

If we truly love our architectural heritage, we will have to fight for it

From the archive

29 May 2004

Another part of Scotland's architectural heritage began to bite the dust yesterday when work started on demolishing Alexander "Greek" Thomson's offices in Glasgow city centre. It was not just neglect or the ravages of time and weather that did for the building, which had been granted "A" listed status in 1990 because of the work the Glasgow-born architect had done to grace it with his Classical design signature. The listing, denoting a building of national or international importance, counted for nothing when Glasgow city council decided that, structurally, it was a risk to public safety and had to come down. The building is one of some 1500 on the at-risk register maintained by the Scottish Civic Trust on behalf of Historic Scotland. Other factors contribute to threatened buildings appearing on the register, including inadequate planning regulations, an unwillingness, or lack of imagination, on the part of property developers to meet their obligations to the historic properties they have acquired and a lack of central funds to help meet the cost of repairs that can be onerous. As a result of all of these factors, buildings that should be cherished because they are part and parcel of our heritage are disappearing at a worrying rate. In Glasgow alone, which has some 70 buildings on the list, the trust is concerned that, at the present rate of loss for Thomson properties, the city could be bereft of them within 20 to 25 years. Yet Thomson was one of the two architects of international repute produced by Glasgow (the other was, of course, Charles Rennie Mackintosh). Imagine the outcry if a Mackintosh building were allowed to fall into a ruinous state and demolition was the only feasible option. Yet Thomson was just as important as Mackintosh. He was the master of Victorian architecture whose designs largely earned Glasgow its reputation as the quintessentially Victorian city, a reputation on which it still trades productively today. If only it had been so careful about the work of its native son, still struggling to escape from the shadow of Mackintosh. The Free Church of Scotland church on St Vincent Street, considered Thomson's finest surviving work but letting in water and suffering from crumbling stonework, has been placed on the 100 most-threatened buildings by the World Monuments Fund. Will it be next to go? All that can be said is that, unless the regulations are tightened up and developers are made to fulfil their duties, Scotland's built heritage will continue to vanish, and we will all be the poorer for that. As matters stand, local authorities have powers to protect historic buildings at risk from structural or other problems, or which are threatened with demolition. The most important is to apply a repairs notice. This requires the owner to undertake repairs to a listed property within a certain timescale. Failure to comply can result in the council, or strictly the planning authority, carrying out the repairs and charging the owner. As a last resort, the authority can seek a compulsory purchase order to make sure the work is done. Faced with the prospect of taking ownership of a building requiring perhaps millions of pounds of expenditure, however, councils are loath to take on that burden. Glasgow is apparently one of the most reluctant authorities to instigate repairs notices. However, it would be unfair to lay all of the blame on it, or any other council, grappling with the problem of a historic building in a deteriorating condition. In Glasgow's case, particularly, it is strapped for cash and has levels of deprivation to address far higher than any other local authority. Which should be the priority, protecting a listed building or supporting health and education initiatives to open the door on opportunity? If all of the owners of historic properties met their responsibilities the question probably would not need to be posed. There is a duty on the owner of a structure of architectural interest to maintain that property, but the authorities, whether at a council or heritage level, face a huge problem persuading them to live up to their obligations. Someone who inherits a historic property but lacks the funds to repair it is in a very difficult situation. The major source of assistance is funding from the historic buildings repair grant scheme. However, the scheme is vastly overburdened and, to indicate the pressure on funds, these are allocated two or three years in advance. It can suit developers to sit on their investment in hopes of turning a profit when the property market picks up. That might be in their interest, but it is not in the interests of the buildings in their care. Self-interest also applies in the case of developers who want the prime land the building sits on, rather than the structure itself. In such cases, it suits developers if the building becomes so unstable as to require demolition. Then they can put up the structure they want, and hang the consequences for the historic streetscape, now gone forever. The law does not seem to be a deterrent, as the case of Alistair Dickson demonstrated last year. He was fined (pounds) 1000 for illegally demolishing 200-year-old Lanrick Castle on his Stirlingshire

estate. How long before hard-nosed developers factor in such sums when costing a potential development constrained by the inconvenience of a listed building? The latest demolition in Glasgow should act as a wake-up call to all with an interest in protecting Scotland's vulnerable built heritage. Our historic, listed buildings cannot exist in aspic. They have to be put to new uses if they are to live on, but their integrity must also be maintained. Perhaps the time has come for the introduction of statutory powers for local authorities to make that happen, before it is too late.