

# Scottish Architectural Photography

About: “Classical Edinburgh”, an exhibition at Edinburgh  
City Art Centre

*Reviewed by Clarisse Godard Desmarest*

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**Photography, both an art form and a tool for documentation, can bear witness to the history of a city. “Classical Edinburgh” celebrates Edinburgh’s neo-classical architecture as seen through the lens of photographers Edwin Smith and Colin McLean, and invites reflection on the conservation of architectural heritage.**

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This exhibition of photographs, mainly black-and-white, entitled ‘Classical Edinburgh’, is a celebration of Edinburgh’s architecture, a half century or so after the publication of A. J. Youngson’s magisterial *The Making of Classical Edinburgh* published by Edinburgh University Press in 1966. It coincides too with a re-issue of Youngson’s book. This exhibition presents some of the original photographs included by Youngson, as well as a new, contemporary set of photographs of Edinburgh, from the same views.

Alexander J. Youngson was Professor of Political Economy at the University of Edinburgh (1963-74) and his volume, published in anticipation of the commemoration of the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the creation of the New Town, has long been considered the standard work on the development of classical Edinburgh. It has certainly framed our understanding of a unique piece of urban architecture and development which occurred some fifty years after

Bath's likewise famous classical new town, and which it sought to surpass. The acknowledgement of Edinburgh's merits brought the city UNESCO World Heritage Site status in 1995.

Photography has played a disproportionate role in documenting Scotland's history, particularly that of Edinburgh—famously, by the pioneer photographers William H. Fox Talbot, Thomas Annan, David Octavius Hill and Robert Adamson in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and, more recently, with for example Bob Morris's *Scotland 1907. The Many Scotlands of Valentine and Sons Photographers* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2007). The importance of the early photographers to Scottish contemporary photography has been fundamental, as seen for example in the work of Calum Colvin (RSA 2007), a Scottish artist whose work combines photography, painting, and installation, and often deals with issues of Scottish identity and culture and with the history of art. At the *Ages of Wonder; Scotland's Art 1540 to Now*, an exhibition of works collected by the Royal Scottish Academy of Art and Architecture, in the National Galleries of Scotland (4 November 2017–7 January 2018), one of the highlights was a reconstruction of Calum Colvin's photographic studio displayed as a celebration of Scottish national poet Hugh MacDiarmid.

## **The rise of conservation**

While photography became popularised widely in the 19<sup>th</sup> century because of its value for documenting its subjects so clearly, and for its artistic qualities, it could be argued that photography is the one art form in which Scotland—or rather Edinburgh—had a pioneering role.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, it seems fair to regard the photographs for this landmark publication, and celebrated now in this exhibition, as a direct legacy of that early and ongoing Edinburgh tradition, a tradition which became so successful in the city thereafter. The photographs for this publication are the work of Edwin Smith (1912-72), who was once described by Sir John Betjeman as 'a genius at photography'. Smith, whose principal passion was for painting, was a London-born photographer with a unique ability to sense the prevailing mood of a place, and who earned the soubriquet 'the English Atget'.<sup>2</sup>

The photographs included in *The Making of Classical Edinburgh* were mostly taken by Smith in 1964, specifically for the publication. A few more on display at the City Art Centre exhibition were from Smith's personal archive and date from an earlier visit to Edinburgh, in

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<sup>1</sup> See for e.g. Bob Morris's *Scotland 1907*.

<sup>2</sup> Eugène Atget (1857-1927) was a renowned French photographer operating in Paris at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and whose documentary vision proved highly influential on the Surrealists, in the 1920s.

1954. His collection of photographs, donated by his widow, Olive Cook, are now part of the Robert Elwall Photographs Collection at the RIBA British Architecture Library in London. Smith became known for capturing British building types, and he was unusual in that most of his photography was commissioned for inclusion in books, rather than for more lucrative and more ephemeral reproduction in advertisements or magazines. Shunning the trend for small portable 35 mm cameras, Smith preferred using a wooden and brass field camera and a tripod to capture in print buildings, as well as the fragility of the historic built environment. Many of his photographs of Edinburgh were purposely taken on overcast days, when light was more subtle and revealed a building's texture and detail.

Youngson's publication, and Smith's photographs, stimulated an awareness of the New Town and its contemporary threats. In 1967 an exhibition called '200 Summers in a City', commemorating the New Town's inauguration two centuries previously, was held in the Waverley Market; which drew a large audience of visitors. Soon afterwards, in 1970, the newly-formed Scottish Civic Trust held a conference in the Assembly Rooms entitled 'The Conservation of Georgian Edinburgh', which in turn led to the formation of the Edinburgh New Town Conservation Committee (ENTCC), now Edinburgh World Heritage Trust (EWHT). Following the conference, the City developed a large-scale conservation programme which needs to be seen against the precedent of the 1962 *Loi Malraux* (implemented 1963) which allowed for the protection of historic districts, with the first *secteur sauvegardé* being established in the Marais, in Paris, in 1964. It was then argued that Edinburgh could learn from Paris the need for a strategic plan to avoid decay, problems of traffic, and to prepare for the growth of commercialisation.

In 2017, architectural photographer Colin McLean decided to re-interpret the Edinburgh seen in Edwin Smith's photographs. He did this with new images, taken by him from almost identical viewpoints to those of Smith, in an attempt to reflect on the changes that have affected the built environment a half-century after Youngson's publication. Colin McLean FSA Scot, chair of the Scottish Civic Trust, also wrote the preface to the 2019 edition of *The Making of Classical Edinburgh*, in which he stressed the value of conservation in the present day. This re-edition includes twenty-four contemporary reproductions of Edwin Smith's original photographs by Colin McLean, in an appendix to the original text.

## **The exhibition display: Edinburgh fifty years apart**

On entering the exhibition space, on the second floor of the City Art Centre, in a pleasant room ornate with Doric columns (appropriate to the theme of Classical Edinburgh), the visitor is immediately drawn in by an informative panel superimposed onto a large-scale

black-and-white photograph of the Playfair Library at the University of Edinburgh. The first section of the exhibition presents photographs, by McLean, of Calton Hill—the National Monument; James Craig’s Observatory House (1776-92, with additions in 1893), now converted to holiday accommodation; and William H. Playfair’s City Observatory (1818), converted in 2018 for the Collective Gallery; the latter two demonstrating how historic buildings can be adapted thoughtfully and successfully for re-use, as if to illustrate McLean’s own message. Two discrete sections in the display present—separately—photographs by Smith, and by McLean. Additionally, the display has information panels with photographs of both Edwin Smith and of A. J. Youngson, which nicely bring those two important figures to life.

Much of the exhibition’s content shows a strong continuity in the appearance and conservation of buildings between the 1960s and now (for example, the view of the North Bridge, looking South from the Wellington Statue), while others show a contrast—in particular, the two views of the city from Salisbury Crags. Smith’s photograph (1954; see illustration) of Auld Reekie was taken before the first Clean Air Act was introduced in response to London’s Great Smog of 1952. In startling contrast to that foggy view of Edinburgh and its skyline of chimneys, McLean’s photograph is in bright colour, and shows a healthier smoke-free environment. In this photograph the St Leonard’s redevelopment also appears, in the foreground—a post-war development in the heart of the city illustrating how significant change has happened in some areas, where styles of architecture other than neo-classical have been adopted.

The last section of the exhibition presents contemporary photographs by McLean which seem almost as if they were taken in the 1960s; testifying in doing so that conservation has worked very effectively in protecting Edinburgh’s historic buildings (e.g. Ann Street). The exhibition shows evidence of how so much of the past is still here today, cared for, and in good condition. The picture of big sacks hanging onto the railings, in lieu of wheelie bins, in the richest parts of the New Town, shows that people had been at pains to try and avoid the intrusion of inharmonious large items from blocking views of the superlative classical terraces. Two photographs of a double porch in Broughton Street, from 1964 and today, show that a decision was made in the interim to remove the paintwork in an attempt to restore the original Georgian character of clean dressed ashlar.

The exhibition also includes a three-dimensional model of Edinburgh in 1829 signed by ‘I. Howell’ (presumably John Howell, ‘Polyartist’ in Edinburgh). This model is thought to have been cast in the same mould as that of the cast-iron relief photographed by Edwin Smith in the 1960s and included in *The Making of Classical Edinburgh*. As with maps, it is difficult to know whether the model accurately reflects what had actually been built or, perhaps less accurately, what was planned, but Youngson and Smith evidently valued it. The model does, however, clearly show the New Town on its axis of George Street, the Northern New Town stretching down the slope to Fettes Row, where building commenced in 1821, and the Moray Estate, laid out by James Gillespie Graham in 1822. It is informative to

compare and contrast this model with detailed maps including those by Robert Kirkwood (1819), and by John Bartholomew (1826) and William Home Lizars (c.1826-8; c.1830-1) for the General Post Office Directory; and interesting also to see the value placed by contemporaries on the New Town they were in the process of building (the model was produced the same year as Thomas Shepherd's *Modern Athens: Displayed in a Series of Views*, 1829).

The work of talented architects (notably Robert Adam, James Craig, William Henry Playfair, Thomas Hamilton, James Gillespie Graham, Peddie and Kinnear) all feature prominently in the display; which also, if less markedly, celebrates the success of Edinburgh sculptors. This includes a close-up of the Royal Scottish Academy building, and the sculpture of Queen Victoria dressed as Britannia, by John Steell (1844). Modern recognition of the value of the sculptural heritage is clear from a recent 2-volume publication: Ray McKenzie, with Dianne King and Tracy Smith, *Public Sculpture of Edinburgh* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2018).

Photographs of the Royal High School, then and now, remind us of the significance of this building for the history of neo-classicism, not simply within the context of Edinburgh or of Scotland, but far beyond. The interior of the school was photographed by both Smith and McLean; the neo-Greek doorway through which leavers would pass on graduation day to embrace the wider world was removed in the 1970s when the building was converted into the home for the anticipated devolved parliament. (The 1979 referendum was unsuccessful and future hopes that the building would play host to the new parliament were abandoned in the 1990s, when the building had become associated with the demands for Scottish independence.) The public local inquiry of 2018 concerning the building's possible conversion to become the diminished centrepiece of a vast luxury hotel shows very clearly the current challenges to the built heritage.

One photograph—the east side of St James's Square—shows a part of Edinburgh that has been transformed not once but twice since Smith's time. There, Smith captured the last days of tenements erected in the 1780s (those had an almost Roman severity and grandeur typical of the first phase of New Town development); but which were demolished in 1965 to make way for the St James' centre. Two women, one holding a baby, stand outside a doorway; parked beside them is a car with a 'GB' sticker suggesting its owner was sufficiently wealthy to travel abroad. Now, in 2019, this location is non-residential and is instead a gigantic construction space where a large development, which includes a hotel, is under construction.

In addition to the photographs, two screens present videos. One of these shows original photographs taken by Edwin Smith, each of which is then followed by a recent one by Colin McLean in black-and-white, and sometimes with a third version, also by McLean, in colour. The second video presents the photographer at work in Edinburgh, and features both Edwin Smith and Colin McLean, against a musical background.

## Reaching out to the public through different media

The exhibition is accompanied by a second publication: *A Capital Investment—Commercial Architecture in Edinburgh's New Town* (The Aperture Trust, 2019), by Professor David M. Walker. In this condensed analysis, Walker deals expertly with the emergence within the New Town of this new type of commercial architecture, which transformed the once residential suburb into the financial capital it remains today. McLean's photograph of the bright interior of The Dome, George Street, and its elaborate plasterwork, conveys the opulence of the former home of the Commercial Bank.

The City Art Centre has also scheduled a range of associated or commemorative events, including lectures, creative classes for adults, family events and photography tours, running parallel to the exhibition (for a full programme, see <https://www.edinburghmuseums.org.uk/whats-on>).

This renewed interest in the New Town and its commemoration, as the city witnesses some of its most significant changes since WW2, appears also in a recent volume of essays on Edinburgh.<sup>3</sup> Another publication on the subject—aimed for a wider public audience—is *Edinburgh Revisited* (2019), a new book of photographs (Gordon Hunter) and poems (Don Ledingham). It is hoped that both the exhibition (free admission) and the recent publications mentioned here will extend the appreciation, and promote the conservation, of Edinburgh's townscape.

This exhibition, set in the heart of the Old Town but within a space overlooking the New Town which it celebrates, shows the evolution of the city in the last half century. It concentrates on the city's past, and its focus is appropriately not exclusive to the New Town and its neo-classical architecture. In an exhibition space owned by the City Council, the visitor may reasonably expect questions to present themselves concerning the future of the city – when current building projects will be changing the cityscape very markedly in the next few years (e.g. St James's Centre and the Impact Centre). Such an interrogation on the future of the city was included in the 1967 exhibition in the Waverley Market; John L. Paterson, its architect, designed a large unit, 'City-Scope', which created an enclosure and was designed to stimulate (through form, space, light, colour and sound) the imagination of the spectator into an awareness of the possible nature of future cities.

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<sup>3</sup> Clarisse Godard Desmarest (Ed.), *The New Town of Edinburgh: An Architectural Celebration*, Edinburgh, John Donald, 2019.

Above all, and through the captivating photography on display, the exhibition presents the New Town of Edinburgh as well meriting its World Heritage status in terms of both its architectural excellence and its state of preservation. It seems that—when the New Town, unprepared for modernity and at risk of degradation—the above-mentioned 1960s arguments that Edinburgh could learn from the *Loi Malraux*, were heeded.

Reviewed: *Classical Edinburgh Exhibition* at Edinburgh City Art Centre, 9 November 2019 to 8 March 2020