

Letters

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Important questions to be asked about our architectural heritage

THE application to demolish Alexander "Greek" Thomson's Egyptian Halls will inevitably raise a public outcry ("Threat to demolish historic Greek Thomson building", The Herald, May 5, 2011). However it also poses bigger questions about how we value our most precious heritage.

Alexander Thomson's public profile has increased greatly over the past generation, and now probably equals that of Charles Rennie Mackintosh. Yet, like Thomson's now-demolished Queens Park Terrace, his streetscape buildings such as the Egyptian Halls lack the visibility and presence of his villas and churches.

Although the Egyptian Halls are located in the city centre, Union Street is hardly one of the city's most salubrious thoroughfares. How many passing punters glance up and appreciate "the noblest wallhead in Europe", or the building's "perfection of the Greek ideal", as described by our architectural peers? Beyond the occasional group following a Greek Thomson heritage trail, how much value is the building to the general public? If it must be pointed out before it can be noticed by Joe Public, does this diminish its heritage value?

Once we enter the building, unlike many Thomson buildings, there is little of his colourful stencilling and decoration. As the building can really only be appreciated from across the street, the value to its owner is reduced, and it becomes more of a public asset. The cynic may view the current controversy as the tool of a frustrated developer, but nobody has a bottomless pit of cash. If the building is as much value to the "public good" as to the private purse, who should stump up the funding?

While the controversy persists, the Egyptian Halls continue to deteriorate. No matter how important a building may be perceived, it is never immune from demolition. The process of deterioration, even of the most important A-listed buildings, is entirely predictable. The scaffold which has obscured the Egyptian Halls for the past three years gives the stark but ominous warning that the end is nigh.

Will the deterioration of the Egyptian Halls be reversed? Beyond the current outcry, the fate of this building raises deeper and more searching questions about the future of Glasgow's heritage, particularly in a time of recession.

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I WAS pleased to learn that Jim McDonald, the Principal of Strathclyde University, has granted the university's music department a three-year stay of execution, and also offered some prospect of saving the



UNDER THREAT: Alexander "Greek" Thomson's historic Egyptian Halls in Glasgow.

Ramshorn Theatre and the Collins Gallery by converting them into charitable trusts ("A ray of hope for university music society", The Herald, May 5). Those in positions of power do not often pay attention to protests from the wider society, and I congratulate Prof McDonald on his good sense and his willingness to think again.

Of course the principal purpose of any seat of learning is to turn out graduates thoroughly trained and skilled in whatever academic discipline they have chosen, so that they can have successful careers and make a useful contribution to society. But there is, or should be, much more to a good university education than that. Even when financial resources are strained as now, universities have a crucial role in providing students with the opportunity to develop other talents, cultural or otherwise, so that they mature into well-rounded and responsible citizens.

Having achieved success in this affair, it seems that Glasgow's doughty band of protestors must now turn their attention to another blatant attempt to destroy a part of Glasgow's cultural heritage. If the new owner, property developer Derek Souter, gets his way, the iconic Greek Thomson building on Union Street will be

demolished. Over the past 50 years Glasgow's unique architectural heritage has been grievously damaged by the demolition of many of its finest buildings designed by world-famous local architects, usually to be replaced by the modern monstrosities that today ruin the city's skyline. Now another A-listed building is under threat and we rely on the city council to defend us from this new act of cultural vandalism.

When Mr Souter bought the property just three years ago he announced grandiose plans to convert it into a hotel and shopping precinct. But it now appears that these depended on massive amounts of public finance being made available. He is now trying to get the city council to financing his development by claiming that otherwise it must be demolished. I trust that another storm of protest will arise, and that our elected councillors will listen.

They should refuse permission for the Egyptian Halls to be demolished, and bluntly tell Mr Souter that the property is his responsibility and he will not be allowed to let it fall into total disrepair.

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