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 THE SCOTSMAN
 Thu 28 Aug 2003

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Holyrood's world-class price overrun

HAMISH MACDONELL SCOTTISH POLITICAL EDITOR

SCOTLAND'S controversial parliament building at Holyrood has achieved probably its most embarrassing accolade to date: it is now officially ranked as one of the worst building projects in the world for cost overruns.

The latest £400 million cost forecast for the project represents a 900 per cent increase on the original estimate of £40million.

This puts the Holyrood project in the top tier of buildings which ran over budget, ahead of the Channel Tunnel, the British Library, the Humber Bridge and the Jubilee Line extension - even though all of these cost vastly more to build than anticipated.

To the relief of the parliamentary authorities, however, Holyrood still has a little way to go before it overtakes the leaders in this particularly ignominious field: the Sydney Opera House, Concorde and the Barbican in London.

A survey by The Scotsman of work done by Scandinavian and German social scientists Bent Flyvbjerg, Nils Bruzelius and Werner Rothengatter revealed where the Scottish Parliament came in the list of projects around the world which have spiralled out of control.

And another table, published this week by Prospect magazine for Scotland's architectural community, brought more uncomfortable news for the parliamentary managers.

It showed that Holyrood is now one of the most expensive buildings, per square metre, in all of Britain.

According to the magazine, the average cost of building a new company headquarters in Edinburgh is about £1,544 per square metre.

Portcullis House, the new office block for MPs at Westminster, cost three times as much at £4,700 per square metre, but the Holyrood building is even more expensive, coming in at about £6,686 per square metre.

The only building to cost more was supposed to be the new Welsh assembly building, with a cost per square metre of £9,390, but AMS stopped the contract when it appeared to be heading out of control.

However, it is the comparison with other major building projects that is the most revealing for Holyrood, because it places the Scottish Parliament alongside some of the most celebrated, and infamous, public building projects in history.

The Sydney Opera House remains the most famous because of its immediately recognisable shape and because it ended up at 15 times the estimated cost.

In Britain in the 1960s and 1970s, there was the Concorde project which rocketed from £45 million to a substantial £1.01 billion by the time it had been developed. However, in the lead, there is the Barbican, in London, which was supposed to cost a conservative £8million and eventually came in at £187million - a rise of 2,237.5 per cent.

The Scottish Parliament, with an increase of a mere 900 per cent, appears modest by comparison - until it is placed alongside other examples of the most contentious projects in British architectural history.

The Channel Tunnel was more cost-effective, it only rose by 80 per cent between design and completion.

The British Library was allowed to go almost £450 million over budget and 15 years behind schedule, but it still has a better record in percentage terms than the Scottish Parliament for cost overruns.

The cost of Charles Barry's Houses of Parliament, at Westminster, caused a scandal when it continued to rise, but it only overran its budget by 200 per cent, not the 900 per cent being predicted for Holyrood.

David McLetchie, the Conservative leader, said: "If ever we wanted a measure of the magnitude of incompetence and bad political decisions,

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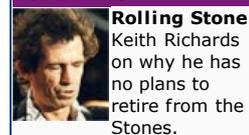
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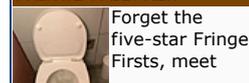


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this table shows it all."

Fergus Ewing, the SNP MSP and consistent critic of the Holyrood project, said: "The Scottish Parliament may not be a medal winner in the cost overrun stakes, but the majority of Scottish people are still perplexed as to how the estimated cost has risen so dramatically."

The one silver lining for the Scottish Parliament managers is the revelation that the spiralling cost of public projects is not a new phenomenon.

New York's Brooklyn Bridge claimed 27 lives and cost twice what it was supposed to do. When the Suez Canal opened in 1869, its final cost was 20 times higher than the first estimate.

And, of late, Boston's "Big Dig" tunnel and road project is already \$6 billion (£3.8 billion) over its \$8 billion estimate and, like Holyrood, that is not finished yet either.

A spokesman for the Scottish Parliament said: "Clearly, we are not dealing with a fixed-price project, but the Presiding Officer is adamant that every penny will be clawed back where it is possible to do so."

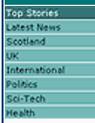
He added that the Auditor General did not recognise the figure of £40million as a realistic initial estimate.

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