The future of Mackintosh’s Glasgow School of Art building.

I write not as an architect or engineer but as an art and architectural historian with a special interest in Mackintosh and a background as a former museum curator, including the curatorship of the Mackintosh collection at the Hunterian, University of Glasgow. I understand, from Historic Environment Scotland, that there now exists a comprehensive digital record of the Mackintosh’s building for the Glasgow School of Art that will allow for an exact facsimile of the building as it stood in 2014. With this as a basis, I believe that a rebuild of the school is not only feasible but necessary. But there are other concerns with regard to the future use of the building once any reconstruction is complete.

The brief for the new building in 1896 concentrated on providing north-lit studios that would be used for architecture, painting and drawing, in a course where all disciplines within the school would be expected to develop drawing skills. Mackintosh’s design successfully fulfilled that brief and the Renfrew Street studios remained in use, pretty much as they were in 1900, for painters, printmakers and sculptors until the late 1980s.

Since that date, as reflected in the change of name from Drawing, Painting and Printmaking to ‘Fine Art’, the needs of students using the studios have changed. Daylight is not a crucial element in the work of most students now using the studios. The move towards video, photography and various forms of conceptual art has produced works and artists that do not require the kind of studio spaces that Mackintosh provided. Painters may still need daylight, but painting has not been a major element of the output of the school since 1990.

In the last thirty years or so, the growth of public interest in Mackintosh, not just in Scotland or the UK but across the world, has led to a curiosity about Mackintosh’s School of Art, a building that was largely closed to public access until about 1980. Since the 1930s, it has gained world-wide recognition as Mackintosh’s masterpiece, and is now seen as a key work in the development of 20th century architecture and a central element of Glasgow’s appeal as a tourist destination.

The School’s administration was slow to enable easy public access, rightly acknowledging that as an art school it needed to protect its students from the intrusions of public tours of the building. But as interest grew in Mackintosh and the school, the administration was forced to reassess this situation by introducing limited tours in term-time and more frequent tours during the vacations. This change was not entirely altruistic: the School charged for access and successive directors attempted to maximize income from other elements of its collections and the School’s Mackintosh associations. (I am told that monies generated directly by such heritage-based activities are not re-invested in the collection or the building but are channelled directly into the School’s general funds). The current access (pre-2014) tried to address the
differing demands of students and visitors, but it was always an unsatisfactory compromise.

In addition to the building, the School has other Mackintosh assets, usually acquired by gift since the 1930s and through the 1960s, when the School was seen as a natural home for such objects and when successive directors recognized the importance of Mackintosh and believed in a duty to preserve his work. From the 1980s, the School attracted funds from an American benefactor to pay for a curator of this collection (which role is now funded solely by the School). Its collection of furniture and watercolours, designed or made by Mackintosh and his friends, was second in terms of quality only to that of the Hunterian collection. It was diminished in number by the 2014 fire when about a hundred pieces of Mackintosh furniture and paintings were destroyed: fortunately, many of the most important items were displayed in the eastern part of the school away from the seat of the fire. There seems to have been little or no attempt by the School to replace any of these lost items from the approx. £4million insurance pay-out directly related to the destruction of its collection.

Acknowledging public interest both in the building and its collection moved the School towards museum status. Recognition of this is reflected in the current annual grant of approx. £198,000 from the Scottish Funding Council Museums Grant, supposedly for the benefit of the Mackintosh building and the relevant collections. No account is available of how this money is spent by the School, although I understand that the routine budget allocation for conservation and materials in Archives and Collections is only £15,000 p.a.

Reconciling the needs of a practicing art school with those of a museum is never going to be easy. Each has a totally different ethos from the other. There are, or were, university museums where teaching department and museum collection shared the same administration or funds, notably Glasgow University’s Hunterian Museum prior to 1976. It was a conflict of interest that was remedied at the Hunterian by the separation of academic and museum priorities with the appointment of a director replacing the responsibilities of six or more individual professors of the relevant disciplines. It has been a welcome and successful change. The School has a similar situation, where its board and director must balance the priorities and very different needs of its two elements. The museum usually loses, in attitude as well as funding.

The School is different from many museums in that its most important ‘exhibit’ is the building itself. This was reflected in the fund-raising required for the restoration of the building after the 2014 fire: funds were not given to reinstate a building for teaching purposes but to restore a world-class work of art.

By the time the school is rebuilt it will not have been available for teaching for over a dozen years. Temporary accommodation put in force after the 2014 fire will likely have had to be replaced by more permanent arrangements. This seems to be a suitable time to consider relieving the School of its responsibility for the Mackintosh building (something it is believed to have considered in the 1990s when it offered the building to a government agency) and removing the inherent dangers associated with its occupation by a large body of students. This would remove from the School the apparent burden of running a major ‘museum’ and also satisfy the growing demand for access, particularly after the injection of £30million of public, private and charitable donations to restore the building following the 2014 fire.
The building could, and should, still have a use as accommodation for artists. The studios could be used as a more select form of the WASPS scheme, offering studio space to established artists from all over the world, attracting painters (and other artists who would benefit from the traditional studios) who might also act as visiting lecturers at the School of Art. Studio space could be offered to painters as a ‘post-diploma’ award, even offered to allot the Scottish art schools as an extension/alternative to the current Hospitalfield residencies. More studios could be open to the public; some could be converted to display spaces for the School’s surviving collection, or even offer display space to similar items currently in store with Glasgow Museums, the Hunterian and the V&A in London. It could host temporary exhibitions, a resource lost to the city after the closure of the McLellan Galleries. With the site to the south of the School likely to become vacant soon there is even an opportunity to develop a cultural centre that, along with the CCA might make Sauchiehall Street a ‘destination’ again.

The School of Art is affiliated to the University of Glasgow, where the Hunterian already has a curator specifically responsible for its crucial and extensive Mackintosh collections. Together the two institutions could form a Mackintosh resource similar to the collaboration between the University of Southern California (owners of the US National Monument, the Gamble House) and the Huntington Museum that has done so much to preserve and promote the work of the Greene brothers; or the collaboration between the Art Institute of Chicago and the various Frank Lloyd Wright foundations. These architects are Mackintosh’s equals and contemporaries whose fame and reputation could be matched in Glasgow by such a new Mackintosh venture.

There will be other suggestions for future uses of the school but they should bear in mind that the building is itself a work of art and should be treated and protected accordingly. It would be unthinkable to restore a work of art from the National Galleries, say, and then offer access to it to the person who damaged it in the first place. But this is the scenario if the building is still to be retained by the School of Art on its current basis. If this should be considered, then it becomes all the more important that the role of the School’s administration and its consultants at the time of the 2008-12 major refurbishment and 2014 fire be fully investigated. Questions arising from that fire bring into doubt the ability of the School’s administration to protect and preserve the building as a ‘work of art’.

The report by Scottish Fire and Rescue Service identified the immediate cause and the reasons for the rapid spread of a minor fire in 2014. A student was allowed to use banned materials within an exhibit which started a fire in a basement studio. At the time the Director explained this as an unfortunate accident. Since 2014, however, it has been alleged that some staff tried to stop the student’s use of these materials but they were over-ruled by senior staff to whom the student appealed claiming a restriction/denial of ‘artistic freedom’. This artistic freedom put at risk the lives of over 200 staff and students that day as well as leading to the destruction of the heart of Mackintosh’s design, the library. Such actions by the School and its staff would be incompatible not only with simple health and safety concerns but are at the root of the different ethos of museums and art schools.

The fire that the student caused turned out to be dramatic but was quickly extinguished by the SFRS. What followed and caused major damage was the immediate spread of the fire up an adjacent ventilation shaft linking all floors from the basement to the roof. This shaft, and a dozen others within the school, should have been protected, in line
with Historic Scotland guidelines, as part of the £8million Mackintosh Conservation and Access project (funded by the HLF and designed to protect the historic value of the building and the School’s museum collections). It has since been revealed that estates department staff, making annual inspections of the school from 2000, had drawn the attention of senior administrators to the inherent danger of these shafts. The School, and its architects, has never explained why these warnings were ignored. Nor has it confirmed whether the decision to leave the shafts unprotected was a deliberate (probably cost-saving act) or whether both parties ‘forgot’ about the shafts or considered them unimportant – or believed they could get away with omitting the cost of such protection to save money.

Any answer (and none has been forthcoming so far) from the School’s administration to these questions will confirm its unfitness as a custodian of this building, a work of art that is recognised across the world as the most important in Scotland.

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