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## Design and democracy; a parliamentary exhibition

When *The Leisure Review* heard that the Scottish parliament was hosting an exhibition and holding a grand opening to boot we sent James Bryce, ably assisted by Catherine Owen, to have a gander.

Atop the rock there is the gaunt magnificence of Edinburgh Castle. A brisk walk down the history-drenched Royal Mile there is the curious – magnificence is probably not the word – of the parliament building, a surreal representation in concrete of upturned boats. Or so they say. I have tried viewing the building from the giddy height of nearby Arthur's Seat and have yet to see boats without a certain amount of perceptual gymnastics. Doubtless my mind's eye is distracted by, among other things, the building's frontage which is emblazoned with what looks like ten metre-long Twiglets, randomly distributed over the walls.

2012 is "the Year of Creative Scotland". We are here to kick the year off with an exhibition entitled Design and Democracy, a unique partnership between the Scottish Parliament and the four main art colleges of Scotland: Dundee, Aberdeen, Glasgow and Edinburgh.

A cheerful five minutes are spent consigning to the scanner, belt, mobile phone, pens and ...uh-oh... a Stanley knife (what else do you use to sharpen pencils?) and a subsequent five minutes dutifully replacing the same in their rightful places (apart from the embarrassed Stanley, which is duly bagged and consigned to a safe with a wry sideways look). We enter a haze of bodies, surrounded by new wood and not a single wall in a straight line. Here, in a building whose opulent design almost broke the coffers of the fledgling Scottish government, is the work of students responding to their world as it is now.

Squeezing through the besuited crowd, I find I have automatically slipped into my 'event opening' mode: a hissy, anxious fog in the brain combined with a strong suspicion that everyone can see me for the uncultured charlatan that I undoubtedly am. Fortified, weakly, by the free wine, I find myself taken up by the question of the title of the event. I know what I like, as they say, in art-and-design but how does it specifically link with democracy? What is the difference between design per se in a democratic state, and design per se in a dictatorship?

There is a hush. The three tiers of the Year of Creative Scotland take the microphone: the presiding officer from the parliament representing the government; a woman from Creative Scotland representing the arts in general; and the professor of Duncanstone College of Art and Design representing the art colleges in particular. Each proclaims how delighted he or she is that the exhibition is taking place in the parliament building and praises the strong message this sends to the country at large. As if to allay my uncertainty about the link between design and democracy, we are told that the students are using design to inspire social change. In a phrase, design is a statement of what we want the world to be like. My mind flits to the one of the pubs I passed on the way, walls emblazoned with video screens flashing sport and gyrating bodies, and fear what kind of world the advertisers are envisaging.

We do the rounds. The collection is certainly eclectic.

There is a photo project revolving round the role of women in Nepal. This, I see, could aid the move to some kind of democracy.

There are a couple of clothes projects, built on the premise that they incorporate designs from the past, thus making a link between our parents' and grandparents' generations and the present. The very materials Sarah Struthers uses are from the past, thus addressing ecological concerns. Her colourful designs are beautifully executed.

**“How does art specifically link with democracy? What is the difference between design per se in a democratic state, and design per se in a dictatorship?”**

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There is a collaborative work with children on the subject of hospitals.

Kevin Cameron's concept includes advertising the dangers of drink on bottle tops, similar perhaps to proclaiming the dangers of smoking on cigarette packets. A nice idea but who actually looks at bottle tops when drinking? However, he has an interesting take on fashion advertising.

Natalia Lozano, in her concept "eat-and-go", advocates the development of edible packaging. Lovely idea but how many fingers will have touched it before it reaches our mouths? I'm sure she'll have thought of that, though.

One of the ambitions of many of these designers is to reflect what the world is for them. By 2020 depression will be the second most debilitating disease on the planet and Mark Kobine has an intriguing toolkit designed to help its sufferers. However, I felt his blurb required more detail to explain how it works.

And there is a flat-pack Marie Curie Shop which can be constructed in a trice in any location. The designer, Karen MacPherson, has already been approached by several individuals who want to use the already-constructed shop and some who want to adopt the idea. A simple design, a pure concept, beautifully realised and made completely from recycled materials.

Another round of the exhibits, and I leave, passing Graham Stewart's gold and silver sculpture Honours of Scotland on the way out, wondering how much that cost.

When you have been focusing on creative work, your senses and awareness are heightened. I walk out into a clear night sky with an almost full moon over Arthur's Seat, reinforcing, yet again, that when it comes to realising beautiful art, nature takes a lot of beating.

Less enchantingly, my heightened senses hear and see the pubs on the Royal Mile beating out music and flashing multiple video screens long before you reach them. These elements I see as the real battering our democracy is getting from design. I leave the reader to gauge my thoughts on that.

**The Design and Democracy Exhibition is free and goes on until 23 March 2012. Visit the Scottish parliament website for full details, opening times and exhibits: [www.scottish.parliament.uk](http://www.scottish.parliament.uk)**

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