

The Glasgow School of Art: a living heritage

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Mackintosh Collection, The Glasgow School of Art

In many ways the Glasgow School of Art is very lucky. Not only has it educated a talented array of architects, designer and artists for well over 150 years but its chief campus building, and the architect who designed it – an alumnus of the school – has an international reputation that is second to none.

According to the American architect Robert Venturi, the north facade of the Charles Rennie Mackintosh-designed Glasgow School of Art ‘is one of the greatest achievements of all times’ (Jones 1990, p. 88). Sir Terence Conran has stated that the School is ‘a robust, functional building imbued with artistry and richness: a working environment that expresses the spirit of creativity’ (1996, p. 206), and Professor Christopher Frayling, Rector of the Royal College of Art has remarked that ‘the Glasgow School of Art is the only art school in the world where the building is worthy of the subject’ (*Guardian* 21 January 2002, p. 11).



Fig. 1. North facade of the Mackintosh Building, The Glasgow School of Art. Photo: © Glasgow Picture Library

Fine words indeed, but as the Glasgow School of Art enters the 21st century it is faced with perhaps its most onerous task ever. It has to balance the needs of its staff and students who continue to use the Mackintosh Building for the purpose for which it was always intended, i.e. teaching, with those of the wider international community who see the building and the collections housed within it as first and foremost a museum of world heritage status.

For those staff now involved with the day-to-day management of the Mackintosh Building, the boundaries between functioning art school and publicly accessible heritage attraction have become increasingly blurred. Certainly, this was not always the case, and to an extent the school has partly become the victim of its own artistic and cultural success.

In 1896, when the original competition to design the current building (to replace the school's earlier, inadequate premises) was put forward, it was a young and relatively unknown junior architect called Mackintosh who was charged with designing and overseeing the construction of a new purpose-built art school able to meet the demands of the impending 20th century (Buchanan 2004, pp. 5–49).

Remarkably, the actual construction of the school, built in two distinct phases, 1897–99 and 1907–09, passed by almost unannounced, and it was not until 1924 that the Mackintosh Building was first mentioned and illustrated in an architectural monograph (Marriott 1924, p. 120). For the next 50 years the success of the school as a teaching institution saw full-time student numbers increase considerably and the campus extend to include further buildings. However, throughout this time the Mackintosh Building remained at the very heart of the school, continuing to provide studio and workshop accommodation for both the first-year and fine art programs, together with an increasing number of administrative offices.

Only in the early 1980s did the subject of Charles Rennie Mackintosh begin to have an impact on the physical running of the school. Slowly, academic interest in the architect's life and work began to grow. An increasing number of international exhibitions and related books and catalogues brought about an increased awareness of the Mackintosh Building itself.

Visitors wishing to experience the Mackintosh Building first hand were still relatively few and almost exclusively academics and college or university students (chiefly from other art or design institutions). However, casual visitors were also welcomed, and often the duty janitor would act as informal tour guide.

By the mid-1980s the City of Glasgow had woken up to the notion of cultural tourism as a means of urban regeneration and suddenly the arts were at the top of the agenda. Throughout the 1980s demand for public access to the Mackintosh Building grew and the school eventually set about establishing a recognised and well-publicised program of student-led guided tours. These public tours lasted about one hour and allowed the visitor access into the heart of the building. Here they saw a few of the prime Mackintosh-designed rooms, including a newly introduced furniture gallery, while minimising the disturbance to students and staff still working in the building.

However, numerous requests from the public for access to the light and spacious painting studios were denied, as the school felt this would be too invasive. Even today the school remains committed to keeping these teaching spaces 'tourist free'.



Fig. 2. First-floor painting studio, Mackintosh Building. Photo: © Glasgow School of Art

In 1990 Glasgow secured the prestigious title of European City of Culture and experienced a phenomenal rise in visitor numbers and the introduction of dozens of new hotels, bars and restaurants. Six years later, in 1996, the largest Mackintosh exhibition to date saw numbers in excess of 200,000 attend the show in Glasgow's McLellan Galleries, a venue literally next door to the art school. Not surprisingly, this one-off event brought record numbers of visitors to the Mackintosh Building and by the end of that year over 15,000 visitors had been accommodated on guided tours. There was also a significant rise in visitor numbers to the school's temporary exhibition program.

Post 1996, visitor numbers to the Mackintosh Building have continued to rise steadily, helped by an enthusiastic local tourist board which has positioned the so-called 'Mackintosh effect' as one of their key marketing tools. Such has been their success that over the last few years the school has at times found itself struggling to meet the demand. Now, tours of the Mackintosh Building run six or

even seven days a week, 51 weeks a year, and visitor numbers for 2003/04, on guided tours alone, were in the region of 22,000.

Since 1985, the guided tour program and a small visitor shop have been managed by a separate trading company, GSA Enterprises Ltd, which, not surprisingly, generates a considerable amount of revenue then directed back into the school by a deed of covenant arrangement. However, both the school and its enterprise company continue to be hindered by the availability of space within the Mackintosh Building.

In recent years there has been a substantial growth in demand for continuing-education classes. In addition to its complement of full-time staff and students, the school now delivers an extensive program of adult evening classes, Saturday morning classes for children, and summer and Easter vacation packages. While not all of these programs take place within the Mackintosh Building, those that do only increase the pressure on its physical resources.

Of equal concern is the fact that the school has only very limited space currently available for the storage and display of its impressive museum collection and archive. At present, the collection consists of over 3000 items in a variety of media, the majority of which are by former students and staff of the school from the 1880s to the present day. Of these items, almost 300 are examples of Mackintosh's own work – drawings, watercolours and furniture that are of truly international importance. The school's institutional archive dating back to its origins in the 1840s continues to grow and has become an important resource for both teaching and research. However, as with the collection, limited space continues to hinder use and accessibility. A new Mackintosh Research Centre for Collections and Archives was set up within the building in 2001 but has already outgrown the space available.



Fig. 3. Ground floor studio, Mackintosh Building during the 2003 Degree Show. Photo: © Glasgow School of Art

A temporary exhibition gallery within the Mackintosh Building and three other small exhibition spaces elsewhere on campus comprises current museum and gallery provision for the school as a whole. However, in June the school's annual degree show dominates the entire campus and just about every available space is commandeered for displaying students' work. In that one week alone, well over 6000 people usually visit the exhibition, with almost half that number attending on the opening night!

For the moment these facilities are just about adequate, but as the school predicts a year-on-year increase in visitor numbers of anywhere between 5 and 10%, together with a growing interest in the school's collections and archives as an area of rich, research potential, something has to be done.

There is certainly recognition that the functioning of the Mackintosh Building as a teaching resource remains paramount. It is felt that the day the students and staff of the school are forced out, to be replaced entirely by tourists, may be the day the character of the building dies (Trowles 1998).

So can the Glasgow School of Art continue to manage the Mackintosh Building as a multi-functional space? It certainly believes it can, but with current educational funding at a premium this can only really be achieved with a substantial investment from external sources. To this effect the school has

recently submitted a major application for UK Heritage Lottery Funds for a project totalling some £6.5m.

In its application the school recognises its responsibilities for the custodianship of the Mackintosh Building and its varied collections and archives. Indeed, over the last decade significant investment has been put into the external fabric of the building with the support of Historic Scotland (the government agency responsible for Scotland's built heritage) and the Getty Grant Program. A substantial grant from the US-based Royal Oak Foundation was also spent on the conservation of many of Mackintosh's original drawings and watercolours. A number of these were eventually loaned to the McLellan Galleries exhibition in Glasgow in 1996 and its subsequent tour to New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles (Kaplan 1996, pp. 351–69).

Ten years on, the internal historic fabric of the building needs to be addressed with the same degree of thoroughness as the external shell. Clearly, if no action is taken over the next few years, the interior of this important building will be increasingly at risk of accelerated deterioration through daily wear and tear. Even more worrying is the potential disaster posed by serious damage from fire or flood as service installations continue to age beyond their economic life. If action is not taken the building itself will not only be put in severe jeopardy but the school's international credibility and reputation may ultimately suffer.

A key element of the school's Heritage Lottery proposal is therefore to focus on the repair and conservation of the historic interiors of the building, such as the Library – and where possible the reinstatement of original features and functions.



Fig. 4. Library, Mackintosh Building. Completed in 1909, and still in use today as a reference library. Photo: © Glasgow School of Art

The project proposes the removal of many later physical additions (including various walls and doorways and a number of mezzanine landings) and the restoration of original elements within the building – such as the reinstatement of folding screens between some first-floor studios. These improvements will not only benefit the architectural quality of the building itself but will more closely reflect Mackintosh's original intentions. Similarly, the proposal calls for the relocation or removal of a number of surface-mounted service installations (electric heaters, telephones, signage etc), which have had a significantly detrimental 'visual' impact on Mackintosh's original scheme.

The provision of new administrative accommodation within the school's broader Estates Strategy allows for the relocation of a number of offices (notably central

management and student services) out of the Mackintosh Building altogether. In doing this, access to two key Mackintosh apartments will be given over to the visitor for the first time (the Director's Room and the Board Room).

Re-routing the existing guided tour will also see the Basement Corridor being included for the first time, giving visitors access to all but a smaller sub-basement area that houses mainly technical workshops. There is also potential to access a number of other original apartments, including the former Luncheon Rooms (now home to the Registry) and a lecture theatre. It is hoped that the room currently occupied by the finance department will be restored and reinstated to its original purpose as a wonderful, north-facing painting studio. In addition, the school also intends to restore the original, forced-air heating and ventilation system (Cairns 1995, pp. 5–10). While there is now some question as to whether the Glasgow School of Art can be considered the very first building to have such technology fully integrated into its design, the original heating and ventilation system is an important and fascinating early example of air-conditioning.

Additionally, the school's Heritage Lottery application recognises it can help to reduce wear and tear on the Mackintosh Building by more effectively managing the flow of visitors through the historic interiors. A unique aspect of the visitor's experience on viewing the school is not only the appreciation of the quality and detail of the physical spaces but also witnessing the building in use as an art school – the very purpose for which it was designed and for which it is supremely effective. However, as the primary purpose of Glasgow School of Art is the provision of education, there remains an ongoing conflict between its functions. There are occasions when visitors intrude on the normal life of the educational establishment, while there are similarly many occasions when the educational purpose of the building inevitably limits the quality of the visitor experience.

By providing new reception facilities (in a proposed new build directly across from the main facade of the Mackintosh Building) the school would be able to offer an enhanced experience for visitors. For the first time, interpretive material (text and image, models, film and computer-based information) could be used to increase visitors' knowledge and understanding of Mackintosh and the very workings of the art school. There are also plans to increase the display of works by students and famous alumni, thereby raising the profile of the institution still further.

Currently, visitors gather in the main Entrance Hall prior to the tour starting and for logistical reasons each tour consists of no more than twenty people. At peak times there can be two or more tours starting out within minutes of each and this can cause significant congestion within the hallway (and elsewhere), obstructing staff and students. The circulating visitors stand at various key locations in the building and, on occasion, intrude upon the educational purposes of the school. By contrast, areas of interest such as the Director's Room and the Board Room are not currently available for viewing due to educational use. Other significant spaces, such as the Mackintosh Room (a former boardroom now filled with

original pieces of Mackintosh furniture), are also sometimes unavailable due to official school business.

An integral part of the Heritage Lottery proposal is revising and re-routing the tour through the Mackintosh Building, to take advantage of extra spaces open to the public for the very first time. These changes would ensure a smoother flow of visitors through the building and end in the Basement Corridor where new environmentally controlled galleries would be installed.



Fig. 5. A student-led guided tour of the Mackintosh Building. Photo: © Glasgow School of Art

As part of the ongoing implementation of the school's Conservation Plan, the project proposes to allocate space in the basement of the Mackintosh Building for a permanent exhibition of Mackintosh furniture. Similarly, an area has been designated as an exhibition space for rotational displays of material from the archives and other school collections. These new galleries will provide appropriate opportunities to develop and display the collections in conditions of proper environmental control and security and will significantly enhance the visitor experience. At the conclusion of the guided tour of these galleries visitors will have the flexibility to spend as long as they wish prior to exiting the building via the relocated Mackintosh visitor shop.

Integral to these proposals is the development of a much more comprehensive Research Centre complete with archive storage in the basement and sub basement of the Mackintosh Building. The Research Centre itself will be able to provide dedicated accommodation for research, allowing students, researchers and members of the public access to the rich history of the school and its alumni. Environmentally controlled storage, adjacent to the Research Centre, will ensure the archives and collections are held in proper conditions with easy retrieval access.

The application also includes a considerable sum set aside for the actual conservation of the school's collections and archives, as at present the school does not employ any conservation staff. In the past, work on the collections and archives has been undertaken almost entirely when requested for a specific exhibition, or when money becomes available.

All things considered, the school's application for Heritage Lottery funds is very ambitious, and one of the most challenging tasks will be to implement these developments without closing the Mackintosh Building. As all its other campus buildings are running at capacity, the school does not have space to relocate the entire body of staff and students from the Mackintosh Building for the duration of the project. Therefore, the school has already begun to work on a suggested rolling program of limited access/part closure across the Mackintosh building. While this makes the project achievable, it will inevitably be more costly and time consuming. This may, however, be the only way forward.

With luck, work will begin late 2006, or early 2007. Assuming that everything goes more or less to plan, the entire project will be complete by the end of 2009, just in time to celebrate the exact centenary of the opening of the second half of the building on 15 December 1899. A truly fitting gesture to the Mackintosh legacy.

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