

The Old Royal High School, Edinburgh
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I would like to consider how the Old Royal High School relates to the wider urban landscape of Edinburgh, and particularly to the World Heritage site, and then to offer a few thoughts on how decisions on its future might be made.

A few pictures from the UNESCO web site sum up the extraordinary gravitas and presence of the city of Edinburgh that has been acknowledged, by its World Heritage status, as being of international importance. World Heritage Sites are inscribed because they are deemed to have Outstanding Universal Value (OUV). This means that they are part of the ‘world heritage of mankind as a whole’ and deserve ‘protection & transmission to future generations’.

OUV is a value and relates in turn to very specific attributes that convey that value. This does not mean that everything about the city must be preserved but rather those aspects or attributes that convey its OUV.

OUV is identified by the World Heritage Committee at the time of inscription. For the Old and New Towns of Edinburgh, its OUV is about the extraordinary juxtaposition and contrast between the clearly articulated planning of the Old and the New Towns in architectural terms, the clarity of its urban structures that are seen to be unrivalled in Europe, the way the New Town is the most extensive example of neo-classical rationalist town planning anywhere in the world, and the high quality of the architecture that exerted a major influence on the development of urban architecture and town planning throughout Europe. And overlaying these physical attributes are associations with the Enlightenment: the way the urban landscape reflects ideas and ideals of the Enlightenment, a period in the 18th century when Edinburgh was the cultural leader of Europe and when its buildings were imbued with the spirit of intellectualism.

It was not just UNESCO that acknowledged and extolled these attributes – they were well articulated by those who wrote the nomination dossier and promoted its inscription on the World Heritage List. ‘Edinburgh is one of the greatest of European capital cities’ it stated and ‘Visually, intellectually and culturally her contributions to the wider culture of the world have been enormous. It is the purpose of this submission to outline what these contributions have been’ – as a place.

As well as those over-arching landscape aspects that conveys OUV, there are also three important specific characteristics that again emerge very clearly from the nomination dossier. First there are the tenement structures in both the Old and New Towns, (although tenement living is found all over Europe the scale and quality of those in Edinburgh are outstanding), secondly the range and quality of public buildings by a succession of accomplished architects, and thirdly the crucial importance of open spaces that link the built forms in the urban landscape. Both of these last two link to the Enlightenment – visual response to the spirit of learning – and both of these are relevant to this evening’s discussion and I will touch on them in a bit more detail.

First the public buildings: the nomination noted that ‘Some of the finest public and commercial monuments of the New-classical revival in Europe survive in the city’. The images show a few examples with which you will all be familiar: the Register House, the Royal Scottish Academy, the National Gallery and of course the Old Royal High School which is the reason we are here.

These distinguished buildings (not just the four shown but also the many others listed in the Nomination dossier) are in visual and architectural terms hugely important components of the overall urban landscape; they also display strong messages. As public buildings, individually and collectively, they reflect uses that provided or still provide public benefit, and they evoke the spirit of intellectualism that pervaded the city. These buildings are significant for more than their built form: they are also significant for what they stand for.

So too are the open spaces that contribute to the urban landscape of the city: these are also a key factor in the way the city portrays ideas of the Enlightenment as a prosperous, affluent and above all a confident city. The most dominant is the "great arena" of Sir Walter Scott's Waverley Valley that links the Old and New towns.

Equally important is Calton Hill which the nomination refers to as 'Every bit as symbolic a location to Edinburgh as the Castle...', and 'Carefully laid out for picturesque effect... in Classical rather than military garb.'

Calton Hill brings together open space and the public buildings of the National Monument, the Observatory & Hopetown monument, and the Old Royal High School in one extraordinarily important ensemble. In the nomination dossier the Old Royal High School is described as 'The noblest monument of the Scottish Revival: and perhaps the single building which most justified Edinburgh's epithet Athens of the North'. Its design was conceived integrally with the design of the National Monument on the hill above.

Calton Hill reflects a remarkable group of young architects who dominated the scene from the 1820s: William Playfair, James Gillespie Graham and Thomas Hamilton who merged coherent classical concepts of architecture with landscape.

The nomination dossier makes one further important point in relation to the ensembles they worked on such as Calton Hill. It stresses how these 'reflect not only the architects but the ambition of the Councillors who controlled the city'. There was clearly an intention not only to establish the city as the Athens of the north but also as a worthy counterpart to the city of classical antiquity.

One of the key attributes of OUV is the way the city of Edinburgh reflects the spirit of the Enlightenment. Calton Hill as an ensemble is absolutely key to that attribute and within that ensemble the Old Royal High School is an essential component. The Old Royal High School must be seen as part of the ensemble of Calton Hill. It also must be understood as a public building – for it is not just its architecture but also its original

use that reflects its links to Enlightenment thinking.

All of this brings into focus the issue of how decisions should be made to ensure development respects these extensive layers of significance that contribute to the OUV of the overall historic urban landscape.

World Heritage status should help not hinder this process. WHSs should be places where the OUV for which they were inscribed on the WH list becomes the starting point for development that reinforces cultural heritage. WHS status needs to be used to drive forward innovative thinking about how the city might develop.

Cities such as Edinburgh can be managed mainly on the basis of protecting their key physical structures – individual buildings, groups of buildings and planning features. But such an approach on its own can often miss the complexity of such places and their inherent dynamism.

Over the past five to ten years, a new approach to management of towns and cities has been evolving that aims to encourage cities to see themselves as dynamic, historic urban landscapes rather than a collection of static buildings. This allows them to manage those landscapes to reflect social, cultural economic and other aspects of city life, based on an understanding of what it is that drives the development of the city and respecting its complexity and inner resilience.

And this is precisely the way World Heritage cities should be perceived and managed through developing a vision for where the city wishes to go, setting out how to get there through re-uniting social, cultural, economic, and political ideas, so that once again city planning is a powerful symbol of positive and enlightened ideas and ideals.

In Regensburg (Germany), part of the World Heritage site of the Old town of Regensburg with Stadtamhof, the municipality decided that its governance system could be improved by exchanging experiences and best practices with other heritage cities. Through a partnership with eight other European cities, Regensburg developed and instituted a new management system that integrates city development and heritage.

The Historic Centre of Vienna (Austria), also a World Heritage site, has similarly structured its plan to foster cultural heritage and new architecture that strengthens the identity of the city and fosters its overall well-being. In 2009 Vienna produced a Dynamic Management Plan. Its Introduction acknowledges that the existing laws and administrative levels in Vienna were sufficient: what was needed was to use them in different ways to foster dynamic approaches through an agreed Vision drawn up on the basis of consultation with a wide range of stakeholders.

The Old and New Towns of Edinburgh has Management plan which is detailed and supported by main partners. When this is next revised, the opportunity might perhaps be taken to make it more aspirational, through the drafting of an agreed, collaborative Vision that could be used to drive forward the city in a way that that integrates development and heritage, and could deliver confidence to decision makers.

To come back to the Old Royal High School: if the school is to be perceived as part of the designed ensemble Calton Hill, as a symbol of Edinburgh's claim to be as important as Classical Athens, and as part of one of the fundamental attributes of the OUV of the historic urban landscape of Edinburgh, we need to ask if the current plans for the re-development of the School meet the following conditions.

Do they reinforce those layers of meaning and signal the extraordinary confidence of Edinburgh as the Athens of the north? Do they help an understanding of these themes within the wider landscape of the wider city?

Do they strengthen public understanding? Do they deliver social, cultural as well as economic benefit? Do they support OUV? In my view the answer to all of these is NO. And we should also ask whether it is acceptable to change one of the most important public buildings in Edinburgh to private use.

The Caltongate development was famously judged 'Not horrendous enough to refuse'. Is this the way the Old Royal High should be judged? Surely for this extraordinary city there should be higher aspirations to

deliver schemes that reinforce heritage assets and provide wide cultural and aesthetic as well as economic benefits.

There was great confidence in the writing of the World Heritage nomination dossier which seemed to hint at the opportunities that were offered to display Scottish culture through this great city, with its Enlightenment links, and its extraordinary array of Public Buildings, churches and houses, for greater public benefit. Edinburgh's outstanding historic urban landscape deserves a dynamic vision based on strong visual, cultural and intellectual engagement and development that supports rather than subtracts from its extraordinary assets, particularly the Old Royal High School.
