



WHAT SORT OF PARLIAMENT building have Scottish MSPs moved into this month? That is, putting aside all the uproar about the £431m cost, the protracted delivery and two official investigations, one of which was due out on Wednesday ... what is the architecture like?

The clear answer is that Enric Miralles, the late Catalan architect, has given them one of the most exciting buildings of the past decade. An architectural masterpiece, even. And also, it has to be said, an architectural mess.

One big relief is that in the most important places the building rises to an exhilarating level of achievement. These are the main debating chamber, and even more so, the MSPs' lobby, where they meet their constituents and other

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petitioners. Nearly as inspiring are the six committee rooms and the MSPs' private offices, with their curiously hen-shaped windows. All these are compellingly sculptural spaces in organic curvilinear forms, resplendent in daylight and lined in natural oak and sycamore. They have a warm, natural, engaging appeal like that of a violin or an upturned boat, with none of the institutional formality associated with government buildings.

To house 129 MSPs along with about 1000 civil servants, the parliament is understandably large, amounting to 29,300 m² in area. But less understandably, it is complex in nature, as it brings together so many diverse functions, from public debating halls through visitor facilities and dining rooms to MSP private rooms and administrative offices. Miralles has revelled in the



Above: The MSPs' rooms come with weird oriel windows that suggest hens, many behind bars
Far left: The back of the MSPs' block is the only rectilinear elevation
Left: Passers-by see a lumpy, shapeless, grey building in concrete, glass and granite

inherent richness, intricacy and complexity of the buildings, playing up their visual excitement. But his creative abandon is also his undoing, as he has allowed the complexity to run riot as swirling cascades of crashing forms, spaces and motifs. The sad result is an architectural jumble, which envelops the splendid spaces mentioned

above and baffles the visitor.

The main debating chamber is a wonderful lofty hall with just the right balance of spectacle, warmth and intimacy. The MSPs' desks are laid out in a horseshoe arrangement, while above and behind them curves a wide gallery for the press and public. Virtually everything on view, from MSP's desks and roof

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trusses down to floor, wall and ceiling linings, is made of natural oak and sycamore, and combined with the hall's curving elliptical shape this gives it a tactile, organic character. On top of that, the whole scene is enlivened by daylight, which streams through extensive glass walls and rooflights.

The dominant feature is the array of giant roof trusses in laminated oak that undulate along the length of the hall. Instead of rising up to a central ridge, the trusses drop down at their midpoint in huge V-formations, as if they were suspended from the roof rather than supporting it. As they snake through the roofspace, they evoke the ribs of a large upturned boat. And at their joints are 112 large elaborate connectors in silvery polished stainless steel that double as functional engineering components and fascinating abstract sculptures.

Even more wonderful is the ►