

# Reviving the dead centre

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Alexander Linklater is excited by a visionary plan to create new model homes on a derelict site. Imagine a city. Start with a centre structured as a grid for strength and coherence, one of only three such plans in Europe. Spreading out from that core are solid commercial buildings, powerful civic and religious monuments, shops, houses, and apartments, centres of culture and transport, offices. To the east and west people of varying economic conditions live in what is recognisably the same place because streets and buildings are integrated with that centre. North and south of a river the balance is maintained because the centre holds, it is dense. All the essentials for living are there. That is Glasgow. Or rather it is what Glasgow once aspired to be, and could have become, if it hadn't been for the diaspora: prosperous middle classes to suburbs such as Newton Mearns and Bearsden; working classes to peripheral estates like Easterhouse and Castlemilk. The fragmentation of Glasgow is not irreversible. The suburban lifestyle has reached its peak throughout the UK. Restrictions are growing on random developments into the countryside. It is becoming ever more widely recognised that middle England is not the measure for everyone. The real thing, a city, is the greatest place on earth to live. And Glasgow's tenement tradition is one of its greatest advantages. Glaswegians know how to live together. As Rob Joiner, director of Molendinar Park Housing Association - whose ethic is to fill the empty spaces of the city - points out, if you ask someone where they would like to live they tend to come up with a pre-programmed response: "Front door, back door, garden, two up, two down", i.e. a burb. But when you show them a well-designed apartment block close to shops, transport, and entertainment, they will not even notice that it doesn't match their original description. "Nowadays you still hear it said that people don't like living in tenements," he says. "But what the hell's the West End? Where do people go when they've got money to spend? A flat in the West End, the lofts in Ingram Street. People are spending vast amounts of money to live in a six-storey building in the middle of the city." Rob Joiner - or "Big Rob" to the architects and contractors who work with him - is one of a rare breed of housing association director. He knows about housing problems, sure. He understands the need to build quickly and economically to serve both public and private sectors, of course. But he believes in architecture and he believes that every development must fit in with a view of the city as a whole. As director of Reidvale Housing Association he has been responsible for the development and refurbishment of low-cost housing in a designated quarter of the East End. But as director of Molendinar Park he has ambitions to take on a floating remit, filling in the gaps which have broken it off from the city centre at the hinge of Glasgow Cross. Into the site of the old Meatmarket, off Gallowgate in Graham Square, Molendinar Park Housing have funnelled a plan to create a complex of housing which is led by three of Scotland's best young architectural practices in an unusual case of architectural collaboration. Around the newly dubbed "piazza" which Glasgow 1999 has designated a Millennium space, and which will be landscaped and adorned by artworks in time for the UK Year of Architecture and Design, East End residents - and, to reverse a trend, people who want to move East - will have reasonably priced accommodation for rent or sale which has been built to advanced standards. What remains of the Meatmarket, located in Graham Square in 1818, is the classical facade of the wall, a freestanding arch and the old

market hotel building. The architects chosen for the job therefore have the task of producing designs which are efficiently costed yet durable, historically sensitive yet boldly, unashamedly modern. Significant progress began to be made on the scheme when a new procurement method was devised for the site. Instead of putting the three sites out to tender to find a construction company, the relatively new architectural practice McKeown & Alexander contacted contractors directly and found one who was able to work along refined architectural principles without costs soaring. As Henry McKeown says of the procurement: "It got round cost problems without architectural compromises." It was no longer a case of "that curved wall will cost you, pal" but contractors collaborating with architects from the outset. Once McKeown & Alexander had this system in place it quickly became apparent that it would work for all three architects. Three different design firms would deal with three different sides of the Meatmarket "piazza" linked by a single contractor. Page & Park architects were the first on site to develop the right hand side of Graham Square, extending a free standing tenement into 24 modern flats into what director David Page calls a "matador's cloak" because of the association with bulls and because it is a "modern provocation to an old idea". Separated into three closes which get wider as you move down, curved walls (hence the cloak image) give a reverse-receding effect next to the early twentieth century tenement. As you look down they appear to be all the same size. David Page's principle of having "total respect for the historical, and out of that respect designing contemporary housing" is shared by the architect Richard Murphy, who is converting the now-decrepit Market Hotel next to the arch at the far end of Graham Square. Murphy, however, has decided to run counter to the tenement tradition of shared staircases by giving his flats a courtyard instead of a close system. Apartments surrounding the courtyard will be accessible by external staircases to produce an effect which Murphy describes, with a hint of mischief, as "mediterranean". Behind the facade of the old Meatmarket (which, along with the arch, will be retained and refurbished to create a contrast with the new developments) McKeown & Alexander is building a further 20 flats in a building which will combine a basic steel-and-glass structure with a variety of other external materials to make different references to the surrounding area: stone to curve off from the Gallowgate, wood to contrast with the masonry of the Meatmarket wall, and contrasting metalworks to front the piazza. Internal features will include moving panels so that occupants can rearrange their own space and energy-efficient ventilation to create flows of warm air in winter, and cool in summer. The overall effect, however, is uncluttered and contemporary. For a change, the East End is not getting third best. "Credit goes to big Rob on this," says Henry McKeown. "Housing associations and architecture are not often mutually compatible. But he's got an attitude about demanding high quality all the time." The Meatmarket development is due to be finished late next year. It has been one of the few successes to come out of the largely forgotten North Gallowgate project, one of four city-wide plans to reintegrate Glasgow's fragments into a whole which, like most of Glasgow's more ambitious urban strategies, has gone astray. But with Glasgow 1999's Homes for the Future project starting up between the Barras and Glasgow Green, and nearby St Andrew's Square also under development, the East End could have a future. If, of course, Glasgow City Council can come up with a coherent plan. Meanwhile Rob Joiner is looking for ways to push ahead with another development which he calls simply "151 Gallowgate". And there are plenty of architects he would like to use, given the chance. "What we're beginning to see spreading out from Belgrave St, Gallowgate, Glasgow Cross, is quite substantial urban development," he says. "What McKeown Alexander are doing is very modern and dramatic and I'd like to see that running right into the city centre. With that sort of development you're setting a standard of quality development, urban development, not suburban development. "From there you're six minutes walk away from the High Street. That is not suburbia, that is the heart of the city. As long as suburban housing goes up east of

the High Street the city is being effectively cut in half. I think Glasgow is much bigger than that."