

# NOOKS and CORNERS

**T**HE Egyptian Halls in Glasgow has appeared in this column before. Built in 1870-72 and designed by a great architect, Alexander "Greek" Thomson, it is an exotic and extraordinary commercial block, inventive and yet practical.

A contemporary journal could even claim that "we doubt if its equal, for originality, grandeur of treatment, or imposing effect, could be found in any city, not excepting the metropolis itself." Needless to say, therefore, in recent years Egyptian Halls has been neglected, its survival threatened by decay and multiple ownership.

Since its last appearance (*Eye* 950), however, things have improved. For once the city council did the right thing and started compulsory purchase proceedings against the delinquent owner of the upper floors. Now, after legal wrangles, majority ownership has been



acquired by a Dundee developer, Derek Soutar, who has commissioned an admirable conservation report from good engineers and architects.

The resulting proposals for a conservative restoration of the whole structure — including the remarkable iron-framed interior — and putting it back into commercial use has the backing of Historic Scotland. But it is at this point, when the future of this building seems reasonably hopeful for the first time in decades, that Scottish Enterprise Glasgow has chosen to pull the plug and renege on a promise to give £250,000 in grant aid of public money.

It claims that to help this project "is not a priority... in terms of the Operating Plan 2000/2001" and "does not fit with any of the priorities for Scottish Enterprise National". Yet three years ago, when called the Glasgow Development Agency, this enterprise company, doling out public money from its plush city-centre offices, was prepared to support a more destructive rehabilitation scheme in the typical Glasgow *macho* style. Indeed, it attempted to blackmail bodies like Historic Scotland into accepting a potentially destructive stone-cleaning of Thomson's extraordinary facade. Image is everything for the agency's sharp-suited spivs, after all, not long-term sustainability.

This decision seriously undermines the attempt to rescue this much-abused building. Yet if the

rehabilitation and commercial use of a largely empty city-centre urban masterpiece by one of the two architects of international stature for which poor old Glasgow is famous is not to be regarded as of economic benefit to the city — as opposed to out-of-town American-style hypermarkets and business parks — then what on earth could be?

Would the agency now help with the restoration of a commercial building by Mackintosh? After all, one of the aims of Scottish Enterprise Glasgow is meant to be the "development, redevelopment and improvement of the environment". Are they hypocrites or fools — or are these flash executives just reflecting the modern Glasgow culture of loathing good architecture and old buildings?

*MY ATTENTION* has been drawn, as they say, to the new "authorised" biography of the late Sir Hugh Casson by José Manser in which this column's relentless persecution of that cuddly exemplar of English charm and shabby chic is condemned.

My criticisms of Casson & Conder's *Ismaeli Centre* in South Kensington in 1982 (*Eye* 549) are even described as "bordering on racist in their venom". What I did, in fact, was to wonder how the Aga Khan, the plutocratic leader of a Muslim sect, should have so effortlessly acquired a site opposite the Victoria & Albert Museum once dedicated to the British people and intended for the National Theatre. I also suggested it was a mediocre, cliché-ridden design which, therefore, deserved the very first Sir Hugh Casson Medal. Was I wrong?

Perhaps Mrs Manser too much identifies her hero with her husband Michael who, as president of the RIBA and a knee-jerk modernist, has also been mentioned in this column. In her book, she declines to suggest any reasons for my "nastiness" towards Casson.

For the record, as I am "ever ready to be offensive", it was not just because I am repelled by charm masquerading as genius or public-spirited concern, but because Casson was shameless in the prostitution of his talents and connections. He used his status as a vice-chairman of the Victorian Society to oppose (for a fat fee) that society and others fighting at public inquiries for the preservation of, say, the Norman Shaw houses in Queen's Gate, Hounslow Town Hall and Liverpool Street Station. Later, he used his legendary charm to bugger up that great Elizabethan house, Sutton Place, without listed building consent.

*De mortuis nil nisi bonum?* Dear Sir Hugh "suffered with stoicism the abuse which was hurled at him" but I am told that being made a joke-figure in the *Eye* greatly hurt him towards the end of his life. Well, I cannot pretend that I am sorry. He also did much harm to the great city of Bath with the wretched "Casson mansard" roof, but I will admit that earlier in life, over the Festival of Britain, he did good things — which is more than can be said for his avid successors as public inquiry tarts, such as A. Blee.

'Piloti'

# NOOKS and CORNERS

**E**GYPTIAN Halls in Union Street, Glasgow, is one of the most astonishing buildings in a city full of great architecture (see *Eyes* 947, 950 & 1011).

Built in 1870-72 as a sort of department store-cum-exhibition gallery, it was designed by Alexander "Greek" Thomson, one of the two original architects of international stature for whose works Glasgow is celebrated (the other being St Charles Rennie Mackintosh).

The interior is a most unusual structure of cast and wrought iron and concrete; and the exterior facade a brilliant composition of Greek and early Classical elements which creates an effect of Old Testament grandeur. Thomson was responsible for other inventive commercial buildings in Glasgow, mostly now demolished; Egyptian Halls, his exotic commercial masterpiece, miraculously survives – just.

Neil Baxter, secretary of the Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland, described it as "a building of the first importance, not simply in Glasgow or Scotland but in European terms". It is listed at the highest grade, "A". Yet this urban architectural wonder is now seriously threatened with destruction largely because of the blinkered bureaucratic obstructiveness of Historic Scotland, the Scottish government's heritage agency.

Thanks to former ownership by a Chinese restaurateur, Egyptian Halls has been in a sorry state for three decades. It has long lost the exotic cast-iron lamp standards that stood outside; the central doorcase has gone and the shop-fronts are inappropriate. Today the roof leaks, the interior is sodden, the iron is corroding and the stonework crumbling. The upper floors have long been empty; and now the tenants of the ground-floor shops have departed.

But there is a developer, Derek Souter, who, for the last decade, has wanted to restore the building and make it into an hotel. This makes commercial sense and would help revitalise Union Street. Historic Scotland, however, has been disinclined to engage seriously with Mr Souter and is now only prepared to offer a maximum £1.5m towards external stonework repairs – which suggests the quango does not understand the intimate dynamic relationship between the masonry front and the iron-framed interior.

Historic Scotland has questioned whether this Dundee developer's companies are "the right people to be delivering this project". Yet Mr Souter has hung on in for more than a decade and battled to buy out the other interests in the building at a cost of £5.5m. Union Street Properties now owns all the four ground-floor shops and Union Street Investments has all the upper floors.

Furthermore he has appointed highly qualified and reputable specialists. The consultant structural engineer is John Addison (who has been commissioned by Historic Scotland on other projects). And the architects, the Morrison Partnership, have prepared a design for restoration and conversion into a hotel which not only retains all the existing historic fabric but is entirely reversible.

Mr Souter would seem to have been transparent in his financial affairs and has been prepared to allow Union Street Investments to cross-subsidise the restoration of the ground-floor shops which are added with inherited listed building repair notice costs. He argues that the money needed from central government now will soon be paid back through rates and the regeneration of Union Street.

Even Glasgow city council, whose treatment of historic buildings over the years has scarcely been edifying, agrees. Recognising its economic and tourism importance, it has offered £1m towards the project, and the economic convenor, Baillie Cameron, has stated that Egyptian Halls "is one of Glasgow's most important grade A listed buildings and is of real international significance. There is no doubt that it is a masterpiece of Victorian design and construction". The council has implored the Scottish government to cover the remaining shortfall of £1.35m on the £18m project.

Yet Historic Scotland and the Scottish government's Fiona Hyslop, minister for culture and external affairs, remain uncooperative and insist the refurbishment is "unviable". They have also now required the developer to take a strictly commercial view of the project, which has ruled out the cross-subsidy and greatly increased the financial shortfall. I note that the Heritage Lottery Fund in Scotland has recently offered a grant of £4.85m to develop the tourism potential of Sir Walter Scott's home, Abbotsford, although that famous historic house is not in danger of collapse. What explains this myopia? Is it just the snobbish prejudice of Edinburgh-based bureaucrats?

Unless there is real progress with the Egyptian Halls scheme very soon the hotel operator will pull out. The grant offer from Glasgow city council will also soon expire, as will the availability of the Business Premises Renovation Allowance. The opportunity of having the hotel ready in time for the Commonwealth Games will also be missed. If the hotel scheme fails, demolition of Thomson's decayed masterpiece may then be the only option. Is this what Historic Scotland wants? And is the Scottish National Party which runs Holyrood prepared to acquiesce in the destruction of one of the very greatest works of architecture in Scotland?

*'Piloti'*



# NOOKS and CORNERS

**M**ORE from the ancient Royal Burgh of Dumfries in Scotland, the once proud and prosperous town which long ago erected "beautiful buildings of the red hewn sandstone".

I recently reported how Dumfries & Galloway council had abandoned support for the old Theatre Royal as having "no future". Earlier, there was the plan to demolish Moat Brae House, a Late Georgian mansion once the home of J.M. Barrie, by the Loreburn Housing Association with the connivance of the council, which also acquiesced in the stripping out of the town's Assembly Rooms as a bar (*Eye* 1243).

Now the housing association, notorious for the offensive mediocrity of the architecture it erects in place of fine historic buildings, has applied to demolish a pair of decent red sandstone houses, built by the sculptor William Flint, in St Mary's Street.

Along with the adjacent former Nithsdale Hotel of 1878, these houses are in an Outstanding Conservation Area. Historic Scotland considers them of architectural merit and that they contribute to the conservation area by maintaining the traditional street pattern and by forming part of the setting for St Mary's Church and Church Hall, both listed.

The houses were occupied until 2006 when the tenants were evicted by the housing association and Dumfries & Galloway council, which claimed that repairing and maintaining them was too expensive. The part of the site owned by the council was sold to the housing association in 2009. Loreburn now wants to replace the houses with blocks of new "social housing" faced in zinc cladding, render, brick and stone cladding – which will scarcely "enhance" the conservation area.

Needless to say the council has granted planning permission, claiming there was no interest in the buildings when placed on the open market in 2007. This is not true: Juliet Caird, a local landlord, offered a sum in excess of the asking price the following year, but the council withdrew the houses from the market.

Historic Scotland says there is no reason Nos 3-5 St Mary's Street could not be made back into dwelling houses and Nithsdale House converted into flats, while more flats could be built on the rest of the site. The demolition is strongly opposed locally and by the Architectural Heritage Society of Scotland; and a petition has been sent to Fiona Hyslop MSP, Minister for Culture & External Affairs, asking for the case to be called in.

No hope there: Ms Hyslop, in her usual wet way, has declined to intervene, accepting Loreburn's pathetic claim that it is not possible to retain the existing buildings and that the social benefits to the council outweigh "historic environment issues". So the mendacious philistinism of Dumfries & Galloway Council triumphs again.

*FIONA HYSLOP* has already shown her uselessness in the tragic saga of Egyptian Halls in Glasgow (see below), an extraordinary iron-framed masonry commercial building in Union Street, built in 1870-72 and one of the most important few surviving works by Scotland's most intelligent and original 19th century architect, Alexander "Greek" Thomson.

Listed at Grade A, it has been neglected for more than 30 years and is now empty and in serious danger of collapse (*Eyes passim*). For the last 13 years Derek Souter, a developer from Dundee, has been trying to acquire and restore the building and convert it into an hotel. He claims his companies have already spent £5m on the project and are willing to invest a further £12m and possibly £14m. Even with grant aid from Glasgow and elsewhere, however, there is still a shortfall of £2.35m. So nothing happens, the fabric deteriorates further and the restoration costs rise.



Historic Scotland has only been prepared to offer £1.65m towards saving one of the most remarkable historic buildings in the country, arguing that it cannot offer more as this is a purely commercial project. Yet Ms Hyslop and the Scottish government are happy to give £4m towards a £10m tourism development project at Abbotsford, the home of Sir Walter Scott. Abbotsford House is of huge cultural significance, but it is not in danger of demolition or collapse. Also, restoring Egyptian Halls as a city-centre hotel and thus reviving Union Street, next to Central Station, will help the economy of Glasgow.

Mr Souter has had enough of the obduracy and prejudice of the Scottish bureaucracy and is now proposing an alternative new build scheme on the site for an 11-storey 200-bed hotel. This will be cheaper and quicker to achieve. In consequence, John Addison, the distinguished conservation engineer who has demonstrated how the original iron internal structure of Egyptian Halls can be saved and adapted, has resigned from the project. It is all very depressing.

Neil Baxter, secretary of the Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland, now accuses Mr Souter of "trying to hold the Scottish Government to ransom" – scarcely fair considering how long he has battled, and how much he has spent on the project.

But what else is Mr Souter – and those who care about Glasgow's rare and precious architectural heritage – to do except try to shame the Scottish government into positive action? He has convened a public meeting to discuss the future of this real architectural wonder so there is hope yet.