Thank you for your letter of October 18th, inviting me to submit written comments to the Scottish Parliament’s committee on Culture, Tourism, Europe and External Affairs, given my previous association with the Glasgow school of Art as its Director, 1980-86. I have had a very close relationship with the School, but in terms of full disclosure would note that I do not know the current Board of Governors, met the Board Chair only briefly 15 years ago, and have never met the Director.

Credentials: I am a scholar of the Mackintosh era, a published author on his work, and have presented hundreds of lectures on the life and work of Margaret and Charles Rennie Mackintosh. I created the first public museum of their work within the Mackintosh building, employed the first Mackintosh Curator, created the first Mackintosh exhibition abroad (in Japan). I both worked and lived in the GSA’s Mackintosh building. I doubt that any other correspondent or Committee witness can claim the depth of relationship I have had with the GSA and the Mack. It is painful for me to write in these terms, but given my intimate relationship with the GSA, my love of Glasgow and Scotland, I am compelled to do so. For six years the School and the Mack were my professional and personal responsibility.

To make my position clear at the outset, I share the world-wide incredulous anger over what happened, twice, at the GSA. The loss of Mackintosh’s masterpiece is absolutely unforgiveable. Glasgow’s single-most famous building, a gem in Scotland’s crown, burned down before our eyes. This should have been the best-protected building in Scotland. Like thousands of others, I want answers. I want to know ‘where the buck stops’. These disasters were caused by people and I want to know who they are.

But if the GSA management and its Board are being maligned unfairly, I want to know that too.

As the investigation into the cause of the fire continues, I believe I can summarize what is being widely asked. But I cannot answer the question often put to me here in the US: “You Scots guys are pretty smart at engineering and stuff – how come this happened twice”? This is humiliating beyond measure.

GSA has a report on the causes of the first fire that was never released. In a spirit of transparency, why not?

The Fire Service report on the first fire was heavily redacted. Other than concealing the name of the student who caused the fire, why? Evidence provided

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to the Culture Committee on October 25 appears to call into question that first report.

GSA said, after the first fire, that “lessons would be learned”. What lessons? After the second fire, GSA instantly said the Mackintosh project was “not part of their estate” – what does this mean, given that they were the clients, they were paying the bills, with public funds.

GSA describes itself as “self-governing”. Legally, who owns the Glasgow School of Art, and who funds it? To whom does the GSA report, and, vitally, to whom is the GSA accountable? Where in Scottish Government is the oversight?

The Chair of the Board and the Director have made public pronouncements that the GSA will be rebuilt. Given that this implies they have secured funds, do they have the authority to say this?

GSA implies it has the funds to commission a rebuilding. Where is the ‘rebuilding money’ coming from? There have been multiple references in the press that “the insurance” will pay for everything, but the terms of the insurance have not been made public. If not full replacement-cost coverage, what is the source of the balance of funds required?

Who reviewed and agreed the security of the project, including physical patrols, temporary sprinkler and fire-suppression systems etc.? Was the insurance company part of the risk-assessment?

Evidence now presented regarding the second fire states that sprinklers etc. were not installed after a discussion over fundraising for them – in other words, they were not left out by accident, they were left out by decision. The ramifications are damning. Who made the decision, and is it reflected in the GSA's meetings Minutes? I suggest making public all the GSA’s Building Committee meetings Minutes, to define the critical path of decision-making.

**Going forward**, who will receive and interrogate the coming Fire Services report on the causes of the second fire? It cannot simply be a report that is merely accepted – it needs to investigated beyond what the fire examiners reveal. A guddle of entities may read the report, but Government needs to step in, assume oversight and establish an action agenda:

**Who, specifically, is going to have command and control of what happens next?**

**The key question is this: who is actually going to be in charge of the future of the GSA and its Mackintosh heritage?**

**Historic safety issues:** In regards to the history of concerns about the risks to the Mackintosh Building, during my tenure as Director, we were in a state of perpetual paranoia about the fragility of the building and the risk of calamity. Scottish Education Department (SED) discussions over enhanced protection had always been about risk assessment e.g. new fire doors and sensors were installed, and during my tenure a rolling programme of protection initiatives - e.g. a huge
sum invested in making safe the electrics, new detection systems etc. Everyone in the building knew what such a vulnerable interior meant in terms of fire and flood, we did everything we could to be on guard. It was more than common sense, we were constantly fearful, hyper-vigilant, we took no risks, and the building as Mackintosh designed it was not an inherently risky place – fire exits were wide and easily traversed. But it needed constant watching. Let me say this, on a personal note: I often had to stay overnight, in the Mack - I reflect today on the possibility as I could have burned to death in a raging fire – but I considered it a safe haven. Every Director passed on to their successor a simple mantra: “The first priority is Protect the Building”.

The GSA stated that after the first fire ‘lessons would be learned’ - I gave them the benefit of some doubt. Obviously, if lessons were not learned, I want to know why. If the GSA says that they had no control over their own estate, who specifically and legally, had the duty of care of the building and the site? Thus, who ‘allowed’ the second fire to happen? Can the Committee lay to rest the rumours of social events being held in the uncompleted building – was this truly in contravention of codes? Did they use of the same infamous insulation that devastated the Grenfell Tower? There is endless social media and newspaper speculation, innuendo, accusations, misinformation - in terms of natural justice and probity, the entity best positioned to put a stop to this is the Committee, getting at The Truth.

These are hard questions. I would ask the Committee to understand they are especially hard and emotional for me ask as I am a part of the GSA’s history, I consider myself a friend of the School and the Mackintosh heritage, and was honoured to have worked at the School, in Glasgow, and in Scotland. But I have to know the truth. If these hard questions are not addressed, there will be a taint forever over this whole sorry business, over the innocent, over Glasgow, and the government. Excuse my use of the Patter, but what you absolutely do not want is my cynical Glasgow friends saying “they’re just gettin’ ready to cover their bahookies wi’ whitewash”. The Committee simply has to get to the bottom of all this, before and after the fire report, regain public trust and confidence.

**A long term plan:** There has been commentary suggesting that the Mackintosh building should be “taken away” from the School. This is posed today as ‘punishment’. But the issue of GSA as a both a college and ‘keeper’ of the Mackintosh Building is nothing new. At my request, The Scottish Office of yore and the SED talked about separating the GSA as a higher education college from its role as ‘protector’ of the Mackintosh heritage. Not ‘punishment’ but a good Idea. The problem was obvious: GSA was funded as the former, but had to address the latter, every day. SED funded GSA’s educational remit as a college, but its financial responsibility to the unique CRM heritage was not part of that remit. No publicly-funded college in Scotland was burdened with the responsibilities the GSA had - because of the Mackintosh building. SED had to stretch to help the GSA protect the most precious part of its estate – and it always did, finding monies from “outwith the box”. I was honoured to be Director of the GSA at an extraordinary time – Glasgow was washing its face, there was new energy afoot, the Mackintosh heritage was becoming an international draw, and young artists in the city and region were being given huge acclaim. Coping with a thickening stream of
respective visitors to the GSA was wonderful, but it was a very real problem. We consulted with the National Trust for Scotland for advice on how to safely progress thousands of visitors through the Mack. The issue, always, was how to strike the balance between being a working college within an internationally-recognized living work of Scottish art and architecture.

So the SED discussion focused on creating a Mackintosh-GSA Trust that legally and operationally would oversee the building, but not the academic mission, it would lease the building back to GSA for a peppercorn rent. The Scottish Office would reconfigure the GSA's capital / estates budget and transfer (“annual virement” were the words used) those funds that were specific to the maintenance of the Mackintosh building, into the Trust. This was important because once the building was ‘quasi-independent’ of SED, it could raise funds to add to an annual baseline SED subvention, and seek donations. This even got as far as my meeting with the Getty Foundation to review funding from their architectural preservation programme. I left the GSA in 1986-87 and the idea of creating the Trust faded. But, going forward, if that Trust were to be created today it could effectively place the future of the Mackintosh Building in the hands of trusted oversight.

I suggest there needs to be an over-arching guiding team led by an impartial but very senior executive, appointed directly by the First Minister, with the authority to craft a comprehensive plan for the GSA’s future. This is a matter of national significance. Such an action would restore confidence. With an appointed group of expert professionals acting as Trustees, under a respected new leader reporting to the First Minister, parliament could assure the public – and all those who revere Mackintosh – that a bright future was in the right hands, strong hands, safe hands.

What to do. I am firmly of a mind that the GSA should be rebuilt.

You have an empty shell. Put an oyster back.

I respectfully disagree with those who think that even a perfect facsimile would be ‘fake’. The GSA was about to show people the rebuild of the Mackintosh Library that had burned in the 2014 fire - I don’t think of that as a fake, and everyone was excited to see it. (The great cathedral rising today in Barcelona is being created from interpretations of rather hazy drawings by its architect, Gaudi, who died in 1926, leaving it far far from finished - but millions of people come to see and (literally) worship what he had envisioned, never calling it ‘fake’. There are many similar projects worldwide). In Glasgow we have everything we need - Mackintosh’s original drawings, laser-accurate measurements of the entire interior and exterior, a large cache of the fittings and furniture. So will a ‘new Mack’ have the lovely ethos and patina that a century of use gives a building? No. And it didn’t have it on the day it opened. We may today love and admire what Mackintosh achieved, with a hundred years of wear on it, but it’s worth remembering that when it was new and raw, it confused people and was widely detested – as a newspaper of the day asked “What are they building up on Garnethill – is it a barracks, a workhouse, a factory, or a temple of strange worship”. (All of them I think - it’s an art school). And a rebuilt Mack should function as it ever was – a working college of art and design, accredited by Glasgow University, with its main Mackintosh chambers available for structured tours.
What a triumph for contemporary Scottish skills this rebuilding will be – to re-create what Mackintosh designed (“designed” by the way, not “made” – he didn’t make anything, crafts-workers built the GSA). The rebuilding is not that complicated, and a new-build can incorporate the appropriate fire safety systems. Give a new generation of Scottish men and women the commission and the tools – skilled Scots hands can do this as brilliantly as in the past. I respectfully disagree that a new contemporary art school should be built on the Mack site. The world wants Mackintosh and his School of Art; Scotland, and Glasgow, need it back.

May I also note the wider community issue, because building the Mack is not the whole story, by far. The role of ‘the next GSA’ needs to be seen in the context of a plan for the future of Sauchiehall Street and the Garnethill drumlin. I call it a “Sauchie-hill Plan”. On my last visit I thought the area around the Art School simply looked awful, little better than a fast-food slum. What has happened to that gallus Glasgow pride in one of the most famous of its streets? There needs to be a comprehensive strategic plan that covers all of the hill, that sympathetically and rationally reviews the needs of the community, the impact of the educational facilities located on the hill and nearby, the merchant entities on Sauchiehall Street, the changing residential demographics, and the long-term future development of the whole of the environs of Garnethill.

The Committee has both the right and duty to ask these questions, and I am grateful as you address these issues on behalf of us all.