

# NOOKS and CORNERS

**ACCIDENTS will happen, though it helps if precautions are taken against them.**

In the case of the fire that destroyed the West Wing of Glasgow School of Art, designed by C.R. Mackintosh, ignition came from expanding foam being placed on a hot projector in an installation being prepared for the degree show by a student in the department of sculpture and environmental art.

The fire destroyed the school's library (pictured), an extraordinary and original interior of timber which was one of Mackintosh's last works and arguably his finest. The school says it will be recreated in replica – a course of action that, when carried out in a building like Uppark, the National Trust country house in West Sussex that was immaculately recreated internally after a fire, is normally condemned as dishonest "pastiche" by modernists, who advocate using the opportunity to create something new and "of our time".

Such is the fame and, all right, "iconic" status of Mackintosh's masterpiece that pastiche is now recommended. The architect John McAslan has argued that "it needs to be rebuilt exactly as it was – as authentically as possible... Perhaps the materials used will have to be weathered. What is built should not be perfect and clean."

Thanks to the efficiency of Glasgow's fire service, the blaze was contained. The school authorities are now upbeat, saying most of the structure and 70 percent of the contents survived; the lecture theatre was only partially damaged and the archives are safe. What the school is not saying is that the store room above the library was also destroyed. This contained paintings by Mackintosh's wife, Margaret Macdonald, as well as furniture. The Charles Rennie Mackintosh Society says that more than a hundred pieces by Mackintosh are gone – as are all the rare books that were in the library.

Nor is the school saying that managers were repeatedly warned about the fire danger – the building was built like a traditional Glasgow tenement, with much timber – and strongly advised that only traditional painting and sculpture should be permitted within its walls.

If ranks are closing in Renfrew Street, there are still questions to be answered – and not only about why expanding foam was ever permitted in so precious a building. A rumour that a sprinkler system was not turned on was soon denied by a "spokesman": "There has never been a sprinkler system here because of the risk of water damage to fragile artefacts if it were activated in error."

This was a little economical. A high-pressure water mist system had at last received planning permission a year ago and was being installed. Why

wasn't it made operational sooner? Part of the answer is that for the last few years all attention has been directed towards completing the £50m Reid Building on the opposite side of Renfrew Street.

This ugly pile is named not after the great local hero Jimmy Reid, as many Glaswegians supposed, but after Dame Seona Reid, until recently director of the School of Art who, as such, must take some responsibility for the management structure and culture that treated Mackintosh's building with such complacent negligence.

Designed by Steven Holl, the American superstar architect, the Reid Building, a concrete brute clad in green glass, with its internal "Driven Voids of Light", has none of the delicacy, thoughtfulness or true originality of Mackintosh's building (see *Eye* 1285). Indeed, while affecting to respond to Mackintosh, it actually looms over and overawes the School of Art.

It is the latest of many insults poor Toshie has had to endure over the years. But the fire, of course, is much worse. It was right that his most famous Glasgow creation was a working building and not treated as a sterile museum, but the fact is that, despite it being the School of Art's principal asset, much loved by the students who use it, and one that generated an income through tours, souvenirs and prestige, those in charge of it failed to look after it.

The School of Art is now short of space and the owners of the Egyptian Halls in Union Street have offered temporary accommodation in that neglected but solid building, though as yet have not received a response. Egyptian Halls is, of course, one of the last surviving works by Glasgow's other supremely original Victorian architect of international stature, Alexander "Greek" Thomson (*Eyes passim*). Neil Baxter, secretary of the Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland, has rightly described it as "a building of the first importance, not simply in Glasgow or Scotland but in European terms" It is also listed at Grade A. But whereas the governments in London and Edinburgh have been quick to offer unlimited sums to restore Mackintosh's masterpiece (is there a referendum soon, by any chance?), Egyptian Halls is in danger and receiving no help from Historic Scotland or Glasgow council, whose latest move is to threaten to enforce the removal of the specially designed protective scaffolding which has prevented any further deterioration of Thomson's exotic commercial masterpiece over the last few years.

"Do we need to get a fire going as well?" wonders the conservation engineer who is trying to preserve this extraordinary and precious Glasgow building – but then realises that Egyptian Halls won't burn, "by virtue of good design."

*'Piloti'*

