

## The new V&A, Dundee:

a 'living room for the city'

### STRONG YET FRAGILE SURROUNDINGS

Dundee is a creative and resilient place. Battered by the storms of industrial decline, it has always rallied — journalism and comic books are still going strong, and it is renowned for innovation in biomedical science and computer games. Yet social problems remain. Unemployment is high and the city has the unfortunate accolade of having the highest number of fatal drug overdoses per capita of any city in Europe.<sup>1</sup> The city council believes that boosting the creative industries and tourism offers a route to improving job opportunities. At the opening of the museum, council leader John Alexander pointed to a sizeable increase in hotel bookings being made in the run up to the opening of the V&A. And the council has apparently persuaded hotel groups and contractors to hire locally and pay the real living wage.<sup>2</sup> What this amounts to for the economic fortunes of Dundonians remains to be seen.

### BUILDING INCLUSION INTO THE CITY

Crucially, will this injection of culture and positivity benefit those who need it most? How can a situation analogous to the inverse care law (so astutely described by Julian Tudor Hart) not apply to the arts and architecture? The V&A Dundee Local Communities Programme has been attempting to make the project as accessible

*Internal textures and volume. Image courtesy of Rod Kemsley.*



*Public realm, passing through beneath the building. Image courtesy of Rod Kemsley.*

and socially inclusive as possible.<sup>3</sup> This has been underway since 2014 and includes events in schools, sheltered housing complexes, and prisons. The building itself is intended to be welcoming and inclusive. 'A living room for the city' was a phrase used by the architect Kengo Kuma and it has become something of a tagline. The proportions of the staircase are supposed to invite sitting. A cycle path linking much of the city passes directly through an arch between the two parts of the building. The cliff face appearance gives the museum a more natural, less formal, feel.

The Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain (Frank Gehry, 1997), is often referenced as the prime example of a museum breathing life into a tired industrial city. It demonstrated that socioeconomic transformation through a programme of regeneration is attainable. More profoundly, its current director, Richard Armstrong, has said that it shows that visual arts can 'impact on a city's capacity to positively change its own psychology'.

Perhaps Dundonian writer AL Kennedy put it best when she said, 'the things that we see every day tell us whether we matter, whether we are loved, whether we have power'.<sup>4</sup> GPs know as well as anyone that self-esteem is linked to health and having Scotland's first museum of design is another thing for Dundee to be proud of.

**Pearce Cusack,**

GPST1, Logan Practice, Houldsworth Centre, Wishaw, North Lanarkshire, Scotland.

**Email:** pearce\_cusack@hotmail.com

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