

## In Conversation with...Audrey Gardner

Interviewed at her home, by Professor Robin Webster on 4<sup>th</sup>  
September 2017



**Robin Webster:** Can you tell us a little bit about your background and how did you come involved with looking after architecture?

**Audrey Gardner:** Well, it was the art scene, of course. We were students at the School of Art, and it was the fine art area to begin with. And then gradually through people we knew in the architecture scene it was a case of "we're starting a society for conservation, would you be willing to join it?" So that's what we did. And we've been there ever since.

**RW:** And when did you get involved in looking at the planning applications?

**AG:** That was when Glasgow opened a branch of the Edinburgh group, the Architectural Heritage Society, which was initially Edinburgh. And then a branch was opened in Glasgow and that was when Jim Macauley was involved, and he invited us to become part of the cases panel.

**RW:** Right. So that was quite some time ago.

**AG:** Oh, yes, very much. I can't remember exactly whether it was the end of the '50s or beginning of the '60s, but it was that kind of time. And it began with the Strathclyde University because that was the source of the beginning of the society, again for heritage preservation and building preservation, which was a new idea then.

**RW:** What would you consider the most significant events related to the built environment in Glasgow for the last fifty years?

**AG:** I think it's been the recognition that a lot of the buildings are worth keeping. And I think it's become an awareness process which has been contributed to by various events like festivals, and I think the media has contributed quite considerably to publicising just what is there and how to look at it and how to think about it.

**RW:** Which buildings are you most proud of perhaps saving or being able to stop being demolished?

**AG:** I think it was the Merchant City. That was the oldest bit of Glasgow and the general approach was "we don't need that anymore." And it was then realised that these old buildings had a history and an integrity, and a quality in fact that should be preserved. And again it was a growing awareness and a growing appreciation which began almost... you could hardly define exactly how it began but it was a growing interest. And people established it and the conservation area started societies, and that I think kept it going in the right direction.

**RW:** You've been looking at planning applications for the last fifty years or more.

**AG:** Well, exactly, and to begin with the idea of conservation was hardly understood that it was important. Okay, buildings are old, you just get rid of them, and the new stuff is more important. And the general perception is that new is better. So exactly how the perception began to change its value, change its opinion, is very subtle, it's very difficult to say exactly where it began and what promoted it, but I'm very glad that it did happen.

**RW:** Possibly some of the new buildings weren't quite as good as they were cracked up to be.

**AG:** Well, again, it's a value judgement. To begin with everything old was just automatically derelict and disposable. And then I think what began to happen was so much disappeared that people said "where's it gone? Why has it gone? We're missing it. We think it had a value which we didn't understand until it had gone."

**RW:** Is there any particular building or planning application that sticks in your mind as being particularly memorable?

**AG:** I think it's mainly the oldest part of Glasgow, Merchant City, and it was there that the idea of antique quality began to be understood. And it was architects who, again, realised that a lot of the quality of modern design was in fact evolving from the old design. To begin with that was hardly understood, and then it was recognised that if you don't have that what are you going to use as your standards? And what are you going to build on as you create new ideas?

**RW:** I'd like to press you, if you could think of a particular single building that you saved or an application perhaps where you were not successful.

**AG:** Again, we were doing mostly architecture of course through the Architectural Heritage Society, which was looking at planning applications which were just lists, and you had to acquaint yourself of just what was going on. But as far as my own experience goes, I tend to look at the buildings I've experienced personally, rather than just buildings that are featured in the diagrams or plans or picture, so I tend to think of the West End as my core area, and the buildings that I am particularly interested in. Also the Southside, for a while I lived there, so I had mental pictures of certain features of Glasgow which were built on the Battlefield Rest or the Victoria Infirmary, and then from there it was to the West End, and here of course we have our tenements and our churches and our public buildings which, again, have established a quality and an image which has become the style, the Glasgow style, which was only recognised once it was actually used as a topic and spoken about and identified. And then it began to gather strength and became recognised as something of importance.

**RW:** Yes, thank you. Who do you think have been the most important folk who have had an impact on Glasgow in your lifetime? It could be positive or negative.

**AG:** I suppose one of the most significant experiences was being a student at the School of Art because that building encompasses almost everything which has identity, which is local and universal. And, again, to be in that building, to be experiencing it, that began to reveal exactly what a building is all about. And again when you're in it a lot of times you see things you didn't see years later that were significant, and again you build a picture of value and value judgement from the best. And I think that's a good place to start.

**RW:** You know Frank Walker.

**AG:** Yes, we knew Frank Walker because this is when we were invited to join a new society which again was in response to the loss of the heritage, and we were asked if we would be interested in helping to form a conservation society. So of course we were delighted to take our experience into the environment, as such as it was becoming recognised, and we joined the society. And then of course we got involved in the much greater detail, the sort of behind the scenes. We had always looked at buildings but began to

understand their origins, their sources, how they were used, and how they contributed to the environment in the way they worked with people.

**RW:** And Dr James McCauley, you knew him too.

**AG:** Well, it was James who actually was instrumental in involving us. We knew James from other connections and he said that he was starting a conservation society called the Architectural Heritage Society, which was an Edinburgh organisation to begin with, and he was going to open a branch in Strathclyde University, was where it was all beginning. So we went along there for a regular meeting every week to discuss what was happening with conservation and its ruling. Because at this time it was generally an idea that you had to protect it because too much of it was being swept away from the great new, brave new world. And it was because of the rate of clearance and the perceptions that old was to be disposed of and new was better, these perceptions were taking over in too sweeping a strong way. And I think that was what sparked the resistance and the consciousness of what was going shouldn't be going.

**RW:** Yes. What would you hope for in Glasgow nowadays?

**AG:** There has been a change of heart when it comes to preserving old architecture, but what I would like to see happen is the idea of a connection, that the buildings are not just isolated. I would like to see, for example, some kind of link-up. What comes to mind is the new building, the Transport one, and across the river of course you have the Govan Old Parish Church. Now, we did do a ferry across, and I thought there's a very valuable link between the old and the new here, how could it be incorporated into some kind of action? It's all very well having buildings on lists and photographs and reference areas, but if it could be involved in some kind of community involvement directly with the background and then to see it happening, the new and the old, which do have an interactive connection even if it's just crossing the river from one area to another, there is a link or could be a link. And this is what I'd like to see.

**RW:** I believe a pedestrian bridge is planned now.

**AG:** Is there? Now, that's interesting. And what prompted that?

**RW:** I think that Govan is seen as... although it's a very old part of the city, in fact it was a completely different part of the city originally, but I think it has been isolated actually and they want to make it link to the Transport Museum.

**AG:** Yes. Govan has a very strange community perception. I taught for a while in Govan and there was a feeling amongst the children of "this is our place, this is Govan, and we know all about Govan, we know its history, we know its connection with the shipping." And they just enjoyed being part of Govan. Which was quite striking because I hadn't come across anything quite like that before.

**RW:** A lot of Govan has been swept away, actually.

**AG:** It has, unfortunately, but there's a core element which is still surviving, and you still feel that old Govan is still there, which is something.

**RW:** Izzy Metstein said that he felt that Glasgow was dying the death of a thousand cuts, citing the number of small losses in the city rather than the big ones. Do you think he was right? Is this still the case?

**AG:** Well, I do. When you walk along a street if there's too many gaps it loses its sense of identity. And this is something that happens in a slow way, and it's only when it's gone

too far that people recognise that that should not have happened. And hopefully that protects other areas from having the same problem.

**RW:** Thinking about Glasgow, where would you think is a good example of that? Sauchiehall Street, perhaps, or...?

**AG:** Yes, the town centre has again lost buildings and made mistakes which have actually been identified as mistakes so that less is happening now in terms of random clearance. Comprehensive development was a disaster. And I think to survive that was very important. And to think that we might have lost with the Bruce Plan, the Art School, the City Chambers, I mean, where does that kind of thinking come from? And are we threatened by that kind of thinking still? Is it a possibility? I'm hoping at the moment the climate is to respect these old buildings, that they do have a value, historical as well as aesthetic. And I think even modern architects are beginning to recognise that you cannot ignore the heritage. How it influences is something which is individual response, but it's recognised that it exists as a value in the background. And that, I think, will protect it from what was happening before, the idea that you just throw it away because it's old.

**RW:** What do you think the most effective way of persuading people to save a building from demolition might be?

**AG:** I think the local buildings groups, I think it's mainly to do with residents' associations. And for one reason or another people will get together and have meetings. And I think that has been the strongest link between people and action. And again it has depended on sufficient numbers of people. And the bigger the protest the more influence it can have with the authorities. And that, I think, has protected a lot of Glasgow.

**RW:** Are there any particular buildings at the moment that you are particularly concerned about?

**AG:** Well, I was concerned about some of Sauchiehall Street, but whether it's been economical or just what has changed it, but it's still there, and hopefully it will be re-evaluated. Again, it comes down to can you adapt the building? Will it function for a new use? And given time that very often happens, but where's the funding to come from to maintain the building while we wait for a new use? And I think that is something which should be recognised as very important. This idea of investment, long term investment, I think should be seriously considered, and funding found for it, because it's so important not to lose just because of carelessness what so important to the future.

**RW:** That rings a particular bell with me in that the use of an old building is often critical and sometimes we have to maybe mothball a building and wait for a new use.

**AG:** This is it, that's right, yes. And mothballing the building I think sometimes could be part of an exhibition. There's no reason why it should be shut up. It could be open to visit by request, and it could be known that the building is open to interested groups. And I think again the awareness of that keeps it alive, keeps the idea alive, as well as the building.

**MR:** Sorry, could you do that question again? You put your hand up to your face, you covered the microphone.

**RW:** I'll ask you again about the advantages of mothballing a building.

**AG:** Yes, the advantages of preserving a building until a new use is found for it of course means that the building will survive. But it does mean that it's going to require personal

funding, probably a special use as an exhibition feature. And as such it could have funding for visits, group visits particularly, and it could be made known that the building is available for group visits and why it should be visited and preserved as part of the integral necessity for preserving the historical idea of Glasgow as well as its new. You cannot have one without the other.

**RW:** Do you think there's been a change in the way modern city planners approach?

**AG:** I think there is, I'm not quite sure where it's coming from, and I'm not quite sure why it's had some success. But I think it is, and it could be that the media is now talking more about history and buildings and what's gone on in different parts of the world, different parts of cities, even programs on castle preservation. The idea that there is potential in an old building for all sorts of reasons means there is the possibility of extending the same thinking to your local buildings. Why not find a new use for your church rather than just clear the site and hope to make a bit of money selling it? The values, I'm afraid, are not necessarily commercial ones.

**RW:** I was wondering. Obviously you've been looking at planning applications in the city for a number of decades and I wondered if you'd seen a change in the type of proposals coming forward, or an improvement hopefully in the quality of design in Glasgow?

**AG:** I think what has happened is, again possibly due to the media programs, there has been a recognition that old is not just useless. Old is in fact contributing. And I think it's probably due to the fact that modern architecture and modern thinking is looking for some new sources of inspiration, and to that extent they are finding that old is not necessarily obsolete. And ideas grow from ideas, nothing comes out of a vacuum.

**RW:** And how do you feel your letters with comments about all these planning applications are received? And how much influence do you think the society has in making changes?

**AG:** Well, again it's difficult to assess except that it's still happening, old buildings are still surviving. So there's a cumulative effect, I think, which is difficult to measure. But the fact something is happening would confirm the fact that it's been worth doing. So that is the only way we can assess it, the fact that it is still happening, and hopefully gaining momentum. I think it is. I think the respect for the old and the historical is stronger in lots of areas. I think even appreciation of history itself is changing, and that can only be a good thing. And it's coming about through exchange of ideas from among different people in the profession, and involving the community, which I think is another aspect which is new and gaining momentum. And that just depends on a lot of individuals being sufficiently motivated. And again getting together organisations of one kind or another, and the publicity that they can engender could gather more support. And I think it is gaining strength.

**RW:** How do you feel old buildings in particular contribute to maybe not everybody's, but a sense of civic identity in a way that modern approaches don't?

**AG:** I think old buildings were meant to have some kind of link with the past and long term function in the future. They weren't intended to be throw-away and quick fix and "we'll use a building for ten years and we'll pull it down and we'll not bother repairing, we'll just replace." That, I think, has been proven to be a kind of sterile way of doing things because I think people have begun to realise unless they do have an area of connection either through long term practice or through historical references, that the awareness that grows out of that means that people's understanding of the effect of their environment, and this I think has been much better understood now.

**RW:** You must have seen quite a lot of cinemas disappear over the last fifty years, do you have any regrets for that?

**AG:** Well, I do. There used to be the Cosmo, the Cosmo was a lovely building, the new idea, it was a new concept of using foreign films, and the cinema itself of course without television was a very significant area of experience. And with television I think you began to realise that there are qualities in older things which have a much broader reference area, and it's not just fashion that motivates them. And it's only time that reveals these kind of differences of appreciation. And of course it's buildings that embody these ideas. And this is what keeps the ideas going, from one building to another there are variables, there are variations, there are developments, and feedback which again keeps everything moving.

**RW:** Maybe say something about personally what does it mean to you to be involved in saving buildings, and what kind of connection do you have with them?

**AG:** It started in my primary school. I was fortunate to have as my primary teacher a Jean Davie, who was related to Alan Davie, the painter, and Cedric Thope Davie, the musician. Now, I can't think of a better connection than that. And some of her own family interests I think were passed to us as youngsters because we began to understand that there were quality values which she could pass onto us. The fact that we were in a school that had an architectural quality, Langside Primary School, a fine red sandstone building, she even looked at a wastepaper basket which had been provided by the former Renfrew Council, which was a basket, what had been replaced for a wastepaper container was Glasgow Corporation's idea, which was a wooden box. So these little subtleties of distinction were I think quite valuable in the early days and you began to think about things which you wouldn't have otherwise.

**RW:** Which school was that?

**AG:** That was Langside Primary School, very much part of the council's collection of primary schools, what you would call a general high standard, because all the primary schools were red sandstone buildings across Glasgow. And they all had a good quality of architecture.

**RW:** Some of the very best architects were involved in primary schools.

**AG:** Yes, exactly. And this heritage I think was very valuable for the youngsters to grow up in.

**RW:** I think I've ran out of my questions. Anything else you would like to say? Anything you expected me to ask that I haven't asked?

**AG:** I can only say that I'm very grateful for whatever it was, and I think it was purely economics at one point, that preserved the old buildings of Glasgow and gave people time to think about the consequences of losing that. And I think it was the difficulty of where do you fit it into your thinking? If it's old it has drawbacks, obviously technical ones as well as fashion, and you're going to build a new design. What do you do with the old? That I think was the main problem. And then all sorts of new ideas about adaptation began to happen, and people began to realise you could convert an old building, and then another thing which saved it was the fact there was an understanding that you weren't just being old fashioned if you clung to your old building. If you recreated or modernised the interior, again, a thinking pattern was understanding that old wasn't necessarily obsolete. That there were values in it which had been lost by too

many changes, and the modern perception was losing out by not recognising some of the long term values which were always part of the heritage.

**RW:** I think after the Second World War politically the tenement buildings were seen as slums, and it became a political issue to get rid of them.

**AG:** Yes, that's right.

**RW:** Irrespective of their architectural quality.

**AG:** That's right. There was this political input, and there was this pressure for new and to change everything, again because of this idea of a brave new world the old stuff had not been part of a successful society so it was a bad image to have, and new would have to be replacing it. And it was quite strange to recognise that in the new there was no experience, there was no feeling of evolution, that ideas did develop from old ideas, and that changes were very often by comparison judged to be going one way or another. And the values again that came out of that understanding and comparison is what has created our understanding, I think, of the value of history.

**RW:** I think it wasn't until the 1960s that Assist architects and others managed to persuade the council that old tenements could be improved.

**AG:** That was it. There was a strange turnaround. The architectural schools did want everything new. There was again this reaction to the old which was just negative, you just throw it away, it's no use. And it was difficult to know exactly where the understanding came from that you were throwing away something which was important. And the feedback from the old into the new was slowly recognised to be valuable.

**RW:** Yes. Thank you.

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