

Time to look after Edinburgh's tenements!

✘ *Edinburgh's tenements are a vital part of a vibrant city. Isn't it time we started looking after them?*

by Andrew Milne

Edinburgh has one of the most famous built environments in the world, an iconic mix of dramatic, historic buildings, quirky streetscapes and – unusually for an international capital – affordable residential accommodation within the heart of the city.

But the solid stone tenements which have sheltered generations of working families, upwardly mobile middle class residents and students spending a few years at the city's institutions of learning are facing an increasing threat to their very existence.

Every building in the world, from a humble cottage to a grand mansion, needs to be maintained to protect it from the ravages of time and, in the case of the Scotland, the dilapidating effect of the weather.

However, tenements in Edinburgh – the fabric of whose buildings and whose common stairs have been looked after in the past by the owners and occupiers – are falling into disrepair as a result of a chronic lack of maintenance. Over time a lack of maintenance can eventually lead to safety issues.

There are a number of reasons for this, including a lack of funds due to the economic climate over the last few years and the lack of participation by the occupiers within a building to “get things done”. Owner occupiers are often faced with flats being occupied by tenants who have little or no interest

in the upkeep of the common areas and absentee landlords who are indifferent to maintenance as they see no increase in their return.

It is to be expected that such investors will wish to maximise the return on their investments and costly repairs will be a secondary consideration to making sure the flow of rent money continues uninterrupted.

With tenements, there is also the difficulty in obtaining the agreement from everyone in the building to having work done. Many Edinburgh tenements have eight properties – some have as many as 16, all with different owners and some who live elsewhere.

The system is that, if a majority in a building agreed about necessary works, the decision is binding on the others. But if any of the other residents declined to participate, the only solution was court action. Not a good way to get on with the neighbours. This can result in delays and considerable additional expense. The old way of the Local Authority in Edinburgh issuing Statutory Notices has, for the time being, been mothballed as a result of the well reported difficulties encountered with the Stair Partnership Initiative.

Under the initiative, if agreement was not reached among the residents, the council would take on responsibility for appointing contractors, carrying out the necessary work and billing the tenement dwellers accordingly.

With no system for forcing residents to participate in repairs for the general good of the building, maintenance is being left unattended and buildings are visibly deteriorating.

In some tenements, simply opening the common stair door will amply demonstrate that no maintenance, or even basic cleaning, is being carried out. Gone are the days of the brown card appearing on your door handle to remind the owner that it's their turn to clean the stair and passage. Who knows what is

happening to more serious defects such as roof leaks and dry rot?

There was a burst of repair and renovation activity in the eighties and early nineties when grants for tenement maintenance became available and suddenly scaffolding was being erected all over the capital.

But now very little in the way of preventative maintenance is being undertaken. At best, repairs are reactive – to, for instance, a sudden ingress of water caused by roofing failure, or plumbing leaks.

Home Reports have helped, by pointing out to people wishing to sell their property what needs to be done to get it into a saleable condition. And perhaps higher prices will encourage private landlords to look after their investment a bit more assiduously.

But, other than that, it is hard to see what can be done to arrest the remorseless entropy which is currently affecting the city's tenement stock.

Glasgow, by contrast, has a much greater preponderance of factoring, whereby factors take responsibility for maintaining the integrity of the building on behalf of all owners. But even that system has been bedevilled by controversy over charges.

Legal experts have debated this issue, with no real consensus as to the way forward. Maybe this now has to become a priority if the tradition tenement is not to get to a point where the cost of repairs increases to the level of being uneconomical.

The tenements which give Edinburgh its character as a city, if not properly maintained might not be with us for much more of this century.

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