David Cotterrell: scottisharchitecture.com : the Edinburgh fire debate

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The Edinburgh Fire DebateShould Edinburgh attempt to "re-create" the buildings destroyed in last weekend's fire?

The fire that raged in Edinburgh last weekend and which has devastated part of the historic Old Townhas engendered a huge sense of loss. However, it has also opened up an opportunity for Scotland'scapital 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 TheLighthouse next spring, addresses the very issues raised by the fire. One of a number of initiativesresponding to the aftermath of 9/11, Renewing, Rebuilding, Remembering focuses on seven cities thathave been devastated by natural or man made disasters, looking at how each responded emotionally andphysically to the impact of events. The focus of the exhibition is reconstruction - success stories whereurban spaces have been revived and monuments to tragedy integrated as living memorials withinregenerated spaces. It highlights examples of how citizens have rebuilt, remade, and rethought theirurban life. And this is the challenge offered to the citizens of Edinburgh in the aftermath of lastweekend'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 thatthey 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 takecentre stage again. Michael Bloomberg announced the "Downtown Plan" for New York earlier this weekand the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation will unveil seven alternative proposals for theredevelopment 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 workwith the acclaimed Scottish architectural and artistic communities to develop a contemporary responseto its own devastation. Scotland has a rich seam of architectural and artistic talent, which Edinburghshould not fail to mine. Practices such Malcolm Fraser Architects whose stunning Dance Base, set in theheart 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 CCAin Glasgow have demonstrated how new visions can not only celebrate but in fact enhance historicenvironments. Respect for an historic setting should never be allowed to prevent the introduction ofchallenging ideas and responses.

Interestingly, although set in one of the oldest parts of they city, the areawhich was devastated in last weekend's fire was in fact renowned as acontemporary cultural centre and hub of Creative Industries. In addition tothe Night Clubs, restaurants and bars, Edinburgh University also hadpremises in the area. Among the many innovative projects being developedby the University is one which involves the Centre for Speech TechnologyResearch and a major urban regeneration scheme - Queen ElizabethSquare in Glasgow's Gorbals. It demonstrates how contemporary ideas canbe brought to an historic area. The Centre's collaboration with artist DavidCotterrell, which is on the cutting edge of artificial intelligence, is set to recreatethe traditional patterns of Gorbals speech and generate conversationusing the very latest in computer technology. This fusion of past andfuture sets a benchmark for the thinking and imagination that should drive the regeneration process inEdinburgh's Old Town. It is vital that any development, which replaces the lost buildings, not onlyrecognises but celebrates this

vision. Here we have an opportunity to create architecture that reflectsthe vibrancy of this area and to address the question of what a 21st century Cultural and CreativeIndustries 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 theopportunity to make a statement about contemporary Scotland and demonstrate tangibly that thiscountry 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 adevelopment that will be seen as a classic example of quality 21st architecture and urban design.

Dr Stuart Macdonald

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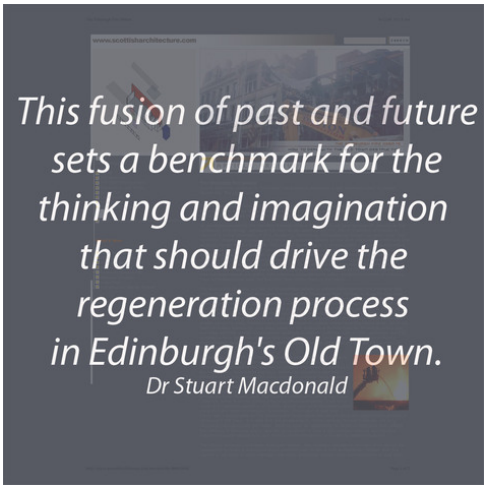

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