Glasgow School of Art's Mackintosh building destroyed by fire fuelled by profit

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Glasgow School of Art's (GSA) world famous, revered and hugely popular Mackintosh building has been destroyed by fire. A blaze discovered at 11:20 p.m. Friday rapidly developed into an inferno that gutted the entire building end to end, destroying the roof and most of its floors. At the time of this writing, it is not clear if the building's shell can even safely remain standing. Two adjacent buildings, an historic cinema now functioning as a music venue and a night club, have also suffered serious damage.

At its peak, the fire, visible for miles around, rained burning embers around neighbouring streets, forcing the evacuation of nearby flats. Despite this, no one, neither residents, youthful clubbers thronging the Sauchiehall Street area around the fire, nor any of the 120 firefighters involved in efforts to suppress the conflagration, suffered any injuries.

The fire was the second in just over four years in a building considered to be the finest work of popular Glasgow-born architect Charles Rennie Mackintosh.

In May 2014, a fire broke out in the basement when an aerosol cannister of expanding foam placed beside a hot projector as part of an art installation exploded. Fire rapidly spread via the building's timber lined walls and through horizontal and vertical ventilation ducts. It emerged that a "fire suppression system" for the vulnerable and flammable public building, completed in 1909, had not yet been completed.

In 2014, however, extraordinary efforts by firefighters saved 90 percent of the building and 70 percent of its contents. The most significant loss was that of the Mackintosh library, listed among one of world's most significant architecturally, along with the collected labours of many GSA students, whose graduate exhibitions were consumed.

The fire also revealed a great appreciation of the building itself, among its hundreds of thousands of former students, lecturers and visitors. The Mackintosh building is loved not only as an art school, a place of exploration, craft and cultural experiment, but as an extraordinary work of public art itself enjoyed by everyone—workers, students, tourists and film stars alike—who had the good fortune to study or simply wander about in it.

As a consequence, after the 2014 blaze, GSA management, with public support and assistance from a significant number of celebrities and former students, was able to raise the £35 million needed to restore the damaged building, one of several which comprise the GSA. A painstaking and faithful restoration of the library, using original techniques and materials, was nearly complete. The libraries shelves were being stocked from around the world.

All these efforts have now been consumed in a far more devastating and horrifying fire. The library and lecture theatre have again been destroyed as have the painting, drawing and sculpture studios which comprised most of the building's older East Wing, which was undamaged in 2014. The building's basement has also been damaged.

A number of questions present themselves.

• By great good fortune, there were no fatalities or injuries. But what might have happened if the fire had taken hold during a busy exhibition? The fire spread rapidly to two neighbouring, older, public buildings. What might have been the death toll if the inferno had taken hold when both of these had been packed with clubbers and music fans? The ABC O2, whose roof has collapsed, was evacuated quickly, but DJ Grant Robertson reported that the venue was relatively empty. Later in the evening, things might have been very different.

• If the 2014 fire revealed the vulnerable building's inadequate or absent fire prevention measures, then why was this was not fully and immediately addressed during the reconstruction? A spokesman for the British Automatic Fire Sprinkler Association said that sprinklers had not been fitted during the reconstruction, despite the fact that construction work often involves a heightened fire risk. Why? No fire prevention patrols appear to have been taking place either. Why?

• Who is actually responsible for the building's fire safety? A June 17 statement from GSA management claimed that "day-to-day management of the site" was controlled by

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contractor Kier Construction Scotland. Does this include fire safety? Why, in any case, have GSA and Kier Construction between them been unable to organise fire prevention for such a world famous cultural artefact?

• Why have both the British and Scottish governments already refused a public inquiry when many, including GSA architecture professor Alan Dunlop, are calling for one? The British government's Scottish Secretary David Mundell said, "I don't at this stage think there's a case for a public inquiry unless someone can bring forward some exceptional reason." Fiona Hyslop, Scottish culture secretary, echoed Mundell, stating "I'm not giving any commitments at this stage".

A major reason for the reticence will be the huge number of lucrative public contracts handed out by the British and Scottish governments characterised by dangerously shoddy work and blatant profit gouging.

Speaking to the *Herald*, leading Rennie Mackintosh expert, Roger Billcliffe, said that questions had to be answered regarding the latest fire, but warned, "don't hold your breath, we're still waiting for answers about the 2014 fire." He noted, "It's well known that buildings such as Charles Rennie Mackintosh's art school are most at risk during building work—look at [Royal Family palaces] Hampton Court and Windsor Castle, both extensively damaged, rebuilt and restored. So what precautions were taken at Renfrew Street? Any? None?

"The restoration of the school seems to have been remarkably successful, but it was £35m of unneeded expenditure. Now it is tragically wasted. We don't know the cause of this latest fire, but don't be surprised if it turns out to be linked to the 2014 fire, through exposure of the building to implicitly dangerous rebuilding operations."

Last year's catastrophic fire at Grenfell Tower in London revealed the disastrous consequences of the decades of systematic deregulation of all aspects of fire and building safety. Seventy-two people were killed, and the government was forced to convene an inquiry that has ruled out any examination of the economic and social factors behind the fire. Still no one has been arrested, let alone charged, for the tragedy.

Grenfell is the worst high-rise fire in British history. But there are countless other examples of cost cutting endangering public safety, including in Scotland.

In 2016, following the collapse of a wall at Oxgangs Primary School, 17 schools across Edinburgh were closed when Edinburgh Schools Partnership (ESP), a private consortium that built and managed the schools, was unable to offer assurances on safety. A subsequent report found poor construction, inadequate supervision, a lack of quality assurance and poor record keeping to blame.

Kier Construction Scotland was itself recently the subject of a damning report by construction safety expert Professor John Cole into the company's work on the DG One leisure centre in Dumfries.

Cole's research found "virtually unprecedented" numbers of building, roofing and drainage faults in the £17 million leisure centre which opened in 2008, only to close six years later. It has subsequently been largely demolished and rebuilt. The building was also threatened with closure by the fire service in 2011.

Quoted in the *Herald*, Cole said "the extent and nature of the defects discovered are evidence of a lack of care, attention, basic construction skills or understanding of some of the fundamental principles of good construction on the part of those who built this building and those who supervised them."

Cole also found the contractor had failed to comply repeatedly with the Building (Scotland) Act 2003. Dumfries and Galloway Council are now passing Cole's report to the police.

Kier Construction is nevertheless part of a joint venture which recently won a place in the Clyde Commercial Framework, a £750 million scheme to refurbish HM Naval Base Clyde at Faslane, where the Royal Navy's fleet of nuclear submarines are based. The company has also won £180 million worth of contracts for schools, colleges, including the William McIllvanney Campus in Kilmarnock and new NHS facilities in Clydebank.

Kier Construction Scotland are also carrying out "restoration" work at the Edinburgh College of Art, Aberdeen Music Hall, Glasgow's Burrell Collection of artefacts, paintings and tapestries and the Citizen's Theatre.

As investigations into the Grenfell fire have revealed, privatisation and deregulation of the construction industry has created an impenetrable, barely regulated anarchy of competing profit centres, each clawing at each other regardless of the social consequences.

After Grenfell, the destruction of Glasgow's Mackintosh building underscores that there is not a single revered cultural institution or essential social facility which cannot be reduced to ashes, rubble or dysfunctional chaos by the uncontrolled predations of the profit system.

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