When the building is the teacher

Few buildings are able to cradle the learning and development of students in the way ‘the Mack’ did at Glasgow School of Art. Karen Grant considers the lessons we can learn from its loss.

In a lifetime, we may be lucky to count on one hand the buildings with which we have had a deep and soulful connection. Those rare buildings nourish our hearts, carry our dreams and help us live at our best. Frequently, those buildings are small, humble, rustic and home-made, as we hear so often from people in the Thousand Huts campaign who fondly remember childhood days in their grandparents’ hut. Sometimes, those buildings are larger, more ambitious and serve a crucial purpose in our wider society.

One such building was the Mackintosh Building at Glasgow School of Art. Its loss in the horrific fire this summer struck a terrible blow to all who loved it. It not only left a hole in the heart of Glasgow, but was felt as a bereavement throughout Scotland and around the world. Many felt disbelief that this most precious of buildings could have suffered two fires in the last four years.

I was very lucky to have had a studio for a year in ‘the Mack’, when I studied painting as a mature student. I was struck by the students’ deep reverence and tenderness for the building. It was like a living, breathing character in their lives, and that feeling persisted long after graduation. After the first fire in 2014, I went to Glasgow immediately to see the Mack. Painful as it was to see the damage, I could see that the spirit and essence was still there—and two thirds of the building was still intact. But after the fire this year, what I saw was a barely recognisable shell. A corpse.

However, there is nothing to be gained from focusing on the loss, painful though it is, and will be for many years to come. Rather we should use this moment to focus on what made the Mack so special—and what it says about the architecture we need to prioritise for the future. Somehow Charles Rennie Macintosh’s design...
for the art school was successful in reinforcing a set of progressive and creative values. Those values are needed today more than ever.

How did it connect so deeply?
Charles Rennie Macintosh’s work was deeply rooted in nature. He used light and space to great effect in north-facing studios with three-storey-high windows. He set huge beams, sometimes pierced through with a love-heart. He used tapered, Japanese-inspired timber pillars, tiles in earthy colours, twisted metalwork tendrils, and rosebud stained glass on studio doors. The Mack had a strange mix of the austere and the whimsical, giving the building’s occupants permission to think freely and experiment. There was fun and warmth built into the design, as well as a diversity of influence and innovation.

Most importantly, the building bore the patina of constant use by art students. Walking the darkened stairwells in the wings, you could not help but stroke the polished concrete of the beautiful arches. For the students there was a very physical relationship with the building. Painting is a gestural form, and the language of paint comes from the intent of the gesture. A painting is made from the repeated caress of paint on a canvas or board until some sort of balance is reached. For students, the gesture was fed by Mackintosh’s painterly use of light, space, materials, lines and flourishes throughout the building. The view across Glasgow from the famous ‘hen run’ at the top of the building was open and liberating. Evidence of the students from years gone by was everywhere, as was the lingering presence of the great and the good of the art world – revolutionaries and national treasures – who had studied and taught there.

It was a very democratic building, putting student creativity above all else. Strikingly, the Director’s office was built with its own studio—reminding us that the highest level of administration in an art school must also be fuelled by creative thinking.

We become what we create
When the House of Commons Chamber was destroyed during the Blitz, the decision was made, with Churchill’s approval, to retain the adversarial rectangular layout, rather than create a semicircular shape favoured by some modern parliamentarians. This was because Churchill credited this pattern with upholding the two-party system. He is noted at the time saying, “We shape our buildings, and afterwards our buildings shape us.” Decisions made at that time set the framework for British politics for many generations to come. Scotland had an opportunity to design a space for supporting its own democratic process in its new Parliament—and chose the horseshoe configuration. I worked in the Scottish Parliament when it was housed in the old Council Tax building on George IV Bridge. When the new building was completed, I could not help but feel that, despite the fact it had no beauty or architectural merit, the old Council Tax building was, in many ways, a more democratic building. It mixed MSPs and their staff, and did nothing to over-inflate egos which can become vulnerable to corruption in buildings which reinforce privilege and hierarchy. It kept everyone’s feet on the ground. There is no doubt that our architecture shapes us—it is up to us to determine how we want our society to be shaped. We must ask ourselves what are the values we want to be embodied in our buildings. Often the monumental buildings in our society are tainted with ethical compromises, vested interests—even the slave trade. We need buildings with integrity. Buildings we can truly believe in.

Glasgow School of Art is committed to rebuilding the Mack and its current Director, Professor Tom Inns, has pledged that the building will become a working art school again. It is crucial that the new building remains primarily as an art school—not a tourist attraction. Its value to future generations must not be denied.

We can learn from our buildings—whether that building is a hut or a national monument. If we are able to create spaces which mirror the values we want to see expressed by our society, we will find they give us the energy to shape the world to match our beliefs.

Karen Grant is a core team member of the Thousand Huts campaign.