

“The Mackintosh Library: An Active Learning Space”

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(The Mackintosh Library in 2010. Image by Mehul Ruparel)

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The Mackintosh Library was a work of art and it was also a working library. Since it was first opened it functioned as a place of learning, supporting teaching and research in terms of the collections held, the spaces offered for study, and the opportunities for site specific creative projects. Of course the Mackintosh Library also functioned in many other ways – as a tourist destination for example – but here we will consider in detail how the Library supported the core educational purpose of the Glasgow School of Art. In doing so we suggest that one of the principles that should inform the restoration plans is the aim of creating a space which works as a library for the students, the teaching staff and researchers of the GSA and visiting scholars from around the world.

It should be noted at the outset that we feel optimistic that such a restoration, proceeding from Mackintosh's 1907 design, and with the intention of creating a space that supports 21st century modes of art education, would be a great success. That is because we have seen how well the library, as designed by Mackintosh, satisfied student need in 2014 for dedicated quiet space for research and study to compliment the busy, social environment of the studio where they spend most of their time. We have seen how the beauty of the space, when it was given over to library workshops, collaborative projects and artistic residencies inspired creative practise. But we also acknowledge that many, including everyone in the library team, were frustrated by our inability to really open up and encourage greater use of the Library because of its heritage status and the treasures it contained. We would of course much rather still have those treasures and be worrying about how to manage them than starting from their charred remains but as we do now look to the future we have the opportunity to reimagine the Mackintosh Library, just as beautiful, just as atmospheric, but operating without the constraints that were necessarily imposed by the originals historic importance and therefore as a much more active space because it can be more available to students and to teaching and research activities.

To be clear on one point before proceeding further: in the 1970s both the book collections and the demand for more study spaces outgrew the Mackintosh Library. Since then the team of librarians have operated the GSA library service across two locations: the original space in the Mackintosh Building and a much larger more modern facility which now includes group and collaborative study spaces, computing facilities and the majority of our printed collections. In this paper we use 'the Library' to mean the Mackintosh Library. We will try to be very clear when we are referring to the 'main library' which was unaffected by the fire or indeed to the 'library service' which encompass both spaces as well as all the digital collections.

Around 1514 the German scholar and astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus began to circulate to close friends his *Little Commentary*, a 40-page manuscript in which he describes for the first time his revolutionary, and indeed dangerously heretical, idea: heliocentrism. This theory, now often referred to as the Copernican Revolution, repositioned the Earth in relation to the other celestial bodies in the mind of man. Despite Thomas Kuhn's rather sparing assessment of Copernicus' achievements, it was a truly remarkable paradigm shift, moving both science and philosophy away from the Ptolemaic universe-view that had hitherto held sway (based on Aristotelian theories of homocentric spheres). No longer was our own planet situated within the centre of the universe, with the other celestial bodies in concert around it; rather, Copernicus jettisoned this prevailing geocentrism to reveal a heliocentric universe in which the sun moves centre-stage.

In the paradigms of modern and post-modern social sciences, we are comfortable with this world-view. Our researches, our explorations, and our travails are predicated on an acceptance that our world, our viewpoint is not the only one. It is not necessarily central to the experience of others. We do not regard those with whom we work, learn and teach as subject to our own will. In 21st century education we are encouraged to work in concert with our learners and colleagues, and to reconsider through the world-lenses of others the landscapes in which we work, learn and collaborate.

We talk, of course, of engagement, and of reorienting what we provide from a system-centric to a learner-centric model. It is in this light that we ask you to consider the Mackintosh Library, as it both existed, and could exist

The particular rarity and value of the furniture and art housed in that space had, we would contend, imposed upon our learners a system-based model for a number of years. They were unable to access its unique materials, or enjoy its experiential qualities, when they wished or required to do so. Rather, they found themselves needing to negotiate the system. In short, the sun was made to orbit the Earth, rather than the latter orbiting the former. Central to our discussions today on how we bring back this world-renowned space for the use of our learners and researchers, is the question “How do we engage with this unique space in ways that are learner-, rather than system-centred?”

Now, the increasing virtualisation of the modern world and the impact technology has had and will continue to have on all our lives, of course begs the question: “Does a library continue to need a physical locale, or could it be reimagined to exist purely in a digital realm?” When one looks behind the easy soundbites and generalisations of commentators, the evidence (and by that I mean the real learner-oriented evidence amassed from careful, time-consuming qualitative research) answers very clearly in the affirmative. Yes, a physical locale remains key to the needs and requirements of our learners, and what is really revealed by this research, but is perhaps surprising to many, is that this need for physical space will not diminish in an increasingly digital world, but will actually increase. Earlier this year, the British Library launched its 2015-2023 vision, based on exhaustive researcher with its learners and researchers. In this vision it notes:

“At a time when the provision of knowledge and culture is increasingly digital and screen-based, the value and importance of high-quality physical spaces and experiences is growing, not diminishing... The more screen-based our lives, it seems, the greater the perceived value of real human encounters and physical artefacts: activity in each realm feeds interest in the other.”ⁱ

The artist-learner and designer-researcher of the future will learn as much from their physical and intellectual interaction with the clay tablet as the digital tablet. We contend that in an Art School context, the centrality of the physical and the experiential cannot be underestimated, and nor must it be diminished

Within humanistic geography, we talk of both place and space as interlocking but very different concepts. Whereas space is an abstract realm for human occupation, place is something much richer, imbued with human desires, memories and narratives. For philosopher Yi-Fu Tuan place can be described as any area to which human beings have given meaning. Much of these meanings are phenomenological in nature, encompassing sight, sound, texture, and smell. Other meanings are undoubtedly symbolic, located within memories and the narratives we tell, both to ourselves and to

others. It has been a great honour to witness countless students contributing their own memories and narratives to the Mackintosh Library whilst engaged in workshops, visits, and private study. The feedback was always the same: a deep love, respect and wonder at the sheer theatricality. Since 1909 it is those learners who have transformed it from space to place. In thinking today of the Mackintosh Library we must ask ourselves how its rebuild can continue to offer to our learners the *place* they so vocally want.

To achieve this of course requires us to open up our spaces to learners much more, both physically and psychologically. Physical access is, in reality, the easiest of these to address, but psychological barriers are more deeply ingrained. How can we begin the process of unchaining those rare and distinctive collections we hold that can add so much both qualitatively and experientially to the learning experience? Two scenarios perhaps present themselves. Do we envisage and imagine a reconstructed Mackintosh Library as dedicated reading rooms, in which our learners and researchers can interact with the School's treasures in an environment uniquely conducive to their study? Certainly, most UK HEIs with serious research development agendas are actively commissioning such spaces, with Martyrs' Kirk at the University of St Andrews a prescient Scottish example. A 2014 paper by Research Libraries UK reports that:

*"In recent years librarians and archivists have taken advantage of shifts in teaching methods towards the discovery of and engagement with primary sources by welcoming students into special collections reading rooms and forming partnerships with academic staff to embed unique and distinctive collections in teaching programmes."*ⁱⁱ

Or, in contrast, do we imagine the Mackintosh Library as a much more informal space, allowing students and researchers to learn independently and collaboratively, across disciplinary and departmental boundaries? In 2012 the British Library published the results of a 3-year research project that focussed on the research and information requirements of over 17,000 doctoral students from more than 70 HEIs. It found that "Informal networking with fellow students and peers is important to most Generation Y doctoral students in exchanging information and ideas and warding off the effects of isolation." Noticeably too "Nearly 50% of older students stated they always or very often cross subject boundaries".ⁱⁱⁱ

So how did the library, the Mackintosh Library, function? Let's start with what you might think of as the traditional ways in which any academic library supports its community of users: providing specialist collections and a suitable space to browse those collections, to read, think and write, nicely illustrated by this 1976 photograph and a quote from Dr Robert Proctor, an erstwhile lecturer with School of Architecture, who we interviewed after the fire for an ongoing project to record people's memories of the Library. Dr Proctor said

"My best memory of the Mackintosh Library is of going in after 11am to hunt for old architecture journals. Seeing the cupboard doors open to reveal shelves of brilliant stuff full of potential has always been a great pleasure. The Library is already like a theatre set, just some pieces of wood hung on an external structure, but it's only when the doors open and books come out that it starts to come alive and take on a real purpose. The cupboards are like columns that disappear when they open, revealing new dimensions of knowledge."



(The Mackintosh Library in 1976. Image by Gordon Haws)

The Library was regularly open to students and researcher one afternoon per week. An average of ten people came to use the library on each of the afternoon openings in the first five months of this year. The feedback on being able to work in the Library was very positive – in fact we had recently refurbished the rather dingy main library, making it a much brighter, more welcoming space with

soft seating as well as large desks for collaborative working. We got a lot of comments from students that reflect that fact that undergraduates in particular liked the new white, bright main library and shared tables, but they also wanted the option of dedicated "sombre" darker quiet space for occasional individual work. Post graduates students felt this even more strongly and the Mackintosh Library provided the desired environment - but only once a week. Groups of students were frequently in the Library outside of the regular opening times as the library staff worked with academic staff to deliver many collections based workshops through the academic year. These included

- Fashion & Textiles undergraduates looking at 19th century fashion periodicals.
- Architecture students looking at original architectural treatises from the 17th century.
- Painting & Printmaking undergraduates looking at the Artists' Books Collection
- Tailored workshops with PhD students looking at historical materials with relevance to their research



Students working collaboratively in the Mackintosh Library, 2013 Image by Inga Paterson

So far, a fairly typical academic library special collections service I would say but the GSA is not a typical academic institution – it's an art school and so over the years we have actively encouraged the innovative use of all library spaces and collections by our users. They have used our interiors to challenge, problematize or develop their practice, from interventions into our spaces, to installations amongst our shelves.

In December 2012, students studying an Artistic Dress elective staged the first of a series of tableaux vivants in the Library. The tableau vivant was a popular form of artistic performance in the 19th century, in which groups of costumed participants strike poses and assume group compositions in theatrically lit interiors. The one rule is that participants do not move or speak, but instead are presented to the viewer as if a 'living picture'. These tableaux became an annual event in the life of the Library, with the most recent tableau appearing in support of the conference 'Crafting the Look: Styling as Creative Process' which sought to analyse the purposeful construction of a 'look' –whether it be in dress, space, or object.

The performance poetry showcase 'The Book is Dead, Long Live The Book!' took place in the Library in April this year. It marked the culmination of a week's site-specific residency that focused on the potential of digital and performance poetry to explore relations between architectural space and practice. The residency formed part of a larger research project lead by GSA's Alan Hooper who is here today. Each poet produced original poems or digital projections in response to the library space and their interactions with it, and performed them during two public events.

In 2014, students on the 'Digital Culture' undergraduate programme were set a project to stage digital interventions into the Library. The student's spent a week working, relaxing and thinking in the space, in order to analyse their experiences of the unique interior. They developed site-specific light installations in order to explore and re-examine the space's character.

These were all great experiences both for the students and for those who came to view the resulting shows. They are, we believe, exemplars of how a library in an amazing space, serving a specialist art institution can function.

We will now turn to some of the ways in which the library wasn't working - some of the things which exemplify the way in which the library had imposed upon our learners a system-based model and which we intend to consider and address in the restoration: the need for constant supervision, the furniture, the staircase and the lack of power sockets. We have already alluded to the fact that the library was only open for drop in use one afternoon per week which was a terrible impediment to general use. The regular opening hours were so limited because, when open, the library had to be supervised to ensure no harm came to any of the furniture. Taking library staff away from the main library where we can accommodate large numbers of students to open a space which can hold less than a quarter of those numbers was always hard to justify. For the worst of reasons we will almost certainly no longer have to worry about caring for original Mackintosh library furniture in the Library so we hope to create a Library that needs no supervision and can therefore be fully open for use whenever the building as a whole is open. The glass fronted book cabinets in the library would also need some slight adjustment in an unsupervised environment -the locks on the original cabinets were not very secure.

Turning to the furniture: Some designs for the library furniture stood the test of time better than others: the wide sloping desks on the balcony remained ideal for consulting large folio volumes. However the original Windsor chairs for the library proved rather delicate. By 1935 the furniture was described in the Governors minutes as 'in need of renewal' and by 1950 many had been replaced by sturdier chairs the school had acquired from the Ingram Street tea rooms. The staircase to the

balcony, an addition in 1946, was fairly precipitous and probably not entirely safe for anyone in a hurry or carrying a pile of books. When the library is rebuilt a better design for access to the balcony should be sought. Finally although the Library was rewired in 1985 there is most no power available to users. Most researchers will now turn up with two if not three devices they want to work with: laptop and phone or tablet and phone and sufficient power at their desks is critical to making a space work for them.

It is in this context that we should consider the Mackintosh Library not just as what we know it was, but as how we know it could be. We can build on what we know about how the library worked for its users as well as what we know about the centrality of the physical and the experiential for 21st century learners. That we restore the library as a space that is open to all but perhaps aimed at the GSA's growing post-graduate research community. A "writing studio" if you like, a library providing dedicated quiet space for research and study separate from the busy social environment of the studio. And a library which provides access to internationally recognised collections of printed, written and drawn materials. A space in which, as Dr Robert Proctor remembered "the doors open and books come out and it starts to come alive and take on a real purpose"

ⁱ British Library (2015) *Living Knowledge: The British Library 2015-2023*, London, British Library, Available <http://www.bl.uk/projects/living-knowledge-the-british-library-2015-2023#>

ⁱⁱ Peach, C. & Mertens, M. (eds.) (2014) *Unique and Distinctive Collections: Opportunities for Research Libraries*, London, RLUK, Available <http://www.rluk.ac.uk/work/rlukudc/>

ⁱⁱⁱ British Library (2012) *Researchers of Tomorrow: The Research Behaviour of Generation Y Doctoral Students*, London, JISC and British Library, Available <http://www.webarchive.org.uk/wayback/archive/20140614040703/http://www.jisc.ac.uk/publications/reports/2012/researchers-of-tomorrow.aspx>