

The new Scottish parliament building

Architect: Enric Miralles

THIS month sees the opening of Scotland's new parliament, 3 years late and, at £430 million, 11 times over budget. For the past year viewers of *Reporting Scotland* and *Newsnight Scotland* have endured nightly highlights from the public enquiry set up to examine the debacle. The otiose Lord Fraser of Carmylie, in the chair and clearly revelling in his role as Witchfinder General, has spent more millions of public money revealing, well, what everyone knew in the first place — that the initial costs of the project (£40 million) would have funded an out-of-town shopping mall but not a parliament; that if you treble the size of a building, and change the specifications on a daily basis, then costs will soar; that a degree of project management can be helpful. Throw in terror-proofing, and bad luck — the deaths of both Donald Dewar, our first and finest, though scatty, First Minister, and of the brilliant but enigmatic Catalan architect Enric Miralles — to rob the parliament project of political and aesthetic direction.

Of course, when it comes to building new parliaments, infinite delay and cost over-run are part of the territory. Think Berlin, Dacca, Brasilia, and Canberra. Moreover, £430 million, although a lot of money, is only slightly more than Arsenal FC will spend on relocation to Ashburton Grove, and less than half the cost of That Dome. And less than half the annual profits generated by Clarityn® (Schering-Plough).

I've visited the building twice, with a hard hat on in March of this year, and this week as the building finally opened. In March there were 800 construction workers on site, and manifest evidence of chaos and spectacular expenditure. Piles of expensive oak cladding lay everywhere. Polished concrete edging had been chipped in the rush to completion. In the completed areas, notably the slim six-storey block housing the offices for MSPs, there was evidence of a build-quality and ambition and thoroughness of design rarely seen in British civic

construction since such qualities became unfashionable in the 1980s. A lovely warmth of concrete and oak. Bathrooms with hand-tooled fittings and hundreds of square metres of Caithness granite. Each MSP has an oriel window seat, all uniquely shaped. A beguiling invitation to stand for election forthwith!

The public areas of the building are more important, however. The subterranean foyer features moulded concrete saltires in the ceilings. The main debating chamber is a gorgeous ellipse with a high and complex oak-beamed roof with airy windows facing Salisbury Crags. Light streams in. Even better are the committee rooms, six in two high towers, where legislation is scrutinised publically, and witnesses called. (This is where RCGP nominees will give their evidence the next time that we're asked.) The largest Committee Room can cope with an audience of almost 200, and everywhere within the new complex the voters, the public, are welcomed in. Donald Dewar wanted a parliament that involved the people, and Miralles' design delivers.

Most strikingly, Miralles' Scottish parliament, unlike most parliaments, is devoid of bombast. No Gothic towers or crenellations. It sits not on a crag, but in a swampy dip, at the bottom of Edinburgh's Royal Mile, next to the royal residence of Holyrood Palace (whose inhabitants, we are led to believe, are unamused ...)

In September, as it opened, pensioners assembled to protest, as they do. They hiked up their trousers and skirts and paddled in the (ludicrously expensive) water features in front of the parliament. Above them canopies fluttering colourfully in the breeze.

At that point, in my partisan view, our wonderful new parliament began to justify itself. Our parliamentarians will be required to raise their game.

Alec Logan



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