The art of the possible

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Leading public arts organisation NVA's ambitious campaign to raise £7.5million to resuscitate one of Europe's greatest modernist buildings, St Peters Seminary, has been given a substantial boost, with a first-round pass from the Heritage Lottery Fund. The award will release £565k development funding leading to a second stage submission for £3 million in 2015.

This major investment provides a significant contribution towards the realisation of the plans for this hugely contested site on the banks of the Firth of Clyde. Over the past four years NVA has forged strong local and national partnerships that can now move forward to unlock the full potential of this ground-breaking heritage project.

The proposals have also been garnering international support since they were presented as a compelling narrative for change at the Venice Biennale International Architecture Exhibition in 2010. Over the next year NVA must raise a further £3.5million through capital fundraising and a major public campaign that will be launched early in 2014.

The consolidated historic buildings, improved path network and new learning pavilion with an exciting programme of events, performance and activities will provide enhanced opportunities for local and community participation and will attract new audiences to Kilmahew. The works will partially restore the stunning chapel within a wider consolidation of the derelict seminary buildings and reinvigorate the surrounding 45 hectare woodland and productive gardens, gradually bringing the site back to life through a wide range of programmed activities. This support represents a defining moment for the imaginative re-use of a public rural space and retention of a 20th century modernist building, many of which have been destroyed in the last 30 years.

Planning and Listed Building Consents for the designs by Avanti Architects and ERZ Landscape Architects have already been granted by Argyll and Bute Council and preliminary works to remove invasive Rhododendron Ponticum from the site is planned early in the new year following an investment from EU funding and a private donor.

Over the last three years, NVA in partnership with Glasgow and Edinburgh universities has run The Invisible College. Cast as a 'future field station', the Arts & Humanities Research Council funded project has been using the 'site as subject matter' for a series of open learning days. The aim is to expand these activities into a world class research programme for students and the wider public over the next five years.

The building, considered a masterpiece of modernism, was designed by Scottish architectural firm Gillespie, Kidd and Coia for the Archdiocese of Glasgow in 1966. It was closed in 1980 and lay abandoned until NVA acquired conditional missives from the owners in 2011. The Archdiocese of Glasgow is hugely supportive of NVA's plans and has recently agreed to donate the site in light of the public benefits the proposals will bring; representing another important contribution.

The design proposals by Avanti and ERZ include consolidation of the main Seminary building as a 'raw' frame, with restoration of the chapel and sanctuary including the stunning ziggurat rooflight as an enclosed events space. There will also be reclamation of the main pathways and repair of the historic bridges and late mediaeval castle keep. The Victorian walled garden will be brought back into productive public use and will be established as the main social focus. A new pavilion building will be designed through an architectural competition and act as the hub for the public activities

and site orientation.

Angus Farquhar, Creative Director NVA said: "The HLF award towards the resuscitation of Kilmahew / St Peter's represents a pivotal moment for the history of 20th-century architecture. The seminary building is held in high regard throughout the world. It has now been given the chance of a second life after 25 years of decline. Working with the formidable skills of Avanti and ERZ, the proposals will deliver an iconic cultural resource where powerful art and heritage learning will sit side by side.

"The remarkable site history spans the arrival of Irish monks 1,500 years ago, to becoming the fabled hunting ground of kings and later the transformation from grand estate to a vast religious institution. Now nearly 50 years on from the day it opened we witness the first steps in a new and radical form of regeneration; one that accepts loss and ruination as part of the site history and sets out a mission to imaginatively re-use a great late modernist structure and in so doing, reflect the same social dynamism and ambition with which it was conceived.

We need to raise a total of £7.5million to deliver the partial restoration of St Peter's seminary and open up the historic grounds to the public in perpetuity. We invite those who share the same belief in the importance of this narrative to support us in making it happen."

Colin McLean, Head of Heritage Lottery Fund Scotland, said: "St Peters Seminary is a masterpiece of Scottish modern architecture but after decades of neglect its condition is perilous. The only way we can hope to save this commanding structure is if organisations that can help work together to identify a viable future. Heritage Lottery Fund has indicated today its willingness to assist in exploring whether a sustainable solution can be found. We hope that at some time in the future people will be able to explore, learn from and enjoy the layers of history and heritage that lie within this unique building and the estate surrounding it."

Fiona Hyslop, Cabinet Secretary for Culture and External Affairs, said: "I am delighted that NVA's innovative project at Kilmahew has been successful in gaining stage one funding from Heritage Lottery Fund. The former seminary at St Peter's is one of Scotland's most important modern 20th-century buildings. The project would at last see the buildings and their wonderful landscape setting conserved and enhanced for the benefit of the community. I am confident that this exciting project would attract the international attention it deserves."

Andy MacMillan, Former Professor of Architecture at the University of Glasgow and Head of the Mackintosh School of Architecture, said: "The seminary is a homage to le Corbusier’s La Tourette in France, and it’s a great credit to Archbishop Scanlon that he had the confidence in Jack Coia, Isi Metstein and I to go ahead with such an ambitious commission. The Church wanted a traditional building and, though St Peter’s is far from a traditional structure, it carefully respects the traditions of the Church in its liturgies. After such a long period of neglect, it is great to see that there is a chance we might find a future for it."

Richard Trail, Councillor Helensburgh and Lomond South, Argyll and Bute Council, said: "It is great news that funding has become available to halt the deterioration of the seminary building and to improve the Kilmahew estate. The imaginative NVA project will reopen the estate to the public and make it a worthwhile destination for visitors. It adds to the growing list of attractions which will bring people into the area and boost the local economy."

Tahira Nasim, local resident, said: "Quite aside from rescuing St Peter's seminary, the ecological improvements and constructive re-use of Kilmahew estate is very exciting. The sheer diversity of plans for the area will turn this neglected patch into a rich and useful resource. For so long, local people who remember the seminary and estate have hoped something might be done to improve the derelict buildings but nothing has ever come close to being achieved until

now."

John Allan, Avanti Architects, said: "HLF's support provides the vital jigsaw piece in our project to rescue St Peter's Seminary from oblivion and make it a unique cultural and educational resource for the people of Scotland and beyond. With Planning and Listed Building Consent also secured, this grant - together with earlier pledges from Historic Scotland and private benefactors – will now enable the team to progress its work to the next stage."

Rolf Roscher, ERZ Landscape Architects, said: "The HLF funding is a major step forward in the longstanding challenge of securing a viable future for the derelict modernist masterpiece of St Peter's seminary, registered as one of the World Monument Fund's most endangered cultural landmarks. The plan considers the remarkable building and its 45 hectare woodland setting together, creating a public resource that aims is to shift people's relationship to the landscape from one of being a passive observer or detached consumer to having an active physical or intellectual engagement."

Professor Steve Beaumont, Vice-Principal for Research and Enterprise University of Glasgow, said: "Over the past three years the University of Glasgow's research partnership with NVA has begun the work of transforming Kilmahew Estate into a creative crucible for the arts and humanities. I am excited at the prospect of The Invisible College generating world class research through the reinvention of St Peter's Seminary, and the heritage landscape at Kilmahew."

Notes to editors

A first-round pass means the project meets HLF criteria for funding and HLF believes the project has potential to deliver high-quality benefits and value for Lottery money. The application was in competition with other supportable projects, so a first-round pass is an endorsement of outline proposals. Having been awarded a first-round pass, the project now has up to two years to submit fully developed proposals to compete for a firm award.

St Peter's Seminary
Designed by Glasgow architects Andy MacMillan and Isi Metzstein of Gillespie, Kidd and Coia the Roman Catholic seminary, was commissioned by the Archdiocese of Glasgow and was completed and consecrated in 1966. The seminary was occupied for just 13 years before closing in 1980. It was subsequently used for five years in the 1980's as a drug rehabilitation unit. The buildings then fell into a state of disrepair. In 1993 the then Secretary of State listed the seminary as being of special architectural importance. The World Monuments Fund, which works to preserve endangered cultural landmarks, added St Peter's to its register of most-at-risk buildings in June 2007.

NVA
NVA was established in 1992 by creative director Angus Farquhar. In recent years the company has achieved international recognition with a number of incomparable and critically successful public artworks, notably The Storr: Unfolding Landscape on Skye, and the Hidden Gardens, Glasgow.

In 2012, NVA created Speed of Light, one of the highest profile events in history of the Edinburgh International Festival. Speed of Light was a lead event of Festival 2012 which aimed to build a lasting legacy from the hosting of the 2012 Olympic Games. It has since toured internationally to Japan, Germany and Salford.

Further information on NVA is available at the NVA website.

Further information

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