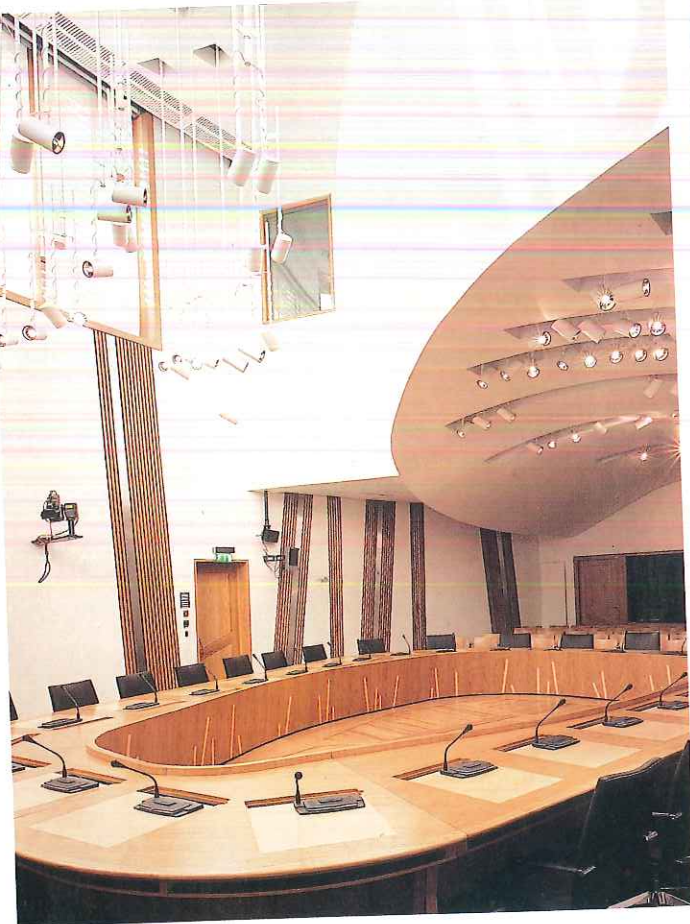


► MSPs' lobby. This is a hall set between the higher blocks that is large enough to absorb official receptions yet irregular in outline and low enough to encourage intimate conversations. The upturned boat theme reappears in this roof, although here the timber ribs support glass rather than boarded timber hulls. One curved side of each hull is lined in stainless steel and projects down below the flat plastered ceiling, and this flap scoops daylight and sunlight and bounce it across the hall below. More than that, as the flotilla of 13 upturned glass boats varies in size, shape and orientation, it projects a shifting kaleidoscope of daylight, sunlight and shadow patterns below.

The six committee rooms are simpler spaces focused on a large doughnut-shaped desk. They are located at the tops of the four central blocks, where they benefit from plenty of daylight and views through skylights and windows on three sides. In each one, a vaulted ceiling in white plaster curves upwards to the skylight in an irregular organic shape like the inside of a conch shell or Le Corbusier's Ronchamps Chapel.

The MSPs' private offices are all contained in a six-storey rectilinear slab block to one side. They are like monks' cells, as each was precast in concrete as one piece including a vaulted ceiling, though any austerity

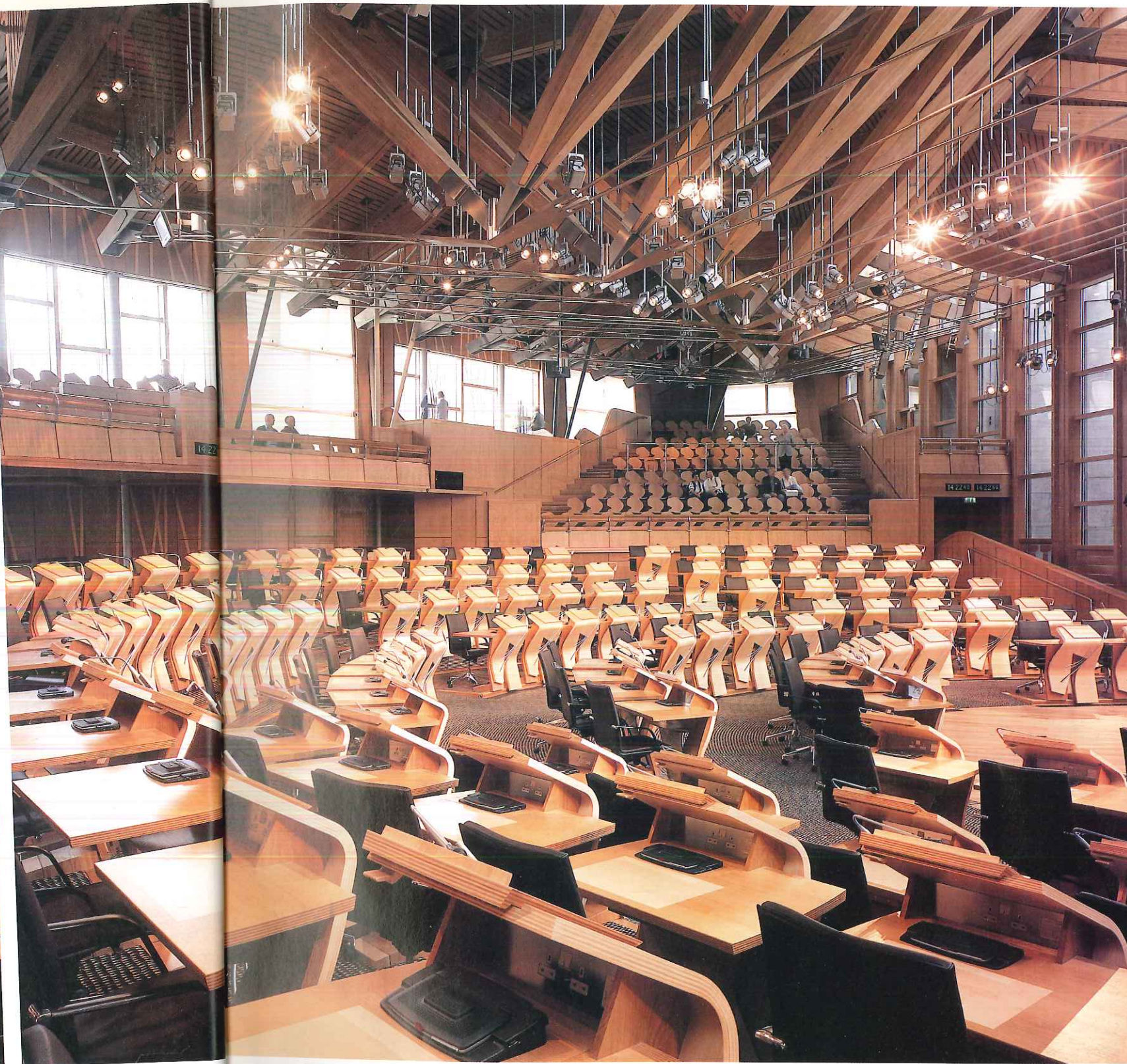
A vaulted ceiling curves to the skylight like the inside of a conch or Ronchamps Chapel



is masked by lavish furnishings in yet more oak and sycamore. Each room comes with a weird sculptural bay window that resembles a pecking hen.

The architectural jumble comes in the corridors, staircases, lobbies and external courtyards that twist themselves through the narrow spaces left between the tight-knit collection of irregular building forms. These circulation spaces have ended up being contorted, baffling and disorientating, particularly for visitors. The most disappointing of them is the narrow central

courtyard opening off Canongate, which is hemmed in by the sharp overhanging prows of the surrounding towers. It is Miralles' homage to the narrow alleys and high tenements of medieval Edinburgh, but none of this comes across in the curving irregular spaces and forms faced in an amalgam of granite panels, clear-glass window walls and stainless-steel sheeting, along with a utilitarian floor of steel grilles. The courtyard is cramped, amorphous and gloomy – sinister pit rather than uplifting patio.



Above: The V-shaped timber roof trusses add dynamism to the elliptical main chamber
Top left: Curved skylights bounce daylight and sunlight through the MSPs' lobby
Above left: Committee rooms come with curving plaster vaults

More critically, the building is also a mess when viewed from outside. The 10 buildings vary between one and six storeys in height, eight are new and two historic; seven are curvilinear in plan and three are rectilinear, and they are all packed tightly together. The result is that every view is quite different – and quite incoherent. The only unifying theme is the grey granite cladding, but this is overlaid by a curious outer layer of large scales or plates. Some of these are composed of seemingly random scattering of wooden sticks, while others are of

near-black Belfast granite, but all are formed in yet another whimsical curving shape and only serve to add another layer of bafflement to the building.

Being the centre of government, the parliament building is Scotland's most important building. No doubt only a tiny proportion of the nation's 5 million inhabitants will actually visit it, but all have the right to expect some instantly recognisable icon of their national democracy – the Scottish answer to Big Ben. The debating chamber and the MSPs' lobby provide just such

iconic images, but there is none on the building's exterior.

Finally, the irregular, sometimes contorted shapes of the buildings pose a more practical problem in the long term. Government buildings are prone to change over their lifetime as one party replaces another in an election and proceeds to eradicate all evidence of its predecessors, and this suggests an adaptable loose-fit shell. The Scottish parliament building has been built to last 100 years. Whether its architecture will last that long without further

changes is debatable.

Today, though, such misgivings are premature. Scots can justifiably take pride in an inspired variant of a government building and await the reinvigoration of democracy it promises to inspire.

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