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Interview with Dr Robyne E. Calvert, Researcher, History of Architecture and Design at the Mackintosh School of Architecture, The Glasgow School of Art

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Interview with Dr. Robyne E. Calvert, Researcher, History of Architecture and Design at the Mackintosh School of Architecture, The Glasgow School of Art.[\[1\]](#)

SW: Robyne, your own research focuses very much on Charles Rennie Mackintosh and Margaret Macdonald. I was wondering how you engaged your students with the Mackintosh building and responded to working in such a historically vested space?

RC: ‘The Mack’, as it is affectionately known at GSA, is an intriguing building from a historical view, as there is a tension in it being both an iconic work of architecture that people wish to treat with kid gloves, yet it is a working school. As evidenced by the many marks of wear on its wood panelling, it is used to its full extent as it was intended, perhaps with the exception of the library. In the eyes of much of the world, the Mackintosh library was a museum space—a masterpiece of early twentieth century architecture fixed in time, to be viewed in hushed tones on school tours.

For many of us at GSA, however, it was very much an active space. Having been fortunate to teach Mackintosh studies alongside Victorian art, architecture and design, I used the school as a teaching space—especially the library. In collaboration with library and archive staff, I held sessions there for students to use the special collections materials that were housed on its shelves. Although this material was well cared for, items like *The Studio* and *Decorativ Kunst* were presented not as precious artefacts, but documents to be used in research. The collections gave students the opportunity to think about primary objects as sources for research and inspiration in their work. We took this a step further in my course on Artistic Dress, where students researched, staged and performed *tableaux vivants* throughout the school. These didactic events engaged with the history of the school, as ‘living pictures’ were a popular pastime for GSA students when it first opened. Over the past few years, my students explored the intersections of art and fashion by, for example, creating and modelling Pre-Raphaelite and Secessionist Dress in the Library. The Mack offered the perfect backdrop for these unique events.

SW: Where were you when the fire started on that fateful afternoon of May 23?

RC: It was a Friday and I was working from home when I saw someone on social media ask if the Mack was on fire. Like all of my colleagues who weren’t on site, from that moment I was glued to the news, Facebook, Twitter, my phone, watching things unfold and fighting the futile urge to rush down there.

SW: What was your initial response to the fire and what did you observe in the people around you?

RC: My initial response was disbelief, then when I learned that it was serious, a gut-wrenching fear. I know the building very well, and judging by the chimney-like structure of the library (essentially a wooden box packed with kindling) it seemed that disaster was imminent.

When reports came that the hen run was on fire, and then that smoke was coming from the library windows, I was devastated. It felt like a loved one was dying . . . and I know that sounds

rather dramatic. But again, I wasn't alone in this feeling. Everyone was in shock, falling apart. I remember seeing a post on Facebook from the daughter of a much-loved professor, who said her father was sitting in his office sobbing.

When I pulled myself together, I did in fact go down to Sauchiehall Street, away from the actual site but in view of the building, because I needed to witness what was happening. By the time I got there, around 5.30pm, the fire was largely contained but the air was thick with smoke. The hen run was gone, the roof had collapsed over the library and flames licked out the windows. It was horrific, and rather surreal.

But strangely, it was also a very comforting day. The Mack is the brick-and-mortar heart of an amazing community. And much of that community—staff, students, and alumni—was gathered in and around the State Bar, our favorite watering hole. I can only describe that evening as something akin to a wake: many tears, but also a great deal of laughter and warmth. And yes, as the night wore on, I think everyone pretty much drowned his or her sorrows. It was a tragic night, but oddly also a wonderful one.

SW: What did it feel like to enter the Mackintosh building after the fire? When did you first gain access again?

RC: Key staff were in the very next day, including the library and archive team along with a group from organisations like Historic Scotland who are playing a pivotal role in what amounts to an excavation job. Saturday and Sunday, the executive staff was tireless in making a plan to tackle the disaster and get on with things without postponing the upcoming degree show. A call for volunteers went out that weekend and many of us gave up that bank holiday Monday to begin decanting the building.

Because we entered from the east end, which was largely unscathed, there was initially a feeling of relief for most of us. But then, the nightmare of the west end was heart wrenching. Watching charred bits of Mackintosh furniture coming out in boxes is something I hope to never see again.

SW: Can you talk a little bit about the immediate salvage efforts and the decanting of the heavily damaged building?

RC: Historic Scotland was helping to manage the actual salvage, but museum and archive staff from across Scotland volunteered to help examine and treat any objects that needed immediate attention. Everyone pitched in where they were most needed, or where their skills best fit. I began with decanting, but quickly moved on to helping the collections staff check for damage, unwrapping each object and making sure they were dry, then repacking items for moving off site. Conservation staff from Glasgow Museums and teams of staff and students from the University of Glasgow's Textile and Technical Art History programmes were amongst those helpful in this task.

SW: *The GSA's director Professor Tom Inns has made it very clear that the lost sections of the Mackintosh building (the library, the hen run, etc.) will be rebuilt and fundraising efforts are well under way. What are your thoughts about the rebuilding?*

RC: There is no question that this loss is devastating, and that there are books and artwork gone that can never be replaced. But much has already been done to restore the collection, with donations of lost items from as far away as Portland, Oregon already coming in.

What cannot be recovered, though, is that original atmosphere . . . the patina of the library that was somehow more than physical, as anyone who entered that space can attest. It was a rather magical place.

I hope that the initial reports that the library will be reconstructed faithfully will be carried out. I think they will. I've heard a lot of questions about this from colleagues in Mackintosh studies, for example how will we ever be able to afford the labor? The same men who built ships on the Clyde originally constructed the library under Mackintosh's watchful eye. They were highly skilled, and worked cheap. Do we have that same kind of labor available today? There is no doubt that there are many challenges in this mammoth task. But there is too much love for the space to do otherwise.

On a more positive note, in my view, there is also a great deal of opportunity. The fire came at a time when the library was beginning to be used again in earnest. In addition to the kinds of teaching and programmes I implemented, other areas of the school were engaging with the space for contemporary new media installations, for example. It had also recently been reopened one day a week to be used for its intended purpose, for students and staff to consult the now lost special collections, or simply sit and work in the peaceful environment.

All of this, however, was always in tension with the fact that it was a kind of museum space. There were chairs we couldn't sit on. Only library staff could go up to the mezzanine for health & safety reasons. One thing about having this new library: it won't be precious. No matter how faithful, how meticulously replicated, it just simply won't be an antique. We can think about using it in creative ways that enhance teaching and learning as well as the field of Mackintosh studies. I can't help but look at that with at least a bit of excitement.

SW: *Thank you very much for your insightful observations Robyne!*

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[1] <http://www.gsa.ac.uk/about-gsa/our-people/staff-profiles/c/calvert,-dr-robyne/>