

AESOP Young Academics

The blog of the Young Academics of the
Association of the European Schools of
Planning

"Bring back the Royal Arch!" Dealing with the past in Scotland's independence city.

Posted on October 5, 2015 by [aesopyadmin](#)

Guest author: *Andrew Hoolachan, Department of Architecture, University of Cambridge.*

The city of Dundee is Scotland's most pro-independence city. The Scottish National Party represents the city at all tiers of governance and the city returned the highest percentage of voters in favour of independence in the 2014 referendum. Its dramatic [£1bn waterfront](#) regeneration programme in many ways symbolises a new spirit of increasing confidence and international outlook. Despite this there have been calls from a local history group in the city to bring back an iconic 19th century Victorian arch which was destroyed in a wave of modernist re-building in the 1960s. The arch in many ways represents a time when Scotland was fully complicit in the exploitation of the British Empire so seems at odds with the values of [Scotland's 'Yes City'](#). This raises significance questions about how a pro-independence city views its historical role during the British Empire.

On the 16th of March 1964 when decolonisation was in full swing, an iconic arch marking the entrance to the port of Dundee was demolished. Known as the Royal Arch, it was built between 1849 and 1853 to commemorate 1844 visit of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert to the city. After the boom and during the slow decline of industry, by 1964 Dundee was in the grip of a fever that had swept British towns and cities: comprehensive redevelopment in the modernist style. The plans for the city centre were similar to many others in Britain in the 1960s; a ring-road that encircled the city centre, cutting it off from the waterfront; underpasses and overpasses channelling pedestrians; grey concrete towers housing municipal governments; complex historic streets turned into efficient and rational shopping arcades. And so it was that as part of Dundee's redevelopment of the 1960s, old Victorian streets and buildings were swept away to be replaced by clean lines, and right-angles.

The demolition of the Royal Arch was part of this process of re-planning Dundee's waterfront where its old docks would be filled in and the city centre cut off from one of the most scenic waterfronts in Britain by a 4-lane ring road. Yet today the city is undergoing another transformation, one which seeks to undo the damage of the 1960s. £1 billion pounds of investment is being injected into the city to revitalise and reconnect its historic link to the Firth of Tay, culminating in a "landmark" design museum, and an outpost of London's Victoria and Albert Museum designed by Japanese Architect, Kengo Kuma. It seems not all localities have given up on the "Bilbao dream".

Reworking past mistakes and setting a plan for the future always brings with it reflections on a city's common heritage. For many years, even prior to the most recent waterfront development, citizens have been divided on the issue of the Royal Arch's demolition. Some argue that it is in keeping with the crazed wave of demolition of the 1960s and the city council's contempt for unique architecture or historical significance. Others have argued that it was in any case an eye-sore and we should move forward. As part of the contemporary waterfront redevelopment, calls have been made on [social media](#) for the historic arch to be restored, gaining local new coverage.

A great irony of the campaign for restoration of the arch is perhaps in what the arch represented at the time it was constructed compared to the values the citizens hold today. Dundee has been described as Scotland's most

Privacy & Cookies: This site uses cookies from WordPress.com and selected partners.
To find out more, as well as how to remove or block these, see here: [Our Cookie Policy](#)

Close and accept

Glasgow to vote Yes. Given the level nationalism in the city, how appropriate would it be to re-construct a building that represents a British monarch who presided over a vast empire of which Scotland was fully complicit, and thanks to which Dundee gained its identity as an industrial powerhouse?

At the time of Victoria's visit to Dundee, the city was on the brink of a Jute manufacturing boom. Jute is a plant which could be lubricated with whale oil and fabricated into a durable textile. It was grown in Bengal and shipped to Dundee to be processed. Jute was used in an innumerable ways from the sails of ships, to sacks for potatoes and declined in use with the rise of plastics. Jute has become a by-word for Dundee's industrial heritage, with factories, tenements, villas, parks and public buildings resulting from its wealth. A direct connection to India was made through this "Victoria" arch. It oversaw the economic exchange between the Dundee factory workers and Indian labourers. Shortly after the arch was constructed, Indians were becoming agitated at British control in the region and in 1857 after the Indian mutiny in which the British massacred hundreds of thousands, the formal British Empire in India began. By 1877 Queen Victoria had declared herself "Empress of India". Thus Dundee's wealth was built on the back of British foreign policy of imperialistic expansion and in particular the subjugation and exploitation of India. Furthermore many of Dundee's workers had come from Ireland, many who were economic migrants following the land clearances and the British induced potato famine in the 1840s.

Does this arch then represent imperialism, monarchy, and capitalistic exploitation of workers and labourers to such an extent, that it is fundamentally incompatible with contemporary narratives and the politics of Scottish nationalism? The Scottish National Party, long a fringe and rather conservative force, became suddenly a left-wing, anti-austerity, pro-EU party. Some SNP members but not all, are also anti-establishment and republican. Thus, can these values of Scottish nationalism accommodate an urban memorial that is so heavily rested on everything it currently opposes?

Of course not everyone in the city is pro-nationalist, and not all nationalists are left-wing. Indeed, 40% of the population of Dundee voted No. Would they be more in favour of the construction of the arch as a symbol of British unity to counteract the city's slide into what they may see as a narrow short-sighted nationalism? I suspect neither side has given much thought in respect to the arch. However, it seems timely and important that we must consider such issues of memory, heritage and representation, before jumping onto Victorian nostalgia to bring back a symbol of the past. After all, such projects cost money and at a time of austerity no doubt the public deserve to understand why we would construct such an arch, beyond a shallow pastiche?

I suspect however the reasons for reviving the arch, may not be about its most obvious symbol of 19th century imperialism. The people of Dundee remember what happened to their city in the 1960s. As a native of the city, it was commonplace for people to bemoan the period when the city was traumatised by the rampant demolition of its Victorian heritage by a corrupt, centralised and authoritarian local government. A narrative of victim-like helplessness of bad decisions made by "the powers that be", of the city bureaucrats, runs high in Dundee. It seems that the population would do anything to reclaim past failures of urban planning just to get a small victory in a long list of historical blunders by the city planners. An old dense street, the overgate, a mix of shops and commercial premises which today's planners would only dream of, was declared a slum neighbourhood and destroyed and developed into an austere shopping mall. If left in-tact, it today could provide some tourist revenue in the city on account of its charm. Similarly, the city was recently relieved at the demolishing of 'Tayside House' an oppressive tower built in the 1960s to accommodate local bureaucracy that was despised by many with its depressive grey slabs and faceless windows. The list of 1960s planning and architectural atrocities on the city could go on.

in an age of bland urban regeneration? Crucially Scotland and Dundee are at a turning point in how they see themselves in relation to the rest of the world. A revived imperial arch as part of an urban regeneration strategy raises questions about how Scotland pushes forward with its post-colonial identity, which many agree, is increasingly at odds with older notions of 'Britishness'.

**It should be noted that officially, Scottish nationalism is an anti-austerity, multi-ethnic, pluralistic, civic but often populist nationalism. It is not an ethnic, or xenophobic nationalism.*

Bio: [Andrew Hoolachan](#) is currently completing his PhD in the department of Architecture, Cambridge, where he is looking at the politics of sustainable urban governance as part of the London Olympic Legacy programme. His previous studies were in Geography at St Andrews and Urban Planning at UCL. He has worked as an Urban Researcher at the University of Manchester and the University of St Andrews. He also spent time working for the UK Civil Service in London.

Advertisements



Glasgow: If You Were Born Between 1953 & 1979 And Have No Life Insurance You Must Read This

Report this ad



Report this ad

Share this:



One blogger likes this.

Related

[#Spacematters - List of planning-related blogs v. 1.0](#)

In "Beyond planning"

[Portrait of a Historical Neighbourhood Through the Lenses of State-led Gentrification: Tarlabasi, Istanbul](#)

[Open Defecation: A Coda of Geospatial differentiation by British India?](#)

In "Academia, research quality and assessment"

This entry was posted in [Heritage and Planning](#), [Planning, city, and society](#) and tagged [heritage](#), [planning](#), [revitalisation](#), [Scotland](#), [UK](#), [urban development](#), [urban regeneration](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#).

3 Responses to "Bring back the Royal Arch!" Dealing with the past in Scotland's independence city.

Pingback: ["Bring back the Royal Arch!" Dealing with the past in Scotland's independence city.](#) | [Eve's Everyday](#)

Pingback: ["Bring back the Royal Arch!" Dealing with the past in Scotland's independence city.](#) | [Centre for Urban Conflicts Research](#)

Privacy & Cookies: This site uses cookies from WordPress.com and selected partners. To find out more, as well as how to remove or block these, see here: [Our Cookie Policy](#)

Privacy & Cookies: This site uses cookies from WordPress.com and selected partners.
To find out more, as well as how to remove or block these, see here: [Our Cookie Policy](#)