

## Demountable Open Air Theatre for Edinburgh Military Tattoo

### ARCHITECTS

The City Architects Department, Edinburgh

### STRUCTURAL ENGINEERS

B.I.C.C. Construction Limited

### STEELWORK CONTRACTOR

Painter Bros. Ltd

### Judges Comments

It is a formidable achievement to design, manufacture, erect and demount a temporary theatre for 10,000 people on this space and still leave a parade ground. To do so with such an elegant silhouette from Princes Street is something of a triumph. So much for the general assessment. From the point of view of engineering design one is impressed by the skill used in manipulating a system to provide seating areas soaring over dramatic drops on the north and south sides of the plateau ridge; also the setting back of the last support of the south line at its west end. The fall down of the parade ground from west to east is also accommodated with apparent ease, as are the high connecting footways spanning from the other stands to the east stand. In the details of the system, where the precision of jointing and lining up are impeccable, it is impossible in a short visit to evaluate the logic of the location and distribution of the members. This is peculiarly so in the east stand at the entrance from the Royal Mile.

For over a quarter of a century this Tattoo has been a major national event, coinciding with the Edinburgh International Festival of Music and Drama, and attracting visitors from all over the world. Its site on the Esplanade, high above the city and immediately in front of the Castle, is the most dramatic and romantic of all Tattoo sites – and the most difficult. The approach from the Old Town, the aery height, and the loom of the floodlit fortress over the arena creates high drama even before the performance begins, but not without the immense difficulties of seating 10,000 people on the constricted ridge, and of seating stands which must be prominent in the city's famous skyline for months and which must be erected amid the stream of the million people who visit the Castle annually and must cross the Esplanade to get to it.

In 1974 the City of Edinburgh District Council lent the Tattoo Committee (which is a joint Committee of City and Army) funds to replace the stands, which until then had been improvised annually in standard scaffolding, with a specially designed demountable structure creating an open-air theatre of 10,000 seats. The specific aims were to achieve maximum seating capacity, a better appearance both internally and in the important long views from other parts of the city, faster erection and a more economical annual operation. The outline design was by the City Architect and various systems of construction were investigated before the 'Mero' system was chosen. The design was then developed in detail with the collaboration of B.I.C.C. and the whole process of design,

manufacture, creation of foundation and first erection of the theatre was carried out inside a year. The foundations were a major problem, since the Esplanade is made ground on top of the original and much narrower rock ridge, and a system of piles stayed by tension to rock anchors had to be created. The Mero framework rises from these points and the aim was to exploit the elegance of the engineering system to the maximum, and to restrict decoration to a scheme of flags and heraldic display which is being implemented over a period of years but which will simply add flicks of brilliant colour and movement to the straightforward expression of the structure. Erection starts annually in mid June, the Tattoo plays for 4 weeks in August/September, and dismantling is completed by October.

