

Rennie Mackintosh's Hill House – when two roofs are better than one

Helensburgh, Scotland

The architect broke new ground in 1904 with his gorgeous design for a family home. Now, a very modern solution has been adopted to save this expressive masterpiece

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‘A £4.5m field hospital’: Rennie Mackintosh's Hill House, around which the architects Carmody Groarke have built a protective structure to shield it from the elements while it dries out. Photograph: Carmody Groarke

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ate has not been kind to the buildings of **Charles Rennie Mackintosh**, Scotland's most iconoclastic modern architect. His masterpiece, the Glasgow School of Art, lies in ruins, doubly destroyed by two catastrophic fires, first in 2014 and **latterly last year**. "One may be regarded a misfortune; two looks like carelessness", to paraphrase Oscar Wilde, an equally iconoclastic and equally doomed fin-de-siecle contemporary. Like Wilde, Mackintosh endured extreme reversals of fortune. In 1900, during a trip to Vienna, "Toshie" and his wife, the gifted artist Margaret Macdonald, were feted as Caledonian heroes by the secessionist movement and cheered through the streets in a flower-decked cart. From these intoxicating heights there ensued a slow descent into poverty and obscurity, exacerbated by the first world war, which severed connections with Europe and robbed Mackintosh of the sustaining influence and acclaim of his co-conspirators.

Prodigiously talented and famously temperamental, he died in 1928 aged only 60, of mouth cancer induced by excessive smoking and drinking, rendered mute in his final months by the disease and its treatment.

Now recast and sanitised as a stalwart of museum gift shops, his signature style being a gift to commodity fetishism, it's perhaps hard to imagine just how radical and unsettling Mackintosh was in his day. Synthesising aspects of art nouveau, Japonism and symbolism, and capable of turning his hand to everything from buildings to candlesticks, his suggestive, sybaritic oeuvre simultaneously beguiled and horrified critics, clients and the public. Kicking against the era's stultifying Victorian pricks, Mackintosh relished the shock of the

new. “How absurd it is to see modern buildings made in imitation of Greek temples!” he fulminated in 1893. “We must clothe modern ideas in modern dress.”

From the outset, the Blackies’ domestic staff were discreetly positioning buckets around Hill House to catch drips

Private houses proved an especially receptive milieu. For a new breed of ambitious patron, Mackintosh was in his element, choreographing space, light and materials on an astonishingly detailed and intimate scale. Following his coup with the Glasgow School of Art, he was commissioned to design a family home in Helensburgh for Walter Blackie, scion of the eponymous Glaswegian publishing house. Completed in 1904, Hill House is “a signpost on the road to modernism”, as Simon Skinner, chief executive of the National Trust for Scotland (NTS), puts it.

Designed “from the inside out”, Hill House reframes elements of Scottish vernacular architecture and undercuts them with a new conception of genteel suburban domesticity. Each of its spaces is based on a precisely controlled underlying geometry, animated by explicit polarities of light and dark, feminine and masculine. Glacially white rooms of ethereal and erotic delicacy are linked by ebony panelled hallways, while changes of scale conspire to thrill and surprise. At every turn, surfaces are subtly ornamented with sinuous, organic motifs. Like all Mackintosh buildings, it’s a gorgeous *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a total and unique work of art.



‘Genteel suburban domesticity’: inside Hill House. Photograph: National Trust for Scotland

It’s also “a 115-year-old sandstone sponge”, according to Andy Groarke of architects Carmody Groarke, charged with delivering a solution to rescue Hill House from its current chronic deterioration, here precipitated by water, rather than fire.

Pursuing an aesthetic of abstraction and progressive to a fault, Mackintosh employed the then new technology of cement render to give the stone dwelling a smooth white finish – “like frosting on a fairytale castle”, says Skinner.

The problem with cement is that, unlike traditional lime mortar, it has no elasticity or porosity: it freezes, it cracks and water seeps in, saturating the stonework underneath. From the outset, the Blackies’ domestic staff were discreetly positioning buckets around Hill House to catch drips. Now it has reached the point where the building’s integrity is threatened and it urgently needs to be shielded from the elements while it dries out and a long-term restoration plan is put in place.



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Hill House has been draped in a gossamer-light membrane of chainmail. Photograph: Carmody Groarke

Usually this would mean closing the house and shrouding it in scaffolding, effectively withdrawing it from public view, a familiar response to the challenge of tottering heritage. But the NTS opted to keep Hill House open and to stop the rot by enveloping it in a protective structure.

Carmody Groarke describe it as a £4.5m “field hospital”, designed to buy an ailing patient some time, yet also a distinctive object in its own right. It is architecture as triage, agile and responsive. The lightweight, temporary structure takes its formal and functional cues from pylon construction, with a simple frame of bolted steel members (welding was ruled out because of the fire risk) draped in a gossamer-light skin of chainmail. As a kind of benevolent parasite, it recalls an earlier Carmody Groarke project involving a restaurant made of scavenged scaffolding that perched on the roof of Westfield shopping centre for the duration of the London Olympics. Fabricated by a German company whose core business is producing butcher’s gloves, the chainmail membrane deflects driving rain while letting in air to assist the drying-out process. Glass was briefly considered, but was more costly and impermeable and would have isolated the house like a specimen in a giant vitrine. Lengths of the finely woven mesh were sewn together on site to form a vast shimmering veil that repels birds but admits bees to pollinate the garden landscape.



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The view through Hill House's chainmail membrane. Photograph: Rory Weller

Within this sheltering armature, visitors are at liberty to promenade around an **Escheresque labyrinth** of walkways and staircases, savouring vertiginous views of the house and its setting. It's like yomping around an upmarket oil rig and on a clear day you can see to Arran. Involving the public in this way, who can peer into chimney pots and see the damage for themselves, heightens awareness of Hill House's complicated past and gives a sense of its possible future.

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“It draws attention to the fact that conservation is not just a physical problem”, says Groarke. “It’s also a philosophical problem, of how and why we should conserve our built heritage. And how we involve people in that debate.”

In any event, the practicalities cannot be rushed. Drying out may take up to three years, followed by a restoration programme that could extend to seven years. The NTS, in charge of Hill House since 1982, is considering its options. But it is confident that visitor numbers, standing at 35,000 per year, will increase and that it will attract a broader demographic, lured by this newly activated version of Mackintosh's architecture. Counterpointing the solidity of the original building, the new chainmail box forms a house for a house: “a modern idea in modern dress”. And though it has been conceived in response to a particular exigency, the combination of medieval chainmail and industrial modernity seems somehow appropriate for Mackintosh, who took such obvious pleasure in the richness of materials and the aptness of form. “We think he might have liked it,” says Groarke.

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