# Edinburgh’s Princes Street faces uncertain future amid St James Quarter rise



# The Future of Princes Street: Balancing Heritage and Modernisation

Edinburgh's Princes Street, long revered as the city's premier shopping thoroughfare, is at a significant crossroads. As the £1 billion St James Quarter settles into the urban landscape, questions are emerging about the future viability and identity of Princes Street amid the shifting commercial dynamics of the city. While this transformation brings fresh developments and investment, some stakeholders express concern over what they perceive as an unwelcome decline in one of the city's most iconic streets.

A representative from a local business group recently remarked that the advent of the St James Quarter has led to an unsettling shift in retail dynamics, suggesting that “since the opening of the St James Quarter, Princes Street’s days as Edinburgh’s premier shopping street look to be over - and that’s not necessarily a bad thing.” This sentiment is echoed by others who acknowledge the potential benefits of modernising the retail landscape while recognizing that such changes often come at a cultural cost.

The anticipated transformation of the public realm through the introduction of a visitor levy highlights the council's commitment to rejuvenating the street. A senior figure involved in previous council initiatives stated, “The public realm, it is clear from the council, will be transformed with the visitor levy. And not a moment too soon.” This underscores the urgent need for intervention to adapt to both evolving consumer preferences and the contemporary demands of urban life.

Despite these calls for revitalisation, there are pressing concerns regarding neighbouring Rose Street, which has been described as “arguably the worst in the city.” Groups such as the Edinburgh Chamber of Commerce and Essential Edinburgh are advocating for a sharper focus on this parallel street, suggesting that its neglect threatens to undermine the overall vibrancy of the city centre.

The Cockburn Association, one of the world’s oldest civic trusts, has sounded alarms over the visible decline of Princes Street, particularly at its western end. They note that as premium retail experiences are drawn towards George Street and the St James Quarter, Princes Street risks becoming a corridor filled primarily with mid-market hotels and international fast-food chains. “Historically Edinburgh’s pre-eminent thoroughfare, Princes Street is undergoing a perceptible decline as the city’s principal commercial artery,” they warn, suggesting that without robust intervention, the street may succumb to a lacklustre retail identity.

Interestingly, while St James Quarter has drawn flak for its potential effects on Princes Street, it has simultaneously demonstrated remarkable commercial resilience. Despite its recent emergence, Edinburgh retains the UK’s lowest retail vacancy rates outside London, maintaining a steady 13% even as retail space expanded significantly. The mixed-use design of St James Quarter appears to support a diverse urban ecosystem, allowing various areas of the city to redefine their roles without directly competing with one another. With sales productivity above the national average, it is evident that the city’s retail capacity is adapting rather well to the monumental changes underway.

The St James development, which includes a high-end shopping centre and offers an impressive range of dining and entertainment options, has drawn substantial footfall, having attracted over 43 million visitors since its inception. The shopping centre features brands like John Lewis, Coach, and Polo Ralph Lauren, surpassing initial projections for visitor numbers—a celebration of modern retail that nevertheless underscores the challenges facing legacy shopping streets like Princes Street.

However, amidst rising visitor numbers and commercial activity, critics argue that the proposed £27 million makeover for Princes Street lacks ambition. Stakeholders are pushing for an extensive and inspiring reimagining of Edinburgh's retail core, one that not only acknowledges modern consumer behaviours but also pays homage to the street's historic significance. The need for a clear vision is palpable, with entities like Essential Edinburgh urging for a balance between contemporary requirements and the preservation of cultural heritage.

As Edinburgh navigates this complex urban evolution, the fate of Princes Street remains in delicate balance. The tension between ensuring economic viability and protecting the city’s storied past will be critical in shaping its future. The conversation around the revitalisation of this iconic thoroughfare must not only focus on commercial interests but also embrace the city's rich history, ensuring that Edinburgh continues to be a vibrant hub of innovation and tradition.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/25146070.wrong-plan-27m-makeover-renowned-street/?ref=rss), [[2]](https://www.scotsman.com/business/edinburghs-retail-capacity-adapting-well-to-arrival-of-st-james-quarter-with-lowest-retail-vacancy-rate-of-uks-major-cities-except-london-4057733)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/25146070.wrong-plan-27m-makeover-renowned-street/?ref=rss), [[4]](https://www.theindustry.fashion/edinburghs-st-james-quarter-celebrates-bumper-december/)
* Paragraph 3 – [[1]](https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/25146070.wrong-plan-27m-makeover-renowned-street/?ref=rss), [[3]](https://www.commercialnewsmedia.com/archives/133646)
* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/25146070.wrong-plan-27m-makeover-renowned-street/?ref=rss), [[6]](https://bdcmagazine.com/2023/08/st-james-quarter-announces-the-opening-of-w-edinburgh-in-november-marking-the-completion-of-the-latest-phase-of-the-development/)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/25146070.wrong-plan-27m-makeover-renowned-street/?ref=rss), [[5]](https://www.retail-insight-network.com/projects/st-james-quarter-edinburgh/)
* Paragraph 6 – [[1]](https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/25146070.wrong-plan-27m-makeover-renowned-street/?ref=rss), [[7]](https://www.scotsman.com/news/people/st-james-quarter-opens-to-public-after-five-years-of-construction-3284397)

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## Bibliography

* <https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/25146070.wrong-plan-27m-makeover-renowned-street/?ref=rss> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
* <https://www.scotsman.com/business/edinburghs-retail-capacity-adapting-well-to-arrival-of-st-james-quarter-with-lowest-retail-vacancy-rate-of-uks-major-cities-except-london-4057733> - Despite the introduction of the £1 billion St James Quarter, Edinburgh maintains the lowest retail vacancy rate among major UK cities, excluding London. The city's retail space expanded by 424,000 square feet year-on-year, yet the vacancy rate remained steady at 13%. Sales productivity, a measure of non-food consumer spending per square foot, stood at £389, surpassing the UK cities average of £357. Euan Kelly of Knight Frank noted that Edinburgh's mixed-use city centre has allowed different areas to re-establish their identities without direct competition.
* <https://www.commercialnewsmedia.com/archives/133646> - St James Quarter in Edinburgh was awarded 'Best Long-Term Regeneration Initiative' at the Revo Awards, highlighting its significant impact on the city. The development includes 850,000 sq ft of retail and leisure space, featuring brands like Coach, Polo Ralph Lauren, and the UK's second W Hotels. It also offers 152 residential apartments and a boutique Everyman Cinema. Since its opening, St James Quarter has attracted over 43 million visitors, with footfall reaching 18.9 million in 2023 and anticipated to exceed 20 million by the end of the year.
* <https://www.theindustry.fashion/edinburghs-st-james-quarter-celebrates-bumper-december/> - Edinburgh's St James Quarter reported record-breaking sales in December, defying broader UK retail trends. Footfall in the final week before Christmas rose 7.4% year-on-year, with a 30% increase on December 21 compared to the same day in 2023. Super Saturday footfall was up 20% from December 2023, and Black Friday footfall rose by 13%. The development, which opened in June 2021, is on track to reach its target of 20 million visitors by the end of 2024, marking a 5% uplift from previous year-end figures.
* <https://www.retail-insight-network.com/projects/st-james-quarter-edinburgh/> - St James Quarter is a mixed-use development in Edinburgh featuring 850,000 sq ft of retail space, anchored by John Lewis. The shopping centre accommodates up to 80 new brands, including high-street retailers like Tommy Hilfiger, Zara, JD Sports, Next, and H&M. Dining and entertainment options include over 30 restaurants, such as Tortilla, Starbucks, Krispy Kreme, Hotel Chocolat, Bross Bagels, Five Guys, Salerno Pizza, SushiSamba, Black Sheep Coffee, and The Alchemist cocktail bar and restaurant. The development also features the Bonnie & Wild marketplace, Scotland's first food hall, and a five-screen Everyman cinema.
* <https://bdcmagazine.com/2023/08/st-james-quarter-announces-the-opening-of-w-edinburgh-in-november-marking-the-completion-of-the-latest-phase-of-the-development/> - St James Quarter announced the opening of W Edinburgh in November 2023, marking the completion of the latest phase of the development. W Edinburgh serves as the centrepiece of the 1.7 million sq ft development, which includes world-class retail, dining, and leisure destinations, as well as 152 residential apartments. The hotel encompasses three buildings, offering 199 rooms and 45 suites, many with outdoor terraces. Its top floors feature W Lounge, SUSHISAMBA restaurant, Joao’s Place cocktail bar and terrace, chef’s table, and a rooftop W deck with 360-degree views of Edinburgh.
* <https://www.scotsman.com/news/people/st-james-quarter-opens-to-public-after-five-years-of-construction-3284397> - After five years of construction, St James Quarter, described as 'the most significant transformation to happen to Edinburgh since the Castle,' opened its first phase, a 850,000 sq ft shopping galleria. The development is a £1 billion project that includes a shopping galleria with 80 retailers, an enticing mix of restaurants, a Bonnie & Wild food hall, Scotland’s first W Edinburgh Hotel, a boutique Everyman Cinema, a Roomzzz Aparthotel, residential apartments, and 1,600 car parking spaces. Over 40 retailers welcomed the public through their doors on opening morning, many debuting their brand in Scotland for the first time.