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The Battle for 'the Mack'

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The Battle for ‘the Mack’

Friday, May 23, 2014 was a busy day at The Glasgow School of Art (GSA); the Mackintosh building was teeming with tutors and students getting ready for the annual degree show (fig. 1). Early reports suggest that a faulty projector in the basement started a fire that turned into a raging blaze around noon. By the end of the day, Charles Rennie Mackintosh’s purpose-built art school (1897–98 and 1907–09) had suffered extensive damage, its beautiful façade was marred by bent metal, smouldering wood, and charred sandstone (fig. 2).^[1] One of Europe’s architecturally most significant and beloved buildings was in jeopardy. Heroic efforts by members of staff and an immediate response by Glasgow’s fire services prevented the loss of any human life and contained the fire to the building’s west wing. As a result, approximately 90% of the structure and 70% of its content were saved. Sadly, the west wing housed one of the building’s most important interiors: Mackintosh’s famous library conceived as a total-work-of-art complete with custom made furniture, light fixtures, and book cases (fig. 3). This space as well as the recently restored hen run—a glazed corridor on the top floor named for its historic connection of the women’s Studio 58 in the west wing with the building’s only female toilet in the east—were completely destroyed (figs. 4, 5).^[2]



Fig. 1, North façade of Charles Rennie Mackintosh’s The Glasgow School of Art, ca. 1910.

[\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 2, Jeff J. Mitchell, Charred Remains of north façade, May 23, 2014.

[\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 3, The Mackintosh Library, The Glasgow School of Art.

[\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 4, The Hen Run, The Glasgow School of Art.

[\[view image & full caption\]](#)

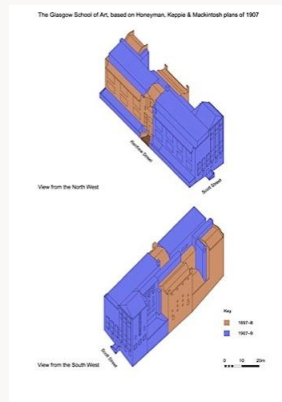


Fig. 5, Axonometrics from Northwest and Southwest showing building phases.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)

In his 1936 ode to modernism, Nikolas Pevsner celebrated Mackintosh as “the European counterpart of Frank Lloyd Wright and one of the few forerunners of the most ingenious juggler with space now alive: Le Corbusier.”^[3] Pevsner was particularly taken by the Art School’s west façade, which, in his eyes, showcased Mackintosh’s mature, poetic handling of volumes and solids.^[4] Little has changed in this assessment and more than 20,000 people have visited the A-listed building every year since to pay homage to this masterpiece of modern architecture. A UK-wide poll by RIBA (Royal Institute of British Architects) taken in 2009 voted ‘the Mack’ (as Glaswegians lovingly refer to it) “Best Building of the past 175 Years”, ahead of London’s St. Pancras Station and Paris’ Centre Pompidou.^[5]

The building’s protracted conception and financially fraught realization has been widely documented by architectural historians.^[6] But a most recent initiative spearheaded by Professor Pamela Robertson, Senior Curator at the University of Glasgow’s Hunterian Museum and Art Gallery, warrants particular mention because her four-year, Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC)-funded research project “Mackintosh Architecture: Context, Making and Meaning” generated an invaluable open-access website that catalogues all of Mackintosh’s known architectural projects.^[7] [Please see Sarah Sik’s review of this website elsewhere in this issue.] The project engenders important new insights into Glasgow’s turn of the last century architectural landscape and will surely stimulate new research. So the building continues to be relevant on multiple fronts, in terms not only of the cultural tourism it generates, but also of the academic research it inspires.

The Glasgow School of Art was founded in 1845 as part of a nationwide effort to improve the quality of the applied arts and design through practical as well as theoretical education (later known as the South Kensington system or ‘teaching by example’).^[8] By the 1890s, the GSA was one of Britain’s leading art schools and its dynamic headmaster Francis H.—”Fra”—Newbery (1855–1946) pushed for a purpose-built home on the now famous rectangular lot on Renfrew Street.^[9] A design competition was advertised in 1896 and the architectural firm of John Honeyman & Keppie famously won with a design by one of their assistants, none other than Charles Rennie Mackintosh (1868–1928).^[10] The budget was very tight (£14,000) and the building work ground to a halt in 1899, with only the center and east wing completed.

Construction resumed in 1907 and a slightly re-designed west wing was finished by 1909. This is the very structure that sustained such heavy damage during the recent fire. The west and south façades paid testimony to Mackintosh's enduring love for medieval Scottish tower houses such as Crathes Castle in Aberdeenshire (fig. 6).^[11] Three impressive oriel windows made of small panes of leaded glass drew up the entire western façade, not only illuminating Mackintosh's double-height library, but also flagging the space as one of the building's key interiors (fig. 7). Mackintosh experimented with light effects throughout his architectural career, and his interiors are famous for their elegant atmospheres generated by such subtle manipulations of light sources and window orientations.



Fig. 6, Crathes Castle, Aberdeenshire, Scotland, 1553–96.

[\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 7, Annan, Library wing, ca. 1910.

[\[view image & full caption\]](#)

The now lost Mackintosh library represented one of the School's most treasured interiors and in recent years, efforts had been made to conserve its content by limiting access hours. However, like all of the other spaces in the building, the library remained a functioning interior and thus part of the daily lives of many generations of GSA students and staff. Much has been written about the library, such as James Macaulay's wonderful recent interpretation of the space as being conceived around an iconography of the Tree of Knowledge.^[12] Figure 3 shows the library's double-height, balconied interior clad in timber (primarily stained Scotch pine) and furnished with carefully designed functional chairs, tables, bookcases, balusters, and what strikes us today as incredibly modern light fixtures suspended from the timber ceiling. Despite its often challenging temperature (due to the vast windows), this interior invited students to be enveloped in the warmth of knowledge and scholarship. Tragically, more than 100 original pieces of Mackintosh furniture were lost in the fire.

Structurally, the library, the bookstore housed in the second story balconies, and a storage space above (formerly a studio for flower painting) were severely damaged by the fire because its timber beams, cladding, and furniture fed the flames ascending from the basement. Although the GSA's main library is housed in a separate building, the Mackintosh library held many precious items from Special Collections that are now lost and will be virtually impossible to replace. As one of Britain's most progressive art schools (then and now), the GSA library subscribed to virtually all of the important international art and design journals published between circa 1890 and the 1930s, also lost in the fire.^[13] Devastatingly, they went up in flames with the rest of the interior. The GSA librarians keep an updated list of items they are trying to replace, and it makes for depressing reading indeed.^[14]

Writing this text brings back many sad memories of that Friday afternoon on May 23. Watching the flames roar through the west wing, voraciously devouring anything in their way before from the rooftop, brought tears to many eyes. Distressed staff, students, and onlookers witnessed thick plumes of smoke billowing out of the building all afternoon (figs. 8, 9). More fire engines arrived and police cordoned off Renfrew Street, moving an ever-increasing crowd of bystanders away from the burning building. We now know that 200 firefighters tackled the blaze and executed a carefully designed salvage plan, which at one point involved the creation of a 'human wall' to prevent the fire from spreading beyond the west wing. Had it not been for their courage and recognition of the significance of the building and its contents, the damage would have been much greater.^[15] The GSA's archives and collections suffered some losses, primarily water damage from extinguishing the blaze, but much of the School's important paper and textile archives as well as the Mackintosh Museum, the Director's Office, the Board Room, the Mackintosh Room, and the Furniture Gallery survived intact.^[16] Miraculously, the infrastructure of Mackintosh's lecture theatre in the west wing's basement, where the fire started, survived (fig. 10).



Fig. 8, West wing with flames coming out of the Mackintosh Library.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 9, Flames coming out of the Hen Run on the south façade.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 10, Bedford Lemere, Mackintosh Lecture Theater, The Glasgow School of Art.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)

Scottish Fire and Rescue Services handed the building back to the GSA a week after the fire and salvage efforts immediately went underway.^[17] Experts from Historic Scotland led the salvage, storage, and restoration efforts. Specialist stonemasons started removing damaged stonework, marking each piece before it was transported to Historic Scotland's Glasgow Cathedral Depot. The GSA's digital design studio laser-scanned the western gable and the three-dimensional plan generated from this scan will hopefully aid its reconstruction. When the building was deemed safe to enter, GSA staff and volunteers from cultural institutions across Scotland immediately decanted its holdings and a human chain moved paper archival materials into buildings where they could be dried and if necessary conserved (figs. 11, 12).^[18] The interview with Dr. Robyne Calvert below provides fascinating insights into the logistics and emotional reverberations of these early days after the fire.



Fig. 11, 'Human Chain' moving paper archives from the Mack into the McLelland Galleries.

[\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 12, Textile Archives drying in temporary storage.

[\[view image & full caption\]](#)

The GSA's director, Professor Tom Inns, estimates that restoration costs will run between £20 to £35 million and that it will take up to four years to complete the work—12–18 months for the east wing and 36–48 months for the heavily damaged west wing.^[19] Insurance will cover part of these costs but extra funds will be required, and a total of £15 million has been committed by the UK and Scottish governments to date. In addition, the GSA launched The Mackintosh Appeal, a high profile fundraising campaign for which Inns and his board were able to secure the support of famous faces such as the actors Brad Pitt (a self-professed Mackintosh fan) and Peter Capaldi (a GSA graduate) who both serve as trustees.^[20] The overall spirit is one of cautious optimism that the Mackintosh building and its interiors will rise from the ashes.

We should also keep in mind though that May 23 was the final deadline for graduating fine arts students and many lost their artworks, research, and documentation. After the initial relief that nobody had been hurt in the fire, this realization hit hard and for a brief moment, the fine arts degree show hung in the balance. But Alistair Payne, head of the School of Fine Art, came up with the inspired idea of asking each fine art student to think about a single image that could encapsulate their intended work for the degree-show. The result was a powerful display of 102 equal-sized digital prints in Glasgow's McLellan Galleries, an abandoned nineteenth-century exhibition space located but a stone's throw from the Mack. During the opening night, the atmosphere in the Galleries was laden with emotion and everyone admired the students' stupendous resilience. The GSA, supported by the Scottish Government, has since set up the

appropriately named Phoenix Bursary (£750,000) to help graduating students to create a new body of work over the next fifteen weeks that will hopefully enable them to launch their artistic careers.[\[21\]](#)

Much has happened since the fire first spread its trail of destruction across the Mack but in the end, Glasgow's resolute spirit, combined with an unexpected response from the international community, prevailed. As a design historian, I was devastated by the loss of the Mackintosh library and its contents. When I first moved to Glasgow four years ago to take up a lectureship at the University, I was so thrilled to be working in the UK's only Art Nouveau city.[\[22\]](#) It is well known that during the 1890s, Britain responded in a rather hostile manner to the potential 'invasion' of this 'feminized' new art from the Continent.[\[23\]](#) Mackintosh and his circle paid no heed to these scaremongers and developed a distinctly Scottish modern style that chimed with progressive developments across Europe and focused on the Vienna Secession.[\[24\]](#) One of my research areas is Vienna 1900, so working in Mackintosh's city is an inspiration and privilege. My professional and scholarly connections to the GSA are manifold, but until May 23, I was not aware of my emotional attachment to the Mack. The tragic event prompted the sharing of memories amongst colleagues, friends, and strangers alike, which serves as a powerful testimony to the emotional power of Mackintosh's architecture. My neighbors, both in their late eighties and graduates of the Art School, burst into tears when they heard about fire. They could not believe that the Mack had survived the bombings of the Second World War, during which time they both served as night-time lookouts on the roof for German bomber planes, only to be destroyed by a faulty piece of equipment.

The fire could not have come at a worse time. Only a day prior, the GSA had won the UK's prestigious AJ 100 Building of the Year award for its recently completed Reid Building designed by Steven Holl and Chris McVoy, and located right across the Mackintosh building on Renfrew Street (fig. 13). This had been a difficult building project, beleaguered by disputes and setbacks, and everybody was celebrating the final completion of phase one of the GSA's ambitious Campus Development Programme. And then . . .



Fig. 13, Steven Holl, Reid Building and the Mack before the fire.

[\[view image & full caption\]](#)

As I write this text, Glasgow just hosted one of the most successful Commonwealth Games in the event's history and spirits across the city are high. Looking back at the events set in motion by the combustion of a single projector fills me with mixed emotions. On the one hand, I still cannot imagine that we lost the Mackintosh library and its irreplaceable contents. But on the other hand, the tireless battle to save the Mack, fought on so many different fronts, has imbued me with a strange and unexpected sense of pride to be calling Glasgow my adopted

hometown. The writer and current chairwoman of the GSA board Muriel Gray said in one of her interviews about the fire that “Mackintosh was not famous for working in precious materials. It was his vision that was precious [. . .]”^[25] This is certainly true and it justifies the rebuilding of the west wing complete with replicas of its original interiors. The Mack represents an iconic structure in the history of modern architecture and one of Mackintosh’s few public buildings. But we must not forget that it is, and always has been, a working art school in the first instance and not a museum or tourist attraction. Sadly, this became the building’s undoing but nobody wants to see the Mack turned into a tomb. While we will no longer be able to feel the kind of material connection to Mackintosh once engendered by the building’s architectural memory and its furnishings’ well-worn patina, new memories will be formed in whatever shape the rebuilt space will take.

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Notes

- [1] For a short film of what the building used to look like see: http://www.mackintosh-architecture.gla.ac.uk/catalogue/images/?filename=b156_001&xml=img
- [2] In the immediate aftermath, access to the damaged site was severely restricted, but veteran Channel Four news anchor Jon Snow was able to tour the site with GSA director Professor Tom Inns: <http://blogs.channel4.com/snowblog/glasgow-school-art-fire-renovation-jon-snow/24392>
- [3] Nikolaus Pevsner, *Pioneers of Modern Design: From William Morris to Walter Gropius*, revised ed. (London: Penguin, 1960), 169. Originally published as *Pioneers of the Modern Movement* (London: Faber & Faber, 1936).
- [4] Ibid.
- [5] Hugh Pearman, “Vote for your favorite building” *The Sunday Times*, April 26, 2009.
- [6] Alan Crawford, *Charles Rennie Mackintosh* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1995); Thomas Howarth, *Charles Rennie Mackintosh and the Modern Movement*, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 1990); Wendy Kaplan, *Charles Rennie Mackintosh* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1996); James Macaulay, *Charles Rennie Mackintosh* (New York: Norton, 2010); David Stark, *Charles Rennie Mackintosh and Co.* (Catrine, Ayrshire: Stenlake, 2004). For an extensive bibliography see <http://www.mackintosh-architecture.gla.ac.uk/catalogue/bibliography/>.
- [7] See <http://www.mackintosh-architecture.gla.ac.uk/>. A second outcome of the project is a long overdue exhibition of Mackintosh’s architectural drawings, *Mackintosh Architecture* at The Hunterian Art Gallery, July 18, 2014–January 4, 2015.
- [8] The GSA implemented the South Kensington system until 1901 when the school severed its ties from the London-based Department of Science and Art and became part of the Scottish Education Department.
- [9] Its extensive northern frontage was ideally suited for studios.
- [10] At the time, Mackintosh’s name did not appear on any of the official documents and it is only through his characteristic handwriting and historical anecdote that this identification can be made. See entry “M134-The Glasgow School of Art” in <http://www.mackintosh-architecture.gla.ac.uk/> [retrieved August 4, 2014].
- [11] For a detailed account of the Mackintosh building’s construction with descriptions and photographs, see *Mackintosh Architecture: Context, Making and Meaning* at www.mackintosh-architecture.gla.ac.uk

[12] James Macaulay, *Charles Rennie Mackintosh* (New York: Norton, 2010), 156–75.

[13] For a statement describing what has been lost, see: <http://gsalibrarytreasures.wordpress.com/2014/05/30/statement-on-the-mackintosh-library-collections/>

[14] Please take a look if you think you might be able to provide any donations: <http://lib.gsa.ac.uk/update-on-fire-affected-library-services/>.

[15] The Scottish Fire and Rescue Service was awarded an honorary Newbery Medal (reserved for each year's top student) at the graduation ceremony on June 20 that reads "Scottish Fire & Rescue Service, 23rd May 2014 - Guardians of The Mackintosh".

[16] For more up to date information, see the GSA Archives and Collections blog at <http://gsaarchivesandcollections.wordpress.com/>.

[17] The hand-over was quite an emotional moment as firefighters had been onsite for 24 hours a day since the fire and in well-honed Scottish tradition, a piper led the fire tenders away from the site.

[18] For a more detailed account of the decanting and salvage efforts, see: <http://gsaarchivesandcollections.wordpress.com/2014/08/04/recovering-our-textile-archives/>

[19] "School of Art repairs will cost £35m and take four years, director says", *Herald Scotland*, 17 June 2014.

[20] <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-glasgow-west-27904400>

[21] <http://www.gsa.ac.uk/media/971381/GSA-Bursaries.pdf>

[22] For Mackintosh's other Glasgow sites, see <http://www.crmsociety.com/visitmackintosh.aspx>

[23] See for example, "L'Art Nouveau: What is it and What is Thought of it – Discussed by Painters, Designers, Architects and Sculptors," *Magazine of Art* 2 (January 1904), 209–13, 259–64, 324–27, 377–81.

[24] A lively exchange took place between Glasgow and Vienna: Fritz Waerndorfer and Josef Hoffmann travelled to Glasgow on separate occasions and The Glasgow Four (C.R. Mackintosh, M. Macdonald and F. Macdonald, J. McNair) exhibited their famous Scottish Room at the 8th Secession Exhibition (1900) in Vienna as well as the Rose Boudoir at the International Exhibition of Modern Decorative Art in Turin (1902).

[25] "Glasgow School of Art Fire: Iconic Library destroyed," *BBC News*, 25 May 2014: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-glasgow-west-27556659> [retrieved August 6, 2014].

Illustrations



Fig. 1, North façade of Charles Rennie Mackintosh's The Glasgow School of Art, ca. 1910. Photograph. The Glasgow School of Art. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 2, Jeff J. Mitchell, Charred Remains of north façade, May 23, 2014. Photograph. Getty Images, 2014. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 3, The Mackintosh Library, The Glasgow School of Art. Photograph. The Glasgow School of Art.
[\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 4, The Hen Run, The Glasgow School of Art. Photograph. The Glasgow School of Art. [\[return to text\]](#)

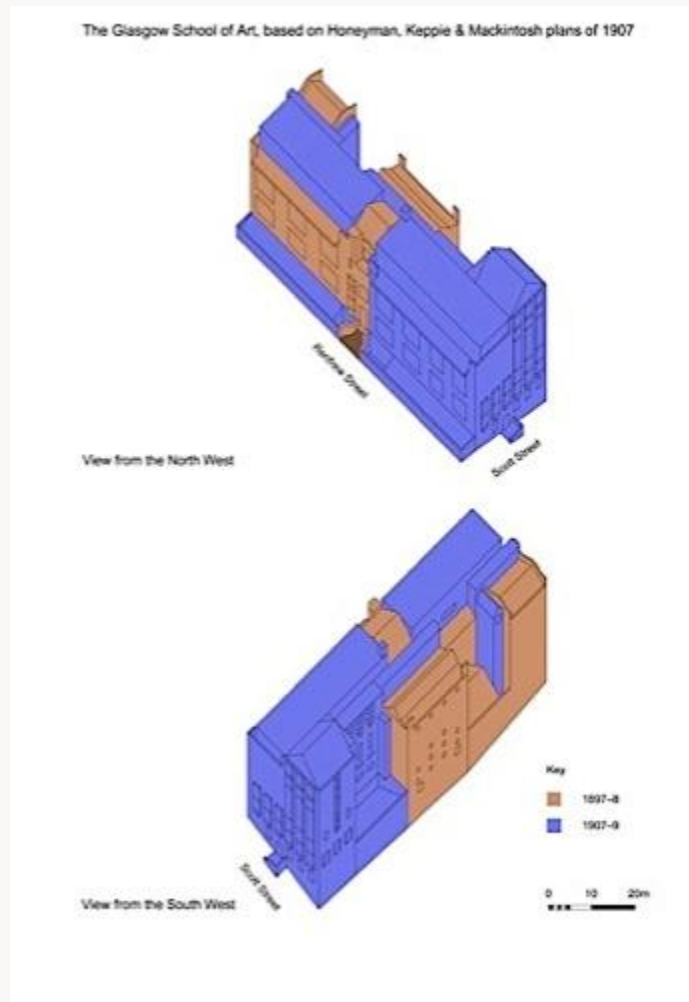


Fig. 5, Axonometrics from Northwest and Southwest showing building phases. Plan. Mackintosh Architecture, University of Glasgow; CAD drawings by Abigail Morris, 2014. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 6, Crathes Castle, Aberdeenshire, Scotland, 1553–96. Photograph. Public Domain. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 7, Annan, Library wing, ca. 1910. Photograph. The Hunterian, University of Glasgow, 2014.
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Fig. 8, West wing with flames coming out of the Mackintosh Library. Photograph. Press Association, 2014.
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Fig. 9, Flames coming out of the Hen Run on the south façade. Public Domain. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 10, Bedford Lemere, Mackintosh Lecture Theater, The Glasgow School of Art. Photograph. RCAHMS, Licensor: www.rcahms.gov.uk. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 11, 'Human Chain' moving paper archives from the Mack into the McLelland Galleries. Photograph. The Glasgow School of Art. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 12, Textile Archives drying in temporary storage. Photograph. The Glasgow School of Art.
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Fig. 13, Steven Holl, Reid Building and the Mack before the fire. Photograph. McAteer, 2014. Licensor: McAteerphoto.com. [\[return to text\]](#)