



2023

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OPINION

Glasgow's Egyptian Halls: why is the council making things worse?

6 hrs ago

POLITICS



The Egyptian Halls



By Mark Smith
Feature writer

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You don't have to go far to find one. The Lyceum cinema in Govan. John Maxwell's school in Pollokshaws. The winter gardens in Springburn. And the beautiful little gatehouse at the Southern Necropolis in the Gorbals. All over Glasgow, fine examples of the city's history and architecture are in a poor way and are in danger of disappearing.

But perhaps the most famous at-risk building of them all – for Glaswegians anyway – is the Egyptian Halls on Union Street and it's probably most famous of all because it's right in the centre of town; it's also one of the first things you're likely to see when you get off the train at Central Station. Welcome to Glasgow! Things aren't going well.

The leader of the council, Susan Aitken, says the current state of the building – damp, crumbling, scaffolded – is a barrier to the regeneration of Union Street and she's certainly right about the state of the street. I was there yesterday but I didn't need a disposable vape or an energy drink so there was no reason for me to linger. Litter swirls past. A fight breaks out. I move on.

What we're told is that the council is working with the owners of the Egyptian Halls to find a way forward and I've no reason to doubt that's true. But for some reason the council has also done something that, on the face of it, would appear to make it harder to maintain the building as it currently is. Given everything else that's going on, it does makes me wonder ... why?

What the council has effectively done is they've slapped a ban on adverts on the scaffolding that surrounds the Halls. The owner of the building, Derek Souter of Union Street Properties, has been served with an interdict and if he doesn't defend the action, the council will be able to obtain a decree to have the ads removed.

Perhaps the council's motivation here is to try and spur Mr Souter into expediting the plans he has for the building – these things can take a long time. The council may also suspect that income is being taken out of the building, via the ads, rather than being put into it. Or maybe they just don't like adverts, who knows.

The problem is that, having spoken to Mr Souter, it's clear a ban on advertising is in danger of being seriously counter-productive. Mr Souter says the idea that he's making a lot of money from the ads – perhaps as much as £70,000 a month – is an "egregious myth". In fact, he says, he's earning less than that a year and says what he does earn is being spent on the scaffolding and the maintenance of the building – the scaffolding alone is currently costing £24,000 a year.

What this means is that, should the advertising ban go ahead, the source of some of the money that's currently helping to maintain the building would be shut off and that surely makes no sense.

The Labour MSP Paul Sweeney, who's a trustee of the Scottish Civic Trust's working group on the building, says that if revenue from the adverts is supporting maintenance, it would be premature to insist that it's removed and that's basic logic I would have thought. So why doesn't the council get it?

Mr Souter tells me the plan now is to ask for time to consult and respond to the council's interdict and that he intends to provide a detailed spreadsheet which will detail all his costs and income since 1999 when he acquired the building. He says the figures should reassure the council and dispel any myth that the money from the ads is in some way being mis-used. He will also be reminding the council how much he needs to spend on the Halls – the current total is around £50k a year.

The point is that the council appears to be in danger of making the situation worse – or at the very least landing Mr Souter with considerable extra costs – without actually getting us any nearer to finding a solution. I get that the council is probably at the end of their tether and I get that they're embarrassed by the state of Union Street (they should be). But court action is not the way to go here. That beautiful, precious building hidden under all the ugly scaffolding needs a plan. But the plan needs to be logical, and positive, and constructive, that's all.

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Glasgow’s Egyptian Halls will crumble if advertising banned, says owner

Mark Smith

Saturday August 05 2023, 12.01am, The Times

Retail



The Egyptian Halls, designed by the renowned Victorian architect Alexander “Greek” Thomson, has been under wraps after falling into disrepair

ALAMY

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Income from advertising on scaffolding at the Egyptian Halls in Glasgow is paying towards the building's upkeep, its owner has said after the city council served a stopping order.

The Egyptian Halls is one of the finest achievements of Alexander “Greek” Thomson, the Victorian architect who was born in Stirlingshire.

Derek Souter of Union Street Properties [acquired a stake in the building in 2000](#). He said the action by the council was unfair and that the income paid for the scaffolding and maintenance. If he does not defend the action the council will be able to obtain a decree to have the ads removed.



The building originally featured shops, a lecture room and a central hall for exhibitions of paintings and antiquities

“An upgrade programme has to be funded via ad hoarding income or grant funding,” Souter told The Times. “Given pressure on the public purse I would have thought a source of long-term income should not be dispensed with too hastily.” He is seeking legal advice.

Paul Sweeney, a Labour MSP and a trustee of the Scottish Civic Trust working group, said time was of the essence for Souter and the council to find a solution. He said that if advertising revenue from was supporting basic maintenance it might be premature to insist on removal.

Souter has until August 14 to go to the Court of Session. The council issued the order in July after Souter was refused planning permission for the adverts.



The owner, Derek Souter, claims advertising helps to pay for the upkeep of the building

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Souter would not confirm the amount of advertising revenue but said it was exaggerated. Adverts on the General Post Office in George Square are thought to have made the owners £70,000 a month but Souter said his earned less than that a year.

The council said it was impossible to comment on Souter's claim without detail. It said: “The bottom line is that there is no planning permission in place to display the advertising as confirmed by the Court of Session. It is the responsibility of owners of historic — or otherwise — buildings to maintain their property.”

Susan Aitken, the council leader, said she was [keen to work with anyone](#) with a creative business plan for the building but that the Egyptian Halls have been the biggest barrier to the council improving Union Street. She said the stopping order meant there was finally movement.

Sweeney said: “Recent structural investigations by conservation-accredited engineers and a feasibility study for renovation works have demonstrated that the category A-listed building is still salvageable.



Glasgow council says the building has been the biggest barrier to improvements to Union Street

TIMES NEWSPAPERS

“Time is now of the essence for the current owners and Glasgow city council to find a way to cut through the long-term impasse, particularly as I understand that there is a commercial interest by a third party in taking such a project forward.

“If it can be evidenced that revenue from the advertising scaffolding is supporting basic maintenance costs . . . then it may be premature to insist on its removal until an approved plan for restoration of the building is in place.”

Retail

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Glasgow's Egyptian Halls owner banned from scaffolding ads

4th August

HERITAGE LOCAL GOVERNMENT GLASGOW



By Caroline Wilson
Senior Reporter

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The owner of one of Glasgow's most important historical buildings has been banned from putting highly lucrative but illegal advertising on scaffolding erected on the property.

Derek Souter of Union Street Properties (USP), the custodians of the Egyptian Halls has been served with an interdict by Glasgow City Council.

The A-list building, considered Alexander 'Greek' Thomson's greatest achievement, has been covered in scaffolding for fifteen years as the building languishes.

Adverts on the redevelopment of the General Post Office on George Square are thought to have netted the owners around £70,000 a month.

Council leader Susan Aitken said the four-storey building had been the "biggest barrier" to progress to improve Union Street, considered one of the most rundown in the city centre and close to Central Station, where scores of tourists arrive each day.

Despite several attempts at restoration, it remains in a parlous state with little done by its owners other than rudimental work and no plans taken forward.



Refusing to comply with the interdict, which was served on July 24, could result in Mr Souter being found to be in contempt of court.

He was refused planning permission and despite a Scottish Government appeal being rejected has had six different advertisements on the scaffolding since June 2022.

The owner has until August 14 to lodge answers to the Court of Session if he intends to defend the action. If he does not, the council can then obtain a decree for the removal of the advertising.

It is hoped the interdict will be a first step in securing a future for the building, which was completed in 1872 as new commercial premises for James Robertson, an iron manufacturer.

Susan Aitken, leader of Glasgow City Council, said it was committed to its future and keen to work with anyone with "a creative business plan."

In May 2021, the Scottish Civic Trust established The Egyptian Halls SCIO, which aims to acquire ownership of the building and undertake a full restoration programme. Its trustees include Paul Sweeney MSP, John Nicolson MP, and Murray Grigor.

"The Egyptian Halls has been the biggest barrier for us being able to do anything with Union Street," said Cllr Aitken.



"It takes up so much of the space, it's a blight on the street and it has been allowed to get into that condition.

"We are finally getting a bit of movement.

"There are communities of interest who care very much about the Egyptian halls and there are some very creative ideas about what could be done with that building to revitalise it and to raise the necessary resource to restore it because it's in an appalling condition.

"It's not going to be overnight, it will take time and significant investment but I think there are a lot of folk who are interested in a future."

In response Mr Souter said: "Legal issues; some known and some non-disclosed caused four approved schemes to founder and costs and deterioration to increase

"USP and its professional team are aiming to meet with GCC circa mid-August, and all relevant issues will be on the agenda.

"USP has also been working on what is believed to be the scheme that will leverage the regeneration potential of the Egyptian Halls and the wider environs of Union Street and will also discuss this with GCC and HES."

Built using cast iron and stone, the Egyptian Halls was one of the last major projects of Alexander Thomson.

The building broke many of the rules of the time; thick stone columns normally found at ground level were on the top floor.

Writing to his brother George after its completion, Thomson commented:

"He [the client] is very proud of the building – a writer in The Architect says of it – this is probably the Architect's most successful effort, and we doubt if its equal, for originality, grandeur of treatment or imposing effect, could be found in any City, not excepting the Metropolis itself."



In common with many other buildings of its era, it fell into disrepair in the second half of the 20th century.

In 1996 Glasgow City Council announced a compulsory purchase order (CPO) on the building.

Four years later Dundee businessman Derek Souter and his company Union Street Developments (USD) acquired a stake in the property and announced plans to restore it but funding problems led to further delays.

In 2003 Glasgow City Council bought the building just before its CPO was due to expire in the hope that USD would find the funding to complete the restoration.

The company bought the entire building in the summer of 2008, but other than work to prevent further decay little had been done.

In 2010 the council put £1million aside for structural repairs which the owners were told to match, but the funds did not materialise.

The Egyptian Halls was added to the shortlist of the fourteen most significant endangered buildings in Europe by Europa Nostra in 2019.

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