

Inspiring sustainability and building resilience by doing it for ourselves

Elinor Gray-Williams is a Chartered Architect and RIBA Specialist Conservation Architect. She is also a Commissioner of the Design Commission for Wales and a tutor at the Centre for Alternative Technology. She believes passionately in repurposing and says small enterprises across Wales can provide a sustainable way to strengthen our economic base and help create a more resilient built environment for both rural and urban communities.

It might not feel like it now but we're so lucky here in Wales. Our post-industrial landscape and unique commitment to the principle of future generations provides a tremendous opportunity to rethink and reshape our communities for the long-term sustainability of our economy.

The definition of 'enterprise' extends far beyond the economic meaning. It is not just about small businesses; it's about sustaining livelihoods, about values and about choices. Most importantly, it is about a sense of community and the quantity - and quality - of what we can provide within a local economy, for the prosperity of local people.

At the Centre for Alternative Technology in Machynlleth, I encourage students to investigate our own foundational economy here in Wales, to review the unique natural and built environment, and resilient cultural identity of Wales. A lot is happening, and in dark times, we see several social enterprises shining through in their brightest lights, actively rethinking poverty, working with other small communities and enterprises to inspire, inform, share learning and skills, and to build on each other's successes.

Recognising and respecting the skills that exist in communities, supporting local networks and encouraging a sense of ownership helps enable people to shape more of their locale, its vibrancy and its destiny. The Covid-19 pandemic means that we are all living and working in small pockets, many of us are trying to shop more locally and we have a far greater appreciation for our built and natural environment than ever before. We are eating local, spending local and enjoying local. If we had not done so already, more of us are learning to love where we live.

Wales is an authentic country where every community is different, whether rural or urban. That's what makes our landscape and our culture so unique. We therefore need an authentic approach to how we define our future with sustainability and well-being at its very core.

The current nomination of the slate mining landscape of North West Wales for UNESCO World Heritage status demonstrates our tradition of skilled, hardworking, great thinkers and do-ers. Our communities, and our natural and built environment have great value and they played a significant contribution to this historic landscape. This will be recognised internationally. If successful, UNESCO status can help preserve this landscape, and if we put in place an appropriate structure for creatively managing the opportunities implied - not only with conservation of this status - but also those offered with increased tourism and trade, then this could be good for business and good for local people. There are several social enterprises doing amazing things already in Blaenau Ffestiniog, Bethesda and other slate mining areas. They are developing bespoke approaches for foundational economic sustainability and community resilience.

It is so important that we tune in to what is happening to those around us. We need to build from the bottom up. There are some great examples of how small towns and communities are working together to create better places; for both young and old people, for families and for businesses. People coming before profit. Communities before corporations. The power of local enterprise and distinctiveness has been evident in the success of places like Crickhowell where local food, business and social enterprise and local skills have played a key role; and Ruthin where an historic market town reinvented itself through local talent, relatively small scale investment and an understanding of its cultural richness.

True sustainability must be built on a strong foundation. It's not just about profit and commerce, about tourism, or a one-dimensional notion of the economy. By recognising the value of a more localised approach, we can give communities ownership and encourage collaborative working that is focussed on building a bright future for all.

It's about doing it for ourselves. The sense and demonstration of local achievement gives us a tangible chance of sustaining success, enhancing well-being and ensuring thriving communities across Wales.

Elinor Gray-Williams is an experienced conservation architect with a strong commitment to Wales and its heritage. She worked at Donald Insall Associates for 13 years after completing the SPAB Lethaby and Plunket Scholarships in 2007, before setting up her own practice Elinor Gray-Williams Architects last year in Caernarfon. Elinor enjoys the challenges of repurposing existing buildings and landscapes, and works creatively to maximise opportunities for environmental sustainability in her work.

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