

Eden Court Art Project

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Art in Architecture

GEORGINA COBURN examines the way in which the new Eden Court complex incorporates art and design as part of the fabric and resources of the building

NOW THE largest Arts Centre in Scotland, the new Eden Court Theatre combines architectural design and commissioned art works to create an integrated series of inspirational spaces. This development comes at a pivotal time in the city's history and in architectural, aesthetic and ideological terms heralds a significant expansion.

In the past Eden Court's programming had been constrained by the parameters set by the existing structure. Embedded in its new design is a greater sense of vision and aspiration. It is a building that functions on many levels as a performance, social, educational, administrative and creative space.

For me the most definitive aspect of this project is affirmation of the central value of the Arts in the Highland capital. Expansion of thought through integrated, exceptional design is at the core of this project of unprecedented scale and complexity. Lead architects Nicola Walls and David Paton of Page Park Glasgow are to be congratulated for their creative vision on a challenging and complex building of three distinct parts.

The integrated architectural design and commissioned artworks create a wonderful environment for performance, education and creative development to flourish

The traditional stone work of the 1878 Bishop's Palace, concrete hexagonal geometry of the 1976 main theatre and the glass and steel of the 2007 extension display a progression of materials and textures leading the eye through time. An extraordinary range of architectural and building work is clearly evident in the completed complex from conservation, restoration and refurbishment to new visionary design.

One of the most exciting aspects of areas such as the new dance, drama and education studios is contemplation of future works that will be created there through classes, residencies and workshops. Standing in The Jim Love Studio with floor to ceiling glass commands an elevated view out to the distant tree line under a magnificent mass of sky.

All the subtlety of light and colour from the outside environment is brought beautifully into focus. There is a feeling of inspiration, possibility and openness communicated by the architecture. Connected to the inner 1st floor foyer via a sliding horizontal window and to the environment outside it is a living breathing space, connecting back to the theatre and the city.

The link between existing and new elements has been negotiated with thought, innovation and skill by the architects, with the greatest challenge emerging from the listed status of existing buildings. As space was limited outside, stacking space whilst maintaining the dominant horizontal plane provided a creative solution. This makes a strong statement, taking in views of the surrounding area and making each distinct section of the building integral to the next. The accommodation of dressing rooms, box office, restaurant kitchen and public toilets have all been incorporated into the back of the building, allowing a continuous view throughout the ground level foyer.

The integration of geometric elements from the main complex – both interior and exterior – is a key device creating visual continuity. The reduction of the rippling foyers in the 1976 façade into simplified geometric form sharpens these original elements transforming them into strong clean edged contemporary design.

The entire interior has been cleared revealing beauty in what was previously unappreciated. This succeeds in making the audience look again at the existing 1970's design in the context of the 2007 extension. This is exemplified in the triangulated structure of the atrium section, constructed as a single steel frame in an Invergordon hangar and echoing the 1976 facade.

Standing on the first floor balcony the way the eye is lead into the space by this angular geometry is both elegant and ingenious. Beneath the atrium reflective surfaces of stone and glass interplay beautifully in an area flooded with natural light.

Regular visitors to Eden Court will remember entering through the side of the building and being funnelled into performance spaces through an artificially lit dead corridor or via the semi enclosed main staircase. From the initial approach to movement inside the building the whole experience of going to the theatre or cinema at Eden Court has been completely transformed.

The new sequence of approach accented by a series of commissioned art works subtly directs our movement through the building and establishes a more fluid relationship between the interior and exterior spaces. The restaurant area and new first floor terrace reclaim outer spaces making the most of natural light and the riverside location.

The ground floor foyer presents no barriers to the view and large doors as part of the restaurant can be opened in the summer time, allowing activity to spill outside into the landscaped forecourt. The new entrance now located at the front of the building addresses the city centre, complimented by the uninterrupted flow of glass at ground floor level and the gentle undulating landscaping outside.

The south facing mound will make the most of our northern sun and a commissioned land work by artist Kate Whiteford transforms what was once a sterile lawn area into a destination.

Whiteford's land drawing "Excavation (Double Disc and Serpent)" is a bold and beautiful statement that gradually reveals itself when viewed from different levels. On approach from the main road the design is a dynamic movement of curves leading the viewer into the site.

Constructed in white gravel and planted black grass the serpentine curves and spiral patterns have been cleverly manipulated to reveal the whole design from an aerial perspective, the first and second floor foyers of the main theatre providing the most complete view. As our physical perspective changes so too do the levels of recognition or meaning in the work.

The strong formal design finds its origin in the undulating patterns of landscape seen in Whiteford's "Drawn on the Land- Sgriobhte airan Talamh", two prints on canvas from Bragar on the Isle of Lewis on display as part of the "A Special Site" exhibition. This opening exhibition on the first and second level foyers curated by Sue Pirnie features work by commissioned artists Alex Beleschenko, Mary Bourne, Keiko Mukaide, Donald Urquhart and Kate Whiteford.

The exhibition provides a lead into a series of permanent artworks that reflect the "location, people and culture of the area". Whiteford's "Drawn on the Land" reveals subtle changes in the landscape seen most clearly from an aerial view. We can see that "something is happening beneath the surface" and this technique encourages further investigation through archaeological excavation. The causeway bisecting Whiteford's land work acts as a threshold to the world of the theatre and the illusion created by manipulation of perspective allows us to see the full design with greater clarity as we journey into the building.

This relates strongly to the experience of an audience and also to collective memory as part of our indigenous past. The element of mystery which is one of the most compelling aspects of Pictish art is also reflected in the work, combining bold contemporary design with ancient resonance.

The Latin title of Eugenie Vronskaya's work "Facimus" ("we are making it") reflects the living nature of the work which will continue to change over time. An evolving series of sixty portraits will record the human face of Eden Court including the architects, fund-raisers, artists, administrators, carpenters, builders, supporters of the arts, performers and audience members.

Rather than a static commission the work will grow and change as the activity within the building grows and changes, portraits will be added and removed. The hanging of the work in four staggered lines gives a sense of growth and reach to the images as they follow the curve of the main foyer wall. A sister work to "Iconostas" (exhibited as part of Vronskaya's solo show at Kilmorack Gallery in 2006), this series of portraits marks an expansion in the artist's practice.

The original idea of recognition within a close knit community through the intimate and personal realm of portraiture becomes a reflection of a wider community in the public realm. This great curve of humanity is anchored to a subtle piece of woven tartan behind, providing the structure on which the paintings are presented. Situated adjacent to the box office and main point of entry, the work reflects the function of the building as a centre for the people of the Highlands.

Recognition in the work operates on many levels; “We are always fascinated by each other’s faces”, “it is a piece that anyone from a child to an older person can relate to”, Vronskaya explained. There is an abstract conceptual element to the work but also a representational element linked to the recognition of individuals. “Facimus” is a representation of human connection on a larger scale than that which we ordinarily associate with portraiture, together with recognition of the energy, dedication and passion that have made the new Eden Court a reality.

Throughout the ground and first floors a series of “Floorscapes” by Elgin-based artist Mary Bourne direct our attention to a space we seldom contemplate, the ground beneath our feet. Use navigation symbols on the ground floor sit beautifully in the imaginative context of the theatre and have been created in the same spirit as a map at the beginning of a childhood adventure story.

In front of the box office a large circular pattern marks the entrance point as a hub of activity. The artist’s drawings and sculpture as part of the opening exhibition give an insight into mark-making as part of her creative process. The way we are subtly directed physically through the building to points of entry, or facilities such as lifts is quite ingenious.

The designs such as the cross of antiquity and forest symbols featuring in the wide sweeping design on approach to the Bishop’s Palace also allude to what might have been on site hundreds of years ago. There is a sense of movement achieved by the sandblasted designs which are part symbol, part navigation on the ground floor evolving into a more fluid organic form on the first.

Here the journey of a river is depicted from source to coast in a series of designs that are evocative of an aerial view of the landscape. One of the most lyrical is sited on the floor of The Newsroom Bar, a beguiling intertwined design that weaves across the floor like the movement of light through water.

At the end of the sequence on the Bishop’s road side of the building two glass panes at right angles open the corridor to light and make visible the etched design of an exquisite wide arc of shoreline, ebbing with foam on the floor. The overall paving pattern presented the greatest technical challenge for the artist in relation to the architecture. All of the designs were created painstakingly on numbered slates in the artist’s studio in correspondence to their position in the building and the structure of the paving pattern.

What is clear speaking to Mary Bourne is her love of her chosen material and its unique properties, something which she brings the audience directly into contact with by design. Rather than simply walking across the floor unconsciously, the navigational symbols and environmentally inspired abstract forms direct and intrigue the viewer.

Between the first floor bar/café and the outer terrace an Alice in Wonderland effect is created by mind bending angles in a playful triangulated entrance and over doorway detail of humour and brilliance. It is fitting that in a theatre complex that magic such as this should be made manifest in the building’s design. There are many wonderful architectural details waiting to be discovered that link together to achieve remarkable continuity throughout.

At different times of day and night or for the repeat visitor there will be new discoveries in design, architecture, commissioned artworks and changing exhibitions. The obvious performance functions aside, the whole building has much to offer its audience. This redevelopment raises the bar through design with creativity part of its fabric, setting a great precedent for future building projects in the Highlands.

The design process in what architect Nicola Wall's described as "a rubik's cube of a building" is challenging and intricate. Standing on the first floor outside terrace between two floor lights and looking directly upwards through a square cut into the canopy, the view of the full height of one of the cooling towers is exhilarating.

The wind towers are part of the new building's natural ventilation system and the first of its kind in Scotland. Air is drawn in at low level, slightly pre-heated depending on the outside temperature and is then pushed into the building underneath the seating. As people and lighting generate heat the air rises and is expelled through the towers. Unlike conventional air-conditioning as well as increased energy efficiency the system has few moving parts. The capital cost essentially happens once and over time this initial investment will repay itself.

The cooling towers are also site of artist Donald Urquhart's commissioned work "Lined Sky Forms". The simplicity of the structures appealed strongly to the artist and the outer cladding relates the work directly to the surrounding environment. "Celebrate(ing) the environmental aspect of the ventilation" there has been no attempt to disguise the structure of the towers, form and function are inseparable.

The use of mirrored surface allows the movement of clouds and changing pattern of light and colour in the sky to become part of the structure. There is always wind at tower level to help draw the air out of the building and this natural element becomes a living part of the work.

Urquhart's earlier work "Sea Beams" at Dysart in Fife created a "three dimensional drawing that allows the ever changing colour of the sea to be visually measured". The artist has applied the same principle in the sky over Eden Court and use of colour allows the prevailing conditions to be measured in contrast or to disappear, becoming part of the vibrant blue of a summer's day.

At the heart of Urquhart's practice is the "analytical study of landscape articulated in a reductive and highly formal manner". The formalisation of the towers is emphasised by black cladding linking to the use of polished granite elsewhere in the new building. This contrasts with the animated mirror surfaces which are further enhanced at night by lighting which bounces off a shallow pool in the flat roof. This rippling effect is intensified by wind on the surface of the pool linking to the river Ness nearby.

From the Crown area of Inverness the full effect of light, colour and form in "Lined Sky Forms" can be clearly seen. The orientation of the towers leads back to the city as a reflection of its development. The choice of yellow at the back of the building as an evocation of autumnal highland moorland is an example of the reduction of landscape into formal elements, in this case pure colour on a strong horizontal plane.

The way that strong colour and geometric form have been utilised on the Bishop's Road side of the building, wrapping around what architect David Paton described as "the knuckle of the building" like a fine abstract composition in painting is truly masterful. On this side of the building perfectly balanced rhythms of vertical steel

and surfaces of polished and matt granite provide simple decorative contrast and rhythm. The interplay of strong colour, geometric form and open glass interior spaces allows an outside view of the activity inside.

The materials follow the road as it kinks around corners, the granite visually breaking down as we turn the corner to the back of the building where colour takes over as a dominant element. Night lighting in purple on yellow creates yet another shift in perception.

As the ground floor foyer flows up to the Bishop's Palace the first of a series of interpretative panels by Graven Images announce public access to the newly restored 19th century building. This open area is also the site of a temporary exhibition "Passing Places – Aite Seachnaidh" created in collaboration with artist Eleanor White, the MacPhail Centre, Ullapool and members of the local community.

There are a number of spaces within the new Eden Court complex which would be suitable for exhibiting a range of different art practice and I hope that this function will continue to be developed. Panels throughout the ground, first floor levels and chapel of the Bishops Palace record the history of the building and its uses: ecclesiastical, wartime and theatrical.

Drawers in hall furniture open to reveal artefacts from the history of the site and original features uncovered during the conservation and restoration process such as the entrance porch tiled floor bring original features back into focus. The restored staircase and vaulted ceiling are revealed in all their splendour overhead, filling the whole space with the warmth of polished timber.

Rather than feeling like a museum piece this is a welcoming space with a number of adjoining rooms for conference, social functions, exhibition and administration. The large simply clad black gothic window with clear glass adjacent to the reception hall emphasises this architectural feature and blends well with large contemporary mirrors in both the hall and entrance spaces.

In the entrance porch of the Bishop's Palace facing the landscaped garden and forecourt is glass artist Keiko Mukaide's triptych set into the gothic stonework of the original architecture. Working with stained glass artist Alec Galloway the artist has created a view through to the space outside articulated by a progression of words selected for their evocation of the three ages of Eden Court's history. The choice of words in Gaelic and English, choice of font and division as three panels reflect historical and natural associations with the site.

Mukaide's work acts as a living piece, we can see the contemporary world outside the Bishop's Palace, the natural changing of seasons and have the opportunity in this heritage space to pause and reflect. The artist's work in glass, a material of transparency, light and visual weightlessness, subject to change through the movement of the sun and seasons, is both conceptual and physical.

Our reading of these words through the glass into history and the environment just beyond the window is contemplative by nature. The gilding of these chosen words in silver and gold infuse them with reverence and relate to the natural world of day and night. Mukaide's practice is "informed by ancient principles of geomancy" emphasising our "relationship with spirit and place". The placement of secular and spiritual structures in harmony

with the environment or specific site is at the core of her practice and can also be seen in her recent installation at St Mary's Church York.

In terms of programming the range of possible performances has greatly expanded with the architecture. The complex incorporates two new state of the art cinemas; the La Scala (140 seats) and The Playhouse (86 seats), the 850 seat main auditorium now known as the Empire Theatre, the new 270 seat One Touch studio theatre, café/bars, a restaurant, dressing room accommodation for 96 performers and the restoration of the Bishops Palace open to the public.

Each space has its own distinct character that will no doubt provide inspiration for innovative programming. The interior of the main theatre has not been significantly altered with the exception of technical upgrading and the installation of additional seating. It is however still very much at the core of the building physically and as the largest performance space.

The new La Scala cinema in opulent purple and The Playhouse in dominant red are luxurious and extremely comfortable, aptly christened by the 5th Inverness Film Festival titled *New Beginnings* in November. The Playhouse, though something of a geometric puzzle in shape, works extremely well exuding warmth and intimacy. Both cinemas are cleverly defined by the acoustic panels in a staggered effect with wall and ceiling panels acting like a zipper over the aisle and directing the flow of movement as the audience enter and exit.

The One Touch Theatre has a raw, robust and experimental feel to it, quite different to the main auditorium. The possibilities here for contemporary dance set the mind racing. The exposed concrete is articulated by red banners that drop down and a black track technical gallery to modify acoustics depending on the type of performance.

The gallery suspended from the roof trusses and consisting of an enclosure of single seats creates an intimate courtyard-like atmosphere. The floor can be retracted to convert the performance area to a flat floor for dance, cabaret, exhibition, concert or conference functions. Like many of the new spaces created there is a high degree of flexibility in this space.

Beside the main entrance to the One Touch Theatre on level one is Alex Beleschenko's "Tree of Life" commissioned by the Friends of Eden Court organisation. There is a sense of outreach in the branches and central spiral pattern that implies a living organism as well as the symbolic association with the Celtic Tree of Life.

This is a contemplative piece enhanced by the choice of complimentary colours in yellow, orange and blue. The opaque layers of glass and enamel lit by natural daylight from behind create a calm and meditative mood. The movement in the scattering of leaves amongst the twigs and branches is beautifully placed, absolutely deliberate as part of the creative process but retaining a random quality like that of the wind on an autumn day.

Beleschenko utilised computer software as a tool to initially place the leaves as part of the design process, later placing each one individually by hand so that none overlapped. The work of a human hand is very much in evidence in this piece and one of its strengths, influenced by a foundation of study in painting and printmaking.

The work is the sum of many parts much like the organisation that commissioned it and sets a positive vibration in the space it occupies and as part of the human and architectural structure of the building.

Known primarily for larger scale architectural commissions such as his Canary Wharf Corridor & Link (London), Herz Jesu Kirche glass façade (Munich) and Millenium Bridge (Coventry), Beleschenko's belief in the integral nature of Art in Architecture finds expression here in work of a more intimate scale. Set roughly at average eye height it can be examined up close as a work of personal dimension, yet evoking a sense of expansion in the design. It is a work that links beautifully with the purpose and aspiration of the building as a creative centre in the North.

Many individuals have contributed to making this new building a reality and the scope of their work has yet to be fully realised. As the wider public begin to discover the new Eden Court I hope that with each visit the thought, energy and creative process that have brought it into being will gradually reveal themselves. We have a choice about the environment we choose to create and the design choices here signify an investment and belief in the value of the Arts and imagination to the future development of our region.

This is also an investment in the quality of life in the Highland capital serving a wide geographic area. For their contribution of £4 million Highland Council have received a world class £23 million pound facility. The cumulative effect and influence of all the creative activity within represents an incalculable value to future generations in addition to the economic benefit to the area year upon year.

The integrated architectural design and commissioned artworks create a wonderful environment for performance, education and creative development to flourish. The reopening of Eden Court is a defining moment in our city's history and one which I hope will lay the foundation for the establishment of a riverside cultural quarter, as identifiable with the city as the River Ness itself.

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