

Councillor Helen Carmichael,  
Provost and City Leader of Inverness  
Highland Council  
Town House  
Inverness  
IV1 1JJ

1 August 2019

Dear Provost and Councillors,

As an Evaluation Panel member, I submit, for your consideration, this brief text in support of the 3 key River Arts Projects that have yet to be realised: the Rest Space; Children's Water Feature and My Ness (formerly The Gathering Place). Having helped evaluate, with two other panellists, numerous submissions from distinguished artists/architects with National and International reputations, these proposals were selected following a rigorous process. They were selected for their individual and distinctive artistic merits, while simultaneously giving careful thought as to how they would make a unique contribution to the collective impact on the River Ness public art scheme. To fail to deliver any one of these projects would diminish the impact of the others. This is particularly the case with the My Ness commission which was conceived of as the major work or 'jewel in the crown' of this array of public art commissions.

The social, economic and cultural benefits of public art of quality are well recognised and reasonably quantifiable. These benefits have been advanced, to my certain knowledge, at Press Conferences held previously at Eden Court and the Highland Archive Centre. The health and wellbeing benefits are perhaps less easy to measure with accuracy, however, research has demonstrated that aesthetically pleasing and stimulating environments contribute significantly to the wellbeing of a community. In support of this assertion, I cite the extraordinary Maggie's Cancer Care Centres, one of which we are fortunate to have located at Raigmore Hospital. I assert this value in relation to a 2018 survey that names Inverness as coming 5<sup>th</sup> out of 189 British cities for quality of life. This is a wonderful outcome, but we cannot be complacent. In order to maintain this ranking, it is imperative that the city moves forward, delivering affirmative and progressive, life enhancing, initiatives that support and extend this achievement as we move into the future. Enlightened public art ought to generate a sense of Civic Pride and signal confidence that Inverness is a forward-looking city committed to innovation and progressive modernity as much as it is a place enriched with distinguished histories and traditions. There is no conflict between the two.

Rather than view these 3 projects as isolated expressions or entities, I propose that they be considered relationally. See them as a sort of cultural hinge between past and future allowing us to view extant public art commissions in Inverness (e.g., those situated around Eden Court) in an amplified context and simultaneously provide a pointer to possible future cultural manifestations that would enhance the built environment. These projects, taken alongside other cultural organisations, institutions and expressions, such as IMAG, Eden Court Theatre, Inverness College and the more recent WASPS studio complex at Midmills gather energies, that nourish and recognise a network of discrete connections that weave an impressive cultural fabric

creating something way larger than the sum of individual threads. This reinforces the identity of Inverness as a vibrant and culturally resonant city. These established creative hubs and visionary new arts organisations such as CIRCUS are vital to the ongoing expression of a city that confidently moves into the future while simultaneously celebrating the unique historical and natural attributes with which it is abundantly blessed. The admixture of these elements proves wonderfully attractive to residents and tourists alike.

Should there be any doubt as to the value and necessity of these projects to the current and future life of a city, it is worth reflecting on the key role that the arts have played in securing European Capital of Culture status for other cities. In 2019 there are 2 European Capitals of Culture, one of which is Plovdiv in Bulgaria. It is recognised that the recently developed cultural quarter of Kapana was instrumental in winning this status:

*“Kapana is now the creative heart of the city, a pedestrianised area full of shops, restaurants and galleries. In the 1990s it was a parking zone full of ruined houses. The transformation began in 2014, when 10 creative enterprises moved into the area, funded by the European Capital of Culture Foundation, and things have taken off from there.”*

Should Inverness ever decide to, once again, submit an application for European Capital of Culture or some similarly prestigious scheme (and why shouldn't it?) then, the way in which the city and its population responds to the current opportunity to embrace these projects will have a significant, possibly determining, role in the success or failure of the bid. These three key public art projects are a gift to the city of Inverness and an expression of confidence in the city by the major funding bodies: Creative Scotland; Highlands and Islands Enterprise and the Inverness City Council Common Good Fund. To win this support from Creative Scotland is a significant achievement and to fail to deliver the projects for which funding was granted would have damaging consequences. This is particularly the case if the My Ness project is not realised. The collaborative teams of OSA and Sans Façon consist of distinguished artists/architects who have successfully delivered ambitious high profile public art projects in an international context. Hopefully the city of Inverness will welcome My Ness; becoming the latest beneficiaries of one of their elegant and accomplished projects.

Considerable publicity around negative views of public art may prove to be a serious impediment to the city of Inverness securing funding for similar, ambitious projects in the future.

Kind regards,  
Prof. Jim Mooney