Culture, Tourism, Europe and External Affairs Committee

Glasgow School of Art

Written Submission on behalf of the Sauchiehall Street Inner Cordon Businesses and Garnethill Displaced Residents Group re the Mackintosh Building

Context

Many have described the Mack as a “living, breathing” building according it with all kinds of qualities which romanticise and anthropomorphise it. By contrast, for many of those who live and work in its lee, it’s simply another building which unknown to us was a timebomb with the power to devastate a community. Some are undoubtedly conflicted. They love the building, its history and its origins but it also represents a distant, selfish, inward-looking and thoughtless neighbour. Although obvious, it appears from recent history that it must nevertheless be said; it must be recognised by those who are responsible, that the building does not exist in a hermetically sealed bubble. It has immense power to impact its neighbours as we now know and the importance of the role of the management of the building is central to where we find ourselves today.

In the view of many local residents and businesses the Mack building had very little relevance to their daily lives before the 14 fire and even in the time after that event it only rose marginally in their consciousness. It was merely a symbol, a building which housed a distant and effete community. It drew 10’s of thousands of visitors each year, with around 1900 students attending the GSoA. That is a drop in the ocean in importance to the local economy by comparison with the mighty people - pulling power of the O2 ABC at some 500,000 -750,000 visitors annually and the circa 350,000 visitors to the CCA. These were the venues upon which many local businesses depended. The students who attend the GSoA undoubtedly bring life to the area and given the poor ratings achieved by the school it seems that the pulling power of the Mack is overriding to the student market. Obviously a dramatic sea change has occurred as the Mack building has become pivotal in an intensely stressful and traumatic life event for the neighbourhood.

The backdrop against which the events of 15th June occurred is crucial. Over the years the management of the building has been, to say the least, insensitive to their neighbours and by any measure they have not been caring, careful or involved in their community. Many Garnethill residents had already been living on a building site created by the works at the School of Art for 10 years. This began with the demolition of old buildings in Renfrew Street in 2009 and the subsequent construction of the Reid Building. These works merged into the fallout of the 2014 fire and the subsequent works. An undercurrent of resentment was already circulating in sections of the community.

A very long-standing resident writes, “The only interaction with local residents has been GSoA surveyors checking for movement/subsidence due to demolition/building works. We have never been included or invited to any of the degree shows or to see the buildings in the 28 years I’ve lived in Garnethill, though we’ve endured the disruption and noise every year”. The picture painted is of a selfish neighbour with little understanding of the
impact that they have on their community, pursuing their own agenda at every turn. GSoA has never at any point made an apology for the years of disruption to the surrounding community, especially those in Dalhousie and Renfrew Streets, according to residents.

The impact that the building has had on lives and livelihoods has been widely underestimated, not least by the GSoA Board, and not only in recent days. In particular the needs of the building have dictated the living and working environment for much of the community for the last 4 years. After the 14 fire a number of local businesses were directly impacted. There were street closures which disrupted the flow of traffic to their door, hindered deliveries and consequently sent turnover figures tumbling for some. Several businesses report that the turnover that was lost during that period has never recovered to previous levels, making the recent closures all the more concerning for the long term economic well-being of the area.

Through the years from 2009 onwards, the locality became all that neighbours dread, with lorries trundling over ill-suited roads and noise, dirt and disruption which lasted for years. However the warning bells that the 14 fire should have sounded were not heeded. The management self-confessedly learnt to engage with the wider world, garnering support for the rebuild from celebrities, philanthropists, former students and those intent on “doing their bit” for Glasgow. Unfortunately they failed to engage with the community on their doorstep. They appeared largely disinterested in anything other than the rebuild. All fundraising was focused on them, their needs and the Mack itself. As has since been discovered, residual funds remain from this effort and yet not one penny was earmarked for the local community who had lived through the fire and the rebuild. It simply seems not to have crossed their minds that during the 4 years of the library rebuild, while they were anticipating celebrating their momentous achievement, the neighbours were undergoing a protracted trial of their good will.

2014 Fire and lessons learned

This cavalier attitude seems to have been pervasive and systemic. The management were insouciant before and after the 14 fire in many respects. They appeared not to have undertaken a proper risk assessment in terms of the potential risk to their students. The SFR report available on Youtube https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=O8bjOmgllds describes a building which was a known danger to life and to the local community and yet the building was permitted to be used for all kinds of unsuitable purposes. Indeed it has already been stated before this Committee that prior to the 14 fire GSoA staff knew the risk to the students and themselves and apparently “joked” about it amongst themselves. It should have been learned from the 14 fire that those responsible for this building which was used for the education of young people had knowingly placed them in harm’s way on a daily basis. It should have been learned from the 14 fire that the building posed an enormous threat to the local community. Yet even armed with that knowledge, the overriding impetus was to recreate an exact replica of the library, implicitly encompassing all that had created the risk in the first instance.

This insouciant attitude of the Board seems to have extended to failing to recognise the value of the Mack and the treasures that it housed even after the 14 fire. To a reasonable man that experience and the knowledge gleaned would have been salutary. However, in
full knowledge of the risk to the remaining sections of the building and the risk that it posed to the community, under the pressures of Historic Environment Scotland that nothing could detract from the architectural and design integrity, effective precautions and building management did not kick in. No sprinkler system was forthcoming and if the first reports are to be believed, basics like rewiring were not undertaken. There was a culture of carelessness where freedom of artistic expression trumped the rules and by extension safety. Instead of being drawn up sharply by its bootstrings, the Board appeared to have foolishly relied on the hope that lightning would not strike twice. It did.

In answer to the question of were lessons learned after the 14 fire a resident wrote, “No, no lessons learned, and if you allow an analogy, a GSoA super tanker has crashed twice onto the rocks of the Garnethill Community causing a risk to life, and devastation to local residents and businesses. Now we’ve got the captain and crew who were either asleep or drunk at the wheel 2 times previously telling all and sundry that somehow they are going refloat and rebuild a burned out shell and take charge a third time, without learning any lessons from the first two catastrophes. Quite rightly the local community are outraged and nervous!”

2018 Fire

We do recognise that the management of the recent Mack fire has to some extent been in the hands of others. It was, however, in the gift of the board to be much more proactive in looking after their local community. Neither the Director, Tom Inns or the Chair of the Board, Muriel Gray, have attended any of the local community meetings in person. Representations by the community were made to the GSoA suggesting that showing empathy and possibly some regret for the damage that the building that they were responsible for has caused to their neighbours might be expedient and the “human” thing to do, albeit without actually accepting legal responsibility. The Board apparently did not agree and they remained behind firmly closed doors.

The community understands that the cause has yet to be determined and the legal implications of any statement which might suggest that the GSoA were responsible. However we also know that if you cause harm to another person, even by accident, most would at least take moral responsibility. To date there has been no suggestion of that being accepted. The Board have emerged to assert like petulant children that the Mack will be rebuilt at any cost, presumably from their lack of empathy that includes the human cost also. Indeed they have maintained “a backs to the wind” approach with their fingers in their ears. The Board are so out of tune with what is happening in the affected area that the Chair of the Board, Muriel Gray on social media recently called on the public to “get along to the CCA” to show support. That was supremely ill-advised because of course the CCA, the 18 businesses it houses, Cafe Saramago and several other businesses remain shut. She did not even have that basic information at her fingertips.

There is grave concern about the preservation of valuable information and evidence that may be required by others to prove negligence and/or criminal wrongdoing. There is a sense that in the rush to make safe and preserve what they can for the rebuild, that the building is being managed purely to serve the ends of GSoA and no consideration is being
given to the need for management of this vital evidence for the claims etc from the wider community.

Neighbouring businesses which were also wiped out by the fire such as the ABC and Campus have had to sit with no information about the destiny of their buildings through the downtaking process. GSoA to use their own words, work “hand in glove” with GCC and Historic Environment Scotland to devise the programme of works which they have not shared with the community or affected businesses despite requests. It is taken for granted that everyone will simply sit back while that is undertaken, brick by brick, in a slow and painstaking fashion.

Little mention has been made of the fact that the ABC frontage also has listed building status. The other damaged buildings, their owners and the businesses who operated out of them are subjugated to the needs of the Mack. Jobs and livelihoods have been sacrificed without a “by your leave” and may never return.

The Future of The Mack

Looking forward, in response to the question of what should happen in the future, there are many and various views. What is apparent to the community is that as a base point the GSoA need to recognise that if whatever building emerges is not to be a folly or a macabre monument to shame, that account needs to be taken of the environment in which it is situated and the views of the community. Those views reflect the variety seen across the wider city. Some say the “new” Mack must continue as a working art school, some see it as essential for it to be taken into public ownership perhaps with some teaching space and mixed use, some favour the thought of creating a Mackintosh district extending the vision presented by Roger Billcliffe or even as part of a larger cultural zone.

The community recognises that a building of some sort will one day stand on the Hill. What we do have consensus on is that those who are most impacted cannot simply be excluded from the decision making process nor ignored as it is built. We must live alongside it night and day and it is simply not reasonable given the dreadful events of recent history to expect that this can be imposed upon us. The overriding concern is that whatever is built must be safe. It is perfectly legitimate to discuss the preservation of our heritage for future generations but surely our generation also understands to our cost, the importance of building safety as a paramount consideration, not some afterthought to design perfection. This is a fact which by extension, Historic Environment Scotland must also be made to take on board as they do not sit with clean hands on the sidelines of the disasters which have befallen the Mack. Two fires and no lives lost must be considered lucky beyond belief. Fate can not be tempted a third time and so the Building must be built with every current safety precaution from start to finish. If the recent disaster is to have a legacy of any value it must be that lives must always trump heritage.

The second thing on which the community largely agrees is that the building must be properly managed. It cannot remain under the control of the same people who have watched it burn twice. Residents and businesses have found their recent experiences traumatic in the extreme, with a number having been obliged to seek counselling for PTSD. Some consider living and working in the shadow of any new Mack building too
hard and too risky a prospect and have made the decision already not to return or to leave at the earliest opportunity, no easy feat with property in the area blighted for the foreseeable future. This exodus is a very public vote of “no confidence” in the current Board. Whether the Mack is taken into public ownership, placed in the control of a body such as the Mackintosh Society or some new purpose - created body, the community do not trust the safety of their lives and livelihoods to the Glasgow School of Art’s current Board. They are simply not fit for purpose.