# Alexander McCall Smith warns Edinburgh’s heritage faces threats from over-tourism and rapid development



Edinburgh, a city celebrated for its stunning natural landscapes and rich architectural heritage, finds itself at a crucial juncture. Renowned author Alexander McCall Smith eloquently captures the essence of the capital’s beauty, describing it as an ever-changing canvas of light and mood, shaped by its unique topography. However, he warns that this beauty is under threat from a relentless influx of tourism and rapid development. In a pointed critique, he expresses concern that Edinburgh risks becoming a “tartan nightmare”—a hollowed-out version of itself, overwhelmed by superficial tourist attractions and losing its authenticity to what he terms a “Disneyfied conglomeration” of commercial ventures.

The implications of this transformation are already evident, with calls from various stakeholders for a balance that preserves Edinburgh's historic charm while accommodating the growing pressures of urbanisation and tourism. The current rate of tourist traffic, McCall Smith argues, could lead to a scenario akin to that experienced by cities like Barcelona and Venice, where local residents have taken to the streets in protest against the negative impacts of overtourism. As crowds fill the city’s famed streets, one must ask whether Edinburgh's well-ordered system can withstand the strains imposed by mass tourism.

The concerns voiced by McCall Smith resonate with findings from various studies and initiatives aimed at mapping the city’s future. The 'Future Edinburgh' initiative set forth by the City of Edinburgh Council lays ambitious groundwork to confront these challenges head-on, aiming to promote sustainable urban development while maintaining the city's unique character. Among its strategies are plans to reduce car usage by 30% by 2030 and achieve Net Zero status, which underscores a larger commitment to addressing climate change and the needs of a growing population. This approach hopes to strike a delicate balance, ensuring that the authenticity of Edinburgh is not lost amidst necessary economic growth.

Furthermore, the commercialisation of the city centre has sparked debates regarding the integrity of its architectural heritage. Critics, including community activists and heritage organizations, point to developments such as luxury hotels in historically significant areas as emblematic of this issue. Such projects, especially in locations like the India Buildings, raise alarms about the potential erosion of Edinburgh's World Heritage status and the character that draws both residents and visitors alike. Concerns are also echoing from local citizens who foresee a future where the city, stripped of its unique features, becomes merely a backdrop for consumerist experiences.

The risk of over-tourism threatening urban authenticity is not limited to Edinburgh. As the city grapples with its identity in a changing world, parallels with other historical cities serve as important cautionary tales. The challenge lies in navigating the competing demands of economic development and heritage preservation—a task that requires not just planning but a collective commitment from all stakeholders, including city planners, business owners, and residents.

As The Herald's series, "The Future of Edinburgh," unfolds, it aims to spark necessary conversations about the path ahead. The rich tapestry of articles aims to confront pressing issues around housing, tourism, and the future of iconic spaces like Princes Street. The series not only reflects on the past but actively seeks solutions for a future where Edinburgh can thrive without sacrificing its core values and character.

In this growing discourse, the voices of community members—those who have lived and worked in the city over decades—are vital in shaping a pragmatic yet visionary approach towards Edinburgh's future, ensuring that the city retains its soul amid the challenges of modern consumerism and urban expansion.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/25211595.a-tartan-nightmare-shallow-garish-threatens-edinburgh/?ref=rss), [[4]](https://www.unesco.org/en/list/728)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/25211595.a-tartan-nightmare-shallow-garish-threatens-edinburgh/?ref=rss), [[2]](https://www.accordingtoed.com/edinburgh-tourism-impact-architecture-development), [[5]](https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2016/sep/08/edinburgh-endarkenment-public-land-luxury-hotel-india-buildings)
* Paragraph 3 – [[3]](https://www.cityofedinburgh.gov.uk/future-edinburgh), [[6]](https://www.accordingtoed.com/edinburgh-architecture-heritage-challenges)
* Paragraph 4 – [[5]](https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2016/sep/08/edinburgh-endarkenment-public-land-luxury-hotel-india-buildings), [[6]](https://www.accordingtoed.com/edinburgh-architecture-heritage-challenges)
* Paragraph 5 – [[2]](https://www.accordingtoed.com/edinburgh-tourism-impact-architecture-development), [[6]](https://www.accordingtoed.com/edinburgh-architecture-heritage-challenges)
* Paragraph 6 – [[1]](https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/25211595.a-tartan-nightmare-shallow-garish-threatens-edinburgh/?ref=rss), [[3]](https://www.cityofedinburgh.gov.uk/future-edinburgh)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/25211595.a-tartan-nightmare-shallow-garish-threatens-edinburgh/?ref=rss> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.accordingtoed.com/edinburgh-tourism-impact-architecture-development> - This article examines the impact of Edinburgh's tourism boom on its architectural heritage. It discusses how the influx of visitors has led to the commercialization of the city centre, posing a threat to its authenticity. The piece highlights concerns about over-tourism and the potential 'Disneyfication' of Edinburgh, emphasizing the need for a balance between preserving the city's historic charm and accommodating economic development. The author also draws parallels with other cities that have faced similar challenges due to mass tourism.
3. <https://www.cityofedinburgh.gov.uk/future-edinburgh> - The City of Edinburgh Council's 'Future Edinburgh' initiative outlines the city's plans to address challenges such as climate change, population growth, and transportation. The strategy includes ambitious targets like reducing car usage by 30% by 2030 and achieving Net Zero status by the same year. The plan emphasizes sustainable urban development, improved public transport, and the creation of 20-minute neighbourhoods to enhance residents' quality of life while preserving the city's unique character.
4. <https://www.unesco.org/en/list/728> - UNESCO's World Heritage Centre provides detailed information about the Old and New Towns of Edinburgh, highlighting their outstanding universal value. The site describes the contrast between the medieval Old Town and the planned Georgian New Town, noting their exceptional historic and architectural significance. The page includes descriptions of key features, such as the Old Town's narrow closes and the New Town's neoclassical buildings, emphasizing the unique urban landscape that led to their World Heritage status.
5. <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2016/sep/08/edinburgh-endarkenment-public-land-luxury-hotel-india-buildings> - This article discusses the controversy surrounding the development of luxury hotels in Edinburgh's historic centre, particularly focusing on the India Buildings. It highlights concerns from local residents and heritage organizations about the impact of such developments on the city's character and World Heritage status. The piece includes perspectives from community activists and UNESCO officials, emphasizing the tension between economic development and heritage preservation in Edinburgh.
6. <https://www.accordingtoed.com/edinburgh-architecture-heritage-challenges> - This article explores the challenges facing Edinburgh's architectural heritage amid rapid development. It discusses the tension between preserving the city's historic charm and accommodating modern needs, highlighting specific examples of contemporary architecture in the Old and New Towns. The piece emphasizes the importance of balancing development with conservation to maintain Edinburgh's unique character and World Heritage status.
7. <https://www.accordingtoed.com/edinburgh-tourism-impact-architecture-development> - This article examines the impact of Edinburgh's tourism boom on its architectural heritage. It discusses how the influx of visitors has led to the commercialization of the city centre, posing a threat to its authenticity. The piece highlights concerns about over-tourism and the potential 'Disneyfication' of Edinburgh, emphasizing the need for a balance between preserving the city's historic charm and accommodating economic development. The author also draws parallels with other cities that have faced similar challenges due to mass tourism.