

# Architecture of Exchanges: Revealing the Regenerative Links between People, Places and Planet

Together **Dr May East, Heather Claridge, Chris Stewart, Sarah Shaw, Ben Wilson, Gina Colley, Alan Hendry, and Prof Brian Evans** urge us to design cities as if relationships were the infrastructure – because they are.

Urban planning has historically centred the able-bodied, working-age man as the 'neutral' urban user. This framing – implicit in zoning codes, transport systems, and public space design – has produced cities better suited to men than to women, girls, older people, people of all abilities, and diverse gender and ethnic identities. Though entrenched, this bias is not immutable.

Concepts such as gender-sensitive placemaking, feminist urbanism, and the gendered city are not passing trends but vital critiques of the lingering command-and-control legacy of post-war reconstruction and regulatory approaches to the built environment. Yet, addressing this historic imbalance requires more than replacing

one dominant perspective with another. Feminist planning widens the circle of care while challenging the myth of neutrality. It recognizes that human well-being is inseparable from planetary health, seeking interventions that enable everyone to thrive. Health, seen through this lens, is not merely the absence of illness but the vitality that arises from thriving relationships – between people, communities, places, and the ecosystems that sustain us.

## **Dialogue as Design Practice Between Women and Men**

Against this backdrop, the Architecture of Exchanges cohort set out to explore how deep dialogue and collective design can support



greener, more inclusive, healthier, and more poetic places to live.

Between March and May 2025, five structured workshops were held in Glasgow – self-declared as the UK's first 'Feminist City'. Each brought together panels of women and men from the public, private, and not-for-profit sectors, alongside UN representatives, contributing extensive expertise in the interdisciplinary nature of design.

Facilitation alternated between a woman and a man, with each workshop focusing on a specific theme: sense of place, active travel, green spaces, or safety. The dialogues, rooted in Glasgow's bio-cultural-spatial uniqueness, rejected universal 'solutions' in favour of context-sensitive approaches, recognising that regenerative trends emerge differently in each place.



#### **Four Gender-Sensitive Design Principles towards Healthier Cities**

What emerged was not a fixed blueprint but a living, evolving framework shaped by deep listening, storytelling, and the humility of unlearning.

##### **1. Safety as Prerequisite, Not Privilege**

Safety is not only a technological fix or policing issue but a relational and spatial condition. Design measures such as well-lit paths, clear sightlines, and welcoming public spaces encourage presence over surveillance. Cultivating safety through belonging is foundational to health: without it, women and girls in particular restrict movement, withdraw from public life, and face isolation. Safety, when designed in, enables physical activity, social connection, and mental wellbeing – making it as much a public health intervention as an urban one.

##### **2. Community-Centred and Playful Urbanism**

We design for what we prioritise. Urban design must place joy, care, and intergenerational connection at its centre. Invisible care labour – disproportionately carried by women – should be redistributed and recognised as central to improving the quality of urban space. Joy itself becomes a legitimate planning metric, with parks, streets, and front yards reimagined as places of laughter, music, and communal rituals for all ages, reducing loneliness and strengthening wellbeing. This principle rests on community protagonism empowering people to develop design thinking skills, shape their places and embed care into the everyday fabric of the city.

##### **3. Mobility Designed Around Life Rhythms**

Traditional transport systems privilege the commuter journey – home to work and back – while neglecting the complex, time-sensitive journeys of women, caregivers, elders and youth. Mobility must reflect varied daily rhythms, supported by safe, seamless, and affordable public transport at all hours. Walking and wheeling networks should promote active lifestyles, while benches, fountains, and trees encourage rest and reflection – designing for both movement and stillness.

##### **4. Nature as Rightsholder and Co-Designer**

Nature should be an active partner in urban design, not just a backdrop. Cities can nurture this partnership by integrating permeable soils, street trees, rain gardens, and fruit-bearing verges, creating spaces where nature thrives. Greenspaces support pollinators, play, and cultural activities while improving air quality, wellbeing, and longevity. Reconnecting with the natural world fosters a sense of reverence and offers profound benefits for both physical and mental health. Designing with nature strengthens planetary and human health alike, allowing urban and ecological systems to co-evolve over time.

***“Joy itself becomes a legitimate planning metric [...] reducing loneliness and strengthening wellbeing.”***

## Experiment in Practice: Choreography at ArchiFringe

The dialogue culminated at the 2025 ArchiFringe Festival, in a session titled 'Architecture of Exchanges: Feminist Urbanism as Choreography'. Part of Scotland's grassroots festival of ideas, ArchiFringe brings together architects, designers and communities to explore how the built environment is shaped by its social, political and cultural contexts. In this spirit, the session combined structured discussion with embodied movement. Furniture was constantly rearranged: intimate clusters, open circles, concentric rings – while women and men alternated as speakers and listeners, exploring what it means to design with women rather than for them. These choreographed movements created moments of attentiveness and vulnerability, offering a glimpse of a city designed through relationship rather than prescription.

## Toward Healthier, Gender-Sensitive Cities

The Architecture of Exchanges series does not end with fixed deliverables but with an invitation to reimagine cities as living, regenerative systems shaped by care, collaboration and interdependence. Grounded in Glasgow's uniqueness, it shows that healthy urban futures do not depend on grand investments or tokenistic gestures, but on sustained practices of listening, sharing and co-creating. Central to bringing together women and men to advance the vision of the feminist city is the need to redistribute power, balance representation, and transform planning systems toward cities that work for all.

Pictured: First page - Parc des Briggittines, Brussels; previous page - Deep listening, shared vulnerability, and unexpected moments of connection unfolded between women and men at ArchiFringe—reminding us that cities, like conversations, grow through trust; this page - The Architecture of Exchanges cohort in one of the curated sessions exercising co-evolving mutualism (missing Prof Brian Evans)

