

Legal battle threatens Greek Thomson's masterpiece

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A VITAL restoration plan to save Alexander 'Greek' Thomson's most celebrated architectural masterpiece has stalled after becoming a casualty of a bitter legal wrangle between a suspended accountant and an ex-football club chairman.

The battle for ownership of Thomson's landmark Egyptian Halls on Glasgow's Union Street is being fought between Tom Dyer, an accountant suspended from his professional body for cheating a bankrupt out of #80,000 and Derek Souter, who resigned his vice- chairmanship of Dundee FC in disgust at the club's links to Giovanni Di Stefano, the controversial Anglo-Italian businessman and friend of Serbian warlord Arkan.

Both men currently own a key part of the threatened property. The restoration project, originally intended to be the highlight of Glasgow's City of Architecture and Design celebrations, is now scheduled for 2000, having been at the mercy of legal negotiations since the early 1990s. Glasgow City Council has backed Souter's bid to redevelop the building, having previously initiated a compulsory purchase notice against the property - citing failure to comply with repair orders - in a desperate bid to save the listed property. Dyer claims he was not given enough time to carry out the repair work. Souter's company, Union Street Properties (USP), is involved in advanced negotiations to purchase two street-level shop units, currently occupied by an insurance company and a London-based businessman. This would give USP control of the entire ground level and all but half of the upper floors, which are owned by Dyer's company, Paratus Ltd. Despite the compulsory purchase notice, which is currently awaiting a Court of Session hearing and will be pursued by the city council unless he agrees to sell to Souter, Dyer appears reluctant to sell, claiming he has a plan to develop the property into a hotel and restaurant complex. His refusal to sell continues to block restoration work. In 1998, Dyer was found guilty of professional misconduct by the Institute of Chartered Accountant's Disciplinary Committee after an investigation into allegations that he cheated a bankrupt and his creditors out of an estimated #80,000. He was ordered to pay costs of #18,000 and was suspended from the institute for three years. Remedial work on the building's exterior began at the end of last year, with the interior being stripped in preparation for future construction work. Those involved include architects Morrison Partnerships and engineers Peter Stephen and Partners. According to George Morrison, a senior partner at Morrison Partnerships, the building, while in terrible shape, can be saved: "The building is in better shape than we feared. We have stripped out all the secondary work that has been done over the years and returned it to the original form.

We hope to see a significant step forward in the next month or so." The history of the Egyptian Halls is complex. Built in 1871, using cast iron and stone, the Halls turned architectural wisdom on its head. The Halls were designed 'upside down', featuring thick stone columns - usually found at ground level - on the top floor, as well as featuring pioneering glass frontage shops at street level. Dr Gavin Stamp, architectural historian and head of the Greek Thomson Society, admits that few in Glasgow realise the importance of the building: "Egyptian Halls wasn't just a warehouse, it was a shopping centre cum bazaar, with promenade concerts inside. It was a Glasgow institution." In 1991, the building was in such bad condition that the council issued a repair order to a Hong Kong restaurateur who owned part of the upper floors. In 1995, this property interest was sold to Dyer. According to the Land Registry office in Glasgow, ownership of the building through a variety of sales and leases, with the property falling into a "black hole". Other Thomson landmarks such as the Caledonian Road Church and the St Vincent Street Church have also fallen into disrepair, with a cash-strapped council and other grant-making bodies like Historic Scotland unable to fund essential restoration. Don Bennett, deputy director of Development and Regeneration Services at Glasgow City Council, admits that with a reduced #400,000 conservation budget, battles such as that over the Egyptian Halls only make things harder. "There are an awful lot of listed building in Glasgow. We'd like to save every one, but we'll never have the resources to do that. If we step in, it invariably takes money from elsewhere. We just can't afford to invest in every one." Born in Stirlingshire in 1817, Alexander Thomson is widely considered to be one of the most remarkable architects to work in Scotland. His ability to design distinctive yet classical buildings earned him the nickname 'Greek'. As part of the city's architecture and design year, Thomson's work will be celebrated in a new exhibition at The Lighthouse later this month, but the future of his greatest work remains in the balance. Tom Dyer was unavailable for comment. I See also Directory