

Interview with Brian Mark Evans, City Urbanist, Glasgow

“Glasgow is on the verge of a fourth era, says its City Urbanist”

Deborah Anderson

FROM a city once at the heart of the industrial revolution to the crippling effects of the closure of the shipyards, Glasgow is a city that has endured difficult times more than most.

However, true to the city's very own motto, Let Glasgow Flourish, it has reinvented itself on many occasions including a 'renaissance period' starting in the 1980s with the Glasgow Garden Festival acting as one of the springboards. The 1990s saw Glasgow become the City of Culture and other accolades followed such as the City of Architecture and Design in 1999.

Now as Scotland's largest city negotiates its way out of the pandemic and looks to continue its recovery, City Urbanist Professor Brian Evans believes Glasgow is entering a fourth era.

“It's helpful to reflect on the history of the city's development, which in some respects is more extreme than many other UK cities,” said Professor Evans, whose role with Glasgow City Council is to contribute to the city's future development.

“In relatively recent history, Glasgow has gone through three quite extreme periods. It went through a period of very rapid industrialisation at the end of the nineteenth century, and in the beginning of the 20th century shared with Manchester and Birmingham, but not with cities like Edinburgh and Aberdeen as their development has been slower and more measured.

“It then went through a period of deindustrialisation and shrinking, which caused trauma to the city. The “*overspill programme*”, took the best and the brightest out of Glasgow and moved them to new towns and depleted Glasgow's social and human capital. In retrospect, that's been seen to have exacerbated the challenges Glasgow faced.”

He described a third phase for Glasgow of regeneration and a renaissance period which began in the late 1970s and the 1980s. “It really kicked off with the housing association movement working with the tenemental fabric of the city, when we stopped doing a modernist redevelopment of the city, and we started a heritage led regeneration.

“This led into the Garden Festival, the Glasgow Action programme and the regeneration of the city centre, which led on to all of the other initiatives, the City of Culture, City of Architecture and Design. Glasgow has become good at these 'pacing devices' and continues to do them well.”

Professor Evans believes that Glasgow has been very successful in repositioning itself in terms of its cultural and creativity offer which the city has done exceptionally well and has been recognised internationally.

He added: “The other thing Glasgow has been very successful with is social housing, where for so long Glasgow had a very major challenge. The modernist high rise redevelopments were to some extent a knee jerk reaction to some of the government policy, but in recent years the city has been very successful in the field and is highly regarded outside of Scotland in the UK and by bodies like the United Nations.

“It is seen as in stark contrast to where Britain and the United States have ended up with housing emergencies and has allowed Glasgow to be talked about in the same sentence as

places like Vienna - the mother ship in terms of social housing. For Glasgow to be mentioned alongside Vienna or alongside the work of the Dutch or the Danes in terms of social housing is quite something."

However, it is the present day in which Professor Evans says Glasgow is now at a tipping point of moving into a fourth era.

"I think we are really moving into a fourth era where we are having to address the post pandemic issues," he added. "We are having to address these at the same time as the climate emergency and we also have to address the decolonisation of our agendas as well.

"On decolonisation, you're seeing quite extreme reaction in some places about wanting such as taking away Cecil Rhodes (in Oxford) statue and [Edward] Colston's statue being felled in Bristol. Glasgow has to address these issues as well, but hopefully with maturity and sensitivity.

"We have got these three forces happening at the same time. We are trying to deal with coming out of a global pandemic and at the same time we are trying to deal with all of the challenges that climate change provokes for our cities. In my role as an academic, one of things we are working on (in the Mackintosh School of Architecture school at the Glasgow School of Art), is reworking the curriculum to enhance climate literacy in the way we train young architects."

While trying to move forward post-pandemic, Professor Evans said there is a need to recognise that, cities in the United Kingdom have a lot less power vested in the city authority than comparable cities in Europe on the Continent.

He added: "There is a lot more delegated to city authorities in many European countries that we look to and admire. What I'm saying is that we should really think about the powers that our cities have to be able to plan their futures in their own hands. Of course, that needs to be moderated by central government and international agencies, but that aside, if we are constantly looking at the likes of Copenhagen, Amsterdam, Barcelona, then we also need to recognise that those cities have delegated responsibility to be able to get on with a lot of things Scottish and British cities cannot do."

He concluded by saying the cities are pressurised and that there could be a risk of uniform programmes resulting in homogeneity.

"Pre-pandemic cities were being asked to be sustainable, to be green, to be smart," he added: "All cities want to be sustainable, green, smart and resilient. What we actually want to be is a whole city. So you want all of these characteristics, but you want them to reflect the quality of the place and the character of the people in this city. You want to have an authenticity such that it's Glasgow and not the same as every other city. We don't want to homogenise cities."

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