



# CHRISTOPHER MARTIN

## KINTSUGI CHRISTMAS

A JAPANESE ART FOR REPAIRING AND RESPECTING OBJECTS SHOULD BE APPLIED TO OUR CITIES, SUGGESTS **CHRISTOPHER MARTIN**

**T**he Climate Conference in Glasgow has been and gone, so what legacy has emerged for the built environment and for the design of towns, cities, and settlements? And how does our thinking need to move forwards, to ensure the places we shape have a better relationship with the environment?

Thinking about this question, it would be remiss of me to not also reflect on the fact that we're reading this in December. For many, this is the season of Christmas, but for most it has become a season of increasing globalised commercialisation – of seeking new things and selling people new things – ultimately having a consequence on our relationship with the environment.

This relatively short-termist commercialisation has trickled into our built environments as well, having a similarly damaging effect on the environment. Constructing standardised units in greenfield sites, set within standardised landscapes, serviced off a standardised roundabout, connecting to an A-road, is similar to selling jumpers every Christmas emblazoned with flashing lights or alpine motifs. This action triggers huge levels of waste, with 95% of these jumpers being made wholly or partly of plastic. The Christmas jumper is one of the worst examples of the environmentally damaging fast-fashion market, and I wonder if a similar percentage of new mass-conceived housing developments have the

same relationship with the environment. Fast-fashion, fast-food, fast-fabrication?

At the opposite end from the Christmas jumper – occupying the space of the considered, the original, and the environmentally supportive – is *kintsugi*. This is the Japanese art of repairing broken objects, putting them back together

“WE SHOULD BE INCREASINGLY TALKING ABOUT PLACE-MENDING RATHER THAN PLACE-MAKING IN URBAN DESIGN”

using lacquer mixed with powdered gold, silver, or platinum. The philosophy sees the breakage and the repair as part of the history of the object, rather than something to disguise, highlighting the story of the object. *Kintsugi* accepts change and fate as aspects of human life.

And here we have parallels with the built environment as well. The idea of saving, of reusing, and telling the stories of a place through the buildings we design – and indeed save – is something which we are increasingly promoting in architecture and in buildings themselves. The hugely successful RetroFirst movement, starting as an AJ campaign to prioritise retrofit over demolition and rebuild, has put the idea front and centre that we should be looking to repurpose and reprogram buildings

before lazily pushing them over and replacing them – releasing all the embodied carbon from the building as well as likely using more and more concrete and other climate-calamitous components.

Scaling this up to towns, cities, and settlements I think we should be increasingly talking about place-mending rather than place-making in urban design. How can we work with what we have in urban contexts to deliver meaningful social, environmental and physical improvements? How can we reimagine the physical environment to futureproof existing settlements? What uses do we need to plan for to intensify activity, and social and community connectedness? And what community systems need to be collaboratively built from the ground up to support this work and deliver social value? This is how we mend places and level up, not running to the field at the edge of town to set about making a place. Wishing you all a *kintsugi* Christmas.

Pictured: Rejecting fast-fabrication and anonymous development in favour of place-mending and building for all time.



### ABOUT **CHRISTOPHER MARTIN**

Christopher is an influential urban designer and planner working all over the globe to help communities improve their public spaces; as well as supporting cities and governments to develop strategy, change policies, and make great places possible. He is co-founder and director of Urban Strategy at Urban Movement; a trustee of the UK charity for everyday walking – Living Streets; vice chair of the UK Urban Design Group; and is a member of the United Nations Planning and Climate Action Group.  
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