

# Glasgow is constrained to initiate and drive its own projects

*02 June 2023*

***Four years ago Glasgow City Council made the bold step to appoint a City Urbanist. In what was a first for the city, it was a key role.***

***As his tenure comes to an end, Professor Brian Evans tells The Herald what he thinks is next for Scotland's largest city.***

This month, the New Glasgow Society will launch a 35th anniversary exhibition of the 1988 Garden Festival. Researching material for the exhibition has involved visiting archives to validate my memory of working with the Festival design team for 4 years. The Festival is fondly remembered, but the newsreels of the time, and Raymond Depardon's Magnum photographs are a window into a bleaker Glasgow very different to the energy and humanity of Oscar Marzaroli's images from the 1950s and 60s.

Thirty-five years after the Festival, I began my tenure as City Urbanist for Glasgow. The city we are now discussing has changed radically for the better since the early 1980s, but not thankfully out of all recognition – the city was then and is now, definitively Glasgow. The role calls for thought leadership in the interaction of design, city, place and people to contribute to Glasgow's on-going story and I suggest that this is an opportunity to put place at the centre of thinking and develop a narrative around Glasgow functioning simultaneously as an *international*, *metropolitan* and *everyday* city – a form of urban alchemy that the city carries off well.

To gather evidence on the city through the lens of place using the Scottish Government's Place Principle, the independent role of the city urbanist offered the opportunity to establish a Place Commission to consider quality of life and quality of place in Glasgow following on from the earlier Connectivity Commission.

In 35 years of design practice, teaching, researching and working across Scotland, the UK, and internationally, there have been periods of time, such as the Garden Festival, when I have interacted with Glasgow City in an intense way ... but from the outside in.

During my tenure, I have spoken to every type of organisation from communities and professional bodies to the United Nations. There have been numerous keynote talks, presentations, interviews, podcasts and articles explaining the role and what it was intended to achieve. In 2019, we brought the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe to Glasgow for a major conference on transition cities that produced the *Glasgow*

*Message on Sustainable and Affordable Housing* to sit alongside the precedent set by Vienna in 2018, that we would later reprise at COP26 two years later with the short film *Living in Glasgow, the journey to 2030*.

In 2020, COVID-19 and lockdown turned everyone's world upside down as localism, agility, recovery, and a search for a new normal became the principal focus and one where the everyday took on new importance. In its response, the City Council showed an agility that is seldom seen publicly given that for most people, interaction with official Glasgow is based on statute, regulation, policy and managed service delivery (all essential for any city authority) but with less visibility of innovation, creativity and leadership. The John Steet office off the City Chambers is a microcosm of this paradox, a fine neo-classical ensemble at the heart of city government ... but somewhere, until recently, where fines were paid, and not a place to see an evolving real-time exhibition on the development of the city and debate plans and ideas over coffee. With the mothballing of the Lighthouse to shine a literal and metaphorical light on the City's development, there is a strong case in urbanism to use the prominence of the George Square renaissance and Avenues initiative to stimulate a change of status for both these places that are at the heart of Glasgow's public realm.

Glasgow has become expert in winning and delivering big initiatives and projects but is constrained – rather than empowered – to initiate and drive its own. This institutional inertia – continuing along a path until external events cause a change of pace or direction – is a challenge for all public authorities in the model of national governance practiced in the four UK countries that is a blend of top-down command and control, and micro-management, particularly of our cities. This is reinforced by (a lack of) finance leading to attrition of resource, a lack of delegated authority and the difficulty of delivering quality services in the face of persistent and pernicious cuts. This puts stress into the system and mitigates against creativity and innovation when people are hugely challenged, have little time, resource or head-space to do anything other than keep abreast of challenges and events.

Hopefully budgets will improve in tandem with the economy. Whether they do or not however, the pace of 21st century change is unlikely to lessen and will bring corresponding pressures on those same budgets. We face a cycle of demographic, climate and technological change that is accelerating. Cities will not get ahead of this cycle nor remain competitive without systemic change. Knowing and understanding this and how do something about it while minimising investment and resources is what drove the work of the Place Commission by learning from the areas in Glasgow where success is visible and recognised – social and affordable housing, partnership working and cultural regeneration – whilst mounting a rear-guard action where this is less apparent, notably in the public environment of the everyday city.

Rather than advocate change to the whole system, an idealistic and questionable approach at best, when much managed service delivery works well and efficiently and should not be changed just for the sake of it. There is too much tinkering by Government as it is.

Nonetheless, there are processes where innovation combined with a lighter touch might be a welcome accelerant to renaissance. That Glasgow has been able to do this with public housing is hugely encouraging and something that must be continued and protected in the face of external intervention to restrict or reduce standards.

The report of the Commission, *People make Places*, invites the city to invert its relationship with place through partnership with stakeholders and with the people of Glasgow – collectively the protagonists for Glasgow’s place ecosystem – in order to act in and with communities and work from the inside out – not the top down. No city can hope to achieve a just transition to net zero without taking its people along for the ride and, in Glasgow’s case, without the people of the metropolitan city – the metrowegians – who live “outside the city”, get on with their work and grow their families.

Glasgow needs to function as a metropolitan collective for all these people through a just carbon transition to maintain its position and role as Scotland’s largest and only truly metropolitan city. The “bigness” of Glasgow is much misunderstood but essential to the country or as Rory Olcayto has put it “... *Scotland without Glasgow, would have no worldly dimension*”.

Glasgow as a city was brought to life in *People make Places* through a collection of 16 Place Stories selected from dozens across the city to highlight different and successful approaches to place. The New Gorbals was born of the Crown Street Regeneration Project and the Housing Association movement with a public sector ethos, and Clyde Gateway was set up as an Urban Regeneration Company with a business ethos. Yet both have delivered similar outcomes in place value, place quality and place attachment with a focus on local empowerment, employment, living, social justice and environmental remediation. On a different scale, the Scotstoun Community Garden, South Seeds social enterprise and the Glasgow Women’s Library are diverse community-focused place projects. Clyde in the Classroom and the Clyde Climate Forest deliver a place focus city-region wide.

To be an urbanist is to understand the views of others, often of a community, listen to concerns and work collaboratively with communities to navigate the minefield of statute, regulation, development, planning, roads and health systems before applying the policy, regulations and guidelines. In this way, the recommendations of *People make Places* advocates turning the system of place inside out. Local politicians see this instinctively – they are elected for this purpose. For officers, bound by statute, regulation and policy or under pressure by developers running a business, it is less easy – moderation within overarching principles to temper with humanity and community is what urbanism is about so that change can be co-created and brought about by design.

In many respects the Garden Festival did this. The prescient themes of the 1988 Garden Festival provided the overall principles to guide the distribution of content and the management of visitors at a memorable event and included many 21st century concerns – plants, food, health, wellbeing, sport, technology, water and landscape. 2028 will bring the

40th anniversary of the Garden Festival and 2030 the 40th of City of Culture presenting a good opportunity to stage further events celebrating the design and delivery of social housing and focusing on place quality, value and attachment of Glasgow's place stories that have propelled Glasgow to the attention of many.

Cities are never complete; they change by default either beneficially or by decay. Glasgow is no stranger to either. But action now in the current era of modern Glasgow might just bring a dynamic equilibrium to the cycle of demographic, climate and technological change made benign rather than toxic to its people. The *international*, *metropolitan* and *everyday* city became a leitmotif for my work as City Urbanist appointed to act creatively and independently for the city and the people of Glasgow rather than any official body – very much a European or US construct. I took every opportunity offered to the City Urbanist to proclaim the merits of the city and its people, particularly in the areas where visible success is apparent – public housing, partnership working and cultural regeneration.

As far as we know, no other city has had a city urbanist and Glasgow has been lauded as the first. I have been subjected to a keen interest in the role and advocated for the city when the many inquiries have come in. Other cities and people are taking a close look at the broader nature of this role ... where Glasgow goes others...? I hope the *international*, *metropolitan* and *everyday* city remains in the public consciousness and a lean, community-centred approach to place emerges in the city's narrative.

*Glasgow's City Urbanist Brian Evans is Professor of Urbanism+Landscape at the Mackintosh School of Architecture, the Glasgow School of Art, and director of the Glasgow Urban Laboratory.*