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ST ANDREW SQUARE: SHAPING A PLACE

The St Andrew Square project was established as part of a major initiative to improve the public realm throughout the World Heritage Site in Edinburgh. The programme was promoted by a consortium of public bodies and led by the Edinburgh City Centre Management Company, later renamed Essential Edinburgh. This paper discusses the design produced to meet the needs of the twenty-first century while working within the context set by the original design intent expressed in the eighteenth-century plan for the New Town and the gardens plans from the 1850s.

The Capital Streets programme was begun in the early 2000s after strategy work undertaken for Scotland's capital city found that the quality of the public realm in Edinburgh failed to live up to the quality of public space that was experienced in other major cities in Scotland, the UK and Europe. Edinburgh's townscape is renowned globally as being of outstanding quality and this has been recognized through the designation of central Edinburgh on the World Heritage Register collated and promoted by UNESCO – the United Nations Environment and Scientific and Cultural Organization.

The townscape of the city centre is cherished by the citizens of Edinburgh, by heritage bodies, and by many national and international institutions, but it is, however, a working, living city centre and, *inter alia*, the principal home of the Edinburgh International Festival. Sadly, but inevitably perhaps, this can mean that well-meant changes to streets and spaces can become the subject of controversy as interested parties – the forces for conservation and the forces for change – become ranged against one another. Too often this can result in one of two outcomes – neither desirable. The first is that some inappropriate or thoughtless change is made to achieve some functional, or perhaps legal, requirement; the second is that nothing happens, leading to a gradual degradation of the very heritage that many seek to conserve. This is particularly true with the public realm where the competing aims of the heritage approval processes, traffic systems and the promotion of economic development had led to stalemate whereby little or no improvement work could be agreed to public spaces.

In 2002, the City of Edinburgh Council representing the people of Edinburgh and, in particular, the planning and traffic systems formed a consortium with Scottish Enterprise (the economic development agency) and the World Heritage Trust in order to establish a system whereby a consensus could be reached about the aesthetics and functional quality of public space in central Edinburgh in order to enable the design and implementation of a series of high-quality improvement projects. The work began with an exemplar project in Castle Street within the First New Town and this was followed by projects for St Andrew Square and the Grassmarket – and is continuing today with further projects in the Old and New Towns. The competitions for the first projects in Castle Street, St Andrew Square and the Grassmarket were won by the Glasgow Studio of Gillespies LLP.

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Figure 1. St Andrew Square before work began – clearly showing the avenue of ornamental trees introduced in the post-war years. Courtesy: Reproduced by permission of City of Edinburgh Council, late twentieth century

St Andrew Square and Charlotte Square are the two public squares that lie at the east and west ends of George Street. Most commentators from A. J. Youngson on agree that this combination of street and squares at the centre of the Craig Plan for Edinburgh's New Town represent the epitome of townscape quality in Scotland that is recognized internationally as an outstanding work of civic art.¹ The two squares were originally built as Georgian pleasure gardens owned jointly and severally by the owners of the properties around each square. Charlotte Square, with owners including the UK government, fared better in the post-war years: well-cared for and opened periodically to the public usually during the International Festival. On the other hand, St Andrew Square at the east end of George Street had more frequent public accessibility, but had suffered a series of inappropriate interventions over the second half of the twentieth century with inappropriate planting and the erosion of the setting of the Melville Monument – the centrepiece of the square (Figure 1).

By the year 2000 there was a clear desire by the body politic to effect a comprehensive and appropriate improvement to the square and to achieve permanent opening to the public. The St Andrew Square project was established with the following objectives:

- To recover the original qualities of the Georgian square.
- To provide permanent opening to the public throughout the seasons and throughout the week.
- To become a focal point for use during the International Festival.
- To ensure that design and access were appropriate to twenty-first-century standards.

- To fit the square within the principal desire lines of the present new town to ensure activity in use.

RESEARCH

In the proactive of contemporary landscape design, there is often acute pressure to produce a design very quickly, ideally with a ‘wow’ factor that is nonetheless capable of being constructed in absurdly short periods of time, on programme and on budget. In contrast, the investigation of how to conserve an historic and dilapidated private garden within a public square (St Andrew Square) within the UNESCO-designated World Heritage Site of Edinburgh New Town in order to establish an a priori case for the garden to be opened to the public is something that requires the appropriate amount of time not only for the genesis of the design but also for the research that will underpin the design. Fortunately, the design team was afforded the opportunity to undertake some research to build a strong and meaningful case for the design. In this, the designers were supported throughout by Historic Scotland and the conservation department of Edinburgh City Council working in partnership with the Edinburgh World Heritage Trust. The principal research questions were fourfold:

- Investigation of the design intent behind the original scheme as an expression of Craig’s Plan for the first Edinburgh New Town.
- Investigation of factors required to conserve the character and quality of the original intent whilst establishing opportunities to open the garden to the public.
- Interdisciplinary research with private owners and public heritage agencies in order to establish the objectives for design intervention.
- A designed response to achieve the objectives for conservation and use.

The research enquiry considered the original design intentions for the Georgian square; the factors that are required to ensure the conservation and enhancement of the existing historic artefact; and the establishment of preconditions for designed intervention to ensure that a contemporary public square and the historic private square could co-exist.² The research was accompanied by a contextual analysis that considered climate, precedent studies from historic city centres throughout Europe, the investigation and appropriateness of various design devices necessary for a contemporary garden and square that included the possible introduction of a pool of water for literal and metaphorical reflection as well as habitat conservation; the opportunity for replanting; and the introduction of seats and, more controversially, a café pavilion.

DESIGN

At length, and following extensive discussion and consultation with the public, with stakeholders, with owners and with the various authorities, a design was agreed upon that sought to honour two important historical documents that illustrated the original intent: Kirkwood’s feuing plan of 1819 and the gardens design from 1849 to 1853. Using these plans as an accepted starting point for the designed intent, the designers rotated the symmetrical geometry around its north–south axis using the ratio of the golden section and then using this as the principal axis through the square on a north-east–south-west diagonal. A symmetrical design was developed that strengthened the outer annular ring of trees, that created a new and tranquil setting for the Melville Monument, and that created two spaces at either end of an ellipse created by the principal path layout (Figures 2 and 3).



Figure 2. Plan view of the completed design for the square
Courtesy: Figures 2–8 © Copyright Gillespies



Figure 3. Orthogonal view of the completed design for the square

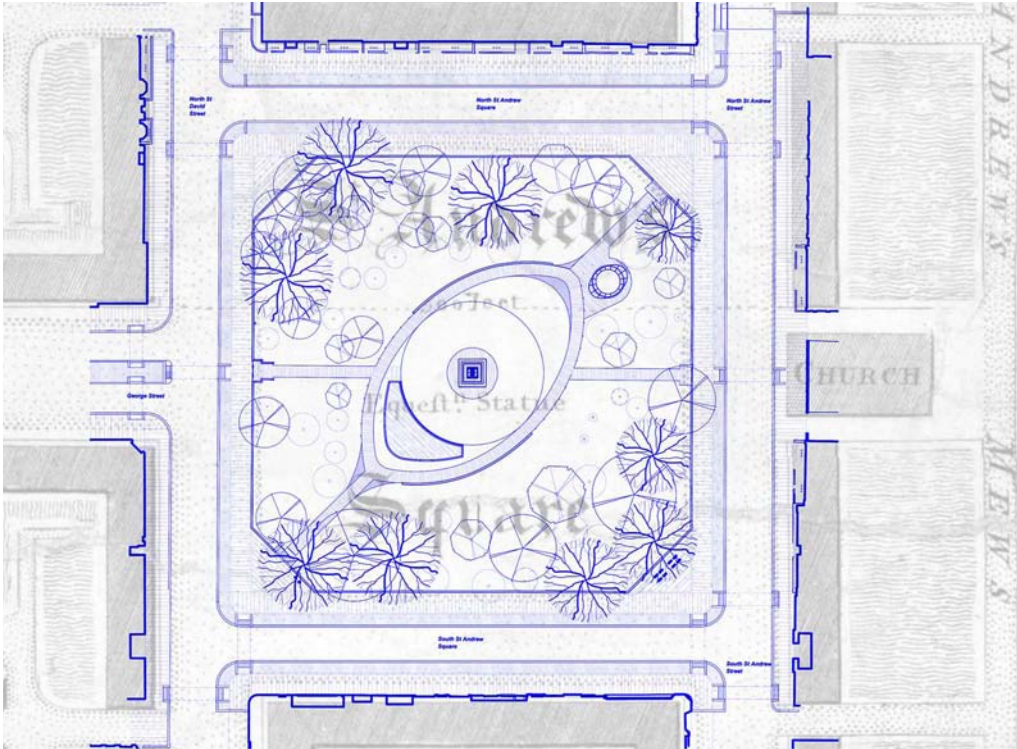


Figure 4. The new design superimposed on the Craig plan of 1768

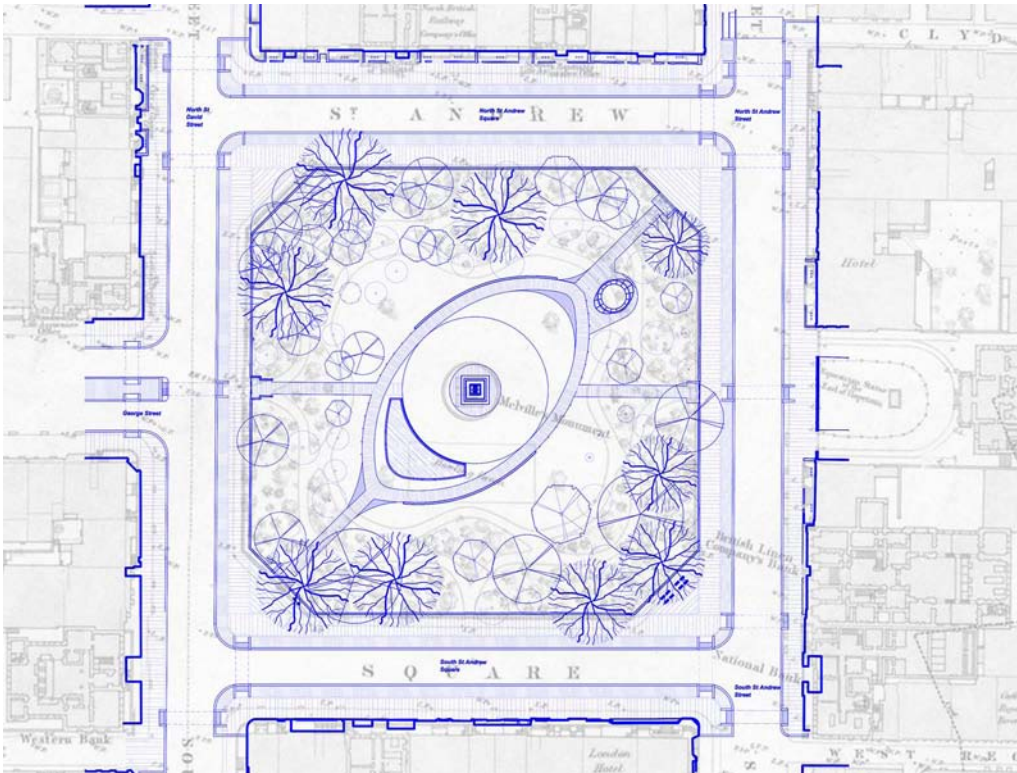


Figure 5. The new design superimposed on the Gardens Plan of the 1850s



Figure 6. The completed design within the context of the New Town viewed from the east



Figure 7. The completed design viewed from the east

In two further illustrations, the new design is superimposed on the Craig Plan of 1768 and the gardens plan from the 1850s to illustrate the care taken by the design team and the client to ensure that the contemporary would fit within and reinforce the



Figures 8a and 8b. The square in use

original design intent, albeit for the completely different purpose of a public garden as opposed to a private pleasure garden (Figures 4 and 5). The completed project (Figures 6 and 7) has been recognized with many prestigious awards. In conferring the President's Award from the Landscape Institute for the best landscape architecture scheme in the UK, Neil Williamson, President of the Landscape Institute, stated in the award citation:

The landscape architect has produced a confident and convincing design for the World Heritage Site in the heart of Edinburgh. The completed scheme has proved a source of delight to local people and visitors alike, and is a splendid example of public space fulfilling potential and contributing to the life of the city [Figures 8a and 8b]. The simplicity and elegance of the design belies the complexity of working in the public realm [...] it is an achievement to be proud of.

REFERENCES

¹ A. J. Youngson, *The Making of Classical Edinburgh* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1966, 1988).

² Gillespies were supported in the research effort by collaborators including Gehl

Architects of Copenhagen, who examined the preconditions for public life in the square, as well as the aforementioned Edinburgh World Heritage Trust, Historic Scotland and the private owners of St Andrew Square.