

Scottish Architects: Alexander 'Greek' Thomson

Alexander Thomson was the greatest architect of Victorian Glasgow and perhaps the greatest mind in Scottish architecture. He was called 'Greek' Thomson to distinguish him from several other Thomsons and because he believed that the architecture of the Ancient Greeks could be the basis of a truly modern architecture. Yet Thomson never visited Greece; in fact he never crossed the English Channel and seldom left Glasgow. He was born in Balfron in 1817 and died in 1875 at his home in Moray Place, Glasgow the terrace he had designed, having done more than any other architect to create the distinctive character of the 'Second City of the British Empire'.

Thomson was not a Greek Revivalist; he did not just copy the architecture of the past and criticised those who did—"they failed to master their style, and so became its slaves." In contrast, Thomson used Greek as a living language to speak to his own time, and was happy to incorporate new inventions like plate glass and cast-iron. He designed all the buildings the expanded city needed: commercial, warehouses, tenements, terraces of houses and villas, as well as urban monuments; those extraordinary "Temples of Solomon" for the United Presbyterian Church.

There was also a mystical side to Thomson; a devout Christian, he was interested in philosophical ideas and in the "eternal laws" which governed architecture, and was influenced by images of Old Testament catastrophes by the painter John Martin.

Thomson's early buildings were not Greek. At first in his villas, he played with various styles: the Italian Romanesque, the Scottish Baronial and even the Gothic. Later, he fervently argued the superiority of the Greek ideal over the Medievalism fashionable in England. Sadly, Thomson was never given the big public commission his genius demanded while far too many of his hauntingly strange and original buildings have been destroyed-making those that survive all the more precious.

Below is provided a summary description of Thomson properties in and around Glasgow. Images of some of these properties can be found at www.catswhiskerstours.com (postings dated November 8th through to 10th 2007 inclusive).

City Centre

The St Vincent Street Church: 1857-59

(Corner of St. Vincent Street and Pitt Street.)

The only surviving intact church by Thomson which is raised up on its own man-made Acropolis on the steeply sloping site. The Ionic porticoes raised up are purely symbolic, while the tall steeple, as it rises, goes way beyond the Greek to the Indian for inspiration. Inside, there are cast-iron columns with extraordinary capitals and windows in which huge sheets of rolled glass are rammed straight into the masonry.

Grecian Buildings: 1867-68

(336-356 Sauchiehall Street/Scott Street)

Now the centre for Contemporary Arts (CCA) but originally a commercial warehouse. The Greeks did not design warehouses, so Thomson had to develop a new building type in his distinctive language. Unusually for the time, a London journal noticed here how “Grecian architecture has been showing new forms in the old spirit.”

West Nile Street Warehouse: 1858

(99-107 West Nile Street)

A small commercial building in an abstracted Greek style in which the top floor colonnade of simple square piers shows the profound influence on Thomson of the work of the great Berlin architect, Schinkel.

The Gordon Street Warehouse: 1858-59

(68-80 Gordon Street, opposite Central Station)

Later called the Grosvenor Building and spoiled by a massive superstructure placed atop in the Edwardian period, this warehouse was a speculation on the site that Thomson and his brother George bought from the congregation that moved to the St. Vincent Street Church. The façade is full of subtleties and distinctive ornament, the first floor windows are placed in front of the tall square columns that support Thomson’s attic storey and that it is difficult to decide what is the real wall surface.

Egyptian Halls: 1870-72

(84-100 Union Street)

The most extraordinary building was not so much a warehouse as a bazaar or shopping centre with an exhibition gallery, named after the Egyptian Hall in Piccadilly, London. The whole interior was constructed of iron, but the façade is of stone, and was designed in a series of rich horizontal layers building up to a strange, exotic colonnade which runs entirely independently of the windows behind. Sailing over all is a majestic cornice, commanding and truly original.

Bucks Head Building: 1863

(59-61 Argyle Street & Dunlop Street)

The only commercial building by Thomson in which the iron construction is expressed externally, for in front of the masonry piers on the curved corner is an attenuated iron colonnade with exquisite capitals supporting an ornamental balcony.

Watson Street Warehouse: 1876

(17-23 Watson Street, near Glasgow Cross)

One of two warehouses built posthumously as part of Glasgow's City Improvement Scheme, whose facades followed a simple, elegant and logical design of uprights and horizontals with just a little Greek ornament.

Beattie Monument: 1867

(The Necropolis, behind Cathedral Square)

Thomson designed several monuments in this finest of 19th. century cemeteries; two are to ministers of the St. Vincent Street Church. That to George Middleton is an obelisk; that to the builder of the church, the Revd. A.O. Beattie, is an extraordinary thing with a pylon topped with a beautiful urn rising from a base of cyclopean masonry.

West End**Eton Terrace: 1862-64**

(41-53 Oakfield Avenue/Great George Street)

A terrace of houses with the ends made prominent with pedimented temple-fronts and with much use of Thomson's favourite square columns. Rhythms are set up by the games played with wall planes and window surrounds, while each pair of porches is treated as miniature temple.

Lilybank House: 1864

(40 Bute Gardens)

Thomson added a sensitive addition to an older villa here in his characteristic style.

Northpark Terrace: 1863-65

(35-51 Hamilton Drive)

One of Thomson's austere designs: a long infill terrace of retained and repetitive rectilinear elegance.

The Sixty Steps: 1872

(Kelvinside Terrace West & Queen Margaret's Place)

A monumental flight of steps connecting with a now-demolished bridge across the River Kelvin. Here as elsewhere, Thomson shows himself a master of the sublime, giving the massive retaining walls added drama with a few bold details.

Great Western Terrace: 1867-77

(Great Western Road)

Glasgow's grandest terrace and a most unusual composition in which the taller houses are placed neither at the ends nor in the middle. The design is very severe, relying on repetition and careful proportions; Thomson's friend and first biographer, the architect Thomas Gildard wrote how: "*The windows have no dressings but Greek goddesses could afford to appear undressed.*"

Westbourne Terrace: 1870-81

(21-39 Hyndland Road)

Thomson's last important terrace, in which he incorporated the canted bay window into a monumental design of dominant horizontality. The composition, in fact, is subtly asymmetrical, and it is instructive to study how this is resolved in the overall symmetry.

South Side**The Caledonia Road Church: 1856-57**

(Cathcart Road & Hospital Street)

Thomson's first church and now a forlorn ruin on the edge of the Gorbals having been burned out by vandals in 1965. What is left retains dignity and distinction, with an elevated portico and a most unusual tower, probably inspired by modern, German architecture.

Walmer Crescent: 1857-62

(Paisley Road West, above Cessnock subway station)

One of Thomson's few surviving tenements and an austere composition with no ornament but relying on the balance of upright square columns and horizontal lines.

The Knowe: 1852

(301 Albert Drive, Pollockshields)

An early villa in Thomson's round-arched Italianate style, composed around a belvedere. Like most of his villas, it is asymmetrical as demanded by the principles of the Picturesque, and its design reflects the influence of the publications by the Scottish writer and designer, John Claudius Loudon.

Castlehill: 1872

(202 Nithsdale Road, Pollockshields)

A fine but typical Thomson villa with its asymmetrical elevation, low-pitched roofs and wide eaves, and the use of his characteristic abstracted Grecian style.

Ellisland: 1871

(200 Nithsdale Road, Pollockshields)

This unusual villa is a sort of Egyptian bungalow and a unique design by Thomson in that it is precisely symmetrical, with its central front door framed by exotic columns,

Moray Place: 1859-61

(1-10 Moray Place, Strathbungo)

A terrace of ten small houses, yet the composition has an astonishing monumentality. Repetition and unity is everything: all the ground floor windows and doors are evenly spaced and exactly the same size, while an unbroken run of 52 square columns on the first floor links the two projecting end houses. For the American historian, Henry-Russell Hitchcock, this was simply “the finest of all Grecian terraces.” Thomson himself lived and died in No 1 Moray Place: perhaps this terrace shows what he meant when he said that

“... all who have studied works of art must have been struck by the mysterious power of the horizontal element in carrying the mind away into space, and into speculations upon infinity..”

The long blocks of tenements across the railway in Darnley Street and around the corner in Nithsdale Road were also designed by Thomson, shortly before he died.

Millbrae Crescent: 1876-77

(2-38 Millbrae Crescent, Langside)

This was one of several jobs completed after Thomson’s death by his last partner, Robert Turnbull, but its flair and elegance in combining the style of rustic villas with the sublime urbanity of the terrace suggest that it was designed by the master.

Double Villa: 1856-57

(25-25A Mansionhouse Road, Langside)

This looks like a single villa but is, in fact, two-the cleverest design for semi-detached houses ever built. Instead of the usual butterfly symmetry in a pair of semis. Thomson took one house plan and rotated it through 180 degrees, so that the resulting building has two identical asymmetrical elevations, each both back and front, with one facing east and the other west.

Also unusual, and typical of Thomson, is the way the windows are made entirely separate from the columns in the projecting bays.

Holmwood House: 1857-58

(61-63 Netherlee Road, near cemetery gates)

Thomson's finest and most elaborate villa, built for the owner of the paper mill beside the White Water of Cart in the valley below, and saved by the National Trust for Scotland in 1994. Thomas Gildard wrote that: "If architecture be poetry in stone-and-lime- a great temple, an epic-this exquisite little gem, at once classic and picturesque, is as complete, self-contained, and polished as a sonnet." And, in fact, Thomson seems to have been the first modern architect to make houses in the Greek style asymmetrically, according to Picturesque principles. A remarkable feature here is the wall that connects the main house with the coach house, a feature reminiscent of the houses of Edwin Lutyens and Frank Lloyd Wright of some forty years later. Indeed, there is something very American about Thomson's villas with their wide eaves and strong horizontal emphasis. Thomson designed everything in this house including the rich polychromatic wall decoration which is now being uncovered.

McIntyre Monument: 1867

(Cathcart Old Churchyard, Kilmailing Road)

A monument commissioned by Thomson's friend, the builder John McIntyre for his son's grave and a powerful composition with a sarcophagus on a base of cyclopean masonry.

Thomson's early death at 57 was much lamented in Glasgow. A fund was established in his memory and used to endow the Alexander Thomson Travelling Studentship-the second winner was Charles Rennie Mackintosh. The trustees also presented a marble bust of the architect, carved by his friend John Mossman, to the city; this can now be seen in the Kelvingrove Art Gallery, along with the extraordinary mahogany sideboard Thomson designed for his home in Moray Place.

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