

The man who built Glasgow

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Alexander Linklater welcomes the belated recognition for an architect whose work stands comparison with that of Rennie Mackintosh. Alexander "Greek" Thomson has, at long last, been officially invited back home to Glasgow. Banners in George Square sport his profile equally with that of Charles Rennie Mackintosh. The Clydesdale bank has started using the same image of Thomson for its #20 notes. And, most importantly, a major exhibition of his work, due to open this weekend, inaugurates the Lighthouse museum on Mitchell Street as the central focus of Glasgow's year of Architecture and Design. It is, in fact, the only exhibition exclusively dedicated to the city which Glasgow 1999 is staging. Certainly, there should have been more. With hindsight, it becomes clear that the recent ill-attended *Vertigo* exhibition theorising future world cities would have had broader appeal and vision if it had specified the substance of its home city instead. But if you are going to do Glasgow, then there is no single figure from the entire cultural history of the city better to represent it than Thomson. The fact that in the last 40 years Glasgow itself has so comprehensively failed its greatest creator only emphasises the drama of this exhibition. Most of the 100 or so buildings that Thomson designed between 1849 and 1875 survived until the 1960s. Thereafter, they began to vanish with terrifying speed. Extensive blocks of his tenements in Gorbals and Tradeston fell victim to the infamous demolition programmes. Unnecessarily, so did commercial buildings in Bath Street and villas in Pollokshields and Shawlands. Thomson's finest tenements, at Queen's Park Terrace, were pulled down as late as the 1980s. Caledonia Road Church, one of the greatest Victorian churches ever built, barely survives as a ruin. Of all the buildings Thomson designed, less than two thirds remain. It is only very recently that Glasgow, not to mention Scotland as a whole, has woken up to Thomson. The National Trust for Scotland has recently refurbished Holmwood House, his finest villa. If an ownership feud surrounding the Egyptian Halls in Union Street is resolved, his finest commercial building may also re-emerge from decline. And the selection of St Vincent Street Church as a World Heritage Site looks set to save his only still-living church. The urgency of this concerns far more than the mere preservation of heritage scraps. In a dazzling introduction to the illustrated book which accompanies Glasgow 1999's exhibition, curator Gavin Stamp frees Thomson from the past, brandishes him as one of Scotland's major creative originals, and sets him up as a key inspiration for innovators of the future. It is not as a simple revivalist - "Greek" or classical or otherwise - that Thomson stamped his mark on architectural history. Rather Thomson's aspiration to dis-cover fundamental laws in ancient Greek or Egyptian styles which drove him to the threshold of a structural abstraction. "We do not contrive rules; we dis-cover laws," Thomson once declared with characteristic zeal. "There is such a thing as architectural truth." Ever since the Alexander "Greek" Thomson society was established in 1991, Gavin Stamp has been one of a few stalwarts who have championed Thomson as the "Unknown Genius". As the title of the exhibition he has co-curated with filmmaker Murray Grigor (whose film on Thomson, *Nineveh on the Clyde*, screens later in June), this has now come full circle as a meaningless phrase. The contents of Stamp's book of the same name says it all: Thomson built villas, terraces, tenements, commercial buildings, churches and monuments. He was Glasgow's cardinal city maker. Stamp sees the revival of Thomson for Glasgow 1999 as a civic symbol, conceding that "official attitudes have now changed." But he doesn't believe Thomson's real importance was ever really forgotten. "Ordinary Glaswegians never ignored him," says Stamp. "I don't think he's ever been forgotten." Destruction of Thomson, whether intentional or not, has left holes in the civic memory. At the centre of the exhibition a huge and miraculously reconstructed model of the Queen's Park Church, bombed into extinction during the war, is an amazing reminder of the force of imagination which once drove a city. Reconstructed capitals from columns in the St Vincent Street church demonstrate that it was an ambition brilliant with interior colour as well as structural ingenuity. Here is Thomson being exhibited in a building designed by the normally more celebrated Charles Rennie Mackintosh which demonstrates that - in terms of originality alone - Glasgow possessed at least two architects of equal genius. Thomson emerges from the very centre of Victorian Glasgow, and in many respects represents the glowering ambitions of his times. But his use of the "Greek" can be deceptive. "How is it . . . there is no modern style in architecture?" he asked in 1871. His solution was "to abandon with all convenient expedition the whole mass of accumulated human traditions under which we have been, as it were, smothered." "Greek" Thomson was neither, precisely speaking, a neo-classicist nor, exactly, an early modernist. His were the fierce outlines of a genuine original.