

# Threat to demolish historic Greek Thomson building

## Owner's fears as £20m hotel bid falls apart

GERRY BRAIDEN

THE owner of an iconic Glasgow building, often described as Alexander "Greek" Thomson's masterpiece, has applied for permission to have it demolished.

Property developer Derek Souter, who took total ownership of the A-listed Egyptian Halls three years ago after a decade's wrangling, said that as long-standing plans for a hotel were no longer financially viable and because local and national government will not provide sufficient grants, there was no option but to pull it down.

An application has already been submitted to Glasgow City Council in recent weeks, with the hotel plans now coming with a cost of around £20 million, five times what it would have cost a decade ago.

Mr Souter said a grant of £2.6m had already been offered but around £6m was required to make it work, adding it would create 200 jobs and repay any grant or loan within a decade in business rates.

However, the city council and Historic Scotland are expected to oppose the move, with many within the authority seeing it as an attempt by the developer to force them into coming up with several million pounds.

The council, Scottish Government and Historic Scotland have all said they cannot provide sufficient funding.

The theory that Mr Souter's move is designed to put pressure on authorities has been given added weight by the emergence of a Facebook site set up to "Save The Egyptian Halls".

The site says: "Planning permission is being sought to demolish Union Street's historic Egyptian Halls, completed in



THREAT: The facade of the Egyptian Halls on Glasgow's Union Street. Its

1872. The building is one of the most spectacular examples of the work of internationally-renowned Victorian architect Alexander "Greek" Thomson.

"Unless public money can be found to save it, the building may be condemned as soon as summer 2011 and demolished. Once the developers have been granted permission to knock it down, Scotland will lose one of its architectural jewels."

A report prepared for Mr Souter says the Halls have European importance and would not usually be considered for demolition, but that demolition and a new build "is viable in every sense" and is the only way his

firm can avoid insolvency.

It adds: "This is an extraordinary building, which has required extraordinary intervention for a long, long time now. The Scottish Government have stated they won't become involved so the only other alternative becomes the only alternative.

"There are significant obstacles presented by the current market conditions which frustrate the preservation and development of the Egyptian Halls. The likelihood that retail or mixed-use development will get underway at the site for a number of years is highly unlikely and probably impossi-



Derek Souter, above, has applied to demolish the historic building. Pictures: Nick Ponty/Colin Mearns

with combined support Glasgow City Council/Historic Scotland/Scottish Government. So far there are no indications that such support is

city council spokesman "The council has been in session with the owner of the Egyptian Halls for a considerable time over the development is very important piece of Glasgow's architectural heritage. We remain very keen to see every important building brought back into use, and while we not fully considered the option, it is unlikely that council would support any proposal for demolition."

## The architect who styled a city

- Alexander "Greek" Thomson was born in Balfour, Stirlingshire, and created some of Scotland's most prominent Victorian secular and ecclesiastical buildings. He blended archetypal Greek styling with Egyptian and other exotic themes.
- Sometimes known as "Glasgow's other architect" after Charles Rennie Mackintosh, he has been recognised as a unique talent whose contribution to the city's architecture is immeasurable.

- His output was prolific and included works such as Moray Place (1859) and the Grosvenor Building in Gordon Street (1859); the stunningly original villas of Holmwood (1857), Ellisland (1871) and 25 Mansionhouse Road (1856).
- He was also responsible for the landmark churches in Caledonia Road (1856) and St Vincent Street (1859), the Queen's Park UP Church (1867) and Great Western Terrace (1867).