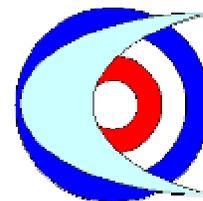


Scottish Curling-Ice Group



THE CIRCLE FILES – Part Two

Part One of the files dealt with the background and progress of the Circle, up to the bidding process, when we submitted a joint bid with MHG (Montgomery Hotel Group) to build a facility that would house the Circle, the National Curling Academy, the new offices for the RCCC and the national curling museum. Part Two deals with the progress of this bid and all matters related to it, but because of the sensitive nature of the beast many details will be withheld. Also, this file represents my own thoughts on the matter, as my colleagues are not in a position to speak their minds as freely as I now can.

The Bid

Having done years of careful research, I was confident that the design of the Circle was as good as anyone could get it, especially from the technical and practical perspectives. The Circle would be able to do its work extremely well, would cost less to build than a conventional facility and would be exceptionally cost effective to run. Although we had planned to build it as a four-sheet rink, we had agreed in this case that it should be a five-sheet rink, and that six sheets would be too many. I could find no supporting data that a six can work in Kinross, based on the specifications provided and our research.

With the addition of the offices and museum the Circle remained exactly the same, but the complex adapted down both sides with the offices replacing much of the area planned for accommodation, and an extra floor down the sides would house the museum and other added facilities. There were no complicated structural problems and, in keeping with the Circle philosophy, the overall design remained simple and effective. I estimated that the complex would cost some £2m to build, allowing for £2.5m, and presented carefully calculated figures for both revenue and expenditure. MHG produced their own figures, which I didn't agree with, but at the time the objective was to present our bid and deal with the next phase afterwards. The essence of the bid was that MHG would provide the land on lease, the SCIG would provide the expertise, and with the RCCC we would run the complex under the umbrella of a curling trust.

Of course, I was very pleased that our bid made the shortlist. It was a very good bid that ticked all the boxes, and deserved to be there. At the time I estimated that the bid had around an 80% chance of success against the others, and with that in mind we all prepared ourselves for the site meeting of the RCCC facilities committee with confidence. We had agreed that MHG could front the bid while we dealt with technical matters, and we looked forward to meeting with the RCCC and sportscotland.

Unfortunately the meeting did not go as we expected. MHG made it clear that they preferred to build the complex across the road on the market green, while we had planned to use the site of the old walled garden. In time we would agree to the market green, but on the day we were simply taken by surprise. The RCCC also seemed determined to push for a six-sheet rink, and MHG immediately assured them that it could be provided. There were other ripples on the day which I cannot go into, but the bottom line was that we heard the warning bells and were not happy at all. When I received an email afterwards from MHG explaining very clearly that the SCIG was considered expendable in the project, I was both shocked and bemused. Forget 80%, the road they were going down was not worth more than 50%.

For us it was back to the drawing board. As always we needed to identify the problems and find solutions, and we had little time. Fortunately the bid survived the site meeting and, as expected, became one of two, but suddenly we could take nothing on trust or for granted.

The design

Much of the design has been dealt with in Part One, but the essential points will be repeated here.

Ice – the building and equipment must be capable of providing excellent ice for every game as effectively as possible. Any shortcoming will cost a few minutes and a few pounds every day. It must be easy to move equipment to where it was needed and to access all plant and machinery without restriction.

Dirt – all traffic must be controlled to avoid the unnecessary transfer of dirt from one area to another, and especially to the playing area. All departments have to function independently through separate doors and passages, yet have easy access to each other when needed. This applies especially to the RCCC, coaching staff, visitors to the museum, deliveries, and customers of the restaurant.

Security – simple CCTV coverage requires clear passages, distinctive entrances and one main access point for the public. Lockers are supplied for the curlers and they only have access to their own facilities.

Space – cramped conditions create storage problems and hamper cleaning. The clubroom and restaurant areas must be spacious, with windows to the outside at waist level for openness and daylight.

Viewing – there must be adequate viewing for all sheets at the home end, and additional viewing for coaches and press at the far end to avoid congestion of computers and cameras.

Catering – curlers have specific needs that must be provided for. These include snacks and drinks in the clubroom for normal curling, as well as full meals of quality in the restaurant when required. If the restaurant is fully fitted, it could also serve meals to the public during evenings/weekends.

Shop – a small shop will display goods for sale, with a good storage area to be able to stock items and so improve availability in the Central region. It can also sell memorabilia and can be manned by existing staff when needed.

Accommodation – simple bedrooms for occasional use will enable visitors or staff to stay overnight at very little expense. Originally this was also intended for use by squads, but with the hotels next door the need is scaled down to staff and technicians and the free space reserved for any future need.

Meeting areas – a variety of areas will be multi-purpose, with the seminar room, clubroom, restaurant and small meeting room being used as needed by varying numbers. The reserved area can be developed as a high-tech gymnasium as and when needed to avoid cluttering the other areas.

Incorporating these design needs into the complex addresses the primary purpose of the facility, which is the customer. Everything must have a feel-good factor to ensure that the staff, coaches, curlers and visitors all enjoy their time within the complex, and their curling within the Circle. It must be smart, simple and effective in every way, and it must be easy to clean and maintain. It must be fit for purpose as a curling facility of national importance, yet it must also be home to its curlers, customers and visitors.

The problems

Everyone has a better idea. Anyone who looks at a complex problem, of which he understands very little, will sit around the committee table and happily discuss only those parts of which he has at least some knowledge, while the rest will be skipped over. Better ideas will be imposed, while ignoring the valid reasons behind the design.

Ice – during the past years the following have been regularly stated, and still are:

- Curlers don't need quality ice.
- It's the same for both sides.
- Modern technology will make good ice.
- We need curlers on the ice, forget ice time.
- Anyone can make curling ice, it's only water.
- Why pay three ice technicians when one will do.
- There's no money for a new broom.
- Put the pipes in the floor further apart, it will save money.
- Never mind heating, it's expensive.
- We can't afford to service the plant this year, it costs too much and isn't necessary.

The list can go on and on. Having studied the subject in great detail we know that everything matters when it comes to curling ice, and the better the attention to detail, the fewer the problems and the less it costs. A good curling-ice technician cannot work alone for fifteen hours a day all year, there should be three. They will need a very good building as designed, with the right equipment in good working order, regular maintenance and replacement of plant and tools, and the correct parameters within which to control the behaviour of water as a gas, liquid and solid.

If these criteria are met they will produce excellent ice for every game as routine; if not, they will struggle and give up any ambition other than survival.

Dirt – another list can be provided:

- Why is the ice so dirty.
- Don't ask for a decent vacuum cleaner, they cost too much.
- We don't need carpets, who will clean them.
- Tell the curlers to get used to it, we don't have time for everything.

If the traffic is well organised and the building is equipped with proper vacuum cleaning, it is not expensive and does not take long to keep clean. Keep the passages and walkways clean and the ice stays clean, with few unwanted pick-ups. Cleaning is part of an ice technician's work, but if he has no time or energy – or the equipment – it won't get done. If every department does its own cleaning, the ice technician will have time to do his. Keeping dirt out of the curling hall is cost effective and easy, and it has to be done.

Security – no-one needs CCTV, the public has no access! Maybe so, but items are often lost or stolen, and there will be no time for staff to deal with it. CCTV is the most cost-effective means of maintaining security and preventing crime – simply call the police and give them the tapes. Vandalism, graffiti and stupidity will also be controlled at no extra cost. A CCTV system allows one person to keep track of the movements of all others in the complex, and if the movements are recorded the entire complex can function smoothly and efficiently, at very little additional cost.

Space – the feel-good factor is important to everyone. Start squeezing changing rooms into the clubroom area and the clubroom loses its atmosphere. Close off the windows with solid walls and claustrophobia sets in. The design of a curling rink has few options: build an ice hall, go longer for the required extra space or go wider. The cost remains much the same, but don't expect everything to fit into the same space.

In our design for the Circle we have studied all the existing designs and have used the space that will be needed as carefully as possible. For the plant room, clubroom and restaurant above it we went longer, because the viewing is important. For the offices, changing rooms and other areas we went wider, because we will only be using the eaves of the building. Every department can decide for itself how to use its space and ensure the feel-good factor for its staff, leaving the curling to function as it should.

Sadly, with the emphasis on trying to build a six-sheet rink and adding some 250m² of ice floor, some 250m² of planned space had to be moved into somewhere else to save money, with the clubroom and restaurant the targets. Considering that no-one has yet provided the evidence that the extra sheet of ice will bring in more money, this is to me simply ludicrous. Scrapping every square meter that contributes to the feel-good factor is not the best way to go about things. Scrapping a five-metre strip down the length of the building to save money, and then replace it with a five-metre strip of costly ice that would not generate more income, made no sense at all.

MHG proposed a design that would do just that. The side under the eaves that would have contained the changing rooms, shop, storage, etc. was to be scrapped to save 250m² of the footprint, and some 500m² of floor space. The changing rooms would now be behind the clubroom at the end of the rink, so blocking all daylight from the clubroom and reducing its size. The restaurant area would be reduced too for upstairs toilets and a meeting room, again blocking the daylight. Access to the away-end viewing gallery and the plant room would be down passages under the eaves, where the changing rooms had been, and the area would also be used for viewing from the side – the upper passage was in effect becoming a viewing gallery, because the clubroom and restaurant had become smaller. The shop would become part of the museum, and storage was not needed. We looked at the plan carefully and objectively, and unanimously agreed that we thought nothing of it, because it simply would not work.

Viewing – the specifications required sufficient viewing for some 250 people, which we could provide with ease. But shrinking the clubroom and restaurant areas, where these people would be moving about, drinking, eating and generally feeling good about being there, would create a serious problem for ventilation – with no windows it would be a difficult problem to solve, never mind health and safety. Trying to compensate by installing viewing along the side creates its own problems, and curlers do not like viewing from the side.

Catering – MHG had a problem with catering, and considering the many facilities within the hotels they had a valid point. We, however, were seeing the provision of meals, drinks and snacks through curling eyes, and considering that not many curlers were impressed with current facilities in the hotels we knew something better had to be provided. We also did not want constant traffic in and out of the complex, resulting in an increase of dirt and air changes. Catering would be an important source of additional revenue to the complex, and during a competition would be very important to all visitors. Although we had offered the franchise to MHG they turned this down, and when we provided a report that analysed the requirements of curlers in this regard they did not respond. Later they seemed to agree with the report and made much the same proposals; they were however assuming that they would have the right to supply all food and drink and so gather all the profit, with no guarantee of providing what the curlers needed.

Shop – in the design of MHG the shop would be smaller and more of a gift shop attached to the museum, and with no storage. It would be manned by someone who also looked after the museum, but it is unclear who would pay the wages. A curling museum – or a museum of any kind – is hardly a busy place, and if the shop is needed once a week that would be considered busy. In our design the shop would be dealt with by existing staff and only when needed, while the museum would be dealt with by the RCCC, and only when needed. Our shop would stock a full range of sizes and items stored for the most part in a storage room, without which there would be only a limited stock and constant special orders, all requiring time from some member of staff. In our view a small shop with no storage was not going to work very well.

Accommodation – we originally included a number of rooms in the design, for use by training squads and visiting technicians. MHG could provide some 100 beds, but at a price that curlers or technicians cannot really afford. We reduced the number of rooms and kept the subject open, but still felt that a few rooms to sleep up to twenty people would be needed. The MHG design scrapped all accommodation.

Meeting areas – the restaurant, seminar room, clubroom and small meeting room were designed to be used as required. The MHG layout provided the same rooms but much reduced in area, and the layout was not as user-friendly as we had intended. It would now be impossible to hold a large function (no single room large enough), the seminar room also used by umpires or squads was upstairs and too far from the ice, the small meeting room (used for small private meetings) was behind the restaurant and not private at all, and the clubroom was now simply a crowded area – how this could provide enough room for some 96 curlers during the peak-time changeover was a mystery to us, not to mention a wheelchair event with some forty entries.

In summary, so much had been changed by the MHG design that we simply could not recognise the original design, or the purpose it needed to fulfil. The balance between mobility and privacy for all users had been destroyed, and wheelchair guests especially would not be able to access all areas with relative ease. The goods lift, also serving as an emergency escape for wheelchairs, had been scrapped. The passage ways between the

home and away ends were reduced to awkward tunnels. The doors and passages designed to facilitate the movement and storage of ice equipment had been changed to an impossible situation, making it very difficult to get the powered cutters into the complex, let alone the ice hall. The simple act of entering the ice hall with an item some 2.5m long presented a challenge, not to mention carrying a full pebble can. The MHG design addressed the problems from an hotel point of view, while our design dealt with them from the curling point of view.

By now it was clear that the project was in trouble. MHG was no longer listening and simply steamed on in their own chosen directions, without consulting or even informing us. With them leading the project there was little we could do, we couldn't as much as speak to anyone other than ourselves. The costs were in trouble too, because they were going down a different route to what we had planned, without ever asking what options there could be. The addition of a large car park would cost at least £0.25m, which would benefit MHG customers more than the curlers, and the specific location on the market green added other costs too. By now I estimated that the project had only a 50% chance of success, which was soon to plummet to 20% – MHG informed me that they were going to pursue the project on their own, the SCIG had been dumped. MHG had decided that they would now submit the bid as their own.

The big picture

Every project has a vision, an aim, a challenge that has to be accepted and dealt with. In this case, we had to design a facility that could, by guarantee, provide excellent curling ice for every game, every day, for about ten months of the year. We had no doubt that the Circle could do this, at a very economical cost and in the best possible way. To this was added the requirements of the RCCC offices, the National Curling Academy and the new museum, and our design could provide that within the one complex. This would be a complex fit for purpose in every way, no more and no less, for at least twenty years and possibly fifty years. If this complex could be built with the cooperation of the hotels, it could tick all the boxes.

In the big, wide world the big picture always matters more than its parts, and the outcome is usually decided by those you know and not by what you know. The big picture is down to money and those who control it. They are architects, construction engineers, accountants, suppliers and any other specialist thrown in, and if there is any mention of government money for a really big picture they are attracted like bees to the honey. The government specifies that it will not allocate any money unless these people are involved, nor will the government increase the amount of money to accommodate the fees of these experts. They will also only work through the governing body of the sport, here the RCCC, who have neither the knowledge in detail nor the construction skills to deal with such a project, so they too rely on the experts, at the government's insistence. The bottom line for the SCIG in all this is that we might well have serious knowledge and rare expertise, but without the backing of the RCCC and sportscotland we are at the mercy of everyone else, and if they throw us out there is nothing we can do but sit back and study the big picture.

Location

There can be little doubt that Kinross is an excellent choice for this complex. The market green is also a very good area on which to build it, never mind the loss to the town of a green space that was seldom used anyway, and this space was unlikely to be developed in any way other than a prestigious project. MHG was in a no-lose situation, especially once they started collecting annual rent for the land, and the extended car park would serve their customers very well.

Construction

Our design for the complex is simple, with virtually everything available off the shelf. There are no complicated extras and any contractor worth his name can build it. I had estimated the cost to be below £2m with £2.5m as a maximum, but the first professional estimate from a cost consultant was for nearly £6.5m. Other estimates ranged around £3m, which is also what other bidders were given. Where would the extra money go, and where was it coming from? No-one seemed to care, and MHG certainly never consulted us on how we wanted to go about things. They pulled the strings with all the local architects and consultants and had been working with these people for years, and the last thing they needed was questions from us about where the money was going, or would come from. The one thing that is quite clear is that the cost consultants calculate at figures per square metre based on their considerable experience, not taking into account that this complex is unique, very simple and unlike any other "office block". The construction industry serves the construction industry.

Control

It was clear to us that the complex would have to be controlled by those who use it and do their work in it. This was clearly the RCCC and the SCIG, who would work together to serve curling in Scotland and the curlers of Kinross. A management committee would run the complex, under the watchful control of a curling trust, while MHG would simply be the landlords of the land upon which the complex stood. Of course there would be cooperation between all parties, and even the interests of MHG would be protected, but MHG would have no control. Losing the SCIG will put them in a different position altogether, although it is unclear how they planned to provide for the customer.

Funding

This will always be a problem, for any curling facility. After careful thought we came to the conclusion that this particular facility, considering its multi-purpose structure, should be funded by public money, in the same way as any other leisure complex, and through sportscotland, considering its national significance. We do not know exactly how much money these bodies are prepared to award to this project, but if we assume a simple figure of £2m, there would be a shortfall – based on my estimates – of £0.5m at its worst. Because we would have some control over the spending we were certain that the shortfall could be minimised, and a simple bank loan could be paid off over a period of time. At its worst this would amount to some £50k per year for twenty years, which would amount to about £200 per day for the 250 days that the curling would generate good income, or about 20% of its daily income. Painful it would be, but possible.

Increasing the size to six sheets, and using the estimates given by the industry, the lowest figure is £3m, with no additional funding from anyone. Now repayment over twenty years will be £100k per year, or £400 per day, or 40% of the income. This will be a very difficult amount to sustain, and the viability of the complex will be in serious danger – in my opinion it will not work, especially for a complex of national significance. Every corner will have to be cut, standards will be compromised and ice during summer will be no more than a dream. In the hope of lowering costs MHG planned to employ fewer technicians, have less floor space for the customers and corrupt the design of the complex so that it cannot possibly fulfil its functions.

The big problem for us is that all this money will come from the curlers. The curlers will not only pay the money that will sustain the complex throughout its life, they will also have to pay off all the loans with interest, and in return they will have to take what they get in quality with little guarantee of standard. We spent years working on this and know what will work, and a serious loan will not work. We believe curlers will pay for excellent ice, a friendly atmosphere, good food and a facility they can be proud of, and we believe the work of the RCCC and NCA can gradually integrate with the normal curling. We do not believe the curlers will pay for poor quality and an oversized facility from which only MHG will have a financial benefit.

The big picture has many parts and we have studied them carefully. While we are confident that we can make this very complicated thing work, we cannot do so if we're not actively involved. On the other hand MHG believe they can make this work by:

- Adding an extra sheet of ice. This will require 20% more work every day, without additional income.
- Reducing floor space wherever possible, leaving the complex unfit for purpose and with no room for expansion.
- Reducing the essential workforce, which will make it impossible for the technicians to sustain quality.
- Depriving the complex of the expertise of the SCIG, without which they will have neither the knowledge nor the people to make this work.
- Ignoring the specifications that clearly require very good curling ice for all, as well as summer ice.
- Providing their own standard of food and service, which only benefits them.
- Borrowing over £1m from the bank, which the curlers will have to pay – MHG will pay for nothing.

It would not be difficult to fill another few pages with ranting and raving, but that is not the purpose of this report. In this report I have given the facts as I find them, for the benefit of those who are interested and those who have supported us over the years. The events of the past few months have left me disappointed to the extreme. It has left me disillusioned, with my passion for curling starved near to death. It has left me disgusted with those who seek only glory and profit, with no thought of the customer and the modern needs of a wonderful game.

With the news that Kinross has been confirmed as the preferred bid for the NCA project, with no mention of the expulsion by MHG of the SCIG, the questions remain answered. I cannot explain what has happened to my family, who have all worked with me and supported me for many years. I cannot explain it to my colleagues, with whom I have spent many years developing the science of curling and curling ice. I cannot explain it to the curlers who have followed our progress and now wonder what is going to happen – with their money. The project has gone from an outside chance to a winner, and yet it has developed into farce, because the people who have the knowledge and can make this a success are no longer involved. In fact, we know that the project is now heading for serious problems, because the people who have taken it over simply do not know enough.

My colleagues and I have not given up on the Circle, because the concept is sound and there is always hope. We can take some comfort from the fact that they can build what they like for the new complex, but it will not be the Circle or anywhere near as good as the Circle can be. We stand back and watch with sadness, and we wait in hope that someone – somewhere – has sense.

*John Minnaar
20 October 2008*