

Managing Cultural Expectations: The Glasgow School of Art and the Legacy of Charles Rennie Mackintosh

The Glasgow School of Art is very fortunate. Not only has it educated a talented array of architects, designer and artists for over 160 years but its chief campus building and the architect who designed it, Charles Rennie Mackintosh, an alumnus of the School, has an international reputation that is second to none.

According to the American architect Robert Venturi, the north façade of the Mackintosh-designed Glasgow School of Art 'is one of the greatest achievements of all times'. The designer and entrepreneur Sir Terence Conran has stated that the School is 'a robust, functional building imbued with artistry and richness: a working environment that expresses the spirit of creativity' and Professor Christopher Frayling, Rector of the Royal College of Art has remarked that 'the Glasgow School of Art is the only art school in the world where the building is worthy of the subject'.

But as the School enters the 21st century it is faced with perhaps it's most onerous task ever. It has to balance the needs of its staff and students who continue to use the Mackintosh Building for the purpose to which it was always intended, i.e. teaching, with those of the wider heritage community who see the building, as first and foremost a site of world heritage status. (In fact, the School and Mackintosh's Hill House in nearby Helensburgh are in the process of submitting an application for possible nomination under UNESCO's World Heritage listing)

For those staff now involved with the day-to-day management of the Mackintosh Building, the boundaries between functioning art school and publicly accessible heritage attraction have become increasingly blurred. Certainly this was not always the case for it was really only in the early 1980s that the subject of Mackintosh begin to have an impact on the physical running of the School. Slowly, academic interest in the architect's life and work began to grow. An increasing

number of international exhibitions and related books and catalogues, brought about an increased awareness of the architect-designer and the Mackintosh Building itself.

Visitors wishing to experience the Mackintosh Building first hand in the early 1980s were still relatively few and far between and almost exclusively academics, or design and architecture students. By the mid-1980s the City of Glasgow had woken up to the notion of cultural tourism as a means of urban regeneration and suddenly the arts were at the top of the agenda. Throughout the 1980s demand for public access to the Mackintosh Building grew and the School eventually set about establishing a recognised and well-publicised programme of student-led guided tours.

These public tours lasted about one hour and allowed the visitor access into the heart of the building. Here they saw a few of the prime Mackintosh-designed rooms, including a newly introduced furniture gallery. By controlling public access, this minimised the disturbance to students and staff still working in the building. However, numerous requests from the public for access to the light and spacious painting studios were denied as the School felt this would be too invasive. Even today the School remains committed to keeping these teaching spaces 'tourist free'.

In 1990 Glasgow secured the prestigious title of European City of Culture and experienced a phenomenal rise in visitor numbers. Not surprisingly, this one-off event brought record numbers of visitors to the School and by the end of that year over 15,000 people had been accommodated on guided tours; a then record number. Since then visitor numbers have continued to rise steadily, helped by an enthusiastic local tourist board who have positioned the so-called 'Mackintosh effect' as one of their key marketing tools. Now, guided tours run six or seven days a week, 51 weeks a year and visitor numbers for 2004/05, on tours alone were over 23,000 not bad for a faculty building.

Since 1985, the guided tour programme and a small visitor shop have been managed by a separate 'in-house' trading company. Not

surprisingly, this small shop generates a considerable amount of revenue – profit of which is directed back into the School itself by a ‘deed of covenant’ arrangement.

In addition to the School’s role as both an educational institution and a major heritage attraction, its third function is that of a recognised museum and the repository of a major institutional archive.

The collection as such started out as almost all university and college collections did – as a teaching resource. Originally, the collection comprised examples of work in variety of media – paintings, prints, textiles, metalwork, ceramics etc – often reflecting an international dimension. Today through a combination of subsequent gifts, bequests and occasional purchases the collection consists of over 3000 pieces with almost all work exclusively by former staff and students of the School. It also owns an extensive collection of almost 200 plaster casts from full-size classical figures to examples of architectural moulding – decorative cornices, architraves, columns etc.

Without doubt, the most important and valuable collection held by the School is work by Charles Rennie Mackintosh - some 200 items of furniture and almost 100 works on paper – work that is constantly in demand for worldwide exhibitions.

But despite this impressive internationally respected collection, the School currently has only very limited space available for the storage and display of this material. It has just one small gallery dedicated to the Mackintosh collection, in an attractive space, but in part of the building not reached by lift or elevator and only accessible by a flight of stairs which makes it very inaccessible for anyone with limited mobility.

There is certainly recognition that the functioning of the Mackintosh building as a teaching resource remains paramount and that the day the students and staff of the School are forced out, to be replaced entirely by tourists, will be the day the building dies.

So can the Glasgow School of Art continue to manage the Mackintosh building as a multi-functional space as an art school first and foremost, as a major and growing tourist attraction and an important museum and archive? It certainly believes it can, but with current educational funding at a premium this can only really be achieved with a substantial investment from external sources. To this effect the School has recently been awarded a major grant from the UK's Heritage Lottery Fund for a project totalling some £8.7m.

In its application the School recognised its responsibilities for the custodianship of the Mackintosh building and its varied collections and archives. Indeed, over the last decade significant investment has already been put into the external fabric of the building with the support of various national and international agencies.

So a key element of our Lottery project is to focus on the repair and conservation of the historic interiors of the building; rooms such as the Library. It is also proposing the reinstatement of many of the original features and functions of the building and the removal of many of the later physical additions (including mezzanines added to the painting studios as recently as the 1960s). These improvements will not only benefit the architectural quality of the building itself but will more closely reflect Mackintosh's original intentions.

The provision of new administrative accommodation within the School's broader 'Estates Strategy' allows for the relocation of a number of offices (notably central management and student services) out of the Mackintosh building altogether. In doing this, access to two key Mackintosh apartments will be given over to the visitor for the first time (the Director's Room and the Board Room) whilst the Mackintosh Room that currently doubles up as a committee room will be set aside purely as a museum interior

Additionally, the School's Heritage Lottery project recognises it can help to reduce wear and tear on the Mackintosh building by more effectively managing the use of the building by staff and students together with controlling the flow of visitors through these historic interiors.

Whilst it intends to refurbish many of the timber surfaces in corridors and on the stairs, for instance it is very much conscious that as a hard working building it will be faced with doing exactly the same thing again in another 50 or 100 years' time!

A unique aspect of the visitor's experience on viewing the School is not only the appreciation of the quality and detail of the physical spaces, but also witnessing the building in use as an art school - the very purpose for which it was designed and for which it is supremely effective. However, as the primary purpose of the School is the provision of education, there remains an ongoing conflict between its functions. On occasions, visitors intrude on the normal life of the educational establishment, while there are similarly many occasions when the educational purpose of the building inevitably limits the quality of the visitor experience.

By providing new reception facilities (in a proposed new build directly across from the main façade of the Mackintosh building) the School would be able to offer an enhanced experience for visitors. For the first time, interpretive material (text and image, models, film and computer-based information) could be used to increase visitors' knowledge and understanding of the school.

The project also proposes to allocate space in the basement of the Mackintosh building for a permanent exhibition of Mackintosh furniture. Although this would be at basement level, because the School is built on a hill, this area would be directly accessible off the street making it fully DDA compliant. Similarly, an area has been designated as an exhibition space for rotational displays of material from the archives and other School collections. Together these new galleries will provide appropriate opportunities to develop and display the collections in conditions of proper environmental control and security and will significantly enhance the visitor experience.

Integral to these proposals is the development of a public Research Centre complete with environmentally controlled archive storage in the basement and sub basement of the Mackintosh Building. This

will provide dedicated accommodation for researchers, allowing better access to the rich history of the School and its alumni.

The School's Lottery application also includes a considerable sum set aside for the actual conservation of the School's collections and archives as at present the School does not employ any conservation staff.

All things considered, the Lottery project is very ambitious and one of the most challenging tasks will be to implement these developments without closing the building – it simply can not shut down completely so it has in a place a rolling programme of limited access/part closure. This has already involved the physical decant of all the collections and archives into another building – not an easy job in itself.

Work started in June 2007 and assuming that everything goes more or less to plan, the work on the Mackintosh building will be complete by the end of 2009, just in time to celebrate the centenary of the opening of the original building in December 1899; the visitor centre aims to be open in 2010/2011.

The Glasgow School of Art sees this project as a truly fitting gesture to the Mackintosh legacy so watch this space!