

Institution: The University of Edinburgh
Unit of Assessment: 34 Art and Design: History Practice and Theory
Title of case study: The Secret Lives of Buildings and the Future Life of Cardross: creating a community of creative practice from architectural ruins
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p><i>The Secret Lives of Buildings</i>, a book by Edward Hollis about famous buildings that ‘went wrong’, has achieved both literary acclaim and a readership in five languages worldwide. The chief insights of the book – that buildings, like stories, are ephemeral things, passed from generation to generation – have been used by an AHRC-funded research network, <i>The Invisible College</i>, to change attitudes towards, and policy about, the fate of one of Scotland’s most controversial modern buildings: St Peter’s Seminary in Cardross. Working with stakeholders from government to the local community, the College has set a new precedent for the incremental and sustainable reuse of abandoned sites in Scotland.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>The majority of modern buildings which have achieved critical acclaim are held in the imagination as ‘masterpieces’ that should either be preserved in their original state, or restored to it. In 2009, Edward Hollis, Reader at ECA (2004-) published his first book, <i>The Secret Lives of Buildings</i>, to challenge the validity of this assumption.</p> <p>The book comprised a series of case studies, in which each historical period was represented, not by an account of an architectural style, such as ‘classical’, or ‘gothic’ but by folk tales about a mode of alteration, from ‘ruination’ (the Parthenon), ‘appropriation’ (Hagia Sophia) to ‘restoration’ (Notre Dame) or ‘prophecy’ (the Hulme crescent housing estate in Manchester). It demonstrated how great buildings, from the Parthenon to Notre Dame, are perpetually incomplete, or in flux, and that this is the key to their cultural capital.</p> <p>In a time of economic constraint, the assumption that great architectural works should be conserved or restored, to all intents and purposes ‘frozen in time’, presents a particular challenge, that affects not only those responsible for historic preservation and urban development, but the communities who live with ruinous buildings day-to-day.</p> <p>In November 2010, a group of architects, artists, public arts administrators, representatives of Historic Scotland, Creative Scotland and the Scottish Government held a debate about one such building as Scotland’s contribution to the Venice architecture Biennale of that year; and the organiser of this event, Angus Farquhar, Creative Director of the arts charity NVA (5.7) who had read <i>The Secret Lives of Buildings</i>, invited Hollis to join the delegation.</p> <p>St Peter’s Seminary was designed by Gillespie, Kidd and Coia in the Brutalist style in 1961 and abandoned in 1986. Located on the wooded fringe of Cardross, twenty miles west of Glasgow, St Peter’s is described by the international modern architecture conservation organisation, DOCOMOMO, as a ‘building of world significance’. However, unoccupied for upwards of twenty-five years, it is currently in a ruinous state.</p> <p>Several proposals have been made, over the years, for St Peter’s. They have all shared the assumptions that the site, in its derelict state, is valueless (in cultural, social or monetary terms), that the only options for the building are either full restoration or complete demolition, and that its future rests solely in private hands. To date, no proposal has been realised: either the required</p>

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investment is not balanced by projected profits or plans have been met with opposition from locals and/or the architectural community.

In 2012, following the Biennale debate, the Invisible College research network was funded by the AHRC (£109k) to explore ways of reconnecting the diverse communities that have an interest in St Peter's. The network is a collaboration between NVA, Drs Lorimer and Gallagher (University of Glasgow), Professor Alan Pert (then at the University of Strathclyde), and Hollis.

Building on his contribution to the Venice Biennale, Hollis' specific role in the consortium was to articulate the value of St Peter's, not as a fixed architectural object, but as a process of dereliction and regeneration. To date, his principal insight has been that the cultural capital of the site was not exhausted with its abandonment but in fact enhanced, and that an understanding of the process of its abandonment is key to the future redevelopment of the site.

3. References to the research

3.1 Authored Book: Hollis, Edward *The Secret Lives of Buildings: From the Ruins of the Parthenon to the Vegas Strip in Thirteen Stories* Portobello Books (London 2009) ISBN 978-1-84627-4 (REF 2 Output submitted)

3.2 Chapter in Edited Book: Hollis, Edward *No Longer, Not Yet in Reinventing Architecture and Interiors: a socio-political view on building adaptation*. Libri Publishing, p. 177-194 (Faringdon, 2013) ISBN 978-1-907471-73-5

3.3 Chapter in Edited book: Hollis, Edward *Building Stories* chapter in *Narrative the Built Heritage – Papers in Tourism Research* (edited by Charles Mansfield and Simon Seligman). VDM Verlag p.62-78 (Saarbrücken, 2011) ISBN 978-3-639-27733-3

3.4 Chapter in Edited Book: Hollis, Edward *Anxious Care and Unsightly Aids* chapter in *To Have and To Hold: Future of a Contested Landscape* (edited by Gerrie Van Noord). Luath Press p54-57. (Edinburgh, 2011 ISBN 978-1-908373-10-6

3.5 Funding: *The Invisible College: Building communities of creative practice* was granted £109,293 FEC in 2012 by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC).

4. Details of the impact

The impacts of *The Secret Lives of Buildings* may be summarised as follows: firstly an appeal to diverse audiences beyond the academy, secondly, the impact of its insights on the workings of the Invisible College, and thirdly, as a consequence, its impact on the ruins of St Peter's Seminary itself.

***The Secret Lives of Buildings*: uptake**

Translated into five languages (Italian, German, Czech, Portuguese, Chinese), *The Secret Lives of Buildings* appealed to a diverse set of readers. The New York Review of Books commented: 'no matter how familiar these works [the buildings] may be, he turns the story of each structure and its subsequent transformations into an informative parable about the inevitable metamorphoses of the built environment' (5.1). Jonathan Glancey wrote in the Guardian: 'The author's purpose in telling the stories of these enchanting and sometimes disturbing buildings is to demonstrate how each has enjoyed more lives than a cat.'

In 2010, *The Secret Lives of Buildings* was nominated for The Guardian First Book Award and the Samuel Johnson Prize for Non-Fiction. Published in seven countries, it has sold around 17,000

copies worldwide (5.10). Hollis has spoken about the book at more than fifteen literary festivals (including the Edinburgh International Book Festival) and in interview with the BBC (World Service, Radio 3 and BBC Scotland), as well as broadcasters in the US, Ireland and Australia.

The role of *The Secret Lives of Buildings* in the Invisible College

The insights of *The Secret Lives of Buildings* have influenced the Invisible College network in the following manner. In 2012, the Invisible College held three public open days at the seminary, with around fifty stakeholders from a range of backgrounds - from international architectural 'fans' to local residents - attending each one.

Each open day ended with public lectures, featuring speakers from geographers of ruins (Tim Edensor, Caitlin de Silvey) to the landscape architect Tilman Latz. Hollis spoke at the close of the second, in a joint event with Andy Wightman, the writer, campaigner and researcher on common land issues. These lectures were used to set the future of St Peter's in a wider cultural context; and for Hollis this involved persuading those stakeholders present to see St Peter's as a dynamic site, like those described in *The Secret Lives of Buildings*.

Hollis also contributed to the design and implementation of workshops on these open days in which participants 'acted out' some of the processes of building alteration described in *The Secret Lives of Buildings*. For example, *Safe as Houses* (June 2012) involved drawing on the fabric of the building, identifying places of safety amid the ruins, while *The Fortune Tellers* (March 2012) involved games in which participants predicted the future of the site over diverse durations, from five days to five centuries.

Intended to spark debate, the activities revealed that an historical understanding of the site might be found in small acts of playful storytelling, and that St Peter's could follow the same path of regeneration as its incremental and anarchic dereliction.

The Invisible College and the future of St Peter's Seminary

The most immediate beneficiaries of these activities have been local residents, who have started to care for, and therefore benefit from, the landscape around the building. Along with NVA, they have begun to clear the forest, replant the vegetable gardens and clear the rhododendrons that choke the site (5.4).

Vandalism has decreased and activity on site is becoming more accepted. During the third open day in September 2012, one Cardross resident, Tahira Naseem, commented: '*Although I enjoy the silence of the area (at times), the thought that one day it may accommodate more than the occasional passing soul is a warming one*' (5.6). Testifying to local interest in, and activity on site, one blogger noted: '*I passed a couple of women collecting fire wood, they assured me [with] permission. It turned out one of the woman's mums had worked at the seminary and had told her of a secret hermit's cave in the grounds*' (5.3).

One of the most significant impacts of this has been an attitudinal change within Historic Scotland, who 'Category A' listed the site in August 1992, but now agree that its value as a national asset is not predicated upon the restoration of the building to its original state (5.8).

Having rejected an initial bid by NVA, in early 2012, for funding to renovate the site, representatives of the Heritage Lottery Fund have since encouraged NVA to reapply on the basis of what they have seen of the work of the Invisible College. To date, along with the Scottish Government and The Caram Trust, Historic Scotland has awarded NVA £88k to purchase the site from the Archdiocese of Glasgow and, following a visit by Fiona Hyslop MSP, Cabinet Secretary

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for Culture and External Affairs in October 2012, application for further Government funds has been encouraged to finance future regeneration (5.9).

In total, NVA aims to raise another £4.5 million for the project, with the results of recent applications known in December 2013 (5.5). This will assist in the incremental transformation of St Peter's, started in 2012 and recently given impetus by the purchase of the site, into an Invisible College 'field station' for arts-led interdisciplinary research and public engagement.

These first steps in the regeneration of St Peters have evidenced the thesis of *The Secret Lives of Buildings*: that ruins can be more than relics of a historic past. Rather, set in incremental, people-led change, they can perform new functions, and in doing so, live again.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

Copies of these web page sources are available at

<http://www.wiki.ed.ac.uk/display/REF2014REF3B/UoA+34>

(5.1) Review of *The Secret Lives of Buildings* by Martin Filler in the New York Review of Books 21.5.2010 <http://tinyurl.com/2wo75jf>

(5.2) Review of *The Secret Lives of Buildings* by Jonathan Glancey in The Guardian, 12.09.2009 <http://tinyurl.com/njx6fq>

(5.3) Blog post about a urban explorer's visit to St Peter's Seminary, Cardross, 18.01.2013 <http://tinyurl.com/q4b5oak>

(5.4) Article about the Invisible College by David Pollock in *The Scotsman*, 31.08.2012 <http://tinyurl.com/l63ujsp>

(5.5) Detailed plans for the incremental redevelopment of St Peter's by NVA, including material on funding from Historic Scotland, Scottish Government etc. <http://tinyurl.com/mr3xcme>

(5.6) Feedback from participants in Invisible College workshops: <http://tinyurl.com/metuk4d>

(5.7) Contact details for the Creative *Director*, NVA, can be made available on request to corroborate statements re relationship between Invisible College and *Secret Lives of Buildings*.

(5.8) Factual Statement from Principal Inspector, southwest team of Historic Scotland can be supplied on request to corroborate statement re. influence of Invisible College in HS approaches to Kilmahew.

(5.9) Factual Statement from Chief Architect, Scottish Government can be supplied on request to corroborate statement re influence of Invisible College on government approaches to Kilmahew.

(5.10) Sales figures for *The Secret Lives of Buildings*: relevant documentation available on request.