

MACKINTOSH BUILDING: THE WAY AHEAD

Prepared by
The Charles Rennie Mackintosh Society

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INTRODUCTION

The destruction of the Mackintosh Building is one of Scotland's greatest cultural losses in living memory. The Charles Rennie Mackintosh Society advocates for its accurate reconstruction and is committed to playing an active role in returning this masterpiece of twentieth-century architecture to the nation.

In July 2026, The Glasgow School of Art (GSA) published its Strategic Outline Business Case Addendum, clarifying that they lack the funds and expertise to faithfully reinstate the building as previously intended. In light of this, we believe responsibility for the project should be vested in a dedicated Special Purpose Vehicle (SPV), with a clear constitutional duty to assemble the expertise, authority, and resources required to deliver an accurate reconstruction and secure the building's future for generations to come.

We welcome GSA's recent progress in political engagement, and the indications of support for reconstruction from the First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education, Culture and Gaelic. We hope this momentum will continue as the Scottish Government exercises its convening power to bring major partners to the table, and we encourage both the Scottish and UK Governments to commit significant funding towards the reconstruction.

We share GSA's ambition to reconstruct the Mackintosh Building and make it the heart of a thriving cultural quarter, acting as a broader catalyst for heritage regeneration in Glasgow. We will continue to offer support and guidance as funding partnerships are developed and a delivery model established, while encouraging transparency, regular public engagement and accountability throughout the process. Should it become desirable or necessary, we also stand ready to play a convening role in establishing the SPV.

The pathway to do this is set out in this document, which has been prepared by the Charles Rennie Mackintosh Society with the support of the organisations listed. Reconstruction of the Mackintosh Building will build the cultural wealth of the nation and, as GSA has rightly noted, offers significant economic benefit. We invite all those who value our shared cultural heritage to join us in bringing Mackintosh's masterpiece back to life.



The Architect

Born in 1868 in Glasgow's East End, Charles Rennie Mackintosh became one of the world's most pioneering artists, architects and designers.

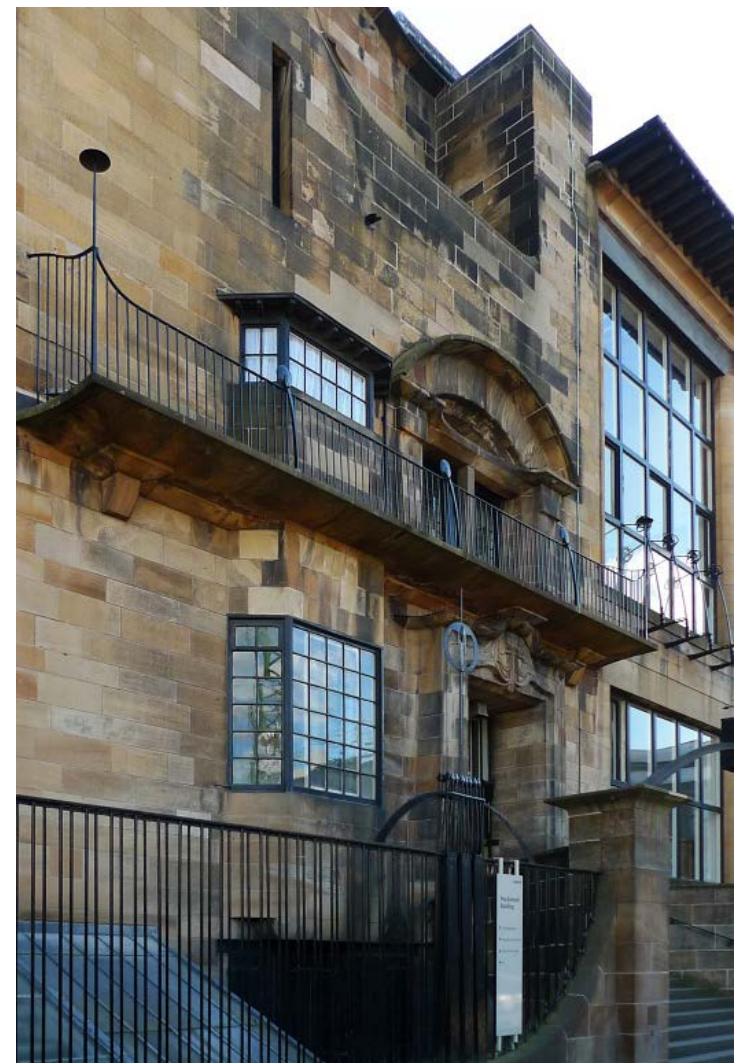
Mackintosh's work is instantly recognised around the world, whether a ladderback chair, a Glasgow rose, or fusions of organic and geometric forms. He represents a vanishingly small group of artists who worked across the disciplines of art, design and architecture. Mackintosh practised a holistic approach to design in which exteriors, interiors, furnishings and finishing details were conceived together; each element developed to create a singular, immersive experience – a total work of art.

The Building

The Mackintosh Building is his masterwork: a landmark bridging the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in which Mackintosh combined a deep respect for traditional crafts and centuries-old Scottish architecture with a fresh handling of space and light, and a humane attention to the experience of the user. It is the best British example of European Art Nouveau and Symbolism; and foreshadows later Art Deco and Bauhaus styles.

This is why historians have pointed to the building – and Mackintosh himself – as a monumental 'Pioneer of the Modern Movement'. It stood for over a century as a catalyst for creative practitioners, from Turner Prize-winning artists and bestselling authors to internationally successful actors and musicians.

Top Right:
Renfrew Street entrance to the
Mackintosh Building.
© Mackintosh Architecture,
University of Glasgow



The Opportunity

As the present generation of cultural custodians, we find ourselves at a critical moment. Since the fire in 2018, little visible progress has been made to rebuild this landmark of British architecture and global design. The choice before us is either to resign ourselves to the loss and accept the building as a consolidated ruin, or to seize the opportunity to return it to the nation.

The Charles Rennie Mackintosh Society believes that the UK has the intellectual commitment to culture, dedication to the creative industries, and world-leading heritage knowledge to undertake an accurate reconstruction. The opportunities for creative sector investment, traditional skills, arts education and growth in the visitor economy are substantial, but the building should also return on its own merits, as a work of international importance. In short, there must be a national commitment to rebuild the Mackintosh Building. This document outlines a credible foundation for a partnership, including The Glasgow School of Art, to achieve that goal.



The building is one of the most documented in the world. This is a visualisation of the famous library, produced from a highly accurate 3D model.
© Page\Park

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The Glasgow School of Art has stated that a partnership approach is needed to reconstruct the building. We agree and are heartened to see talks with the Scottish Government taking place to progress this. Should it become necessary, the Society is prepared to convene the formation of an independent SPV to deliver the project, after which it would return to being a purely advisory body. The following pathway offers a credible route forward if required.

ENGAGE

The process must begin with extensive consultation and engagement with key stakeholders to ensure that an SPV is fit for purpose, inclusive in its objectives, transparent in its operation and agile in its approach. Importantly, it must be capable of both holding the building and assembling the finance required to protect it. The Society has access to sector-leading legal expertise, with a long track record of establishing major SPVs, trusts and joint ventures in Scotland, ready to advise on its formation.

The Society supports GSA's stated goal of establishing a broad coalition of support, including statutory and governmental stakeholders, community interest groups, heritage and cultural institutions, experts and potential donors. As an independent organisation dedicated to the preservation of Mackintosh's heritage, the Society should play an active role in forming that coalition. The support for this document is an indicator of our reach.

ESTABLISH

Once a credible model is agreed, the SPV should be created with a constitutional responsibility to reconstruct the building. GSA has indicated that it is making progress toward this goal, but the Society offers to lead the process should an independent party be viewed as preferable and will press its case if the process stalls.

A cross-sector team with the relevant knowledge and skills should then be appointed to lead the SPV through an open application and interview process, with selection based on an agreed set of core competences to deliver a project of this scope and ambition. The membership should include key stakeholders, including GSA, which has an important role to play but should sit as an equal partner rather than lead the body. The SPV would then explore operational models, project costs, public benefit and fundraising.

TRANSFER

To be most effective, the SPV should hold ownership of the building before reconstruction works can commence. There will also be questions around liabilities and existing funding. We are prepared to work alongside GSA and other project partners to agree the terms of any transfer.

At this point, the SPV would be required to carry out consultation and provide evidence of a clear route forward, including a funding model and reconstruction plans backed by a business case. A funding package would need to be in place at the point of transfer, with the SPV providing confidence to all parties in its ability to deliver.

ENACT

Once the SPV has legal ownership of the building and full or partial funding in place, reconstruction can begin. The exact process will be decided by the SPV's Directors with specialist advice from advisers and stakeholders, guided by a core constitutional obligation to reconstruct the building for the benefit of the nation. We envisage oversight by international experts and representatives of the Scottish and UK Governments, alongside other national stakeholders.

What is the public benefit?

The Mackintosh Building was previously a significant part of Glasgow’s offer to visitors, and Mackintosh’s built heritage remains a key strand of the city’s Tourism Strategy, which is supported by VisitScotland.¹ The Scottish visitor economy is worth £11.4bn and is the largest sector for employment;² £2.1bn of that is attributable to heritage tourism, which supports over 81,000 jobs.³ A reconstructed Mackintosh Building will undoubtedly increase visitation, provide an excellent platform for destination marketing and enhance Scotland’s international reputation.

Decisive action at a national level will be read globally as a statement of how seriously cultural heritage is taken in Scotland and the UK. Commitment to reconstruct the Mackintosh Building will also send a positive signal to those working in the creative and visitor economies, creating a solid foundation for new investment and future growth.

GSA’s Addendum rightly notes that the building sits within an established concentration of creative and cultural institutions running from Sauchiehall Street northwards to the Forth and Clyde Canal. That area has previously been described as a creative and performance supercluster that is not yet formally designated, governed or invested in.⁴ A reconstructed Mackintosh Building would be a world-class anchor and catalyst for that supercluster. In 2021 the creative and cultural sector contributed £320m of gross value added in Glasgow city centre alone, having grown by 47% in six years. Businesses in listed buildings generated gross value added 4.4% higher than those in unlisted buildings.⁵

Between 2015 and 2018 the Mackintosh Building restoration project employed around 60 specialist craftspeople, supporting an industry with a recognised skills shortage.⁶ The future reconstruction might well be the largest conservation project of its type ever undertaken in Scotland. It is an unprecedented opportunity to invest in skilled jobs that are sorely needed in the heritage sector, with a ripple effect on traditional skills throughout the country.

The Society believes that options for future use should be determined by the SPV following wide consultation and business case analysis, but the final use must enable people to visit the building and engage with Mackintosh’s work. The building was intended as a place for artistic production, and for over a century it inspired students and those in the creative industries. Future use should therefore include creative and cultural learning, so that those benefits are afforded to future generations. Tuition or exhibitions by GSA may be part of the final use, but we do not believe that the building should be returned to GSA. We believe that a goal of the SPV is also to create a plan for future care and protection of this building as a significant cultural asset.

The Society would support a final use that elevates Scotland’s culture and tourism offer, drawing on the depth of national collections, our dynamic art and design scene, and considerable expertise in curation and visitor experience. We look forward to being part of the consultation process.



Apprentice carving new stone during the 2015-18 restoration. Copyright © Alan McAteer

Joiner and apprentice after completing a 1:1 prototype of the Library in 2018. © Alan McAteer



How can the project be funded?

The Society joins public pressure groups, culture and heritage organisations and international creative stakeholders, including The Glasgow School of Art, in calling on the Scottish and UK Governments to commit in principle to substantial funding and underwriting for the reconstruction. Beyond that, we would expect the SPV to pursue Heritage Lottery funding, city and regional investment, corporate support, and individual giving from Scotland and the large international constituency that cares about this building.

Alongside proven funding streams, the first phase of works to consolidate the structure also offers the opportunity to generate income for later stages of the rebuild. This could include Mackintosh exhibitions and immersive experiences, some with international touring potential, which would keep the project in the public imagination while helping to win private financial support.

There is precedent for large-scale international philanthropy for buildings of similar significance. Notre-Dame drew donations from several hundred thousand people around the world, and the Frauenkirche in Dresden was rebuilt largely through international private giving. The Mackintosh Building has a comparable global following.

GSA has calculated the current cost of full, phased reinstatement at around £265m, equivalent to five times its annual turnover.⁷ These costs would need to be independently re-valued and benchmarked. Establishing a robust, independently tested cost and funding profile would be among the SPV's first tasks and would remove financial risk from GSA.

What is already clear is the cost of inaction: GSA notes that continuing the present arrangement is financially unsustainable, delivers no usable building and makes no meaningful progress towards reinstatement. The Society therefore supports GSA's first-phase proposals for stabilisation and increased public visibility of the building. To avoid later complications in achieving full reconstruction, however, the details on how this will be accomplished should be shared with a wider

expert group. We strongly recommend the creation of an external expert panel to advise GSA during this first phase.



The Frauenkirche, rebuilt from ruins in the 1990s.
© CEphoto, Uwe Aranas / CC-BY-SA-3.0



Reconstruction of the famous
Hen Run in progress in 2017.
© Alan McAteer

Why do we say 'accurate reconstruction' rather than 'faithful reinstatement'?

Given the substantial damage suffered in the 2018 fire, a reconstructed building will be largely formed of new construction combined with conservation and repair of the remaining masonry shell. The Society has therefore chosen the term 'accurate reconstruction'. By this we mean that elements of Mackintosh's original design should be reconstructed only where the evidence base exists to inform their reinstatement. We do not support reconstruction where conjecture is required, or where extensive alteration to the original design proves necessary.

The Burra Charter, the standard guide to decisions about places of cultural significance, treats reconstruction as appropriate where three conditions are met: a place is incomplete through damage, reconstruction is warranted by its cultural significance, and sufficient evidence exists to reproduce an earlier state⁸. The Mackintosh Building meets all three, the third particularly strongly. The 2014–18 restoration produced a large body of research, forensic investigation, a full 3D scan survey and measured drawings prepared for construction. In addition, GSA's archive holds extensive photographic and written records of the building's history, including the original correspondence between the architect and the school. This may well be one of the most complete records of any building in the world.

Further justification is found in the 1994 Nara Document on Authenticity, which holds that authenticity is judged within the cultural context of a place rather than by material survival alone⁹. UNESCO has since moved to protect intangible heritage alongside physical sites¹⁰. The World Heritage List includes the reconstructed old town of Warsaw and the rebuilt bridge at Mostar, both inscribed on the understanding that a reconstruction can carry the significance of what was lost¹¹.

The Society's position is that accurate reconstruction should be carried out on a significance basis, prioritising all areas identified as of Exceptional, Considerable or Moderate in existing or future conservation management plans. While the ultimate goal should be complete reconstruction, concessions are likely to be required.

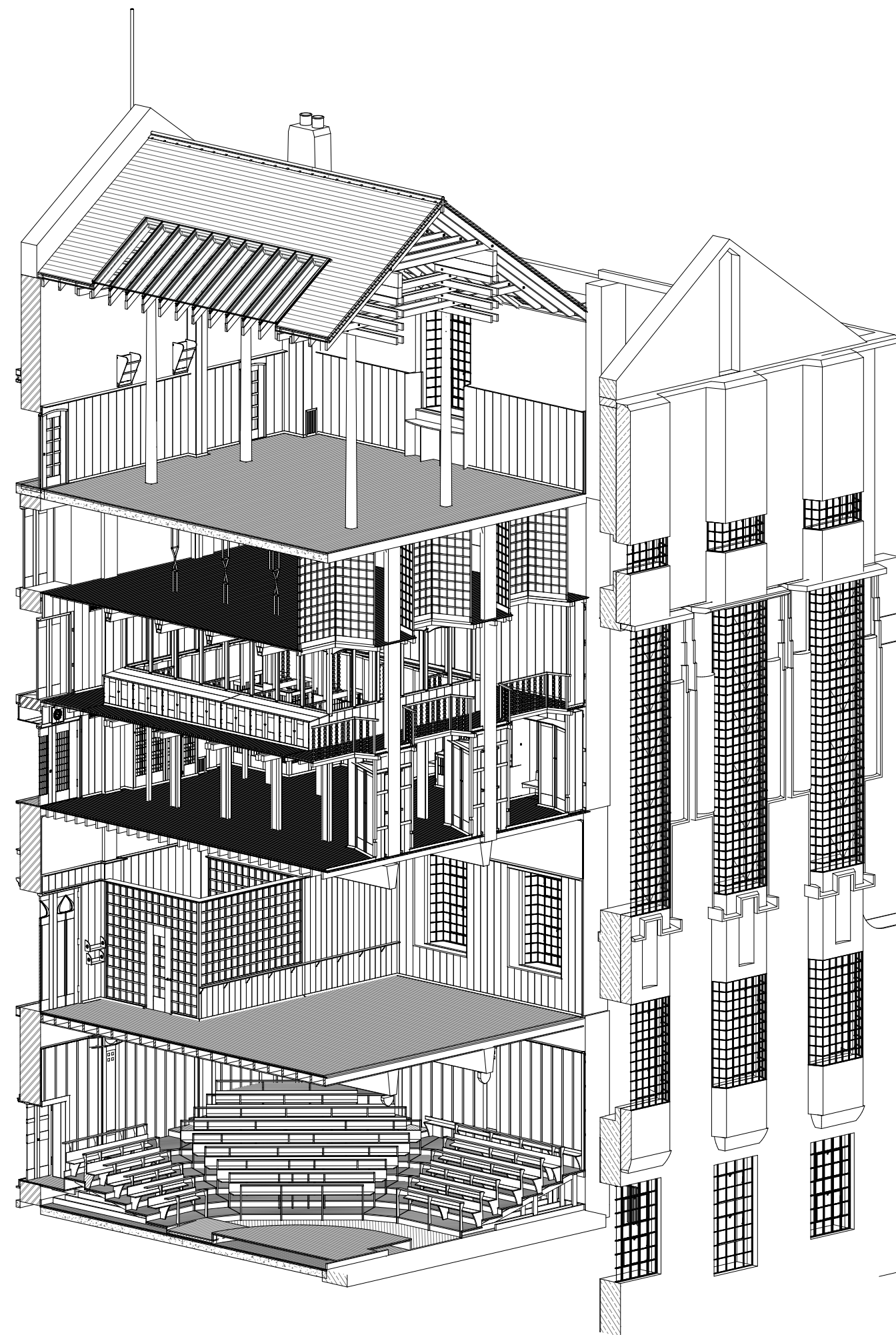
Managing alterations to the original design

The building retains its Category A listed status, the highest category of listing in Scotland. Any construction work at the site should therefore be considered by statutory authorities as alteration to an existing listed structure, rather than new build.

Contemporary building standards will apply in part. As with any listed building, however, some dispensation will be needed where full compliance cannot be achieved within the bounds of the existing building. Further dispensation against specific legislation may also be introduced via Section 3 of the Building (Scotland) Act 2003, permitting relaxation of building regulations under a special act of parliament for the reconstruction of the Mackintosh Building.

Some concessions to the original design will nonetheless be required to ensure the building is safe to occupy and accessible to all. In line with standard conservation practice and the international guidelines set out by ICOMOS, these must be reviewed by an international panel of experts. That panel would provide oversight of the conservation philosophy and decision-making throughout the project. Local stakeholders responsible for planning and building control must also be involved from the earliest opportunity, in a collaborative approach to achieving the best possible outcomes.

The Society supports reconstruction on the basis that a collaborative approach to building compliance is adopted. If all current regulatory guidance is applied dogmatically, our support may be withdrawn on the basis that the original design would require unacceptable levels of alteration.



3D Model produced during
2015-2018 reconstruction project.
© Page\Park

CONCLUSION

The Charles Rennie Mackintosh Society is committed to the accurate reconstruction of the Mackintosh Building and will work with partners who can make purposeful progress toward that aim. As an independent stakeholder in open, respectful conversation with GSA's senior leadership, we hope to give other partners confidence that we are positioned to celebrate progress, amplify communications and bring our voice to calls for greater funding and support.

However, we are also a critical friend to GSA. Given eight years of project stasis, the Society wants to ensure that robust timelines and governance structures are in place to press forward with accurate reconstruction as soon as possible. This should happen in tandem with the first phase, ensuring a swift handover of later phases to the independent SPV. We also strongly recommend regular communication with stakeholders and the public, initially from GSA and subsequently from the SPV. This would allow all interested organisations and individuals to monitor progress and hold both to account for their stated aims, keeping this nationally significant project in the public eye throughout.

From the people of Glasgow to artists and architectural experts and enthusiasts around the world, there is a shared conviction that the Mackintosh Building must be restored to the nation. The Society believes this document sets a clear direction toward that goal. Reconstruction would be a source of national pride and a powerful statement of Scotland's commitment to culture, heritage and the arts. It would be a catalyst for the creative industries, a training ground for a new generation of traditional craftspeople and a beacon for international visitors. Above all, it would allow the building to do once more what it did for over a century: inspire those who pass through its doors to imagine, as Mackintosh did, the future of art, architecture and design.



Scott Street entrance to the Mackintosh Building, completed in 1910.
© Mackintosh Architecture, University of Glasgow

Who are the Charles Rennie Mackintosh Society?

Founded in 1973, we are an independent charity dedicated solely to the promotion and protection of Mackintosh’s creative legacy, including his globally significant architecture as well as his art and design. Our Director chairs the national working group that promotes Mackintosh’s legacy. The group brings together custodians of his buildings and major organisations with collections and archives, including The Glasgow School of Art.

The Society has been active in safeguarding Mackintosh’s work for over 50 years, intervening whenever necessary. It was instrumental in preventing the loss of Martyrs’ School and Scotland Street School, and stepped in as custodian of Queen’s Cross Church, which it now owns and operates as a publicly accessible venue. The Mackintosh Building is Mackintosh’s most significant architectural work and currently the one with the most uncertain future. We believe the Society now has an integral role to play in its reconstruction.

Our dedicated Buildings and Interiors Group is overseeing our part in this initiative. Its members are listed opposite:

Peter Ranson (Chair, Buildings and Interiors Group): Worked for Historic Environment Scotland for almost 25 years as a District Architect. He gave advice on grant-aided work at Queen’s Cross Church and The Glasgow School of Art up to 2014.

John Brown: RIBA Specialist Conservation Architect, and Director at Page\Park. He leads the conservation team who previously worked on the post-2015 Mack restoration.

Robyne Calvert: Fellow of the Royal Historical Society and Cultural Historian at the University of Glasgow, author of award-winning book ‘The Mack’ (Yale University Press, 2024).

Liz Davidson: Project Director for the National Trust for Scotland, leading The Hill House restoration and Board Director at Glasgow Building Preservation Trust.

John Sanders: Partner at Simpson & Brown, a leader in conservation consultation nationwide. John was instrumental in the reinstatement of the Willow Tearooms.

Joseph Sharples: Curator of Mackintosh Collections and Applied Art at The Hunterian, and co-author of the most comprehensive survey of Mackintosh’s architecture available.

Paul Sweeney: Labour MSP for Glasgow (Region), Shadow Minister for Business and Fair Work and Veterans, Trustee of The Egyptian Halls (SCIO) and Trustee and Director of Glasgow City Heritage Trust.

Michael Dale (Society Chair): Founder of Glasgow’s West End and Merchant City Festivals, and previous director of the Edinburgh Festival Fringe and Glasgow Garden Festival, and co-authored Glasgow’s European City of Culture bid.

Matthew Williams (Society Director): Previously Commercial Development Manager at Aberdeen City Council with responsibility for commercialisation of arts venues, city destination and events strategies, visitor levy policy, and major events including the multi award-winning Tall Ships Races, Scotland’s largest event in 2025.

References

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³ Historic Scotland ‘New reports highlight the strength and contribution of Scotland’s historic environment’ 2024. Available: <https://www.historicenvironment.scot/about-us/news/new-reports-highlight-the-strength-and-contribution-of-scotland-s-historic-environment/>

⁴ The Glasgow School of Art, The Mackintosh Building: Strategic Outline Business Case Addendum (SOBCA), June 2026, Economic Case: Part Two (BOP Consulting), pp. 34–35. Available: <https://themackintoshbuilding.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/07/GSA-Strategic-Outline-Business-Case-Addendum.pdf>

⁵ The Glasgow School of Art, The Mackintosh Building: Strategic Outline Business Case Addendum (SOBCA), June 2026, Economic Case: Part Two (BOP Consulting), p. 42 (citing Glasgow City Council, Glasgow City Centre Strategy 2024–30) and p. 37 (citing The National Lottery Heritage Fund, ‘New Ideas Need Old Buildings’, 2013). Available: <https://themackintoshbuilding.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/07/GSA-Strategic-Outline-Business-Case-Addendum.pdf>

⁶ Email communication from former GSA senior project manager Liz Davidson, 25 April 2022.

⁷ ‘The GSA Provides Update on the Future of the Mackintosh Building’, GSA press release, 22 July 2026. Available: <https://gsamediacentre.co.uk/the-gsa-provides-update-on-the-future-of-the-mackintosh-building-2/>

⁸ The Burra Charter, Australia ICOMOS, 2013, Article 20 and definitions at Article 1. Available: <https://australia.icomos.org/wp-content/uploads/The-Burra-Charter-2013-Adopted-31.10.2013.pdf>

⁹ Nara Document on Authenticity, ICOMOS/UNESCO, 1994. Available: https://www.iccrom.org/sites/default/files/publications/2020-05/convern8_06_thenaradocu_ing.pdf

¹⁰ UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, 2003. <https://ich.unesco.org/doc/src/15164-EN.pdf>

¹¹ UNESCO World Heritage List: Historic Centre of Warsaw (inscribed 1980); Old Bridge Area of the Old City of Mostar (inscribed 2005).

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