

Strand 3: The challenges facing Art Nouveau Heritage

Rooms without a view. The challenges faced so far through the conservation and restoration of the disassembled interiors of Charles Rennie Mackintosh's Ingram Street Tea Rooms.

Alison Brown

Forty-two years ago, in 1971, the interiors of fifteen rooms designed between 1900 and 1911 by Charles Rennie Mackintosh were salvaged from a building on Glasgow's Ingram Street. The interiors occupied a building space of 1466m.sq and had been operational as tea rooms until 1951¹. Originally situated over three levels - basement, ground floor and mezzanine - in a former warehouse and office block, the removed interiors comprise of the panelling, fittings and partial furnishings for two billiards rooms, six tea rooms, four toilet/wash room areas, two servery areas and two corridor routes. The largest room was 47 feet long.

Mackintosh's client was Glasgow tea-room entrepreneur and astute businesswoman Miss Catherine Cranston. Born into a family of Temperance hoteliers, Miss Cranston had an excellent instinct for what we now term 'marketing' and 'branding', and built up a successful business empire on city-centre prime-sites over the course of forty years. She championed the new aesthetic designs of young Scottish designers, and her artistic tea rooms were the most public face of what we now call *The Glasgow Style*. Miss Cranston nurtured Mackintosh's contribution to her dining premises; he collaborated

¹ Miss Cranston first opened her tea rooms in rented premises in Glasgow's commercial district at Ingram Street on the 16th September 1886 as 'The Crown Luncheon Rooms' with gas-lit aesthetic décor. She gradually expanded the operation, opening tea rooms in neighbouring properties until 1909-10 by which time she had commandeered the Ingram Street side of the whole city block as 'Miss Cranston's Tea Rooms and Luncheon Rooms'. From 1900 all new tea rooms at Ingram Street were designed by Mackintosh. From 1930 the tea rooms were owned and operated by Glasgow grocers Coopers as 'The Ingram' until 1950 when they were acquired by the Corporation of Glasgow. See Perilla KINCHIN *Tea and Taste The Glasgow Tea Rooms 1875-1975*, Oxford, White Cockade, 1991; 1996. p.17-129.

with her over a period of 21 years between 1896 and 1917². Theirs was obviously a mutually supportive relationship: he gave her cutting-edge new design; she gave him freedom to experiment. From 1900 until 1917 Mackintosh was the only designer Miss Cranston employed.

We now recognise that these interiors are important because they are a surviving suite of 'shop-fitted' spaces designed by the architect throughout the height of his Glasgow-based career. As such they reflect his changing ideas and design concerns: from the early classic-Mackintosh white interior of the Ladies Luncheon Room (1900-01)³ to the boldly-coloured geometric-led interiors designed in 1911, influenced by Chinese, Japanese and Moorish patterns, colours and decorative forms. When compared with his private domestic commissions and furniture we can see these tea rooms are not luxurious, high-end Mackintosh. But what they do demonstrate is resourcefulness for imaginative design solutions in the articulation of working tea rooms, each requiring to accommodate, on average, between 20 to 36 seated people. These surviving interiors also inform us of the materials and finishes Mackintosh favoured and allow us to analyse his - sometimes unusual - choices⁴. Of the other tea rooms he designed in the city, only the heavily-restored Willow Tea Rooms survives and still functions in part with its original purpose⁵.

When the interiors at Ingram Street were removed to allow for the conversion of the building into a hotel, only those people with a passionate interest in the work of Mackintosh pressed for their survival. This was 1971: Glasgow was in the middle of

² Mackintosh designed some mural decorations for Miss Cranston's Buchanan Street Tea Rooms in 1896 opening 5th May 1897. In 1897 he designed furniture and light fittings for her five-storey tea rooms on Argyle Street which opened the following year. Design credits for both these tea rooms were shared with George Walton - who provided the furniture and interior design respectively for these premises. In 1903 Mackintosh was responsible for the complete design of The Willow Tea Rooms on Sauchiehall Street, undertaking remodelling of the exterior façade and full interior design, opening on 28th October 1903. He added themed basement extensions to Argyle Street in 1906 and The Willow in 1917. He also designed the interiors for Miss Cranston's two tea rooms at The Scottish Exhibition of National History, Art and Industry of 1911 in Glasgow's Kelvingrove Park. See P. KINCHIN *Tea and Taste*...,p.17-124.

³ Also often referred to in later in publications on Mackintosh as The White Dining Room.

⁴ For instance over the course of material tests of the interiors in 1993-2002 conservators determined he used materials such as tin and aluminium leaf, and casein plastic.

⁵ The Willow Tea Rooms were the first of Miss Cranston's rooms to be sold off; becoming 'The Kensington', run by the Smith family, and later part of Daly's department store. It was only after partial restoration of the building between 1978 and 1980 that the Willow Tea Rooms were reborn with a new leaseholder taking the name as a business franchise. See P. KINCHIN *Tea and Taste*...,p.121-129.

redeveloping its transport route infrastructure and thus in the process demolishing areas of its Victorian and Edwardian architecture. The importance of Mackintosh's legacy was still to be recognised by the city. Over the course of only a few days it was all hands on deck by willing volunteers to assist with the documenting, recording and removal of the Mackintosh panelling and fittings to a temporary city centre store owned by the Council. Over 3000 individual pieces of panelling were removed. Some furniture pieces, fittings, the fascia board and even sections of a stencilled plaster wall were dispersed to the University and School of Art collections. The focus was on saving Mackintosh rather than recording the premises as a whole. Selections and judgements were obviously made on site, for example interiors designed before Mackintosh's involvement at the tea rooms were photographed but not salvaged.

It was only after a restructuring in the Glasgow City Council-run museums and the establishment of curatorial departments in 1973 – most notably in this case a Decorative Arts department – that the collection of material lodged in the Council stores began to be inventoried and assessed. The first public presentation of furniture and fittings from the tea rooms went on display in Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum in 1975, sitting alongside other works by Mackintosh and his contemporaries from the city's permanent collection. As interest in Mackintosh grew over the next ten years the city's museums lent examples of tea room furniture, light fittings and cutlery to temporary exhibitions in Scotland, the UK and Europe. It was not until 1984 that a section of a tea room interior was restored and exhibited. Part of Mackintosh's 1911 Chinese Room was analysed, cleaned, repainted and reconfigured (to fit the gallery space available) and displayed as part of *The Glasgow Style 1890-1920* exhibition⁶. A section of The Cloister Room, also of 1911, was similarly pieced together for *The Glasgow Girls Women in Art and Design 1880-1920* exhibition in 1990⁷.

⁶ Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum: 27 July – 7 October 1984. Curated by staff from the Decorative Art Department of Glasgow Art Galleries and Museums - Brian Blench, Rosemary Watt, Juliet Kinchin, Liz Arthur, Jonathan Kinghorn, Fiona McNaught - this was the first exhibition to present an overview of The Glasgow Style.

⁷ Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum: 24 August – 21 October 1990. Curated by Jude Burkhauser in association with Glasgow Art Galleries and Museums and the Glasgow School of Art.

Over this timescale of twenty years, the disassembled interiors were moved between at least five different storage sites in the city. Big, bulky and dirty, the panelling was exposed to the problems of repeated handling, temperature fluctuations, damp, pests, and even a small fire in store resulting in localised damage to one interior. Long-term solutions for their reinstatement into other buildings were discussed but none ever came to fruition.

Conservation and Restoration: 1991-2002

On 25th May 1996 Glasgow's museum-going public caught their first glimpse of the first, and to date only, fully restored Ingram Street tea room interior by Charles Rennie Mackintosh. The Ladies' Luncheon Room of 1900-01 was a 'key object' prepared for a major new exhibition on the architect's life and work opening at the city's McLellan Galleries⁸. (Fig.1)

It had taken Glasgow Museums' conservation and curatorial team three years to piece the room back together: straighten warped wooden panels; clean, research, analyse, preserve and replicate the surface finishes of the room's walls; match lost antique coloured glass, create a strong free-standing structure upon which to mount and support 253 individual pieces or sections of panelling. A specialist conservator and his team was employed to remove over-painting from the two highly-textured, four and a half metre long, gesso panels: *The May Queen* by Margaret Macdonald and *The Wassail*, the only gesso panel ever made by Mackintosh.

Using Mackintosh's surviving working drawings and archive photographs for reference, the museum staff dressed the room. They made new dining tables and bench seating; recreated anew the leaded-glass panels and entrance doors, net curtains, flower vases and menu stands; sourced horse-hair upholstery, china and cutlery. All staff from the museums' technical and conservation departments were involved at some stage in the work - even the museums' taxidermist made the fake food for the recreated table

⁸ McLellan Galleries 25 May – 30 September 1996, (cat 54). Exhibition guest curated by Pamela Robertson and Stewart J Johnson; project curated by Daniel Robbins and managed by Glasgow Museums in collaboration with the Hunterian Art Gallery University of Glasgow and Glasgow School of Art. The Exhibition went on to tour to The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York 19 November 1996 – 16 February 1997; The Art Institute of Chicago 29 March – 22 June 1997 and Los Angeles County Museum of Art 3 August – 12 October 1997. The Ladies' Luncheon Room was also loaned to the National Gallery of Art, Washington for the V&A's touring *Art Nouveau* exhibition 8 October 2000 – 28 January 2001.

settings. Rather than sourcing and investing in grey oil-cloth, the floor – already a slightly raised platform for structural reasons - was simply sealed and painted micro-density fibreboard, making it easier to maintain for wear and tear⁹. The room had no ceiling so a simple solution was found by stretching a lightweight translucent white fabric across the top of the supporting walls. The original pendant light fittings – made of copper with a painted aluminium finish - were cleaned, conserved and rewired so they could be illuminated with low wattage lamps and hang from the gallery lighting track. The overall room lighting was enhanced by discretely located spotlights and a giant diffused light box placed behind the north-facing window wall. The latter was to hint at the street outside and give the impression of the windows that once provided daylight to bounce softly along the aluminium leaf covered panels on the West and East walls.

Twenty-five years after being dismantled from its original building Mackintosh's classic white tea room interior was recreated and rediscovered by a new audience; albeit in a purely objective, aesthetic manner divorced from its original surroundings. Through the course of time since its removal there had been improved museum standards in documentation, storage and treatment, so this interior and its contents - panelling, furniture and fittings - had become a museum object with its care and conservation meeting MGC and ICOM standards. Reassembled so that it could be toured and installed into temporary exhibition spaces, it could no longer physically or practically be a functioning room. Public access into the room had to be restricted: doorways and corridor areas were too narrow, the staircase was no longer load-bearing and the original Mackintosh chairs could not be sat upon. Ultimately the viewing point into the room - from under the rear south wall balcony - was determined by all of these issues as well as the exhibition route, fire exits and other health and safety issues. Despite such limited access into the room itself an evaluation survey determined it was visitors' favourite 'object' in the exhibition.

⁹ The exhibition received a footfall of 208,742 visitors over its duration in Glasgow; a further total of 723,080 people viewed the tea room on display in the four American galleries between 1996-2001.

The approach for the presentation directed the methodology for conservation and restoration. The display was to give the impression of the Ladies' Luncheon Room as it would have looked when the tea room first opened. Such an intention was possible because it was one of only three rooms at Ingram Street to have a surviving photograph dating from its time of completion¹⁰. The other surviving rooms would all be much, much harder to recreate to the same level of detail.

The success of the 1996 exhibition and its subsequent American tour certainly fuelled a desire in Glasgow to complete the rest of the Ingram Street interiors, as well as expressions of interest from museums and galleries around the world to exhibit them. Significant funding was secured to continue the work between 1998 and 2002¹¹. The remaining three rooms which had had the luxury of having had annotated elevation drawings made by architects Keppie, Henderson & Partners Architects at the time of dismantling in 1971 - the Chinese Room, the Cloister Room and the Oval Room - were tackled first (Fig.2).

Each room had its own set of questions and problems. The decorated barrel-vaulted ceiling for the Cloister Room no longer survived, so a sculptor was employed to make it from scratch. But what colour was its plaster finish originally? The wood and rush panels of the Chinese Room had been over-painted many times; even after microscopic analysis of cross sections, much debate took place over which layer was the authentic colour. Also, what was the organic material used for the woven wall panels and what was the best way to repair them? Much of the silvering on the mirrored-glass panels in the Chinese Room was now lost so should the mirrored glass be replaced completely or could a metal leaf matching the colouration of the originals be successfully applied to bring back the reflective surface on their uniquely undulating glass? Each question required lengthy research, analysis and tests, followed by painstaking restoration. Not all of the questions have yet been answered.

¹⁰ Hunterian Art Gallery, Glasgow University. GLAHA 52687. Only images of the rooms completed between 1900 and 1901 survive in the Mackintosh archive. The other rooms to have record photography are the billiards room in the basement and the first Mackintosh design of the space he later redesigned as the Cloister Room in 1911.

¹¹ Funding for the second phase of the tea rooms work was received from the Heritage Lottery Fund with additional funding from American philanthropists Donald and Jeanne Kahn.

Behind the scenes the Council and its museums department tried to pursue options and possibilities for a publicly-accessible final resting place for all the tea rooms¹². However it became increasingly clear that there was insufficient information known about all of the rooms to be able to inform architects of what would really be required of a museum space to house them, or what work would be required in order to redisplay them. It was obvious that most rooms had been repainted - some many times - with only two remaining relatively untouched with their original finishes intact. What panelling, fittings and fixtures had long been lost or relocated - and thus misrecorded to elsewhere within the building - was unknown. The next stage of the project was therefore easily identified: cease the room by room, conservation-led reassembly and restoration approach and instead pursue an holistic goal identifying exactly what remained stacked in racking in the stores.

Research and assessment: 2003-present

So how do you piece together a very large jigsaw where there's only a partial picture to work from without physically reassembling it? The panelling and fittings for the rooms that remained to be worked on had by now been in store for 30 years. There was only the basic documentation made at the time of removal to work from, a few black and white record photos and an outline floor plan upon which each room had been allocated a reference number. Thankfully, each piece of panelling was marked - in either white paint or black marker - with the room reference code: room number: N,S,E or W depending on compass direction, and a sequential number referencing its position along that wall.

The methods and techniques used commonly for documenting buildings all relied on the rooms still being in situ or already assembled. Without a building none were suitable for the task required. The methodology for the next stage had to be sought from elsewhere, and was found in archaeological practice. A four-person project team was appointed,

¹² One option seriously discussed in 1994-98 was a proposed remodelling of Glasgow's General Post Office Building on George Square as a National Museum of Scottish Art and Design. It failed to receive funding. Another option assessed in detail was for the rooms to be included in the relocation plans for the old Museum of Transport to a new purpose-built site. The space required by the complete suite of rooms was too big for the scale of the site and project.

working alongside the museums permanent staff¹³. The team was to examine every piece of panelling and fitting as part of an assessment and quantification of the collection. They calculated the resources needed to research and conserve all the rooms for public display.

A standard system was devised to produce a consistent record of the units making up the tearooms, their three-dimensional relationships, their current appearance and their condition. The recording system was based on the methodologies used for recording below-ground archaeology and standing buildings. For the Ingram Street project it was adapted for room interiors that had been separated from their original architecture.

The assessment and recording process was physically demanding, heavy work. Taking one room at a time, the project team sorted through the stores, laying out flat on the floor all the panelling and fittings associated with that interior, wall by wall. A measurement recording grid was then placed over the physical assemblages before photographs were taken looking down from directly above. To achieve this a camera was mounted on a moveable wooden-dolly system that straddled the assemblage. The digital photographic images were scaled and merged together to create composite images of the groups of panelling. These images then fed into the conservation and technical reports, but were also printed, cut out and glued to card to make a 1:20 scale model of each room. These models were an excellent way to present the original interior clearly without having to reconstruct the panelling and provide an excellent overview as to the current state of each room. The visible grey card denotes either the structural building elements not removed in 1971 or panelling and fittings either not salvaged due to rot or simply missing (Fig.3).

In order to establish a work-plan for any future conservation treatment and restoration each piece of panelling was condition-assessed and scrutinized for all possible evidence of its past. The basic construction, condition and original method of attachment of each piece was noted along with any damage it had subsequently suffered. All visible layers

¹³ Comprising of project manager Abigail Morris, conservator Suzanne Lamb, research assistant Helen Munday and technician Neil McInnes. With input from Glasgow Museums' curatorial, conservation, learning & access and research staff. Staff at Headland Archaeology were helpful with advice on recording methods. Funding was received from the Scottish Executive for this phase of the project which lasted from November 2004 to April 2007.

of paint, varnishing or other surface finishes and materials were carefully logged to create a surface-history timeline. Such information has identified which panels should be tested through invasive paint-sample investigation and thus established the next stage of a future investigation programme for each room. Sometimes, confusingly, not every panel in a room has told the same story. Such instances probably indicate localised damage, repairs and redecoration undertaken through minor building alterations or maintenance.

All fittings and surviving furniture were similarly assessed in order to establish how far each room could be authentically furnished and finished. What did we have, what did we know was out there¹⁴, what was missing and what questions about room function did we still need to find out? The Honeyman, Keppie and Mackintosh job books list work undertaken at Ingram Street from 1904¹⁵. The entries include bespoke furniture, light fittings, glass and metalwork, listing suppliers or manufacturers and price. The 1971 record photography and the few surviving earlier photographs - all black and white - of the interiors revealed wall, floor and ceiling finishes not removed and missing leaded-glass panels, fireplaces and light fittings.

Gaps in the over-painting on the wall panelling revealed the ghosts of old fixtures now lost such as billiard-cue racks. Sometimes the holes drilled into the wooden panels revealed the probable locations of umbrella racks or coat hooks similarly lost over time but sometimes not even listed in the job books¹⁶. Scraping along the walls caused by wear and tear could be measured and assessed in some cases for the historical positioning of furniture.

Each room was assessed one at a time and all staff involved would meet to present research findings. They would discuss how far each room could be authentically displayed, what was needed in order to achieve conservation and restoration, what

¹⁴ The first book to consult for all reassessment was the Mackintosh furniture 'bible': Roger BILLCLIFFE, *Charles Rennie Mackintosh The Complete Furniture, Furniture Drawings and Interior Designs*, London, John Murray, 1986 (third edition); Moffat, Cameron and Hollis, 2009 (fourth edition).

¹⁵ Hunterian Art Gallery, Glasgow University. GLAHA 53062 and 53063. The rooms of 1900-1901 are not listed in the job books.

¹⁶ Just one of the odd omissions from the job books. An early twentieth century tea room sited in a business district in Glasgow would most certainly require umbrella racks and coat hooks!

further research was required and how much would be original and how much would be reproduction.

The following summary gives an idea of what survives from some of the larger rooms:

ISTR.1, Chinese Room, 1911

No. of panels in Collection: 49; Percentage of panelling missing: 25% (mainly street front and leaded glass)

Panels: structurally stable: 89%

Panels: surface stable: 91%

Percentage of furniture and fittings missing: approx. 45%

ISTR.3, Cloister Room, 1911-12

No. of panels in Collection: 111; Percentage of panelling missing: 6% (skirtings)

Panels: structurally stable: 92%

Panels: surface stable: 88%

Percentage of fittings missing: 18% (plus chairs, tables, light fittings)

ISTR.10, Oak Room, 1907

No. of panels in Collection: 642; Percentage of panelling missing: 24%

Panels: structurally stable: 55%; partially unstable: 27%; unstable: 18%

Panels: surface stable: 54%; partially unstable: 33%; unstable: 13%

Percentage of furniture and fittings missing: approximately 50%

ISTR.11U, Oval Room, 1909-10

No. of panel sections in Collection: 49; Percentage of panelling missing: 43%

Panels: structurally stable: 24%; partially unstable: 42%; unstable: 34%

Panels: surface stable: 24%; partially unstable: 51%; unstable: 25%

Percentage of furniture and fittings missing: approximately 95%

ISTR.14, Billiards Room, 1900-01

No. of panels in Collection: 372, Percentage of room panelling missing: 17%

Panels: structurally stable: 57%; partially unstable: 36%; unstable: 7%

Panels: surface stable: 80%; partially unstable: 19%; unstable: 1%

Percentage of furniture and fittings missing: approximately 95%

By comparison the Ladies Luncheon Room was about 95% original panelling and 75% original furniture and fittings.

Debate and discussion - options in absence of a final conclusion

It is clear that very few of the Ingram Street tea rooms could be fully restored and reconstructed with the same high percentage of original material to the same authentic

standard as the Ladies Luncheon Room in 1996. So a key question for our discussions has been how do you present the rooms as Mackintosh interiors when you do not know the full original design scheme? Can his billiards room be authentically presented without the original table, lights, scoreboard, cues and cue racks? Is it sufficiently powerful as an unfurnished space? Should the furniture and fittings be replicated? Might it be more appropriate for the restored wall panelling by Mackintosh to be the walls of a space that presents a museums display within its floorspace on the phenomena of billiards in Glasgow tea rooms?

The issue of physical access was discussed in detail for every room. The warren of tea rooms that was Ingram Street did not meet building and fire regulations for a dining establishment by the 1950s. To restore all the rooms together back into a building matching their original size and configuration would not be possible under the design regulations in place today. Corridors are narrow, and some doorways are not wide enough for today's minimum access requirements. Some rooms only have one entrance/exit and are exceptionally small - when laid out with furniture, access would be impossible! To accomodate fire exits and meet disabled access requirements could the rooms be reconstructed in a sympathetically disarticulated manner in order to give essential breathing space?

It is clear from the three tea rooms that we have reassembled that the visitor needs to physically enter and be within the interior space in order to receive the quintessential Mackintosh experience. Mackintosh's designs need to be walked into in order to receive that sensory response to colour and of light. The metal leaf and mirror surfaces on the walls reflect and bounce natural and electric light around the rooms; the addition of human movement within the interior space adds to this play over the surfaces. Another reason for needing to enter the rooms is that the areas around the doorways are often some of the most ornate features in the room, so you must be able to enter, to turn and look back, to get the full effect. So, another question: do we consider creating new entrances into rooms - by removing plainer, repetitive sections of the walls - to allow the visitor to enter a designated area of the interior space in a controlled manner? Such a methodology would not place all the restored and conserved surfaces in danger of

damage, and would also require that the rooms only be partially furnished - altogether much more achievable.

The size of the rooms is the biggest issue to address in facing any reconstruction. One way to make the rooms at least partly accessible is to only display sections - enough to give a taster of what a room was like. Carefully laid out with furniture and fittings, this approach can be effective in evoking scale, colour and design. This approach has been taken in the redisplay of the Mackintosh and Glasgow Style gallery in Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum¹⁷. Despite the Mackintosh collection being allocated one of the biggest gallery spaces in the city's flagship museum, very few of the tea rooms would actually fit into it whole, and those that could, would not leave much space to provide a balanced display of the collection. The solution was to display sections that provided an overview of Mackintosh's tea room designs and told the story of the Glasgow tea room (Fig.4). Sections from the Ladies' Luncheon Room, Oak Room and Chinese Room were configured within the gallery so the public could pass through or by them in a manner similar to how they would have interacted with the panelling in the original tea room space. A selection of furniture from those rooms is displayed adjacent to the panelling sections, and graphic panels use photographs to assist with the interpretation of the interiors. It has allowed the museum to communicate very effectively and succinctly the evolution of Mackintosh's design ideas at Ingram Street. Visitors surveys carried out between 2008 and 2011 confirm that this display has been successful and is extremely popular with visitors.

Such is the impact of the 1996 exhibition that Glasgow Museums is still approached with requests from around the world for the loan of Mackintosh's tea room interiors. Future plans for a new storage site, which will include the workshops currently holding the tea rooms, are at the funding application stage. If successful, the intention is that the tea rooms will be conserved and reassembled one room at a time in bespoke premises. Members of the public visiting the stores will be able to watch the work in progress,

¹⁷ Opened 16th July 2006 as part of the three-year refurbishment and redisplay of the museum, funded partially by the Heritage Lottery Fund. The Mackintosh and Glasgow Style Gallery was curated by the author.

viewing the room without entering the workspace. It certainly offers an exciting way of communicating the conservation process and making it accessible.

We now have a thorough plan in place for future research into the rooms and we know what further scientific investigation needs to take place to inform any final restoration stage. Hopefully through this process we will obtain a deeper understanding of their original design and use.

One reason for presenting to you at this conference is not just to share with you the work we have undertaken and the information we now have amassed, but also to hear your thoughts and responses to this paper and about the possible options we could pursue. I look forward to hearing from and speaking with you in June.