An iconic house by Scottish architect Charles Rennie Mackintosh gets an intervention.

BY SARAH MEDFORD

THE SCOTTISH TOWN of Helensburgh, northwest of Glasgow on the banks of the Clyde, is veiled in clouds and drizzle for much of the year. The chalk-colored villa that architect Charles Rennie Mackintosh built here seems to rise out of the damp like an apparition. The Hill House, with its truculent, asymmetrical facade and wayward chimneys, is famous among design lovers as a signpost on the road to modernism; radical when it was built in 1904, it has since settled into midlife as one of the jewels of the National Trust for Scotland.

Inside, the rooms have a dreaminess conjured by their allover hues of dark chocolate or moonflower white, a reflection of the holistic fervor Mackintosh and his wife, the artist Margaret Macdonald, brought to their decoration. The cloakroom’s dark, gridded cubbies were a favorite of Brad Pitt’s when he stopped by during the filming of World War Z nearby; fashion designer Jonathan Anderson—who drew on the Scottish architect’s decorative motifs for a Loewe capsule collection last fall—admires the pale rooms.

“I have always been kind of obsessed by him,” Anderson says of Mackintosh, “this person creating spaces that were completely out of step with what was happening in the rest of the world. I think what’s inspiring is that you have this elusive figure who built an aesthetic that will probably survive for a very long time—and is still influencing people today.”

Mackintosh designed the Hill House for the family of Walter Blackie, a successful local publisher of fairy tales and other illustrated books. A better pairing of architect and client would be hard to imagine. Blackie was out to make a statement, and Mackintosh, 33 when he took the job, was already getting attention for his commission to expand and update the Glasgow School of Art, his alma mater.

That the Hill House would be willfully different from its high-Victorian neighbors was clear from the start. The Blackies’ architect visited with them to see how the family lived before getting down to work. The result was a house designed from the inside out: There were play spaces for the couple’s five children, a vanilla-dipped master bedroom and drawing room (the latter with a heated window settee) and a flower pantry outfitted with a deep sink and three separate taps—for
SHADOWS AND LIGHT

Left: Overlooking the garden, a heated window seat in the white drawing room has stenciled burlap upholstery—and extensive water damage overhead.

Opposite: Level changes and a switchback staircase lend the dimly lit entry hall a sense of spatial dislocation.
rainwater, heated water and water from a nearby spring. The total bill amounted to £6,652.

To push the sculptural effects of his creation to extremes, Mackintosh used none of the exterior coping stones or corner dressings typical of Scottish vernacular buildings. He framed the Hill House like a petit four in a material known as harling—the local equivalent of stucco—made not from traditional lime slurry but from a recent English import called Portland cement.

As followers of Louis Kahn, Frank Lloyd Wright and other architectural avant-gardists knew, what makes a building modern in construction can prove fatal over time. Lime-based harling breathes; Portland cement doesn’t and is prone to cracking, proving fatal over time. Lime-based harling breathes; Portland cement doesn’t and is prone to cracking, making a building modern in construction can prove fatal over time. Lime-based harling breathes; Portland cement doesn’t and is prone to cracking, making a building modern in construction can prove fatal over time. Lime-based harling breathes; Portland cement doesn’t and is prone to cracking, making a building modern in construction can prove fatal over time. Lime-based harling breathes; Portland cement doesn’t and is prone to cracking, making a building modern in construction can prove fatal over time. 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