Rebuilding the Mackintosh Library collections

Following the loss of Glasgow School of Art’s Mackintosh Library in the May 2014 fire, RIAS Council generously approved the donation of historical back runs of a dozen architectural magazines which had been in storage in Rutland Square, enabling GSA to take a significant step forward towards rebuilding its lost collections.

In addition to destroying several thousand books, the fire also consumed the School’s holdings of pre-1985 international art, design and architecture magazines, a fine collection which included important Art Nouveau titles, magazines from around Europe such as Domus and Casabella which charted the rise of Modernism and its successor movements, and long runs of ‘Establishment’ titles such as the AJ and AR.

These magazines were a vital resource for students looking for precedent studies for their designs, and for other researchers seeking contemporary reactions to buildings immediately after their construction. Most buildings, even relatively well-known ones, never feature in books, and magazines remain the sole authoritative source of information. Today, these publications appeal to an even wider audience, such as students of fashion and graphics who want to explore at first-hand the look and feel of a particular decade through advertisements, illustrations, distinctive typefaces and striking cover designs. Due to the complexities of copyright law relating to the ownership of text and images, surprisingly few of these magazines are available digitally, and the print copies remain difficult for students to track down.

The magazines donated to GSA by the RIAS have now been catalogued by library staff, and they represent an interesting cross-section of academic and trade publications. Titles include Manchester-based The British Architect, which started up in 1874 and was absorbed by The Builder in 1919. It is an interesting magazine because of the way it targeted an increasingly dispersed architectural profession by emphasising industry news from Scotland and Northern England, and for its willingness to bypass the influence of London-based bodies such as the RIBA, Institution of Civil Engineers, and Royal Academy. Anticipating the position of many of today’s glossy design magazines, The British Architect also sought to engage with the burgeoning middle classes with features on domestic interiors and furnishings.

Also of interest in the collection is a run of The Illustrated Carpenter and Builder, a rare publication providing a fascinating insight into how the various building trades operated during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Also thanks to the RIAS, GSA now holds the best run in Scotland of the short-lived Modern Building Record, snuffed out in infancy by the outbreak of World War 1 and with bookplates connecting them to the office of Sir Robert Rowand Anderson. The donation also includes a large chunk of The Builder with its fine lithographic illustrations, produced by draughtsmen whose artistic talents were heavily relied upon by large architectural practices towards the end of the nineteenth century.

Intriguingly, the collection also includes titles from the US, where different cultural and publishing practices encouraged greater emphasis on advertising and marketing in architectural magazines. There is a decade’s worth of Architectural Forum, a key promoter of Modernism which had an influence out of all proportion to its modest circulation. There is also one year’s worth of the little-known but beautifully produced Building Budget, published in Chicago with its curious mix of lithographs and photographs, some of which illustrate the emerging skyscraper form. No other library in Scotland has copies.

These magazines are a fascinating reflection of their time and demonstrate how their constant search for new ideas and technologies helped to stimulate architectural change and development. More so than books, architectural periodicals are the home of criticism and this, combined with an often practical focus on current industry activity meant that architects and supporting tradesmen would have eagerly digested their contents.

Finally, what of the future rebuilding of the art, design and architectural collections at Glasgow School of Art? It is not necessarily appropriate to replace everything that was lost. We are, however, continuing to seek donations of pre-1985 magazines in order to establish a core collection of titles with runs as complete as possible. We also maintain a regularly-updated ‘wants list’ of key historical books, and this can be viewed online at <https://gsalibrarytreasures.wordpress.com/help-us-rebuild-our-collections-after-fire>. We would be delighted to hear from anyone willing to trawl their lofts or bookshelves and to contribute to the restocking of a rebuilt Mackintosh Library. In the meantime, we are deeply grateful to the RIAS for their donation, and to those members who have already given material to us; your generosity is much appreciated.

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