

Barcelona - VI 2011

Peter Trowles

The Glasgow School of Art
167 Renfrew Street
Glasgow G3 6RQ, Scotland
p.trowles@gsa.ac.uk

TOURIST ATTRACTION, MUSEUM AND CULTURAL ASSET, OR EDUCATIONAL FACILITY?

Changing attitudes to working practices at The Glasgow School of Art.

In the days immediately before and after the recent royal wedding in London, Westminster Abbey experienced a dramatic increase in visitor numbers. Not that the Abbey's management are unfamiliar with accommodating such large numbers of people; in fact, the building regularly receives well over one million tourists per year. But how would the original architects of the building have reacted had they known that after so many centuries of continuous use as a place of worship, the Abbey's original role was now being superseded by a growing army of tourists eager to enter its hallowed walls only to move on the next 'must do' cultural attraction?



1. Westminster Abbey, London.
(photo: © The Dean and Chapter of Westminster).

Meanwhile, how many of today's visitors have any idea that Westminster Abbey still hosts daily church services for a small but dedicated congregation who see the building first and foremost as their local church? And of the two seemingly diverse functions of the building, as a tourist attraction and as a house of God, is one morally or ethically better than the other?

Many years ago now, and long before my involvement with the Réseau Art Nouveau Network, I made my first ever visit to the Horta Museum in Brussels. Armed with my guidebook I entered the museum only to be passed by a woman on her way out of the building; a woman that I just sensed was not your typical museum visitor. It was only on a subsequent visit to Horta's former home and studio that I discovered from Françoise Aubry the museum's curator that the woman I had passed on that very first visit was probably Madame Legat who actually lived in the building, in a private apartment on an upper floor. Somewhat bizarrely then, as I was entering the museum that day to get my 'cultural fix' she was probably on her way out to do something as mundane as shopping for bread and milk!

Looking back on it now, we both had every justification for wanting to enjoy Horta's finest building but how many other visiting tourists ever got to meet this woman, or even knew that the building was being lived in? And even if they did know, would their attitude to the building's multi-functional use have changed in anyway? And as the building's only tenant, did Madame Legat ever feel compromised by the fact that her home was also part of a well-loved public museum?

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Now here in Barcelona there exists a similar situation, only this time it is here in this very building - *La Pedrera*. Tucked away below the rooms and displays given over to the tens of thousands of tourists who descend upon this, Gaudi's most celebrated building, Señora Sastre and a number of other residents, continue to live in the family apartments that have been their homes for many years.



2. Carmen Burgos, La Pedrera, Barcelona. (photo: © Michael Thomas Jones)

Importantly, *La Pedrera* still operates in part as Gaudi intended it, as a residential block, but perhaps today it is all too easy to view the building simply as one of Barcelona's most celebrated tourist attractions? But at least Señora Sastre can step into her apartment, close the front door and leave the often frantic world of urban, cultural tourism behind her. After all, her apartment and those of her neighbours are clearly private, secluded spaces, around which an altogether different, more public and sometimes more manic world seemingly co-exist.

A similar co-existence can be found at Charles Rennie Mackintosh's iconic Glasgow School of Art. Here the students and staff find themselves working in a once relatively private building that is increasingly public in outlook and is having to adapt to the demands of a growing appetite for 'all things Mackintosh'. But of course, being an art student at the Glasgow School of Art is very much like being an art student anywhere in the

world. The students are there to pursue their studies as practicing artists and designers and for them it is all about their own work, developing their own ideas and above all being creative. Not surprisingly perhaps, very few students use the Mackintosh Building as a direct influence on their own work. They see Mackintosh's art school as *their* place of work and not in general as many others see it as a place of cultural pilgrimage. That is not to say that by literally ignoring the building's architectural merits today's students are being disrespectful to Mackintosh; far from it, they just have other, sometimes very different priorities.

To counter this, the Glasgow School of Art constantly reminds its students (and staff) that their actions in going about their daily business *can* impact on the physical condition of the building itself. It is after all an educational building in constant use and apart from a few days over Christmas and the New Year it rarely closes. However, as an increasingly public building (it welcomes over 25,000 visitors a year on guided tours), the actions of the school as a place of study are also under the spotlight.

Wear and tear is inevitable and so is occasional accidental damage but with just a little extra care and attention the need for constant repair to the building's overall fabric *can* be reduced. And by reducing the amount it has to earmark for maintenance and conservation it will inevitably have more money left over to spend on other important things like teaching - so it is not a difficult concept to grasp.

Interestingly, the School has learnt in the past that simply producing a list of *Do's* and *Don'ts* can sometimes fail to achieve what it set out to do. Students being students will often end up doing the complete opposite to what you would expect them to do - so it is really important

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to engage with them and to involve them in any decisions that may impact on their time spent studying.



3. Guided tour, The Glasgow School of Art. (photo: © Peter Trowles)

Between 2006 and 2009 the Glasgow School of Art undertook a major conservation and access project within its Mackintosh Building, funded in part by the UK Lottery Fund. This returned much of the building back to its former glory, emphasising the importance of original late 19th century Mackintosh design, whilst allowing the building to fully function as an art school in the early years of the 21st century. As the building remained open throughout the project, it was a period of upheaval for both students and staff but thankfully this disruption was kept to the

very minimum. Now post project, the School is keen to ensure that current and future staff and students recognise the good work that has been done to conserve the building (and its historic collections and archives) and that this work is not ignored.

After some lengthy discussions the School decided against producing a written policy outlining how it expected its students (and to a lesser extent its staff) to respond to the newly conserved building. Instead, it was more about putting across the need for level of respect for the building and its historic contents and rather than compiling a set of 'dry' rules and regulations, the School commissioned two short animated 'information films'. The first film addressed the Mackintosh Building itself – the original fixtures and fittings and how these could be better protected on a day-to-day basis by means of simple actions coupled with a lot of common sense. The second of the two films showcased a newly opened Archives and Collections Centre and the wealth of historic material available to students as a source of inspiration for their own work. Here it was felt that by encouraging the students to examine the School's history and the famous alumni who had used the building themselves, this would ensure greater respect for the School's heritage.

Early signs are that this is indeed the case and that there is a growing recognition that studying at the Glasgow School of Art is a rare privilege and future generations of students (and staff) should be given the same opportunity. Charles Rennie Mackintosh would surely approve!

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Images

Figure 1. Westminster Abbey, London. (photo: © The Dean and Chapter of Westminster).

Figure 2. Carmen Burgos, La Pedrera, Barcelona. (photo: © Michael Thomas Jones)

Figure 3. Guided tour, The Glasgow School of Art. (photo: © Peter Trowles)