

The Old School Bunkhouse Project A Lesson in Collaboration

Sarah MacKinnon

Strathclyde Building Preservation Trust

The Old School is the last survivor of a group of 4 buildings constructed around 1851 as a direct consequence of the “Disruption”, which split the Free Church from the established Church of Scotland. The Free Church in Campbeltown constructed a complex of buildings including a Trade School, two temporary church buildings (one for Gaelic speakers and one for English) and this building, a Grammar School. The first schoolmaster was Alexander Ross a key figure in the Disruption who, having been dismissed by the established Church was taken on by the Free Church and worked in this building until the building ceased to act as a school sometime after the 1872 Education Act.

Mike Davis has characterised the architectural style of the building as “a well handled composition combining neo Tudor and Gothic styling in keeping with its ecclesiastical connections”. We don’t know who designed the Old School, but he was certainly influenced by the current best practice in school design as exemplified by J.C. Loudon’s 2nd edition “Encyclopaedia of Cottage, Farm and Villa Architecture”. This book was published in 1846 and included design principles for school buildings, which notwithstanding its awkward shaped site, this building complies with almost exactly.

The Old School performed a range of functions from the late 19th century onward as a Sunday School, a vaccination centre and it is remembered by some residents as the place they went for their free milk. It finally fell out of use in the 1980’s and having been given a category B listing in 1996, was gifted to its current owners the Kintyre Amenity Trust (KAT) in 1997. KAT had by then established the Campbeltown Heritage Centre in the adjacent (redundant) “Tartan Kirk” designed by James Boucher and opened in 1867 to replace the two temporary churches. KAT’s intention was to preserve this important example of mid 19th century school architecture and utilise it in support of their main charitable aims but the financial resources to achieve this aim did not emerge until Argyll and Bute Council secured one of the first Historic Scotland Conservation Area Regeneration Schemes (CARS) for Campbeltown in 2007. A funding partnership between the Council, Highlands & Islands Enterprise, Argyll & the Islands LEADER Programme and Historic Scotland provided investment for heritage led regeneration in the centre of the town. The Council’s then

Conservation Officer Jenny Carlile had already introduced KAT to Strathclyde Building Preservation Trust (SBPT) and a collaboration was begun that will finally see this little building brought back into use this year. The project has not always run smoothly and it has taken considerable perseverance and determination from all parties to get this far. The summary below explains the key stages and highlights some of the lessons learnt.

In 2008 with funding from the Campbeltown CARS and an Options Appraisal grant from the Architectural Heritage Fund, KAT commissioned SBPT to produce an Options Appraisal considering future uses for the Old School and developing a strategy for delivering the project. The market analysis contained within the appraisal came out strongly in favour of refurbishing the now near derelict building and converting it for use as a bunk house for visitors to the town. The modest income from the facility would support KAT's work. The Options Appraisal was followed by successful applications to the CARS and the Argyll & the Islands LEADER Programme for development funding to push the project forward and a team led by SBPT and including John Gilbert Architects, the Structural Partnership, CDM Scotland and Morham & Brotchie began work in the summer of 2009.

The CARS was boosted by the successful bid by Argyll and Bute Council to the Heritage Lottery Fund which saw the Campbeltown Townscape Heritage Initiative awarded in July 2009. More success came in late 2009 as the Council secured ERDF funding through a Community Planning Partnership for three projects in Campbeltown including the School project. This success secured £173,000 for the project provided it met the key conditions and aims of the scheme which could be summarised as the provision of new business space and that the end user or manager of that business space could not be pre-determined. As with the CARS, the Old School was a priority project so we were now pretty confident that we could deliver the capital project.

KAT, the Council and SBPT wanted to make this an exemplar project and we considered a range of design options to make the building as eco-friendly as possible. This made sense because a low energy requirement means low running costs which would assist the sustainability of the building in use. Assistance and potential funding from the Historic Scotland Technical Conservation Group and Community Energy Scotland made the possibility of incorporating natural materials and micro-generation a real possibility. But with the demise of the Community

Energy Scotland grant, the costs became unmanageable and we were forced to adopt a simpler and more conventional approach.

This adventure into the world of eco-design was instructive but time consuming. It illustrated the particular difficulties of managing a project with multiple stakeholders all of whom have their own aims and aspirations and the importance of maintaining a clear focus on a clearly defined objective.

By summer 2010 we had a budget and planning and listed building consent applications were lodged but access agreements with the Church of Scotland which owns the area around the building, threatened to derail us once again. A new access to the adjacent car park was required as a planning condition and the process of agreeing this with the Church was not straightforward. Ultimately however, agreement was reached and additional funding for the access was secured through a s.75 agreement relating to other development in the town.

And so at the end of 2010 the contract was tendered. Final grant applications were made in early 2011 with a contract sum of just under £380,000 and total delivery costs of £435,000. The go ahead was given in early May and the contract which had been awarded to local firm McKinven & Colville, commenced on 15 May. A vital component in allowing the project to happen was a cash flow loan provided by the Council which is being utilised by KAT while grant funding is drawn down.

So where are we now? Well we hope to be completed by the end of February 2012 with the Bunk House opening before Easter this year. KAT have tendered the opportunity to run the Bunk House and the process of determining the final operator is ongoing. Has the project been a success? I suppose only time will tell whether the business will be sustainable but the quality of conservation work undertaken throughout the project has been very high and this important little landmark building will be retained as part of the Campbeltown built heritage record, so our primary objective has been achieved. Without the determination of all the collaborators to overcome challenges and to see the project through, this would not have been possible. We have all learnt important lessons from the project that will inform future work and skills have been learnt and transferred between the various organisations involved which will be invaluable in future delivery.