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Street Furniture as an Assetizing Apparatus: Advertising Concessions, Public Maintenance and the Production of Neoliberal Urban Space in Glasgow

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ABSTRACT

Across British cities, everyday street infrastructure is increasingly sustained through revenue-generating concessions that detach maintenance from direct municipal budgets. This article examines how street furniture in Glasgow has been incrementally reorganized as an assetizing apparatus under prolonged austerity. Drawing on micro political-economic tracing of committee records, procurement documents and transport authority contracts, it shows how maintenance obligations are displaced from public budgets into advertising-funded income streams, standardized through procurement and consolidated through concessionary portfolios. Rather than a sudden privatization of public space, assetization emerges as an accretive institutional process operating through commensuration, bundling and contractual duration. The article argues that low-visibility infrastructures such as bus shelters are key sites where neoliberal urban governance is rendered durable, binding everyday public space to market performance while narrowing democratic contestation over public responsibility.

摘要

在英国各个城市当中，日常街道基础设施日益依靠产生收入的特许经营安排来维系，维护由此脱离了市政预算的直接拨款。本文考察在当前英国城市治理的长期紧缩主义政策之下，格拉斯哥的街道家具如何被逐步重组为一种资产化装置。通过对委员会记录、采购文件与交通管理机构合同的微观政治经济追踪，本文展示维护义务如何从公共预算转移至由广告资助的收入流，经采购程序得以标准化，并通过特许经营组合得到巩固。公共空间的私有化与资产化并不是在一瞬间发生的，而是一种经由可通约化、捆绑与合同期限运作的累积性制度过程。我认为，公交候车亭这类低可见度基础设施，是新自由主义城市治理获得持久性的关键场所:它们将日常公共空间系于市场表现，同时收窄了围绕公共责任的民主争辩空间。

1 | Introduction

Across British cities under conditions of neoliberal fiscal constraint, the provision and upkeep of mundane street infrastructure—bus shelters, benches, wayfinding posts, lighting columns and the frames that carry advertising—have increasingly been reorganized through contractual arrangements that detach everyday maintenance from direct municipal budget lines (De Magalhães 2010; Iveson 2011). In cities such as Glasgow, where long-term deindustrialization, austerity governance and entrepreneurial restructuring have converged, these arrangements have become routine mechanisms through which local authorities sustain basic amenities 'at no cost to the council' (GCC 2024a, 2). Often presented as technical or managerial responses to budgetary pressure (De Magalhães and Freire Trigo 2017), such shifts mark a deeper transformation in urban governance. As maintenance becomes reliant on revenue-generating and concessionary arrangements, public space itself is progressively

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reworked as a conditional, income-dependent infrastructure. The capacity to maintain everyday environments—where people wait, rest, navigate and gather—becomes tied to market performance rather than public obligation (Wang 2026b), with direct implications for spatial justice and urban citizenship. Street furniture is nonetheless treated in much public debate as neutral background or technical equipment, even though it is a site where political decisions about responsibility, obligation and entitlement are materially fixed (Heathcote 2022; Herring 2016; Wang 2026c). Encountered daily and at the scale of the body, such objects appear politically unremarkable, a quality that helps naturalize their changing governance arrangements and obscure their distributive effects. Grasping how such objects are converted into revenue-bearing assets therefore requires an account that connects macro-level fiscal restructuring to the contractual and administrative work through which it is fixed in the material fabric of the street.

Three lines of scholarship bear on this task. The first is urban political economy and radical human geography, which have developed powerful accounts of cities as strategic sites of capitalist accumulation, crisis management and state restructuring. Foundational work has shown how urbanization operates as a spatial fix for capital (Harvey 1985), how neoliberalization unfolds unevenly through localized institutional experimentation (Brenner and Theodore 2002), and how state power is rescaled through urban governance (Brenner 2004). Scholarship on austerity and regulatory capitalism further demonstrates that fiscal scarcity functions not as a temporary interruption but as a governing formation, displacing political decisions into contractual, audited and performance-based frameworks (Peck 2012; Raco 2014). More recent work on local-government financialization identifies concrete channels—outsourcing, revenue substitution, asset-based strategies and debt management—through which financial logics are assembled within everyday municipal practice (Beswick and Penny 2018; Hasenberger 2024).

A second line carries these concerns to the scale of everyday urban life. Tonkiss (2013) finds a makeshift urbanism in the interstices of the post-crisis city, small spatial incursions seeking 'durability through the temporary'. Arampatzi (2017) follows the 'struggle communities' of crisis-era Athens, where everyday solidarity becomes contentious spatial politics. In Oaxaca, routine adaptations to insecurity, care networks and adapted mobilities turn political as they reach beyond the neighbourhood into the competitive city (Jenss 2024); in post-war Beirut, checkpoints, traffic and the daily politics of movement organize power and class (Monroe 2016); and in the Reykjavík capital area after 2008, overbuilt landscapes stand as economic crisis rendered concrete (Mathiesen 2014). Together, these studies make the everyday a primary scale for the analysis of austerity; their vantage point is chiefly that of inhabitants and their practices.

A third line takes street furniture itself as its object. Urban design history and public realm studies have treated street furniture as an index of civic ambition and institutional responsibility, particularly within the post-war welfare state, where design governance and standardization were tied to democratic accessibility and municipal care (Herring 2016; Stamp 1989, 2008). Practice-oriented and material culture approaches further show how mundane objects acquire political significance through use, maintenance, neglect and contestation (Benediktsson 2022; Wang 2026b). Research on outdoor advertising moves closer to the institutional terrain by linking street furniture to governance arrangements through which public space is monetized and visibility allocated (Cronin 2000; Iveson 2011; McCarthy 2001). More recent work on smart street furniture extends these concerns to digital infrastructures, attending to the data relations and public imaginaries that smart kiosks and benches carry into the street (Gangneux et al. 2022; Humphry et al. 2022).

These lines clarify, in turn, why fiscal constraint restructures urban governance, how restructuring is lived at street level, and what street furniture has meant as design, politics and media. The process through which such objects are converted into revenue-dependent infrastructure runs across all three yet sits at the centre of none: it figures as one channel among several in accounts of local-government financialization, as a background condition in studies of everyday austerity, and as context in histories of design and advertising. This article places that process at the centre of analysis. It treats budget withdrawal, cost neutrality, risk redistribution and income-contingent maintenance as the concrete mechanisms through which neoliberal urban governance acquires material form, and it approaches the everyday from the institutional side, through the routine committee papers, procurement notices and contracts in which the local state writes austerity into the streetscape. Three questions guide the inquiry. Through what institutional and contractual mechanisms are maintenance obligations displaced from municipal budgets into revenue-bearing arrangements? How are these arrangements stabilized and rendered durable over time? And with what consequences for the spatial and distributive organization of public space?

To answer them, this study takes Glasgow, an emblematic site of post-industrial restructuring and prolonged austerity governance, as its empirical setting and redefines street furniture as an assetizing apparatus. Analytical attention concentrates on bus shelters, advertising panels and pedestrian wayfinding systems, the elements of the streetscape most consistently entangled with revenue generation in the documentary record. In this framing, street furniture is understood as a material and contractual arrangement through which local authorities, under conditions of fiscal constraint, reorganize public obligation: maintenance is rendered deliverable without direct budgetary allocation, in exchange for granting access to the street as a revenue-generating resource. The analysis situates advertising-funded and smart street furniture within a longer trajectory of neoliberal urban governance and fiscal adaptation, focusing on how revenue logic becomes an infrastructural precondition stabilized through procurement design, contract duration and performance regimes. By foregrounding Glasgow, the study shows how assetization unfolds incrementally through commensuration, bundling and contractual techniques that redistribute responsibility, risk and value over time, and how this process reshapes the material conditions of everyday urban life.

Methodologically, the paper advances a micro political-economic tracing approach grounded in the analysis of publicly available governmental records, read relationally to reconstruct how responsibility, value and durability are organized through contractual form. The argument unfolds as follows. Section 2 develops

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the conceptual framework, drawing together scholarship on assetization, on the funding and maintenance of infrastructure and on austerity and the everyday. Section 3 anchors the analysis in Glasgow and reconstructs the British shelter-advertising economy that forms its institutional baseline. Section 4 sets out the methodology. Section 5 presents the analysis in three phases: an uneven opening of assetization in the 2000s, a stabilization problem in the 2010s and a hardening of the apparatus in the 2020s. Section 6 draws out the implications for austerity governance and local statecraft.

2 | From Design Reception to Institutional Tracing: Conceptualizing the Assetizing Apparatus

Research on street furniture has traditionally worked within the governance conditions of the Keynesian welfare state, reading objects through production and reception: design standards, aesthetic regulation and everyday use (Cullen 1961; Herring 2016; Stamp 1989). Herring's account of post-war Britain exemplifies the approach, reconstructing street furniture as a state-led design project whose decisions were publicly articulated, institutionally visible and open to political and professional contestation (Herring 2016; Nairn 2025). Two shifts have since undermined the conditions on which such analysis relied. Concession-based delivery moves design, costing and justification behind commercial confidentiality, and the governing logic of provision has tilted from welfare towards financial performance, with objects increasingly required to sustain themselves through advertising, data extraction or bundled services (Dagdeviren 2024; Fuller 2018). Street furniture governed in this way calls for concepts. This section assembles them from three bodies of work: scholarship on assetization, on the funding and maintenance of infrastructure and on austerity and the everyday.

2.1 | Assetization and Financialization

The concept of assetization describes the transformation of things into assets: objects of ownership and control that yield durable income streams and are managed with a view to future returns (Birch and Muniesa 2020; Christophers 2020). Recent syntheses distinguish assetization from financialization. Financialization concerns the growing weight of financial markets, instruments and actors in economic life; assetization, by contrast, directs attention to the practical work through which revenue-bearing qualities are constructed and attached to particular objects (Golka et al. 2024). Much of what councils do under fiscal constraint involves no securitization, leverage or sale of public assets. The relevant question is therefore on the assetization side: how public infrastructure is administratively and contractually reorganized so that it can sustain calculable and durable revenue streams.

Valuation scholarship and infrastructure studies identify three operations through which this reorganization proceeds. The first is commensuration, the transformation of different qualities into a common metric, which Espeland and Stevens (1998) analyse as a foundational instrument of modern administration and which assetization studies place at the origin of any calculable asset (Birch and Muniesa 2020). Commensuration is what allows a dispersed population of shelters, panels and posts to be tendered, valued and governed as a single stock. The second is bundling. Research on infrastructure finance shows that the qualities making infrastructure investable are organizational achievements: heterogeneous elements are configured into unified contractual objects whose income-bearing components carry their loss-making obligations (O'Neill 2019). Street furniture concessions, which combine shelters, panels and public conveniences within a single agreement, have long exemplified this form (Iveson 2011). The third is contractual duration. Assets are constituted by capitalizing expected future income (Birch and Muniesa 2020; Christophers 2020), and long contract terms are what stabilize those expectations, converting years of anticipated advertising revenue into a present resource against which obligations can be discharged. Work on the funding, financing and governance of urban infrastructure clarifies what these operations reorganize (Coutard and Florentin 2024; O'Brien et al. 2019; Pike et al. 2019). Financing raises capital to build; funding settles who ultimately pays for provision and upkeep (O'Brien et al. 2019). Advertising-funded street furniture operates on the funding side: advertising income is installed where a maintenance budget would otherwise stand. Each of these operations is an ordinary act of administration, yet their cumulative effect is far from ordinary. Long-duration exclusivity turns municipal geography into a long-lived revenue container, and public obligation is redefined incrementally, through mundane contractual decisions of exactly the kind Harvey (2005) identifies as characteristic of neoliberalization, advancing without overt ideological rupture. Nor do such arrangements assemble themselves: scholarship on financialized city statecraft shows local states acting as contract designers, market participants and risk managers in the process (Beswick and Penny 2018; Hasenberger 2024; Pike et al. 2019). Assetization, on this reading, is a mode of statecraft available to authorities that retain ownership of infrastructure while lacking the budgets to sustain it.

2.2 | Contract, Maintenance and the Reorganization of Public Obligation

Within this mode of statecraft the contract is the central instrument. Contracts translate political obligations into specified, auditable deliverables; they allocate responsibility and risk between public authorities and private operators; and they fix these allocations across time spans that exceed electoral and budgetary cycles (Power 1997; Raco 2014). A contract in this sense bears power over the built environment. It determines which objects are provided and replaced, the standard to which they are kept, the conditions under which their upkeep continues, and the consequences when revenue falls short. Research on regulatory capitalism shows how such delivery frameworks relocate political decisions into technical domains of procurement scoring, compliance and performance management (Raco 2014).

Maintenance requires equal conceptual attention. Infrastructure studies treat maintenance as the continuous labour through which sociotechnical systems are held together, a labour that becomes visible mainly upon breakdown (Coutard and Florentin 2024; Graham and Thrift 2007; Star 1999). Folkers (2017) describes public infrastructure as existential

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provision, the technopolitical arrangement through which the material preconditions of collective life are secured. The institutional status of maintenance is therefore diagnostic. Whether upkeep figures as a public obligation discharged through budgets, as a delegated service purchased from contractors, or as a contingent output conditional on income reveals how public responsibility is constituted at a given moment.

Movement between these statuses redistributes risk alongside responsibility. When maintenance is funded from advertising revenue, exposure to media-market volatility is written into the upkeep of public space. Contracts manage this exposure through guarantees, revenue shares and portfolio construction; they cannot eliminate it, and their design settles who absorbs it. Risk redistribution, the intensification of revenue extraction and the progressive hardening of contractual form thereby become analytical objects in their own right, observable in procurement language and committee records.

2.3 | Everyday Infrastructures and the Uneven Spaces of Austerity

Tonkiss (2013) describes a makeshift urbanism of provisional, low-cost spatial arrangements that acquire durability under austerity because nothing arrives to replace them. Arampatzi (2017) traces the everyday politics of solidarity structures in crisis-era Athens. Jenss (2024) develops the notion of everyday scalar politics to show how ordinary practices of adaptation in Oaxaca connect neighbourhood life to the multi-scalar pressures of the competitive city. Monroe (2016) demonstrates how mobility and infrastructure organize power in the everyday spaces of Beirut, and Mathiesen (2014) reads the Icelandic built environment as a materialization of financial crisis. Across these settings, the everyday emerges as the scale at which macro-economic transformation is mediated, absorbed and sometimes contested.

Assetization also has its everyday spatial signature. Harvey's account of uneven geographical development holds that the costs and benefits of crisis-driven restructuring are distributed selectively across the urban fabric (Harvey 2001, 2005). Revenue capacity varies across a city, and so does the symbolic value that authorities seek to protect. Converting public amenities into revenue-bearing assets therefore involves locational choices about where commercial infrastructure is placed and which spaces are shielded from it; I call this selective geography of conversion an uneven opening of assetization. These choices redistribute visual burden and civic benefit across neighbourhoods, and they can be expected to track existing patterns of privilege and deprivation.

Based on the above arguments, I approach the same mediation from the institutional side. Its everyday is the administrative everyday of committee papers, procurement notices, agency agreements and contract schedules, the routine documents through which fiscal pressure is fixed in material form. The two perspectives meet at the built environment. Contractual decisions configure the material conditions under which waiting, resting and navigating occur, and the practices studied in the everyday austerity literature unfold within infrastructures whose funding and upkeep are settled in documents of this kind. Tonkiss' account of the makeshift can be extended accordingly. Local states themselves govern in a makeshift mode under scarcity: income contracts are institutional improvisations that promise provision without expenditure, and their durability converts a temporary fix into a settled feature of governance. The organizational inventiveness that scholars observe in austerity governance belongs to this register (Peck 2012; Tonkiss 2013).

3 | Case and Background: Glasgow and the British Shelter-Advertising Economy

The empirical analysis focuses on Glasgow, Scotland's largest city and a longstanding site of industrial restructuring and neoliberal governance reform. Over the 20th century, Glasgow experienced successive phases of welfare-state provision followed by early and sustained post-industrial adjustment, entrepreneurial governance and austerity-driven adaptation. Urban scholarship has consistently treated the city as a paradigmatic case for examining the reworking of state–market relations, particularly in relation to regeneration, housing and fiscal constraint (McIntyre and McKee 2008; Traill 2021).

More recent studies emphasize that Glasgow's urban landscape is characterized by institutional volatility. Appeals to participation and local responsibility have often functioned as techniques of responsibilization, redistributing obligations downwards, whereas material resources remain constrained (Kearns et al. 2024; McIntyre and McKee 2008). In this context, the maintenance of everyday urban environments increasingly depends on hybrid arrangements combining public authority, private operators and commercial logics.

Thus, Glasgow functions as an analytical anchor that allows the reconstruction of institutional chains in sufficient empirical detail. By tracing how street furniture provision is organized within a specific governance context, shaped by fiscal pressure, transport governance and longstanding engagement with outdoor advertising, the micro political-economic analysis is grounded in a traceable setting while remaining analytically transferable to other neoliberal urban contexts in the UK and across the global North.

Glasgow's street-furniture regime took shape within a British model whose outlines can be reconstructed from regulatory, parliamentary and industry sources. The exchange of advertising rights for the provision and upkeep of shelters dates to the early 1970s, when Adshel began offering local authorities shelters at no charge in return for advertising rights (Financial Times 2009). The fiscal crises of that decade created incentives for off-budget solutions in domains deemed peripheral to core welfare provision, and the arrangement normalized a contractual logic through which a civic maintenance obligation could be discharged via a privately organized revenue stream (Tomlinson 2001; UK Parliament 1999). By the 1980s, the exchange had hardened into routine metropolitan practice. In 2005, Transport for London framed its bus-shelter deal as a concession over advertising space coupled to the maintenance and design of street furniture across much of its network, and the contractual form had become a scalable template for metropolitan infrastructure (Transport for London 2005).

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The template operated within a durable regime of containment. Outdoor advertising in Britain has long been regulated in terms of amenity and public safety, leaving the underlying exchange of advertising rights for infrastructure largely uncontested (Greenhalgh 2021; Scottish Government 2014; Town and Country Planning Act 1990). Revenue remained anchored to a narrow family of objects, principally bus shelters and six-sheet panels, whereas signage, lighting and other civic systems continued to be governed through public provision and the design standards inherited from the post-war welfare state (Herring 2016). The Office of Fair Trading's market study found local-authority contracts concentrated in small-format sites, many 'agreed in the 1990s without a tender process', 'of long duration, in some cases exceeding 20 years' and with Clear Channel and JCDecaux between them holding 'virtually all local authority contracts' for such sites (OFT 2011, 6). The arrangement was proto-assetizing. Exclusivity and duration locked in sites and stabilized income streams, converting municipal geography into a revenue container, whereas the containment regime limited how far this logic could generalize across the street environment (Iveson 2011; OFT 2011).

Glasgow entered the 2000s firmly inside this economy. JCDecaux secured the city's bus-shelter contract following a competitive and legally contested tender (Marketing Week 2000), and municipal records from the early and mid-2000s treat shelter-advertising agreements as routine transport contracts, whereas signage, lighting columns and other public design systems remained conventional objects of procurement and capital allocation (GCC 2004, 2006). The baseline for the analysis is a commercially embedded yet typologically contained shelter economy, in which advertising funded specific infrastructures without organizing public design decision-making as a whole.

In the years that followed, the national policy environment offered maintenance no new support. Central intervention continued to arrive as competitive, project-based funding: the levelling up agenda and its successor, the Pride in Place programme, are only the most recent instances of centrally orchestrated capital allocation for visible regeneration, awarded place by place (HM Government 2022; MHCLG 2025). Scotland added its own layer, from the statutory community-empowerment framework and the Place Principle to the Glasgow City Region City Deal's infrastructure fund (Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015; Glasgow City Region 2014; Scottish Government 2019). What these instruments share is a bias towards capital projects and away from recurrent expenditure: they build and refurbish, but they do not fund the routine upkeep of what already stands. Maintenance therefore remained exposed to shrinking revenue budgets, and it is precisely this exposure that advertising concessions promise to relieve. Everything traced in the remainder of this article unfolds from this baseline and within this funding environment. The next section introduces the methods through which I reconstruct these two decades of change.

4 | Methodology: Micro Political-Economic Tracing

This study advances a micro political-economic tracing approach grounded in systematic analysis of the publicly available records through which everyday public design is governed. The method reconstructs how street furniture is rendered fiscally viable and institutionally durable under austerity, through procurement form, contractual duration and performance regimes. Administrative and contractual records are approached as organizational artefacts that formalize categories of responsibility and legitimacy and that enact governance through technical language and procedural requirements (Atkinson and Coffey 2011; Prior 2003).

4.1 | Data Sources and Documentary Corpus

The corpus combines primary governmental records with supplementary contextual materials, assembled to reconstruct how street furniture is authorized, procured, maintained and justified over time; the primary corpus spans 2004 to 2026. The distinction reflects analytical function: primary materials constitute the formal sites through which governance arrangements are enacted, whereas supplementary materials situate, clarify and interrogate those arrangements.

Primary materials include council and committee minutes and reports, public procurement documentation (contract notices and award records), transport authority reports and inter-agency agreements, read relationally and alongside the planning and advertisement-control legislation that defines the permissible scope of street-furniture provision. Committee documentation captures how fiscal pressures, service obligations and policy priorities are articulated and authorized, whereas procurement and inter-agency records specify how these priorities are operationalized through contractual form, most notably via service bundling, risk allocation, performance requirements and contract duration.

Supplementary materials include selective use of media reporting, supplier communications and Freedom of Information responses, used cautiously as reference points for contextualizing market conditions and for probing ambiguities or silences within official documentation (Lee 2005; Luscombe and Walby 2017). Across the corpus, documents are treated as elements within administrative chains through which governance is authorized, operationalized and reviewed, rather than as transparent records of decision-making.

4.2 | Analytical Procedure: Tracing, Coding and Periodization

Analysis reconstructs change over time as a sequence of incremental institutional adjustments and connects these adjustments to broader political-economic conditions, showing how fiscal pressures and governance rationalities are translated into durable arrangements at the level of everyday infrastructure. Three iterative operations structure the procedure: coding, chain reconstruction and periodized synthesis.

Coding: The corpus is first navigated through a keyword-led reading strategy oriented to contractual and administrative terms with institutional consequences, including *no budget*, *income generated*, *guaranteed income*, *maintenance*,

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performance, *risk*, *concession*, *advertising rights*, *ownership* and *asset*. Documents are coded by institutional source (e.g., council committees, transport authorities, procurement portals) and by decision type (authorization, procurement, implementation, review). Coding is initially descriptive, capturing what obligations these terms define, to which actors they assign responsibility, and what conditions they attach to provision, before moving towards more focused analytical categories as patterns stabilize (Charmaz 2014; Saldaña 2015).

Chain reconstruction: Coded materials are then ordered chronologically and read relationally to reconstruct delivery chains linking fiscal problematization to concrete governance arrangements: committee records are read against procurement notices and awards and inter-agency agreements alongside municipal documentation, to trace how budgetary pressures are translated into procurement form and how responsibility, risk and durability are settled through bundling, contract duration and monitoring. Particular attention is paid to moments of disruption, such as single-bid tenders, renegotiations or market contraction, because these moments reveal the political-economic conditions that contractual arrangements are designed to absorb and stabilize.

Periodized synthesis: Finally, reconstructed chains are grouped into historical phases to identify shifts in contractual vocabulary, governance arrangements and fiscal reasoning over time. Periodization functions as an analytical device linking micro-level institutional adjustments to wider transformations in urban political economy: within each phase, documentary evidence is synthesized into the mechanisms through which maintenance is rendered fiscally viable and politically normalized, including cost-neutrality premises, revenue guarantees, risk transfer, bundled service delivery and performance regimes.

Applied to the Glasgow corpus, this procedure yields the three phases: an uneven opening of assetization in the 2000s, a stabilization problem in the 2010s, and a hardening of the apparatus in the 2020s. Each phase is presented through the same sequence. A fiscal conjuncture establishes the conditions under which municipal decisions are taken; documentary chains reconstruct how those conditions are translated into contractual arrangements; and a closing synthesis names the mechanisms at work.

4.3 | Contribution and Limits

Methodologically, the study formalizes a replicable approach for analysing everyday public design as a site of political economy. By shifting attention from design reception to documentary chains of procurement, maintenance and contractual governance, the method complements macro accounts of neoliberal urbanism by specifying the micro-material mechanisms through which fiscal rationalities are enacted and stabilized in ordinary objects. Its limits are clear. Documentary analysis privileges formally articulated governance arrangements and under-represents informal negotiation, tacit practice and lived experience, whereas partial disclosure and commercial sensitivity constrain access to detailed financial information. The corpus also excludes key informant interviews with council officers, transport authority staff and operators; such perspectives are a priority for future research, although commercial confidentiality limits how far interviews could reach the contractual specifics reconstructed here from the public record. These limits do not undermine the analysis because the study is concerned precisely with how public obligation is formally constituted, justified and rendered durable; within that scope, the documentary record provides an appropriate and sufficient basis for tracing how responsibility, revenue logic and maintenance are reorganized over time.

5 | Street Furniture as an Assetizing Apparatus: Glasgow in Three Phases

Building on the tracing approach set out above, the analysis examines how street-furniture governance in Glasgow is reconfigured over time through successive adjustments in funding, procurement and contractual form. The three phases are cumulative: arrangements assembled in one period become the conditions and constraints of the next. Each subsection opens with the fiscal conjuncture, reconstructs the documentary chains and closes by naming the mechanisms at work.

5.1 | The Uneven Opening of Assetization: Civic Design Under Fiscal Strain (2000s)

By the mid-2000s, Glasgow's street-furniture regime remained institutionally contained within the object-specific arrangements described before. Advertising-funded shelters were a mature and commercially embedded practice, but they operated alongside publicly financed systems of civic design, signage and maintenance. Advertising had not yet become a generalized economic condition for the provision of street furniture or public realm infrastructure. It is against this baseline of containment that the significance of the period surrounding the global financial crisis must be understood. What unfolds between the mid-2000s and 2008 is not a sudden conversion of street furniture into revenue infrastructure, but a gradual loosening of institutional boundaries under mounting fiscal strain—an opening through which assetization becomes thinkable, if not yet fully operational. The deepening crisis then carried that opening into practice.

The fiscal conjuncture of this phase is the deterioration surrounding the financial crisis of 2007–2008. The crisis exerted acute pressure on public finances across the UK, and signs of stress were evident before its most dramatic moments. Economic growth slowed sharply, with UK GDP growth falling to just 0.2% in the second quarter of 2008, the weakest performance since the mid-2000s (UK Parliament 2008). Fiscal projections deteriorated in parallel: government budget statements show the projected deficit widening from approximately £34 billion in 2007 to £43 billion in 2008, signalling tightening conditions even prior to the banking collapse (HM Treasury 2007, 2008). These shifts formed the macro-economic backdrop against which subnational governments were required to plan service provision.

In Scotland, the scope for fiscal manoeuvre at devolved and local levels was already constrained. Audit Scotland records indicate that although the Scottish Government's net resource budget rose in nominal terms from £25.7 billion in 2006–2007 to £28.2

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billion in 2007–2008, underspends remained marginal—around 1%—suggesting limited slack even before the downturn intensified (Audit Scotland 2009). This constraint translated rapidly into local-government pressure, with capital expenditure falling by approximately 11% between 2008–2009 and 2010–2011 (Audit Scotland 2011). Capital-intensive domains such as public realm maintenance, renewal and street infrastructure were particularly exposed.

Glasgow entered this period with especially fragile fiscal resilience. Its post-industrial legacy and longstanding regeneration commitments sustained high expenditure demands, whereas revenue growth remained constrained. Council financial monitoring reports in the immediate aftermath of the crisis record a sharp contraction in available resources. By 2009–2010, GCC's capital investment programme registered a £41.3 million reduction in income, explicitly identifying pressure on the revenue side of capital financing (GCC 2009). Although this figure postdates the 2008 committee discussions analysed below, it indicates the direction and scale of fiscal stress already anticipated as the crisis unfolded.

Against this tightening backdrop, the institutional significance of the 2007–2008 wayfinding and advertising arrangement becomes visible. In August 2007, Clear Channel Outdoor announced that it had been awarded a long-term contract to supply and maintain street furniture in Glasgow. The contract covered more than 300 advertising panels on free-standing units across the city, alongside a pedestrian tourist sign system incorporating more than 200 map and information panels and finger posts (Clear Channel Outdoor 2007). The company framed the scheme through the language of urban renewal, legibility and integrated street-furniture design, presenting Glasgow as a major European city whose public realm could be enhanced through a coordinated wayfinding strategy (Clear Channel Outdoor 2007). Yet, this civic-design programme was tied from the outset to a substantial advertising estate.

The Council minutes from the following year make this relationship clearer. In 2006/2007, the Corporate Management Team had agreed to review the Council's advertising initiatives 'with the aim of maximising revenue opportunities, increasing the design quality of displays' and pursuing the replacement of the existing pedestrian tourism signs with 'a new system funded through advertising income' (GCC 2008, 293). By August 2008, the new signage system was due for installation by the end of the year, 'financed through advertising displays in the periphery of the city centre, outwith conservation areas' (GCC 2008, 293). The arrangement can therefore be understood as a spatial and financial bargain: public orientation, tourist legibility and design quality were secured in one part of the city through the commercialization of another.

This configuration marks an early and precise opening of assetization, and its instrument was bundling: the civic-design benefit of maps, information panels and finger posts was packaged with a revenue-bearing advertising estate in a single long-term contract. The 'free' provision of public design was therefore not free in spatial terms. Its cost was transferred from the municipal budget to the visual and commercial reorganization of particular streets. Street furniture became the material hinge through which fiscal pressure, urban design, heritage management and advertising revenue were brought into a single operational arrangement.

Financing the pedestrian tourist signage system through advertising displays outside conservation areas indicates that advertising was understood as potentially disruptive to the visual coherence of protected urban space. Where advertising may appear, and where it may not, is itself an exercise of urban governance (Iveson 2011). The exclusion, however, was simultaneously a redistribution. As Figure 1 shows, conservation areas were concentrated in the city's most symbolically valuable central districts, precisely where Glasgow's civic image, tourist movement and higher-value urban consumption were most intensely organized. They could receive improved wayfinding while remaining insulated from the commercial surfaces that financed it.

The contradiction becomes much sharper when this map is read together with the geography of deprivation. As Figure 2 shows, areas with deprivation rates above 20% were concentrated in large parts of the east, north, south-west and inner peripheral areas of the city. Set against the conservation map, the contrast is stark: the districts most protected from advertising were also those most protected symbolically and economically, whereas many of the areas more exposed to advertising infrastructure were those already marked by concentrated deprivation.

This is the central contradiction disclosed by the images. The residents and users of the most privileged parts of the city encountered wayfinding as civic care, urban hospitality and navigational clarity. Those in the poorest parts encountered the material condition that made this possible: illuminated advertising, free-standing panels and the incremental conversion of public surfaces into revenue-bearing assets (cf. Monroe 2016, on the class-differentiated experience of urban infrastructure). Put more bluntly, the better-off and better-protected parts of Glasgow were allowed to enjoy good design, whereas poorer districts were made to look at the advertisements that paid for it.

Harvey's account of uneven geographical development situates this arrangement. Crisis-driven urban restructuring proceeds through selective spatial fixes in which the costs and benefits of accumulation are distributed unevenly across the urban fabric (Harvey 2001, 2005). Glasgow's early assetization did not commercialize the city centre uniformly. It protected the symbolic value of the centre by shifting the commercial infrastructure of funding towards its less protected edges, drawing on central flows of tourists, students, shoppers and workers while externalizing part of the visual burden onto streets whose residents and users had less access to the protective languages of heritage, conservation and civic prestige. Austerity reaches the street by descent. It is downloaded first onto the local governments least able to refuse it (Peck 2012); within the city, it descends again, settling on neighbourhoods where disadvantage has already gathered (Jenss 2024). The advertising geography of 2007–2008 was its final step, fixed in street furniture.

The 2007–2008 arrangement therefore marks an uneven opening of assetization within an inherited civic-design regime.

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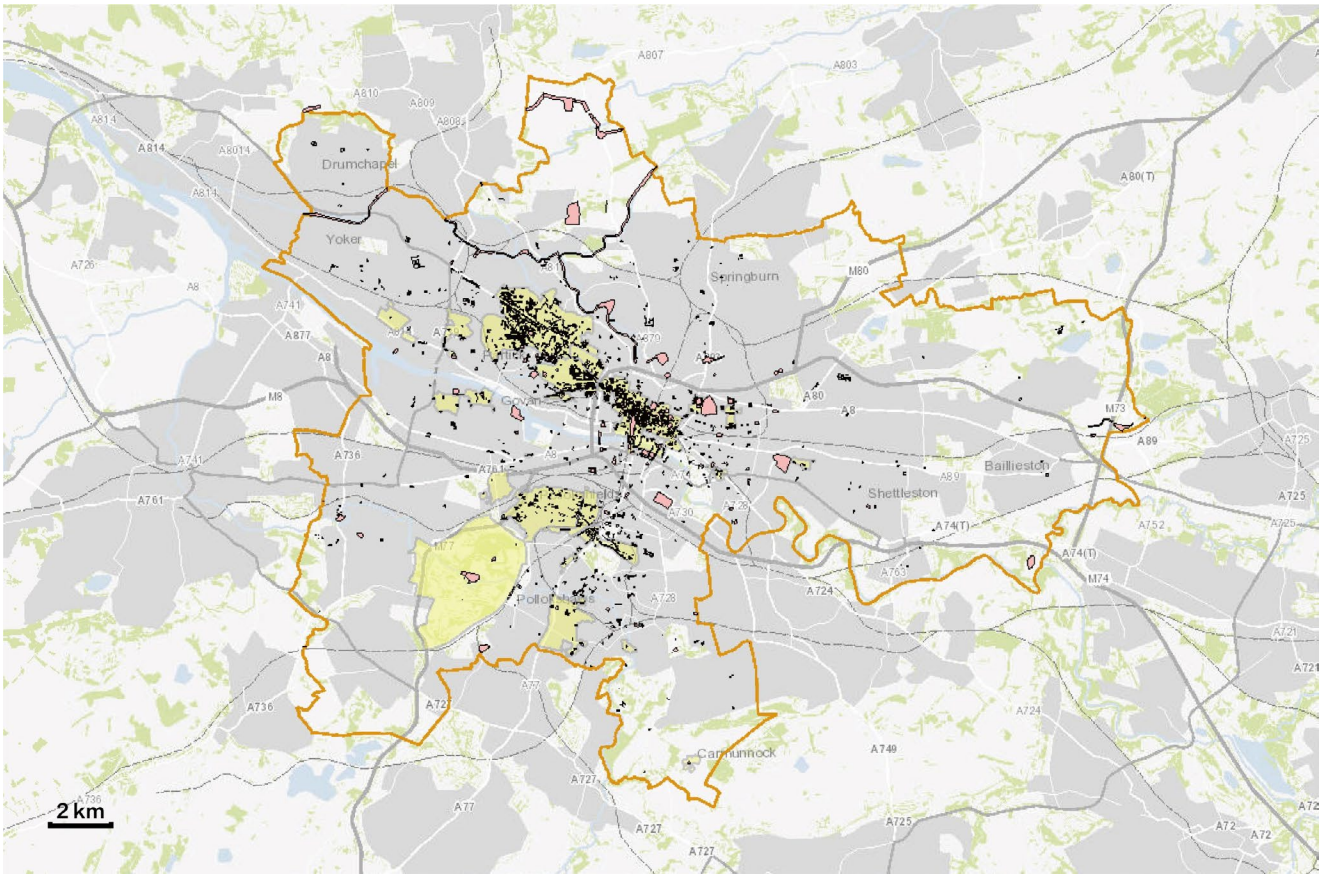


FIGURE 1 | Spatial distribution of conservation areas and listed buildings in Glasgow. The city boundary is shown in orange; green areas indicate conservation areas and pink areas denote listed buildings. *Source:* Author's mapping based on Glasgow City Council GIS data and Glasgow Open Data Portal.

Public design was preserved through a new fiscal and spatial mediation: the values of legibility, design quality and civic presentation remained rhetorically intact, whereas their material conditions were reorganized through advertising income and the selective allocation of commercial surfaces. Assetization first appears here as a distributive mechanism. It translated fiscal pressure into spatial differentiation, delivering design improvement to some places and assigning others the task of financing it, in patterns legible in the juxtaposition of Figures 1 and 2. It also prepared the ground for the following decade, when income contracts would move commensuration and the redistribution of risk to the centre of the apparatus.

5.2 | The Stabilization Problem: Public Maintenance, Income Contracts and Portfolio Logic (2010s)

Although the experiments of the late 2000s opened pathways towards new fiscal arrangements, the following decade was characterized by governed coexistence and gradual re-weighting. Established shelter-advertising contracts from the 1990s and 2000s continued to operate, whereas new procurement instruments increasingly re-described parts of the shelter estate as income-bearing infrastructure whose upkeep could be delivered 'at no cost' to the public purse. What changed was the administrative grammar through which it was organized. Post-crisis procurement began to treat the shelter estate less as a discrete object-level exchange alongside public budgets, and more as a fiscally articulated portfolio whose yield could be specified, standardized and distributed through contract.

Scottish local government entered the 2010s facing tightening settlements shaped by UK-wide spending reductions and sustained pressure on capital budgets (Audit Scotland 2011). Local authorities across Britain were pushed towards outsourcing, asset-based strategies and intensified contractual management in place of expanded budgetary provision (Donald et al. 2014; Hastings et al. 2015; Peck 2012). Within this context, procurement language performs fiscal work, transforming everyday infrastructure maintenance into a problem of revenue engineering, risk allocation and performance audit.

Importantly, the early 2010s did not begin with the replacement of public maintenance by concessionary governance. Evidence from Strathclyde Partnership for Transport (SPT) shows that a public-maintenance track remained explicit and operational. A 2013 agency agreement specifies that SPT was responsible for maintaining 'non advertising bus shelters owned by the Council', covering 'repair and maintenance (including vandalism)', relocation, storage and illumination (SPT 2013). The shelter appears here as a maintained public asset, with ownership and liability clearly assigned. For periodization, this document

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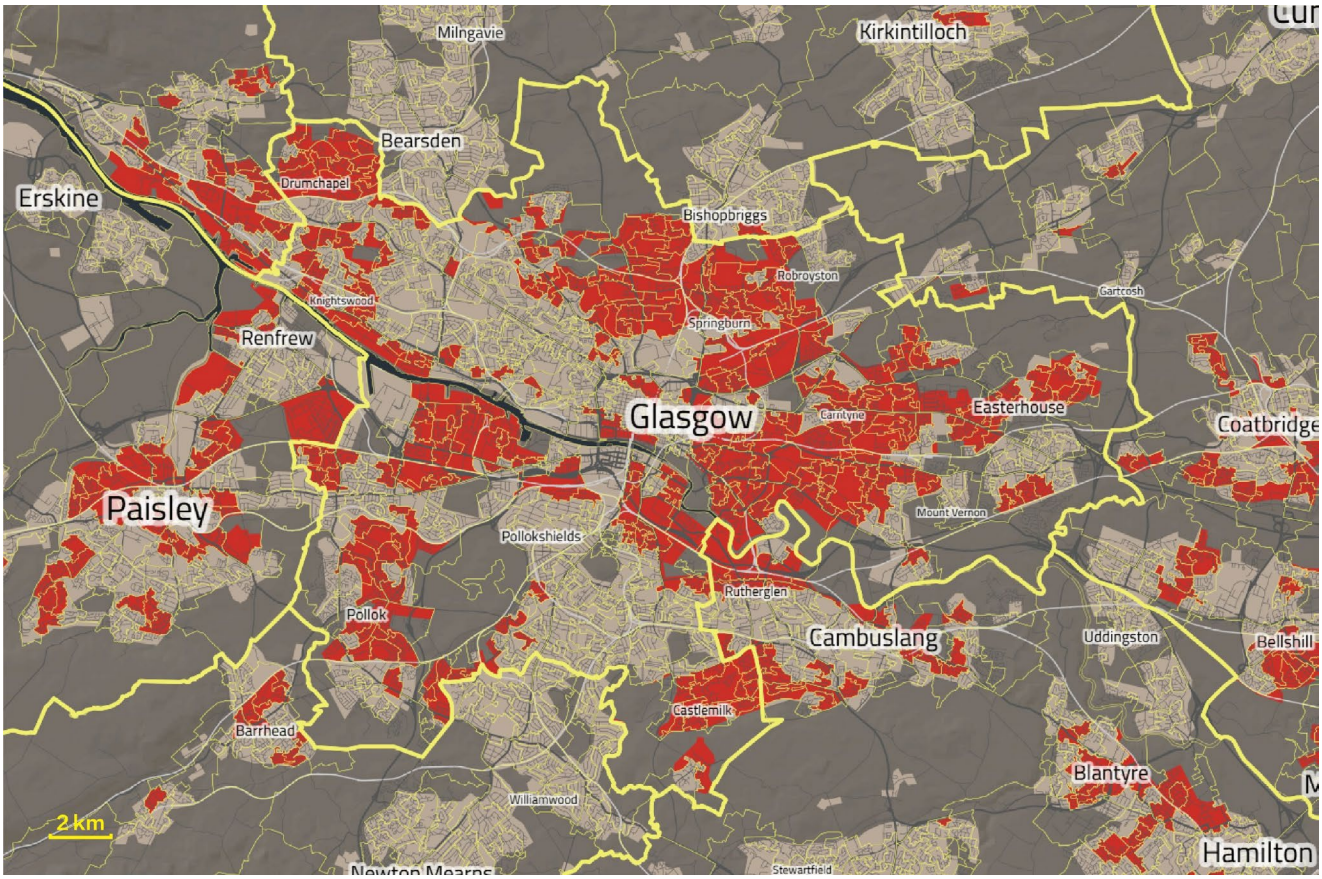


FIGURE 2 | Distribution of the most deprived areas in Glasgow, with red indicating areas within the top 20% of deprivation in 2012. The city centre largely overlaps with conservation areas, whereas the highest levels of deprivation are concentrated towards the urban periphery, broadly coinciding with locations of roadside advertising infrastructure. *Source:* Author's mapping based on Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) data.

demonstrates that income-based arrangements expanded alongside, rather than immediately displacing, conventional public maintenance.

The decisive shift occurs in 2014, when income logic becomes explicit and standardized. For the first time, a contract announces itself as an 'Award of an Income Generated Contract', specifying that 'the annual income per advertising shelter paid to SPT on behalf of respective Council's [sic], will be uniform for all shelters, in all areas' (SPT 2014). This clause reorganizes governance by folding site-specific variation into a portfolio calculation. From the perspective of authorities operating under austerity constraint, bundling a fragmented shelter estate into a single commensurable revenue metric simplifies administration and stabilizes expectations. Heterogeneous objects are rendered governable as assets through commensuration, aligning with broader accounts of assetization (Birch and Muniesa 2020).

The same notice also clarifies ownership and responsibility without recourse to outright privatization. It anticipates that 'not all 199 shelters will be under ownership of the Councils' at contract commencement, with transfer dates 'no earlier than 30 November 2014 and no later than 24 July 2015' (SPT 2014). Analytically, this performs boundary work: it stabilizes the legal conditions under which a revenue-administered shelter estate can operate 'on behalf of' councils. Transformation occurs through legal-organizational arrangement rather than asset sale (Birch and Muniesa 2020).

A further step follows in 2015, when GCC's procurement language articulates the fiscal premise of the arrangement with unusual clarity. A contract award notice states that the Council 'will not provide a budget for the delivery of these services' and that the scope of the service 'is expected to be fufilled [sic] from the revenue generated from advertising campaigns' (GCC 2015). Maintenance is no longer framed as public expenditure but as a function of advertising yield. Although public-maintenance arrangements persist elsewhere, income generation is now formally installed as an organizing principle for part of the shelter estate.

Procurement reform is central to how this shift is legitimated. The Procurement Reform (Scotland) Act 2014 expands expectations around reporting, sustainability and community benefit (Scottish Government 2022). These frameworks do not mechanically produce revenue contracts, but they widen the justificatory repertoire through which income-based arrangements can be framed as fiscally prudent, service-preserving and socially responsible. Revenue-oriented infrastructure governance becomes narratable as good public administration rather than exceptional marketization (Raco 2014).

By the late 2010s, however, a structural limit becomes visible. Income-contract arrangements reorganize vulnerability rather than eliminate it. A 2019 SPT committee report records that an OJEU process for bus-shelter advertising attracted only a single tender, with the successful bidder offering a

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guaranteed income plus profit share (SPT 2019, 1–2). The income offered was '28% less than the current contract', reflecting the declining market for 'classic' paper and paste 6-sheet advertising (SPT 2019, 2). Crucially, the report specifies that where the income received from the advertiser 'is insufficient to meet the costs in full', 'the Council will provide the required financial support' (SPT 2019, 2). Revenue volatility is thus managed through guarantees, but ultimate risk cannot be fully displaced.

Taken together, the 2010s reveal a distinctive configuration. Public maintenance persists for non-advertising shelters (SPT 2013), whereas income logic is standardized through uniform revenue metrics (SPT 2014) and coupled to a 'no budget' premise in council procurement (GCC 2015). By decade's end, bidder scarcity and advertising-market decline expose a stabilization problem, partially addressed through guarantees but tempered by retained public liability (SPT 2019).

This is an austerity story in a strict political-economic sense, but not a simple account of capitulation. Public bodies exhibit organizational inventiveness—packaging and standardizing a fragmented shelter estate—while attempting to maintain service continuity under fiscal constraint. Glasgow's income contracts belong to a wider repertoire assembled across British local government in these years, in which revenue substitution and asset-based strategies came to stand where grant funding had been (Hasenberger 2024). At the same time, advertising markets impose external volatility that contracts can manage only imperfectly, and revenue-seeking under constraint generates exposures of its own, a fragility documented across the sector in the years since (Dagdeviren 2024). The early to mid-2010s therefore mark the point at which income logic is explicitly installed as a procurement principle, whereas its limits as a stable governing settlement become increasingly apparent. This stabilization problem provides the hinge into the post-2020 period, where concessionary portfolios and harder contractual forms emerge as attempts to secure revenue-based governance under intensified volatility rather than as abrupt departures.

5.3 | Hardening: Post-Pandemic Governance and Concessionary Portfolios (2020s)

The 2010s configuration analysed in the previous section ended with a stabilization problem: income logic could be installed in procurement language, but it could not be insulated from advertising-market volatility. The period from 2020 to 2025 brings this contradiction into a more compressed conjuncture. The COVID-19 shock produced a historic contraction in UK output, with annual GDP falling by 9.9% in 2020 (ONS 2021). Inflation then accelerated sharply in the cost-of-living crisis; UK CPI inflation reached 11.1% in the 12 months to October 2022 (ONS 2022). Fiscal instability deepened in September 2022, when the Growth Plan announced by the Truss government contained roughly £45 billion of unfunded tax cuts (HM Treasury 2022). Gilt yields rose sharply, sterling fell to a record low against the dollar, and the Bank of England intervened with temporary purchases of long-dated gilts to stabilize markets (Bank of England 2022). Most measures were withdrawn within weeks (OBR 2022), yet the episode raised the cost of new local-authority borrowing, which is priced against gilt yields, and compounded inflationary pressure on council budgets (Audit Scotland 2023). For local government, the significance of this sequence lies in the combined effect of diminished fiscal room and structurally higher unit costs of routine service delivery—energy, materials, labour and contract administration—at the moment councils faced widening budget gaps, including a collective gap of around £585 million for 2024/25 budgets across all 32 councils (Audit Scotland 2024). Capital funding remained constrained, with councils increasingly reliant on complex funding models and borrowing to sustain investment and upkeep (Audit Scotland 2025). These pressures do not merely reduce spending; they narrow the range of politically viable governing forms and intensify the appeal of arrangements that can be defended as fiscally self-financing, contractually governable and administratively legible under scarcity (Birch and Muniesa 2020; Donald et al. 2014; Hastings et al. 2015; Peck 2012).

By the early 2020s, street-furniture contracts in Glasgow become instructive as the question shifts to what form of income governance can be made robust enough—at least institutionally—to sustain a non-deferrable obligation: the maintenance of a city-wide waiting-space network. In this period, public responsibility is displaced outwards and downwards. First, the burden of maintaining everyday infrastructure is pushed from budgets into private delivery; second, the pressures generated by that displacement are redistributed through service quality, uneven upkeep, intensified advertising exposure and the wider normalization of public space as an extractive interface for revenue recovery. The focus is therefore on hardening: the consolidation of a revenue-based apparatus capable of governing volatility rather than simply being exposed to it.

What crystallizes in 2024–2025 is the institutional consolidation of a trajectory assembled through successive contractual iterations since the 2000s. Income-based provision functions as the default governing mechanism for maintenance obligations under volatility. This consolidation takes material form in a service concession explicitly framed as an 'income generating' contract, in which the operator is authorized to 'run and exploit' the service—marking a shift from conventional procurement towards the management of an extractable infrastructure estate (GCC 2024a, 2). The shelter system is constituted as a single operational portfolio that brings together shelters with and without advertising capacity and assigns full responsibility for cleaning, maintenance and repair of the entire network to the concessionaire. Compared with the 2015 arrangement—where portfolio logic applied primarily to advertising shelters while non-advertising shelters remained a residual public responsibility—this configuration collapses the boundary between monetizable and non-monetizable infrastructure. Differences across the estate are no longer handled through separate funding streams or differentiated responsibilities but absorbed into a unified package whose viability depends on portfolio-level revenue performance.

Maintenance is consequently redefined as a contractually enforceable output contingent on monetization, whereas the council simultaneously 'does not have a budget for the provision of these services' (GCC 2024b, 3) and 'will receive significant

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guaranteed revenue from the concessionaire' (GCC 2024a, 4). In practical terms, monetization denotes more than the presence of advertising: it describes the conversion of an entire public infrastructure system into a revenue-bearing base whose capacity to function depends on continuous value extraction from advertising markets. Portfolio construction is the decisive hardening mechanism: volatility is relocated into the concessionaire's portfolio calculus, extending income dependence beyond revenue-generating shelters to the upkeep of those that cannot themselves be monetized. Under sustained fiscal pressure, the council achieves a simplified budgetary interface by externalizing risk and obligation to private capital; yet capital can absorb this responsibility only by pursuing profitability, cost minimization and revenue intensification. What appears administratively as fiscal prudence is therefore better understood as a redistribution of risk: public obligations are transferred to private operators, reworked as conditions of profit and the social costs settle on everyday users.

The contractual documentation also clarifies how this third-generation configuration addresses the decline of traditional advertising formats through the proceduralizing of technological upgrading. It specifies that payments to the council may derive from fixed formats as well as from 'digital or any other form of advertising medium', while stipulating that any such expansion must be 'agreed by the council' and 'permitted in terms of any necessary planning permission or consents' (GCC 2024b, 4). By locating intensification within planning consent, the contract redefines upgrading as a procedurally governed process rather than a discretionary or exceptional political event. Digital formats—associated with higher revenue density through flexible scheduling and multiple advertisers—carry heightened sensitivities in public space. Routing them through consent processes converts these sensitivities into assessable criteria and stabilizes upgrading as an investable component of the concessionaire's strategy, governed by known procedural parameters. In this way, revenue recovery is tied to procedural compliance: income density can be increased where consent is secured, whereas formal oversight is preserved over spatial and visual effects.

Hardening, however, is not only economic and technical; it must also be made politically legible as public responsibility. In the 2024–2025 model, this is achieved through audit, KPI governance and the contractual programming of 'social value' as monitored outputs (GCC 2024a). The committee report classifies the contract through the Council's Contract Management Assessment Tool, commits to performance monitoring against key performance indicators, and specifies that community-benefit outputs will be tracked through Cenefits, with sustainability commitments recorded through the CPU Sustainable Register (GCC 2024a, 3). Labour governance is similarly proceduralized. Clear Channel UK's tender submission includes Fair Work First commitments such as payment of at least the Real Living Wage, worker voice, workforce development, no inappropriate use of zero-hour contracts, and flexible or family-friendly working from day one; Fair Work First is built into award evaluation with a 5% weighting (GCC 2024a, 5). These details show that the Council does not simply withdraw from public responsibility. It retains responsibility in a regulatory, supervisory and collaborative form, converting political expectations into scored, monitored and reportable contractual obligations.

The FOI/EIR response makes this form of delegated responsibility clearer. Community engagement was introduced as a requirement only in the current bus-shelter concession, and bidders 'select community benefit outcomes they wish to offer' from 'a Community Benefits menu provided by the Council as part of the tender pack' (GCC 2026, 5). Bidders are also required to provide a narrative delivery plan against the selected outcomes and to submit a Community Benefits methodology as part of their tender. The Council monitors delivery through Cenefits, assigns strategic leads to specific benefit themes and manages community-engagement funds separately, with any funding offered 'required to be delivered over the lifetime of the agreement' (GCC 2026, 5–6). This framework preserves a visible public hand: the Council defines the menu, establishes assessment categories, assigns officers and tracks performance. Public responsibility therefore survives as an architecture of selection, oversight and audit.

Yet, this is also where the displacement of responsibility becomes most acute. The Council defines the framework, but the concessionaire selects which community-benefit outcomes it wishes to offer, writes the narrative delivery plan and proposes the methodology through which those benefits will be delivered. The market actor therefore participates in deciding which forms of community support become contractually recognizable, fundable and deliverable. In this sense, community benefit is not simply outsourced as a task; it is reconstituted as a field of corporate discretion within a public procurement platform. The question of what local need deserves support is displaced from budgetary politics into a menu-based tender process, where 'community' must appear as an outcome that can be selected, narrated, costed, monitored and evidenced (Wang 2026a). Co-production under austerity carries exactly this risk: responsibility travels outwards, whereas the authority to define need is reconstituted inside the delivery framework (Habermehl 2021).

This produces a more precise form of assetized public responsibility. The Council retains the capacity to regulate, monitor and validate, whereas the concessionaire gains the capacity to translate public value into a deliverable portfolio of benefits. The arrangement therefore combines public oversight with corporate gatekeeping. It does not abandon redistribution altogether; it turns redistribution into a contractual supplement attached to an advertising-funded infrastructure estate. The committee report's community-benefit commitments make this structure visible: 150 instances of community engagement delivered as financial support with a minimum value of £1000 each, and 30 instances delivered as non-financial support with a minimum of five hours each (GCC 2024a, 5). These outputs are countable, auditable and administratively defensible. They also make public support dependent on the concessionaire's capacity and willingness to assemble eligible forms of benefit within the logic of the contract.

By doing so, the Council does not only outsource the physical continuity of the bus-shelter estate; it partially relocates quasi-welfare and redistributive functions into a concessionary apparatus. The public authority remains present as designer of the platform, guardian of compliance and monitor of delivery. The private operator becomes the actor through which public benefit is selected, narrated and materially supplied. This arrangement

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stabilizes fiscal withdrawal without making it appear as abandonment. It allows the Council to claim continuing public responsibility through oversight while shifting the burden of provision onto a market actor whose ability to deliver depends on advertising revenue, profitability and reputational calculation.

The likely effects follow from this structure. Delivery will tend towards benefits that are easiest to evidence, administratively compatible with the menu, reputationally valuable to the concessionaire and deliverable within the commercial rhythm of the contract. Needs that do not translate well into selectable outcomes, narrative delivery plans or Cenefits records risk becoming less visible. Fiscal withdrawal is therefore stabilized through auditability, whereas substantive discretion moves outwards: first to the procurement framework, then to the concessionaire's selection of benefits, and finally to the uneven everyday consequences of an infrastructure system whose maintenance, income return and community support are all tied to advertising-led profitability. Public responsibility is preserved as procedure, but its material content is increasingly mediated by corporate selection.

Through this configuration, GCC succeeds in one crucial respect: it renders fiscal withdrawal governable. Revenue volatility, service continuity, labour standards and redistributive expectations are translated into bounded obligations that can be monitored without reopening direct budgetary commitments or sustained political debate. Public responsibility survives through contractual oversight, platform monitoring and collaborative delivery, whereas its substantive provision is displaced into market-mediated arrangements. The cost is structural. By anchoring everyday infrastructure and community-benefit outputs to the profitability of advertising-led concessions, the Council binds public obligation to market performance and gives private operators a decisive role in shaping what forms of local support become visible, valid and deliverable. What is stabilized at the level of municipal finance is rendered precarious at the level of everyday urban life.

The same mechanisms that harden governance on the demand side also reshape market structure on the supply side. By embedding full-life-cycle maintenance, quantified community-benefit delivery, labour standards, sustainability reporting and guaranteed income return into a revenue-funded concession, the 2024–2025 contract relocates obligations historically anchored in public provision onto the operator as conditions of market entry (GCC 2024a, 2024b). Entry thresholds rise sharply: credible bidders require substantial capitalization, an existing advertising estate capable of cross-subsidy, compliance and reporting infrastructures and the ability to absorb advertising-market volatility while simultaneously maintaining a city-wide network at zero budgetary cost to the council and returning a guaranteed income stream. The procurement outcome reflects this filtering with unusual clarity: although twelve suppliers expressed interest, only two bids were submitted (CCUK and JCDecaux). Competition narrows substantively by design and concentration emerges not as an incidental by-product but as a functional requirement of hardened concession governance. This reproduces longstanding concerns in UK competition analysis, where long-duration local-authority contracts and bundled obligations systematically favour large incumbents with extensive portfolios and financial depth, foreclosing smaller or more locally embedded operators—contracts the OFT already saw as 'locking up existing sites and limiting the opportunities for new and smaller media owners' (OFT 2011, 6).

Read through austerity urbanism, the 2020–2025 contract represents a concentrated expression of how the local state is remade under constrained capacity (Donald et al. 2014; Hastings et al. 2015; Peck 2012). A non-deferrable obligation—the maintenance of everyday waiting space—is displaced from budgets into a revenue-funded concession; associated responsibilities such as labour standards, community benefit and sustainability are reformulated as auditable outputs. Political and distributive questions, previously contestable through budgeting and council debate, are relocated into technical domains of procurement scoring, compliance reporting and performance management. Governing shifts away from deliberating whether public obligations should be conditioned on market performance, towards ensuring that predefined outputs are delivered within contractual terms, aligning with accounts of the contemporary local state as reconstituted through technical and contractual forms rather than simply hollowed out or fully privatized (Beveridge and Cochrane 2023).

In sum, the 2020–2025 transformation of Glasgow's street-furniture governance demonstrates how assetization hardens under prolonged fiscal constraint. What begins as an income-offset device becomes consolidated into a concessionary portfolio apparatus that reorganizes public obligation, market participation and accountability in tandem. Maintenance is displaced from budgets into revenue-funded contracts; upgrading is proceduralized through planning consent; social and labour expectations are recoded as auditable deliverables; and market access is narrowed through elevated entry thresholds that privilege large incumbents. The configuration succeeds in making fiscal withdrawal administratively governable and politically defensible, but it does so by binding public responsibility to market viability and translating political questions of obligation and redistribution into matters of compliance and performance. The result is not simply a change in how street furniture is financed, but a deeper reconfiguration of local governance in which risk is externalized, contestation is disciplined, and the costs of stability increasingly settle on everyday urban life.

6 | Discussion and Conclusion

This article has argued that the transformation of street furniture in Glasgow cannot be adequately understood through the familiar lenses of privatization, urban branding or technological innovation. The analysis reframes street furniture as a material mechanism through which public obligation is incrementally reorganized and stabilized under conditions of prolonged fiscal constraint. Tracing the institutional, contractual and fiscal arrangements governing everyday urban infrastructure shows how austerity is made durable through mundane objects that quietly bind public space to market performance.

The central contribution of the article is to shift analytical attention from abstract accounts of neoliberal urban governance to the everyday mechanisms through which such governance

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is enacted. Critical urban political economy has demonstrated that cities operate as strategic sites of crisis management, fiscal adaptation and state rescaling (Brenner and Theodore 2002; Peck 2012). Yet, it has paid less attention to how these processes are materialized through low-visibility infrastructures that appear administratively technical and politically neutral. The Glasgow case shows that street furniture—precisely because it is ubiquitous, maintenance-intensive and institutionally dispersed—functions as a key site where public responsibility is recoded through contractual form. The result is a gradual redefinition of what counts as a public obligation and how that obligation may be discharged.

Across successive phases, street furniture governance in Glasgow reveals a cumulative re-weighting of responsibility. What begins as a contained exchange—advertising rights traded for specific objects—opens unevenly into the funding of civic design, meets a stabilization problem as advertising markets soften and hardens into a concessionary portfolio apparatus that absorbs heterogeneous infrastructures into a single extractable asset base. This transformation does not depend on formal asset sales or the withdrawal of public ownership. Instead, it proceeds through commensuration, bundling and contractual duration, stabilizing income expectations while redistributing risk across institutional boundaries. Assetization unfolds as an accretive institutional process embedded in procurement language, performance regimes and fiscal justification.

This reframing extends existing accounts of urban political economy in three ways. First, it sharpens Harvey's account of urbanization as a spatial fix by showing how crisis displacement increasingly operates at the scale of everyday infrastructure. Alongside spectacular redevelopment, crisis management also proceeds through the conversion of mundane public systems into revenue-bearing arrangements whose viability depends on continuous value extraction. In this process, responsibility is displaced alongside capital: maintenance obligations move from budgets into contracts and from political deliberation into performance metrics.

Second, the analysis specifies the mechanisms through which austerity governance is made administratively workable. Austerity is often described as retrenchment, but the Glasgow case shows that its durability depends on organizational inventiveness. Income contracts, concessions and portfolio reasoning allow local authorities to disavow direct expenditure while preserving service continuity in form. Vulnerability is not removed but redistributed: advertising-market volatility is displaced onto concessionaires and ultimately onto urban users, whereas councils retain a simplified and defensible budgetary interface. Austerity governance operates by translating political obligations into technical deliverables that can be monitored without reopening fiscal debate.

Third, the article contributes to debates on assetization by demonstrating how asset-like qualities can be assembled without explicit financial instruments or ownership transfer. Street furniture in Glasgow is not financialized in the narrow sense of securitization or leverage, yet it is rendered asset-like through the stabilization of income streams, the bundling of heterogeneous objects into commensurable portfolios and the use of long-duration contracts to secure future value. Assetization here functions as a governance logic, advanced through routine administrative decisions.

These extensions converge on a claim about statecraft. The trajectory reconstructed here does not describe a local state responding episodically to external constraint; it describes a change in how the local state routinely operates. Contract design, revenue engineering, portfolio management and performance monitoring have become ordinary capacities of municipal government, exercised through procurement and sustained without policy announcement (O'Brien et al. 2019; Pike et al. 2019). The 2024–2025 concession is best read in this light, as an indication that the micro political economy of neoliberalism has become embedded in the everyday machinery of urban governance, reproduced through administrative routine and available as a template whenever fiscal pressure recurs (Beveridge and Cochrane 2023; Peck 2012). What began as adaptation has become constitution.

The implications of this trajectory are distributive and democratic. By binding the maintenance of everyday infrastructure to market performance, the concessionary model exposes the most socially dependent users of public space to heightened precarity. Service quality, upkeep and even community benefit provision become contingent on revenue flows, and the relocation of obligation into contractual and audit frameworks narrows the terrain of democratic contestation. Questions once subject to council debate—how public space should be funded, where resources should be allocated, and whose needs should be prioritized—are increasingly reformulated as matters of compliance, performance and risk management. Public responsibility is preserved formally, but hollowed out substantively.

These dynamics also reshape market structure. The hardening of assetization through concessionary portfolios raises entry thresholds and privileges large incumbents capable of absorbing volatility, financing full-life-cycle maintenance and delivering audited social and environmental outputs. Market concentration thus emerges not as a failure but as a functional requirement of austerity governance, enabling fiscal self-financing to appear stable while foreclosing alternative forms of provision. The resulting streetscape is governed through oligopolistic arrangements whose resilience depends on scale, capitalization and procedural expertise rather than democratic accountability or local embeddedness.

Taken together, the Glasgow case demonstrates that everyday urban infrastructure constitutes a critical operating surface of neoliberal urbanism. It is at this low-visibility level—where budgets disappear, contracts endure and maintenance becomes conditional—that neoliberal governance acquires its everyday durability.

The political significance of everyday public design lies not primarily in its aesthetic or representational qualities, but in its role in structuring the conditions under which urban space is sustained. Attending to mundane infrastructures such as street furniture foregrounds questions of maintenance, funding and responsibility as central to spatial justice. Who benefits from public space, whose environments remain functional,

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and which forms of care become contingent on market performance are no longer technical details but core political questions. The article thereby reconnects the political economy of infrastructure with debates on the social production of space and the right to the city (Harvey 2008; Lefebvre 1991), showing how struggles over urban justice are increasingly mediated through the ordinary material systems that organize everyday life. The everyday scale cuts both ways. The literature that shows austerity being absorbed through mundane practice also shows those practices acquiring political force, in makeshift claims on space, in solidarity structures and in ordinary acts that reach across scales (Arampatzi 2017; Jenss 2024; Tonkiss 2013). If assetization narrows the formal channels through which the funding of public space can be contested, the bus shelter remains a site where the terms of that settlement are encountered daily, and where they can be politicized. Making the contractual life of ordinary infrastructure visible is a first step in that direction.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are derived from publicly available documentary records, including council and committee minutes, procurement notices and contract award records, transport authority reports and relevant statutory and regulatory documents. Freedom of Information (FOI) requests and responses were used selectively to clarify specific governance arrangements where public documentation was incomplete. All sources are cited in the References. No new datasets were generated.

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