In the light of the presentations already made to the committee with respect to the Glasgow School of Art fires, the current status of the building and the way forward, I feel that I may have a special insight which may be of value in expanding the knowledge base of the committee and in enhancing the understanding of some of the underlying issues and the future possibilities. I am a part time member of staff, working in the professional sector, but I am also a practising architect, former Vice-chair of the Architect’s Registration Board, an ARB Investigations Panel member, and an Expert Witness in the field of professional liability, building failures and claims analysis. Like most staff and alumni, I have a powerful sense of connection with the building, mourn its loss and ask why such a failure was allowed to occur. I have summarised the background and areas in which I may be able to provide assistance.

- When I trained to be an architect in the school and worked in the Mackintosh Building, all of the staff and students were aware of what a privilege it was to be allowed to use it.
- The building was designed to be a school, containing all the functions of a school and functioning perfectly for the modelling of light for art.
- How the school was formed, and the story of its architect are part of Scotland’s history and its identity. The reverence for Mackintosh’s masterwork, not really appreciated during his life, increases as more is understood about it.
- Every part of this building serves as an artistic and architectural education in itself, because it is so well designed and so culturally significant.
- We all felt honoured to work in the building and everyone knew every part of it by the smell of clay and oil paint. That patina was destroyed by the second fire. That does not mean to say that it cannot return.
- The building was a tinderbox, but it was not a fire trap. The building may have burned down, but its layout did not endanger its users. It was well designed for escape. All occupants could be out within two minutes of an alarm.
- The last four years’ intake of architecture students do not know the building at all. They are missing something considerable. Even so, in a show of hands at a meeting last week, at least 95% wanted to see Mackintosh’s masterpiece rebuilt.
- If the school is reincarnated as anything other than in its original role, we are short-changing those we have a duty to imbue with our artistic culture and reference points.
- It is entirely possible for the new building to be laid out exactly as the original, finished in the same materials and be made safe to use and robustly protected against the spread of fire.
- If a stronger priority had been in the protection of our heritage and what we are, simple measures would have been taken by those responsible to protect this vulnerable building in the most dangerous part of its life.
- Perhaps Mackintosh’s building could return as a “school within the school”, separately resourced and managed by a specialist team, with the student body all experiencing it, in circulation, maintaining its scale and diversity of use.
In the future the maximisation of the benefit for the student body, the building, Glasgow and Scotland must be of a greater priority than the needs of the body corporate that shares a name with Mackintosh’s masterwork.

Main text

I am a former student of the Glasgow School of Art. I trained to be an architect in the school and throughout that training I worked in the Mackintosh Building (the Mac). For the first two years of my training our studios were based on the top floor of the East wing. It turns out that these studios were located directly above the apparent seat of the second fire. I regularly attended lectures in the Mac lecture theatre below the library and I would go and research architecture in the library itself. All of us in the architecture department got to know the building very well indeed because it was our workplace, our historical research reference point, a statement of our local identity as people, our educational playground and our inspiration to achieve. We would work in it up to 16 hours day, usually until the janitor threw us out. Our professors, Andy McMillan and Isi Metzstein would declare in tutorials, “If you want to see how to resolve that issue, go and see how Charlie did it”, referring to Mackintosh and the Mac, and meaning that every part of that building has been laid out in plan, section and elevation to demonstrate all the different ways in which space, finishes and methods of construction could be used. Every one of us loves that building and we always remained fully aware of how important it was to be in our local and internationally recognised school building and what a privilege it was to be allowed to work in it.

The Mac was designed to be a school, containing all the functions of a school. It was built in two halves, ten years apart, as funds allowed, by the same architect, who changed his design over that period. Part of the second half extended over the top of the first, and the “Hen Run” made that linkage between the two. Ironically one of the most iconic interior images of the school is in the stair that bypasses the formerly external windows of the Mackintosh Room and then the first-floor studios. It is actually a fire stair, added to provide an exit from those new top floor studios that I later trained within. Mackintosh was so particular and so difficult, in trying to achieve the perfection that resulted, that by the time that the building was finished he was persona non grata with the board that inherited the masterpiece. It was only when Mackintosh’s work started to achieve international recognition, from Central Europe, that the school itself started to take note. That recognition remains and the reverence for Mackintosh’s masterwork increases, as more is understood about it. Mackintosh was first and foremost an architect/masterbuilder who understood space, light and context. That work of architecture went on to influence architectural development throughout Europe and America. Those who have in the past branded him a stylist may not understand the architecture, how it works and what its reference points are.

Of course, I speak as a fan of Mackintosh but also as a teacher of architecture, and my second level of interest is as a part time member of staff of the Mackintosh School of Architecture. As an official representative of the school I could obtain access to most of the Mackintosh building to do my job. I would encounter parts of the building previously unseen by me, that just happened to exhibit some element that I had seen written up in an international journal. I would also be confronted by
Mackintosh’s little games in the stained glass inserts into the doors, or find the references to Glasgow’s coat of arms throughout, or the inverted Scots vernacular references, or the code in the geometric tiled level indicators, or find the ad-hoc design of twisted beam ends that sent the contractors out on strike back in 1908, or gain some additional insight into the European influences at the east end and the Japanese influences at the west. Walking around I would note that every space in the building has its own identity and purpose, I might just marvel in how the strong light from the south is modelled and how the view of Glasgow is captured and, in the biggest studios, be amazed be how the even spread of light from the north is captured by windows of an unheard of scale at the time of the design, or I could walk outside and see how the proportion of this massive building respects the scale of the fabric of the city and all the time I think “There is no part of this building that is not in itself an artistic and architectural education.”

However, as a teacher and alumnus, an amateur historian and an architect, the biggest impact upon me, prior to the fires, was when I asked for the key to the Mackintosh Lecture Theatre and the Janitor would look me sternly in the eye, with an implied “Make sure it is returned when you are finished with it, and make sure you switch off the lights.” I would choke with pride very time, and I could never get over having the original key and being personally responsible for a part of that building; to prepare it, lecture in it, switch of those historic lights and lock it up again. We all knew every part of that building by the smell of clay and oil paint and we knew the scratches and the scrapes, along with the architecture. Of course, even if it is all restored, it is that originality and that patina of history and use that is gone forever. And whilst there is still collective mourning of terrible loss by all like me, that does not mean to say that it cannot return.

There have been questions about its design. I would answer these by saying that as it is laid out, the design of the building works near perfectly in terms of fire escape. There are two fire stairs at the ends, both of which exit to adjacent ground level without interruption throughout the entire building, and there is a central main staircase which is separated from both means of escape. The travel distances to the fire stairs are not excessive and the routes are easy to follow. All the fire routes excepting the basement are naturally lit, and at both ends of the basement fire route there is natural light to follow. The building may have been a tinderbox, as many of that age are. However, it was not a fire trap. The building may not have been able to save itself, but it did not, by its design, endanger its users, all of whom could be out of the building and safe within two minutes of the fire alarm sounding, no matter where they may be within it.

My final insight is as a teacher hearing the views of this year’s intake of architecture students, all of whom were hoping to enjoy and experience the building in the near future. At a meeting of all architecture students some announced to the room that they did not know the building at all, and felt little for it, because it had not been open or usable in the last four years, since the first fire. Some worried that the focus was being taken away from them, because of this all-prevalent and unknown burnt out burden being the cause of their displacement from their own studios and the work that they were at the school to do, because currently the whole campus is closed. Nevertheless, in a show of hands, at least 95% wanted to see Mackintosh’s
masterpiece rebuilt, as it can be, from the original plans and all the surveys gathered over the years.

Therefore, I feel deeply sorry that those students will not have the opportunity of engagement with the building during their education, but I sincerely hope that they can experience the building as a working school when it is done. It is my belief that if the school is reincarnated as anything other than in its original role, we are short-changing those we have a duty to imbue with our artistic culture and reference points. The point about Mackintosh’s design is it worked, and it still works, because there are immovable truths in it, which do not age, and from which its student body, and by reputation, the school and Glasgow itself are enhanced. I would disagree with those who say that it cannot return as a school, or that the new building cannot be made safe. It is entirely possible for the new building to be laid out exactly as the original, finished in the same materials and be made safe to use and robustly protected against the spread of fire. In the first one hundred and fifteen years since the first half opened, there were no fires, and in most of that time there was no concept of formal health and safety. All the staff and students in that time knew how to look after this important building.

However, whilst I strongly advocate its return to use as part of Glasgow School of Art, perhaps it needs to be taken out from under the mantle of the current priorities of the directorate and the board, which to the staff appear to be physical expansion of the campus, the reduction in resource cost and attraction of international fees. I would not disagree with those who say that it should not be redeveloped or run by those individuals in charge during the two fires. More than once since June we have heard it said by those in charge (and I paraphrase) that “we have lost a building, but we still have many others”. I would suggest that if a stronger priority of the Art School directorate or the board had been in the protection of our heritage and what we are, as much as in the expansion of the school in other areas, simple measures would have been taken to protect this incredibly vulnerable building in the most dangerous part of its life. Although we have not seen the report on the cause of the second fire, and therefore cannot yet determine who or what may bear responsibility, we know that both fires were preventable. This is not just about health and safety, but about the much older construction issue, always written into contract documents, called “Protection of the works in all stages”. One has to ask why the contractor’s own offices were in the building when it was in an unsafe state, and why no effective building protection measures were prioritised by the contractor or by those in the school in charge of this project. I do not believe that enough lessons were learned from the first fire. In the GSA review of the fire report, management shortcomings were not addressed at all. Therefore, it is my view that those responsible for the recent stewardship of this part of our national heritage, given what could have been learned after the first fire, must surely bear a measure of responsibility for the fact that the second fire was not able to be prevented, contained or controlled at all.

Looking to the future, perhaps Mackintosh’s building could return as a “school within the school”, with every group of students, in circulation, of combined ages and not just the first-year students as was proposed, getting to experience the building in part of their curriculum and share the design ethos, scale, diversity of use and Scottish and international cultural experience that it offers, and perhaps participation could be widened so that more of our citizens could experience working in it. It could be
separately resourced and managed by a specialist organisation separate from GSA, working in the building, concentrating upon it and resourcing it with staff who are passionate about teaching and the dissemination of their own knowledge all set in the context of the knowledge embedded in the building itself. The current expansion plans of the Glasgow School of Art could rest elsewhere, and GSA the academic institution could perhaps live more harmoniously with GSA by Mackintosh as a result. This would allow the building to benefit from the care it would receive, the student body to gain first-hand the joy of working in it, and Glasgow and Scotland to know that its proud heritage is actually being cared for, used and loved again.

In conclusion it is my view that the needs of this building must be of a greater priority than the needs of the body corporate that shares a name with Mackintosh’s masterwork.

Gordon Gibb
Director of Professional Studies
Mackintosh School of Architecture