

# Holl's 'homage' to Mackintosh in Glasgow

## The technical socialisation of knowledge

### Poetics and ruthless pragmatics

*'a design strategy driven forward with a mixture of poetics and ruthless pragmatics'*

David Porter

*'Americans are identical to the British in all respects except, of course, language.'*

Oscar Wilde

'We aim for a building of complementary contrast' writes Steven Holl, currently finishing the Seona Reid Building for the Glasgow School of Art which was addressed by Johnny Rodger in *arq* 17/1 (pp. 24-36). Situated at the top of Renfrew Street, and directly opposite Mackintosh's masterpiece, the new building is envisioned by Holl with a thin translucent materiality, in considered contrast to the masonry of the Mackintosh building, using 'volumes of light which express the school's activity in the urban fabric'.

The American architect's £50 million addition to the School of Art campus in the Garnethill conservation area intends to be more than studios, café, administration and workspaces for students. He aims for the project's 'unique interior and exterior forces on the design' to be the 'catalysts for creating a new twenty-first century model for the art school'. The proposal is to replace the Newbery Tower and Foulis Building and bring together under one roof the disciplines of textiles, silversmithing and jewellery with product design engineering and visual communications to create a new School of Design. Five years in the planning, it is the first phase of the redevelopment of Glasgow School of Art's estate.

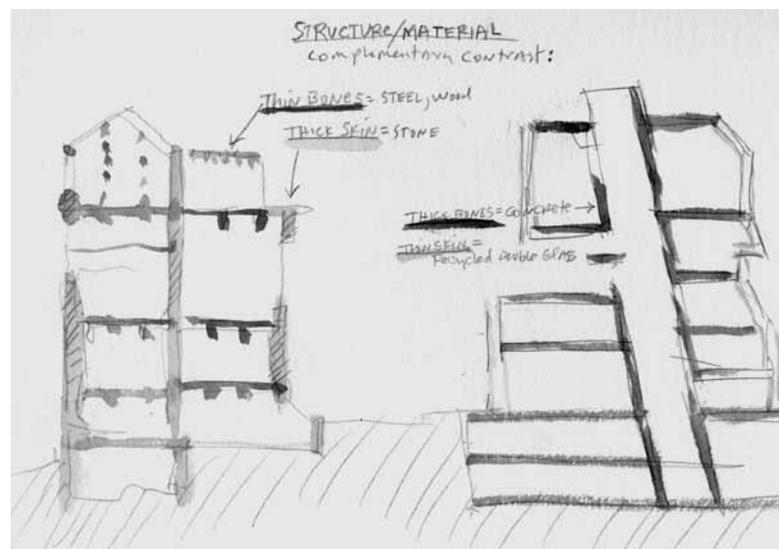
For Holl, the completed building is to be an 'homage to Mackintosh'

and a 'symbiotic relationship' with the School of Art is promised. In June of 2013, the building presents itself as a mass of concrete and reflective glass which dominates Garnethill and overwhelms the School of Art. Looking upwards from Sauchiehall Street, Holl's project is less formidable and less dominating but it is unequivocally out of scale with Mackintosh's masterwork. From street level, instead of the driven 'volumes of light' described by the architect as 'spatial modulation, bringing natural light into the heart of the new building' and a 'connectivity to the outside world', the cylinders of exposed concrete look like giant tubes which have crashed through the floor plates.

The idea of 'homage' may come as a surprise to those visiting the current works on site, some six months before students are due to move in. Although the specialist opal green non-reflective rainscreen glass panels being fixed

soften the east gable, when viewed from the adjoining streets, the building looks curiously over-scaled. Up close, the external rainscreen and the proposed finish become clearer and the quality of the detailing emerges as sophisticated and considered. But why use glass as rainscreen finishes at all, particularly when much of it fronts a heavy concrete exterior wall? Holl's approach to materials and form has been explained elsewhere as being half intuitive and half informed by context.

Of course, it is never wise to judge any work of architecture before its completion and, as Robert Venturi remarked, 'great architecture is never appreciated in its own time [...] The real question is, do the right people hate it?' When Holl first presented his proposals in his trademark watercolours they were criticised, with even his most ardent admirers admitting that it was hard to envisage how his structure could complement



1 Steven Holl, Glasgow School of Art, sketch conveying 'complementary contrast', 2010

Mackintosh's masterpiece, described by Holl himself as one of the United Kingdom's 'greatest works of art and architecture'. Although completed in 1909, the Mackintosh GSA has stood the test of time and is still very much a working building. The building is known throughout the world and admired by thousands of visitors each year. Yet, for Holl, his project includes a 'unique potential to transform the GSA's presence in the city to a twenty-first century, cutting edge art school'.

Holl clearly has a healthy ego but he is an internationally respected architect with great experience of building for education. His School of Art and Art History at the University of Iowa and the Higgins Hall insertion at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, New York, have been much praised and he seems to have many other educational and campus works in production. Holl is an artist and all his projects start with his distinctive hand-painted watercolours. The architect usually describes his ideas in the language of poetics, which can be bewildering to simple souls. Most proposed interiors eventually seem to come together in computer-generated images of blinding white light and many of these images look indistinguishable.

A great number of Holl's commissions are buildings which stand in an open landscape, not required to address issues of city, urban scale or form, and his attitude to materials can often seem more theatrical than contextual. The use of iridescent glass – and strong sculptural forms both inside and out – are themes which run through much of his work. That said, he has built alongside other important historic buildings with real success. When Visiting Chair of Architecture at Kansas State University, I was a frequent visitor to the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City where, in 2007, Holl completed the Bloch Wing, an extension which 'boldly transformed the campus and marked a new era of distinction' for one of the nation's premier art museums. Aspirations similar to those set out by Holl for Garnethill and the Seona Reid Building.

As with the competition for the building in Glasgow, Holl impressed trustees to win the Kansas City project. Marc Wilson, Director of the Nelson Atkins Museum, commented: 'Steven was the only one who had a real idea'. The Bloch Wing comprises five free-standing iridescent glass structures



2 Holl, Glasgow School of Art, view from Renfrew Street, 2011

that emerge from the ground within a new sculpture park setting. Connections to each of the galleries are made below a covered landscape with much of the building underground. At night, its luminescent skin of transparent glass panels lights up the park. The entrance is a huge volume of immaculate, uncluttered white space and is much like the blinding computer-generated images presented in other projects by the architect. The Bloch extension is beautifully detailed and expertly constructed giving the galleries a pared-down and restrained quality with high levels of ambient light.

Members of the Glasgow competition jury visited the Bloch Wing in Kansas City and were impressed by the new gallery and the architect's response to building alongside an important and established museum. The original Nelson-Atkins was built in 1933 by Kansas City architects Wight and Wight and the Neoclassical limestone building is home to an extensive collection of Asian art and American and European painting. It occupies a prominent position in the grounds of Oak Hall, once the home of eminent publisher William Rockhill Nelson. The Bloch addition by Holl is clever. The architect has not been intimidated by adding a wing of contemporary galleries and the project has been sensitively done. Holl's new addition complements rather than dominates and he has given Kansas City a quality work of architecture.

With the Seona Reid Building, Holl's approach seems similar. Unintimidated by the commission,

his design is subservient to Mackintosh's. The Nelson-Atkins, however, is not the Glasgow School of Art, which is widely considered to have been a precursor to the Modern Movement in Europe, and the concept of a 'thin translucent materiality in considered contrast to the masonry of the Mackintosh building' seems a too obvious replication of his approach to the Kansas City museum. Mackintosh's School of Art is Glasgow's, and arguably Scotland's, most important twentieth-century building, designed by an architect who many believe to be the country's greatest. Faced with designing alongside a building of real historical and international significance, the architect's response feels less restrained. In Victorian Glasgow, at the summit of Garnethill, Holl's proposal lacks sensitivity and any particular sense of place.

Holl's idea of 'complementary contrast' is curious. What does it mean? He says that 'you don't want to do the same thing, if you want to respect someone; you do the opposite. You do something in contrast'. In this respect, Holl has succeeded. Mackintosh's elegantly proportioned building details his development as a unique and talented architect over a twelve-year period. Holl's glass box seems too big for its site. It is uniform in its elevational treatment and repetitive in its detail. Mackintosh's art school, while functional and robust – and clearly driven by the needs of students and influenced by the Arts and Crafts Movement and the architecture of Japan – is firmly rooted in Glasgow and identifiably

true to the materials of its construction. Reyner Banham wrote that the ordinary materials of masonry, brick and wood in Mackintosh's GSA were not new but were used in a contemporary way that was unmistakably modern. The Seona Reid Building is a concrete frame, masked by a highly sophisticated and bespoke glass curtain-wall system, but its overall shape is bulky, apparently a continuation of themes that characterise Holl's fascination with transparency, iridescence and sculptural form. Mackintosh's building can be read. The lintels, arches, north lights and king post trusses are exposed, the construction innovative and clearly expressed. In contrast, much of the promised delights of Holl's building lie under the skin

Holl has projects all over the world and consequently seems to rely on developing solid relationships with executive architects in each country. In Kansas City, BNIM and partner Greg Sheldon took on the responsibility for the day-to-day running of the Bloch Wing and deserve much credit for its success. In Glasgow, JM Architects are working with Holl and Henry McKeown is the partner in charge. Both Sheldon and McKeown speak very highly of their relationship with Holl and of his talent and commitment. Holl was 'open to their ideas, self effacing and easy to get along with'. McKeown, a talented architect in his own right and a distinguished alumnus of the Mackintosh School of Architecture is a passionate advocate of the Seona Reid Building and speaks with enthusiasm about the project. He is clearly committed to making it a success.

Perhaps then, it is in the interiors and in the aim to maximise levels of natural light that any real 'homage to Mackintosh' can be uncovered. It was apparently the abundance and sophisticated control of natural light in the Bloch Wing and the rational, robust structure of his work at the Pratt Institute that the Glasgow competition jury found compelling. Holl has said that this project will be about light and structure, derived from the way that light comes into the building, and he is not fazed by the challenge of a horizontal sun during a Scottish winter, with its contrasting light conditions. 'I grew up in Seattle' he says 'and that is Scottish light. It is the same.' Although, having spent much time in Seattle and even more in Glasgow, I think he is mistaken.

Mackintosh's Renfrew Street elevation is dominated by large north-facing windows which flood the studios, bringing an even source of ambient light. The studios to the north of the Seona Reid Building are also designed to maximise high levels of north light and, like the Mackintosh building, are generously proportioned with large volumes. Many are on two levels. The shuttered concrete in the studios and throughout the building is left exposed and painted white and is expected to be sufficiently robust to withstand any student onslaught. The staircases and driven volumes are carefully constructed and expertly made. Whether they will bring light into the heart of the new building is yet to be seen but for the moment they remain strong sculptural elements which extend throughout the building and visually connect all floors in the central void.

The central space looks promising and is potentially a dynamic and inspirational place, appropriate for a school of art. Views from one floor to another are surprising as the floors open up in unexpected ways as you walk from one level to another. The student refectory is on two levels with views across a garden space and to the north elevation of the Mackintosh building. From the top studios there are uninterrupted views to the north of the city and carefully composed views south over Glasgow and the River Clyde.

It is the relationship with the Mackintosh building and Holl's stated desire to create an 'homage' that appears, at present, to be compromised. There is no doubt that this is a strong work of architecture; considered and skilfully constructed and it may turn out to be a great work. The interiors are innovative, well planned and there is the promise of an uncompromising beauty in the brutality of its exterior. If Holl had treated his response as a companion rather than an homage, his building would have been better served. But then of course he may not have been commissioned, for the telling of the story is as important in architecture as it is in all other aspects of life.

ALAN DUNLOP  
Glasgow

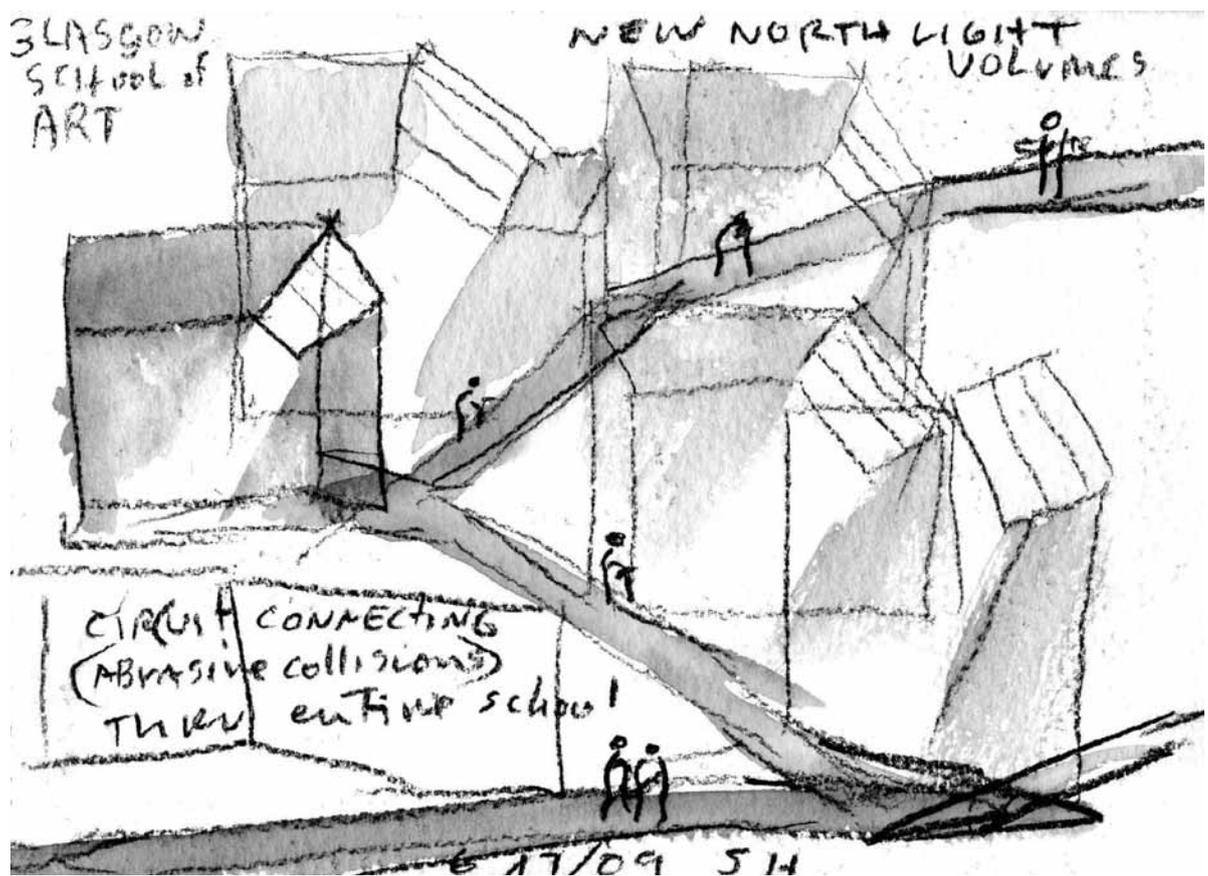
*Alan Dunlop leads Alan Dunlop Architect Ltd and is Visiting Professor at the Scott Sutherland School of Architecture, Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen*

### Three Places, Two Buildings, One Street

Johnny Rodger's erudite and, in many ways, celebratory paper in **arq** 17/1 (pp. 24-36) explores the ideas that have informed Mackintosh's Glasgow School of Art and Steven Holl's new building on the Glasgow School of Art campus. It unlocks critical and imaginative relationships between the two architects' intentions. It is a welcome critique, due in no small way to the use of scholarship in the difficult task of fathoming a piece of contemporary architecture still in its incomplete state. In it, he also chairs a widely published debate between Professors William Curtis and David Porter which had taken place well before a spade was lifted.

Most commentaries so far have concentrated on the new building's exterior and its relationship to the form and character of the Mackintosh Building facing it across Renfrew Street. One exception is a group of essays published earlier this summer by the Mackintosh School of Architecture.<sup>1</sup> Given that a key challenge of the design competition which led to the project was to figure out how to design opposite such an internationally significant building, this is perhaps inevitable. But has this emphasis on criticising the external appearance not been the easier route to take than, say, to imagining its internal atmospheres and qualities?

It is too easy to criticise new architecture. I do it all the time. We architects have been educated in criticism, and have gone through the school of hard knocks, and we are often defensive and trigger happy in equal measures. When it is perceptive and creates new knowledge, critique is a high art. How many of us read Philip French's *Observer* film reviews as much to learn about the art of cinema generally as to read a review of a particular film? However, in our clever-ready scorn, we sometimes forget how difficult it is to deliver a building of any quality, never mind one informed by ideas. The practitioner must ask themselves with frank honesty in their quieter moments, 'Given the chance, what would I have done opposite the Glasgow School of Art?' The historian or writer is of course free from this burden, never having to answer such questions by working in three dimensions themselves. Theirs is the privileged position of drawing on the past to cast judgement on the present and this is both an advantage and a disadvantage. The rest of us simply



3 Holl, Glasgow School of Art, interior image of the 'circuit of social connection', 2010

try to make our next building better than the previous one.

It has been illuminating to observe the new building's impact on the Garnethill drumlin since it reached its full height earlier this year. The views from Sauchiehall Street up Dalhousie Street and Scott Street are still dominated by the Mackintosh Building. Standing on Sauchiehall Street, looking up Scott Street, there is a memorable and unique juxtaposition of Thomson, Mackintosh and now Holl hovering above Honeyman and Keppie, all seemingly content in each other's company. Looking westwards up Renfrew Street, the new building's cantilevered top storey appears to float miraculously just above the cornice line of the Victorian stone terraces further down the same hill. This endears the new building significantly and emphasises the (lower) eaves line of the Mackintosh Building. Close up, the Reid Building (to give it its proper title, named after the outgoing director, Seona Reid) establishes itself convincingly as a piece of street architecture and creates what promises to be a significantly charged urban space between itself and the Mackintosh Building. This is arguably the Glasgow School of Art's most significant gift to the city of Glasgow.

As I have written before,<sup>2</sup> there is not much more to say about the Glasgow School of Art that hasn't already been said, and yet many of us have experienced a heightened sense of its qualities since Holl's design began to take shape. It is as if this new exotic neighbour is reminding us not to take for granted this precious yet familiar part of our everyday lives. Typologically, the Mackintosh Building can be interpreted as a terraced house sandwiched between two factories. Mackintosh's genius lies partly in his compositional prowess and ability to synthesise the diverse interior spaces inside into a sublimely composed north-facing exterior. Its enigmatic domestic character was already in evidence when the (now demolished) Newbery Tower and Foulis Building stood opposite. That same character is even more palpable since Holl's more institutional-looking edifice has begun to take shape. And yet, the height and topographic modelling of the exterior with large-scale solids and voids do not in any way seem at odds with the surroundings. While we must still wait a little while longer before we can experience the entirety of the new building in its svelte glass overcoat, it seems to me now that

the most profound relationship in the new campus is not between the two exteriors, but between the two interior worlds and the unbuilt space between them.

Gazing out over the building site over the last year from the Mackintosh School of Architecture's Bourdon Building home, and enjoying regular visits to the site at various stages courtesy of the main contractor, Sir Robert McAlpine, my thoughts have become increasingly focused on the relationships between the interiors, rather than the exteriors. At the time of writing, the external glass facade panels are being secured in place, second fix electrics and internal decoration are well under way, chunky maple door frames are in evidence as are witty stainless-steel handrail brackets. For some time now (and certainly since the topping out ceremony on 7 May), there has been a heightened sense of anticipation among staff and students as more and more of the interior has been able to be experienced during our monthly visits. Despite (or perhaps because of) its unfinished, primitive, *rohbau* state, its form and presence has already worked its way into students' consciousness, if their studio designs are anything to go by.

The interior world that Mackintosh created in the Glasgow School of Art building is a calm and tranquil one; a world where, despite extensive circulation routes threading through the building, the visitor is encouraged to linger and pause, not constantly keep on the move. The small palette of materials and colours employed has much to contribute to this feeling. Rooms that face north are often white (the original secretary's room being an exception), while south-facing spaces tend to be dark. The east-facing boardroom is also white while the west-facing library is dark. These may have been practical responses to differing lighting conditions for the artists, but are also subtle reminders of where we are within the building. The navigation between these contrasting characters provides a phenomenological way-finding mechanism for the user or visitor internally, but also connects them to the sun's path and the passage of time externally.

In contrast, within the Reid Building, there is a sense of perambulation, meandering, almost *Ruhelos*. Rising through each floor is a kind of geological experience. Great strata of white-painted concrete studios are lit from dramatic glazed fissures, slots, cleavages and sometimes it seems, entire walls of glass. The rise upwards reveals increasingly larger volumes culminating in a dramatic industrial-scale three-storey studio space. On every level, the quality of light is evenly balanced and comfortable (on my most recent visit in September it was a typically wet and overcast Glasgow afternoon), giving the impression that the entire structure has been split randomly apart to reveal its interior to the sky in a variety of ways. If Mackintosh's interior can sometimes feel like a series of wooden cabinets – giant pieces of furniture inserted into a stony casket – walking through the Reid Building feels like being on the decks of some monumental concrete ocean liner whose spatial order has been fashioned by a different set of requirements than just an academic institution's needs.

Juxtaposed with the studio spaces are the deconstructed forms of Holl's *Canons de Lumière*, or Driven Voids as he has named them. It is difficult to grasp their scale from plans. At around five metres in diameter, they are more than ample to hold a decent dinner party in yet, from the drawings, appear as inconvenient

interruptions in an otherwise straightforward plan. But plans do not reveal all the qualities of a building as anyone who has visited Le Corbusier's La Tourette will have discovered. And so it is with this building. It will require the internal scaffolding to be finally removed before we can truly appreciate how light enters and is manipulated by these devices but, at present, they provide an astonishing modulating presence in the interior. In their nibbled, sliced, gauged, cut-away and generally deconstructed form, they contribute considerably to the spatial drama unfolding throughout.

That interior drama has informed the particular treatment of the exterior. Holl describes the exterior as:

*[...] like the idea of a caesura. Like in music, if you have a symphony, you need a pause, the caesura. The caesura is this building. [...] The outside is the silence that needs to complement this building (Mackintosh) to make a great street space. So the silence is on the outside and our interior is our symphony.*<sup>3</sup>

His partner Chris McVoy expands this: 'There is something about when you go in, you don't know what to expect when you go in, you can't anticipate what you are going to see. It becomes this discovery [...]'<sup>4</sup>

Johnny Rodger rightly attributes the Reid Building with an ambition to enter into dialogue with its physical and cultural surroundings in different ways. It does this through implicit and explicit visual connections to views (near and far), through the manipulation of light and circulation, through the articulation of massing, structure, materials and detail and finally through mystery. It has its own identity. There are few recent public buildings in Scotland of international quality that could be described as symphonic;<sup>5</sup> buildings which are eloquently fashioned and communicate ideas and values beyond the activities that are contained within. Enric Miralles's Scottish Parliament is one. Benson & Forsyth's Museum of Scotland is another. The Reid Building may, in time, prove to be the third addition to this list.

CHRISTOPHER PLATT  
Glasgow

*Christopher Platt is co-founding director of architectural practice studioKAP and Head of the Mackintosh School of Architecture, The Glasgow School of Art*

## References

1. C. Platt and B. Carter, *Uneasy Balance* (Glasgow: MSA Publications, 2013).
2. R. Kemsley and C. Platt, *Dwelling with Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2012), pp. 21–28.
3. Platt and Carter, *Uneasy Balance*, p. 77.
4. Ibid.
5. Defined in the *Penguin English Dictionary*, 2002, as 'something of great harmonious complexity'.

## Illustration credits

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Letters for publication should be sent to:

Adam Sharr  
adam.sharr@newcastle.ac.uk

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