



## The Glasite Meeting House / Ingleby Gallery

CAL HARRIS, a graduate of Glasgow School of Art, is an assistant architect at Helen Lucas Architects Ltd (HLA). Cal has been involved in a diverse range of built projects and was an assistant to the Project Architect, Helen Lucas, on the conversion of the Glasite Meeting House. The Ingleby Gallery are long established clients of HLA, collaborating on projects spanning the past two decades.

Main image (above) shows the inaugural exhibition of the Ingleby Gallery in the Glasite Meeting House with works by Callum Innes. All images © Angus Bremner Photography for Helen Lucas Architects, except where stated otherwise.



The Glasites were a breakaway Christian sect founded in the 18th century by maverick Scottish Clergyman John Glas, and their place of worship in Edinburgh was the Glasite Meeting House, an unassuming neoclassical 'church' designed by Alexander Black and built in 1835. Nestled inconspicuously within the New Town, on the fringes of the World Heritage Site, the category A listed Meeting House is a stone's throw away from the bustling thoroughfare of Broughton Street. The Glasites were utilitarian and modest in their ethos which is reflected in the building's lack of superfluous decoration and ornamentation. Blank, in-filled windows and polished brown glass reflect their desire for privacy over ostentation and few people walking past the site would have been aware that a congregation gathered there.

The 'Kale Kirk', as it was known, saw its last Glasite service in 1989 when it was gifted to the Cockburn Conservation Trust as "a permanent base for the Architectural Heritage Society of Scotland". In October 1991 the AHSS moved in and in 1997 secured ownership of the building through the AHSS Charitable Company (renamed the Glasite Meeting House Trust in 2005). Considerable redecoration, repair work and fundraising was undertaken to secure the building's future with the aim of creating a centre for conservation.

Readers may recall the many events, lectures and meetings held there, and the presence of a number of other heritage organisations including the Garden History Society of Scotland, ICON, The Society

for the Protection of Ancient Buildings in Scotland and the National Stone Institute.

Ultimately, however, the financial burden of repairing the Meeting House and the ongoing operating and maintenance costs meant that a new purpose had to be found for the building and a new home found for the AHSS. The Scottish Historic Buildings Trust (SHBT) took over ownership in late 2012 and began efforts to establish what this new use could be. The Trust offered various rooms for hire and, for a short time, a popular community-led film programme ran called the New Town Community Cinema. No other paid bookings were received and so in 2016 SHBT submitted two (successful) planning applications which aimed to convert the building into a more flexible and commercially attractive space. These applications proposed the introduction of new windows into the dummy openings of the façade, removal of the central pews from the Meeting Hall, the construction of a new surface above the raked floor and the disassembly of the pulpit's lower tiers.

Around this time the owners of the Ingleby Gallery, Florence and Richard Ingleby, were looking for a new gallery space and, seeing the potential of this simple, elegant building, approached SHBT. Having collaborated on a number of architectural projects spanning nearly twenty years, the Inglebys appointed Edinburgh-based practice Helen Lucas Architects with the task of the delicate restoration and conversion of the building, and its return to the public as a centre of culture.

Before the work could begin, a lengthy appeals process took place to challenge the

*The undulating hum of psalms and prayer reverberates around the cavernous chamber of the unadorned Meeting Hall. As the service approaches noon, the sound of preaching and song makes way for the familiar clatter of cutlery and crockery, and the creak of a pulley as cauldrons of soup are hoisted from the kitchen to the Feast Hall above. Hot bowls of broth are served to the hungry congregation, perched on benches along long rows of tables, before returning to the Meeting Hall to resume their worship.*



Above: The Glasite Meeting House on the corner of Albany Lane and Barony Street. 'Glasite Meeting Hall 01' by byronv2 licensed under CC BY-NC 2.0.

Below: View of the Meeting Hall, photographed in 1990 from the north west showing the pulpit. © HES



unsuccessful planning application submitted by HLA in 2017. The root of contention was the future of the Meeting Hall's pulpit; the former perch and lectern of the Glasite Deacons, Precentor, Reader and Elders. Designed by renowned Scottish architect David Bryce, the two-tier canopied timber pulpit was installed in 1873, almost 40 years after the Meeting House's completion. Although it wasn't contemporary with Black's original scheme, The City of Edinburgh Planning Department were adamant in its preservation and the initial application (which was also objected to by the AHSS Forth & Borders Group cases panel) was refused.

A fundamental requirement for the display of contemporary art is the need for a vast expanse of uninterrupted wall space. For the Meeting House to function as an art gallery HLA felt that taking down the pulpit in its entirety was unavoidable and appealed the decision. After considerable deliberation, and with the project programme suspended for many months, the planners finally granted permission. They agreed to the careful dismantling of the pulpit on condition that the component parts remained within the Meeting Hall itself to allow for the possibility of its reassembly, should the building's use as an art gallery change.

The riddle of how to store the pulpit was solved by the boldest of the proposed architectural interventions. Originally rectangular in plan, the east and west 'wings' of the Meeting Hall were divided from the main space. Ten-metre-high removable steel partitions were erected into these natural room breaks, intricately scribed to the underside of the room's perimeter



The cupola, made up of over 400 hand-painted glass panes, required extensive conservation and careful cleaning.



Light from the cupola dances across the walls.

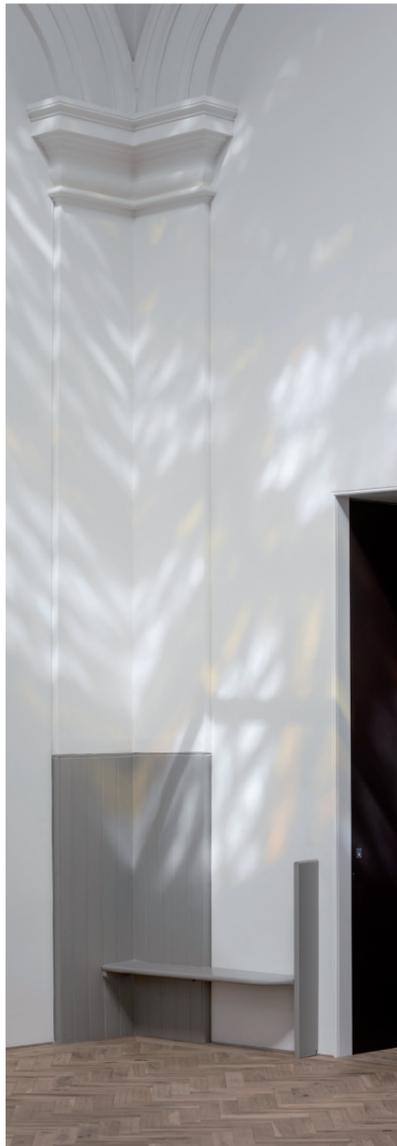


The dining room, photographed above in 1990, was renamed the Colin McWilliam Room in the 1990s following a bequest in his memory. © HES



The dining room was transformed into a secondary gallery and dining space, now known as the Feasting Room.

Below: The main gallery space with reused pews.



arches, creating a storage zone on each side of the central space. The partitions were then lined with Fermacell, a specialist class of self-healing gypsum board, designed to bear the weight of massive artworks and installations. These new ancillary spaces are only accessible between exhibitions, via concealed doors, and serve as the storage areas for large artwork crates and the archive of Bryce's pulpit. The partitions accommodate vital service zones for the gallery, but they also recast the Meeting Hall into a perfect eleven metre cube. This stark, symmetrical volume provides an immaculate yet evocative backdrop for the display of paintings, sculpture and artefacts.

At full capacity, the Meeting Hall could seat 700 Glasites, and the original timber box pews, still inscribed with initials carved out by restless children during lengthy services, were carefully removed and distributed to various sites across the Scotland. The recently restored Riddle's Court in Edinburgh's Old Town was a notable recipient. Two of the corner pews were retained within the Meeting Hall, to offer a moment of respite and reflection to gallery visitors. A fleeting chance to rest one's legs, the pews retain an element of human scale within the lofty chamber.

The original raking timber floor boards were also preserved in place but covered by a new level floor. The floating floor structure incorporates a wet heating diffusion plate system, maintaining the gallery's climate at a cool sixteen degrees centigrade. The new floor, at over 100 square metres, is finished with an expanse of distinctive herringbone parquet, bringing warmth and

texture to the predominantly neutral space.

The completion of the new level floor facilitated the most fragile and painstaking task of the project: the restoration of the cupola. A striking octagonal skylight, comprising an exquisite latticework of timber fins and diamond shaped glass panes, soars eleven metres above the centre of the gallery floor. A true feat of engineering and craft, its purpose was to envelop the chamber and congregation in natural light.

However, it was only when access was attained from the Meeting House's roof, via a single, precarious crawl space, that the true extent of the cupola's condition was brought to light: decades of dirt and dust settlement between the inner and outer cupolas had resulted in a blanket coat of grime to the individual glass panes. It was also here that the fragility of the paper-thin glass was understood. With over 400 panes to restore, the notion of cleaning them became an increasingly daunting and dangerous one.

The sheer fineness of the cupola incited the erection of a temporary internal scaffold. A 'crash deck', encompassing the entire internal footprint, was constructed nine metres above the Meeting Hall floor, offering the design team a one-off opportunity to walk within the spectacular ceiling vault. The timber and glass lattice was carefully propped to this floating deck, allowing a single person to enter the cupola itself (between the inner and outer glass skins) to meticulously hand clean the skylight, pane by pane. Previously smothered by dust, the cleaning operation revealed a radiant composition of hand-

etched glass, and hand-painted motifs of which no two panes were alike.

Whilst the scaffold was in place, sixteen discreet fixings were made into the ceiling's inner timber ring beam for the suspension of a simple, slender lighting gantry. Once the cleaning and paintwork to the ceiling was complete, the crash deck was finally dismantled. For the duration of the build, the scaffold had cloaked the site in perpetual darkness. Its dismantling was eagerly anticipated, and finally permitted the now pristine cupola to bathe the room in natural top light, further accentuated by the freshly painted gallery walls.

The rigorous restoration of the cupola also led to the discovery of an extraordinary, and entirely unexpected phenomenon. When Edinburgh skies are clear, and the sun shines brightly, a projection of the painted glass – fragmented scintilla of yellow, amber and gold – is thrown from the cupola onto the crisp white walls. At noon, on a high summer day, a flawless disk of sunlight is cast onto the centre of the north wall. With the progression of the sun, this celestial, ever-changing formation dances clockwise around the room, occasionally draping the artworks themselves in delicate shards of glimmering light.

The uncovering of this spectacle naturally begs the question: did the Glasites intend for the building itself to function as a sundial, on an architectural scale? Regardless if by design or by chance, the daily theatrics of light and shade are an allegory for the hidden joys of the Glasite Meeting House that were unearthed through its restoration.

Although the Meeting Hall presented the

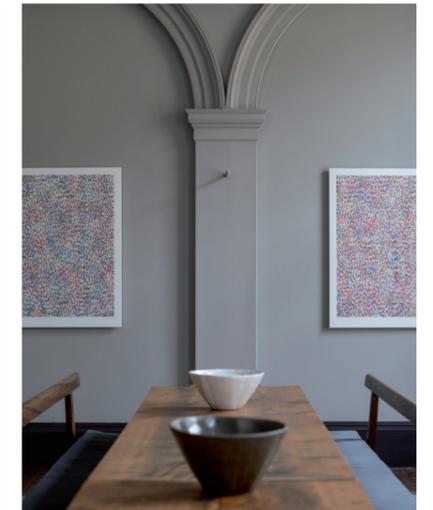
team with the greatest design challenges, repairs and redecoration were needed throughout the building, both inside and out. Externally, windows were repaired and refurbished, and cast-iron pavement grilles were reinstated to match those unique to Barony Street. Extensive repairs were made to the delamination and cracking of the external stonework; the handiwork of almost two centuries of Scotland's finest wind and rain.

The kitchen and ancillary rooms across three floors were fully renovated, and the dilapidated dumb-waiter made operational once again. A number of door heads were raised to three metres, to accommodate the ferrying of large artwork crates. The dining room, where bread was once broken and stories shared, was re-established as a secondary gallery space and private viewing room, and was furnished with the original Glasite dining tables and benches.

The Ingleby Gallery have settled into their new home on Barony Street, bringing with them an ambitious programme of exhibitions and an eclectic roster of both established and emerging talent. The Glasite Meeting House is restored, and returned to the city as a dynamic, versatile platform for the forefront of contemporary art, whilst embodying a celebration of its peculiar fragility, humanity, and austere beauty. ■

For more information about Helen Lucas Architects, visit: [www.helenlucas.co.uk](http://www.helenlucas.co.uk)

To find out about exhibitions and events at the Ingleby Gallery, visit: [www.inglebygallery.com](http://www.inglebygallery.com)



Original tables and benches were used to furnish the new Feasting Room.

