

Moray Cultural Quarter:

Redevelopment of Elgin Town Hall

Initial concept report



AUGUST
2020

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In conducting the process of preparing this report, the valuable and informative contributions of the following people and organisations are duly recognised: Gary Templeton and Jim Grant of Moray Council Environment Services; Mike Devenney (Chairman) Angus Lawson and Donnie Squair (Directors) of Elgin Town Hall for the

Community Group; Garry Rendall, and Stacey Toner of Moray College Business and Leisure and Creative and Cultural Industries; and George Findlater, Head of Partnerships and Projects, and Simon Montgomery, Area Inspector, of Historic Environment Scotland.

Report by Dr Nick Brown, with assistance from Tony Pinner,
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1.0 INTRODUCTION

This report summarises work done in summer 2020 to scope out the potential for Elgin Town Hall to be transformed into a creative hub, as part of the Moray Growth Deal vision to establish a Cultural Quarter in central Elgin serving all of Moray.

The report identifies the aims, objectives and spatial requirements of a new creative hub and, following analysis of the existing building and site, as well as consultation with key stakeholders, outlines some initial ideas and recommendations for taking this ambitious project forward.

The report has been commissioned by the Moray Council on behalf of the Moray Growth Deal Elgin Town Hall Steering Group.

2.0 BACKGROUND

The Moray Growth Deal is a regional programme to boost economic growth by bringing together Scottish and UK Governments, The Moray Council, partners from the public and third sectors, plus private business. The overall vision for Moray's growth is based on the notion of 'innovation from tradition'. The general area between the present Community Centre and the Cathedral is believed to be such an area of growth potential. The Town Hall is seen as being apt as the focus of a Cultural Quarter as a key part of the emerging masterplan for the City Centre, with connectivity between the core retail area, Cooper Park and Lossie Green a key issue, aspiring to change the pedestrian/vehicle hierarchy in the longer term.

Recent initial investigations by a Conservation Architect (NBPA, 2019) and a Landscape Architect (MBLA Design Ltd. 2019) have indicated that the Hall and its environs could be extended and/or added to in order to create a sensitive and exciting new purpose(s),

and change the road network at Trinity Place to allow a new hard landscaped area to the north of the Town Hall, with options to explore extending and reconfiguring the entrance. These suggestions have been generally endorsed by the Moray Growth Deal Cultural Quarter Board and the Town Hall Steering Group.

The approach to upgrade and transform the Listed Town Hall has also been well received by Historic Environment Scotland, and SSE has initially indicated that their sub-station and underground cabling should not be seen as a 'showstopper' for any such proposal involving an extension on the south side.

The Elgin Town Hall (ETH) Steering Group, who have since been to The Nerve Centre in Derry to view a project of similar nature, now wish to take the Elgin Town Hall project to its next stage, and have commissioned NB Planning and Architecture (NBPA) from Cullen to investigate further.





Visualisation prepared to convey a remodelled entrance plaza to Elgin Town Hall.

Image courtesy of MBLA Design Ltd

3.0 AIM

The main aim of the commission is “to advance the Town Hall redevelopment process by investigating what is (i) needed and (ii) possible, to transform it into a creative hub at the heart of a new Cultural Quarter”.

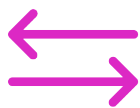


4.0 DESIGN OBJECTIVES

The key design objectives of the commission are as follows:



Provide for a ‘performance theatre’ as a functional focus to the hub



Transform with appropriate addition(s), if required, to serve creative industries



Provide high quality food and drink related spaces and facilities



Identify any creative functions better sited elsewhere in town centre.

5.0 SPACE REQUIREMENTS

The additional space requirements, which have been discussed by stakeholders for the Town Hall during 2019-20, are identified by the Cultural Quarter Board as :

Performance and rehearsal space for local performing arts activity

3 small rooms for **musical rehearsal, digital animation** , each roughly 3m x 3m soundproofed

Staff room(s), toilets etc associated with the above

Space to accommodate **film-making students** (likely a classroom-type facility and studio)

Light and inspiring **gallery space(s)**

Café/restaurant and lounge bar break-out spaces to support these uses

‘Fablab’ type facility; roughly standard classroom size, with office/workspace for technician

Small **cinema**, with a capacity for c.40 people, which can double as a **lecture theatre**

Potential for new, more **attractive entrances** to be created to the front and rear of the building.

6.0 EXISTING BUILDING AND SITE

Elgin Town Hall was built in 1961 to a design from the Edinburgh office of one of Scotland's foremost 20th century architects, Sir William Kininmonth. His office, which was also working on a Castlehill Housing project in Forres at the time, won a design competition run by Elgin Town Council in 1957 to build a new Town Hall as a replacement following fire damage in 1939.

A pupil of Sir Edwin Lutyens in the late 1920s, William Kininmonth was a rising star in his early years, even building his striking art deco home at the age of 29, and throughout his career he adopted contemporary practices of the time, whilst cleverly fusing knowledge of Scottish vernacular. After forming partnerships with Basil Spence and then Rowand Anderson in the 1930s, Kininmonth led his office from 1946, with William Leslie and Richard Ewing doing most of the detailed design work.

Elgin Town Hall is a building executed in the international style – now a relative rarity in the Moray area – and is described by architectural historian Charles McKean as a “...plain and cubist 1960s pavilion”

(p.41). By the mid-20th century, the prime architectural symbol of the international style was the ‘open box with mere planes surrounding a volume, which tended towards the hypothetical flexibility of the free plan’ (Frampton, p.248).

During the 1950s, Kininmonth's contemporaries in Scotland such as Basil Spence, John Keppie and Robert Matthew, influenced by the likes of Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe, produced notable modernist civic buildings in the international style.

Elgin Town Hall was built as an open box with a grid-iron structural plan that allowed the original designer(s) freedom to pursue a permeable and informal relationship between the main, central hierarchy of spaces, with the more enclosed ‘utility’ functions either side to the east and west. Whilst this may have represented the zeitgeist of the time, acoustic permeability has since proven to be the building's principal design flaw and has, so far, prevented its long term adaptability towards multi-operational uses.

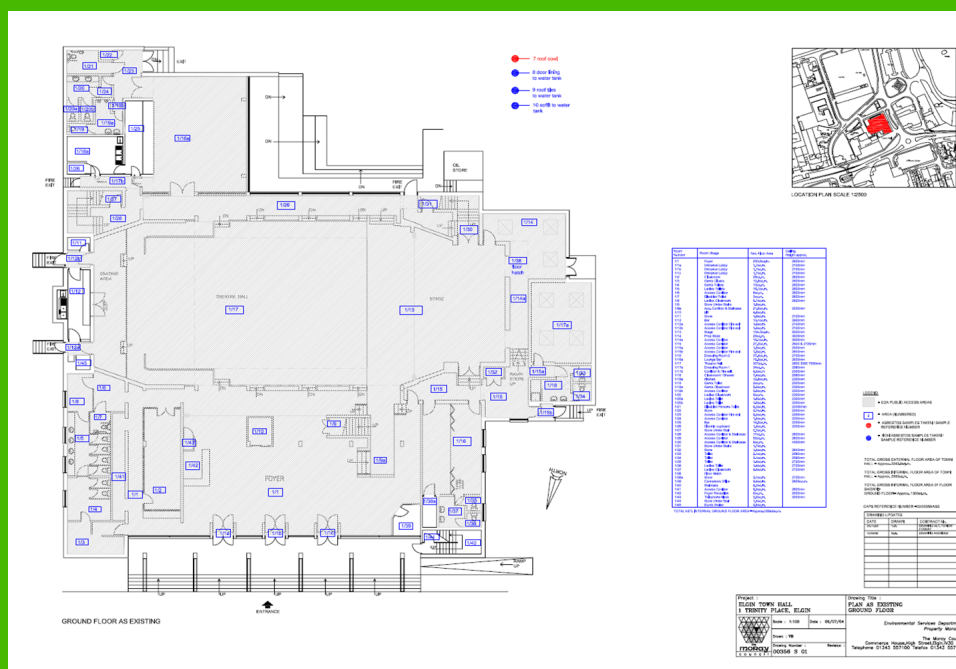
The key heritage merit of the Town Hall, however, is derived from the **quality of design and finishes** of its Scandinavian-style c.800 seater auditorium and ancillary spaces



The key heritage merit of the Town Hall, however, is derived from the quality of design and finishes of its Scandinavian-style c.800 seater auditorium and ancillary spaces - perhaps inspired by renowned Finnish architect Alvar Aalto, with his more humanist approach to international style interiors, particularly through the use of wooden finishes.

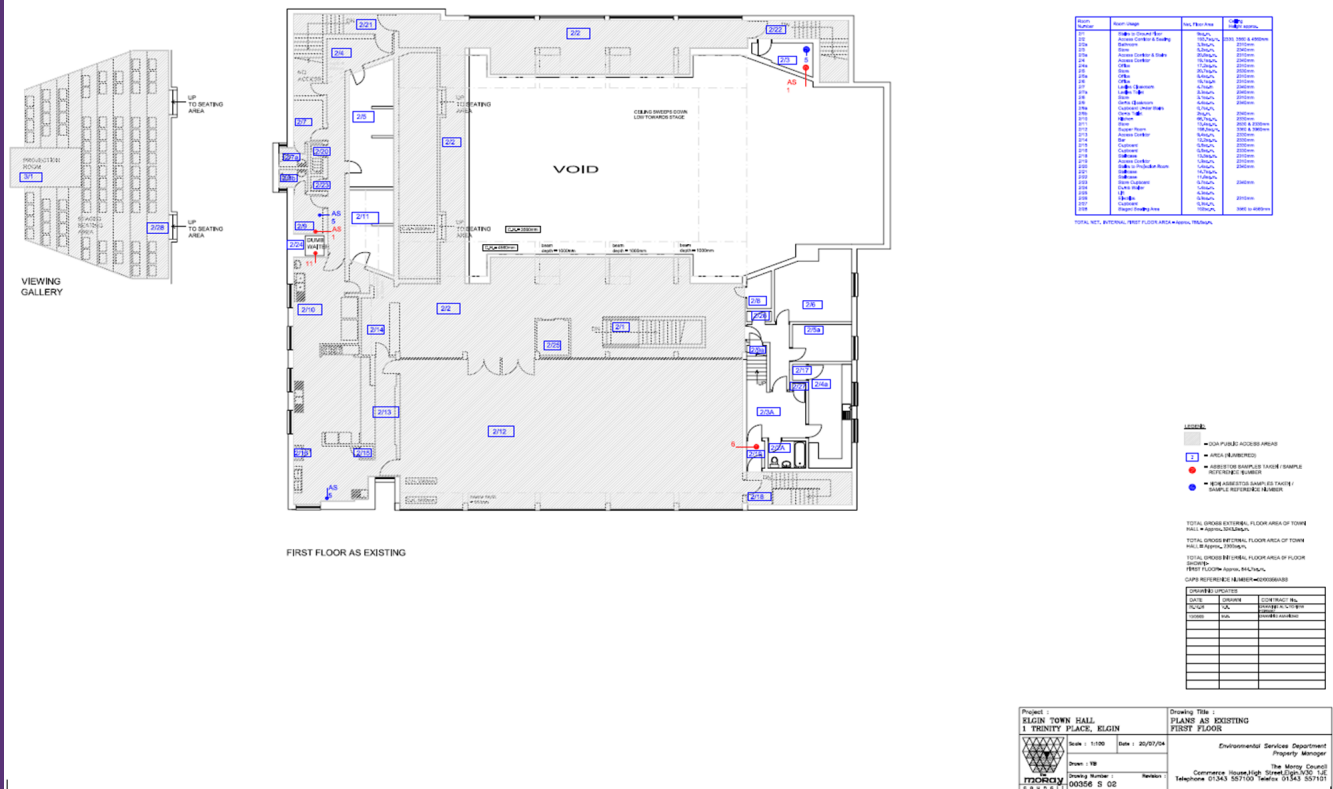
The building has a stepped entrance front to the north, which is both functional and elegant in design. However, an unintended consequence of the construction of the inner ring road, in the late 1970s, has been to expose the rear

of the Town Hall to public view in a particularly prominent manner. Despite this, Elgin Town Hall was listed in 2000 and was managed by the Council until 2018, when it was declared surplus and offered up for Asset Transfer. Its operation was recently taken over by a community group, who took out an initial two-year lease. The building has since become more popular as a local facility, but there is still conflict in the operation of its two main function spaces - these two spaces are served by one entrance/spill-out area with very little sound separation between them.



The existing ground floor plan of the Town Hall highlights (i) the stepped entrance and foyer area; (ii) the main hall space; (iii) the lounge extension; (iv) the stage extension to west; and (v) the utility services along the east wall.

Courtesy of The Moray Council



The existing first floor plan highlights (i) the main hall's upper floor viewing areas; (ii) the spacious supper room above the entrance foyer; and (iii) the utility services on the east and west walls.

Courtesy of The Moray Council

7.0 STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

In preparation for tackling the main aim of this commission, engagement took place with representatives of key stakeholder groups. Elgin Town Hall users were represented by 3 of the Community Group Directors. This group pointed out the need to maintain 'multi-functional spaces' throughout the building, in order to sustain the building's interest and long-term commercial viability. The group was also keen to point out the building's current 'hamartia'; which is the inability for anyone to productively use its ancillary spaces when a main event is occurring in the auditorium, mainly due to the lack of acoustic separation.

Moray College was represented by members from the Business and Leisure and Creative and Cultural Industries staff. With its desire to grow creative industries provision across art, drama, writing, film and music, the UHI College highly interested in the prospect of the Town Hall focusing upon the performing arts, but is also very keen for flexible studio/classroom space, as well as café, restaurant, and bar facilities. It is believed that staffing of the 'right people' will be necessary to run the new facilities, but no commitment is yet made.

Moray Council was represented by the Strategic Planning and Development Manager reporting to Cultural Quarter Board colleagues. As well as seeking sustainable and creative use of the Town Hall building, the need for external improvement of the building and wider environment as a visible transformation is sought.

There is a shared vision amongst the stakeholders for the new building to be a 'special, regional centre day and night' that serves Moray, rather than just Elgin. The expectation is for a refurbishment that has a "...bit more wow!" In doing so, it will appeal to people of all kinds far and wide, i.e. the new creative hub will 'attract people to visit, live, learn and create' in Moray.

Based upon current work by the Town Hall users, the curriculum of UHI Moray College, and the ambitions of the Cultural Quarter Board, it is perceived that the present Hall/Auditorium be rebranded as first class Performance Theatre, with the ability to attract high quality travelling shows and acts. This may involve adjusting the current stage

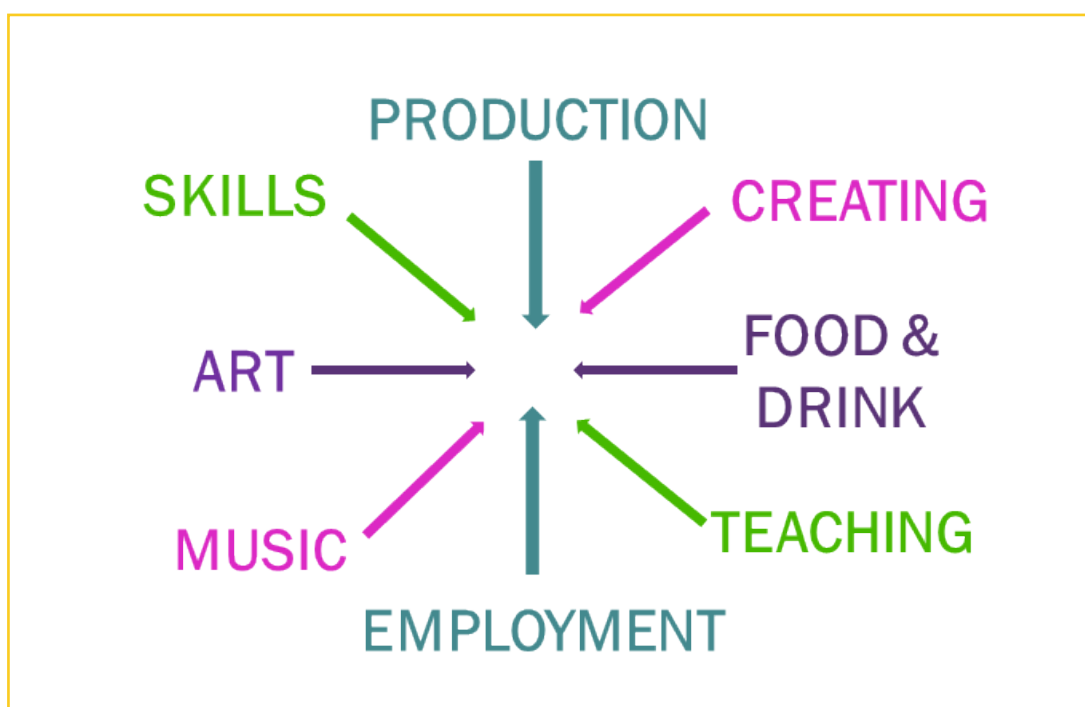
to include either a hydraulic stage and/or a fly system.

Based upon the curriculum of Moray College, the ambitions of the Cultural Quarter Board and the lack of facilities and affordable space for practitioners, there is a local need for spaces to provide a new hub in the area for the creative industries sector. This envisages the current site as a multi-art venue for teaching, creating, producing and displaying film, gaming, art, and music.

Based upon the curriculum of Moray College, the ambitions of the Cultural Quarter Board, and the needs and

expectations of the general public when visiting cultural quarters elsewhere, the provision for high quality food and drink facilities is also required. This will be particularly important for serving conferences and weddings, which will respectively be important income generation markets for the new centre.

Furthermore, it is the stakeholders group's desire that the site will not only be a hub for cultural activity and bridge the gap between the Moray College and the wider community, but also effectively provide the region with an employability centre for those honing their creative skills and talents.



8.0 EXTERNAL CONSULTATION

Initial informal consultation has taken place with Historic Environment Scotland (HES) regarding the Listed status of the building, and with Scottish Southern Electric (SSE) regarding the proximity of their main sub-station and associated cabling.

HES is generally supportive of plans to make a rejuvenated Town Hall part of wider cultural quarter and welcomes development of a business case that uses the high-quality townscape and heritage resources found in Elgin. The listed building consent procedure is there to allow for change, because it is recognised that change will probably be necessary to ensure that its owners or occupiers have a continued interest in using a building and maintaining it.

HES acknowledge design-led intentions for a 'conservation plan' approach, and the Area Inspector has promoted the approach of working within the original spirit or original intentions of the architect. This is particularly appropriate with 20th century buildings where detailing or materials may no longer be fit for purpose and a new approach is necessary, but executed in the same style to be sensitive to the original architecture. The legislation for listed buildings seeks the preservation of listed buildings, their setting and any features they possess. The meaning of preservation, in this context, is the preservation of the key characteristics that led to its listing as a building of special architectural or historic interest.

The expectation is for a refurbishment that has a **"...bit more wow!"** In doing so, it will appeal to people of all kinds far and wide, i.e. the new creative hub will **'attract people to visit, live, learn and create'** in Moray.

The Head of Partnerships and Projects recognises the need to address Town Hall's flaws and alter and add ancillary facilities, and has positively suggested that, "...the Moray Growth Deal represents a significant opportunity to address these and allow for its fine interior to be used and appreciated to the full".

Early consultation has taken place with the Engineering Design section, and then the Wayleave section, of SSE, who own and operate a major electrical sub-station immediately west of the Town Hall. They currently gain access by vehicle across the rear of the Hall. SSE obviously needs continued access to sub-station, but indicate flexibility around this. There is also significant cabling below the current access road, but it appears that this can be worked around in consultation with SSE. Consequently, it appears that SSE will seek to be supportive of the Moray Growth Deal project and will aim to co-operate and, so far as possible, to enable it to proceed.

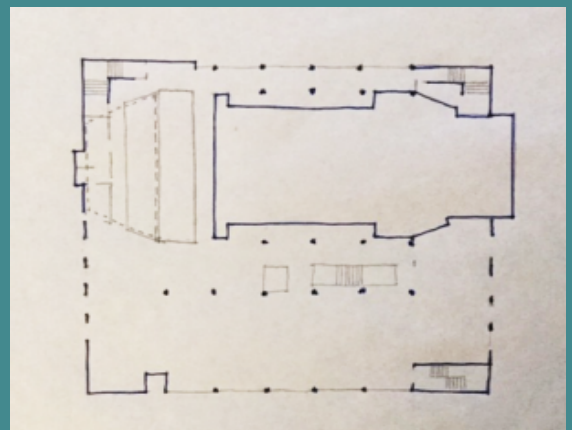
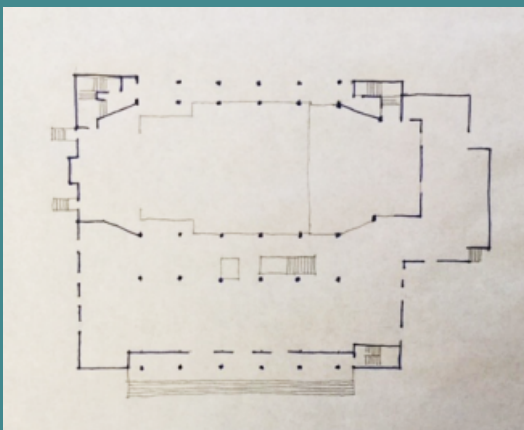
9.0 DESIGN ANALYSIS

Out of respect for the original design for the Town Hall, and due to the building's statutory Listed status, it is proposed to take a conservation-led approach by assessing the key characteristics, seeking to understand the architects' original intentions, and by identifying (a) what elements require protection/retention and (b) where the need, and scope, lies for sensitive alteration.

The Town Hall has been designed as a rectangular box with a functional envelope, resulting in distinct north and south elevations; although the rhythmic elegance of south elevation has been slightly clouded by a single storey addition at the east end. The entrance front, however, is the key architectural element, along with the entrance steps and fountain, which all indicate the civic aspirations of the Town Hall and Elgin at the time.

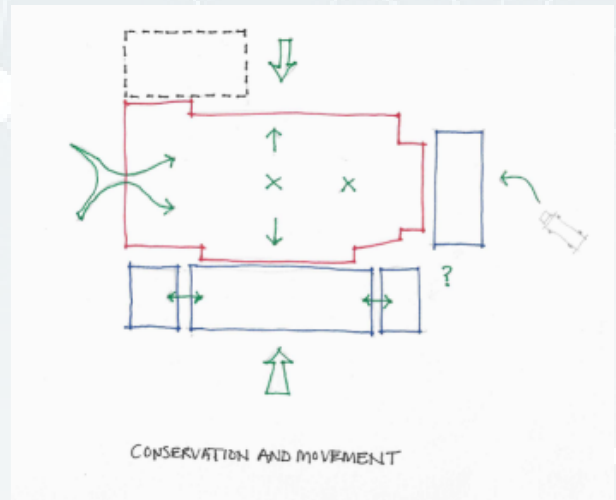
The Hall's central interior is clearly the principal characteristic of special interest,

and within this there is a hierarchy of three main spaces with some original detailing and materials surviving. The auditorium is the key space, with the first floor 'supper room' and entrance area as subsidiary spaces. The auditorium is in a very good state of preservation, and remains as a fine example of the influence of Scandinavian architecture on civic design in Scotland in the 1950s and 60s. The interior also seems to have been conceived on the basis of openness, where the windows in the south and north elevations provide light deep into the building. The main architectural spaces flow into each other - but this concept has unfortunately not worked well in practice, with curtains originally hung to keep light out of performances and deaden noise, and ultimately, a glass partition inserted to soundproof the supper room from the auditorium. Applying the modernist mantra of 'form follows function', this flaw in a leading idea needs sensitive and, possibly, radical resolution.

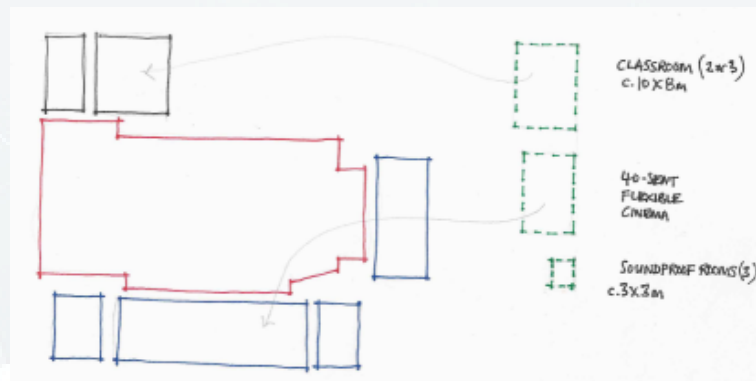


Sketch plans of Ground and First Floor : an initial conservation-led approach identifies the main auditorium, central spaces, and main structure and fire staircases as the building's features for retention (note, the existing single storey is excluded)

Examination of the movement in and out of the building reveals constraints, issues and opportunities. Unlike many other large performance halls and auditoria, principal movement is from the side, rather than from the end, opposite the stage. Due to the building concept, and the proximity to the main road, the option of changing the auditorium main entrance is very limited. However, entrance from the north side provides the building with interest and uniqueness and, due to the building's design, there is an opportunity to repeat this access/egress on the south side too. That said, it is a current flaw in the building's operations that anyone wishing to travel between the north and south side rooms has to pass through the auditorium, which would not be possible when a performance or function is taking place. A future refurbishment of the building would provide the opportunity to rectify this flaw.



Sketch diagram of movement inside and out. The main entrance is from the north, with further opportunity to the south, and limited opportunity to the east. The west side functions as the service zone.

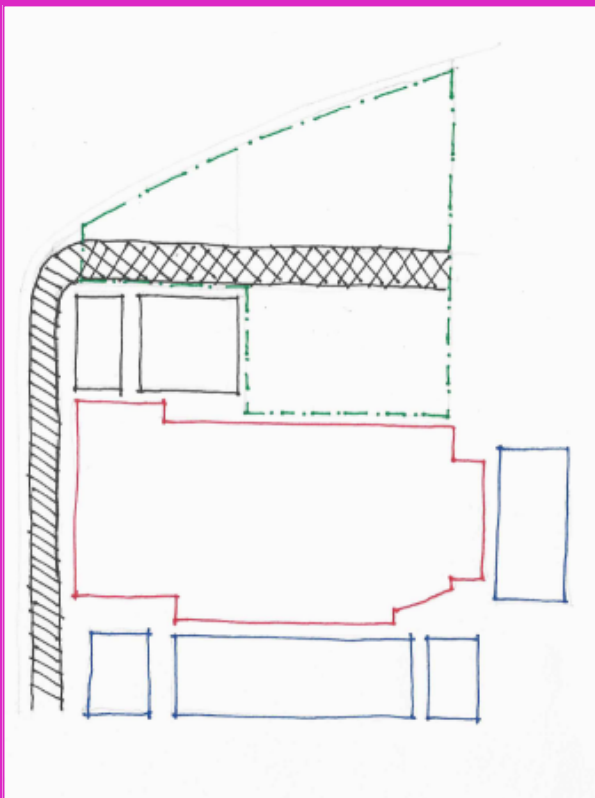


Sketch diagram of the size of new rooms desired relative to the existing building. Some new room functions could be sited within the existing building's spaces but, without intruding upon the main auditorium, the number and scale of the new accommodation required implies that some additions to the existing building will be necessary

The number and scale of new spaces required within the building is outlined above (see item 5.0). Initial examination of these indicates that some could, at least in spatial terms, be incorporated into the existing building, e.g. into the supper room and/or rear meeting room. However, not all can be accommodated without compromising the building's main spaces, including the auditorium.

In relation to the potential to extend the building, there are significant constraints all round. To the north, the land is associated with the building's designed entrance and there are, rightly, intentions to enhance this area by reclaiming a vehicular route for pedestrians and subsequent plaza landscaping. To the west is the building's disabled parking and servicing area. To the east is the main

Elgin to Lossiemouth road, including a bus lay-by, with a further slip road in between. To the south is a tarred road giving access to an electrical sub-station (see Item 8.0 consultation with SSE) and, beyond that, is the trunk road (which may, however, be de-trunked in future years, should A96-dualling improvements proceed, as planned).

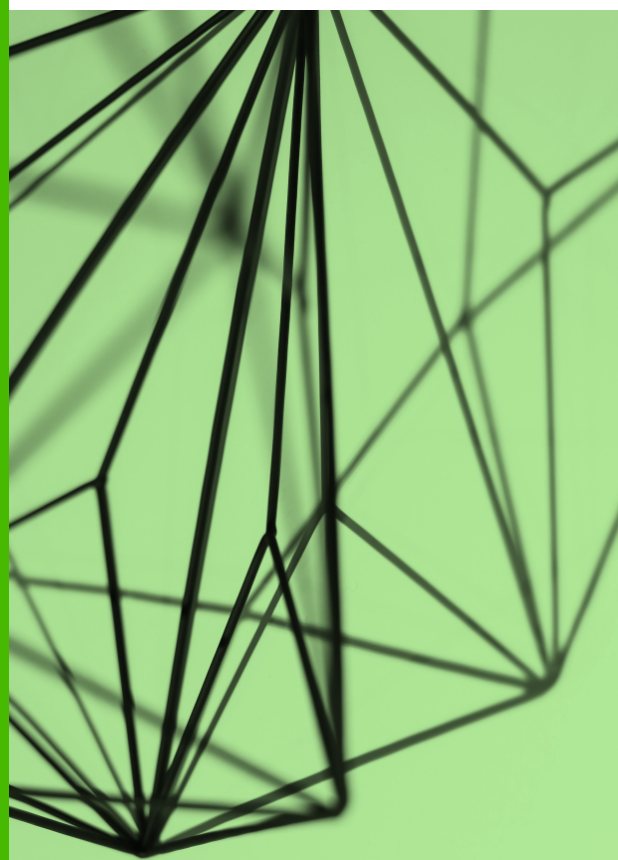


Sketch diagram showing the land to the south where opportunity may lie for extending the existing building, shown in dotted green. This land is presently 'severed' by the sub-station access road which may, or may not, prove to be a major constraint to the project's ambitions

10. INITIAL PROPOSALS

Taking on board all of the above, the initial proposals have been developed only to their earliest stage of outline design, but they are shown in sufficient detail to allow spatial interpretation of the design intentions and, more importantly, permit dialogue amongst the relevant parties to enable the project to advance to its next stages.

The overall design approach taken is to conserve, enhance and alter the building in a way that is both radical and sensitive. For example: acoustically separating the auditorium, yet still striving to preserve its feeling of openness and permeability with semi-glazed partitioning; and extending this atmospheric concept through into a major extension to the south in the form of a street atrium, whilst still retaining the civic presence of the building. Constraints are viewed as opportunities. For example : the open aspect side entrance to the auditorium from the north can be 'replicated' on the south side to maintain a form of symmetry and focus upon the central auditorium, as well as provide a new, secondary entrance point that links the new building to the town centre; furthermore, the diagonal visibility splay of Alexandra Road provides the opportunity to form a new architectural line that accentuates a



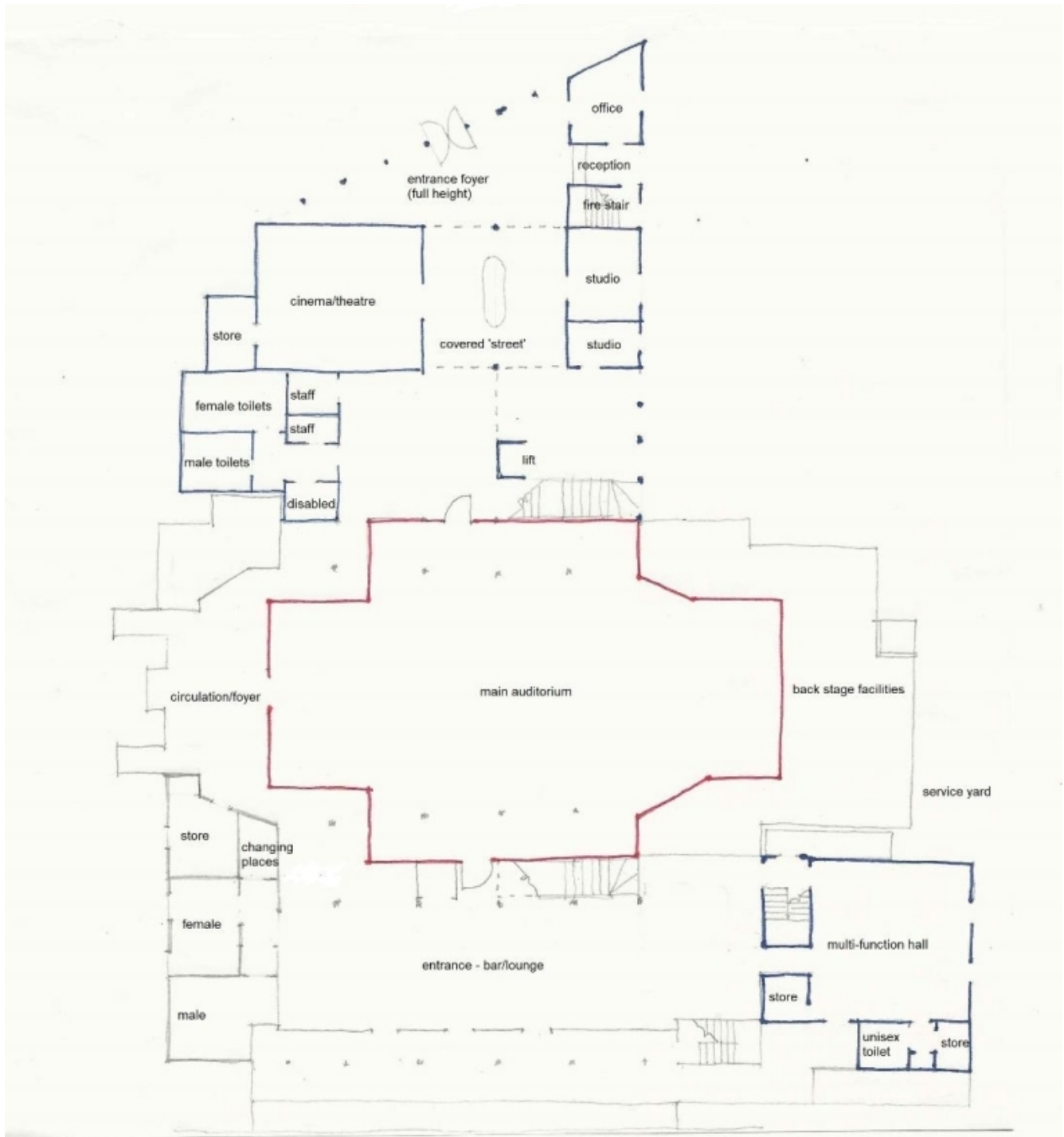
The overall design approach taken is to **conserve, enhance and alter** the building in a way that is **both radical and sensitive**.

contemporary 'slice' across the grid-iron layout of the original building.

The design approach to the individual rooms throughout the new building is focused upon flexibility, adaptability, versatility, and multi-use e.g. cinema room as shared use space and not fixed or set for only one function; and classrooms that can reduce/increase in size to suit circumstances. The flexible solution for gallery space – e.g. in non-specific rooms and/or throughout the open circulation spaces - responds to need and demand for community and contemporary art, rather than commercial art, i.e. the new building will not be bespoke enough to host a national gallery exhibition.

Inspiration for space, style and quality can be derived from comparable examples elsewhere, such as Lerwick's Mareel Centre, Dunkeld's Birnam Arts, Aberdeen's Art Gallery, Dundee Contemporary Arts, Derry's Nerve Centre, and Croydon Fairfield Halls.





Sketch of possible new Ground Floor Layout – the main interventions are: new separation partitioning to the north and east sides of the main auditorium; a new subsidiary extension to the north-west of the building to house a multi-purpose community space; a new major extension to the south, with new entrance, to house a cinema and creative industries studios.

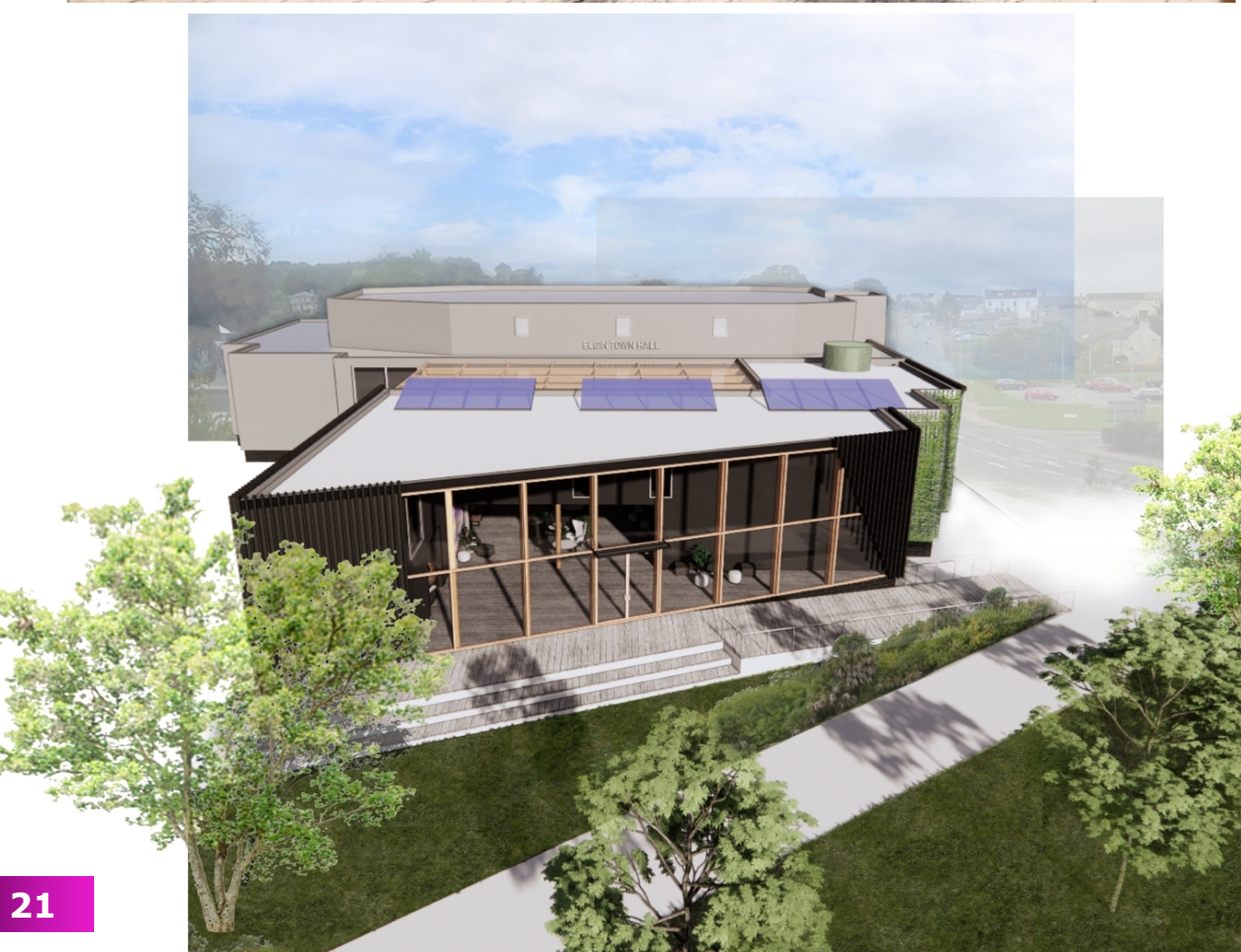
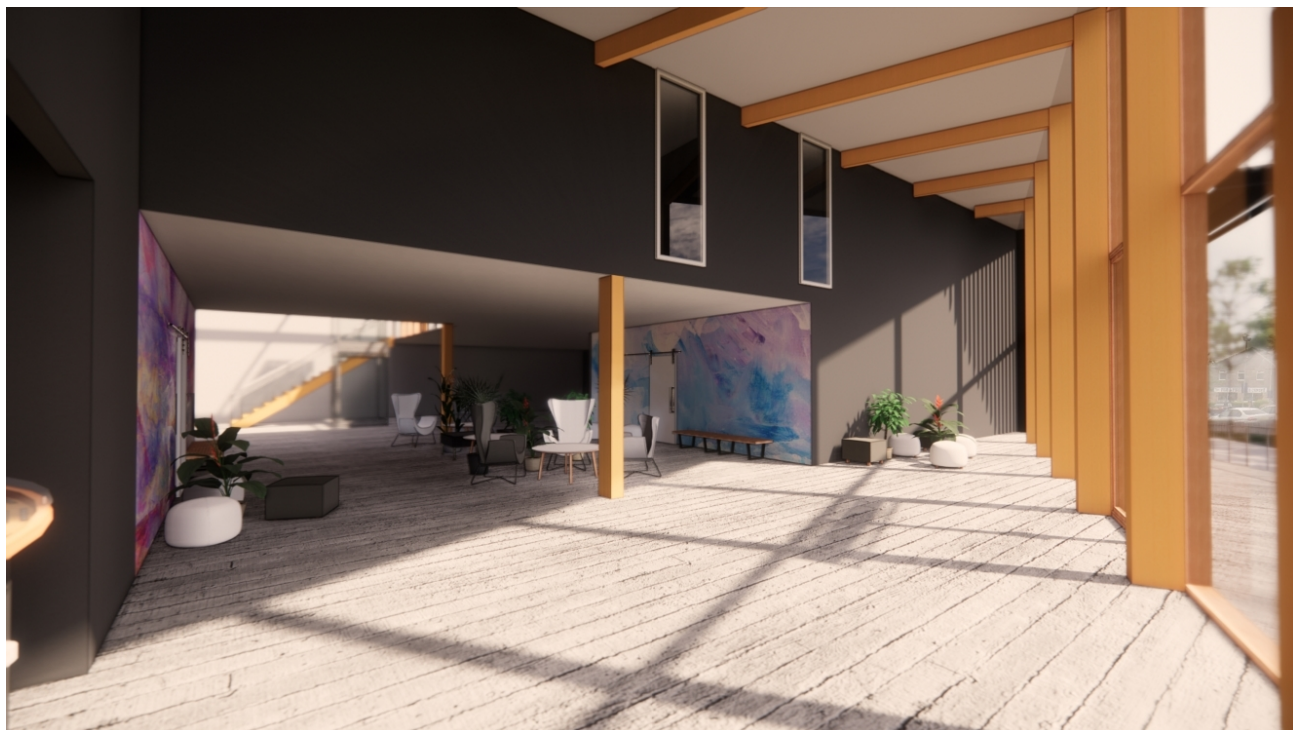
Sketch of possible new First Floor Layout – the main interventions are: new separation partitioning to the north and east sides of the main auditorium, with new access point from south side; a new minor extension to the north-west to house a main kitchen facility; a new major extension to the south, with atrium balcony, classroom studios, and ancillary rooms.

In proposing a new extension to the south, there is an assumption that any SSE constraints imposed by SSE and/or Trunk Road safety, can be overcome.



The following visualisations indicate how the south side proposals could look from several angles





11. TIMELINE

A simplified, indicative timeline for delivering the project quickly is outlined below:

Stage	Comments	Date
Client brief concluded	Incl. consultation process	Autumn 2020
Design Team procurement	Multi-discipline team	Autumn 2020
Development process	Incl. funding package and business case	Winter 2020
Planning Application	Incl. Listed Building Consent	Spring 2021
Building Warrant Application		September 2021
Tender process	Main contractor identified	Spring 2022
Commencement	Possibly in phases, to allow parts of building to remain operational	Autumn 2022
Completion		Autumn 2024

The above timeline assumes that agreement can be reached between all parties, constraints can be overcome, that the business case is strong and the public generally supports the proposals, and that funding to enable the development is forthcoming.

It is noted that the Moray Growth Deal Cultural Quarter Board wants to accelerate the process as much as it can, e.g. aiming to commence on site in 2022.

12. CONCLUSION

This short commission has been tasked to briefly examine the performance of the existing Town Hall, identify desired spaces to see if they can be accommodated within the existing building (ref. 5.0), and explore what the building could become in conceptual terms. The work has not produced a finalised design or style, but has merely sought to foster 'high level' discussions and decisions about the building's possible form, with the detail to be resolved later in the process.

The study indicates that the predicted needs of the users and stakeholders (ref. 7.0) along with their spatial ambitions for a Creative Hub, requires (i) internal separation of the main auditorium and (ii) an extension(s) to the existing Town Hall.

A sensitive, radical refurbishment and alteration of the existing building will give it new lease of life and long-term survival. As a result, it is supported, in principle, by

Historic Environment Scotland (ref. 8.0).

Analysis of the existing building and its land available indicates that extension opportunities best lie to the south and north-west of the site (ref. 9.0).

The ambition and requirements of the project Steering Group provide an exciting opportunity to create a more landmark form of architecture to draw attention to a re-oriented and re-imagined building and its entrance (ref. 10.0). This, however, is quite dependent upon any constraints, such as access and cables to the electric sub-station, being sufficiently addressed and/or overcome.

The study concludes that the transformation of Elgin Town Hall to more of a regional Cultural Centre (excluding a commercial gallery) is feasible and will likely bring substantial and wide-ranging benefits to Elgin and the Moray area.

13.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to take the project forward, it is recommended that the Moray Growth Deal Elgin Town Hall Steering Group:

1. Obtain written confirmation from SSE that their underground cabling and access to their sub-station is not a 'showstopper' or major impediment for a southern extension to the Town Hall
2. Conduct specific consultation with Transport Scotland and Transportation Services regarding the influence of the main road network upon the design and project implementation.
3. Extend the local consultation process to involve more users and/or interested parties
4. Critique in more detail the 'backstage facilities', with a view to identifying any issues to resolve through refurbishment
5. Expand the overall design brief, consider early design team procurement, and confirm a project timeframe
6. Consider an outline business case and delivery programme for implementation

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