

# Architect's Choice

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Our Question Time panelists discuss the proposed Glasgow School of Art restoration

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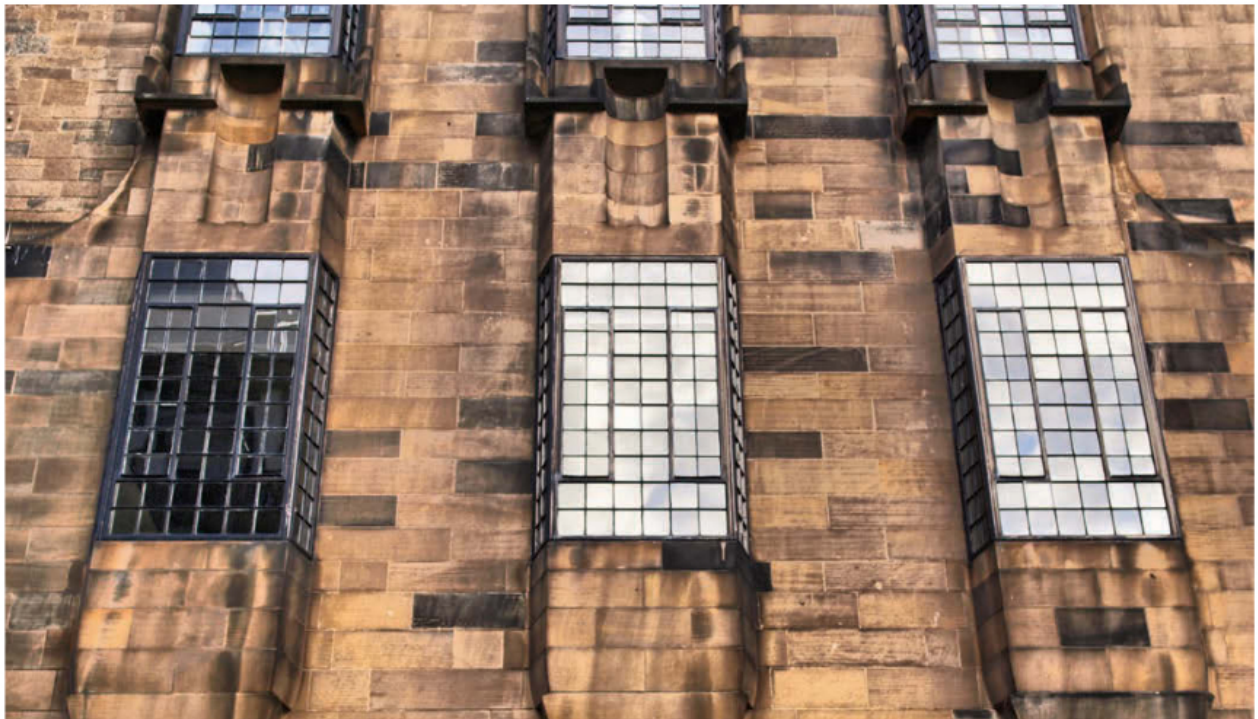


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# QUESTION TIME

**THIS MONTH'S QUESTION:** WHAT WOULD YOU DO TO RESTORE THE GLASGOW SCHOOL OF ART TO ITS FULL GLORY?



Glasgow School of Art, the Grade A-Listed art nouveau Mackintosh building was terribly damaged in a fire back in May of 2014. The news reports showed this beautiful building suffer at the hands of flammable gases, in this case, a canister of expanding foam. The dust has now settled and plans have emerged to restore this glorious Glaswegian building. The school aims to raise £20million towards the cost of the restoration and have as such, announced five architecture firms who have made the shortlist to lead the restoration. These firms include Avanti Architects, John McAslan and partners, LDN Architects LLP, Page/Park Architects and Purcell. The winning bid will be revealed at the end of March. These finalists have all demonstrated exceptional skill in restorative work and an

appreciation and understanding of the arts world.

As architects looking at the project from the outside in, what would you do to this building to restore it to its former glory? Where would you implement changes and how would you still respect its Art Nouveau history, whilst making it fit for purpose in modern times? Also, considering its purpose as a school, what measures would you bring it to take it to the next level as an institute of education?

**SUSAN MCBAIN,  
CASSIDY + ASHTON**

I have a personal interest in the project as sadly one of my relatives lost her art work in the fire. I first visited the building about 10 years ago and my strongest reaction, like

most I am sure, was shock and sadness, but then my thoughts soon turned the recognition that there was a need for a total and faithful restoration.

This is one of the nation's most documented interiors and is integral to Scottish architectural history. The destruction of the library represents a major loss to Glasgow and Scotland's culture. For many traditional craftsmen, this would be the commission of a lifetime and I am sure they would do a perfect job.

However, with the passing of time, I feel we must evaluate what we are actually restoring. The shelves, the woodwork the decoration all can be faithfully restored and copied from the original drawings and photographs, but that is in essence just the canvas. The wear and tear of 100 years of students would be lost. The

scratches and knocks on the desks, the small acts of graffiti, the patina given to the library by the many generations of students gone before is lost.

A faithfully restored library would be a carbon copy, but would be unused, brand new. I would be fearful that it would then resort to becoming the museum piece that should not be touched for fear of damage – like the best china left in a glass-fronted cupboard, too good to use. Or worse, it could look like a modern, mass-produced Mackintosh-inspired kitch item, commercially available in all well-known retail outlets – items of which I regularly receive as presents, because of their ‘architectural’ design.

Perhaps we should look to tell the story of its history, acknowledging the fire and the past, but giving a modern re-interpretation. Use this opportunity to build on Mackintosh’s design values, through the use of craftsmanship, to showcase contemporary design ideas and craftsmanship to create a research/study library, which is fit for the 21st century. Obviously it needs to be designed to modern standards – or surpassing them in the case of sustainable elements. Modern services need to be integrated into the space sympathetically. It needs to have adequate Wifi/data points, electrical sockets, even the ubiquitous Macintosh lights!

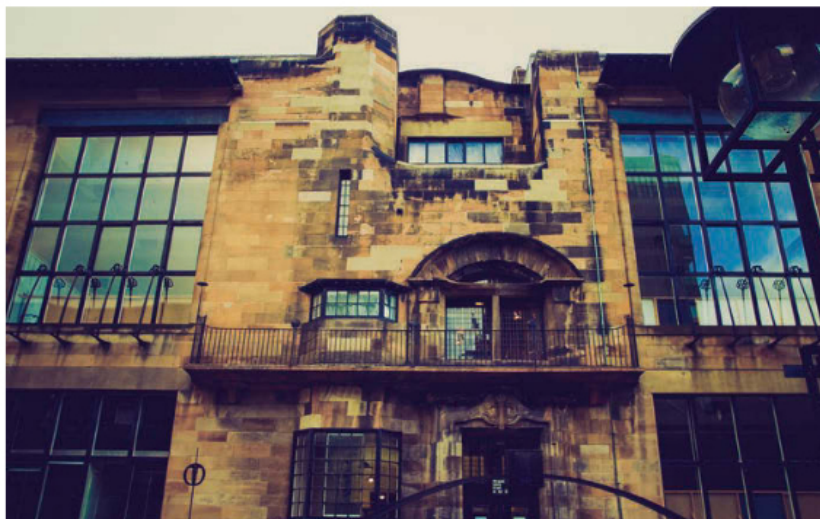
I feel that the refurbishment of the Grade II-listed Manchester Central library has been a great success. It still embodies the original ethos of the building, but with small touches, such as re-made desks and chairs to replace broken originals. The new desks have integrated services and the central area of the floor has been opened up and replaced with structural glazing to let light into the dynamic, technological ground floor below.

I went on a tour of the restored building as part of the RIBA Conservation Course and the calm, understated restoration of The Reading Room would be in keeping with how I would see the design develop for the Mackintosh Library.

**CHRISTIAN GARNETT,  
GARNETT + PARTNERS LLP**

Charles Rennie Macintosh’s architectural career was incredibly short, with all his major commissions coming within a ten-year period between 1896 and 1906, yet he is regarded as one of the greatest architects of the modern era, influencing architects and the arts across Europe and north America to this day. Of the few realised commissions, Glasgow School of Art, is perhaps his most famous completed project and one of the most complete expressions of the European art nouveau movement, flowering around this time. The value of the building to European and international culture is difficult to estimate and for me the building approaches the status of a modern monument.

The project provides an opportunity to strip



away the incremental alterations, adaptations and extraneous layers built over the last 100 years and recomplete the original spaces and restore the parts damaged by the fire. A light touch is required to see how modern M&E services and problems such as accessibility can be integrated into the structure in a discreet way, while enhancing and preserving the original spaces. The project should be about how to provide a coherent response to the damage caused by the fire that incorporates the original fabric while allowing

skillful introduction of contemporary interventions. I would like to see an archaeological approach to restoration and repair of the existing elements with the spatial context and materiality of the original structure emphasized wherever possible. There is clearly a dialogue to be had between faithful painstaking reconstruction of those parts based on respect for original material and authentic documents, and respect for the historical structure in its different states of preservation. With respect to modern

## THE EXPERTS...

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**SUSAN MCBAIN  
SENIOR ARCHITECT,  
CASSIDY + ASHTON**

Susan recently joined the Chester office of the North West-based architectural, building surveying and planning consultancy after 12 years at a local practice where she amassed a wealth of experience, particularly in the education sector.



**CHRISTIAN GARNETT  
FOUNDER, GARNETT +  
PARTNERS**

Christian trained at Sheppard Robson Architects and later worked with Sir Terry Farrell & Company and Franklin Israel’s office in Los Angeles as a project architect. Christian returned to his beloved London in the early 1990s to launch his own practice, Garnett + Partners.



**CORA KWIATKOWSKI  
SENIOR ASSOCIATE,  
STRIDE TREGLOWN**

Cora joined Stride Treglown in 2006 and has been responsible for a wide range of projects in the UK – office, residential, and education; her previous working experience in Germany, Sweden and Switzerland also included urban design as well as transport projects.



interventions, clear delineation is required from Macintosh's architectural composition and must bear a contemporary stamp. With the cost of the restoration estimated at around £35m with around £20m to be raised through a combination of private and public funding, a primary focus of the restoration scheme should be about how to expand public access and open up the building for participation in the cultural life of the city, and the wider international architectural community. Increasing accessibility and re-introducing museum spaces, café, exhibition, lecture areas to allow semi-public access should be explored. There seems scope for introducing creating new and exciting spaces at second floor as a result of the requirement to replace the badly damaged roof. A key challenge for any scheme to open up the building will be to provide level access and introduce a new lift and fully accessible toilet facilities. One option could be to look at access through the Reid Building via a new underground link below Renfrew Street. I think the focus must be on how to enable the building to transcend its day to day use as a working school of architecture, to preserve the memory of one of our greatest architects, and become a focus for innovative architecture and the creative arts.

**CORA KWIATKOWSKI,  
STRIDE TREGLOWN**

The Glasgow School of Art became a symbol for emerging creativity in Glasgow, which in turn made the city a trailblazer for modern art and architecture. Although an amazing study environment, the spirit of the school is not just tied to a building but connected to

teaching and research, as well as the city's vibrant cultural offerings.

The damage to the Mackintosh building will not break this spirit of innovation and creativity and we should therefore overcome the disaster and embrace the future. We should trust in our own profession to be able to design a sensitive refurbishment and unlock the further potential of the building. I think it is important to retain as much of its original substance as possible, although the library has been tragically lost, we shouldn't forget that over 90 per cent of the building could be saved and we should be grateful to use what remains.

A thorough analysis, an understanding of the original concept and a creative approach to conservation will be required to improve the building and make a different use of space possible, enabling students to be even more innovative and tutors more efficient. Incorporating the latest technology is now an option, which might not have been possible to that extent in the existing library.

I do not think it is possible to replicate only parts of the building, as they would not have the patina of the remaining building and a rebuilt library would look completely out of place. In addition to this, replicas of the furniture of the library might create a 'Disneyland' effect. In my opinion, it will be important to take ideas of Mackintosh's genius library and continue in his spirit rather than creating a pastiche.

I believe that John Ruskin's statement in 'The Lamp of Memory' (1849) is still valid today: "... it is impossible, ..., to restore anything that has ever been great or beautiful in architecture... that spirit which is given only by the hand and eye of the workman can

never be recalled... And as for direct and simple copying, it is palpably impossible. What copying can there be of surfaces that have been worn half an inch down? ..."

In history, styles were always combined or even forced onto the existing – for example baroque features overlaid onto medieval churches. We are now a lot more aware of the significance of historic buildings and the possibilities of restorative work and should 'continue to build' rather than replicate the past. There are lots of successful examples of this approach, not least Berlin's Neues Museum and more recently, Astley Castle in Warwickshire.

I also believe proposed additions should reflect on the past without imitating it and be clearly identifiable. One option would be to reinstate the library as a paraphrase of what has been lost, respecting the original massing and window proportions but without replicas of the interiors.

Let us not underestimate the adaptability of the historic fabric and be afraid of change but embrace it to create a great building that evolves with time; the damage is now part of its history.

**Our panel of contributors are experts in their field and have experience in a vast area of architectural design including; landscape, public sector and private residencies. If you would like to contribute as a panelist email: [jade.tilley@necoms.co.uk](mailto:jade.tilley@necoms.co.uk)**