

COP26 – an architect's take on climate change

**by Rab Bennetts, OBE, founder,
Bennetts Associates Architects**

How are you responding to the climate emergency?

As an architect, by far the best thing I can do is design buildings that have very low or zero carbon emissions, and it's something I've been trying to do for many years.

Ever since I was a student in the 1970s I've been interested in environmental issues. It was the time of the first oil crisis and the three-day week, which forced us to confront the way we were treating the planet and using our resources.

Ever since, I've been fascinated by architecture that minimises its impact on the environment, because the resulting buildings seem much more interesting and far more enjoyable to use than those which rely on, for example, air conditioning or excessive amounts of energy. Simple things like good daylight, (in order to keep the lights off) or opening windows (instead of mechanical ventilation) seem obvious but there are many other things to consider like using the right materials and finding inventive ways of upgrading an existing building.

When my wife Denise (who is also an architect) and I started our own architectural practice in the late 1980s we were soon able to practice what we preached, with a series of low-energy buildings that pioneered sustainability through good design, engineering and construction. Well over thirty years later, we're still passionate about environmentally-conscious architecture and our current buildings are more innovative than ever before. In 2008, we also helped to set up the UK

Green Buildings Council and it now leads the way on research, best-practice and campaigning for a better environment. Much more recently, along with a very committed group of volunteers and interested groups, we have created a new public venue and exhibition in Edinburgh called [SpACE](#) – the space for Architecture, Carbon and Environment – and it opens to the public in time for COP26 at the old Fire Station in Lauriston Place, running until 4 December 2021.



Bennetts Associates Architects. Pictured Rab Bennetts.
(Photograph: MAVERICK PHOTO AGENCY)

In a city like Edinburgh, carbon emissions from the built environment account for a whopping 50% of the total and, apart from design itself, we can all do a lot to reduce our emissions. Our company measures the carbon produced by everything it does, with targets to reduce our emissions every year on things like commuting, business travel, consumables, waste and energy. Our 75 staff, based in London, Edinburgh and Manchester willingly support these objectives by measuring their own carbon footprints and by joining industry groups to share research and new ideas. We gave people time off recently to join the climate strike and, if they want to travel to Europe on holiday, we give them an extra day if they travel by train instead of plane.

Our own carbon footprints are too high, though. We are based in Edinburgh most of the time, but frequent trips to London for work and family over thirty-plus years mean we have two homes. We used to fly too often but now use the train and we gave up having a car in London some years ago, as public transport there is extremely good. We eat less red meat than before but haven't yet signed the pledge to go vegetarian or avoid holidays outside UK completely; we're far too addicted to seeing Europe's finest architecture to do that, but we offset our travel when we can and are investigating how we can donate towards some woodland planting in Scotland.

Rab Bennetts trained at Edinburgh College of Art, where he met his wife Denise. They both founded Bennetts Associates in 1987, opening an Edinburgh studio in 1994.

The practice is architect for Bayes Centre, Edinburgh Futures Institute and King's Theatre refurbishment.

Read more about SpACE in our earlier article [here](#). It is open to the public every day at the former Fire Station on Lauriston Place between 11am and 5pm and there are events which you can also register to take part in.