City of Memories – City of Voids

Generative Mechanisms within Contemporary Glasgow City

Dr. Mahnaz Shah, SFHEA, FRHistS
Edinburgh School of Architecture and Landscape Architecture, University of Edinburgh
e-mail: mshah2@ed.ac.uk

Wols, *The City* 1950-51

It was the tenement, therefore with its concentration of dwelling, its linear continuity, its intimate relation with the street and its adaptability to different rooms and uses, that provided the connective tissue of the expanding city. And consequently it was to the great damage to the vitality of the city that it was the tenemental quarter that suffered the devastation of comprehensive redevelopment and inner-city highway planning in the 1950s and 1960s. What happened then was a twofold discontinuity, a twofold dislocation: one on the ground, as we move around the city: passing from place to place, and the other in time, in our experience of its history and our part in it.

Peter Reed, *The Tenement City* (2000)

Abstract

Glasgow never aspired to represent the "utopian city" based on an "urban ideal" - rather the visual qualities of the city reside solely in its architecture as it's embedded within a s eries of urban matrices. Its Victorian architectural underpinnings are attuned to an individual and subjective reading of the city by its architects over time - as expressed in the multitude of design vocabularies, materials and forms, to structurally formulate and present the identity of the city. Glasgow has over 1800 listed historical buildings. While there are a s ignificant number of historical buildings at risk, only 12% are under restoration in Glasgow.

The city is on the cusp of temporal urban fragmentation as it comes to terms with it's reflections, memories and voids.

This paper explores the notion of memory and void as a generative design mechanism that double negates the notion of a void and pr esents an alternate evolution of the city's identity and its future aspiration. Case studies include the analysis of 4 V ictorian architects whose buildings continue to resonate the city's memory and identity.

Introduction

It can be argued that the 21st century Glasgow's identity is based on an 'image of the city' rather than the city itself. There are multiple instances of the literal interpretations of the past - (Thomson's Buck's Head perched on top of the Building1862; alongside the phenomenal presence of an absence through the large gaping voids (in the guise of a glass sheet in place of the Honeyman's addition to the Western Club) and multiple urban disjunctions.
Salmon's huge Mercantile Chambers on Bothwell Street (1897) and the astonishing "Hatrack" at 142-144 St.Vincent Street (1899) with a façade less than 10 metres wide, reiterate the memory of the old Georgian houseplots that often determined the form of the building. In Caledonian Chambers (Miller 1901-3) on the other hand continues to reaffirm the urban infrastructure of the city as its inherent identity. The medieval Glasgow Cathedral and High Street with the Glasgow Royal Infirmary (Miller 1901-7) for all its purported demerits, singularly links the medieval Cathedral to the Victorian and contemporary City - laterally through the beaux arts profile of the Queen's Diamond Jubilee Block, overlooking the Cathedral Square.

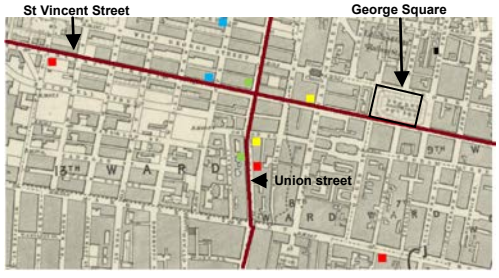

Fig.1 Map of Glasgow 1865

In every instance contemporary Glasgow retains and thereby generates it's image as a memory.

Memory's Images

Memory's images, once they are fixed in words, are erased. Perhaps I am afraid of losing … all at once, if I speak of it. Or perhaps … I have already lost it, little by little.

Italo Calvino Invisible Cities (1972)

Alexander Thomson (1817-1875) architectural contributions invite the viewer to look at the city in a critical way, to move away from conventional perceptions and instead embrace ideas that may initially seem remote and fantastical. The urban context is never ignored, rather it seems to evoke an incremental reading of architecture and the city, insofar as it has been perceived with the contemporary city in mind.

His architecture encourages an expanded discourses of the pre-conscious memories of the viewer - with no temporal restriction put in place. The architectural vocabulary is as much embedded within its immediate urban ambiance as it is within the perception of the city as it strives to invent its future direction.

Fig.2 Buck's Head Building as a generative urban scroll.

Thomson's Buck's Head building (1862) composition portrays a holistic discourse on the coeval urban realities and problems. It introduces an important context within the urban space: that of semiotics. There is a distinctive emphasis on the relationship between language, form and a multitude of interpretations and narratives. Thomson's building constantly animates and reinvents itself - at par with the ever evolving urban dictum, through the use of form as an idealized vision.

The Buck's head building includes a series of compositional narratives that support and devise alternate architectural readings of the building. At the outset the facade is a trabeated masonary composition that both accentuates and encloses the corner site within a single rhythmic overlay of glass and cast iron colonnettes that spread across the curved corner. The lower levels rise up to support a decorative wrought-iron balcony all placed in front of the stonework. Here the structure demands the viewer's attention through a number of disjunction - at the outset, there is immense sense of modernist sensibility with the; 'glazing now direct to the iron frame, and so on two storeys, we have a facade as nearly glass-fronted as possible. At least before the curtain-walling of the twentieth century was devised. The lightness of the frame is abruptly discontinued at the top level, the attic storey, here the iron stanchions are encased in thick, tapering square masonary columns, which in sharp contrast to the slender columns below tend to create a structural tension and divide the building into two horizontal frames of reference: the square columns as they reference the past identity of the site; and the glass-fronted facade as it transcends and animates the structural integrity of the building. This horizontal emphasis within the facade is further amplified by the treatment of the apex of the central facade, which is presented as a 'quadrant occupying three bays of the facade' [1]. The quadrant with its slight off-centre bearing provides an asymmetrical resonance that further accentuates the horizontal play of glass fronted planes, as they animate and attempt to support the upper levels.

The horizontal narrative of the facade as it continues on from the width of Argyle Street to the narrow confines of Dunlop Street creates an added dissonance. Here the design elements adopted are much more 'simplified to provide a vertical emphasis suitable for a narrow street'.[2]

Placed within the historic vicinity of Trongate and the Glasgow Cross, the Buck's Head building both replicated and articulated a series of a design narratives that contextualize the city's ancient streets. These ancient streets - Castle Street, High Street, Saltmarket and Briggate that ran across the length of the city, traced their irregular route from the cathedral down to the river. This historic

axis is intersected at Glasgow Cross by Gallowgate and Trongate. [3]
The Trongate-Argyle Street axis projected the city towards a westward expansion, by the '1840s mansions and townhouses surviving from the eighteenth century had been absorbed into the tight urban structure of the Merchant City'. The myriad of secondary roads and tight closes and wynds that surrounded the Glasgow Cross were also replaced by an 'urban block' configuration during the 1868 and 1877 improvements [4]. The Buck's Head Building typology provides an element of dispersed monumentality that the city at that point in time was experiencing. Here the 'memory in architecture' is as much a socio-cultural narrative, as it is a display of visual metaphors. The building assimilates the site's past identity quite literally at the top level with a large sculpture of a buck's head and attempts to reflect and refract the ongoing urban chasms through its lower levels.

In the Buck's Head Building Thomson attempts a generative 'urban scroll', the top alluding to the past and the lower level alluding to the present, while the central asymmetry of the levels contextualize the site's corner presence within a single cohesive plane. The Buck's Head building in its ability to enhance a void as it overshadows the solid, attempts to generates this new visual logic. Similarly, Thomson's Egyptian Halls (1870) replicates and shrouds itself in its own image. Having been vacant for 40 years and covered in scaffolding for well over a decade, it is considered one of Thomson's masterpieces, and named among Europe's most important, endangered buildings by the Europa Nostra, a pan-European heritage project.

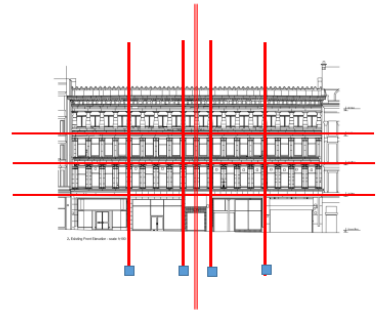

Fig. 3 Egyptian Hall Diagrammatic analysis of the placement of the cast-iron lamps placed in front pavement of the building as inherent coordinates for the building.

Its depleted state has now become a space where the viewer becomes a reader, who must enter, wander round, maybe lose his way in, and then eventually find an exit, or perhaps even several exits, or maybe a way of breaking out on his own [5] - while the physical construct of Egyptian Halls is transformed into a memory etched in words and devoid of its urban semblance.

Memory is Redundant

'*The city is redundant: it repeats itself so that something will stick in the mind*' and *Memory is redundant: it repeats signs so that the city can begin to exist*.' The association of these two different notions implies that the cognitive perception of the city can result from the redundancies of signals, behaviours and memory.

Fernandes and Silva, From Moore to Calvino: The invisible cities of 20th Century planning (2014)

John Honeyman (1931-1914) on the other hand presents an urban discourse where architecture is streamlined within its urban bearing. His architectural compositions are based on

agglomeration of urban mechanisms and infrastructures.

Fig. 4 The F & J Smith Warehouse (Ca'd'Oro Building), Union Street/Gordon Street 2022

Placed at the junction of Union Street and Gordon Street, Honeyman's design for the F & J Smith Furniture warehouse (1872) is situated in close proximity to the iconic commercial warehouse of its time, Alexander Thomson's Egyptian Halls (1870). Presumably inspired by the Palazzo Santa Sofia (1428-1430) or the Ca 'd'Oro on the Grande Canal, Venice, the warehouse was built using triple-arched cast iron frames with masonry arches above the ground level. The warehouse was designed with a tall ground floor of big arches in solid masonry and cast-iron and glass façades to the three floors above, each bay being triple arched on slim shafts rising through the first and second floors to circular third floor windows in the panel above them. While the composition is emblematic of a Venetian Gothic palace, the ground floor detail is High Renaissance/Mannerist.[6]

The Ca'd'oro building by virtue of its placement at a junction, triggers a promenade, where recollection and the memory of past events create maps of relationships and spaces through which to wander. The building with its large glass panels dematerializes into a tracery of its silhouette and constantly transform the viewer's perception by real and imagined events. Strolling across this junction instils nostalgia for an urban narrative that is redundant. The building thereby takes on the role of a reference point for collective history. The significance of Honeyman's architectural intervention and the need for its continued retention as an urban reference point is best articulated by the French anthropologist; Marc Augé (b.1935), who argues that:

…never before has individual histories been so explicitly affected by collective history, but never before, either have the reference points for collective identification been so unstable. The individual production of meaning is thus more necessary than ever.

Hypothetically the Ca d'oro building is already in an ambivalent and precarious state, as Honeyman architectural vocabulary was conspicuously and as a matter of norm, linked to its immediate context - in this case Thomson's Egyptian Halls. The presence of an absence of the Egyptian Halls, presents a violent stitch in the urban identity of the place, and inserts a discord within the design narrative. The city in this instance is incapable to narrate 'its past, but contains it like the lines of a hand, written in the corners of the streets, the gratings of the windows, the banisters of the steps' [7]. While the Ca d'oro attempts to simulate an urban ambiance, its proximity to the motionless preserved image in the guise of Egyptian Halls, divides the urban narrative between the organic evolution of the site and the misplaced and redundant memories. In similar manner the now demolished Honeyman's Wing (1871-74) site on St

Vincent Street presents a semiotic fissure. Here all traces of the addition to Hamilton's Western Club are eradicated and in place a glass structure is inserted, which comes close to the definition of a '*non-place*, I.e., a space that cannot be defined in terms of identity, relationships and history.'[8]

Fig. 5 (a) Honeyman's Wing. (b) Glass structure in place of Honeyman's extension of Hamilton's Western Club.

Divided between nostalgia and contemporary urban needs, the above site disconnects and breaks away from the continuity accorded to it by Honeyman's addition Hamilton's Western Club.

James Salmon Jr (1873-1924) architectural compositions explore geometry and fragmented forms in a division of planes that reveal the aesthetic influence of cubism and futurism. His architectural compositions emphasize the cognitive perception of the urban space. St Vincent Chambers or the 'Hatrack', St Vincent Street (1898-99) presented a dynamic sculptured form, that was set on a nar row and r estricted site.

Here Salmon's expertise in modelling from his Art School days, is equally relevant as his architectural finesse. Salmon partnership with the sculptor Francis Derwent Wood (1871-1926) expressed a unique amalgamation of form as it contoured into an or nament or vice versa.

Fig. 6 Salmon's drawing of the Hatrack Building displayed at the annual exhibition of the Royal Glasgow Institute of the Fine Arts in 1900. The Hatrack + Detail August 2020

The façade was conceived in two stages, the original Dean of the Guild drawing, shows a gabl ed façade with two bay windows. The redesign of the top as an interesting semi-octagon or hexagon was a brilliant after thought.[9]
To achieve the maximum amount of glazed area to the street, the building included a c antilevered steel frame construction, this transferred the loads from the façade and t he floors to the H-section columns based entirely within the building. This paved the way for the elevation to be devoid of all structural weight, which allowed the 'stonework to

be whittled to the minimum, thereby permitting the glazing to be held within a thin skeletal stone frame'. [10]
There is no di stinction nor divide between where the building begins and the ornament formulates. Both the form and the sculptural and ogee pedi ments reduce as the building soars above to its full height. The upper most level is enshrined in a s pliced semi-octagonal tower with rhythmic concave and convex planes leading upto the solid void dichotomy in the shape of the attic windows - the pinnacle is almost reminiscent of a lighthouse typology.
The rhythmic treatment of the façade is further accentuated with concentrated rings of the wrought iron work and stairway and rooftop railings, and instils a sense of dynamic and w eightlessness, again reminiscent of a l ighthouse tower above the sea.
While the Hatrack animates it's sculptural bearing, Salmon's Lion Chambers (1904) - despite its depleted condition, constantly ensures that the site is animated and the viewer revolves around the constricted plot. Designed for a Glasgow lawyer and politician, William George Black (1857-1932), the Lion Chambers brief included a bl ock of offices for an exceptionally narrow corner site at the junction of Hope Street and Bath Lane.


Fig. 7 Lion Chambers 2022

The building was envisioned quite literally as a study of cubist forms, Salmon extensive time at the Glasgow School of Art and v isits to the central European cities, proved an i ncentive to initially integrate materials and forms within a s ingle architectural vocabulary, and laterally; deconstruct the complexity of the form into its bare minimal geometric essence. The Lion Chambers comes under the second mode of study.
The project was developed in reinforced concrete and t ook approximately three years to be ex ecuted. Salmon and Gillespie worked in collaboration with Louis Gustave Mouchel (1852-1908) founder of Mouchel, one of the country's largest engineering consultancies, to design the structural system, and appointing the Hennibique Contracting Company of Leeds to execute the construction work.[11]
The building was developed with all load bearing columns and beam s, allowing the walls to be f ree of all load bearing responsibility externally and internally. The outside walls and i nside floor slabs are 4inch (about 100mm) thick. Which means there was no space for insulation installation. The load capacity of the building is entirely reliant on 21 columns, beams and floor slabs.
The resultant building rises up to 90 feet, or 100 feet, if the basement is taken into consideration. Built around a structure of 21 columns, each one starting 13 inches square, tapering to eight inches at their summit. Again creating a bal ancing act internally, through geometrical composition. The loads from the cantilevered floors are transferred via this column arrangement to a r aft foundation at basement level and stabilizes the structure across the whole site.

Interestingly the external form at the street level deviates from the minimalistic context above and includes 'roll mouldings at the windows, borrowed from 'The Hatrack' and a group of mock corbels at the fifth floor level'[12]. The function of these mock corbels is decorative and visual dissonance purpose only, as they do not support the overhanging floor. Salmon emphasizes their lack of function through the elaborate carvings of the corbels - an effect which Venturi would have referred to as a 'perspective by incongruity'[13] here Salmon not only changes its meaning but also introduces an alternate semiotic discourse on its validity as an established architectural design element. The mock corbel than becomes part of the cubist forms hovering over the elevation, superimposing within the phenomenal transparencies of the site and the architects perception and memories - with the building dematerialized into a single paper thin dimension, that concurrently accentuates its soaring height.
This sense of dematerialized form is further pronounced on the north elevation, which takes on the guise of a glass façade, due to the use of elaborate glass grid of windows. Its functional significance lies in the ability to instantly flood the internal confines of the building with daylight, and aesthetically reinvents the formal composition of the structure from solids to a series of shapes afloat within the voids accentuated.

Both buildings project generative urban mechanisms; the Harrack laterally across St Vincent Street, and Lion Chambers in concentric circles.

Salmon's buildings introduce a new discourse on the image of the city as a preconscious reflection.

The image of the city in James Miller (1860-1947) architectural discourse comes closer to the early twentieth century design sensibility associated with the Suprematists. His buildings do not reproduce objective elements of reality as accurately as possible but rather present an implied depiction of grandeur and form - the Union Bank (1924) presides empirically on St Vincent Street with an effigy of a side elevation.
The Union Bank was designed as a monumental public structure and an efficient office building, in line with the wishes of its client. Modernist vocabulary was interspersed within Classical design dictum to develop a structure that would highlight its regional stature and inherent presence within the city.

Fig.8 Union Bank. (a) Renfield St to Union St. (b) St Vincent St to Blythswood Square. (c) St Vincent St leading to George Square.

Situated on the junction of St Vincent Street and Renfield Street, the principal form of the building is best understood as a breakdown of design elements, part-to-part and inside-to-outside context that allows it to establish a complex interchange with past architectural vocabularies and future design heritage.
Miller re-conceived architecture as a diagrammatic interpretation of the urban fabric, it acts as a central nodal corridor and links two principal arteries of the

cities: St Vincent Street as it projects its bearing through Thomson's St Vincent Street Church and cuts across the urban milieu to culminate at George Square, and; Renfield Street, as a single continuum between Jamaica and Union Streets as they merge and culminate into Renfield Street.

The building's typology, its Modernist Classical style constructs a link between Thomson's St Vincent Street Church, and the quasi Modernist neo-Baroque architectural philosophy of George Square. Miller's Union Bank also directly contextualizes and enhances the link between his earlier 1903 building at the corner of George Square and Queen Street - The Olympia House. Miller here constructs a series of geometric figures that form a type of subtle, abstract, airy and weightless city. His building contemplates with fascination, its own absence.

Fig. 9 Caledonian Chambers, Union Street to Jamaica Street

The Caledonian Chambers is an alternate example of Miller's work ethics and systematic methodology of determining a design solution that presented an architecture with a strong urban confluence: almost acting as an urban fabric with the building's base used as a warp, and its vertical treatment a weft, his building incorporated modernist design sensibility within the city's urban consciousness. Situated in the commercial heart of Glasgow's Union Street, the Caledonian Chambers asserts its presence through its dramatic jump of scale, enveloping an expansive block: the building incorporates a pedestrian entrance to Central Station, [which Miller was then remodelling] and inserted a modernist mega-structure within a group of iconic late Victorian assemblage - without in effect disrupting the street's urban consonance.

Miller's buildings resemble an infrastructure of engineered spaces, irrespective of the scale or the client in question, his design vocabulary was oriented towards an alternate reading of an architecture as monument. In the design of a monument it is often the case that the number of architectural elements at play is fewer than in a building, thus requiring the formal devices in play to be all the more precisely tuned [14].
His buildings act as vectors with porous boundaries that direct and formulate new contexts and relationships as the city continues to evolve. The multiple contexts embedded within each and every single one of his architectural projects provides a generative mechanism of the said building as an inherent part of the city's topology and identity.

He thereby constructs a series of geometric figures that form a type of subtle, abstract, airy and weightless city. His building contemplates with fascination, its own absence.

Conclusion

Glasgow is a city of dissonance, it's strength lies in its ability to constantly intervene and invent its identity and incorporate new structures, materials and design sensibilities. The architecture of the city is based on individualism; on subjective design sensibilities, expressed in abstract forms and the use of innovative new building technologies and materials. The juxtaposition of design vocabularies over the centuries, forms part of the city's aspirations of harmony with its topography and history, between improvisation and premeditation, between beauty and the mundane, between built and the void.

Sartre (1905-1980) said of Wolfgang Schulze(1913-1951), the artist known as Wols, that he tried to "see the Earth with inhuman eyes". *The City*, blurred and drawn randomly and impulsively, in a frenzied manner, is painted with a mixture of techniques. Wols's tangled city seems light and a passing semblance of itself. Devoid of growth, it seems to have a life of its own, as if it continues to consume itself.

It is a reflection of what Glasgow has become.

Contemporary Glasgow speaks in voids and depleted structures, it makes no sense to divide the City into the past and present, but rather into a generative urban mechanism, that through the years and morphologies continues to give it form to desire, and that in which this desire either erases the city or is erased by it. [15]

References

[1] Gomme and Walker (1987) *The Architecture of Glasgow* London: Lund Humphries in association with John Smith & Son p.146
[2] Stamp, G. (2000) *Alexander "Greek" Thomson: The unknown genius* Laurence King Publishing p.104
[3] Reed, P. (1999) 'The Victorian Suburb' in *Glasgow: The forming of the city.* Edinburgh : Edinburgh University Press, p.57
[4] Mckean, C. (1989) *Central Glasgow: an illustrated architectural guide* Eds. Charles McKean, David Walker, Frank Walker. [Edinburgh]: Mainstream Publications: Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland, 1989. p.98
[5] Barthes, R. 'Urban Semiotics', in *Rethinking architecture: a reader in cultural theory* / edited by Neil Leach. New York: Routledge, 1997 p.412
[6] Prof David Walker's correspondence with author dated: 1 July 2020.
[7] Calvino op cit.
[8] Augé, M. (1992*) Non-lieux: introduction à une anthropologie de la surmodernité* / Marc Augé. Paris: Seuil,
[9] Prof David Walker correspondence with author dated 12, July 2020
[10] O'Donnell, R. (2003) *The life and work of James Salmon, architect*, Glasgow: Rutland Press, p.75
[11] O'Donnell op cit. p. 113
[12] O'Donnell op cit. p.115
[13] Venturi, R. (1981) *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture,* Museum of Modern Art New York, 1981 reprint, p.41 as quoted n O'Donnell p.115
[14]I borrow this concept from William O'Brien Jr, 'The Chemistry of Imperfect Crystals' in Stan Allen (2017) *Stan Allen : Four Projects* San Francisco : Applied Research and Design Publishing, p. 29
[15] I recontextualize and rephrase Calvino's narrative on Zenobia, from the Invisible Cities.