

Glasgow – still spooked by Mackintosh

THERE'S NO doubt about it: Glasgow still doesn't really like Charles Rennie Mackintosh. No-one noticed when he and his wife, Margaret, left Glasgow for Walberswick in Suffolk in 1914 where, as the First World War began, he was arrested as a German spy because the locals couldn't understand his Glasgow accent.

And no-one in Glasgow took any notice when Mackintosh died in London in 1928, though they may have been surprised when an exhibition was staged in London in 1968 to mark the centenary of his birth.

Nor, when Glasgow City Council began its grandiose motorway expansion in the 1970s, was there much opposition to the city's plans to demolish Mackintosh's Scotland Street School (1904) and Martyrs Memorial School (1895) to make way for cars. The city even planned to surround his Queen's Cross Church (1899) by building a motorway interchange around it. Only lack of funds prevented those ideas from going ahead.

It was not until the euphoria of Glasgow being selected as European City of Design 1999 that there was a brief official acknowledgement of Mackintosh's importance to the city.

This led to the refurbishment of his Glasgow Herald building in Renfrew Street (1901), which became The Lighthouse, complete with a permanent Mackintosh exhibition. But now, all the excitement of The Lighthouse's exhibition and conference programme has evaporated and the building is marking time while the city decides what to do with it.

As for the two schools, Stuart Robertson,

director of the Charles Rennie Mackintosh (CRM) Society, has warned that Scotland Street School (now an educational museum) and the Public Martyrs School (now mothballed) are being allowed to fall into disrepair.

And that's not the end of the story: the Willow Tea Rooms in Sauchiehall Street, which opened in 1901 and were saved from demolition in the 1970s by the CRM Society, is also in bad repair, while questions hang over the future of the remains of Mackintosh's Queen Margaret Medical College (1894-6), now buried within the former BBC television centre.

A tv adaptation of The Hunchback of Notre Dame showed Quasimodo swinging from its tower, which masqueraded as the roof of the Paris cathedral. There were plans to turn the BBC Centre into a boutique hotel but these have fallen through and the complex is up for sale.

Finally, Mackintosh isn't the only architect of major significance whose heritage in Glasgow is being ignored. Alexander 'Greek' Thomson's Egyptian Halls – built in 1873 and widely regarded as a masterpiece in commercial architecture – now face demolition as its owner and developer, Derek Souter, has given up waiting for approval of public grants towards his £ 20m plan to convert it into a hotel.

Instead, Souter plans to replace the Egyptian Halls with a modern building. Having lain empty for 30 years, it is a disgrace that the Egyptian Halls should suffer such an ignominious end. And, as Professor Isi Metzstein has said, "If such a superb and



Saved: the Mackintosh house formerly at Southpark Avenue, reborn at the Hunterian, Glasgow

adaptable building can be at risk, then no building in Glasgow is safe from uncaring philistinism."

Another Mackintosh building – The Hill House in Helensburgh (1901) – is proving to be very expensive for the National Trust of Scotland – its owner – to keep in good repair. Soon after the trust acquired the building in the 1980s, it discovered that the exterior walls had sandstone laid vertically below the roof with the result that rain got in and split the stone. Part of the walls had to be rebuilt. And now it's been found that the mortar used in buildings of that age in Helensburgh has always been faulty: more expensive repairs are now needed.

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