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Sir Fraser Morrison

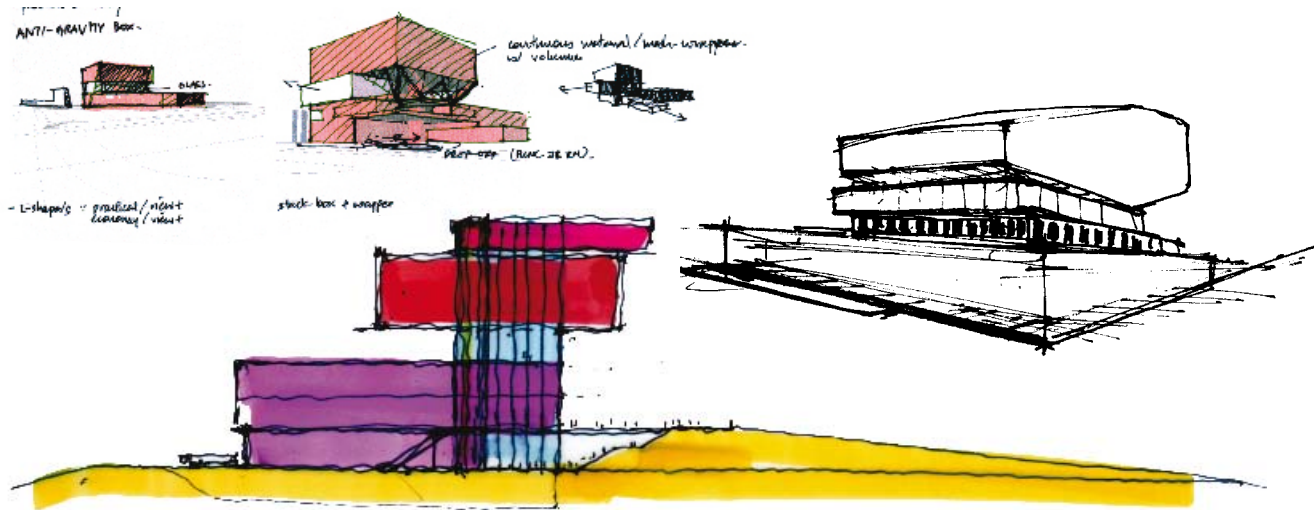


The work of the Design Studio on buildings like the Las Colinas Convention Center in Texas and the R&D facility for Genzyme in China is very special indeed. We are pressing ahead to expand our Healthcare practice, which is currently designing hospitals in Princeton, New York and Singapore. We have quickly secured international work for our Princeton-based Global Education Studio and are now working on a project in Libya and pursuing other opportunities in the Middle East. We are focused on becoming one of the leading Architectural Preservation practices in the US and are currently engaged on the preservation of the US Supreme Court, the Cincinnati Museum Center and the Payne-Whitney Gymnasium at Yale University. The enthusiasm with which our Interior Architecture team is setting about growing their Studio is impressive and our Environmental Graphics team has recently rebranded under the name MERJE.

I don't want to convey the impression that everything has been plain sailing – on occasion we have had to paddle very hard under the surface. We are definitely seeing projects delayed or cancelled in the US as a consequence of the recession. There are projects we would love to have won which we have not. But overall we are moving steadily in the right direction and it's a great credit to everyone that we are making good progress strategically and achieving the financial targets set at the time of the merger.

As we celebrate the first anniversary of the merger of RMJM and Hillier Architecture it's good to know that our organisation has a compelling design proposition, challenging business objectives and a global platform with incredible reach. The merger has been impressively implemented and we now have the opportunity to design some of the most prominent buildings in the world.

I find that one of the most exciting propositions of my business life and am enormously inspired by the professionalism and enthusiasm around the practice.



Las Colinas Convention Center, Texas

A BEACON OF MODERNITY

with RMJM's iconic Royal Commonwealth Pool set to undergo a two year refurbishment, Miles Glendinning revisits Edinburgh's foremost building of the 'first age' of modernism

Architectural review

words by Miles Glendinning





modernism

One of Scotland's best-known sports facilities, RMJM's Royal Commonwealth Pool in Edinburgh, will close next summer and undergo a two year renovation programme.

The new swimming pool marked a change in society – where once swimming baths had served a necessary public hygiene function, by the 1960s they were emerging as a place for recreation and leisure.

RMJM invited Miles Glendinning, Director of the Scottish Centre for Conservation Studies and Reader in Architecture at Edinburgh College of Art, to revisit the building ahead of the refurbishment.

The Royal Commonwealth Pool is Edinburgh's foremost building of the 'first age' of Modernism – those three post-Second World War decades of furious reconstruction (referred to by the French as the 'trente glorieuses') that regenerated and reorientated society in conformity to the welfare-state ethos. This was a process, strongly informed by utopian ideals of 'community', in which a key role was played by a physical assault on the then universally-condemned environments bequeathed by Victorian capitalism, in all their stately solidity.

In Edinburgh, however – unlike Glasgow and many English industrial cities – that regeneration involved not mass demolitions of vast swathes of the city, but selective, subtle interventions, in and around the 19th century urban fabric.

The Commonwealth Pool, subtly implanted at the interface of Victorian Edinburgh and the landscape of Holyrood Park, is the chief standard-bearer of Edinburgh's post-war strategy of modern 'conservative-surgery' and echoes the ethos of Patrick Geddes. Commissioned in 1965 by Edinburgh Corporation as the centrepiece of a programme of modernisation and enhancement of its stolid 19th century public baths, the project gained an additional international status in its later association with the XI British Commonwealth Games of 1970.

A modernist design concept

As Scotland's foremost post-war exponents of welfare-state architecture, Robert Matthew and Stirrat Johnson-Marshall's firm (now RMJM) was a natural choice to design this project, which was ultimately overseen by John Richards who'd been appointed partner in 1964. Architecturally, the building's wide impact stemmed chiefly from the ingenuity and subtlety of Richards' design concept, exploiting the fall of the site through an innovative, multilevel section – a primacy of 'function' and 'planning' over 'image' that exemplified the values of that first, idealistic era of Modernist ascendancy.

Location and context

The pool was built on a former playing field, located at the junction of three radically contrasting landscapes: to the north-west, 19th century tenements and the Old Town; to the south-west, solid Victorian villadom; and directly adjacent to the east, Holyrood Park. The building's external form responds directly to this rather schizophrenic context, while maintaining an external appearance of calm, almost Miesian, horizontality which reflects Richards' own preferred idiom of Modernism. The main bulk of the complex is hidden away at the rear, whereas at the front it appears to be only one storey high – low, long and sheer, just like Richards' exactly contemporary Pathfoot Building at Stirling University.



Royal Commonwealth Pool foyer



Primacy of plan and section

The external treatment is very simple, with a minimum range of materials: the roof finish is aluminium with anodised aluminium eaves fascias and the long window-strips comprise large sheets of plate glass in oiled hardwood frames; external walling at the rear is in facing brick.

Internally, the key challenges of swimming pool design were heat-loss from the main pool hall, external condensation and glare from windows. These problems were addressed, on plan, by enclosing the main pool hall at various levels with circulation spaces and subsidiary rooms. The west-east site fall of four metres was exploited by putting the main entrance and 'dry' public areas at the very top level and the main pool hall and 'wet' levels lower down, surrounded by plant and changing rooms: the diving pit and deep-end of the main pool were put at the very lowest part of the site. In effect, this constituted an expanded system of double-glazing, with people and furniture sandwiched between the layers of glass. Architecturally and spatially, this diagonal, descending arrangement of plan and section is boldly expressed, in a sudden and theatrical shift from 'human scale' and low ceilings to vast, airy space.

The story since completion

The chief role of the project since its 1969 inauguration, in social and political terms, was as the linchpin of Scotland's only international-standard complex of sporting facilities – while architecturally its innovative design attracted some notice in the specialist building press and won it a RIBA regional award in 1970 and a Civic Trust award in 1973. Over the decades since its opening, the building's general civic prestige ensured that it was on the whole well maintained, with a 1970 sauna extension and other interior adjustments being subtly managed; its transition into 'heritage' was marked by Historic Scotland with a Category 'A' listing in 1996.

Into the future

Only now, after more than forty years, is a more comprehensive revitalisation of the Royal Commonwealth Pool clearly required.

When that begins in 2009, it will be vital to respect and safeguard the special innovative spirit that it transmits to us from the 'trente glorieuses'. This task is all the more challenging because of the dominance of present-day architecture by a 'revived Modernism', superficially similar in style but radically different in key underlying respects. Socially and economically, the differences between the two Modernisms are blatant: a decisive shift from social welfarism, directed by the state, to a new laissez-faire world-outlook of global capitalist competition.

Architecturally the differences are more subtle but nonetheless inescapable. This is highlighted in Edinburgh by the EMBT/RMJM parliament design, which responds to an almost identical situation (at the interface of Holyrood Park and the Old Town) not with cool 'rationalism' and self-effacing scientific precision, but with an 'iconic' profusion of fanciful building forms and metaphoric images.

As an architect, a historian and a campaigner for the conservation of buildings of the modern movement it seems to me an essential task, in any revitalisation of the Royal Commonwealth Pool, to maintain a proper distance and mutual respect between these two modernisms, rather than allow the one carelessly to appropriate the other.



as Scotland's foremost post-war exponents of welfare-state architecture, Robert Matthew and Stirrat Johnson-Marshall's firm was a natural choice to design this project

Miles Glendinning

Miles Glendinning is Director of the Scottish Centre for Conservation Studies and Reader in Architecture at Edinburgh College of Art. He has published extensively on the history of 20th century architecture and housing, and Scottish housing: publications include the award winning Tower Block (with Stefan Muthesius) and A History of Scottish Architecture (with Aonghus MacKechnie). He has recently completed a major monograph, Modern Architect, on the life and times of Sir Robert Matthew, co-founder of RMJM and the foremost Scottish architect of the post-1945 era.

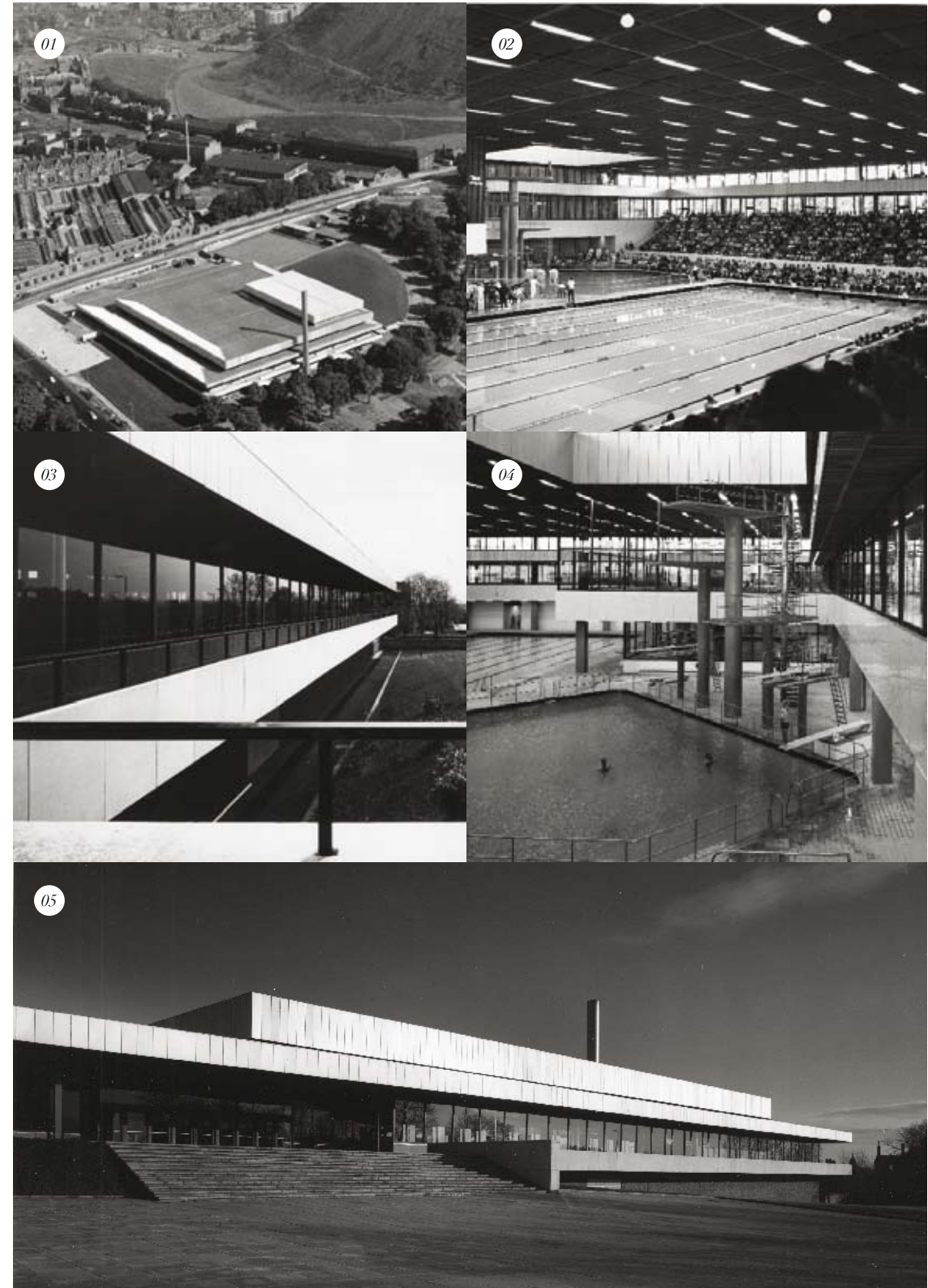
01. Royal Commonwealth Pool, at the junction of three contrasting landscapes

02. The Commonwealth Games took place in Edinburgh in 1970

03. The design won a RIBA regional award in 1970

04. And a Civic Trust award in 1973

05. The building appears long, low and sheer

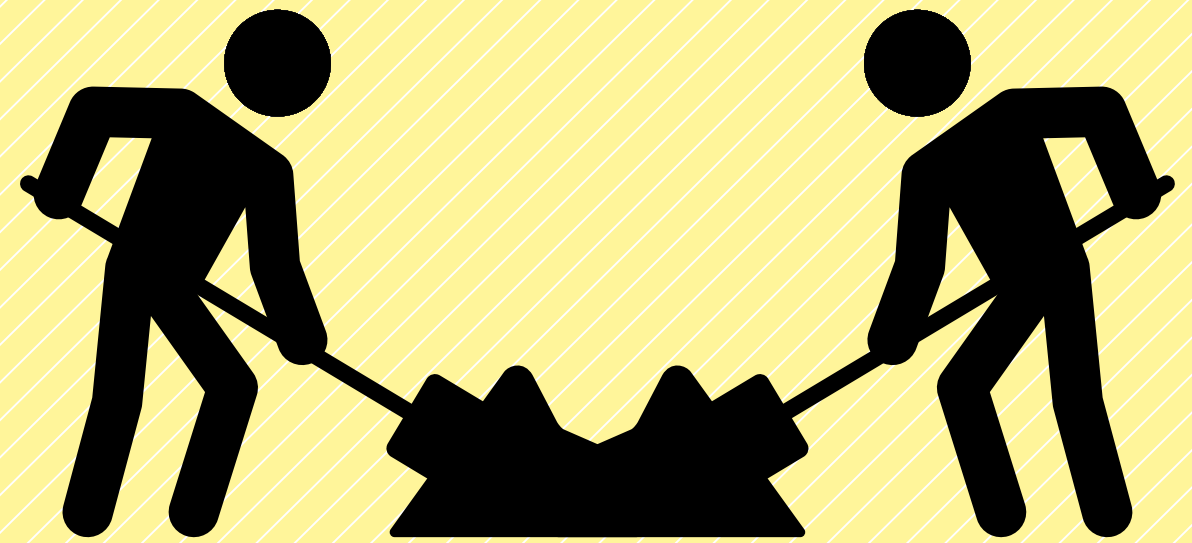


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partners in construction

words by Tony Archibold & Claire Kirkby



PARTNERS IN CONSTRUCTION

JUST A COUPLE OF BLOCKS FROM RMJM HILLIER'S NEW YORK OFFICE, THE EMPIRE STATE BUILDING STRETCHES 102 STOREYS SKYWARDS. WORK ON THE STRUCTURE STARTED IN 1930 AND FINISHED JUST 410 DAYS LATER, WITH BUILDERS COMPLETING AS MANY AS FOUR FLOORS A WEEK AT THE HEIGHT OF THE PROJECT. THAT BUILDING WAS THE VISION OF A PARTNERSHIP OF NEW YORK BUSINESSMEN WHO, BACK IN THE 1920s, SET UP A TEAM TO TAKE PART IN THE RACE TO BUILD THE WORLD'S TALLEST BUILDING. THEIR SUCCESS (THE EMPIRE STATE HELD THAT TITLE FOR MORE THAN 40 YEARS) OWES SOMETHING TO THE TRUST, TEAMWORK AND GOOD COMMUNICATION THAT RESULTED FROM THAT PARTNERSHIP APPROACH. RMJM IS NOW USING THE SAME APPROACH TO MANAGE PROJECTS ON SITE.