I had just started my tenure as Director of Glasgow School of Art at the time of the first Mackintosh Building fire in May 2014. I was still Director at the time of the second Mackintosh Building fire in June 2018. I stepped down as Director on 2nd November 2018. Outlined below are my personal views on the two Mackintosh fires and the future of the building, these notes have been prepared over the last 10 days without reference to Glasgow School of Art documentation.

I am truly sorry for the disruption caused over the last 5 months to local residents and businesses as a result of the recent fire. I am also truly sorry to see the damage that both fires have inflicted on Mackintosh’s masterpiece.

As Director of Glasgow School of Art, I was responsible for the Mackintosh Building which meant ensuring working practices within the building were safe and appropriate when it was being used by the Glasgow School of Art. This also meant ensuring that Glasgow School of Art appointed appropriate contractors and consultants to work on the Mackintosh Building when it was being restored. Glasgow School of Art appointed its own team of expert project managers and specialists to work with the appointed contractors and consultants on the restoration. Glasgow School of Art maintained oversight of the project through various Board Committees.

I understand that Glasgow School of Art’s submission to the Culture, Tourism, Europe and External Affairs Committee will detail the background to the May 2014 fire and the actions that Glasgow School of Art took as a result. After the May 2014 fire Glasgow School of Art changed many aspects of its’ operations. I understand the submission will also detail the processes used by Glasgow School of Art to appoint contractors for the restoration, to ensure that appropriate fire strategies were put in place to protect the building and to provide effective governance of the project.

There has been considerable speculation in the media and at the Culture, Tourism, Europe and External Affairs Committee about what the causes of the June 2018 fire might be. Many experts have come forward to make suggestions. Until the SFRS/Police Scotland investigation into the fire is completed, however, I believe it will be impossible to fully understand what happened in June and what lessons can be learnt.

Many have questioned Glasgow School of Art’s approach to stabilising the Mackintosh Building since June 2018. Over the summer, I received an equal number of communications from people who told me Glasgow School of Art was taking the building down too slowly, as I did from others, who felt the Glasgow School of Art was proceeding with inelegant haste. I do believe the dismantling strategy chosen, after full consultation with Building Control at Glasgow City Council and Historic & Environment Scotland, was the best approach and didn’t actually compromise either speed or preservation of the remaining parts of the building.

There has also been great interest in what should happen next to the Mackintosh Building in terms of rebuilding and restoration with some individuals advocating rebuild, other suggesting a new building or even relocating the Mackintosh Building to other parts of Glasgow.
Initial discussions, whilst I was still Director, did suggest it should be possible to rebuild the Mackintosh Building. This would be a substantial project, which I understand will cost in excess of £100 million and take 5 to 7 years. If the Mackintosh Building is rebuilt, I believe it will have to be compliant with a majority of contemporary building regulations. Presumably any future rebuild and restoration will also need to be authentic to Mackintosh. This will be a significant but exciting and I suggest, achievable challenge for the architectural team appointed to the project. The best possible architects and crafts people will be needed.

As plans for the rebuild are developed the potential future use of the building will need to be carefully considered. I believe a fully restored Mackintosh Building should still be the home for creative education as it has been for over 100 years, it was not built to be a museum. I also believe the Mackintosh Building should be open and permeable offering everybody creative inspiration and an insight into Mackintosh’s genius.

One key challenge for Glasgow School of Art moving forward will be how it organises the rebuild of the Mackintosh Building (assuming this route is taken) whilst ensuring the Art School thrives and develops as an Institution.

Glasgow School of Art, as an Art School, is an exceptional place and plays a key role in the cultural life of Glasgow and Scotland. Glasgow is one of only 6 cities in the world that has an Art School and Conservatoire ranked in the top 20 in the world QS World Rankings. (The cities being - London, Helsinki, New York, Boston, San Francisco, Glasgow). Scotland should be incredibly proud of this status.

Glasgow School of Art has developed significantly as an Institution over the last five years: student numbers have grown by 25% with the development of new postgraduate programmes; turnover has grown from £27 million to £38 million; GSA now leads the way in Scotland for its recruitment and retention of students from disadvantaged backgrounds; new academic schools have been opened, along with a Highlands campus and new international partnerships.

There have also been challenges, however, and to remain independent and at the forefront of creative education I believe Glasgow School of Art still needs to develop on many fronts. In the four and a half years since the May 2014 fire, a considerable part of my working week, when I was Director, was spent dealing with the Mackintosh Building restoration and associated fund raising. The restoration had its own dedicated project team but also drew widely on resources from across the Art School.

The budget allocated to the last restoration was £49 million over a 5-year period. If as suggested the rebuild will cost in excess of £100 million over 5-7 years, ie more than twice the scale of the previous restoration over a longer period of time, this could potentially draw considerable energy, resource and profile away from the Glasgow School of Art and its core purpose of creative teaching and research excellence.

It might be very relevant to explore the suggestions of Professor Tony Jones in his submission to the Culture, Tourism, Europe and External Affairs Committee last week. In this he discusses some form of trust that legally and operationally might oversee the Mackintosh Building and its rebuild and restoration. Establishing such a trust would allow the Board of Governors and management team of Glasgow School of Art to focus on the task of running one of the world’s top art schools, leaving trustees of an independent trust and its executive team the challenge of what will be one of Scotland’s biggest heritage projects over the next 5 – 7 years. A Mackintosh Building Trust could be for the benefit of Glasgow School of Art but also for the benefit of others.
Some form of Mackintosh Building Trust could be a game-changer for the development of Glasgow and the Sauchiehall Street area, boldly opening up access to creativity and the Mackintosh legacy within Glasgow.

A similar approach has been taken in Dundee with the development of the new V&A museum (a project of equivalent scale costing approx. £90 million, which ran from 2010 to 2018 with its own Board). The V&A in Dundee was developed in close collaboration between the Universities in Dundee, Dundee City Council, the Scottish Government and other partners. The V&A in Dundee is a museum dedicated to design, the Mackintosh Building should not be a museum but could be a centre of creative education for Glasgow School of Art and the City of Glasgow dedicated to all forms of creative practice and the celebration of Mackintosh’s genius.

Professor Tom Inns, 12th November 2018