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Enjoying Charles Rennie Mackintosh's Architecture in Glasgow, Scotland

John Thomson (/john-thomson) | 3/27/2012



IMAGE BY: John Thomson

Charles Rennie Mackintosh's fingerprints can be seen all over Glasgow, including central Buchanan Street

Exploring Mackintosh's Glasgow: searching for architectural treasures in Scotland's largest city

Glasgow is the birthplace of Charles Rennie Mackintosh, often cited as one of the world's greatest architects.

I'm an architectural buff who likes to travel, and last summer in Glasgow I combined the two passions while researching the works of 19th century Scottish architect and designer [Charles Rennie Mackintosh](http://www.crmociety.com) (<http://www.crmociety.com>).

You may not recognize his buildings, but his chairs will be familiar: severe, high backed structures that created quite a stir in the 1900s. Personally, I'm not a fan of [Mackintosh chairs](http://www.sculptart.co.uk/crm.html) (<http://www.sculptart.co.uk/crm.html>), but I appreciate their historical significance. And besides, Mack is an icon. Make no mistake, Mackintosh is Glasgow's



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favourite son and the city fathers aren't shy about promoting him. He's been immortalized, idolized and commercialized. There's no escaping it – a trip to Glasgow is trip down the Mackintosh trail.

Crashing Glasgow's Most Famous Landmark

The [Glasgow School of Art](http://www.gsa.ac.uk/) (<http://www.gsa.ac.uk/>), arguably Glasgow's most famous landmark, is considered the pinnacle of Mackintosh's architectural career. Completed in 1909, it's a massive stone structure that reminded me of a castle. One wall even has narrow slit-like windows from which medieval archers could shoot arrows if they wanted. If Glasgow were ever under siege, this school could be the first line of defence.



The iconic Mackintosh Chair
(Image: John Thomson)

A bunch of students congregated on the steps and I tried to engage them in a Mackintosh conversation. No dice. The talk turned to rugby and football. No matter, I was standing on a piece of history and I was going to enjoy it.

"Where dae ye think yer going?" the uniformed security guard shouted out as I was halfway down the hallway. In my excitement to see inside, I had scurried through the main doors and missed the "Report to Security" sign. The school doesn't want tourists wandering the halls so they have volunteers on hand to escort them through the building. Tour times are posted at security and on the school's [website](http://www.gsa.ac.uk/visit-gsa/mackintosh-building-tours/timetables-tickets) (<http://www.gsa.ac.uk/visit-gsa/mackintosh-building-tours/timetables-tickets>).



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Mackintosh's Early Work



The Glasgow School of Art's western wall and (right) Mackintosh's tower at the Lighthouse
(Images: John Thomson)

Having already sneaked a peek, I skipped the formal tour and took the subway to the Kelvinhall and the [University of Glasgow's Hunterian Art Gallery](http://www.gla.ac.uk/hunterian/) (<http://www.gla.ac.uk/hunterian/>). Mackintosh's 1906 residence (or at least parts of it) – the hall, the dining room, a living room and the main bedroom – have been moved from their original location and reassembled here for public display.

Mackintosh and his wife designed everything themselves right down to the fireplace decorations. They even knocked down interior walls to create more space, a radical innovation at the turn of the 19th century.

The display was breathtaking in its simplicity. Everything was co-ordinated. A bit too co-ordinated. I longed for a piece of half-eaten toast on the dining room table or a pile of dirty clothes at the foot of those oh-so-perfect matching beds. Nevertheless, I had to admit the duo was ahead of its time. Their 1906 digs looked like they belonged in the 1930s.

The Lighthouse Sums up the Mackintosh Story

Mack's legacy crystallized for me at [The Lighthouse](http://www.glasgow.gov.uk/en/Visitors/TheLighthouse/) (<http://www.glasgow.gov.uk/en/Visitors/TheLighthouse/>), a design incubator and museum just off Buchanan Street in central Glasgow. Its most prominent feature is a tower Mackintosh added in 1895. A vigorous romp up the circular staircase leads to a rooftop view of the city, but it's on the third floor that the Mackintosh story comes to life. Original drawings, photographs and three-dimensional models paint a bittersweet picture of the man and his times. Like his contemporary Frank Lloyd Wright, Mackintosh practised the mantra 'form follows function' well before it became a concept much less a catchphrase. He paved the way for others.

I'm still not sure about those straight-back chairs though.

Other Mackintosh Attractions in Glasgow

Other examples of Mackintosh's artistry can be found at [The Hill House](http://www.gnws.co.uk/glasgow/tourist/hillhouse.htm) (<http://www.gnws.co.uk/glasgow/tourist/hillhouse.htm>), the [Scotland Street Public School](http://www.gnws.co.uk/glasgow/museums/scotlandstreet.htm) (<http://www.gnws.co.uk/glasgow/museums/scotlandstreet.htm>) and the [Willow Tea Rooms](http://www.willowtearooms.co.uk/) (<http://www.willowtearooms.co.uk/>), which Mackintosh designed right down to the cutlery. They're part of the [Mackintosh Trail Ticket](http://www.crmssociety.com/trailticket.aspx) (<http://www.crmssociety.com/trailticket.aspx>), an all-inclusive fare that covers admission and transport to 12 Mackintosh sites via bus or subway. The Trail Ticket website offers hotel suggestions too.

John Thomson (/john-thomson), Contributor

Vancouver writer John Thomson specializes in architectural issues, urban design and travel. He writes for broadcast, print and the Web.

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