

## Glasgow 2020 – A fair COP?

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*"Before we can build the city of the future, we must first imagine it".* This is a starting point most designers would endorse. Unfortunately, as John Higgs later elaborates in his book *"The future starts here: Adventures in the twenty-first century"*, the future we are imagining is a dystopian vision of wanton ecological destruction, alarming extinction of species, uncontrolled global heating and failing political and economic systems.<sup>1</sup> To rational believers the science is undeniable. However, stated as bald facts and when accompanied by programmes of draconian countermeasures, this approach is terrifying people into a fatalism that encourages enjoyment today, because the future is doomed, whilst simultaneously living in a state of high anxiety about the viability of future generations and the planet's ability to sustain the human species. The message is clearly correct, but the messaging is failing and robbing ordinary people of hope. This provides an easy position to sow doubt and peddle false optimism as evidenced by the US Government's stance at the recent World Economic Forum in January this year.

We are now deep into what Nobel Laureate Paul Crutzen entitled the *Anthropocene*, a new geo-historical era when humanity has become a major geological and geobiological factor influencing the Earth.<sup>2</sup> The United Nations predicts that world population will reach 10 billion by 2050 and, although slowing down due to female emancipation, technological advance and development convergence, will move towards 11 billion by 2100.<sup>3</sup> For some time, received wisdom has held that in this, the *century of the city*, when urban population exceeded rural for the first time, we might accommodate our greater numbers in compact resilient, competitive cities.<sup>4</sup> As Ed Glaeser dryly suggested, it is possible to accommodate the current world population in one city the size of Texas together with all necessary infrastructure and amenities.<sup>5</sup> Cities, we believed, would save the world.

It is true that cities and humane ecological urbanisation are our best hope of accommodating many more people. But the challenge is not simply a matter of space. Humanity is swarming the earth. We are exhorted to eat less meat, fly less, give up plastic and recycle and upcycle. Of course, every little helps and we should certainly all 'think global and act local',<sup>6</sup> but the truth is, that unless billions of us make these change, we will fall short. Widespread acceptance by governments and major corporations leading to systemic international change building on individual behaviour is needed. New research evidence suggests that far from accommodating 10 billion, 3 billion is a much more likely figure for future equilibrium.<sup>7</sup>

Climate Change and ecophilic integrity are not, however, the only challenges we face. Recent research for UN-Habitat identified a number of trends in addition to climate change that affect all the countries in the area of the UNECE (the world from Vancouver to Vladivostok) namely Ageing, Low Fertility, Migration, Automation and Artificial Intelligence (AI).<sup>8</sup> This cocktail of climatic, demographic and technological change encapsulates the spirit of our times ... our zeitgeist. They are the international and remorseless forces of globalisation and they interact with one another. This interaction can, without intervention, become toxic for countries, cities and communities. Fortunately, there are also opportunities, and with enlightened leadership and pragmatic management, the combined effects can be made more benign, if not beneficial. This however requires vision, clarity, skill, transparency and a

degree of political courage to face down the hypocrisy and dissimulation pedalled by many commentators.

The combination of the *jet age* and the *net age* has compounded urban concentration. The predicted *death of distance* whereby the entrepreneurial class takes off to the islands to telework over fibre broadband has proved to be a myth.<sup>9</sup> Certainly there are those who desire remoteness, but they are comprehensively outnumbered by those who seek the face-to-face buzz of the city with a centripetal effect of urban concentration in cities across the global north.<sup>10</sup> To explain the phenomenon, the UN devised the concept of *supercity* – clusters of competitive cities of some 50 million population that combine to compete with the megacities of the global east and south and asking whether the UK and Ireland are a such a *supercity* system.

Management and intervention in these trends are necessary, as is recognition of the consequences described above, but these are not sufficient. To harness the effects of these forces in a benign manner requires vision, leadership and a **designed** response. National objectives, performance frameworks and indicators together with national outcomes are all very important. It is important to measure things. However, it will take international consensus-building and a designed response, a plan, to bring about change. Adoption of the UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) formulated after the Paris Agreement of 2015 is a good place to start and UN-Habitat has highlighted how national urban policy can be dovetailed with the SDG targets.

The recent drive to community activation and engagement is welcome – essential in fact. The roll out of charrette-based activity is beneficial in assisting communities (and those who serve them) to understand and manage assets and to facilitate strategic change. The gulf between community activity and national planning is, however, too great and we need regional mechanisms for spatial mediation in the provision and delivery of infrastructure between community and nation.

At the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Frank Arneil Walker wrote that designing for place demands an ability to reconcile the *genius loci* (the spirit of place) with the *zeitgeist* (the spirit of the times) – a simple, elegant concept to grasp, if a deal harder to describe, teach and practice.<sup>11</sup> We must manage these international trends carefully and design intelligent responses or we will face attrition of what we hold dear. This then is the job of government, national and local, and it is the job of society at large and all of us as professionals.

Later this year, the UK and Glasgow will host COP26.<sup>12</sup> The success of a COP event is dependent primarily on two distinct but interacting factors. The first, and most significant, concerns the ability of the host Government and UNFCCC to set an agenda that is sufficiently challenging to satisfy countries and parties who wish to formulate aggressive action in support of ecological, environmental and climate priorities in such a way that minimises the opportunity for more 'conservative' countries and parties to veto the outcome. That is the main business of the international consultation that goes on in advance of the COP and the intensive – frequently sleepless – negotiations that run for the duration of the event often until, or beyond, the 11<sup>th</sup> hour of the final day. The second, and principal supporting factor concerns the experience and acumen of the host city to stage an international event with the super-complexity of handling international leaders, protagonists, activists, protestors and press in such a way that everyone has a 'voice' and all passes off peacefully with a secure 'campus' for the event itself and ample opportunity elsewhere for 'pop-up' festivals

and protests. Glasgow has a fine pedigree in this field with numerous successful international exhibitions, gardens festivals and international sporting events and games, but the City, its authorities and the UK and Scottish Governments are in no doubt that COP elevates to a new level the necessary skill and the scrutiny that comes with it. If this was not enough, there is the alchemy of what takes place internationally in what Harold Macmillan allegedly described as ‘Events, dear boy. Events’. It is no mean challenge to host Government and City to bring off a successful COP. Just as well perhaps that Glasgow understands the significance of once having been ‘No Mean City’.<sup>13</sup>

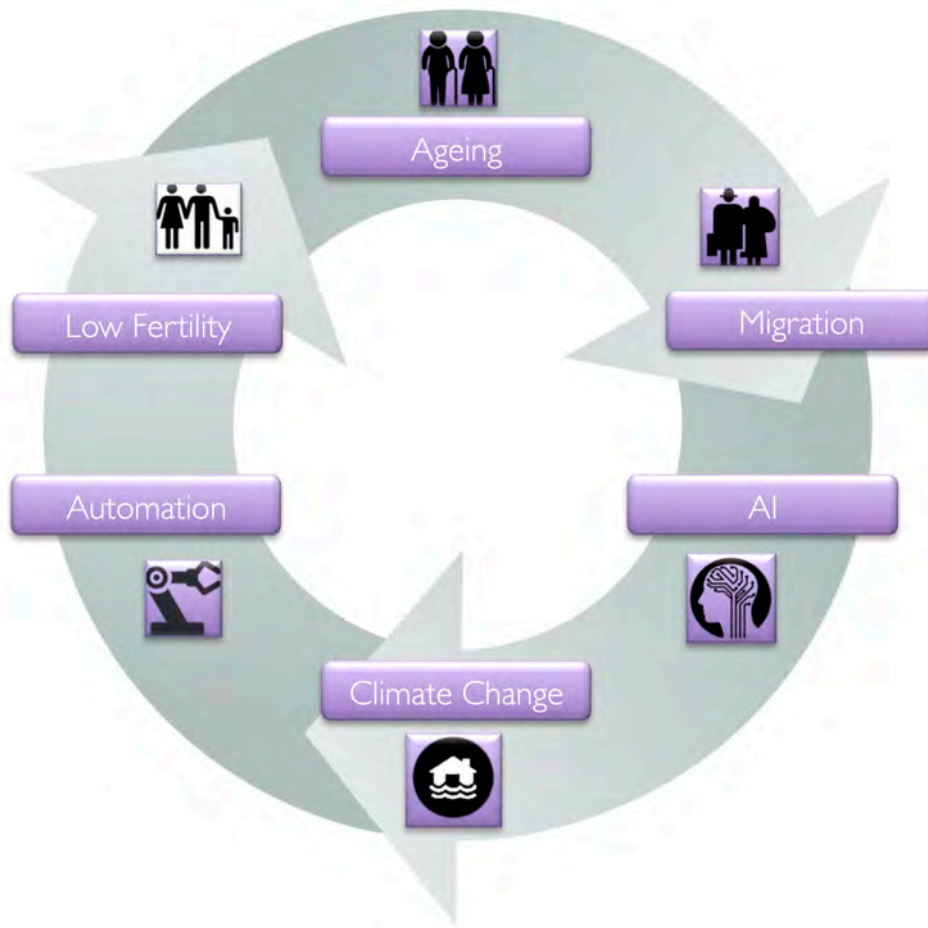
What are our cities and design professions to contribute? Glasgow and Edinburgh have entered into sibling rivalry to become carbon neutral by 2030 to emulate Copenhagen, our latitudinal role model, now joined by London and others in a call for a ‘UK Green New Deal’. Will the cities succeed in this transition? For the city I call home, I am optimistic. For all of my professional working life, Glasgow has faced near existential challenges. Bolstered by the humour and resilience of its quick keen people, successive generations of leadership and professionals have dug in, have brought the best and the brightest to town and suffused this with local talent and determination. Will the transition be made well? That is harder to call, and it is the job we all face over the next decade. We must grasp the opportunity that COP presents to showcase city, national and state leadership. And we need to do this in a prospective as well as reactive manner though leadership and design.

In 2019, I had the opportunity to participate in ‘*Design with Nature Now*’, the international conference, exhibition and book developed by the University of Pennsylvania to mark the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of ‘*Design with Nature*’ the masterwork of landscape architect and city planner Ian McHarg.<sup>14</sup> I discussed McHarg and Scotland’s contribution to green consciousness. McHarg advocated ecological urbanism when it was a choice and before it became an imperative. His insight, leadership and determination were born of his upbringing in Glasgow where he was apprenticed to the landscape architects for the 1938 Empire Exhibition and attended the Glasgow School of Art before wartime service in the army and post-war study at Harvard where he qualified in city planning and landscape architecture. McHarg reviled what Glasgow had become by the 1950s but by the time he published his autobiography in 1996, he recognised the effort and the steps Glasgow had already made towards designing with nature.<sup>15</sup> 2020 is McHarg’s centenary and Glasgow plans to partner with the Landscape Institute, the McHarg Centre at University of Pennsylvania and others to bring the ‘*Design with Nature Now*’ exhibition to Glasgow for COP, to celebrate his message in his home town and to build a platform for landscape architects and planners throughout the UK and internationally in the period leading up to COP and at the event itself to formulate and deliver a message to world leaders concerning ecology, landscape planning, design and hope!

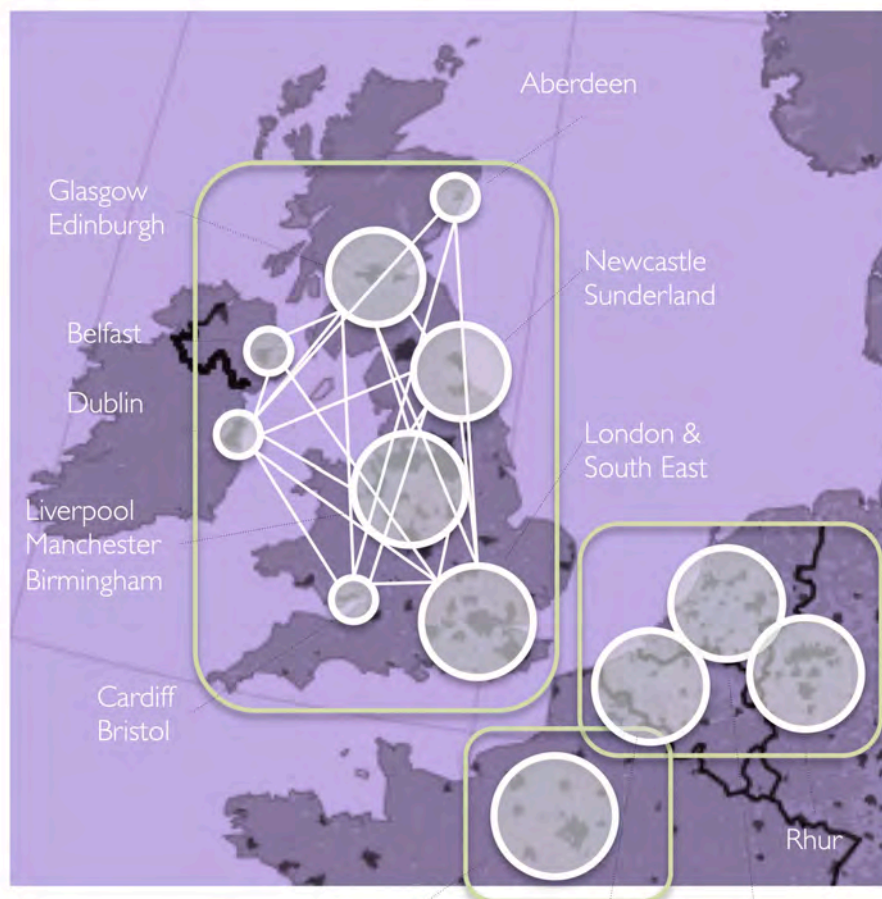


Design with Nature Now Cover –  
source: The Lincoln Institute of Land  
Policy





The cocktail of international trends – source: “Scotland’s Urban AGE”, Evans et al, Glasgow Urban Laboratory, 2018



Supercity UK/Ireland – source: “Scotland’s Urban AGE”, Evans et al, Glasgow Urban Laboratory, 2018





National Urban Policy & SDG Targets – source: UN-Habitat, Nairobi, 2018



Glasgow, host city for COP26 2020, view north towards Ben Lomond. The Clyde Campus which will become UN territory for the duration of COP26 is shown centre/left – source Collective Commons License

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<sup>1</sup> “The Future Starts Here: Adventures in the twenty-first century” John Higgs, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> “The theory of the Anthropocene is based on the assumption that, due to the effects of increased population and economic development on the global environment, humanity should be considered a major geological and geobiological factor on Earth. Along with other scientists, Nobel Laureate Paul Crutzen, who coined the term, argued human-induced changes in the earth system were of such deep impact and long duration that one could speak of a new epoch in Earth’s history. In addition, the Anthropocene concept argues for a new, holistic view of the role of humans in shaping natural systems. As such, it does not follow only a declensionist narrative, but also points out the cultural, technological, and ecological achievements of human societies, as well as their potential in enabling the sustainable use of natural resources. Thus, the Anthropocene provides a more comprehensive perspective by highlighting all the possible impacts of humanity’s past, present, and future actions. Today, environmental scholars see the concept as a good approach to combining protective measures with mitigation and adaptation strategies in addressing global and regional change.” Environmental and Society Portal (Available at <http://www.environmentandsociety.org/tools/keywords/paul-crutzen-popularizes-concept-anthropocene>, accessed on 08 January 2020).

<sup>3</sup> World Population Prospects: The 2017 Revision, UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2019 (Available at <https://population.un.org/wpp/>, accessed 16 January 2020).

<sup>4</sup> See for example “Scotland’s Urban AGE, Aberdeen, Glasgow and Edinburgh in the century of the city”, Evans et al (Available at <https://www.burnesspaull.com/content/news/welcome-scotlands-urban-age>, accessed on 08 January 2020).

<sup>5</sup> ‘the Triumph of the City: How our greatest invention makes us richer, smarter, greener, healthier, and happier’, Edward L Glaeser, Macmillan, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Apocryphal ... possibly Patrick Geddes or Buckminster Fuller.

<sup>7</sup> A Planet of 3 Billion: Mapping Humanity's Long History of Ecological Destruction and Finding Our Way to a Resilient Future: A Global Citizen's Guide to Saving the Planet, Christopher K Tucker, 2019.

<sup>8</sup> ‘Towards a city-focused people-centred and integrated approach to the new urban agenda’, Evans et al, UN-Habitat, 2019. The Regional Report on the UNECE prepared for Habitat III, 2016

<sup>9</sup> The Death of Distance: How the Communications Revolution Is Changing Our Lives, Cairncross, F., The Economist, 1997

<sup>10</sup> “Scotland’s Urban AGE: Aberdeen, Glasgow & Edinburgh in the century of the city”, Evans, B. Lord, J. Robertson, M., The Glasgow Urban Laboratory and Burness Paull, 2018

<sup>11</sup> Grasping the Thistle, Walker, F.A. in Urban Identity: Learning from Place II, Evans, B.M. Macdonald, F. and Rudlin, D. (editors), Routledge 2011

<sup>12</sup> Conference of the Parties, the United Nations Climate Change Convention (UNFCCC). The COP is the supreme decision-making body of the Convention. All States that are Parties to the Convention are represented at the COP, at which they review the implementation of the Convention and any other legal instruments that the COP adopts and take decisions necessary to promote the effective implementation of the Convention, including institutional and administrative arrangements. A key task for the COP is to review the national communications and emission inventories submitted by Parties. Based on this information, the COP assesses the effects of the measures taken by Parties and the progress made in achieving the ultimate objective of the Convention. 2019 (Available at <https://unfccc.int/process/bodies/supreme-bodies/conference-of-the-parties-cop>, accessed 16 January 2020).

<sup>13</sup> ‘No Mean City’ the novel by H. Kingsley Long and Alexander McArthur and an account of life for the ‘hard men’ of Glasgow in the 1930s.

<sup>14</sup> Design with Nature Now, Steiner, F. Weller, R. McCloskey, K. and Fleming, B. (editors), The Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, 2019. See also ‘Design with Nature’, Roberts, A. LANDSCAPE, Issue 4 –2019.

<sup>15</sup> ‘A Quest for Life’, Ian L McHarg, 1996.