ED61/85, Robertson memo, 27 September 1971.

<sup>44</sup> E.g. 'Opera Architect Accuses Civil Servants', *Scotsman*, 21 October 1972.

<sup>45</sup> NRS, ED61/85, J Kidd memo, 17 April 1972.

<sup>46</sup> ECA, LPC files, Castle Terrace folder 15, Note of Meeting on 28 August 1972,

Annable, commented that Kininmonth's claims of secret representations intended to undermine him were only a 'half-truth'.<sup>47</sup>

What were the perceived problems? In November 1971, Beckett and Drake outlined their views in detail, taking aim at the project brief, the way in which RAKP had been appointed without reference to the City Architect,<sup>48</sup> the design, and RAKP's managerial competence:

We feel that we should set down as briefly as possible our concern for the above project. It was clear from Tuesday's meeting that there is no written brief for the project, that such brief as does exist is in the mind of Mr Kininmonth and his staff and has been derived from the shortest of general statements by the Corporation coupled with advice from an incomplete list of advisers who may well represent something less than the latest thinking on theatrical matters. It is evident that Mr Kininmonth has no knowledge of modern approaches to cost control and it is also clear that this difficult and complicated project lacks any system of project management whatsoever. We understand that Mr Kininmonth's appointment was on the direct recommendation of a previous Lord Provost with no special architectural knowledge and without reference either to the Department or indeed to his own City Architect.

We are convinced that if present policies are pursued there is every prospect of an expensive fiasco; quite certainly the design which Mr Kininmonth has produced is poorly planned, dull, pedestrian, and totally unworthy of such an important building and site. This view is

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<sup>47</sup> NRS, ED61/86, photocopy of letter from Kininmonth to Edward Glendinning, 1 September 1972.

<sup>48</sup> In discussion (April 2017), Annable stressed the 'improper' nature of Kininmonth's appointment as the key concern.

also held by influential members of the lay and technical press who will ensure a great deal of embarrassment for the Secretary of State unless an alternative approach is adopted.<sup>49</sup>

Beckett and his colleagues were not alone. For example, it was reported that the Royal Fine Art Commission for Scotland (RFACS), which had professed itself satisfied with the 1968 scheme, 'now felt some anxiety'.<sup>50</sup> A letter published in the *Architects' Journal* was scarcely more complimentary: 'Mr Kininmonth claims his buildings speak for themselves; they speak very convincingly in favour of a limited competition'.<sup>51</sup>

In February 1972, Robertson chaired a meeting at the SED, which concluded that RAKP would have to be replaced.<sup>52</sup> The grounds on which change was advocated now also included criticism of the auditorium and stage layout: 'The aim should be a plan with flair and imagination based on [...] post-war theatre projects including Ontario, Minneapolis, Chichester, and the Crucible at Sheffield'. In naming theatres which had rejected the proscenium-arch stage for projecting 'thrust' stages, this argument perhaps misunderstood the extent to which tradition held sway in opera-house design, as well as in theatres that received touring shows. The examples named all staged their own productions and so could afford to experiment with the actor/audience relationship. Beckett proposed that Renton Howard Wood (RHW), the designers of the Crucible, might productively take over in Edinburgh; alternatively, he favoured Robert Matthew Johnson-Marshall (RMJM).<sup>53</sup> A design competition was suggested, potentially to be chaired by Leslie Martin, who had been the Deputy Architect to the London County Council at the time

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<sup>49</sup> NRS, ED61/85, B.P. Beckett and B.E. Drake to I.M. Robertson, 12 November 1971.

<sup>50</sup> NRS, ED61/85, I.M. Robertson memo, 29 September 1971.

<sup>51</sup> 'Edinburgh Opera House', *Architects' Journal* 156 (13 December 1972), p. 1339.

<sup>52</sup> NRS, ED61/85, meeting at SED, 8 February 1972.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

of the Festival Hall's design and construction. Other judges mentioned included Alex Gordon (then President of the RIBA) and Denys Lasdun.

In February 1972, Beckett reported that the technical design of the building was, in fact, not bad.<sup>54</sup> RAKP had, he said, obviously been well-advised, in spite of the apparent absence of a detailed brief, and so that in itself could hardly be grounds for dismissal. In any case, the absence of a developed brief was not necessarily the architect's fault: 'there might be presentational difficulties in arguing that this was a further reason for seeking Sir William's dismissal'.<sup>55</sup> Beckett nonetheless alleged that Peter Moro – the well-regarded architect of the Nottingham Playhouse (1963) – had resigned from the technical panel because 'although he felt that the basic planning of the building was about right he was unhappy with the architectural expression of it and did not want to be associated with the building which he felt must now result.'<sup>56</sup> Yet questions of aesthetics were essentially subjective. The Lord Provost responded by arguing that Kininmonth was a distinguished architect who had been knighted and was President of the Royal Scottish Academy.<sup>57</sup> It would therefore be hard, he felt, for the Corporation to question his approach.

In April 1972, the Lord Provost's Committee – which took the key decisions concerning the project – decided to assess the capacity of the various firms involved.<sup>58</sup> The question of staffing had been brought into focus by the expansion of the project brief. The review of 1971–72 had altered the purpose of the 'opera house', which was now conceived more clearly as a multi-purpose theatre staging its own productions as well as receiving touring

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<sup>54</sup> NRS, ED61/85, I.M. Robertson memo, 22 February 1972.

<sup>55</sup> NRS, ED61/85, meeting at SED, 8 February 1972.

<sup>56</sup> NRS, ED61/85, I.M. Robertson memo, 22 February 1972.

<sup>57</sup> NRS, ED61/85, I.M. Robertson memo, 3 March 1972.

<sup>58</sup> ECA, LPC files, Castle Terrace folder 17, Note by the Town Clerk, 16 November 1972.

opera; it therefore needed expanded backstage facilities for a resident company. Particular attention was given to the junction between auditorium and stage in order to achieve the acoustic and physical conditions needed for opera and drama. The project also now included the internal reconstruction of the Lyceum and its connection to the new theatre and Usher Hall, a project itself estimated to cost some £1 million. A meeting was convened to consider whether RAKP was large enough to cope with this expanded brief: 'if slippage in the time table and possible design errors were to be avoided, the whole question of Sir William's continuing as the sole architect must be considered.'<sup>59</sup> Kininmonth suggested that two further architects and ten assistants might be employed, but there was concern that the newly hired staff would be aware that the office had expanded for this one project alone, and so would soon be looking to move on in the expectation that they would be laid off when it was completed. Partnership with another firm might solve the problem, but Annable and colleagues reported further reservations. Kininmonth, they argued, was sixty-eight years old, and 'performance by his junior staff was patchy'.<sup>60</sup> There were fears that he would not survive the job.<sup>61</sup> (This assumption was not entirely unreasonable, given that his contemporaries, Spence and Matthew, would both be dead by 1976, although in fact Kininmonth was to live until 1988.)

During the summer of 1972, Kininmonth was summoned for talks that apparently were so confidential that, within the Corporation, only the Lord Provost was fully aware of developments.<sup>62</sup> He appeared before the Lord Provost's Committee in August 1972, with an unofficial (and hardly

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<sup>59</sup> NRS, ED61/86, Notes of meeting between Scottish Office and Edinburgh Corporation officials, 4 July 1972.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> ECA, LPC files, Castle Terrace folder 15, Brian Annable to Jack Kane, 10 August 1972.

<sup>62</sup> NRS, ED61/86, I.M. Robertson memo, 18 July 1972.



complementary) record of the meeting being taken by Brian Drake. Kininmonth was invited to speak: 'there then followed a lengthy whine punctuated by dark references to "plots"'.<sup>63</sup> His contributions were described as unconstructive; he apparently failed to understand questions of staffing and contracts. He reportedly refused to enter into a 'single project partnership' with RHW, preferring instead Law and Dunbar-Nasmith, then engaged on designs for new theatres at Inverness and Pitlochry, or a European architect with experience of opera house design. After Kininmonth had left the meeting, Drake reminded the committee that, in view of the large sum of money promised to the project, the Scottish Office sought its artistic and architectural success. Kininmonth, he went on, had been about to commence detailed design without a detailed brief: he had 'found it possible to produce drawings and models of a project for which a brief did not exist and that furthermore informed opinion seemed almost unanimously to condemn the design offered as far below the standards required for such an important project.'<sup>64</sup> Drake also argued that the project needed one building contractor and therefore one architect. The Lyceum, he suggested, could not practically be given to another designer, as Kininmonth had proposed. Drake's note concluded by reporting that even members of the committee who had previously been opposed to dismissing RAKP seemed to be coming round to the idea.

The files now contain a flurry of correspondence and memoranda. Kininmonth protested to Sir Norman Graham, the Secretary of the SED, claiming that to stand down would be fatal to his firm.<sup>65</sup> There was further discussion of the terms on which RAKP had been appointed in the first place.

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<sup>63</sup> NRS, ED61/86, B.E. Drake memo on the committee meeting, 11 August 1972.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> NRS, ED61/86, Norman Graham memo, 17 August 1972.

It seems to have been hoped that a formal appointment had not been made, allowing the Corporation now to claim that RAKP's work had only ever been preliminary.<sup>66</sup> Continuing attempts were made to force Kininmonth into a partnership, and various firms were approached.<sup>67</sup> Kininmonth, however, maintained his opposition to working with Andrew Renton (as he had done in 1966), apparently because RHW had no office in Scotland.<sup>68</sup> Robert Matthew he had no quarrel with, but he felt that RMJM were poor administrators and so he would enter into partnership with them only under protest. His preference remained Law and Dunbar-Nasmith, but their office was deemed too small to make a material difference to the administration of the project.<sup>69</sup> His other suggestions were Alan Reiach, or Spence Glover and Ferguson. Kininmonth was asked to approach Spence, Reiach, as well as Matthew, but none was keen.<sup>70</sup>

Were the negotiations doomed to fail? Kininmonth's demand for an equal partnership was natural enough, but was unappealing. Robert Matthew, for example, turned down the proposal, perhaps tactically stressing the need for a 'clear line of command', while the Lord Provost's Committee noted that 'progress [in the creation and management of a partnership] might well be impeded by the fact of the appointment of the present firm'.<sup>71</sup> In addition, as Kininmonth suspected, the archival record suggests a preference for a clean

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<sup>66</sup> NRS, ED61/86, J. Kidd memo, 29 August 1972.

<sup>67</sup> ECA, LPC files, Castle Terrace folder 17, letter to RMJM, 21 September 1972.

<sup>68</sup> NRS, ED61/86, William Kininmonth to Edward Glendinning, 1 September 1972. One wonders also if there was a personality clash. In 1972, Annable noted that Renton had been a 'prima donna' designer in the past. See ECA, LPC files, Castle Terrace folder 14, Brian Annable to Edward Glendinning, 24 July 1972. Folder 15, 'Theatre Developments', 1 August 1972, states that Kininmonth did not like Renton.

<sup>69</sup> Kininmonth rejected that assessment: 'it is now painfully obvious [it] did not suit the plans of your architectural advisers'. See ECA, LPC files, Castle Terrace folder 16, Kininmonth to Lord Provost, 16 October 1972.

<sup>70</sup> NRS, ED61/86, report by Annable to Lord Provost's Committee, 15 September 1972.

<sup>71</sup> ECA, LPC files, folder 16, Robert Matthew to Brian Annable, 13 October 1972; Lord Provost's Committee minutes, 20 September 1972.

break. Beckett considered that RMJM's John Richards was 'was one of the best young architects in the United Kingdom', a ringing endorsement that suggests that Richards was potentially being lined up to do more than execute RAKP's design.<sup>72</sup> Indeed, Annable suggested to RMJM that a single firm would be appointed if a single project partnership was not possible, prompting Kininmonth to claim that RMJM was being invited to refuse a partnership in order to secure the project entirely for themselves.<sup>73</sup> Meanwhile, senior civil servants concluded that 'it would be better to face the adverse publicity of getting rid of Sir William than the much greater difficulties of delay and in-effectiveness in the Opera House planning.'<sup>74</sup> A handwritten note in the Lord Provost's Committee files similarly records that 'govt. would be embarrassed by any return to Sir W.K.'<sup>75</sup>

In September 1972, the Corporation terminated RAKP's appointment, ostensibly to force the creation of a single project partnership.<sup>76</sup> Extensive press coverage followed. By November, however, despite protests, RAKP had been decisively dispatched, their work to date being described as a feasibility study.<sup>77</sup> Indeed, the documentation issued by the Corporation in 1973 implied that a new appointment at this stage in the project had always been intended.<sup>78</sup>

## **THE RMJM SCHEMES, 1973–1975**

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<sup>72</sup> NRS, ED61/86, J. Kidd memo, 29 August 1972.

<sup>73</sup> ECA, LPC files, folder 17, Kininmonth to Lord Provost, 1 November 1972.

<sup>74</sup> NRS, ED61/86, J. Kidd memo, 29 August 1972.

<sup>75</sup> ECA, LPC files, Castle Terrace folder 15, undated note [September 1972].

<sup>76</sup> ECA, LPC Files, Note by the Town Clerk on the Castle Terrace Theatre Project, 16 November 1972.

<sup>77</sup> 'Opera House: Kininmonth out', *Architects' Journal* 156 (1 November 1972), p. 991.

<sup>78</sup> ECA, LPC files, Castle Terrace folder 17, 'Interviews with Private Architects', 29 June 1973.

The selection of a new architect began in earnest in May 1973. Annable briefly sought to capture the project for the City Architect's office, but withdrew before the matter could be discussed by councillors.<sup>79</sup> The RIBA proposed Denys Lasdun, Spence Glover and Ferguson, RMJM, Casson and Conder, RHW, Arup Associates, and Colin St-John Wilson.<sup>80</sup> Several had theatre experience. We have already encountered RHW and Lasdun, while RMJM was responsible for the Macrobert Centre at Stirling University, and Casson and Conder had designed the well-received Wyvern Arts Centre in Swindon. Notably, with the exceptions of RMJM and Spence Glover and Ferguson, all were based in England. The presumption appears to have been that a firm with a national reputation – defined in terms of the UK – was required, along with experience of 'prestige' projects. Alexander Dunbar of the Scottish Arts Council offered some thoughts on the list, drawn in part from discussions with colleagues.<sup>81</sup> Lasdun was 'excellent but expensive'; he and Wilson were thought to be the highest calibre designers. Casson and Conder's Wyvern Arts Centre was praised, as was RHW's Crucible, while the Macrobert Centre was thought to be 'interesting and intimate', if acoustically problematic owing to late changes in the brief. Spence Glover and Ferguson were linked with two university venues which in fact had been designed by Spence's London office, namely the Nuffield at Southampton and the Gardner Arts Centre at Sussex, neither of which was felt to be good. Dunbar proposed several additional names, including Chamberlin Powell and Bon (designers of the Barbican Arts Centre in London), Leslie Martin, Gollins Melvin Ward, and two architects known as specialists in theatre design, Peter Moro and Roderick Ham. Moro was also suggested by the theatre consultant Martin Carr.<sup>82</sup> At a meeting at the Town Clerk's home one Sunday afternoon in late July 1973, the list was

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<sup>79</sup> NRS, ED61/87, 'Selection of Architect', 29 June 1973, and I.M. Robertson memo, 9 July 1973.

<sup>80</sup> NRS, ED61/87, Lorraine Kelly to Edward Glendinning, 26 June 1973.

<sup>81</sup> NRS, ED61/87, Alexander Dunbar to Edward Glendinning, 19 July 1973.

<sup>82</sup> NRS, ED61/87, Martin Carr to Annable, 10 July 1973.

considered.<sup>83</sup> Spence, Casson and Conder, and Lasdun had reportedly declined to be considered owing to pressure of work.<sup>84</sup> RMJM, RHW, and Wilson seemed to be the frontrunners, and Beckett told the group that he would be happy with any of them. The choice was put to councillors, Annable presenting the options with the aid of slides. Although Annable favoured RHW on the basis of the Crucible and Warwick Arts Centre, the project was given to RMJM.<sup>85</sup>

*Building Design* considered the result 'a favourite son vote'.<sup>86</sup> RMJM had an Edinburgh base and had completed a series of major projects in the city, while Matthew himself was something of an architectural grandee with an international profile as an 'organiser'. Given the opera house's turbulent history, he may well have been considered a safe pair of hands, well-used to complex projects in sensitive places. Matthew promised that he would supervise the job himself, and that he would set up a dedicated design team under Kenneth Graham and John Richards. Several pencil sketches experimenting with the layout of the theatre testify to Matthew's personal involvement.<sup>87</sup> His interest in the project surely reflected the extent to which it could be conceived, like the Festival Hall before it,<sup>88</sup> in Geddesian terms as a kind of 'outlook tower' in which a community's 'cultural essence' might be distilled, but understood now at a national as well as a city level. Certainly Matthew referred to a 'building of exceptional national and civic

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<sup>83</sup> NRS, ED61/87, Bruce Beckett to Norman Graham, 23 July 1973.

<sup>84</sup> That said, Annable recalled (in discussion with the author, 18 April 2017) that he had interviewed Lasdun for the job.

<sup>85</sup> 'Architects Named for Opera House', *Scotsman*, 24 July 1973.

<sup>86</sup> Miles Glendinning, *Modern Architect: the Life and Times of Robert Matthew*, London, 2008, p. 447.

<sup>87</sup> Edinburgh University Library, Centre for Research Collections, RHM29, pencil sketches by Matthew.

<sup>88</sup> Glendinning, *Modern Architect*, pp. 89-90.

importance'.<sup>89</sup> It may well have been a particularly appealing project given that Matthew had chaired the panel that chose Lasdun to design the National in London, and so had effectively ruled himself out of that project. Furthermore, Matthew had long been convinced of the virtues of Geddesian 'conservative surgery', something which made his recent enthusiasm for architectural conservation over the kind of comprehensive development with which he had been associated in the 1950s and 1960s less of a volte-face than it might initially appear.<sup>90</sup> Faced with a prominent site that comprised a 'hole in the ground', cleared by the city authorities in the 1960s when construction seemed imminent, here was a prime opportunity to repair the urban fabric. That said, Miles Glendinning has speculated that Matthew may well have concluded that the project would never be built, seeing it instead as a lucrative source of income for RMJM during the mid-seventies recession.<sup>91</sup>

The brief now comprised a 1400-seat theatre for opera and drama, a 250-seat studio theatre, as well as the refurbishment and integration into the new building of the Lyceum. With three auditoria of different kinds (including the Lyceum), the project was as big as the National Theatre in London.<sup>92</sup>

Numerous auditorium concepts were drawn and evaluated during 1973; a press release in July 1974 stated that '10,000 man-hours' had been expended on the auditorium alone.<sup>93</sup> Regular meetings were held with Annable and his Deputy, Stuart Harris, as well as Sandy Brown (the acoustician), and the theatre consultants. Early in 1974, the design team visited twenty-one theatres

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<sup>89</sup> NRS, ED61/88, Robert Matthew to Stuart Harris, 14 August 1974.

<sup>90</sup> Miles Glendinning, 'The "Grand Plan": Robert Matthew and the Triumph of Conservation in Scotland', *Architectural Heritage*, vol. 16, 2005, pp. 72-102.

<sup>91</sup> Glendinning, *Modern Architect*, p. 448.

<sup>92</sup> Glendinning, *Modern Architect*, p. 448.

<sup>93</sup> Edinburgh University Library, Centre for Research Collections, RHM29, drawings of Castle Terrace Theatre auditorium options; NRS, ED61/88, Press Release, 3 July 1974.

and opera houses in West Germany and Switzerland.<sup>94</sup> Their first designs were ready by the summer of 1974 (**figs 3 and 4**).<sup>95</sup> The key move was to turn the auditorium through forty-five degrees so that it no longer lay parallel to Castle Terrace but now occupied a diagonal position on the site. Not only that, but the building was cantilevered out above Castle Terrace, essentially 'borrowing' the space above the carriageway. It presented a compact mass, faced in sandstone and copper, and dominated by an angled wall of glazing through which the foyers were to be visible. The auditorium betrayed the influence of John Bury, the prominent scenic designer well-known for his work with the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) and who had been engaged as one of two theatre consultants on the Edinburgh project, alongside the technical specialist Martin Carr. For example, the sides of the auditorium featured forward-facing sledges on the Barbican model. (The key difference is in the means of access to the auditorium: the seating rows in Edinburgh were to be interrupted by aisles, unlike the Barbican's side gangways, separated from the auditorium itself by narrow doors.) The stage, meanwhile, was large, although the confines of the site meant that wing-space would be limited on one side. Elaborate means of adjusting the position of the proscenium arch to suit opera and drama were tested.

RMJM's design has a weightiness that that might be considered appropriate to its purpose, although its extensive glazing suggests a more permeable, accessible monumentality than was the case of the rather introverted Usher Hall. It would be, according to the *Evening News*, a 'futuristic complex' and 'a space age scheme in sharp contrast to the classical Edwardian Usher Hall nearby'.<sup>96</sup> However, the RFACS was less convinced. It had warned in early

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<sup>94</sup> NRS, ED61/88, 'Progress Report 10', 8 February 1974.

<sup>95</sup> Historic Environment Scotland archive, Edinburgh, RMJM uncatalogued boxes 197 and 198.

<sup>96</sup> 'Opera House on Show', *Edinburgh Evening News*, 5 July 1974.

1973 that the brief was ambitious. Its commissioners (including Jack Coia, Anthony Wheeler, and Alan Reiach) now considered the design 'bold and ingenious' but criticised its 'damaging visual impact and [...] adverse effect on environmental quality and character'.<sup>97</sup> They argued that the 120 ft high fly tower above the stage towered excessively above the Usher Hall and that the site had been overloaded by a brief that was 'too ambitious'.<sup>98</sup> Matthew had earlier justified the tower with Modernist orthodoxy as emblematic of the building's function; 'what is functional is not necessarily ugly'.<sup>99</sup> Earlier in his career, he had won battles against conservationists, but, as Glendinning argues, the conservation lobby in Edinburgh had since grown in strength.<sup>100</sup> The poorly received example of the St James Centre loomed large as an example where a substantial building had been squeezed onto a prominent site: was such a similarly large and clearly 'modern' building right for Castle Terrace?<sup>101</sup> Nonetheless, the *Scotsman* held out in favour of the design, seeing it in terms of civic pride and claims to 'capital city' status:

If the project is abandoned or downgraded to that a second-best substitute is considered adequate, it will be a sign – yet another sign – of civic acceptance of mediocrity. Conservation of parts of Edinburgh's heritage is not enough for a capital, Festival city.<sup>102</sup>

A revised scheme of October 1974 reduced the height of the flytower and sank the building slightly into the site. Then, in early 1975, a new scheme appeared which attempted to play down the bulk of the building by replacing the sheer wall of glass with a series of 'terraces' (**figs 5, 6, and 7**).<sup>103</sup> They bring to mind the dominant horizontality of other contemporaneous RMJM projects,

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<sup>97</sup> 'Commission Object to Scale of Opera House', *Scotsman*, 8 August 1974.

<sup>98</sup> Glendinning, *Modern Architect*, p. 449.

<sup>99</sup> 'Plans for Edinburgh's New £16.7m Theatre Outlined', *Scotsman*, 6 July 1974.

<sup>100</sup> Glendinning, *Modern Architect*, p. 449.

<sup>101</sup> NRS, DD12/3414, copy of letter from Oliver Barratt to the *Scotsman*, 12 August 1974.

<sup>102</sup> 'Second-best City?', *Scotsman*, 10 August 1974.

<sup>103</sup> Historic Environment Scotland archive, Edinburgh, RMJM uncatalogued box 446.



including the Commonwealth Pool in Edinburgh and the University of Stirling. Clearly the firm was evolving a kind of universal language of Modernism suited to civic projects. A further source, however, was surely the terracing of the National Theatre in London. That Lasdun's work may have been in the air at RMJM generally is suggested by the contemporaneous teaching block at Stirling University. It forms a long, cranked building whose scale and geometries reprised those of Lasdun's University of East Anglia. Lasdun himself noticed the similarities, filing a picture of Stirling in his archive with the annotation 'UEA TEACHING WALL!'<sup>104</sup>

During 1974, it was hoped that the theatre might be open by the early 1980s. However, the project was increasingly living on borrowed time, and not only because of the ongoing doubts about its scale and modernity. A civil servant wrote in April 1975 that 'there is no point in further wasting public money in decking out the corpse to tender stage.'<sup>105</sup> In 1971, it was noted that a growing number of councillors saw the project as 'frill', while in June 1975 Robertson recorded that Labour members would be whipped to vote against the scheme.<sup>106</sup> Local government reorganisation, furthermore, meant that the old Edinburgh Corporation was replaced in 1975 by a new District Council. Both it and the new Lothian Regional Council were reported in April that year to be 'unenthusiastic'.<sup>107</sup> A vocal group of residents campaigned against the 'opera house', calling instead for upgrades to the 1920s Edinburgh Playhouse. One, G.F. Lucas, wrote to the Prime Minister, claiming that the majority of

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<sup>104</sup> RIBA Archives, London, LaD/146/5, 'For the Record'. I am grateful to Barnabas Calder for this information.

<sup>105</sup> NRS, ED61/89, J. Kidd memo, 25 April 1975.

<sup>106</sup> NRS, ED61/83, I.G.F. Gray memo, 1 June 1971; ED61/89, I.M. Robertson memo, 6 June 1975.

<sup>107</sup> NRS, ED61/89, I.M. Robertson to Alexander Dunbar, 18 April 1975.

residents did not want an opera house and anticipating unspecified 'drastic action by these people if this scheme should proceed'.<sup>108</sup>

Costed at £9 million at the start of 1973, severe inflation and design changes meant that the estimated cost now exceeded £20 million at a time of significant cut-backs in all areas of public expenditure. Although never intended for opera alone, the 'opera house' label was hardly helpful, its elitist connotations no longer suggesting cultural aspiration but rather the frittering away of public money on a minority pursuit. During 1974, civil servants increasingly seemed to hope that the scheme would be abandoned:

I have my doubts as to the desirability of public expenditure of this magnitude for any one project at this time of financial stringency. [...]

It may be that when final details and costs are available that the successor authority to Edinburgh Corporation will have second thoughts and relieve us of having to make a decision.<sup>109</sup>

The MP Bruce Millan, too, enquired whether government really had committed to support the scheme,<sup>110</sup> and he encouraged the listing of the Playhouse in order to make sure that it was not demolished before the fate of the Castle Terrace project was known.<sup>111</sup> The issue was not only what it would look like to spend this sum of money on a theatre. The money simply was not available, especially in the light of competing claims from Glasgow (the Burrell Collection, the Concert Hall and Cultural Centre, and the refurbishment of the Theatre Royal for Scottish Opera) and elsewhere.<sup>112</sup> Yet neither the Scottish Office nor local councillors wanted to make the first

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<sup>108</sup> NRS, ED61/59, G.F. Lucas to Harold Wilson, 23 August 1975.

<sup>109</sup> NRS, ED61/88, Robert Hughes memo, 29 July 1974.

<sup>110</sup> NRS, ED61/88, I.M. Robertson memo, 15 July 1974.

<sup>111</sup> NRS, ED61/88, Minutes of meeting, 6 September 1974; T. Spence memo, 29 September 1974. The investigators thought the Playhouse's elevation 'respectable but uninspired' and the auditorium of greater interest.

<sup>112</sup> NRS, ED61/89, 'Castle Terrace Theatre, Edinburgh', 13 February 1975.

move. It was not until late September 1975 that the District Council was informed by telephone that the plug had been pulled.<sup>113</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

How much was the Castle Terrace project really an 'object lesson in how not to get things done'? In 1974, Stuart Harris reported that the 'opera house' was hardly the saga that it was often claimed to be:

The Press and public seem persistently to believe that the Corporation have been slow in progressing this project. In fact, considering the procedure which local authorities must follow and the interests which have to be consulted, a cool look at the history over the last few years might reveal a different picture – one of steady and fairly systematic progress.<sup>114</sup>

Certainly the length of time from inception to anticipated completion was not unprecedented. Twenty years would have elapsed between the Oppenheim proposals and the projected opening of the RMJM-designed theatre. While few regional theatres took quite so long to come to fruition, their gestation was nonetheless often protracted. The new Dundee Rep, for example, was first discussed in 1963 but did not open until 1981. More comparable is the National Theatre in London. After a series of false starts during the first half of the twentieth century, an Act of Parliament authorising the Treasury to make a financial contribution to its construction was passed in 1949, but the theatre did not open until 1976.

As was to be the case in Edinburgh, the National Theatre witnessed a change in architect. Brian O'Rourke had been appointed in 1947, but by the early 1960s

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<sup>113</sup> 'No-one Will Sign Death Warrant for Opera House', *Scotsman*, 5 September 1975; NRS, ED61/59, Press Release, 25 September 1975.

<sup>114</sup> 'We've Not Dragged Heels on Opera House, Says Architect', *Edinburgh Evening News*, 13 April 1974.

his rather sedate form of Modern architecture had been overshadowed by the work of a new generation of designers, and he was replaced in 1963 by Lasdun.<sup>115</sup> RAKP's Modernism was as middle-of-the-road as O'Rourke's: as we have seen, Beckett and Drake thought it 'pedestrian'. During the 1930s, Kininmonth's output had spanned traditional styles and Modernism, and his firm's post-war designs, though typically now more 'modern' in appearance, demonstrate a similarly undogmatic, visual approach that seemed superficial to some critics. The assessments of the *Buildings of Scotland*, for example, are hardly glowing. The Scottish Provident Institution is described as a 'wilful' and enthusiastic example of 'would-be modernity'; only the abstracted Corbusianism of Craigsbank Church (1964) is favoured with an image.<sup>116</sup> Perhaps 'style' was more acceptable in church design. In contrast, RMJM had a stronger critical reputation and greater international profile, plus more experience of the design of major public buildings. RMJM's Modernism was rigorous in conception and subtle in execution, although it was hardly avant-garde. Indeed, Matthew was perhaps an even more 'establishment' figure than Kininmonth. Yet while RAKP's work arguably failed to reach the heights achieved by Kininmonth's former partner, Basil Spence, whose approach was similarly visual, we should be wary of entirely writing it off. Certainly RMJM's proposals were better resolved and more effectively planned than those by RAKP, the domes of whose 1971 'opera house' scheme seem less than successful. However, RAKP's elevations compare reasonably well with the Scottish Provident building, even if in the case of the theatre there remains a sense of Lasdun-esque strata being employed as applied visual dressing rather than as part of an integrated composition. If there was a real 'design'

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<sup>115</sup> Barnabas Calder, 'Committees and Concrete: the genesis and architecture of Denys Lasdun's National Theatre', Ph.D. dissertation, University of Cambridge, 2007, p. 38.

<sup>116</sup> John Gifford, Colin McWilliam and David Walker with Christopher Wilson, *Buildings of Scotland: Edinburgh* (Harmondsworth, 1991), pp. 70, 323 (Scottish Provident), p. 588 and pl. 47 (Craigsbank).

problem at Edinburgh, it related to planning rather than architecture as such. From Abercrombie onwards, the location of the new theatre was dictated in part by the presence of the Lyceum, which was either to be replaced or would form part of a multi-venue cultural complex along with the Usher Hall. However, the site was relatively small. Even RMJM's ingenious attempt to borrow the space above the adjacent roads still resulted in a design that seemed to overload the site. Mention was occasionally made of constructing the theatre opposite the Usher Hall on the other side of Lothian Road, but this idea never appealed, partly because it was felt to lack the potential advantages in terms of shared backstage and front-of-house facilities that the Castle Terrace site would allow.<sup>117</sup>

Harris's mention of 'the procedure which local authorities must follow' touches on a more significant point, and one which perhaps starts to get to the root of the matter. The 'opera house' was essentially a civic initiative, but to what extent was the public purse able to support very big projects? The onus was on local Repertory companies to fundraise, and/or local authorities to step in, though the latter were limited by the provisions of the Local Government Act and the extent to which spending on the arts was considered politically expedient. 'Housing the Arts', as we have noted, was limited by its relatively restricted capital allocations. The significant number of medium-sized new theatres around Britain which were realised between the 1960s and the 1980s testifies that the system worked as far as Repertory theatre in the English regions, Scotland, and Wales was concerned. Bigger projects, however, were cast into something of a vacuum. The National Theatre was successfully completed, but planned opera houses in Manchester and Cardiff, proposed at the same time as the Edinburgh project, never came to fruition,

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<sup>117</sup> NRS, DD12/3414, 'Preliminary Observations on RFAC Letter, 7 August 1974', 9 August 1974.

and Glasgow's £20 million cultural centre was truncated, with only the concert hall being constructed. Were these big projects just too big for local authorities? Alexander Dunbar of the Scottish Arts Council concluded of Edinburgh in November 1975 that the creation of a special organisation like the South Bank Theatre Board (which had overseen the National Theatre) would have been helpful.<sup>118</sup>

In addition, the extent to which a decision about the funding of the 'opera house' seemed to be stalled between 1966 and 1971 raises the question of just how keen central government really was to support these larger projects. Clearly the aim to improve theatre outwith London was genuine, as the slew of new theatres around Britain confirms, and some projects which successfully claimed national significance, such as the Burrell Collection, were eventually funded. However, such significance could be debated: Glasgow's cultural centre proposals, for example, were deemed, perhaps conveniently, to be a local project and so not eligible for government funding. Furthermore, was a grant promised to Edinburgh only grudgingly? In 1971, the Paymaster General advised that the decision to spend large sums improving Covent Garden meant that 'it would be difficult to refuse this offer [to Edinburgh] while providing the greater part of finance in London'; making a commitment to Edinburgh gave a presentational advantage to the London grant.<sup>119</sup>

Meanwhile, proposals to improve Edinburgh's Playhouse and Glasgow's Theatre Royal were seized on; in the latter case, Scottish Opera was praised for having raised so much money itself.<sup>120</sup> That the Playhouse could be refurbished as a viable large-scale theatre for at least the medium term also counted against significant expenditure on a new building. If all Glasgow and

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<sup>118</sup> 'Arts Council Still Have Opera Hopes', *Scotsman*, 13 November 1975.

<sup>119</sup> NRS, ED61/84, Paymaster General to Home Affairs Select Committee, 23 April 1971.

<sup>120</sup> NRS, ED61/88, Scottish Minister draft letter to send to Chief Secretary to the Treasury, n.d.

Edinburgh wanted was something better than they already had, then refurbishment would deliver that.<sup>121</sup> Thus with other calls on the public purse carrying greater political weight in a period of increasing economic turbulence, pragmatism ultimately won out over idealism. In these circumstances, the delays occasioned by the lengthy negotiations about finance in the late 1960s and by architectural squabbling in the early 1970s, neither of which in itself should have been fatal, collided with a system that worked well for smaller theatres but made little formal provision for 'monster projects'.

In 1975, a civil servant reflected that

Probably few of those who have been personally involved in the Castle Terrace project over the last 5 years will be anxious to repeat the experience, and a project of the Castle Terrace scale will have to wait another half generation for new enthusiasms and a better economic climate.<sup>122</sup>

Indeed, it was to be the 1990s before significant sums of public money were once again routinely spent on major arts buildings in Britain. In Edinburgh, after proposals for a substantial theatre were briefly resurrected in 1984, the 'hole in the ground' on Castle Terrace was filled in the early nineties by an office development that also included new premises for the Traverse Theatre. Finally, in 1994, the city's Empire Theatre re-opened after major reconstruction by Law and Dunbar-Nasmith and Theatre Projects Consultants as the Edinburgh Festival Theatre, effectively creating the centre first proposed by Abercrombie some forty-five years before and bringing a long saga to a close.

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<sup>121</sup> NRS, ED61/88, J.A. Clare memo, 14 August 1974.

<sup>122</sup> NRS, ED61/59, J. Kidd memo, 11 July 1975.

## **Acknowledgements**

A conversation with Tom Parnell encouraged me to think that an account of the 'opera house' would be worth writing, and I am grateful to Diane Watters and Sally Rush for giving me the opportunity to do so. I am especially pleased to have had the opportunity to discuss the project with Brian Annable OBE. I would also like to thank Miles Glendinning for commenting on the draft text, Dawn Evers and colleagues at Historic Environment Scotland for making available (and photographing) uncatalogued RMJM material, the Centre for Research Collections at the University of Edinburgh for access to uncatalogued Robert Matthew drawings, and Jennifer Hogg at Edinburgh City Archives for referring me to uncatalogued papers. Historic Environment Scotland generously provided many of the images that illustrate this article.

## **Illustration captions**

1. The 'Opera House' as proposed by Kininmonth in 1966, viewed from the south-east with the hotel tower beyond (Crown Copyright, National Records of Scotland, ED61/72)
2. Kininmonth's 1968 proposal viewed from the north, coupling terraces reminiscent of Denys Lasdun's National Theatre in London with a



strong sense of symmetry and vaguely 'Art Deco' vertical feature (© The Scotsman Publications Ltd)

3. Model of RMJM's 1974 proposal for the 'opera house' (RIBA Collections)
4. Section through RMJM's 1974 proposal: the 'backward' stepping of the rear wall of the auditorium and the forward-facing 'slips' within the auditorium betray the influence of John Bury, as both recall the Barbican Theatre in London, with the design of which Bury had been involved (Historic Environment Scotland (Robert Matthew, Johnson-Marshall Collection))
5. RMJM's 1975 'opera house' scheme, drawing of the elevation to Castle Terrace (Historic Environment Scotland (Robert Matthew, Johnson-Marshall Collection))
6. RMJM's 1975 scheme, plan including the Usher Hall and Lyceum Theatre. Castle Terrace (and the existing multi-storey car park) is to the right. A dotted line shows the extent of the building, which would sail over the road. (Historic Environment Scotland (Robert Matthew, Johnson-Marshall Collection))
7. RMJM's 1975 scheme, section (Historic Environment Scotland (Robert Matthew, Johnson-Marshall Collection))