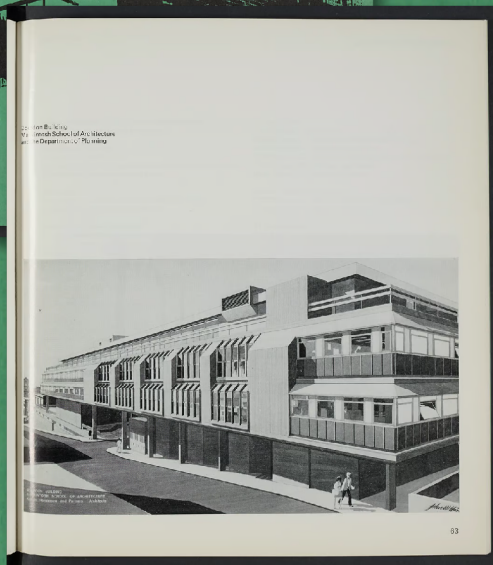


The Bourdon





The Bourdon

Built: 1979

Architectural firm: Keppie Henderson & Partners

Location: Scott Street

Listing: B

Name: Named after the French architect Eugene Bourdon, the first Professor of Architecture at GSA



Bruising The Mack?

Johnny Rodger

THE BOURDON AND THE MACKINTOSH



(c) GSA



Home of the architecture school and the main library at Glasgow School of Art (GSA), the Bourdon Building has been a much-maligned addition to the Garnethill Campus. Completed in 1979, it is described in the 1990 Penguin Architectural Guide to the City as 'spoiling the view to the west', while another well-known critic, Charles McKean, wrote of it as 'coarse concrete' which 'crowds in on Mackintosh's masterpiece with bruising indifference.'

As hinted there, the Bourdon, and its architects, had a lot to live up to. And, ironically the architecture firm that designed it, namely Keppie, Henderson and Partners, was a continuation of the same firm (formerly Honeyman and Keppie) which had designed the Mack with Charles Rennie Mackintosh, as their junior and subsequent partner, in charge of the design and build from 1896 through to 1910. The firm is still on the go to this day as Keppie Design.



The Bourdon is generally perceived as a Brutalist building, that is to say, one which shuns decoration or refinement of its purposes and its plain and simple materials – concrete, brick, steel and timber – and which boldly declares its programme through robust geometrical forms. Indeed, the etymological source of the name ‘Brutalist’ is said to come from the French ‘beton brut’ which means literally ‘coarse concrete’. Despite some formal design concessions to the Mackintosh style – like the large black mullioned windows along the flanks of the Bourdon, which seem to echo the huge studio windows on the main façade of the Mackintosh building – it is this crudity, and, what is judged by some as a drab and too bold plainness, that seems to fly in the face of the historical refinement and elegance of the Mack.



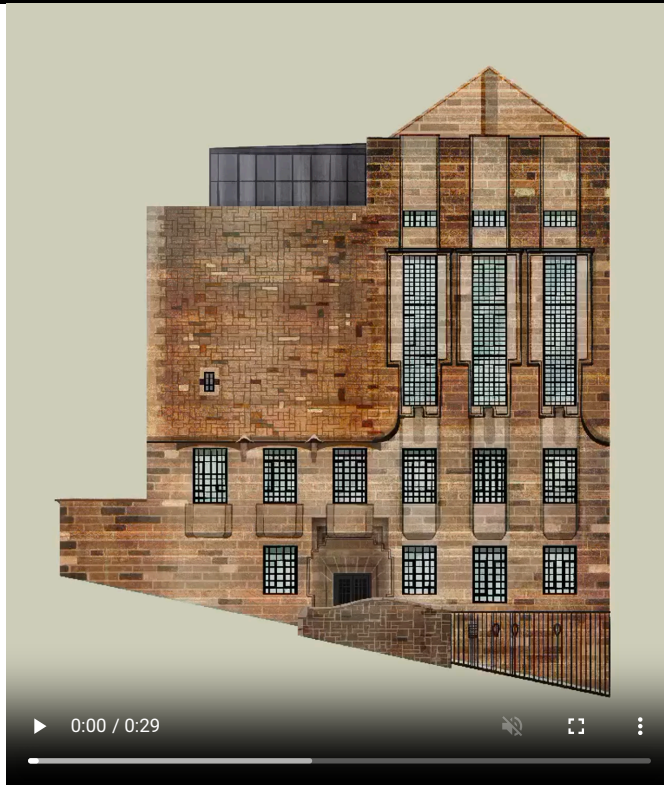
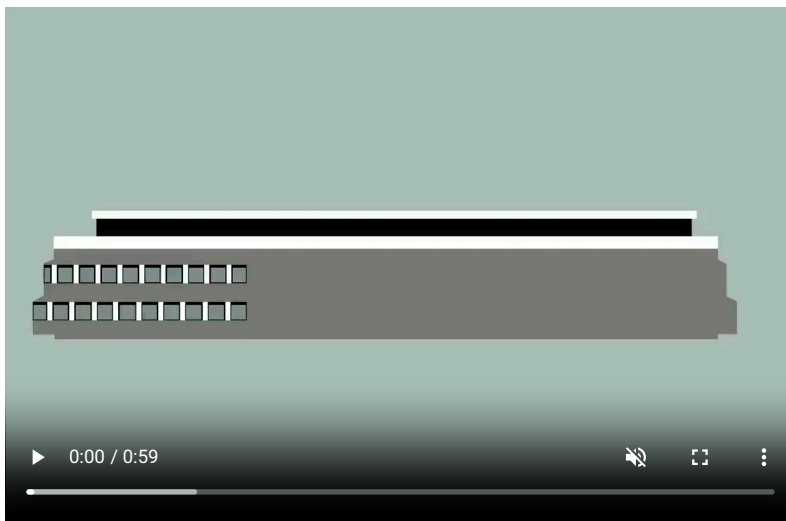
The large black mullioned windows along the flanks of the Bourdon.



The huge studio windows on the main façade of the Mackintosh building, (c) GSA.



Yet, can the formal and contextual relations between the two buildings be summed up quite so simply as this? The client's brief for the Mackintosh in 1896 was for a 'plain building'. As such, one ought not to get carried away with the completed building's oft-cited designation as an 'Art Nouveau' work. Mackintosh's design, notwithstanding his many exquisite and idiomatic flourishes, achieves that aim for a plain building. What became obvious from experience down through the hundred years of its use as an art school, was its plain and robust suitability as a building which could host the messy and rough, the *bruising* knockabout of activity that is the reality of training and developing artists.



(c) The Bourdon and The Glasgow School of Art, works in progress Natalie Tweedie / Nebo Peklo



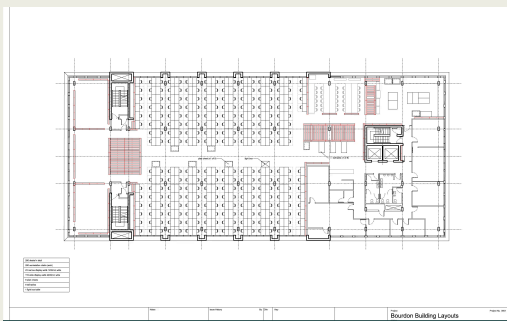
Furthermore, the functionalist defence and appreciation of the Bourdon need not be limited to the building's material and formal aspects. The criticism that the Bourdon 'spoils the view to the west' brings one vital aspect - and indeed arguably a strength rather than a failure - to mind. The criticism refers to the fact that the building bridges, and thus obscures the view west along Renfrew Street to Park Hill. This is seen as a disappointment of the picturesque urban possibilities and an unnecessary interruption of Glasgow's urban grid form. Yet, the view along Hill Street - parallel to Renfrew Street merely some 25m up the hill, is where the real picturesque view can be taken in, in the sense that it centres there on the church towers of Park Hill.



(c) Richard Findlay, FotoFling Scotland

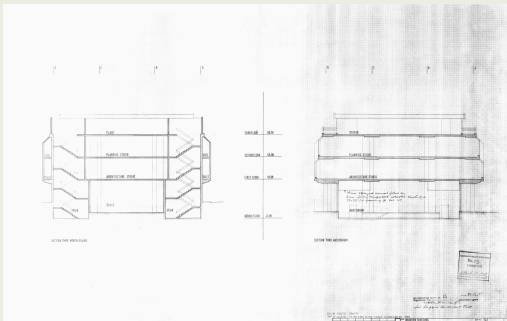


Therefore – in this writer’s view and I see it every day as I work in GSA – nothing picturesquely important is lost, but rather, something very important is gained by the bridging of Renfrew Street. For there is also a great functionalist achievement, in terms of the architectural programme there: that is to say, in how the client’s functional requirements are achieved through planning and layout of the accommodation. The architecture school has need – unlike the other subject schools at GSA, Fine Art and Design – of very large communal studios for full year collaborative project work. Thus, bridging Renfrew Street has allowed for a lateral layout of open studios on each cantilevered floor of up to 62.2m interior length high across the street, with windows east and west to the city. The specific and exceptional studio-size requirement of the client is something that could otherwise never have been achieved given the small dimensions of the sites on either side of Renfrew Street.



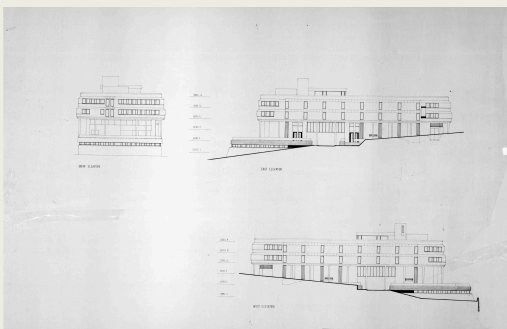
Bourdon Building Layouts

Level 2 term time
 280 desks in total
 280 workstation chairs (arch)
 119 wide display walls 2400mm wide
 8 plan chests
 8 tall tables
 1 light box table



Planning Studio Bourdon

Section thro. North Stairs
 Section thro. Auditorium



Elevations Bourdon

South elevation
 East elevation
 West elevation

And perhaps, indeed, the extravagant rupture of the urban form as a purely architectural solution to the problems of the programme and the steep site is where the ostensibly plain building steps up to the mark of both the flamboyant Beaux-Arts French-Belgian it commemorates – Eugène Bourdon, Director of Architectural Studies at GSA, 1904-16 – *and* his nemesis, the daring, brilliant and maverick outsider, Charles Rennie Mackintosh.



End

[Back to Top](#)

BRUTAL GLASGOW

[The Gallowgate Towers](#)

[Our Lady and St Francis](#)

[The Met Tower](#)

[The BOAC](#)

[The Savoy Centre](#)

[The Bourdon](#)

[The Pontecorvo](#)

[Anniesland Court](#)

[About](#)

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