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NATIONAL TRUST FOR SCOTLAND DIGS DEEP INTO THE CONDITION OF THE HILL HOUSE

- **Initial research allows for cautious optimism about condition of walls at Charles Rennie Mackintosh's architectural masterpiece**
- **Steel 'Box' erected by conservation charity has provided vital protection from west-coast rain**
- **Research will inform and enable next phase of work to save unique heritage site for the nation but clock is still ticking**

Early conservation findings indicate that action by the National Trust for Scotland is slowing down deterioration of Charles Rennie Mackintosh's design masterpiece, the Hill House.

Four years ago, the conservation charity erected an architect-designed, award-winning steel cage – the Box – to protect the Hill House from rain and damp, allowing buildings specialists to dry out and stabilise the Hill House and ensure its long-term survival.

A trial to carefully remove small areas of render from the A-listed building's exterior has shown that the walls, which had begun to show signs of water ingress from as early as 15 years after its completion, are steadily drying and regaining strength. The conservation charity has welcomed these results as it embarks on the next stage of its pioneering project to save the Helensburgh house for Scotland and Mackintosh enthusiasts all over the world.

Liz Davidson, the National Trust for Scotland's Project Director for the Hill House, stated: 'These works at the Hill House will help the National Trust for Scotland establish the properties of the materials used by Mackintosh and subsequent repair projects. This in turn will allow us to identify the most appropriate replacement materials to keep the building free of the persistent damp that has threatened its stunning interiors, such as the original stencilling by Mackintosh's wife Margaret Macdonald.'

'The protection offered by the Box has allowed this drying-out and transformation in structural performance, but all of us working on this wonderful and important building are aware that the clock is ticking on now being able to embark on permanent repairs and conservation before the shelter of the Box is removed in compliance with planning rules. We're delighted with the initial research findings but remain very much aware of the scale of the conservation task ahead.'

The new study saw a team of engineering and conservation specialists carefully recording the condition of the walls and overseeing the excavation of areas around the building to examine the very core of Mackintosh's construction. The team meticulously removed the Portland cement roughcast in six locations around the building to reveal the substrate beneath, including what is thought to be the original damp proof course, red sandstone and brick walls as well as some of the repair details of the last century.

The works allowed the Trust to take small samples of all the materials found – including a sample of what is believed to be Mackintosh's original roughcast mix surviving in one area of the building. Small quantities of all the materials exposed were sent to researchers at the University of Dundee for analysis of their composition and material behaviour.

The most significant result of the work is the finding that the walls, under the roughcast, have been steadily drying and regaining strength in the controlled environment provided by the Box. Further investigation will commence on a similar exercise working from the inside face of the building, targeting rooms where historically the damp has been most prevalent, including chimney flues and areas below steep parapets.

Meanwhile the excavations themselves have been neatly sealed up with cover plates which allow specialist surveyors to revisit each site, match the data from internal recording, and steadily explore the questions of what lies beneath the cement jacket of the Hill House.

Philip Long OBE, Chief Executive of the National Trust for Scotland, added: 'The Hill House is the only original Charles Rennie Mackintosh domestic dwelling open to the public, and over the coming years, the conservation of this internationally-renowned and unique heritage asset will be a critical project for our charity. The work to save and conserve the Hill House is a vital and substantial task, and one we won't be able to undertake without generous support from funding bodies, philanthropists and Mackintosh enthusiasts in Scotland and around the world, whose help we will be appealing for.'

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Notes for editors

About the Hill House

The Hill House was designed by Charles Rennie Mackintosh in 1902-4 for the publisher Walter Blackie and his family. It represents his largest and most complete domestic work designed at the height of his architectural powers in a striking fusion of proto-modernism and Scots baronial styles style with the trademark Art Nouveau and symbolist interiors developed in partnership with his wife and artist Margaret Macdonald.

The House came into the ownership of the National Trust for Scotland in 1982, from which time the conservation charity has systematically repaired and conserved both interiors and exteriors. However, the experimental detailing and materials of the house – in particular Mackintosh's use of early Portland cement roughcast for its exterior walls when combined with non-traditional detailing - has meant that the decades of water penetrating and percolating through its fabric endangers its structure and decoration.

The erection of the Box, which opened to visitors on 7 June 2019, to shelter and protect the Hill House has dramatically slowed down these effects.

About the National Trust for Scotland

Established in 1931, the National Trust for Scotland is Scotland's largest conservation charity and cares for, shares and speaks up for Scotland's magnificent heritage.

Over the last 90 years the Trust has pioneered public access to and shared ownership of some of the most magnificent buildings, collections and landscapes in Scotland. It cares for more than 100 sites, from ancient houses to battlefields, castles, mills, gardens, coastlines, islands, mountain ranges and the plants and animals which depend upon them.

In March 2022 the National Trust for Scotland launched *Nature, Beauty & Heritage for Everyone*, its ten-year strategy which sets out the ambitions of the charity over the coming decade. From speaking up for Scotland's heritage which doesn't have a voice, to improving the lives and wellbeing of people across the country, and responding to the climate and biodiversity crisis, the Trust will build on its work in recent years to grow its impact and conserve and restore more of Scotland's heritage, as it moves towards its centenary in 2031.

Scotland's largest membership organisation, the National Trust for Scotland relies on the support of its members and donors to carry out its important work.

For more information on the National Trust for Scotland visit www.nts.org.uk.

The National Trust for Scotland is a charity registered in Scotland, Charity Number SC 007410.