

1802



2002

Glasgow: the Architecture of the City

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The architecture of a city is not just a matter of its individual buildings. It is as much to do with the way in which the buildings are related to each other and to the spaces between them and around them. Buildings and spaces come together in distinctive patterns characteristic of their times and the architecture of a city is the aggregation, juxtaposed or superimposed, of these various patterns.

A plan of Glasgow (see overleaf) published in 1841 reveals the patterns of the city on the eve of its great period of industrial prosperity. In an irregular line, the ancient streets – Castle Street, High Street, Saltmarket and Bridgegate – trace their way southwards from the cathedral to the historic river crossing. This route is continuously edged with buildings and the deep furrows of its backlands are densely built upon (see page 100). At Glasgow Cross, the pivot of the pre-industrial burgh, the route is intersected by Gallowgate and Trongate, opening up the lands to east and west. Here was sited the focal civic building, the Tolbooth, the centre of administration and of law (see page 101). The estates south of the river – Trades Town, Laurieston and Hutcheson Town – are by this date connected by four bridges and they flank what was the main street of Gorbals village in variously proportioned rectilinear grids. Hand-some frontages overlook the river



An 1841 plan of Glasgow as featured in Glasgow Illustrated in 21 Views ...

(see page 101) but behind them these lands have already begun their decline into what were to become among Europe's most notorious slums. To the east are the weaving villages of Calton



and Bridgeton – not yet within the Glasgow burgh boundary – the first expanding eastwards from its own crossroads, the second on an orthogonally gridded plan set off from the straight road to



Tenements on High Street before city improvement development, as photographed by Annan.

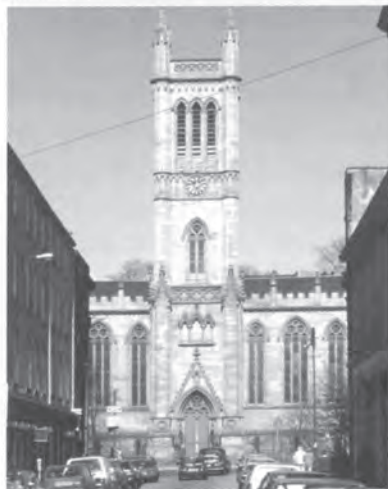
Rutherglen Bridge. But the thrust of the city is emphatically to the west, downriver. With the opening of the Clyde to deep-sea vessels, the development of the inland port is well advanced, with wharves and dockside sheds lining both banks below Glasgow Bridge. A vignette included with the plan showed the harbour crammed with sailing ships and the plan already intimates the next and necessary stage in the development of Glasgow's port. Proposed off-river basins are lightly shown in locations where Kingston Dock and Queen's Dock were to be opened up later in the century. The northern hinterland to this business of the river shows gridded development as far as Anderston, in blocks ever longer and narrower to the west. By this time, the development here had already become an unregulated mixture of warehouses, wood yards, glass- and bottle works, foundries, machine workshops and factories, all enmeshed with housing and occasional public buildings.

The Trongate–Argyle Street axis, extended westwards, divides this industrial and dockside zone from the planned expansions of



Left: Trongate and Argyle Street, with the Tolbooth steeple, Tolbooth and beyond them the Tontine Hotel. Of the three, only the steeple survives. Painting by John Knox, c. 1820. Right: Carlton Place (Peter Nicholson, 1813-18), with Gorbals Parish Church (David Hamilton, 1806-10, demolished 1973).

the city that had begun in the early 18th century with the siting of what were then suburban mansions for Glasgow's wealthy merchant class; these were early manifestations of the persistent impulse for the better-off to remove themselves from the less salubrious aspects of the city. The Shawfield mansion (c. 1712) established the precedent, both in its choice of architectural style (the classical) and in its axial closure of the view along a newly opened or regularised street (in this case Stockwell Street). By the time of our 1841 map, what had survived of these townhouses had become absorbed into the tight urban structure of what we now call the Merchant City. The most monumental of these was the Cunningham Mansion, built in the 1780s, which had been transformed in 1827-32 into the Royal Exchange and set centre-stage in a formal square. But although the merchant's mansions have all but disappeared, the point-de-vue principle of planning they established was later adopted in the siting of public buildings



*Top Left: Trades' House (Robert Adam, 1791-4).
Top Right: Hutcheson's Hall (David Hamilton, 1802-5).
Bottom: Ramshorn Kirk (Thomas Rickman, 1824-6).*

such as the Trades House, Hutcheson's Hall and the Ramshorn Kirk (all above), which remain among the Merchant City's most distinctive civic features.

The opening up of the Merchant City lands was initially by projections northward from Trongate and Argyle Street toward



*Top: Wilson Street with the pedimented portico of the City and County Buildings (Clarke & Bell, 1842-4).
Bottom: Merchants' House (Clarke & Bell, 1842-4).*

Ingram Street (then not the undeviating thoroughfare it is now). In the 1790s, an east-west axis, Wilson Street, was constructed midway across these routes. Broader than other streets in the Merchant City, it gave the area its own focus and its status was affirmed when the civic functions of the Tolbooth were moved here in the 1840s, so signifying a westward shift in the centre of gravity of the city. The City and County Buildings, occupying a full urban block, incorporated initially the county offices and sheriff court on Wilson Street (left, top) and the Merchants' House (moved from Bridgegate) on Hutcheson Street, where it was elevated in axial relationship with the Trades House on Glassford Street (left, bottom). Thus were the administrative, juridical, mercantile and manufactur-

ing interests of the city brought into a classically structured relationship at the new core of the extended city.

But, as our 1841 plan shows, further westward expansions of the burgeoning city were already securely under way. In the 1780s, the burgh surveyor, James Barry, had laid out land to the north-

west of the Merchant City on a gridded plan with George Square near its centre and with Buchanan Street, edging the Merchant City to its west, connecting the scheme directly to Argyle Street. The plan was principally for housing in terraces and tenements. George Square introduced a rare neo-classical tone for Glasgow at this time in that each its blocks was integrated elevationally. Only one of them survives, much modified, as a hotel. Other streets in Barry's plan openly invited their extension into the neighbouring countryside but for legal reasons, it was not until the turn of the century that this invitation could be taken up by the Campbells of Blythswood, the owners of the estate adjacent to the west. The undulating Blythswood lands were feued out on a plan that imprinted the grid untrammelled across the terrain. South of Sauchiehall Street, the development was mostly for individual terraced housing, two- or three storeys high and not architecturally co-ordinated (below, left), though in Blythswood Square, the western counterpart to George Square, each of the four defining terraces is elevated to a single neo-classical design. Our map shows that north of Sauchiehall Street, detached villas, rather than terraces, were the norm (the façade of one has recently been revealed within the newly refurbished Centre for Contemporary



*Above: 204-226 West George Street.
Right: West George Street successive
developments; the modernist building to
the right has recently been rebuilt.*



Buchanan Street, west side. From left to right (using the original building names): Royal Bank of Scotland (extension, A. Sydney Mitchell, 1886-8); not known; Carron Building, on the corner of St Vincent Street (James Boucher, 1884); Western Club (D & J Hamilton, 1839-42); Stock Exchange (John Burnet, 1875-7); the tower of St. George's Tron church (William Stark, 1807-9); Liberal Club (J. J. Burnet, 1886) and the Athenaeum Theatre (J.J. Burnet and J.A. Campbell, 1891-93).

Arts). Most of Blythswood's early buildings have disappeared, for as Glasgow prospered and came to its industrial and manufacturing prominence, much of the estate was progressively taken over to become the main part of the central business district. It is one of the attributes of the grid that it imposes no strict architectural discipline and so, for good or ill, is openly susceptible to commercial pressures. Terraces, tenements and villas were replaced piecemeal by offices, hotels, banks, shops and warehouses, often raised many storeys above the original constricted sites (opposite, right). The transformation of the Blythswood area continues to this day.

If Glasgow in modern times has been recognised as 'the finest surviving example of a great Victorian city'¹, this is due in great part to the high quality and originality of the buildings put up in the central business district during its Victorian and Edwardian heyday. Buchanan Street, for example, demarcating the Merchant



The Grosvenor Building, Gordon Street (Alexander Thomson, 1859-61, rebuilt 1866 – the addition, above Thomson’s topmost cornice, by J.H. Craigie, 1907).



Offices on St. Vincent Street: on the left, the ‘Hatrack’ (James Salmon junior, 1899-1902) so-called because of its skyline projections; on the right the cornerpiece by Burnet, Boston and Carruthers, 1899-1900).

City from Blythswood lands, was transformed from a procession of unremarkable terraced houses into Glasgow's most fashionable shopping street with 'the best mixed 19th- and early 20th-century group in the whole country'² (see above). The style of Victorian Glasgow was generally classical, often personally interpreted and seen at its most idiosyncratically original in the work of Alexander 'Greek' Thomson (left). In the later years of the Victorian age, some leading Glasgow archi-



Glasgow School of Art, from Sauchiehall Street (C. R. Mackintosh, first phase begun in 1897, the second in 1907).

itects turned from the regularising discipline of classical design to the expressive freedom offered by Art Nouveau. The 'Glasgow Style' of Art Nouveau is more easily recognised – that is to say more homogeneous – in the decorative arts than it is in contemporary architecture, which encompassed both the bristling elegance of the Hatrack building (by James Salmon junior) (left, bottom) and the austere eclecticism of Charles Rennie Mackintosh. Thomson and Mackintosh are deservedly the most famous of Glasgow's architects but Mackintosh, unlike Thomson, had little opportunity to contribute to the architectural heritage of the city – apart, that is, from his masterpiece, the Glasgow School of Art, one of the great buildings of its time (above).



The City Chambers, George Square (William Young, 1882-90).

Glasgow in the second half of the 19th century found its apposite expression in new and grandiose municipal buildings erected during the 1880s on the east side of George Square, where they replaced a row of modest 18th-century terraced houses. The City Chambers (above) make an appropriate symbol for the Glasgow of its time in several ways. Their exterior lavishness and interior opulence have been seen to represent, somewhat ostentatiously, a prosperous city proudly aware of its place as the 'Second City' of the British Empire; in their scale and monumentality they also demonstrate the power of the municipal authorities over the well-being of the local citizenry. Significantly, the location of the City Chambers meant a further distancing of the focus of the city from its origins, this just forty years after the move to the City and County Buildings on Wilson Street. By the 1860s the backlands off the High Street had become a deep sink of destitution with a population living at densities at least as high as anywhere



City Improvement housing: High Street (Burnet, Boston & Carruthers, 1899-1902)(left) and Saltmarket (John Carrick, 1880-1887)(right).

else in Europe and in conditions – graphically preserved for us in the invaluable photographs of Annan seen on page 100 – that could scarcely have been worse. Here and in other neighbourhoods to the north, east and south of the city centre were concentrated the many thousands of immigrants who had arrived in the city looking for work in Glasgow's burgeoning heavy industries. The Merchant City, too, had begun a decline that was not to be reversed until the later decades of the 20th century.

In this age of high capitalism, the response to such problems was what has been called 'municipal socialism'. A number of improvements in public services were initiated throughout the city, beginning with the provision of uncontaminated water and the removal of sewage. During the second half of the 19th century, other public services were brought under municipal control and steps were taken to reduce overcrowding, culminating

in an almost complete reshaping of the city's historic core. A Glasgow Improvement Act was passed by Parliament in 1866. Over a period of 36 years, the City Improvement Trust progressively cleared High Street, Saltmarket, Bridgegate, Gallowgate and the adjacent backlands of their old structures and redeveloped the area with new tenement housing. The architecture was mostly in a classical manner with direct Parisian influences, but there was also an inventive use of Scottish baronial (page 109). In other settlements around the city – such as Calton and Bridgeton and the Gorbals – where conditions were hardly more salubrious than in Glasgow's historic core, redevelopments were also undertaken by the Trust. These were real achievements of the Trust, but they were made much more for the sake of urban improvement than for the relief of the overcrowding of the masses. This problem was largely shifted to the surrounding neighbourhoods.

The City Chambers turned their back on these problem areas and faced westward, to the expanding commercial district – they still effectively mark its eastern limit – and, beyond that, to new fauborgs for the more affluent classes. Our map of 1841 shows that on the Blythswood Estate construction had proceeded on street block lines as far as Blythswood Square, but then it appears to have run out of steam, leaving much of the grid unoccupied. For by this time those who could afford it had begun to look even further afield for a different style of living, one that was both healthier and more securely distanced from the older and declining parts of the city. There were, of course, others who sought to increase their own wealth by meeting this demand. Landowners all around the city began to look to the development potential of their estates. Over twenty estates of greatly different size were involved in the suburban development of what is now known as the West End of Glasgow. These estates enjoyed great advantages over those lying in other directions from the city. Given improved roads (which came with the regularisation of Great Western Road and the opening of a New City Road – now Maryhill Road – leading to Garscube, both in place by 1840) they were directly

accessible to the business centre and, moreover, without the need to travel through areas of destitution. Then there was the natural advantage of the undulating territory which, properly exploited, offered the benefits of fresh prevailing breezes and southerly prospects across the Clyde.

Our map shows the first stages in the development of the West End with the emergence of new residential forms upon the Glasgow scene, forms that were released from the discipline of the orthogonal grid. Around the lower slopes of Woodlands Hill are terraces, some straight, some curvilinear, off-set from the street and with gardens laid out for communal recreation. Architecturally, these south-facing terraces and crescents are organised in palatial symmetry like the grandest of country mansions. These early picturesque developments, accessed directly from the extension of Sauchiehall Street, were soon followed nearby by neo-classical developments generated around St George's Cross, the main junction of the new road layout: Southpark (below) celebrating the entry to New City Road with a grand pair of porticoes (though only one was built) and Queen's Crescent, part of a more introverted scheme related to Great Western Road.



Clarendon Place as illustrated on the feuing plan (by Alexander Taylor, 1839) of the lands of Southpark belonging to W. S. Nisbet Esq.



Top Left: Kirklee Terrace (Charles Wilson, begun 1845).

Top Right: Grosvenor Terrace (J. T. Rothead, 1855).

Bottom: Crown Circus (James Thomson, 1858).

Soon after the opening of Great Western Road, the owners of Kelvinside, by far the largest of the West End estates, commissioned a feuing plan (c. 1841) for their estate. The scheme, although it proposed a number of palatial terraces overlooking the thoroughfare, was mostly given to commodious villas, each detached in its own landscaped garden. In fact, this vision of an arcadian suburbia



came to naught – only the terraces were built (above). It was not until the 1870s, when the tide of building reached out this far from the city, that the development of Kelvinside gathered pace, this time not to one grand design but in separate parcels under a number of owners and to a variety of plans.



*Top: The Park development: Park Terrace, Park Quadrant and Park Circus (Charles Wilson, begun 1855).
Bottom: The University of Glasgow (George Gilbert Scott, begun 1866; the tower and spire completed by J. Oldrid Scot, 1887-91).*



Changes of plan were the norm in the development of the suburban estates, mostly because the landowners were initially too ambitious, aiming at the higher end of the market. Kelvinside apart, plans were soon revised to accommodate all levels of the bourgeoisie.

There was only one West End estate where the need for different kinds of housing for a wide spectrum of society was recognised from the outset. Dowanhill, contiguously south of Kelvinside and stretching down to Partick, was first prepared for feuing in 1853. Over the undulating uplands of the estate were disposed villas and terraces for the well-to-do. The summit of Dowanhill itself was crowned with a circuit of

grandly designed outward-looking terraces, providing a prominent advertisement for the new development. Below, on the plain stretching towards the emerging manufacturing base of Partick, a grid was laid down for the building of tenements, appropriate to the growing class of artisans. These features were carried into the construction of the estate, which proceeded slowly over the next 60 years or so.

These private developments lay outside the boundaries of the Municipality. It was east of the Kelvin and within the city limits that, in the 1850s, the Corporation made its own direct intervention in the development of the West End. The Corporation acquired the lands of Woodlands (which encompassed the brow of the hill), Kelvingrove and Kelvinbank together with small contiguous parts of other estates. A feuing plan was prepared



The West End of Glasgow in 1860 (Ordnance Survey).

which incorporated a large public park on the east bank of the Kelvin and, to help pay for it, housing of the most superior kind high up on the plateau of Woodlands Hill. The result is a relationship between terrace and landscape rivalled elsewhere in Britain only in Bath and Marylebone (page 113, top).

By the time of the first Ordnance Survey in the 1860s, most of the estates of the West End had made their initial moves into the competitive housing market. The survey (opposite) shows their fragmentary nature, holding little promise of a coherent urban structure for the expanding Glasgow. But in the later decades of the 19th century and the years leading to the First World War, two developments transformed this suburban scatter into a cohesive, well-served and densely populated adjunct to the city (below).



The West End of Glasgow, c. 1930 (Ordnance Survey).

The first was the establishment of cultural and social institutions in these western parts. Even before its residential development, Kelvinside had attracted a re-location to its pollution-free territory of what were two University-based concerns: the Botanic Gardens and the Observatory. It was, however, the move of the University itself from the High Street (where it gave way to a railway goods yard) to Gilmorehill, the prominent site overlooking Kelvingrove, that proved a decisive moment in the promotion of the West End to being something more than a collection of semi-rural off-shoots from the city (page 113, bottom). Work began on the buildings in 1867 and they were occupied in 1870. In a short time, the park and the buildings around the new University site were to constitute a centre for the leisure, education and culture of the region as a whole.

But even more significant in the transformation of the western estates was the second development. As the metropolis encroached upon these lands and as they became more accessible to a wider social range, the building of individual houses – as villas or in terraces – ceased on the estates nearer to the city. Then began that extensive construction of tenement buildings that was to gather together the separated settlements of the West End into a coherent urban complex.

Glasgow's population was rising almost exponentially throughout the 19th century. Through the 1830s, '40s and '50s there was a two-fold increase bringing the total population to around 400,000 by 1861. Between 1861 and the outbreak of the First World War, this figure doubled again. This pre-dominantly working-class population growth offered attractive opportunities for capital investment in the construction of new housing (for the skilled rather than the casual worker) on a modest scale and for rent. In spite of some extreme fluctuations in the construction industry, there was a massive investment in this market and the consequence was a dramatic transformation in the shape and culture of the city of Glasgow.

The bulk of this new housing was in the form of tenements



Great Western Road with (left) Lansdowne Church (J. Honeyman, 1862) and (right) St Mary's Episcopal Cathedral (George Gilbert Scott, 1871-74; spire by J. Oldrid Scott, 1893).

with, on each floor, three flats (or 'houses') of only one or two rooms (or 'apartments') accessed from a common street entrance and stair (or 'close'). The tenements could be of three-, four- or five storeys, though four was the norm. Tenement units were aggregated into rows, rows into blocks and blocks into districts. Since economics dictated an orthogonal subdivision of the available land, in the tenemental quarter, the grid re-appeared, but now on a new urban scale. Such tenemental quarters appeared all around the expanding city. They followed the outward movement of heavy industry to the peripheries and the opening of new docks and shipyards westwards along the Clyde. Tenement rows filled the interstices left in the suburban speculations of the West End and other similar ventures to the south and east of the city. Cliffs of tenements lined the major thoroughfares, their



Parkhead Cross (left, Burnet Boston & Carruthers, 1902; centre, Crawford & Veitch, 1905).

commanding monotony punctuated by the occasional public building (opposite, top) and, perhaps, at intersections by a distinctive Glasgow 'cross', where the tenements would be architecturally elaborated and raised up a further storey or two with skyline features like turrets, domes or spires (left).

By no means were all tenements of the meanest kind. Indeed the grander tenement was adopted in the later development of many of the middle-

class suburbs. Thus in the Woodlands area beyond Queen's Crescent, where most of the estate had remained vacant for two decades or so, building activity was renewed in the late 1860s. Over the next 30 years, the district was built-up with tenements on a plan of angled street-blocks generated about the axis of West Princes Street (opposite, top). In Dowanhill, even more up-market flatted housing on the slopes above Highburgh Road brought to conclusion the development which had been initiated in the 1850s, while in nearby Hyndland, a new middle-class tenemental settlement of similar quality was established after this area was connected (in 1886) to the city centre by suburban railway (opposite, bottom).

It was the tenement therefore, with its concentration of



*Top: Barrington Drive,
Woodlands.
Bottom: Hyndland Road.*

dwelling, its linear continuity, its intimate relation with the street and its adaptability to different norms and uses, that provided the connective tissue of the expanding city. Through the ubiquity of the tenement and with a population close to a million, Glasgow had become one of the most coherent and densely occupied of cities by the time of the First World War. It was *the* tenement city.



Tenement-building construction was, perhaps, too good or, rather, it was good enough to last well beyond the time when the accommodation and services it provided for the poorer classes could any longer be deemed acceptable (even as late as 1951, half



Public housing, Cranhill, built 1963-6; tower blocks refurbished and refaced 1990-91.

of Glasgow's housing stock was made up of one- or two-room flats, many without their own sanitation). Glasgow became closely identified with its congested, insanitary and decayed tenement housing, blackened by decades of pollution. Post-Second World War reconstruction was therefore targeted on the demolition of its poorer tenement areas and their rebuilding on wholly new, comprehensive lines, following ideas that had first been explored in continental Europe in the 1920s.

During the 1960s and 1970s the Corporation saw the solution to its housing problem generally in terms of high density developments of multi-storey, pre-fabricated building in theory (but rarely in practice) set in landscape and requiring the abolition of traditional urban structures based upon the street. Slabs and towers, ranging from eight to thirty-one storeys, appeared all around the city (above). But the reality did not often match the vision, not least because of inadequacies in construction. By the early 1970s the ill-effects (and high cost) of comprehensive redevelopment

were recognised and a halt was called to the programme. However, since demolition of tenement areas necessarily preceded redevelopment, this left the city with large areas of vacant land which, in the straightened economic circumstances of the later 20th century, were to remain derelict for decades.

In the regeneration of the city that began in the mid-1980s with the brilliantly successful 'Glasgow's Miles Better' campaign, nothing has been more significant than the revaluation of its architectural heritage and the rehabilitation of the tenement as an urban form and a way of life. In this change of direction, tenements have been repaired, modified and refurbished, enclosed backcourts landscaped and the street facades stone-cleaned as part of a city-wide campaign that progressively lifted the veil of industrial grime from the rich facades of Glasgow's great ensemble of Victorian buildings. The virtues of tenement housing have, moreover, been recognised in the ongoing rebuilding of the inner-city. In Gorbals-Hutchesontown, the first of Glasgow's post-war comprehensive development areas, the 1987 demolition of notorious deck-access blocks made way for the Crown Street



Crown Street Regeneration Project: Errol Gardens.



*Top: Crown Street Regeneration Project: Ballater Gardens.
Bottom: the Glasgow Science Centre.*



Regeneration Project, launched in 1990. Here has taken shape a restatement, albeit with a difference, of Glasgow's traditional urban character of street-bound housing in three- or four storeys; but in place of the old-style partitioned back-court the inner space of a block has a perimeter of small private gardens with a secure communal play area at the centre (above).

The Clyde, the conduit through which flowed much of the industrial wealth of

Glasgow, has scarcely figured in this brief account of the architecture of the city. For most of the last 200 years it has been a working river – a port, a shipyard, a highway, a supplier of water, a sewer – and rarely has it been dignified architecturally. The closing of the port and most of the shipyards during the second half of the 20th century created the most visible of Glasgow's stretches of dereliction but also, of course, the city's most magnificent opportunity to establish its image as a city with a dynamic future. Sadly, little of what was achieved before the turn of the century fulfilled this expectation. It has taken a Millennium Commission award for the creation of a National Science Centre (opposite, bottom) on the site formed from the part-infilling of Prince's Dock (where the Garden Festival was held in 1988) to raise hope that a regenerated Clyde may have a leading part in the continuing story of the architecture of the city.

NOTES

¹ Lord Esher *Conservation in Glasgow: A Preliminary Report* The Corporation of Glasgow 1971.

² Gomme A. & Walker D. *The Architecture of Glasgow* Lund Humphries, London 1968.

Photographs are by the author except for those on page 100 (Annan); page 113 (bottom), courtesy of Glasgow University Archives; and page 122 (courtesy of Glasgow Development Agency)

