

MACKINTOSH: MATERIALS & MATERIALITY

Introduction, Dr Robyne Calvert

I'd like to officially welcome you all to our symposium, Mackintosh, Materials, and Materiality. It is an exciting day for us, as it is the first time these four important conservation projects have come together in a public forum, and we are delighted to do so for an audience of esteemed scholars, colleagues, and Mackintosh enthusiasts, half of whom have travelled across an ocean to be here today. When the Society for Architectural Historians planned to host their conference in Glasgow about four years ago, they certainly didn't expect so much Mackintosh to be under scaffolding – and none of us, of course, could have predicted the fire that happened here at the Glasgow School of Art on the 23rd of May, 2014.

As you know, the fire severely damaged the west wing of 'The Mack', as we affectionately call it here at the art school. I know for many, perhaps most of the people here, it was a heart-breaking day. It certainly was for me, as I stood on Sauchiehall street below and watched the flames surging from the library windows – the very space that first drew me to this city as a graduate student nearly eleven years ago. Now, as the Mackintosh Research Fellow here at Glasgow School of Art, it is my job to foster and capture the research opportunities that have arisen from our restoration project. I confess that I adore my job, but it is a strange feeling to have such an extraordinary opportunity arise from an event, which literally destroyed my favourite spot in the world. And I am certainly not alone in this feeling – it wasn't just Glasgow, but an international community of design lovers who mourned this loss, and mourn it still. In my role I give many talks on our project, and I usually start them with this acknowledgement of what we have lost, for what we are now learning and discovering is so exciting, it might perhaps even sound as if we are pleased that all of this happened. We aren't – but we have chosen to seek opportunity from misfortune.

I hope you will forgive my indulgence at getting so personal about this subject at the start, which is perhaps a bit unorthodox for an academic forum, but I think highly appropriate in this case because in Glasgow, we feel a very personal connection to Charles Rennie

Mackintosh. Not everyone knows the details of his life, or his work, but they know his name, and that people such as you come from all over the world to see his work, and it makes us proud. Born in our 'dear green city' 149 years ago on this day, many of us feel that the work of Mackintosh and those close to him, particularly his wife Margaret Macdonald, are the perfect emblems of this city: beautiful, organic, compelling, creative, clever, and ever so slightly weird.

The talks today will assume a certain level of familiarity with Mackintosh from our audience. We will not be focussing on his biography, oeuvre, or his collaborative practice with his friends and family. Instead, we will be diving straight into the myriad research projects that are allowing for a re-examination of Mackintosh studies through much-needed conservation and condition surveys of extant works. In particular, we are thinking a great deal about materials - most obviously at GSA we have been focussed on what we have lost, and how to rebuild. In this process we have learned much about Mackintosh's approach to materials, I had been thinking about the need for a wider project to connect up what was being learned in the other conservation projects. Then, serendipitously, Pamela Robertson came to me just about a year ago to say that she had also been thinking a great deal about Mackintosh and materials since the completion of the Mackintosh Architecture project, which she will tell you about shortly, and had similar ideas about a collaborative project. And so we hope that today marks the beginning of a broader partnership between our conservation projects, through which we are learning so much, not just about Mackintosh, but about architectural practices and approaches from this period.

As for our symposium theme for today – the 'Materials' subject is straightforward – it is the stuff of objects and the fabric of the built environment. Materiality is, I feel, a bit more complex, and something I hope we might query in our discussions. It is a word I have heard used in a number of ways, and sometimes rather vaguely. I've heard it used by architects as simply another word for materials, perhaps referring to their physical qualities such as strength, weight, texture, or colour. But I think there is a more nuanced application of the word materiality, one which refers to the more intangible aspects of materials that affect the space they compose – not the mere physical attributes of material, but their effect on the senses within the atmosphere of place. How might they smell? How might they refract

of reflect light? What is the impact of materials as they work in concert with each other: glass against iron; wood alongside render?

In art and architectural writing, we gravitate towards that useful phrase, 'the overall effect'. Mackintosh, like so many great architect-designers, was very much interested in 'the overall affect'. The gesamtkunstwerk. How does the combined aspects of materials, the symphony of materiality, come together to work upon our senses, to inform us on spatial use, and to create environmental poetry? Each of these projects have, through necessity, forced us into a position to forensically examine material, but also to analyse, and perhaps even philosophise, issues of materiality, particularly when faced with the problem of atmospheric loss. That dreaded word 'patina' often rears its head in these discussions, the aspect of time which we know we cannot recreate, but which we hope to honour and acknowledge through research, through considerable sensitivity, and in the case of the projects you will hear about today, through a deepened understanding of Mackintosh's approach to materials and materiality.

After our keynote, GSA's Senior Project Manager will give you all an overview of the restoration of the Mack. While I think it is true to say that the conservation work in the Mackintosh building has invigorated interest in our field, it is certainly not the main catalyst for the projects presented here, most of which were well underway before the GSA fire. The National Trust has spent many years trying to grapple with the slow but steady decay of the render on The Hill House, which Bryan Dickson will talk about. The conservation of the dismantled Mackintosh tea rooms in the collection of Glasgow Museums includes a forensic research analysis that was made over 10 years ago, and in fact one of my very first experiences in Glasgow was seeing them in pieces in a storage space in Maryhill 11 years ago, being studied and measured by Alison Brown and her team, so I am extremely delighted she is here to tell us about them today. And John Sanders of Simpson & Brown Architects will tell us about the newest Mackintosh project – and ironically probably the first one to finish – the restoration of the original Willow Tea Room building just around the corner from us on Sauchiehall Street.

After our lunch break, we will have talks from three individuals who represent some of the unique skills that are needed for these ambitious projects. Dr Will Napier, a chartered surveyor and heritage consultant, will tell us about his technical research on The Hill House. We will then hear from David Macdonald who is the managing director for Laurence McIntosh, the firm appointed to make a full-scale prototype of a library bay based on the reconstructed Mackintosh plans made by Page/Park Architects. And then, our own Adam Frost of the School of Simulation and Visualisation will talk to us about the 3D laser scanning of the Mack that was done immediately after the fire.

There should be time for 1 or 2 questions after each talk, but we will invite all speakers back to the front and hope to have a lively discussion about what we have learned from these Mackintosh Conservation projects – and welcome insight from any experience you may have from your work as well. Whether fire, or rain, or conflict, or simply time – our built heritage is constantly at risk, and it is important that we look at all change as an opportunity, and that philosophy underpins all the projects you will hear about today.