

What comes next for our cities? Building Back Better, not building the inevitable.

Brian Mark Evans

“Build back Better” is the phrase of the year. But better than what? And to what end? It is generally taken to mean better than where we were before COVID by using the recovery to enhance a few systemically broken issues in order to take us to a better place. But what ... or where ... is that?

COVID has had an immediate and visceral effect with potentially serious consequences for the individual. After a stumbling start as a result perhaps of inadequate emergency planning, the Scottish and UK Governments accelerated action, ran tests and got vaccinating. Along the way we reconfigured lots of city spaces to make them safer for people to physically distance and in so-doing developed a new Scottish urban aesthetic – the boardwalk – enabled through emergency and temporary roads regulations. In April 2020, after suggesting such a thing, I was told “that’ll never happen here” ... and then it did, after Paris and Milan showed the way and we saw the elegant ‘kit of parts’ designed by Vinnova, the Swedish Design Agency. This was followed in short order by “but it’s just temporary and will have to go” inflamed perhaps by a justifiable suspicion that this had been a space grab by dangerous fifth columnists ... cyclists, pedestrians and even ... environmentalists ... all intent on punishing the motorist to a chorus of the city centres will die. We’ll see.

Let’s take a step back and consider the pre-occupations of urbanists and designers. We’ll start with the proposition John Higgs makes in his book “Adventures in the 21st Century: The Future starts here”, ‘if we are to build the city of the future, we must first imagine it’ before he goes on to reflect on the consequences for our collective consciousness and mental health if the only futures we can imagine are apocalyptic and dystopian. In recent work for the Long Now Foundation of San Francisco, Peter Leyden looks at our times from a perspective 80 years out. He doesn’t try to imagine life in 2100, but instead creates the space to imagine back to 2020-2050. Leyden’s work is instructive for distinguishing between inexorable processes and the inevitability of their outcome and so in reflecting on Higgs’ concern that current trends will lead inevitably to apocalyptic dystopia, Leyden reminds us that, as the architects of the Anthropocene, Humanity has Agency that can influence the inevitability of the outcome. So as designers, as we imagine our way out of the pandemic, the big question is whether we can migrate the urgency of our collective response to COVID into the agency to act and influence the inexorable forces of extreme weather events and increased sea-levels as a result of ice-melt and warming oceans (described by Jeff Goodell in his book “The Water will come: Rising Seas, Shrinking Cities and the Remaking of the Civilised World”) to become the imperative to influence an otherwise inevitable and dystopian outcome.

To put this another way, WE can shift the needle away from apocalyptic dystopia to a more humane outcome through the intelligent harnessing of the current inexorable forces of change in a shift from utopian visions towards achievable, ecophilic ambitions. This is Kate Raworth territory of adjusting human existence to live between the two membranes expressed (in the somewhat unfortunately titled Doughnut Economics) as the ecological ceiling

(biodiversity loss and climate change) and the social foundation ('leave no one behind' – in the UN's words), where we work to minimise overshoot of the former and undershoot of the latter. No surprise then that David Attenborough puts this model front and centre in his witness statement *A Life on Our Planet*, nor that it is mentioned by Mark Carney (former Bank of England Governor and author of *Value[s]*).

The task ahead is daunting. Switching the energy source of cars and public transport from fossil fuels to electricity or hydrogen and introducing a circular economy is only the start. We need to retrofit and decarbonise ALL of our existing buildings – do away with gas ... and we need to deal with water. Not just the water coming down our rivers from increased rainfall and extreme weather events, but the water coming up our firths and sea-lochs from increased sea-levels which if Goodell and others are to be believed IS now inevitable. Most of the population of Scotland and UK lives on or near the coast or tidal waterways. All this and we have not opened the box of populations displaced by climate change. How then are we to afford this, how are we to imagine it, and how are we to exhort people to follow of their freewill and positively contribute. More emergency powers and regulations, without grants and financial incentives seems a big ask.

We will see what emerges from the G7 meeting this weekend and from COP26 in November. Scotland is gearing up. Earlier this month the David Hume Institute published "*A Scotland of Better Places*" with some big place-based propositions: Reconnecting the Scottish Government and Communities, Infrastructure in Place, Elastic Space, Reversing Fiscal Centralisation, Making Land Work more effectively, Building Homes, developing Community Capacities and Skills; and 'Thinking Enterprise'. Perhaps more encouraging was Deputy First Minister John Swinney's commitment at the launch that the Scottish Government intends to move away from a programme of 'portfolios and policy' to one of 'people and place' where delivery will be 'wrapped around the people of Scotland' rather than expecting them to adapt themselves to the delivery systems of Government Agencies and local authority service provision. It is encouraging and dead right to deconstruct strategic action to deal with demographic, climate and technological challenges to the level of dealing with quality of life and quality of place at what the policy wonks refer to as the granular, or community level. As John Swinney has suggested, we need to find a way to wrap all this around people. Work with them in their places and their lives. This will take some skill and insight. Developing programmes to tackle big picture targets through detailed programmes to improve Scotland's places by working with communities to enhance their inherent creative capacity and give people hope that the future can be a lot better than dystopia while delivering on climate and social justice. This means establishing the means to engage with people about the future of their places by having strategic programmes designed to be applied at the local level. That takes skill, belief and commitment from politicians and professionals alike.

This year's Scotland+Venice programme "*What if ...?/Scotland*" launched last month at V&A Dundee is intended to address the Biennale theme "*How will we live*" through 5 pilots projects across Scotland that seek to re-engage the civic role of design professionals by asking citizens from across Scotland to share their hopes and dreams for the future of the places they call

home. Big picture action played out at the community level of people and place? If properly resourced, if we engage the imagineers pouring out of our design schools ... and we trust them to get on with it ... will take courage and a hefty budget, but maybe, just maybe....

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