

Glasgow tenement housing, some of which narrowly escaped demolition and proved flexible enough to be upgraded and improved.



Ingrid Petit Glasgow



DAVID GRANT

As I start thinking about this article, it feels luxurious to have the opportunity to revisit places – if only mentally – after months of lockdown with life barely venturing beyond my kitchen, living room and bedroom. Meanwhile, as bustling London, the Haussmannian streets of Paris, the exoticism of Kyoto, and the French island where I spent my childhood summers drift in and out of memory, despite not having lived there for almost a decade it is Glasgow that keeps coming back to my mind.

Arriving there for my Erasmus year – a choice mainly based on the Mackintosh School of Architecture – I wasn't entirely sure what to expect from this city. However, it didn't take me long to feel at home. I keep very fond memories of my first weeks there and the countless times I found myself lost in the city's gridded layout. People would stop to help me find my way and I was astounded by the generosity and warmth which contrasted with the cold descriptions I had heard characterising the city as industrial or as Edinburgh's ugly sibling.

Glasgow was also a surprise topographically. As I looked up Scott Street and its steep hill leading to the school over Garnethill, I realised how little I had been accustomed to such variations in landscape. Nonetheless, I developed an ability to walk up and down in all weathers even through the icy winters – especially if it led to earning a drink at Nice N Sleazy down the hill. Being able to gain a vantage point over

the city also serves as a good reminder of the surrounding landscape and the city's proximity to the countryside. The Necropolis is one of my favourite walks – for myself an odd substitution to Paris's Père Lachaise – and provides a wonderful view on to the district of Mansera and the infamous Duke Street.

Throughout the year, it also became apparent how pronounced the seasons are and how the city and its habits radically change and adapt in response. On one side, there are the cold dark winter days with barely any daylight, where pubs with an open fire become the most popular places. On the other side, the long summer days create the opportunity for joyful street parties and endless drinks in the park. These contrasting conditions also bring to life the otherwise repetitive street elevations with subtle variations of light and shadow, which I enjoyed contemplating from my flat's window seat, developing a slight obsession with the light and the colour of the sky.

It's on the same window seat that I started researching the architecture and layout of Glasgow's tenements. Living in one, I was intrigued by the compact layout balanced with the high ceilings and the ingenuity of combining different uses with nooks for bedsits or seating in the kitchen.

As I researched the tenements, I read about the Bruce Report, published in 1945, which proposed an intensive programme

of regeneration with significant demolitions to rebuild a healthier and beautiful city. Thankfully, not all its recommendations were put into practice or Glasgow could have become a very different city. One of the proposals – almost implemented in its entirety – was to demolish the run-down tenement housing, relocating communities to the outskirts of the city where life was allegedly healthier.

Locations for these planned demolitions included Duke Street, but resident John Butterly decided to rally others in the community to save their buildings. He believed that the tenements weren't at the end of their life and that their layouts and structures were flexible enough to be renovated with modern conveniences added. This led to the creation of one of the first resident-run associations, which purchased and renovated the properties, saving over 1,000 homes along Duke Street.

In the context of the climate emergency, particularly with the COP26 conference recently hosted by Glasgow, I find this story inspiring, especially returning to Duke Street not long ago and seeing all the new shops and cafes that have flourished along the road. Perhaps, we could all learn from this "wee man with a bee in his bonnet" and critically assess whether demolition is necessary or if buildings can be upgraded and improved to suit present circumstances.

Ingrid Petit is an associate at Feilden Fowles