



## Missing in Architecture

Missing in Architecture, MiA, was established in 2018 as the result of many conversations between friends and colleagues around our interests, aspirations and frustrations with architectural pedagogy and practice. Through MiA, we want to promote creativity and action within the profession. Essentially, we are interested in filling in the missing gaps in architecture that we care about, and providing a voice for those that are often overlooked.

We are beginning to realise that our interests are in step with many others within the profession and within education and we have found that this leads to a constant dialogue, and a need to adjust and respect different views, both within MiA and within the wider community that we engage with.

We have developed themes within architecture to focus on. These are:

Equality + Diversity

Education + Inspiration

Identity + Practice

The Future

These themes are all interconnected and influence everything that we do in our work as both educators and architects.

Based within the Mackintosh School of Architecture, MiA seeks to collaborate with students through a variety of projects and activities. By harnessing the students interests and supporting their developing working methodologies, we aim to foster confidence in exploring ideas, collaboration and agency as they prepare to step into practice, in whichever form that takes.

## Student Partnership Project

Following a successful collaboration with the Glasshouse Charity in 2021 and their 'WeDesign series' which offered students an insight into facilitating co design events, MiA has used this framework to invite students to develop a theme and project in response this year's WeDesign theme of RElearning Place.

The GSA student partnership project open call in Oct 2022 allowed a platform from which a group of interested students and staff could come together and develop a project in response to the growing number of students interested in feminist design practices, co design, collaborative working and community engagement, supporting equality, diversity and inclusivity in working methodologies across disciplines.

### Project title: Redefining Glasgow as a Feminist City

A recent motion has been passed At Glasgow City Council whereby councillors backed a motion from Green Councillor Holly Bruce which will see Scotland's largest city making women central to "all aspects of planning, public realm design, policy development and budgets".

As a collection of students and staff, we examined the principals of feminist spaces and discussed how to provoke discussions around redefining Glasgow as a feminist city through a co design event



with Glasshouse. Through a series of sessions with the Glasshouse team, we were taken through the methodology of facilitating a co design event. How to engage participants with design through a series of questions that could develop into a physical response. How timing is important so as not to lose pace and interest and that being able to capture ideas and report back at the end is a skill to learn.

We created a series of provocative photo prompts and activities for the event space. The students split into pairs to visit parts of the city to the north, south, east + west before the event to collect a series of thought-provoking images of non-feminist or inequitable built environment realities. The key themes around feminist town planning relate to accessibility, transport, lighting safety, green spaces and so included images of raised curbs at crossing points, stair-only options at thresholds to public transport spaces, unlit park spaces, uneven street surfaces, and unsheltered seating.

The students also wanted to create a live capture of the participants, using a life-size outline of the 'average' man and woman (taken from the Architect's Hand Book – an industry guide containing technical information that many designers use to inform the size, volume and shape of the spaces they create).

### **A celebration for International Women's day 2023 and a co design workshop event.**

This co design event sought to explore how Glasgow and other cities across the UK can be redefined as feminist spaces, exploring these ideas through a creative and interactive co-design activity.

The photo prompts were pegged up to a washing line along the wall of the room and the 'average' man and women outlines were printed life size and pinned to one of the walls. Arriving participants were then invited to stand in front of the images, and add their own outline to create a live map of the people in the room. Overwhelmingly, we saw that both the outlines were far too small compared to the average height of our participants, which sparked an interesting discussion of whether we are designing places to an average that is out of touch with reality.

Both these activities promoted conversation and introduced participants stepping into the room to what the students meant by a 'feminist city', and the themes that each of them are exploring within their own work and research.

We were joined by students, academics, practitioners and community members from across the city on International Women's Day 2023 to explore how feminist spaces, theories and practices can make a more inclusive and equitable built environment for us all. Jules Scheele, a Glasgow-based illustrator, also joined us to create a live illustration which captured the emerging ideas and themes from the evening's discussion and activities.

### **Introduction**

Sophia of Glasshouse welcomed the participants into the space, introducing the event before introducing MiA and the students, to set the scene by exploring the theme of feminist cities. We were also joined by Holly Bruce, who is the Green Councillor at Glasgow City Council who put forward the motion for a shift to feminist town planning, centred around the needs and perspectives of women.



The participants were invited to sit at one of 4 tables which each explored the theme of redefine through the lens of either community, education, practice or ecology. The student facilitation teams had each prepared a series of prompting thoughts, questions and provocations centred around their chosen theme and feminist city-making; “Pausing and extended pausing requires some degree of comfort”, “What is feminist ecology?”, “How can we encourage everyone to engage in their community?”. Using these prompts as starting points, the student teams then led each of the groups through a discussion and co-design task, exploring ‘what if’ interventions and ideas for urban spaces and cities across the UK that could redefine how we consider each of the lenses to create more feminist (and therefore equitable) spaces.

## Education

The education table was interested in how we can shift perceptions of education, which currently value formal education (school, university etc.) over less formal examples (such as cooking), to bring both to the table as equal.

Their proposal, a feminist square which could be added to any urban space or city centre, sought to shift how we consider, define, and therefore value, education throughout our lives. The ‘square’, which would be located geographically centrally in a city, would be a welcome space designed for everyone. It would be a space for learning from others, stepping into each other’s shoes to understand how we each move through the city and the obstacles (both physical and otherwise) that we each face. The ‘square’ was actually designed as a circle, physically representing the lack of barriers to the space and inviting people in to learn freely.

The feminist square would not only aim to redefine education, but also current streetscapes, turning traditional cities on their heads by featuring feminist street names (for example, Chrystal Macmillan Street) and female statues to create a physical representation of change. This group challenged our current notions of education, and argued that emotional and social learning need to be valued on the same level as university degrees or other formal routes to bring about a more feminist future.

## Community

The community table’s student facilitators started their conversation by asking each of their participants, “What does community mean to you?”. They settled on a definition rooted in good communication and lots of connections (represented by the many arrows in their model).

They acknowledged that whilst many places do have thriving communities and locally-based activities, these can often feel hidden or inaccessible to newcomers in an area, or people outside of local connections. This felt particularly poignant for people who don’t have the time or resources, often taken up with full-time working and family life, to dedicate energy to unearthing these networks and communities. They considered how the era of Covid has drawn particular focus and understanding (both as individuals and as a collective society) to the importance and power of local communities, how vital they are and how we need to be valuing them further.

In response to this, the community group proposed a community fair. Taking place in underutilised spaces across cities as a way to bring these spaces back into use, the community fair would be an open event to highlight and showcase the many initiatives going on in local areas or within local communities.



When considering how the community fair could work, participants noted that current policies (such as the Community Empowerment Act) put a strong onus on community-based groups to be leading local activities and conversations. They acknowledged that this is fantastic in principle, but in reality often communities are underfunded, both in terms of time and money, and members of these groups are already juggling multiple roles, both in more formal job roles but also as family members and carers. We can't expect people to keep up with the increasing demands of modern life alongside carrying the health of their local community too. Therefore, we need to explore ways in which we can work together, bringing communities, local people, groups, councils and authorities into one space to ask "what can we do together?".

## Ecology

The ecology student facilitator also started their table's discussion by asking what ecology meant to each of the participants, which fruited a range of definitions centred around the idea of a network, both human and inhuman (animals, plants etc.) of people, places and the natural world around us. One of the participants highlighted that Glasgow has one of the highest numbers of parks and green spaces of cities in Scotland, but that this is not obvious from their experience of living in the city as the green spaces are so disjointed, disconnected from the wider city and often penned in, hidden behind walls and fences. They wondered, how can we connect all of our city's inhabitants, both human and animal, whilst considering safety and accessibility?

It was noted that often things that can be good for nature (e.g. fewer street lights, more wooded areas) can make cities feel less safe or secure for their human inhabitants. How can we balance ecological voices with human needs in cities? Is it about relearning our personal experience and responsibilities (e.g. carrying a head torch for dark spaces), challenging crime and antisocial behaviour that makes people feel unsafe or using interventions that aren't detrimental to nature (e.g. certain coloured lighting which doesn't interfere with bats). We acknowledged that the answer lay somewhere between all of these points, but also that this conversation should be underpinned with the very feminist principle of choice.

In that vein, our Ecology group proposed adding layers of pathways and routes into cities, with various layers of access for animals and humans. The crux of this idea was that there was no one prescriptive route or path to travel to get from place to place, but instead a network of journeys. This idea acknowledged that we are all different individuals with different wants and needs (nature included), and by offering lots of different choices, we are able to create multilayered cities which give us all a place to feel welcome and travel the routes and spaces we want to. On reflection, this group realised what they were proposing was an ecology in itself, a physical ecology for the city that created a network of somehow "messier" systems and connections between people, their places and nature which challenges the formal grid-like structures we so often impose on cities.

## Practice

The practice group started by questioning and looking closely at how we currently *practice* cities in terms of designing and building, but with a particular focus on movement, freedom of movement and how this affects access and use. They wanted to consider what re-practicing cities might look like, and focused their conversation and proposition at street level, taking a typical Glaswegian



street as their starting point. They added a range of propositions, from more lighting and green spaces, to free public transport and public toilets.

They discussed how often streets don't feel comfortable, accessible or safe for lots of people, and feature design choices, such as high curbs or cobblestones, that impact modern accessibility needs. They pondered if the route of this discomfort draws from much of the urban fabric around us being inherited, made up of pre-1980's material designed predominantly by able-bodied white, middle-class men (of course, this is a generalisation, but does hold true for many of our cities). As one participant put it, "Spaces weren't designed by people like me, we're not thought of." It's important to note that whilst this historical design bias has no intentional maliciousness, it does mean that current cityscapes function best for a particular demographic.

Looking back to practice, this group proposed more inclusive and diverse design teams that open up conversations to a wider group of voices. In doing so, their hope is that the design, building and management of our spaces becomes more equitable resulting in cities which work for us all. They also hoped that in time, this could also shift who the decision makers are to create a more democratic and equitable future.

## Summary

Following each of our tables sharing back their key discussion points, creations and propositions for change, we brought the room back together to close REdefine with a joined up conversation that summarised some of the key points from the evening:

Inclusivity, a key feminist principle, is key to the success of designing, building, managing and maintaining our cities through all phases of its (and our) lives.

Connection is vital and important, not only in how we create and manage cities, but also in how we operate as individuals within society. The theme of connection emerged strongly from within each of our groups, from connecting through community fairs and to creating a city-wide ecological network.

We wrapped up our evening by asking ourselves what needs to change to create a more feminist built environment now and in the future:

We felt there was a need to acknowledge that the participants at REdefine were of a similar mindset, and to shift external perceptions we each need to do our part in cascading these ideas outside of our community of interest.

We were also keen to keep creating spaces for hopeful, creative conversations about the future which don't shy away from our collective problems in the here and now. We felt it was vital that these embed that element of hope, and create action now to form the future we all want to see.

Finally, coming back to the theme of REdefine, we agreed that through communication, we need to redefine what works in our shared spaces, and even re-examine what (and who) cities are for, and how we connect the built reality back to these ideas and hopes.



## MiA evaluation

Being able to develop tactics in facilitating co design activities is a large part of architectural practice when required to lead a community consultation that is meaningful to both the community and the design team to become more than a tick box exercise.

By using the Glasshouse Co-design event as the vehicle, it has allowed the students to engage with a live co- design activity and learn through the experience.

The collaboration with the students in the lead up to the event was primarily driven by the interests around how we live and work in the city of Glasgow, drawn from our own individual experiences. Discussing these together through a series of workshops, brought a set of shared experiences which underpinned the direction of the co design event preparation and set up.

The photo prompts offered a range of insights to how we all experienced the city, through our individual journeys and the spaces we each inhabit. The photos were selected together and categorised into themes around ACCESSIBILITY/ THRESHOLDS/ PAVEMENTS/topography, HIDDEN SPACES, PUBLIC TRANSPORT SYSTEMS, LIGHTING, safety, SEATING/ SHELTER, TRAFFIC - PEDESTRIAN CROSSING, Cycling, NATURE, AIR QUALITY HOUSING / INDUSTRY and PLAY.

Using these photos as prompts we were then able frame questions around them in relation to who do these spaces affect? How do they make you feel? Why are they problematic or work well? How can they be made better?

In understanding the framed contexts of the city of Glasgow, could these prompt discussions and reactions in a co design event from which a community can build a voice to address issues in relation to the redefinition of the built environment and those it affects.

The students were keen that these spaces should be relatable to the human body in all its genders shapes, sizes, colours, age and that as a measure of our differences we should look at the 'average' sizes of people. A life-sized print out of the average man and women allowed each of the team to be drawn around and be compared to the average sizes that our build environment is designed for. Using this at the co design event proved a fun, interactive ice breaker for the participants of the co design event.

The Co Design event was held with Glasshouse at Civic House in Glasgow on International Woman's day 2023. The students set up the room with the photographic prompts and welcomed participants as they arrived to learn more about how we might redefine Glasgow as a feminist city. Tables were set up with four themes: Education, Community, Ecology + Practice and each held a variety of tools to engage people with, from sparkly pipe cleaners, to maps, tracing paper and post it notes.

The Glasshouse team were fully supportive of the students and had worked with them to understand the co design activity purpose, timing and facilitation requirements. The Glasshouse team provided a structure and tools for the event that captured the conversations and stage managed the room so effectively that a variety of opinion was heard and brought together as a landscape of voices.

The students reported back to the room through the design responses that visually harnessed and spatialised the concepts being explored around the four themes of Education, Community, Ecology + Practice, using the redefining a feminist city to underpin every conversation.

Glasshouse ran a reflection session the following day, which allowed the students to evaluate their experience and what the key take aways were from the event.



## Student evaluation

As a group of students and staff from the Mackintosh School of Architecture, we were keen to get together and work with The Glass-House as an opportunity to expand feminist design conversations that we were having in our studies, outside of our university's walls. I was personally motivated to get involved as I am passionate about co-design but didn't know where/how to start. In 'traditional' architectural education it is very rare that we get to work closely with communities through co-design: so far I hadn't had an opportunity to get involved in conversations about inclusive, people-centred design with many people outside of my university. Working with The Glass-House was an opportunity to expand my interests by learning new facilitation skills to equip me for my future practice, which I am so grateful for.

As a group we met for a few planning sessions before our REdefine event, in which we explored our local areas of Glasgow, taking photographs as we went which highlighted feminist issues we discovered to use as conversation starters at our event. Considering our own and others experiences of barriers to public transportation, pavement accessibility, among other issues grounded us in reality, whilst inspiring some blue sky thinking about the possibilities of a more feminist future for the re-design of Glasgow's urban realm.

During the REdefine event itself, the students paired up and split into 4 tables which participants could choose between to join in the conversation based around the feminist city themes of 'education', 'practice', 'ecology', and my group, 'community'. Although this theme was quite broad, I worked with my friend Nirali to provoke the group (made up of architecture students and staff; council and community workers; and members of the public) into thinking about their own experiences of 'community', asking what it means to them. We had a really productive and fulfilling conversation, scribbling down notes and ideas as we talked. The group conversation mainly surrounded the importance of public access and inclusion, connection and support for these groups, who are continually under strain in their survival/vitality. We were also beginning to think of strategies the city of Glasgow could apply to encourage and make everyone feel involved in local community groups, as we believe many face barriers to inclusion at present.

The best part for me was the co-design activity, where we were tasked with making a 3D model/sculpture which represented our conversation. Our "Community: Communication and Connection" proposal for a community groups fair based in Glasgow's George Square, although this model could be applied in any city. We proposed this as a wayfinding exercise to raise awareness of community groups around Glasgow, a place to connect them to each other. It was great to have a round up at the end to learn about the ideas from the other tables - I wish I'd been able to take part in all 4 conversations!

I was initially a little apprehensive about leading a co-design activity as I have physical and vocal tics which are heightened in busy/over-stimulating environments, and can make it difficult/painful for me to communicate. I am grateful for how



accommodating The Glass-House team and participants were for my needs and I was left feeling confident and able to participate freely. My accessibility requirements are a reminder of the many feminist issues we should all consider in co-design - it is vital that we work hard to make sure all voices are included and heard.

I left the event feeling empowered, and hopeful that a feminist future is possible for Glasgow if we work together and share our appetite for change with others. Overall it was a really invaluable experience to work collaboratively with staff and practitioners in a non-hierarchical manner - which is quite rare for the student experience! I felt like our ideas were heard and taken seriously which is refreshing - as students we have gained skills that will stay with us and prepare us for the future as design practitioners, in order to more ethically include users in the design of their places and spaces.

As a student and staff partnership team at MSA, we are keen to take our REdefine experience forward this summer by sharing our conversations from the REdefine event further with other audiences, and using our newly gained facilitation skills in a few projects in the pipeline this summer. All of our energy and enthusiasm will hopefully translate into making Glasgow our feminist city in reality!