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An Update on Aberdeen Civic Society

As with many things in life just now, our activities in Aberdeen Civic Society have been severely cut back over the last year. The last formal activity we had was our Annual Dinner and presentation of Awards on 6 March 2020. The evening was a success, but slightly strange because everyone was anticipating the arrival of the first lockdown on 23 March 2020. We had to put off our AGM, scheduled for 22 April 2020, and since then, other than commenting on a few development proposals, our activities have been in hibernation.

Looking forward we would hope to restart a limited programme later in the year if we are allowed. It may be that meeting in person and in larger groups will remain restricted, so we would like to be able to do something using technology. We are hoping to hold a joint 2020 and 2021 AGM using ZOOM and will let you know about that later. In the meantime, it would be great if those members who have an email address and are happy for us to use it were to let us know what it is so that we can advise any details. Please email details to **info@aberdeencivicsociety.org.uk**.

There is no doubt that the Covid-19 pandemic has changed things. Life in the city is unlikely to get back to what it was before – and that is probably a good thing. Rather than try to make it return, we should all be looking at how to do things differently. This applies equally to commercial activity in town centres as well as organisations such as Aberdeen Civic Society.

Annual Awards 2020

There was a common theme running through all the awards presented at the Annual Dinner in March 2020 - and that was tourism and culture.

The main award was given to **The Ferryhill Railway Heritage Trust** which was formed in 2007 to bring back into use the Edwardian railway turntable in Ferryhill and some of the other items of railway heritage nearby. The turntable had become redundant by the mainline railway and through the work of the Trust, the turntable has been brought back into use, and is used to turn locomotives, mainly steam locomotives, that come to Aberdeen as a place to visit. The Ferryhill Railway Heritage Trust has achieved their work on extremely limited funds and is mainly staffed by volunteers. It is a great project, and one that we were hoping to hear more of at our AGM planned for April 2020 but postponed due to Covid-19. It is a talk that we still need to have.

We gave two Commendations, one to **Aberdeen City Council** for the TECA Event complex at Bucksburn and the other to **Aberdeen Performing Arts** for the work done to improve and refurbish the Music Hall.

It is a shame that events over the last year have meant that all these projects are unlikely to have reached their full potential, but we hope that they will in the future.

Historic Environment Scotland and the Listing of Multi-Storey Blocks

The recent decision by Historic Environment Scotland to list eight multi-storey housing blocks in the centre of Aberdeen at Category A has provoked derision in print and social media. Aberdeen City Council, which owns most of the flats, opposed the designation and has said it will appeal to the Scottish Government. Kevin Stewart, Aberdeen Central MSP and Minister for Local Government, Housing and Planning, has also denounced the listings, saying www.aberdeencivicsociety.org.uk

that they make necessary changes to improve the energy efficiency and thermal performance of the flats more difficult and expensive.

Historic Environment Scotland, in their Record of Handling, say the group of multistoreys meet the criteria for listing because of their special architectural or historic interest, representing a uniquely Aberdonian response to the city housing shortage in the decades after WW2. Unlike the contemporary system-built blocks put up in Scotland's other cities (and elsewhere in Aberdeen), the city centre multistoreys were designed by the City Architects Department and built to high standard by local construction firms W J Anderson and Alexander Hall & Sons. Quality construction, including North East vernacular references such as large granite aggregate embedded into the concrete panels on the end elevation walls, as well as a history of careful management by the council, means the blocks, unlike others built elsewhere in Scotland remain in good condition. Scottish architectural historian Miles Glendinning, who proposed the listing, says the towers, as a surviving group in the centre of the city, are landmarks and an asset of which Aberdeen should be proud.

Stated objections to the designation fall into two, sometimes overlapping, categories; that the buildings are ugly and not really heritage, and that they need to be changed in ways that listing will either prevent or make more costly. The latter reason is the basis on which Aberdeen City Council will appeal. HES respond that listing is not an obstacle to necessary improvements to the towers and that they are working with the council to pilot a study on improving their energy efficiency, clearly an urgent necessity in the effort to meet decarbonisation goals. HES points out that proposals to list older buildings, for example granite tenements, are not opposed on the grounds that they will require changes to improve thermal efficiency or address fire safety and accessibility requirements.

Whether consensus can be found that post-war buildings, especially housing, should be part of Scotland's listed heritage is unclear. If not heritage, the Aberdeen tower blocks are undoubtedly an inheritance that needs to be kept. Roughly half the existing national building stock was built after WW2 and successfully managing this segment will be necessary to reach national Net Zero Carbon targets. The recently published Scottish Infrastructure Commission Report makes this explicit by calling for the effective reuse of all existing national assets, including buildings, in preference to new. The embodied carbon in existing buildings makes them particularly useful in the critical short-term drive to reduce carbon emissions.

In this respect, the efforts of HES to list notable examples of the vast-post war building stock should be supported. Their offer to work with Aberdeen City Council, bringing conservation competencies to ensure necessary upgrades are done in way that protects existing building fabric, could be seen as emblematic of the collaborations that will be necessary in the future. The lessons learned from working with the small number of post-war listed buildings, particularly housing, could be applied elsewhere. Aberdeen's designated multistories, seen as symbols of progress when they were built, present an opportunity for the city going forward.

Contributed by Julia Strickland

We welcome contributions from guest writers to our newsletter. Please send them to info@aberdeencivicsociety.org.uk.