Sir George Gilbert Scott’s Architecture: A Victorian Vision on Paper

Introduction:
George Gilbert Scott’s architecture is impressive today as always, both on paper and in life. My experience cataloguing and conserving Scott’s plans for the University of Glasgow buildings, has shown his unique and surprising artistic vision. Many notations, revisions, and the lining of these works for easy storage, display, and transport, show that the plans were first and foremost working and functional drawings.

Environment and Material
Both textile and paper are made from the polymer cellulose. Paper is made of a random mesh of cellulose fibres held together by hydrogen bonds. Textiles are made of long fibres structured into twisted threads and woven together. Cellulose is especially sensitive to relative humidity. In high humidity, paper expands. However, when textile fibres expand they cause an overall contraction of the threads and weave. These opposing forces and unequal absorption of water can lead to surface distortion. A computerized system was used to monitor humidity and temperature levels during storage.

Conservation Methods
- Assessment – Analyse and document original condition including digital and infrared photography and examination with fluorescent light and light box.
- Dry Cleaning – Both paper and textile were rubbed with sponge and eraser, with careful attention to notations and delicate areas.
- Consolidation of Loss – Reattach loose paper and textile fibres. Inject glue into gaps where paper has become detached.
- Japanese tissue – Fill remaining holes in paper surface with tissue cut to the exact shape. Press flat, when dry coat with glue to mimic shiny surface.
- Retouching – Modern watercolour pigments were used to tint Japanese tissue fills and irreparable cracks in paper to ease visual disruption.

Planning and Building
The examination of Scott’s plans gives us insight into the engineering, financial, and artistic choices surrounding the project.

Conclusion:
My experience allowed me to learn active and passive conservation measures. I became familiar with and researched methods of display and storage that were amenable with the current uses, exhibition, and storage facility. I used modern technology to provide written and visual documentation of the plans and their conservation. During my work on Scott’s plans I found that they, themselves, were snapshots of a work in progress. A valuable encapsulation of the artist’s vision, financial constraints, structural concerns, and other practical matters.

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