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Becca Thomas is creative and founding director of New Practice, part of Civic, the team of system thinkers in the built environment. Becca leads on the delivery of transformational placemaking, community engagement and enlivenment strategies for both public and private clients.

Notably, Becca was lead architect on the £2.7 million redevelopment of the Kinning Park Complex building in Glasgow on behalf of Kinning Park Complex SCIO and continues her commitment to community-led regeneration at Cumberland Street Station.

Her work includes delivering complex built projects at a wide range of scales - from pavilions and public realm works, to renovations, creative workspaces, cultural and community buildings and arts hubs.

In 2019, Becca was appointed to the Glasgow Urban Design Panel where she provides constructive advice to development, design teams and planners, as part of the pre-application consultation process. In 2021, Becca was made a Trustee of the Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland (RIAS), and a Glasgow Institute of Architects (GIA) Council Member.

INCLUSIVE DESIGN, A COLLECTIVE ACT

By: Becca Thomas

INCLUSIVE DESIGN TEAMS MAKE INCLUSIVE DESIGN OUTCOMES.

It's a phrase we repeat often, because it's not just a nice idea, it's a provable truth. And yet, so many in our built environment profession are still trying to achieve inclusive outcomes from within exclusive systems, designing *for* communities they don't reflect, rather than designing *with* and *within* them.

Inclusive design is not a checklist. It's not a flowchart. It's not a ramp or a lift added to an otherwise inaccessible design. It's a mindset: messy, collaborative, political, human. This mindset is empathetic. It demands compromise and welcomes disagreement. It requires real humility: acknowledging what we don't know, setting aside ego, and actively making space for views that challenge our own to the benefit of our projects, our clients and ultimately our cities.

It is important to be honest and say that we're not always successful in doing so, and that it is almost never easy to do 'inclusive design' right.

DESIGNING WITH, NOT FOR

We are continually learning and adapting our approach. Since the beginning of our practice, we have learnt a great deal about adaptive ways of working with differing communities and their specific needs. At its best, inclusive design reflects the diversity of the people it's for. That starts with the diversity of the people who make it.

One of the core truths I've learned is that inclusive design doesn't have one right answer, but it has many wrong ones. Designing only for a single identity group - no matter how well-intentioned - while excluding others is not inclusion. Ignoring the quiet voices in the consultation room is not inclusion. Assuming you already understand the needs of someone else is not inclusion.

At New Practice, part of Civic, we build places by building relationships. True accessibility and inclusion come from collective understanding: from the client, the design team, and, critically, from within communities. That means listening actively, iterating often, and remaining open to being wrong. It means putting lived experience at the centre.

I've understood that this takes relentless effort.

It takes a genuine willingness to engage and listen.

**It takes not being afraid to stand up for what you believe in.
And lastly, it takes being vulnerable.**

Our work in public space constantly reveals these tensions. In certain instances, active travel can, for example, offer freedom and safety for some; whilst simultaneously creating barriers for others. The infamous 'floating bus stop' debate reflects this exactly: what's intuitive and elegant for one user group becomes unsafe or exclusionary for another. So, we balance. We compromise. We educate. We co-design.

Because inclusive design is balance.

BEYOND THE RAMP

There's often a temptation to treat accessibility as a spatial problem with a spatial solution: add a ramp, widen a door, drop a kerb, add an accessible toilet. These are important, of course, and they are relatively easy fixes. However, alone, they are not enough.

True inclusive design broadens the field of vision. It accounts for hidden disabilities, for sensory and cognitive access needs, for cultural contexts, for life experiences that don't fit neatly into standard codes. It invites us to ask: who is not here? Who is not visible? Who is made invisible by our assumptions?

Inclusion is not just about disability. It's about the full spectrum of identity: race, class, gender, queerness, age, language, faith, immigration status, and more. It's about building places where *everyone* can see themselves and be seen. It's about creating connection.

THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION

This work is political, by which I don't mean party politics, but people politics. Who gets heard? Who gets space? Whose needs are prioritised? These are questions of power. Architecture and the build environment is political. The choice of who we work for, who we design with, and who we hire is political. Our studio cultures are political. And we are proudly, unapologetically political.

When I say to others in the industry that I work for a woman, LGBTQ+ and disability-led practice, I believe that this is a political statement in itself. At New Practice, part of Civic, we've been women-, disability- and LGBTQIA+-led since the beginning. That shouldn't be remarkable, but it still is. We work in an industry that remains overwhelmingly white, male, and middle class at leadership levels. And that has consequences. It shapes who buildings are for. Who they exclude. Whose safety is considered. Whose joy is prioritised.

We are different, and we use that difference to make better work. We bring lived experience of queerness, disability, migration, gender, and economic diversity into conversations that often lack it.

We design from the margins, because we live there, and that gives us a powerful perspective. We know what it's like to be designed out. A recent focus in the built environment towards making spaces for 'women and girls' is welcomed, and begins to fix one of the many gaps in the making of our places.

We speak openly about who leads our practice because visibility matters. Too many young people entering built environment professions still don't see themselves represented. I remember how isolating that felt. I still feel it sometimes. But we are trying to be the kind of workplace, across the whole Civic team, that we needed when we were starting out. Making sure representation goes further than a shiny team photo, it's about making clear that all voices are valued and welcomed into decision-making, in briefing, in authorship.

WHO GETS TO DESIGN?

The industry talks a lot about diversity, but less about power. Too often, practices tick boxes or hire "diverse" staff without shifting how decisions get made or who has influence.

Inclusive design isn't about tokenism. It's about equity: sharing authorship, credit, and opportunity. It's about knowing when your voice isn't needed and stepping back. It's about recognising that good design comes from deep listening, not from inside your head.

If your team reflects the world outside your window, if it includes disabled people, trans people, people of colour, immigrants, parents, neurodivergent folks, queer people, *and* the “everyman”, then your design will be richer. More layered. More useful. More loved. And if your team doesn’t reflect your community, you need to work harder. Build relationships. Hire differently. Commission differently. Fund differently. Support educators to get young people into and through education in the first place.

DESIGNING WITH FEMINISM AND CARE

One of the projects we, as a practice, are most proud of is the redevelopment of Kinning Park Complex (KPC). It’s a building, yes, but it’s also a feminist legacy. Saved by local mothers in the 90s, sustained by community activism, and reimagined by a team rooted in care and representation.

KPC wasn’t briefed in the usual way. No neat bullet points or formal business cases. Instead, we began with a mind-map: messy, joyful, full of contradictions. Through dialogue, it became a brief organised around themes of Accessibility, Identity, Creativity, Flexibility, and Community. And that shaped the outcome. Where others might have expanded, we worked with what was there. We added a new Quiet Space for prayer, breastfeeding, neurodiverse users: whatever people needed. We kept the building colourful, building a new - intentional - bold palette as part of our access and wayfinding strategy. We reopened the twin staircases to improve visibility and security. We designed with dignity.

KPC isn't about architectural spectacle. It is about listening. It is about trust. And it has redeveloped a building and a place that people feel is *theirs*. That's inclusive design.

BUILDING KNOWLEDGE = SHARING POWER

From our work with KPC came another project we're deeply proud of: *A Building for Your Community*. It's a free resource, born out of our own conversations, missteps, and learnings. It exists to support communities, especially those without technical expertise, to become confident clients, to shape their own built environments, and to ask the right questions.

This is what inclusive design means to us: knowledge sharing as activism. Opening doors. Naming systems. Naming ourselves.

So far, the series includes two guides: *Community-Led Development in Scotland* and *Making Accessible Places*. We hope it becomes a library. A starting point. A tool for solidarity.

THE WORK IS NEVER DONE

We won't always get it right. That's part of the process. But we keep trying. We challenge the status quo, not just in our drawings, but in our team structures, our language, our workflows.

Books like *Invisible Women* remind us that when women are left out of design, they are actively put at risk. We've seen this in everything from city lighting strategies to bus routes to toilet provision. When data is "gender-neutral," it defaults to male. When decision-making rooms are homogeneous, bias becomes policy.

Design, therefore, must be intersectional. Because cities aren't neutral. Placemaking, architecture and engineering aren't neutral. Data isn't neutral. We aren't neutral. And so, we must design accordingly.

I'll end where I began:

- **Inclusive design teams make for better buildings.**
- **Inclusive design teams make better places.**
- **Inclusive design teams make better policies.**

Inclusive design is not a luxury. It is not an optional add-on. It is foundational.

It is feminist, it is queer, it is political, and it is possible. It takes relentless effort. It takes listening. It takes standing up. And it takes being vulnerable.

When we build inclusively, we build with hope. We build with care. We build a future that belongs to *everyone*.