

OPINION

Glasgow's Egyptian Halls: why is the council making things worse?

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POLITICS



The Egyptian Halls



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You don't have to go far to find one. The Lyceum cinema in Govan. John Maxwell's school in Pollokshaws. The winter gardens in Springburn. And the beautiful little gatehouse at the Southern Necropolis in the Gorbals. All over Glasgow, fine examples of the city's history and architecture are in a poor way and are in danger of disappearing.

But perhaps the most famous at-risk building of them all – for Glaswegians anyway – is the Egyptian Halls on Union Street and it's probably most famous of all because it's right in the centre of town; it's also one of the first things you're likely to see when you get off the train at Central Station. Welcome to Glasgow! Things aren't going well.

The leader of the council, Susan Aitken, says the current state of the building – damp, crumbling, scaffolded – is a barrier to the regeneration of Union Street and she's certainly right about the state of the street. I was there yesterday but I didn't need a disposable vape or an energy drink so there was no reason for me to linger. Litter swirls past. A fight breaks out. I move on.

What we're told is that the council is working with the owners of the Egyptian Halls to find a way forward and I've no reason to doubt that's true. But for some reason the council has also done something that, on the face of it, would appear to make it harder to maintain the building as it currently is. Given everything else that's going on, it does makes me wonder ... why?

What the council has effectively done is they've slapped a ban on adverts on the scaffolding that surrounds the Halls. The owner of the building, Derek Souter of Union Street Properties, has been served with an interdict and if he doesn't defend the action, the council will be able to obtain a decree to have the ads removed.

Perhaps the council's motivation here is to try and spur Mr Souter into expediting the plans he has for the building – these things can take a long time. The council may also suspect that income is being taken out of the building, via the ads, rather than being put into it. Or maybe they just don't like adverts, who knows.

The problem is that, having spoken to Mr Souter, it's clear a ban on advertising is in danger of being seriously counter-productive. Mr Souter says the idea that he's making a lot of money from the ads – perhaps as much as £70,000 a month – is an "egregious myth". In fact, he says, he's earning less than that a year and says what he does earn is being spent on the scaffolding and the maintenance of the building – the scaffolding alone is currently costing £24,000 a year.

What this means is that, should the advertising ban go ahead, the source of some of the money that's currently helping to maintain the building would be shut off and that surely makes no sense.

The Labour MSP Paul Sweeney, who's a trustee of the Scottish Civic Trust's working group on the building, says that if revenue from the adverts is supporting maintenance, it would be premature to insist that it's removed and that's basic logic I would have thought. So why doesn't the council get it?

Mr Souter tells me the plan now is to ask for time to consult and respond to the council's interdict and that he intends to provide a detailed spreadsheet which will detail all his costs and income since 1999 when he acquired the building. He says the figures should reassure the council and dispel any myth that the money from the ads is in some way being mis-used. He will also be reminding the council how much he needs to spend on the Halls – the current total is around £50k a year.

The point is that the council appears to be in danger of making the situation worse – or at the very least landing Mr Souter with considerable extra costs – without actually getting us any nearer to finding a solution. I get that the council is probably at the end of their tether and I get that they're embarrassed by the state of Union Street (they should be). But court action is not the way to go here. That beautiful, precious building hidden under all the ugly scaffolding needs a plan. But the plan needs to be logical, and positive, and constructive, that's all.

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