Probus talk 26 September 2024

Historic Shopfronts of the West End

Iain Wotherspoon

At first glance the topic may appear to be rather specialised, and of interest only to a limited, rather nerdy, audience. Iain Wotherspoon soon proved this view to be false giving us a superbly presented talk that was both illuminating and entertaining.

Shops had their origins in the market stalls of used by traders centuries ago. Trade then moved to the front rooms of houses on the streets near the markets where the traders lived. As towns and cities grew, developers designed streets that incorporated shops in the ground floor of buildings, typically tenement blocks. Sound architectural principles and symmetry gave pleasing effects, and the shops were designed to entice and make customers welcome.

Iain described the various architectural features to look out for in the shop fronts. His presentation slides illustrated these very well. The entrance door would usually be set back from the shop front to give more window display and provide space for the potential customer to browse before entering. In Glasgow especially it was a useful space to fold your umbrella, and put it up again before venturing out into the rain.

Among the examples he showed was a lovely photo of an old Coopers shop window in the West End, full of different many food options from meat to fruit. It would be very hard to walk past this type of shop window without wanting to pop in and see what you could get. Coopers was effectively a precursor of a supermarket.

Over time however new shop owners modified their shop fronts, putting up, bland, generally less tasteful sign boards and covering up the fine features. These shops were at odds with the others and ruined the overall look of the street. Window displays became less attractive; in extreme cases being replaced with ugly posters or hoarding. Among the causes were the desire too follow corporate branding (for non-independent shops), competitive pressure to cut costs and generally lack of awareness of aesthetics. Photos of some egregious examples were shown with the comment that the talk could equally have been entitled “Horrible Shop Fronts of the West End”.

Recently there has been evidence that people are now more aware of the heritage, with some shop fronts now being improved to reflect good taste. Original features have been restored or developed, so transforming the look of the shop.

This meeting was the first with the Club’s new, and much clearer, sound system in operation. Ironically Iain had been a professional actor and thus did not need to use a microphone!