

Greek Revival?

above An unapologetic intervention could soon be bedfellow to Thomson's masterpiece

GLASGOW'S decaying architectural legacy has long been waiting for appropriate benefactors to pull up. Now after a wait of near half a century, those prayers look to have been answered for the former Caledonia Road Church. Hot on the heels of the Egyptian Halls and St Vincent Street Church, this forelorn relic of bygone glory is to be pulled belatedly into the 21st century.

Riding the crest of Glasgow's commercial prosperity Thomson was able to channel the city's trade wealth into totems of architectural grandeur by drawing upon diverse influences from synonomous Greek homages to Egyptian, Romanesque, Persian and Indian influences. The Church, at the time keen to assert its influence and identity, provided a rich architectural seam for Thomson to sow, landing him a string of commissions that included St Vincent Street Church and Queen's Park Church (sadly since destroyed).

As religion receded from the city however a litany of architectural marvels were left in its wake, purposeless, vandalised and in decline. Now Gholami Baines Architects in association with the Alexander Thomson Society have intriguing plans to re-instate the full splendour of the Caledonia Road edifice in a contemporary fusion of old and new. Of the many hurdles facing a scheme of this magnitude it was the fact that Caledonia Road Church does not actually reside upon Caledonia Road that presented one of the earliest head scratchers for the sites custodians. After some deliberation however it was decided to rename the church One Alexander Thomson Place (ATP), to best articulate their new ethos.

ATP has long sat sentinel over an important transport corridor between the south side and city centre, a

Alexander "Greek" Thomson has long been overshadowed by the cult of Mackintosh, however with a recent hat trick of proposals, that may change.

haunting burned out skeleton. Despite the international significance of Thomson and being structurally sound, this shell has been closed off to visitors since 1965 and hints only obliquely at past grandeur. Reduced to a romantic ruin the church carries all sorts of memories as one of the few surviving 19th century buildings in the Gorbals and makes a highly memorable impact, particularly from the north.

This situation has not gone unnoticed by the Alexander Thomson Society who wish to put this historic wrong to rights by transforming the crumbling structure of the existing A listed ruin into a custodian of Thomson's work, an archive to better communicate what was special about his contribution to the city, which numbered some 140-160 projects since he first hooked up with John Baird in 1849. This is envisaged to take shape in similar fashion to Le Corbusier's Villa La Roche and Centro Internazionale di Studi di Architettura Andrea Palladio, Vicenza.

Nevertheless selection of ATP by the Alexander Thomson Society for such a home proved a thorny issue for backers of St Vincent Street Church, which benefits

from a central location and intact interiors. Mark Baines explains the decision: "The depths of connection Thomson had with the Gorbals are clear, he was an elder of the church, worshipped there, built a lot of tenements between Eglinton St and Caledonia Rd and is buried in the nearby Southern Necropolis. Saint Vincent Street on the other hand is compromised in the eyes of the society by already having a number of other church related activities going on in the meeting hall and disabled access is problematic. Egyptian Halls was not necessarily a permanent location either as we would be renting space in the building as a commercial development which didn't seem appropriate. It then dawned as obvious that Thomson's first public building, not so at risk but still essentially isolated, was best placed to house the collection."

Sally White, secretary of the Alexander Thomson Society added: "In one sense we're lucky at Caledonia Rd that we don't have the responsibility of working with interior schemes. An ongoing debate with many buildings is do you recreate what was existing previously? Do you peel away more of what remains? Do we touch up

decoration or leave it the way it is? The destruction of the Caledonia Road interior makes that no longer an issue."

By reaching out to a still somewhat moribund swathe of city, despite the intervention of New Gorbals which itself is walled off from neighbours, it is hoped the development can be a catalyst not only for Thomson but Glasgow as a whole, establishing a meaningful partnership with the Mackintosh Society for cross collaboration, perhaps even realising a long held ambition of bringing tourist buses south of the Clyde.

Early on it was recognised that a gallery alone wouldn't be sufficient to attract large numbers of people, different uses were needed to enrich the space with meeting, rooms, studios, apartments and museum.

Entrance to the building begins at a public space, defined by granite setts and a statue of Thomson strategically sited to greet visitors. A tall narrow slot on axis with the tower leads visitors under the new building and into a central courtyard lined with planting derived from classical decoration. The courtyard acts as a haven from nearby noise and pollution and is the main source of natural ventilation. Within the courtyard a stone doorway rescued by the Thomson Society from a warehouse on Watson Street leads into the Thomson Gallery and Study Centre.

Most dramatically the site will witness the construction of five storey new build accommodation on land adjoining the partial church gable, this satisfies the dual aim of recalling the scale of original tenements whilst reinstating a northern frontage with ten serviced flats.

A minimalist facade of polished silver grey granite to the north uses glazing sparingly to create a smooth geometric sheen that will reflect the light and weather. South facing conservatories to the apartments view the tower. Baines describes: "Thomson's buildings are all monolithic, even timber detail is made to look like masonry, so we didn't want a mix of materials but something that was sharp, precise and machine cut." Sedum roofs with solar panels will be incorporated with built in roof level lanterns and floor to ceiling glazing drawing in light.

As the City Council is providing financial support for the planning application we can probably assume that permission will pass without a hitch. The same cannot be said for funding however, which is still not in place. The city council have agreed to partner the Trust in any

fundraising appeals, there is still a lot of work to be done before the this building can provide a roof over the head of the Thomson Society.

One Alexander Thomson Place will be built by a team comprising Gholami Baines Architects, David Narro Associates, Buro Happold, Ross & Morton and WHITE Design.

WALK LIKE AN EGYPTIAN

The Morrison Partnership have unveiled long awaited plans to restore Alexander "Greek" Thomson's Egyptian Halls for Union Street Properties. The £6.5m development represents culmination of 11 years investment directed towards securing 100% ownership of the crumbling Halls, despite challenging and sometimes perplexing obstacles.

Restoration of the famous A listed cast iron framed warehouse will reinvigorate a down at heel Union St by returning to prominence its most famous architectural landmark, potentially initiating many spin off benefits as Soutar exclaims: "this project could be the linchpin of a Townscape Heritage initiative for Union Street, similar to the Merchant City project".

George Morrisson of the Morrison Partnership said: "The current outward appearance is so dirty and forlorn that I guess the building does not register with most of the passing public." Behind a thirty years in the making coat of soot, grime and guano however resides one of the most striking facades in Glasgow, with potential to make a real and lasting contribution to Union Street.

Thomson's heritage is subject to a belated revival in fortunes of late and Morrison is happy that the famed structures now may be subject to strong and viable solutions but professes unease at any wider hook ups in the short term: "I would be concerned that early joint promotion of these buildings as a form of holy trinity might appear to complicate matters and frighten off the very people (and their money) who might save the buildings. As the future of these buildings becomes identified and on their way to being established then it may be appropriate on the back of the increasing confidence and their individual success to establish some sort of cross promotion and reference.

Indicative proposals call for reinstatement of original motifs at ground level alongside standardised signage across the presently cluttered streetscape. Most dramatically a contemporary roofscape intervention, in a

similar vein to Cooper Cromar's g1, is also planned, though Morrison is wary of heritage body reaction: "an inordinate amount of time and energy goes into trying to promote such ideas and I feel that as a principle there should be less of a presumption against it. That said, such challenges are not new. Even Greek Thomson spoke out against such resistance to new ideas. Given Greek Thomson's progressive thinking I wonder if he would be more inclined to encourage the evolution/ change of his buildings to meet today's demands or would resist all such thoughts."

Interminable delays and protracted negotiations have witnessed considerable deterioration in the fabric of the Egyptian Halls, notably the collapse of one of the main cupolas and the loss of much of the internal plasterwork on the upper floors due to water ingress, which has badly rotted the timber floors. Now the question is how much of the building can be reasonably retained and can those solutions be practical, economic and sustainable.

Morrison states: "The intention is to reinstate internally those features where it is appropriate and practical in the context of the proposals, as well as financially viable bearing in mind the need for Planning and Listed Building Consents. Externally we will be endeavouring to retain principal features such as the front elevation and where detail has been overlaid with more recent finishes we will endeavour to reverse that work. Elsewhere inside the building we may discover other features hidden by more recent works. These will be recorded and where possible and practical we will endeavour to retain in some form."

Amongst the key steps still to be crossed are confirming a technical and practical solution, conveying the merit of such a solution; having those proposals accepted, getting adequate funding for those proposals; getting the right type of contractors and getting funders to understand the project and providing the necessary funding on reasonable terms

The tortuous timetable thus far traversed indicates that the road ahead will be by no means clear, a problem further compounded by the present economic climate. Any new applications for Planning Permission and Listed Building Consent will only happen once discussions with the Authorities are complete but it is hoped that works could be underway on site in 2010, though this is predicated on parties executing their roles timeously to establish and maintain momentum.



clockwise Structural beams at St Vincent St have been clad in steel, a lead roof offers protection; One Alexander Thomson Place from the air; Egyptian Halls restored



ST VINCENT STREET

St Vincent Street Church, a recurrent entrant in the World Monuments Fund's top 100 most endangered buildings, stands a forlorn relic of past architectural glories, the only surviving substantially complete church by Alexander "Greek" Thomson remaining in Glasgow. Until recently it was imperilled by leaking roofs but these have finally been addressed in a second phase of an ongoing programme of restorative works by Page \ Park on behalf of owners, Glasgow City Council.

The shallow pitching roofs to the main sanctuary and lower side aisles were reslated in the early 1990s with slates insufficiently sized to protect the church in its exposed location on Blythswood Hill and wind driven rain led to many leaks over intervening years. Ian Hamilton, Associate Director at Page \ Park explained that "much time was spent soul searching and discussing with Historic Scotland and the Planning Department the issue of changing the original roof finish. In the end it was agreed that a change from slate to lead-finished roofs would offer the best long-term protection to the valuable building fabric and finishes."

Despite having stood for over 150 years without obvious distress structural engineers called into question whether the original slim, exposed timber structure of the main sanctuary roof had sufficient inherent strength and lateral restraint, even without the additional loads imposed by the new roof finish. The only strengthening option open to the design team was the unorthodox approach of fixing

thin steel plates which span full length and tie the three truss-beams into the wallheads at both ends.

Hamilton voiced Page \ Park's dilemma: "was it really right to leave the structure in that condition if there is an opportunity to consolidate with minimum intervention? The Sanctuary space had to be preserved at all costs and in themselves these interventions - the new lead roof finish and the structural strengthening have gone a substantial way towards securing the building's future."

Outlining the resultant attention to detail Hamilton continued: "Each plate is only 10mm thick and has been engineered to follow precisely the bow on the individual truss beams which they support. The sides of the original timber beams are decorated and extreme care was taken to recreate that decoration on the faces of the steel plates to the extent that it is impossible, even at close quarters, to tell the difference."

Wider discussions are ongoing about the church's long-term sustainable future. The World Monument Fund chaired a recent workshop at Page \ Park's Glasgow offices to discuss ideas for new possible uses of the building. Included were representatives from Glasgow City Council, the Alexander Thomson Society, the St. Vincent Street Milton Free Church and 'Chanan' (both current tenants), Historic Scotland, Glasgow Building Preservation Trust, Visit Scotland and Page \ Park. Outline proposals for conversion of part of the church to provide an interpretation centre for Thomson's work were discussed even though a more advanced development

designed by Mark Baines to include a similar facility is currently being championed by the Thomson Society on the site of the former Caledonia Rd Church.

Hamilton recalls: "these are parallel ideas but the Caledonia Road proposals are obviously quite advanced. St Vincent Street Church's location is certainly more central and accessible but it's all about joined up thinking. The idea of a 'Thomson Trail' starting from his finest surviving building and leading around his other city centre works, perhaps out to Caledonia Road and deeper into the south side beyond to include Holmwood House (an earlier Page \ Park conservation project for The National Trust for Scotland) could be tempting to visitors.

"Caledonia Road Church is a shell but it's had the essential repairs carried out to secure its future, albeit as a shell. St Vincent Street Church is still a functioning church and whilst relatively unchanged since its completion it still needs significant amounts spent on it. The unique decorative scheme of ornate stencilled work and plaster detailing within the main sanctuary must be restored as it is of world-class significance. That will be an enormously important, and costly, future phase of work."

The current economic climate makes conservation work ever more difficult to effect with Glasgow City Council strung out in so many different directions with pleas for funding. The hope remains however that St Vincent Street Church could once more be a stunning monument to Glasgow's forgotten genius- Alexander 'Greek' Thomson."