



Showcase

Eden Court Theatre, Inverness

Eden Court reopened in November 2007 following a major redevelopment, transforming the venue into the biggest arts centre in Scotland. Theatre Director, *Colin Marr*, explains

Eden Court first opened in 1976 amid some controversy. The modern design by architects Graham Law and James Dunbar-Nasmith divided public opinion and in an era of high inflation the escalating costs nearly brought work to a halt. However, the vision and courage of a handful of local councillors ensured the new civic building was completed and the Highlands gained its first proper theatre.

It was a new cultural centre for an entire region, and the need to accommodate the full spectrum of arts (opera, drama, ballet, music, film, modern dance), as well as community

and conference events for a diverse audience, informed its design. The 80 foot wide stage with a motorised centre can be adapted for different performances or moved back to reveal an orchestra pit for 60. The horseshoe shaped auditorium of three tiers comfortably seating 830 (now 847), or for smaller scale performances, with the upper tiers dark, has the feel of a more intimate theatre. It was a bold, contemporary design that has stood the test of time – the main auditorium has been little changed in the recent redevelopment – and the building has earned a Category A listing for its exceptional 1970s architecture.

However, over thirty years the pattern of theatre-going has changed considerably and, where once people primarily came along in the evenings to be entertained, we now find the venue is busy all day, with people of all ages, many of whom are coming to take part in an arts activity rather than just watch.

By 2003, the 1976 building and the adjoining Category A listed Victorian house, known as the Bishop's Palace, which housed the dressing rooms and small cinema, were inadequate and tired. The number of visitors was rising year on year, competition for use of the stage was intense, with not a dark night in the calendar, and new requirements for disability access meant serious improvements were required.

The development of the new Eden Court by architects Page/Park has, we hope, created a venue that will comfortably accommodate the growing appetite for cultural activity in this dynamic region well into the 21st

Century. Working with the existing listed buildings, we have added a third, modern building that wraps around the south side of the 1976 theatre, mirroring its relationship with the Bishop's Palace to the north. Within this we have created a new, 270-seat theatre (a modern, flexible space with retractable seating and adjustable acoustics), two new state of the art cinemas, two dance and drama studios dedicated to teaching and participation (the first in the Highlands), and an outdoor terrace overlooking the river.

This new building, constructed in concrete, is one of the first in Scotland to use stack assisted natural ventilation to reduce energy consumption. The system draws fresh air into the bottom of the building, warming or cooling it as it passes over a mass of concrete, with pressure differences helping to draw it out through six wind towers on the roof. It precludes the need for mechanical air conditioning and will save approximately 30,000 tonnes of carbon emissions a year. Another important measure to increase sustainability has been the introduction of solar panels to provide hot water for the kitchens and bathrooms.

The Eden Court complex literally spans three centuries of architecture, but inside, with interior design by Graven Images, the spaces flow cohesively. Visitors now enter via the front of the building into a large open plan ground floor area housing our box office, restaurant and café bar. The fully restored Bishop's Palace is connected via a glazed walkway that encourages visitors to explore this historic house. The original features of the interior



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provide a marked contrast to the very contemporary style of the new parts of Eden Court and provide a characterful backdrop for meetings and events here. At the rear, a new dressing room block with space for 90 performers has been built, allowing us to reclaim the rooms in the Bishop's Palace for offices and functions.

The redevelopment of Eden Court took more than two years and £24 million to complete. At times it was as controversial as the initial development, but no one has looked back, or regretted building the theatre in the first place. And I am quite sure the next generation will thank us for being brave enough to expand it for them.

