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The Edinburgh Fire Debate

Should Edinburgh attempt to "re-create" the buildings destroyed in last weekend's fire? Dr Stuart Macdonald, The Lighthouse

The fire that raged in Edinburgh last weekend and which has devastated part of the historic Old Town has engendered a huge sense of loss. However, it has also opened up an opportunity for Scotland's capital to demonstrate this country's contemporary architectural vision.

An exhibition curated by the Van Alen Institute of New York, which will have its only UK showing at The Lighthouse next spring, addresses the very issues raised by the fire. One of a number of initiatives responding to the aftermath of 9/11, *Renewing, Rebuilding, Remembering* focuses on seven cities that have been devastated by natural or man made disasters, looking at how each responded emotionally and physically to the impact of events. The focus of the exhibition is reconstruction - success stories where urban spaces have been revived and monuments to tragedy integrated as living memorials within regenerated spaces. It highlights examples of how citizens have rebuilt, remade, and rethought their urban life. And this is the challenge offered to the citizens of Edinburgh in the aftermath of last weekend's fire - to rethink this urban space. The communities of Beirut, Berlin, Kobe, Manchester, Oklahoma, San Francisco and Sarajevo were able to overcome the trauma of the diverse tragedies that they had experienced and define their collective remembrances within the positive context of renewing. They remembered the past, but had their eyes firmly fixed on the future.

The next couple of weeks will see the international debate on urban redevelopment and memorial take centre stage again. Michael Bloomberg announced the "Downtown Plan" for New York earlier this week and the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation will unveil seven alternative proposals for the redevelopment of Ground Zero, including a response by British architect Sir Norman Foster, next week. Edinburgh too should seize the opportunities opened up by the events of last weekend. It should work with the acclaimed Scottish architectural and artistic communities to develop a contemporary response to its own devastation. Scotland has a rich seam of architectural and artistic talent, which Edinburgh should not fail to mine. Practices such as Malcolm Fraser Architects whose stunning Dance Base, set in the heart of historic Edinburgh, was short-listed for the prestigious Stirling Prize for Architecture this year, and Page and Park whose contemporary additions to historic buildings such as The Lighthouse and CCA in Glasgow have demonstrated how new visions can not only celebrate but in fact enhance historic environments. Respect for an historic setting should never be allowed to prevent the introduction of challenging ideas and responses.

Interestingly, although set in one of the oldest parts of the city, the area which was devastated in last weekend's fire was in fact renowned as a contemporary cultural centre and hub of Creative Industries. In addition to the Night Clubs, restaurants and bars, Edinburgh University also had premises in the area. Among the many innovative projects being developed by the University is one which involves the Centre for Speech Technology Research and a major urban regeneration scheme - Queen Elizabeth Square in Glasgow's Gorbals. It demonstrates how contemporary ideas can be brought to an historic area. The Centre's collaboration with artist David Cotterrell, which is on the cutting edge of artificial intelligence, is set to re-create the traditional patterns of Gorbals speech and generate conversation using the very latest in computer technology. This fusion of past and future sets a benchmark for the thinking and imagination that should drive the regeneration process in Edinburgh's Old Town. It is vital that any development, which replaces the lost buildings, not only recognises but celebrates this vision. Here we have an opportunity to create architecture that reflects the vibrancy of this area and to address the question of what a 21st century Cultural and Creative Industries quarter should look like? What kind of architecture is needed for these industries?



The historic buildings have been destroyed forever. Any nostalgic attempt to recreate them denies the opportunity to make a statement about contemporary Scotland and demonstrate tangibly that this country is not stuck in some heritage time warp. Edinburgh should resist the temptation to look back.

Let us create an appropriate memorial to Scotland's historic and continuing creativity in the form of a development that will be seen as a classic example of quality 21st architecture and urban design.

Dr Stuart Macdonald is director of The Lighthouse, Scotland's national Centre for Architecture, Design and the City. The Van Alen Institute New York's "Rebuilding Remembering Renewing" exhibition runs at The Lighthouse from 25 January to 14 March 2003.

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