

## The Stairs – by Kathryn Allan

It started with stairs, with an ascent. First there were the North Façade’s stone steps delivering you from Renfrew Street to those black Mackintosh doors, their radiant brass push plates, emblazoned with ‘ART’ and ‘SCHOOL’, ‘IN’ and ‘OUT’, reflecting the light of that big northern sky. There is a secret in the ‘A’ of his ‘ART’.<sup>1</sup>

The doors would swing abruptly; getting the right side was important, I learned. Moving through them you passed under ‘The Glasgow School of Art 167’ black and white sign, decorated with CRM’s 4 by 4 squares – a kind of threshold blessing – and in that liminal moment you sensed a transfer *into* a work of art, a being *within* a designer’s imagination. From there, a staff member propelled the new undergraduates – seedlings – upwards again: ‘*Get up those stairs! This is the first day of the rest of your life!*’ She instructed us to climb the architect’s dark timber staircase – its keeper a janitor in a small Art Nouveau office (the inquiry box) – which led to the first-floor galleried landing.

Those who have made this ascent will know it is a movement from darkness to light, the glass ceiling making light visual, and in that sense it illustrated a life’s moment: a dawning. And somewhere up there, in that beautifully designed dawn, we enrolled on our courses, transformed Paul Winstanley’s ‘empty potential’ of the art school studio into intimate spaces, ours for a period of time. A few years later, at the end of my Scottish studies, I would descend the same stairs – timber then stone – with degree result in hand, heart both heavy for the ghosts left behind and awakened to the possibilities ahead.

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<sup>1</sup>: ‘The stratified segmentation of the triangle of the letter “A” is consciously emphasised to suggest the importance of aspiration towards a higher state of spiritual consciousness in all artistic production’ (Neat, T., 1994, *Part Seen, Part Imagined: Meaning and Symbolism in the Work of Charles Rennie Mackintosh and Margaret Macdonald* 1<sup>st</sup> edn. Edinburgh: Canongate Books)