

We have the opportunity to reconfigure the beating heart of Glasgow – Interview with Brian Evans

Deborah Anderson, The Herald, 6 February 2022

It might have seemed unthinkable pre-covid to pull down a shopping centre that's just over 20 years old and for a city like Glasgow, known for its retail prowess, even a recipe for economic disaster.

However, as we emerge out of the pandemic that is exactly what is on the cards for Scotland's largest city as it begins to reconfigure itself. One of the country's largest development companies, Landsec, which operates Buchanan Galleries is looking to replace it with a £825million mixed-use urban neighbourhood creating new streets in the process.

However, while it might seem to some that Glasgow is turning its back on retail at a time when Edinburgh has recently opened the £1billion St James Quarter which will include a hotel, apartments, along with dozens of shops and restaurants, city council leader Susan Aitken recently said Glasgow can still be a leader in retail, but that there might just be a bit less of it.

Edinburgh City Council leader Adam McVey said they had progressed specific actions to help Princes Street which has been impacted more than anywhere else, by encouraging mixed use developments, such as ground floor food and drink alongside events and new experiences to draw people back. He said: "By re-shaping our planning policies to allow changes of use we can reflect what people want from their city centre, a strong mix of retail, leisure and hospitality for local people and those from further afield. "The opening of the new St James Quarter in the East End and the Johnnie Walker attraction in the West has marked the start of an exciting, and positive, period in Princes Street's changing landscape. Together with new uses for key buildings such as the Royal Over-Seas League building, the former BHS and Debenhams' shops, and the iconic Jenners department store."

City Urbanist Professor Brian Evans, whose role with Glasgow City Council is to contribute to the city's future development, said this wasn't a time for Glasgow to be fearful but we should be concerned the changes are done well.

Prof Evans said: "It is important to develop a better system for understanding our cities and towns so that they are better placed to work with the players who have access to the best advice available in terms of reconfiguring what they do."

Mr Evans is looking on the bright side for Glasgow and cites three major strategic project that will evolve and put the city in a strong position.

"Together with The Avenues Project, a new transportation strategy that will be published soon, and the redesign of George Square, we have the opportunity to reconfigure the beating heart of Glasgow and of a city region," he added.

"Quite rightly this causes people apprehension because they want to ensure we get it right but it is fantastic that there are so many people who wish to invest in the city and wish to do these things well. We all need to raise our game in terms of doing what we do, doing it better, more efficiently and understanding interactions. Post-pandemic, the cycle of demographic, climate and technological change is accelerating – so we need to work in real time with the consequences these bring.

Mr Evans says he believes that Scotland's key cities are not in competition and that the different cities play to their strengths.

“We have an urban system in Scotland where some that do better at some things and others excel in different ways and that is fortunate for the country,” he added.

“I am a big fan of looking at Glasgow in Edinburgh not just in a binary way but factoring in Aberdeen, Dundee, and the smaller cities and bigger towns. When you do that, you realise that St James’ came through slightly earlier in the cycle because key policies and investments were in place. Glasgow is now addressing many similar things. What this suggests to me is that the two cities are in a slightly different position in the cycle, but it doesn’t mean it’s a competition. I don’t think the cities see it that way either. I think that kind of rivalry is a thing of the past – today we’ve got a more focused understanding of the circumstances we find ourselves in. There are bigger things out there that should cause us pause for thought. There is the influence of Brexit on all of this which is largely hidden by the immediacy of Covid and some of the technological changes we are seeing and the ability to deal with climate change.”

Mr Evans says that the steps we take now could define the city for decades to come.

He added: “the M8 and modernist planning that defined us for decades, the Burrell Collection and European Capital of Culture set the tone for a generation. The unsung heroes in Glasgow are the community-based housing associations that have done extremely well. In the 22nd century, Glasgow has done as well, if not better, than any city in the UK in terms of social and affordable housing. It gave Glasgow an infrastructure of localism that is ideally placed to deal with some of the challenges that it faces today such as 20 minute neighbourhoods. If we are going to see great levels of investments in some major projects, it will define us for the next 30 to 40 years. We have got to hope that we get it right.”

This week Scotland’s retailers saw a slight improvement with more shoppers hitting the high streets on the back of working from home restrictions being lifted, but footfall remained down by a sixth on pre-pandemic levels.

And rather than Scotland’s retail hubs competing with one another for greater footfall, Ewan MacDonald-Russell, Scottish Retail Consortium Head of Policy, said the likes of Glasgow and Edinburgh both have something different to offer.

Mr MacDonald-Russell said: “Scotland is incredibly fortunate to have two flagship retail destinations in Edinburgh and Glasgow. The past two years have been tumultuous to say the least, and both cities have been clobbered hard by Covid and the associated restrictions and repeated government lockdowns. In particular, they have suffered from the prolonged absence of office workers, civil servants, tourists and students. Even so-called essential retailers in the city centres have lost out due to the collapse in footfall.”

He added that in the medium to long term both cities are likely to continue as retail destinations. “Both have an admirable variety of retail brands catering to consumers on everything from a tight budget to looking for a luxury splurge alongside vibrant hospitality and cultural attractions,” added Mr MacDonald-Russell.

“There are of course differences – Glasgow will continue to benefit from its strong transport links throughout central and western Scotland whilst Edinburgh has the opportunities awarded by its tourist trade. Even as shoppers continue to switch to digital options there will remain a desire to visit shops and high streets; both cities are likely to remain very popular destinations.”

And it is not just cities across Scotland that are looking to change, Scotland’s Towns Partnership (STP), the national body for Scotland’s town centres, believe towns need to repopulate themselves.

Chief Officer of STP Phil Prentice said city centres of the future are going to be about much more than simply shopping and echoed that sentiment for towns.

Mr Prentice said: “Successful, stronger, sustainable city centres will be those in which people live, work, shop and socialise. They will have distinct districts, with their own character and greenspaces. The proposals being discussed around Buchanan Galleries are a powerful demonstration of that.

“Glasgow - like other city centres - needs to be repopulated. The same is true for our towns. Having people living in them is the key to unlocking so much of the wider benefits, from reducing our carbon footprint to creating a sense of community and strong economic growth. People living there - in good quality, energy efficient homes - will spend their leisure time there too. The transformation of the Merchant City in recent years is a fantastic example of what can be achieved.

“With the footprint that retail needs reducing, it creates the potential to use those spaces to create new leisure and cultural venues and attractions, bringing with them better and richer experiences for residents and visitors.

“There are so many opportunities from which Glasgow can build to achieve all of this - from the success of its universities and the people they draw into the city, to expanding on the possibilities the land around the Clyde brings.

“The changing face of retail means that change has been coming for some time, but the impact of the coronavirus pandemic has been to accelerate that.

“In communities across Scotland, work is underway to reimagine how we best use our city and town centres to sustain jobs, build community wealth, embrace digital opportunities, tackle climate change, encourage active travel and so much more. At STP, we are doing all we can - through programmes like the Scotland Loves Local campaign - to help ensure that happens at pace.”