The Future for Mackintosh’s Glasgow School of Art

Written submission by Professor Alan Dunlop

The purpose of this paper is to assist the Culture, Tourism, Europe and External Affairs Committee in its inquiry into the Mackintosh School of Art Building Fire of 2018. It details my analysis of some of the issues pertinent to the inquiry and the statements contained therein are personal and not connected with any organisation. I have no conflict of interest.

I am a practising architect with a portfolio of award-winning buildings, including: The Radisson SAS in Glasgow, Hazelwood School, Sentinel, and Glasgow Central Station. I am a passionate educator and visiting Professor of Architecture at Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen and the University of Liverpool. I held the Chair of Contemporary Architectural Practice at Liverpool University, The Chair of Architecture at Kansas State University, and the Mahlum Endowed Lecturer at Washington State University. I have taught architecture and design at schools in China and throughout the UK for over 30 years. I have written extensively on architecture and culture in the press and in professional publications. I am an alumnus of the Glasgow School of Art.

Summary:

1. The country has lost a cultural icon in the Charles Rennie Mackintosh Art School Building.
2. There are questions about the causes of the loss and about liability and culpability—answers to these are outstanding and reliant upon specialised investigation and reporting. At present, the evidence is unclear.
3. A decision appears to have been made to “rebuild -brick by brick”.
4. There is no transparency about how this decision was made, or if alternatives were given authentic consideration.
5. The funding for the decision, or indeed, the testing of the validity of the assumptions upon which it has been made, are highly speculative.
6. No formal public consultation or debate about the long-term strategy for the building has been undertaken.
7. There appears to be no overarching strategy, and no master plan for the redevelopment of the environs of the building, especially the ABC O2 Arena and the entire frontage of Sauchiehall Street.
8. The issue is of national importance and worthy of public debate and this inquiry is much welcome.

I intend to expand on each of the above statements and offer my views in the spirit of openness. I do not have access to some matters of fact and I hope to see these in the fullness of time when the Fire Investigators produce their report. I would like it placed on record, that previous reports on the first fire were heavily redacted and therefore limited in their utility. I hope that a different, more open approach will be taken to this latest event.

1. The country has lost a cultural icon in the Charles Rennie Mackintosh Art School Building:
Mackintosh’s School of Art is Glasgow’s and arguably, Scotland’s most important 20th century building, designed by an architect considered to be the country’s greatest. The Glasgow School of Art was very much a working building, housing a prestigious school of art until the fire in 2014. Moreover, what no fire can erase is the 108 years of history, the spirit and goodwill of the thousands of students, artists, and architects who have worked there, and who, consciously or subconsciously, will have been influenced by Mackintosh’s essence.

Charles Rennie Mackintosh was a superb architect, a gifted artist, and above all, a dynamic innovator. He believed that the artist "cannot attain to mastery in his art unless he is endowed in the highest degree with the faculty of invention". He rejected all “copyists” and wrote—“How absurd it is to see modern churches, theatres, banks, museums, exchanges, municipal buildings, art Galleries etc, etc made in imitation of Greek temples”.

The committee asked how Mackintosh might see this debate. It is my contention that his writings, lectures and the sum of his lifetime’s creativity suggest that he would not approve of pastiche or replication and that he would be appealing to the new.

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3. A decision appears to have been made to “rebuild -brick by brick”.

I content that, if you did “rebuild brick by brick” that the replacement would be a lie. It might look like the old building but we all know that it would have to meet a whole long list of contemporary building requirements, quite rightly, that include; access, environmental, structural, safety and security that Mackintosh did not have to address as a part of his creative agenda.

As for the ease with which the building can be replaced, I draw the committee’s attention to the country’s track record on major buildings. The parliament building was ten times over budget, delayed and has ongoing maintenance issues; the new V&A in Dundee has been delivered three years late at over double the budget—just to name a couple.

4. There is no transparency about how this decision was made, or if alternatives were given authentic consideration.

There is little evidence of authentic debate. I see much danger of group think —of exclusion—quite literally of anyone with a dissenting opinion and scant regard, if not disrespect for the people around the school -the impact on their immediate, current, long term lives. There are people talking of their unique grief and loss. Important decisions, however, should not be based on high emotion-that might work for a limited amount of time, or in extreme situations- as in the shocked aftermath of the fire, but if logical evidence and alternative views are ignored then the collective decisions and the end outcome will be poorer. People are moved by emotion and it must be given its place, but the best decision making comes from taking time to consider matters and from giving space to those with disparate and perhaps uncomfortable views. There should be a proper time to mourn, yes, but no precipitate rush to clone.
Considered dissent has until now been ignored or dismissed, including my own. For the committee’s benefit, and to show the width of alternative expert opinion, I point to:

- William J. Curtis, the internationally respected architectural critic and writer and expert on the work of Mackintosh, who was invited to deliver the keynote address at the centenary of the Mackintosh Building titled, ‘Materials of the Imagination: the Glasgow School of Art by Charles Rennie Mackintosh. He writes:

“But worse was to follow: in the summer of 2014 there was the first fire, apparently started when a student project went wrong, and a projector caught fire under the influence of a chemical foam. Such materials had no place in wooden parts of the old building at all, especially when less inflammatory studio spaces for experimental work were available elsewhere. In an article about this tragedy in the Architectural Review (July 2014) entitled “Burning Questions” I wondered, was this just an accident? Was there responsibility at some level? Why had the sprinkler system in the old building not been completed when millions had been spent on the annex? Quickly such questions were smothered under political rhetoric and the promise of major public funding to restore the building, as if that were really possible. The best one could hope for was a competent pastiche of the Library and other damaged areas.”

2018 -Reports are emerging that a sprinkler system was partly installed but not yet functioning, almost a repeat of the first fire of 2014; that no alarms went off and that it was bystanders who first saw flames leaping out of the roof. Temporary re protection systems for restoration sites are easily available but ….it seems that none were installed. It is important to establish precisely how, when and where the fire got going. There should be a full public inquiry but already there are politicians denying the need for this. What do they wish to hide?

As for Mackintosh’s majestic masterpiece the Glasgow School of Art, I fear that this time it has left this earth forever more, body and soul.”

- Professor George Cairns, Queensland University of Technology and International Research Fellow at the Center for Policy and Futures Studies, in Chicago, completed his PhD thesis on the “Glasgow School of Art: an architectural totality”. He wrote:

“…key original features of the spatial design and aesthetic could not be reinstated, notably the open visual and physical flow of space through the corridors and stairwells. In this day and age, buildings are required to have stairwells that are physically separated to contain smoke and ensure a safe exit from upper floors in the case of a fire. My argument against recreating the Mackintosh relies on looking at what cannot be reinstated. As outlined above, the original spatial composition of open corridors and stairs cannot be restored. With immense sadness, I say it is time to let go of the building, to remember it fondly through the artefacts and records that show it as it was at all stages throughout its history.

We should honour the building and its architects (Mackintosh, Honeyman and Keppie) with something new that serves both as a working art school – which the original did so splendidly throughout its life – and as a repository for these records and precious memories.”
• John Byrne, an internationally respected Scottish artist, who will be well known to the committee, trained at the school. He insists that, even before this year’s fire, that the Mackintosh Building was “no longer in use as a working art school (neither students nor staff can actually draw).” He says it is irrelevant whether the art school is rebuilt, but that what matters is how and what students are taught inside. “I really don’t care if they rebuild it or not – the soul of the art school is completely gone, never to return.” Byrne said the ethos of the school had been lost.

5. The funding for the decision, or indeed, the testing of the validity of the assumptions upon which it has been made, are highly speculative.

Much has been made of the art school’s contention that the insurers will pay. The Guardian also reported Muriel Gray estimating that the project would take 4 to 7 years and cost around £100m, to be made up by insurance cover and a major private fundraising drive. Let us hope that this is so. However, at this point there is absolutely no surety, and until a full investigation as to the causes of the fire has been undertaken, it is unlikely that any insurer will make such a generous settlement. As in all insurance contracts there will be matters of liability and accountability to be established. My own view is that there will be an inevitable call on the public purse.

6. No formal public consultation or debate about the long-term strategy for the building has been undertaken.

7. There appears to be no overarching strategy, and no master plan for the redevelopment of the environs of the building, especially, the ABC O2 and the entire frontage of Sauchiehall Street.

The vision of Glasgow City Council’s “Development and Regeneration Services Service Plan” is primarily to “drive, direct and deliver economic growth.” Disappointingly, it is absent any overarching vision for architecture much as it was in Mackintosh’s time, although there was a City Architect in his day. Architecture is clearly a matter of great civic interest yet its role in Scottish society is marginalised.

8. The issue is of national importance and worthy of public debate and this inquiry is welcome.

Conclusion:

The Mackintosh’s School of Art building is lost. There is an opportunity to properly honour Mackintosh by considering alternatives that reflect his extraordinary legacy. There should be no rush to replicate his masterpiece.

I suggest respectfully that a full public debate is necessary to include the option of an international competition to design a new art school.

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