1 ALEXANDER THOMSON PLACE

formerly Caledonia Road Church

A Regeneration Proposal by Architects Gholami Baines

The Building in Context

Caledonia Road Church was designed by the Glasgow based architect Alexander Thomson and built between 1856 and 1857. The building was his first public commission and, along with Tor House in Bute and the Double Villa in Langside, was executed in his mature style, a unique and largely abstracted interpretation of the architecture of ancient Greece and other middle eastern sources.

The church was built on a wedge shaped plot on the southern tip of an urban block situated at the south eastern extremity of the district of Gorbals. The block was bounded to north by Cumberland Street and the church bounded by Cathcart Road to the west and Hospital Street to the east. Caledonia Road was an open sided, major east west thoroughfare which long formed the southern boundary the district of Gorbals and, ultimately the site. Hospital Street was a typical residential street of tenements and few shops. Cathcart Road was, and remains, a major north south thoroughfare leading to and from the city centre. Opposite the Church, and to the south west, was the south side terminus of the Caledonia Railway. Thomson's response to this setting was at once imaginative and practical.

The plan was simple. The rectangular, galleried nave of the church was aligned with the orthogonal junction of Hospital Street and Caledonia Road. A triangular meeting hall was positioned between the church and the angled incidence of Cathcart Road. This plan gives rise to the building's extraordinary three dimensional composition.

On Caledonia Road a massive podium with flanking doorways was surmounted by an Ionic portico, its composition boldly offset by an asymmetrically positioned tower with characteristically distinctive modeling to the apex of the shaft. On Hospital Street, a wall with three blind windows, their raised surrounds buttressing its height, was surmounted by a continuous, glazed colonnade. The lower wall to the meeting hall on Cathcart Road again assumes the form of a glazed colonnade flanked by two doorways. It is extremely likely that the glazing to each colonnade was translucent like that of Thomson's later St Vincent Street Church. A continuous plinth binds each of these three distinct compositions together.

Thomson also designed an adjacent pair of four storey tenements of subtly different composition which were compositionally linked to the church by means of the related disposition of stone coursing, window pediments and entablatures. Chimney stacks and gables provided both tenements with their own distinctive silhouettes.
THE CALEDONIA ROAD CHURCH, GLASGOW.
FROM A MEASURED DRAWING BY J. GAFF GILLESPIE.
History and Current Context

Following the completion of the church and its adjoining tenements a series of radical alterations occurred most notably in the 1860’s, the 1960’s and the 1990’s, all periods of urban upheaval and change throughout the city.

In the 1860’s a new railway bridge was constructed across Cathcart Road, the continuing viaduct necessitating the demolition of the tenements on the north east corner of the urban block before bridging Cumberland Street. Thomson’s tenement was spared though views of the tower were, to some extent, visually compromised from the north western approach.

The near comprehensive demolition of the Gorbals under the city’s Comprehensive Development Plans of the 1960’s effectively removed the church’s congregation resulting in its deconsecration in 1962. Empty and neglected it fell victim to arson in 1965 leaving only the tower, portico and perimeter walls minus the high level colonnade. Basic repairs were undertaken by the city to secure the building after an outcry against its proposed demolition. By 1972 both tenements had been demolished as dangerous structures.

The rebuilding of the Gorbals in the first phase of its reconstruction was relatively shortlived and the social housing built during this period was in turn progressively demolished during the 1980’s. There subsequently followed the Crown Street Regeneration Project promoted by the city and won in competition in 1993 by the London based practice of CZWG. Their proposals have been substantially adhered to with the principal exception of the curved realignment of the former Hospital Street, now Laurieston Road, and its upgrading to an urban clearway and part dual carriageway (the Central Area Link Road) in anticipation of the M74 extension.

This and Cathcart Road are both heavily trafficked thoroughfares. For this reason all new buildings on both roads between the River Clyde and Govanhill are considerably set back from the road to provide a quieter and safer residential environment. A report ‘Caledonia Road and Surrounding Area’ undertaken by the city in 1996 ahead of Glasgow’s year as City of Culture recommended that ‘It is unlikely that a frontage following the present line of Laurieston Road would make a valid contribution to the setting of the church, as it would effectively be tucked out of sight. Also Laurieston Road would allow insufficient room on the site to service or provide sufficient amenity space for such a frontage’.
The report promoted re-routing this road to the west of the former church. Cost and the decision to retain the railway line precluded this option.

The present housing to the east of Laurieston Road is distanced by approximately 20 metres of landscaping consisting of a grass verge, a near continuous wall surmounted by a fence, streets with parking and a narrow garden strip. Similarly Caledonia Road has been realigned to meet with Cathcart Road at a point further south thus disassociating the church from the road which gave it its name.

In 2002 Glasgow City Council and Historic Scotland invested £250,000 in making the building structurally sound and reinstating the roof of the tower.

The currently dormant, high level railway has the potential to be reopened at some point in the future as a light railway connecting Strathbungo with the city as part of the proposed Cross Rail Plan with a new station straddling Cleland Street to the north.
The remains of the former Caledonia Road Church currently stand empty and isolated from their surroundings. Although partially damaged and in need of substantial masonry repairs, the tower, portico, vestibule and former meeting hall façade are intact externally, but the east wall to the former nave is without its upper colonnade. Within the walls, only the empty shell of the vestibule and the base of the wall between the meeting hall and the church remain.
The Proposal

The proposal was born out of the Alexander Thomson Society’s wish to establish an appropriate home for the society in order that it might expand its activities and more effectively promote a greater public awareness of Alexander Thomson’s architecture. The remains of the former Caledonia Church offer an ideal opportunity in these respects, whilst conserving and maintaining the Grade A listed ruin.

This proposal is the development of the outline proposals described and illustrated in a document entitled ‘Caledonia Road Church – A Regeneration Plan’ which was prepared, funded by, and presented to Glasgow City Council in 2007.
Accommodation

The accommodation to be provided primarily consists of a series of exhibition spaces dedicated to Thomson, his life and his architecture. In support are a temporary gallery, a study centre, a café bar, meeting or seminar rooms and an office for the Society. These spaces form the public side of the building. In addition, two studios at ground level and ten apartments located at the upper levels are intended both to complement the public uses of the building and to provide necessary revenue income. This accommodation is not subject to future sale.

Vehicular access is only permitted from Cathcart Road and all servicing is to take place within the curtilage of the site. The entire building and the external landscaped space is to be owned and managed by the Alexander Thomson Society.

It is intended that the range of accommodation is a mutually enriching combination wherein each activity benefits from the presence of the others. It is hoped that this would broaden the appeal of the proposal and bring additional life to the building and its surroundings. Culture, recreation, working and living would animate the currently derelict site contributing to the enjoyment of the public realm. As a public building it is hoped that it would also become a desirable venue for a variety of events and occasions and act as a focus not only for the neighbouring districts but within the city as a whole.
Design Strategy

The principles behind the design strategy are specifically derived from, engage with and ultimately offer a deeply considered means of reconciling the challenging urban, architectural, environmental and conservation issues which arise from the diverse nature of the client’s requirements, the history and prevailing character of the former church, the island site and its environs.

The remains of the former church are to be conserved and substantial repairs to the stonework undertaken, the extent of which is to be determined at a future date in consultation with the Stone Specialist and Historic Scotland. It is proposed to remove the more recently erected section of stone wall to the north or the former nave and meeting hall. The new building is placed partly within and outwith the curtilage of the remaining walls to establish a physical rapport and a spatially intimate relationship with the remaining elements of the former church.

In essence the proposal brings together old and new, one in counterpoint to the other, in order to create a single building, the arrangement of which is analogous to that of a ‘palazzo’. The plan is deliberately compact, its geometry and three dimensional configuration shaped in response to the constraints of the Grade A listed structure, the roads, the railway bridge and viaduct.

A new, five storey building, aligned between Laurieston Road and Cathcart Road to the north of the former nave and meeting room, contains the Museum, meeting rooms, apartments and studios. The Thomson gallery occupies the shell of the meeting room whilst the nave becomes an open court in which the café bar and the ATS office are axially aligned, recalling the relationship between the original seating gallery and the raised pulpit.

The arrangement of the building also clarifies the issues of accessibility and entry and, importantly, ensures a degree of public access to the former church without charge.
Public Space

An integral part of the design strategy is that the new building defines two, new interlinked public spaces of contrasting character and ambience. The first is a public ‘Place’ outwith the new building and the second an entrance courtyard within the shell of the old. For security the courtyard is to be gated outwith opening hours, although accessible to residents. It is an arrangement which defines arrival and entry as well as unequivocally clarifying the relationship of public and private providing an important link, a stepping stone, between New Gorbals and Laurieston.

The public ‘Place’ is defined by the north façade of the new building and the industrial architecture and engineering of the railway viaduct. A perimeter screen of closely planted, pleached trees is to provide a green framework to the open edges of the space as well moderating the movement and noise of traffic. Quiet surfaces of granite are to be merged with granite setts which define the surface for vehicular access and parking. The setts would also be a sympathetic reflection of the heavily textured masonry of the viaduct. The two arches are envisaged to be incorporated into the proposal and their frontages upgraded. This space is hopefully to be entitled ‘Alexander Thomson Place’ lending the building is name, a singular address for its various occupants and importantly, a fitting gathering space for visitors arriving either on foot or by car, distanced from the busy roads.

The transition from the ‘Place’ to the entrance court is announced by a tall, slender opening aligned on the axis of the tower beyond and towards the centre of the north façade. Set within the opening a high level window to the museum is to display a bust of Thomson.

At this point the opening then widens to accommodate a pair of independent entrances to the ATS office, a studio, the plant room and the apartments. Beyond this point the paving changes from granite to sandstone which is then continued within the public spaces on the ground floor of the building.

Once within, the courtyard is seen as a quiet haven, a tempered environment sheltered from the world outside. Here one is enveloped by Thomson. Underfoot, the paving pattern is to represent an abstracted layout of the original pews by means of inlaid strips of sandstone to either side of a central spine which channels water to a pool around the base of the ATS office. The strips are to be engraved with the names, locations and dates of Thomson’s complete works. A planting strip parallel to the east wall is to display selected shrubs and climbing plants which inspired the classical decoration which Thomson also used extensively.

A large, reconstructed doorway designed by Thomson heralds the entrance to the gallery and museum. The doorway was salvaged from a now demolished warehouse which stood in the city centre on the corner of Bell Street and Watson Street. It is hoped that similar recovered architectural fragments would also be displayed in the courtyard.

Each space is a threshold, a graduated progression between inside and out creating an unfolding sequence of spatial and sensory experiences. This notion is further amplified in the interior spatial arrangements. Internally, the existing stone walls remain exposed and are contrasted with new materials limited to combination of sandstone paving and timber paneling. The ATS office, study mezzanine and the café bar servery are treated as small pavilions articulating the larger spaces they occupy.
Facades

The scale and proportions of the new defer to those of the old. The prismatic modeling, material finishes and detailing of the new building are offered as a counterpoint to the powerful form and presence of the former church as well as the textured surfaces of eroded ashlar and undressed stone which now characterize its shell. The respective compositions of the new facades also allude to the generic aspects of Thomson's architectural language, in particular his use of symmetry and asymmetry, the stratified build up of the façade from ground to top and the highly disciplined ratio of window to wall expressed either, literally, as a wall, or alternatively as a load bearing, fenestrated screen of masonry and glass that is both window and wall.

As a courtyard building, and as in the ‘palazzo’ typology referred to previously, the building is both outward looking and inward looking. The exterior has strength, the heart is softened.

Externally, the facades are, as in Thomson’s former church, consciously abstract, sculpted compositions which betray little of the building’s internal subdivision by walls or floors and visually suppress the presence of the residential accommodation in favour of its appearance as a public building.

The new building rises above a continuous plinth, aligned with Thomson’s, but clad in large panels of silver grey, honed granite. The upper levels are clad in polished granite with edited, cut out patterns of fenestration set flush with surface. A recessed horizontal screen composed of clear and opaque glass separates the base from the superstructure.

The expansive entrance façade to the north is scaled to the ‘Place’ before it and is to provide a frontage which acknowledges the curved approach along Laurieston Road whilst allowing the silhouette of the tower to remain the dominant element of the overall composition. The facades to the west and east, by contrast, present relatively concise frontages to both Cathcart Road and Laurieston Road so as visually counterbalance the appearance of the portico and tower. Correspondingly they are separately scaled and modeled with respect to the height of the adjoining facades, and inflected towards the presence of the portico and tower at the opposing end of the overall composition. The projecting form of the gallery extends the frontage along Laurieston Road while the angled wall to the ‘Place’ invites entry towards the opening in the façade. A large corner window overlooks the ‘Place’, the road and New Gorbals beyond. To west the first floor meeting rooms have broad windows overlooking Cathcart Road and, again, the ‘Place’.

In contrast the courtyard is framed by a series of glazed screens, individually composed and visually offset by the planting to the east wall. The apartments are raised above the height of the existing walls and overlook the tower, the rear of the portico and the courtyard below.
Environmental Strategy

Careful attention and consideration has been directed towards the environmental issues affecting the building and their holistic resolution by means of the building’s physical and spatial configuration and material constitution. These are designed to minimize the need for mechanical systems, maximize the use of natural ventilation whilst employing renewable energy sources in order reduce reliance on electricity and gas supplies. The building fabric, passive and mechanical systems are each designed to work in partnership with one another. All materials are to be resourced from sustainable sources as far as possible. Each system, or combination of systems, has been selected in relation to the diverse requirements of the building programme.

Of primary consideration are the levels of noise and emissions affecting the comfort levels and air quality due the heavily trafficked roads which flank the site. The primary response to these issues lies in the provision of the public ‘Place’ in front of the building and the courtyard which provides a tempered environment facilitating the natural ventilation of the surrounding gallery, museum, café bar and ATS office. The gallery museum and café bar are served by under floor heating, the mass of the floor and green roof structures regulating the internal temperature of these spaces which allow natural ventilation during the summer and limited mechanical input in winter. Air handling units are positioned locally to the gallery, museum and the café bar minimizing ductwork and power requirements. Mechanical ventilation is required for internal wc’s and bathrooms.

The apartments are each arranged behind a broad, south facing conservatory, a passive amenity which enhances the quality of the accommodation and well as its environmental performance in terms of energy consumption and noise control. They also provide shade to the upper level windows of the museum. Solar collectors mounted above the apartments provide additional heat for the domestic hot water supply. The green roof structures also help foster local flora and fauna.

Ground sourced heating from bore pipes positioned below the ‘Place’ augments that supplied by a gas boiler situated at ground level. The remaining equipment is located in a basement below the entrance hall to the ATS office.

Conclusion

The former church is a well known landmark and an enduring survivor of the many vicissitudes that have shaped its history and led to its present, unseemly situation. This proposal aspires to restore an appropriate sense of dignity to the extant remains of the former Caledonia Road Church to ensure its future care and longevity. The new building is seen as the guardian of Thomson’s early masterpiece and as a highly visible symbol of the continuing regeneration of this area of the city.

The building, its exhibitions and resources, along with the ongoing activities and initiatives of the Society, are intended to finally position the architecture of Alexander Thomson firmly in the public eye in recognition of the international stature of his architecture and his uniquely creative architectural contribution to the city of Glasgow and its environs.