

Statement following the GSA's response to the Committee's report on the Mackintosh Building

The Committee would like to thank the Glasgow School of Art (GSA) for providing a further response to the Committee's report 'The Glasgow School of Arts' Mackintosh Building: The loss of a national treasure'.

Before addressing some of the more substantive points raised by the GSA in their response, the Committee considers that it would be helpful to clarify the remit of the Committee's inquiry. As stated in the report, the purpose of the inquiry was to examine the overall management and custodianship of the Mackintosh building and its collections. By understanding the wider context, the Committee hoped to draw on the lessons learned from the Mackintosh building to better protect historic buildings nationally.

As such, the scope of the inquiry did not consider the specific circumstances which may have caused the 2018 fire as this is a matter for the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service (SFRS). Therefore, the Committee's scrutiny of Kier Construction and their involvement in the renovation of the Mackintosh Building centred on the measures in place, contractual or otherwise, to safeguard the building during the construction phase of the project.

The Committee considers it regrettable that Kier Construction did not provide publicly all the materials requested by the Committee and accordingly the Committee was therefore not willing to consider them on the grounds of transparency. However, the Committee was satisfied that any potential negligence on the part of Kier Construction would be captured by the SFRS in the course of their investigation.

Contrary to Ms Gray's observations about Kier Construction and the Committee's scrutiny of them, it is not the role of a parliamentary committee to examine the suitability of a contractor involved in a project, particularly as the GSA had sole responsibility for the tendering process. When this matter was discussed at the Committee's meeting in November 2018, the GSA were satisfied the contract underpinning the tender was adequate and expressed no concerns about the contractor's suitability, despite concerns raised by GSA staff in written evidence.¹

It might also be helpful for those not familiar with the report to reiterate why the Committee decided to conduct this inquiry. In the immediate aftermath of the 2018 fire, the Committee received or was made aware of concerns raised by notable Mackintosh Scholars, GSA staff/alumni and local residents regarding the GSA's management of the building. Given the occurrence of two fires in a relative short space of time and that the GSA is a Higher Education Institution (HEI) in receipt of public funding, the Committee considered it appropriate to scrutinise their management of the building.

¹ Gordon Gibb, Written submission, 12 November, p.3.
https://www.parliament.scot/S5_European/Gordon_Gibb_GSA.pdf

The recommendations made in the Committee's report are based on the balance of evidence provided over the course of the inquiry taking cognisance of the views of a variety of parties with a range of experience and expertise.

The Committee is therefore extremely disappointed that the GSA's response seeks to question the credibility of the evidence provided by some of the witnesses. In reaching our conclusions, it is right that the Committee takes evidence from a range of experts, all of whom have significant experience in their respective fields. The Committee wishes to re-iterate its appreciation to all those who provided evidence to the Committee.

Notwithstanding the more technical evidence provided in relation to fire safety at the Mackintosh site, a number of GSA alumni (most notably two former Directors at the art school) expressed serious concerns about the GSA's ability to adequately manage the building, suggesting that serious consideration be given to it being placed in a trust. By drawing on a range of perspectives, the Committee's inquiry provided an opportunity for the GSA to reflect on their management of the building and rebuild relations with local community. It is therefore disappointing that the GSA make little or no reference to many of the recommendations contained in the report opting instead to attack the credibility of witnesses.

Given that two fires took place at the MacKintosh Building in a short period of time, and the serious concerns raised in oral and written evidence regarding the management of the building, the Committee considers it extraordinary that Ms Gray should consider that the function of the Committee's report should have been to compliment the GSA on their management of the building. Instead the Committee's focus was on learning lessons from the tragic events that have taken place at the Mackintosh building. The Committee fails to see any evidence from the GSA response that lessons have been learned within the GSA.

Central to the Committee's critique of the GSA's management of the Mackintosh building was the length of time taken to install the mist suppression system which was still not completed at the time of the 2014 fire. While the Committee accepts that the building was compliant with the relevant fire safety standards, after identifying severe risks to the building, it is arguable the GSA did not in terms of the balance of evidence taken by this Committee, do enough to safeguard the building. In oral evidence Ms Gray described the suppression system as an enhancement. However, the Committee maintains that the GSA having identified serious risks, and understanding both the cost and complexity of the chosen suppression system, should have considered what interim measures could have been implemented to ensure the building safety.

Although the time taken to install the mist suppression system does raise wider questions about the support available to custodians of historic buildings nationally the GSA were acutely aware of both risks to the building and the challenges surrounding the installation of the suppression system. Indeed, this point is also made in the supporting evidence provided by the GSA in their most recent response.

The paper² produced by the GSA and Page/Park architects in 2009, sets out the GSA's concerns with regards to fire safety and in particular the need for enhanced funding support for the Mackintosh building and also for the wider protection of Scotland's national cultural heritage. Many of these observations, made by the GSA ten years ago, compliment the recommendations made in the Committee's report. It is therefore disappointing that the GSA did not provide these materials at an earlier stage nor were they able to articulate what steps they took to engage with Scottish Ministers or Historic Scotland with regard to this issue.

Finally, the Committee notes the GSA's comments regarding the section of the report which refers to cladding rather than insulation. While the Committee recognises the term cladding isn't directly relevant to the Mackintosh building, this section of the report reflects aspects of the wider debate concerning the use of certain insulation materials. Specifically, at the Mackintosh building, PIR insulation was used in selective areas of roof refurbishments or reconstruction.³ The purpose of this section of the report was to highlight the concerns raised in evidence regarding these materials and the Committee recommended that the Scottish Government, HES and SFRS consider whether this type of material poses an unacceptable fire risk to historic buildings.

The Committee remains of the view that following the conclusion of the SFRS report, the Scottish Government should establish a public inquiry with judicial powers into the 2014 and 2018 fires at the Glasgow School of Art. The inquiry should also examine the risks posed by fire in historic buildings nationally and the ability of custodians to manage these properties, drawing on the lessons learned from the GSA.

The Committee is awaiting a formal response from the Scottish Government to the Committee's report and also the publication of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service's report into the 2018 fire. Once the Committee has had the opportunity to consider all the responses to the Committee's report and the SFRS report then the Committee intends to take further evidence from the GSA.

² GSA, Written Submission, The Mackintosh Conservation & Access Project The Importance of Fire Suppression,
https://www.parliament.scot/S5_European/Inquiries/CTEEA_GSA_PageParkArchitects_MistSuppression.pdf

³ Written Submission, Page/Park, 8/11/18, p.1.
https://www.parliament.scot/S5_European/General%20Documents/3.2.2_PPIInsulationQuestions.pdf