The Invisible College

First referenced in the 17th century by the natural philosopher and scientist Robert Boyle, the concept of **The Invisible College** was initiated by a group of intellectuals dedicated to furthering knowledge through experimental investigation. It was described as an “institution without walls” with no fixed home or declared identity.

Nearly four centuries later, the idea of the college has been given a new twist with the formation of a research network that connects academics, educationalists, contemporary artists and a wide range of local people and wider communities of interest. It uses the woodlands and the partially ruined form of St Peter’s Seminary as a new centre of learning that is fluid and adaptive in its structure and programme. Live research is currently being led by different arts & humanities disciplines including geography, history, social anthropology, environmental art, landscape architecture, architecture and philosophy.

**The Invisible College** is producing an inspiring programme of seminars, talks, research projects, debates and creative commissions all focussed around group activity days on the site. Operating as an informal learning system, it builds creative connections between diverse communities breaking away from traditional higher education models. Research is undertaken, discussed and will be published with individuals from the across the academic spectrum, from professorial academics to local primary school children.

**Site History**

The former 133 acre Kilmahew Estate, built in Victorian times, has miles of buried trails, unseen waterfalls and bridges that cross its two burns. Ancient yews and a medieval castle hint at a distant past. At the centre of all this is the Grade A-listed seminary, hidden deep within the beautiful woodlands.
St Peter’s Seminary was designed by Glasgow architects Andy MacMillan and Isi Metzstein of Gillespie, Kidd and Coia for the Archdiocese of Glasgow. It sits in a semi-ancient woodland between the villages of Cardross and Renton, below Carman Moor, looking out onto the Firth of Clyde. Opening in 1966, for 13 years, St Peter’s was home and place of learning for trainee priests before closing in 1979. After a brief spell of use as a drug rehabilitation centre, the buildings fell into a state of disrepair. It is now registered as one of the World Monument Fund’s most endangered cultural landmarks.

Over the past two decades a number of unsuccessful proposals have been put forward to bring the buildings back into private or commercial use, while vandalism and water ingress have continued to take their toll.

**Capital Development**

Key improvements to the site will include consolidation and partial restoration of the seminary buildings for safe public access. A process of repair, upgrade and intervention is applied systematically across all the built fabric. This will sustain the raw skeletal superstructure alongside a reinstatement of the interior chapel space.

The walled garden is to be brought back into use in line with its original function with the glasshouses cleaned out and the support of a new pavilion to accommodate office, work and seminar space. This will provide productive land for communal growing by local people and schools, also servicing the Invisible College and acting as a hub for creative commissions, around the theme of food production and site heritage.

Other capital works include re-instatement of the path network; provision of limited vehicle access & car parking and the gradual regeneration of the woodland leading eventually to bespoke accommodation and camping facilities and the further consolidation of Kilmahew castle.

The wider landscape will be free to access for day visitors, walkers, cyclists and other recreational users. All the buildings and resources on site are designed or brought back into use to facilitate educational, arts and heritage programmes throughout the year.