

# A Beautiful Living Thing

Ross Birrell  
Joanna Crotch

*'Let every artist strive to make his flower a beautiful living thing, something that will convince the world that there may be, there are, things more precious more beautiful - more lasting than life itself.'*

C R Mackintosh 'Seemliness' (Glasgow, 1902)

On the 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2014 a fire spread through The Glasgow School of Art, Charles Rennie Mackintosh's masterpiece, badly damaging the heart of the School. The west wing of the building was particularly badly affected including several of the Studios, Professor's Offices, the Hen Run and sadly the Library, considered to be the 'Jewel' of Mackintosh's work, which incurred significant damage.

## The Project

In the immediate aftermath of the fire the response from the GSA's students, staff and alumni was overwhelming. The sense of loss and sadness impacted on this community not just locally but also at an international level. This emotional reaction has, over the course of time, developed into a desire to engage with the Mackintosh Building, and a growing number of research projects focused on the building are now underway, involving students and staff.

Following this tragic event, Birrell and Crotch were both driven by a deep desire to record the irrevocable damage, and the concept of 'A Beautiful Living Thing' developed. Both authors independently felt a connection with the building in the context of their own research and through this common ground they agreed to collaborate on the project. The ambition was to capture and record the beauty within the building viewing the restoration of this damaged work of art from the immediate aftermath of the fire, and through the process of restoration to completion. Through discussion the project developed and it was agreed that a series of three films would be produced; designed as a series of visual 'movements' each would be aligned to mark significant stages of rehabilitation of the building; before, during and after the restoration work.

*Film 1* places a single musician within the damaged library, and records a new composition transposed from the words of Mackintosh 'A Beautiful Living Thing'. *Film 2* will concern itself with 'improvisation' in response to the improvisatory nature of fire and will take place during the reconstruction phase.

*Film 3* will celebrate completion and a new beginning through a choral piece. It is hoped to invite GSA's own choir to participate in this event. Overall this is a linear project that has been conceived as a whole but with each part having independent legitimacy.

## The Project Team

This collaborative project involves staff from within GSA and also has the ambition to extend its collaboration to artists from other creative institutions in the city. Director Ross Birrell, an artist and lecturer at Glasgow School of Art (GSA), and producer Joanna Crotch, an architect and teacher at the Mackintosh School of Architecture also at the GSA, are the principles authors. They had not previously worked together before the fire but have found a connection through their own practices that brings their thinking together in the context of the Mackintosh Building, collaborating in the making of the filmic artefacts. They are supported by a core team of technicians from GSA who bring their own experience in film making to the project. It is also the authors' aim that the project provides a platform for collaboration with other Glasgow-based practitioners including RSNO, Glasgow Improvisers Orchestra, Royal Conservatoire and GSA Choir.

Birrell's previous work demonstrates a long-standing portfolio, which combines film, music and installations. He has become particularly fascinated with the relationship of music and place. His work includes site-specific compositions for the bomb-damaged Spiegelsaal, Claerchens Ballhaus, Berlin, the Non-Catholic Cemetery Rome and the Burgkirche St. Romanus, Raron. This research has been widely exhibited internationally.

Crotch's research explores embodied experience and memory, and this has resulted in a phenomenological approach to learning and teaching in the design of space and place. Her teaching practice involves the creation of experiences that in turn become memories for the participants. Working with a multi-disciplinary postgraduate group; these acoustical experiments use sound and music within specific site locations. The Mackintosh building pre-fire has been one of the loci used for these events. These hands on workshops begin a discovery of ones understanding of environments through first hand experience. She has previously worked with RSNO violinist Chandler, exploring spatial experience via music and sounds.

## The Research

The primary objective of the research is to produce a sequence of films which respond through composed and improvised music and movement to the fire-damaged spaces of the Mackintosh building and their subsequent reconstruction in such a way which recognise that the fire-damage has produced new compositional forms. For Deleuze 'art is composition' and this premise both underpins and is challenged as the captured 'movements' address 'composition' and 'improvisation'

in music and movement in response to both architecture (composition) and fire (improvisation).

The primary research questions are 'How might the fire-damaged Mackintosh building be viewed as a composition?' and 'How might music / movement register the emotional impact of the event of the fire and follow the paths of its reclamation and reconstruction?' In light of these questions a methodology has been structured around composition and improvisation, which will respond to the contexts of composition (Mackintosh building) and improvisation (fire) to produce new compositions and films. Echoing the painstaking reclamation process, the camera will be used to record details of the interiors in 'forensic' close up, using slow movement, panning, steadicam and tracking shots, to collect these temporary compositions within the building. The focus is upon music and this further evolves Birrell's previous research into how musician responds to architectural spaces. This preoccupation continues through his compositions, which transpose context relevant text into scores that form the 'soundtracks' of his site-specific films. Crotch's experiential workshops with sound, including Mackintosh library pre-fire, continue their concerns with site specificity and sound.

## Part One

The first 'movement' or film has now been completed. It explores the damage and debris resulting from the fire and features a composition by Birrell, transposed and inspired by the words of Mackintosh 'A Beautiful Living Thing'. Bill Chandler (RSNO) performed the musical score in late December 2014/early January 2015 inside the ruined library. Captured on film, along with contextual shots to locate and record the status of the building then and there. At that time debris, now painstakingly removed by the archivists was still in location and provided a rich visual landscape, its multi-faceted surface also creating a unique temporary acoustical condition within the library.



The resulting short film captures the atmosphere and spirit within the space through the performed music and captured visuals. It records the devastating impact of the fire on the Library's unique interior and its precious contents. Beginning in silence in the first floor corridor in the west wing, the film takes the viewer slowly into the library, revealing an unworldly landscape of burnt fittings and fixture as well as badly charred books and furniture. Here the lament begins with an overriding feeling of nostalgia, and a beauty and peace to the devastation is exposed, which creates an

eerie and emotive atmosphere. The full physical volume of the library and the now exposed furniture store above is revealed as the camera pans back, exposing the catastrophic damage that has resulted from the fire. A single bearded sculpture of a musician with a violin in hand, stands guard aside the glassless towering windows, charred but resolute. The viewer is finally taken up to the loggia, and at this point the lament builds to a more hopeful tone, where views of the city are revealed in the last light of the day. Throughout the movement the composition works with the canvas of city noise, resulting in a textural soundscape unique to that place at that time.

## Part Two

The second movement is currently in the planning stage and it is envisaged that this will be complete by autumn 2015. It will mark the completion of the decontamination process, which is currently underway, and also the commencement of the restoration contract. This second 'movement' intends to explore more closely the relationship of the passage of the fire through the building. Unlike the first film, where the composition was created prior to the filming, this second phase will work with improvisation and this will represent a metaphor for the fire. A flow of movement and music will explore the studio and circulation spaces, using the mode of improvisation to weave paths and eddies within the spaces in an abstracted reflection of the nature of fire. Performances will be by the Glasgow Improvisers Orchestra, led by Professor Raymond MacDonald, Head of Reid School of Music, and Edinburgh University. It is also intended to develop the theme of movement and improvisation with a Glasgow based dance improvisation group, and negotiations with them are currently in progress.

## Part Three

The concluding film will celebrate the completion of the restoration process. It is hoped that this will be developed in collaboration with The Glasgow School of Art's Choir, and is likely to be a celebratory coral composition. The date and precise venue for this final piece have yet to be determined.

This on-going project has been fully supported and funded by the Glasgow School of Art's research office and is part of a major programme of academic research aligned to the restoration of the Mackintosh Building. The first film has been well received having been screened at a number of events with GSA. Its first public screening was in April 2015, when it was screened as part of the programme for 'Building on the Mac' public symposium. The RIBA in London featured it within a special event to mark the end of its very successful 'Mackintosh Architecture' exhibition that showcased original drawings by Mackintosh, at the end of May 2015. Other screenings have also been planned.

A Beautiful Living Thing is dedicated to the Scottish Fire & Rescue Services and the Staff and Students of The Glasgow School of Art.

