

The great reinvention of Manchester: 'It's far more pleasant than London'

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A median age of 29? The tallest all-steel apartment building in the UK? Actual enthusiasm on the streets? In the latest in his series of urban reports, John Harris marvels at the improbably glitzy revival of England's second city

Jake Stainton is 23. For his sins, he grew up in Stratford-upon-Avon – but from his late teens onwards, he and a few friends began a once-monthly ritual involving a weekend drive up north, and a “proper night out” in a big city. “We did all the big places: Liverpool, Newcastle, Leeds, Sheffield,” he tells me. “But very quickly, [Manchester](#) became our go-to place.” They were soon regular visitors, gleefully traveling up the M6, painting the town and staying at the Ibis hotel on Portland Street: “One person would pay for the room and we’d all sneak in there.”

Stainton is now a business student at Manchester Metropolitan University, with a part-time job at [Shoot Business](#), a video company that operates from a centre for aspiring entrepreneurs called [Innospace](#), full of hot-desking facilities and compact offices, and a palpable sense of go-getting optimism. As evidenced by his breathless enthusiasm for the city in which he now lives, he is also a Manchester evangelist. “I won’t be leaving after my degree,” he tells me. “The opportunities here are fantastic. They say it’s the second business hub outside London. I like the culture up here, and the people. I love the nightlife. It’s just a great city. I can’t see myself going back.”

Over the three days I spend in Manchester, I hear a lot of stuff like this: tributes to the city so frothingly enthusiastic they rather suggest

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the script for a promotional video. On one level, this isn't surprising: I come to Manchester a lot, and inside an hour of arriving, the city centre's sense of possibility always starts to feel infectious. Taking the long view, though, meeting people who talk about a thriving economy and supposedly boundless opportunities, still seems a little strange. To someone who grew up not far from the city and is now on the wrong side of 40, Manchester's reinvention can still feel like something that happened only recently, against huge odds.

Before coming up this time, I watched [the 2007 feature-length documentary](#) about those exemplars of downcast Mancunian existentialism Joy Division, directed by Grant Gee – in which, amid stock footage of city slums and smokestacks, that great civic patriot Tony Wilson talks about a city that reached its nadir 40 years ago. “I can remember very precisely what Manchester was like in the mid 70s,” he says. “It felt like a piece of history that had been spat out. It was really grimy and dirty. Dirty old town.” Then comes the voice of the group's guitarist, Bernard Sumner: “You were always looking for beauty, cos it was such an ugly place.”

Beyond the city centre, particularly on Manchester's north side, there are more lingering traces of this phase of local history than some over-excited accounts of the city's rebirth might suggest. But in the heart of town, the contrasts between then and now are often jaw-dropping. Cranes are an ever-present feature of the skyline, and towering new buildings seem to pop up at a frantic rate. From St Anne's Square, you can marvel at No 1 Deansgate, the tallest all-steel residential building in the UK, where [three-bedroom apartments can be rented for £9,000 a month](#). Walk for five minutes, and you are confronted by the [Wakefield Street Tower](#), reckoned to be the “tallest purpose-built student accommodation in the world” – outwardly more suggestive of a midtown New York hotel than a hall of residence, but such is the new Manchester: a place whose student population of nearly 40,000 gives its population a [median age of 29](#).

Other startling statistics extend into the distance. Between 2001 and 2011, [Manchester's population increased by 20%](#). In 1987, the

population of the city centre was a mere 300; [now, it is over 11,000](#). The [city is predicted](#) to exceed the UK's average rate of economic growth for at least the next 10 years. This is now the place, moreover, to which a lot of other English cities look for clues about how to somehow escape the post-industrial condition, and make the most of the 21st century: as a recent piece in the [Financial Times](#) poetically put it, "an assertive, restless, almost republican city in an increasingly disunited kingdom".

The day after my visit to Innospace, I spend 90 minutes with Richard Leese, the leader of Manchester City Council, and one of the most powerful Labour politicians in Britain. In his pristine offices in the Town Hall, he talks at length about what has happened here over the last quarter-century, and what remains to be done. He is a quiet, understated presence, and not one to brag – but every now and again, he says something that underlines his sense of success.

"I think what we've done – and I'm talking about thousands of people here – is help to make Manchester a far more exciting place," he says at one point, "and a far more pleasant place than London – or pretty much anywhere else in the country."

Though he speaks in a gentle Mancunian accent, like a lot of the people who lead English cities, Richard Leese – Sir Richard Leese, to give his full title – is not from the place he commands. He grew up in Mansfield in Nottinghamshire, and went to Warwick University. It may be some indication of the methodical, eternally pragmatic approach that sets him apart from a lot of politicians that he studied pure maths. He then spent a year teaching in Minnesota on an exchange programme, before coming to Manchester in 1979 to take a job as a youth worker.

To start with, he lived just north of the city centre, in Cheetham Hill. "Round there, it was full of life," he says, "but the middle of town was a Monday-to-Saturday, 9-to-5 business centre. It went to sleep at 5 o'clock most days: outside those hours, it was dead. And it was in the same state of decline you saw in a lot of city centres at that time. It was a pretty dreary place." It was also about to be hit by the austerity

and recession of the early 1980s, manifested in the Moss Side riots of 1981.

Leese became a city councillor in 1984, and eventually played his part in a convulsive debate between two tendencies within the Mancunian Labour party – the result of which, he says, set the city's co-ordinates for the next 25 years. “There was the welfarist wing of the Labour party and the labourist wing,” he explains. “The welfarist view of how you tackled poverty was to just increase people's benefit payments. The labourist wing said, ‘Well, hang on – what are the causes of poverty? The biggest cause is that people haven't got jobs, or they haven't got jobs that pay decent wages.’ The labourist side won the argument, when we were in the midst of very significant public sector cuts. Which meant that if we were going to create jobs and get people into them, it wasn't us who were going to do that – it was going to be the private sector. And if we wanted to develop the city, the same thing applied.

“That debate probably took nearly four years. It went from 87, through to the introduction of the poll tax. But we came out of that period with the mantra of ‘jobs, jobs jobs’. And that's been the driver of politics in the city ever since.”

There is a sense in how Leese tells this story of a move away from an outmoded kind of Labour politics into an approach that was much more modern: New Labourish, perhaps, but so specifically Mancunian that it had a distinct identity all its own (and, more to the point, has survived as a meaningful project well beyond the demise of Blair and Brown). “The old council, which we sort of swept away, was complacent, paternalistic and patronising,” he says. By contrast, he and his colleagues had an appreciation of the importance of involving people in what was done to the city, and the significance of symbolism – as evidenced by the [1991 demolition of the Crescents](#), the huge residential blocks that had dominated the neighbourhood of Hulme, and whose knocking-down Leese puts at the start of the modern Mancunian era.

Leese became leader of the council in 1996 – political continuity is a key part of this story, bound up with the amazing Labour dominance that means the party has all 96 city councillors – and he has been assisted, since 1998, by Manchester’s [renowned chief executive Howard Bernstein](#)

In political terms, he continued sloughing-off any residual leftwing hostility to business – capitalism, even – and relentlessly focused on developing necessary relationships, something seen latterly in the council’s close work with everyone from the Beijing Construction Engineering Group (who have a 20% stake in a huge new development around Manchester Airport), to Masdar, a set-up based in Abu Dhabi who have [invested in work with graphene](#), the versatile industrial material pioneered at Manchester University. When it came to the city’s infrastructure, the drive to create a thriving economy led to the building of the Metrolink tram system, which began running in 1992, has since expanded four times – and, as evidenced by the clattering building work happening right next to the Town Hall, is now being extended across the city centre.

At the same time, the city council did its best to encourage the kind of cultural developments that had become a byword for the new Manchester since the late 1980s, when the great entrepreneurial upsurge around acid house and Manchester’s renown as a gay-friendly city began to create what we would now call a night-time economy.

“From the late 80s, the council very consciously supported the notion of bringing people back to live within the city centre,” Leese says. “We very consciously supported creating pavement-bar culture. But it still needed people to come along and do it: it did need your Tony Wilsons and so on. But that was very much based on northern European cities. Stockholm is a good example. We looked at what was going on in other places and borrowed bits.”

A quarter-century on, Manchester is the most mentioned place in an increasingly loud conversation about British cities, and is looking how

to realise that great holy grail of somehow boosting the north and “rebalancing” the UK economy. Policy-wise, this debate has two elements: George Osborne’s beloved Northern Powerhouse project (which aims at a “a virtual supercity of the north,” Leese explains, “but with a scale to balance London, and match larger cities elsewhere”), and the devolution that will see the [Greater Manchester](#) area elect a new mayor, and take on new powers, over health, transport, housing, further education and more.

Leese talks about both these things with obvious enthusiasm, but there are caveats, not least when it comes to the cuts. At one point, he anxiously considers what might happen in Manchester thanks to Osborne’s looming spending review. [Advance chatter](#), after all, has suggested cuts to local and city government budgets of between 25% and 40% – and even the lower number would cause the city no end of problems, leaving the council able to do little more than seeing to statutory social services. “If we continue to spend what we currently spend on what we call targeted and specialist services,” he says, “with even a 25% cut, we have no money left for anything else.” Apart from anything else, another dramatic hacking-back of money would obviously undermine all that talk from Osborne and his colleagues about a newly confident north of England. “Part of economic growth is about life,” says Leese. “It’s about parks and libraries and culture and all those things – the things that councils support.”

Towards the end of our conversation, I reach in my bag for a document titled [Northern Future](#), published by the Jeremy Corbyn campaign before he won the Labour leadership. It has a downright hostile take on the new wave of devolution, calling it a “cruel deception” and claiming that “there are no constitutional answers to economic problems”, which is not the Manchester position at all. Strangely, its 20 close-typed pages do not mention what has happened here thanks to its Labour council – nor, indeed, any of the Labour politicians who run all of England’s big northern cities.

“It’s a load of rubbish,” Leese tells me. “First of all, there’s no coherent economic policy there. Second, it ignores completely the devolutionary route that Labour local authorities in the north have

been driving. Nearly every solution in there has the word 'national' in front of it ... And it ignores that northern cities, not just Manchester, are in a far healthier place than we were in the early 80s. We've all created new economic bases that we can grow from. You wouldn't know it from that."

A little later, having acknowledged the new leader's "thumping great majority", he says this: "We'll work with the new leadership; we'll use the evidence that we've collected over a decade a half to make the case for the way we believe we need to work."

I have two remaining questions. One of them is parried by Leese before I have even asked it, when he rejects the idea that Manchester's success and prosperity have done for its creativity. "Stuff about needing poverty to get creativity – it's clearly bollocks," he says. "Absolute bollocks." He mentions the esteemed Mancunian solo artist [LoneLady](#), new artists working in [pop-up studios at the Castlefield Gallery](#), and [MadLab](#), a self-styled "not-for-profit grassroots digital innovation organisation" based in the north of the city centre. "There is more creativity now in the city than there ever was 35 years ago," he says. And it's all over the place."

Which brings me to the last point written in my notepad. Even if the city centre now oozes ambition and optimism, what of those parts of Manchester that still seem to lag behind?

"Overall, I'd give you three statistics," he says. "Between 2000 and 2011, the population of the city went up by 19%. We were the fastest-growing city in the country. Up until about 2005, all we ever did was close schools; now, we've not been able to build them fast enough. We've probably increased by the equivalent of 40 primary schools over that time. Between 2007 and 2012, the number of families went up by 15%, and the number of families in poverty went down by 25%. It's still far, far too high, but that was an enormous decrease. And if you look at our economic activity rate, from 2004 to 2014, the national change was plus 9%; in Manchester it was 28%."

He then asks himself a couple of questions. “Are we making a difference by doing things in the most deprived communities? Yes we are: very significant, measurable differences. Are we exactly where we’d like to be? Nowhere near. We’ve got a long way to go.”

Collyhurst is not much more than a mile and a half from central Manchester, but metaphorical light years away from the more upmarket parts of the new city. Those au fait with the details of Manchester’s pop-cultural past will know it as the location of the Electric Circus, a short-lived punk venue in a disused – and since demolished – variety club that hosted most of the big names of its era, from the Sex Pistols and Clash to the early incarnation of Joy Division known as Warsaw.

To get to this part of town, you drive through the bohemian expanse of the so-called Northern Quarter, past the redeveloped neighbourhood of New Islington, and up the Rochdale Road, until you arrive in a flat, bare-looking expanse peppered with tower blocks. Its southern border is marked by the current outer frontier of city-centre regeneration: three hulking residential high-rises done up by the Mancunian developers Urban Splash, and renamed [3Towers](#). Each is topped with the illuminated first name of one of the Pankhurst sisters – Sylvia, Emmeline and Christabel – and protected by what estate agent blurbs call “a gated secure fob/code system”.

Just over 7,000 people live in Collyhurst. Among the first I meet is 52 year-old Tony Reeves, a former carer who moved here from London 25 years ago. “You could sit in your flat and hear other flats getting broken into,” he remembers. “You could hear doors being kicked in. There was one time they were renovating some maisonettes: the council would put in all the new boilers and radiators during the day: they’d drive away, and then another van would pull up, break into the places and take everything out again. That’s what it was like. Pretty wild west.”

Things in Collyhurst are different now – “It’s gone from somewhere no one wanted to go to, to a place where people do want to come and live,” says Reeves – but deep difficulties remain. It has no

supermarket or post office. Its solitary cashpoint charges £1.85 for withdrawals. The city council's own reports have described it as "one of the most deprived areas in the whole country" – and even if the city has long since switched from "welfarism" to "labourism", there are ingrained problems in Collyhurst with long-term unemployment. The area was recently dealt a cruel blow, moreover, when the incoming coalition government [cancelled a £250m redevelopment plan](#) that was meant to be funded via the on-tick magic of the Private Finance Initiative.

Now, the [national charity Big Local](#) is trying to improve life here by establishing walking routes that will draw together long-divided housing estates, offering loans to would-be local businesses, putting new facilities into forlorn-looking public space, and energetically trying to boost the place's fractured sense of community. Thanks to a £6m programme introduced by the city council, local houses have been spruced up, reinsulated and provided with new fences, and some housing has been demolished to make way for new development. The council, indeed, has [plans to attract developers](#) who will build hundreds of new private homes over the next 15 years. Most of the locals I speak to seem guardedly optimistic about all this, but also concerned that as more affluent newcomers arrive, the deep problems faced by the people who already live here will be concealed.

Apart from anything else, what an afternoon spent here illustrates most vividly is that whatever Richard Leese and his colleagues do, much bigger forces are at play. At the Lalley Centre, a community facility run by the Catholic church, volunteers say that in the last two years, demand for the twice-weekly food bank has doubled, so that up to 120 people come here for help every week. Kath McCarron, a debt and benefits adviser, tells me about people instructed to travel to job interviews at impossible times and distances, and then denied their benefits: one man, she says, was told to travel 10 miles from here for an interview at 5.30am on a winter's morning: he tried to do it on his bike, failed, and had his benefits stopped for three months.

Local advice services have been slashed thanks to the cuts; the state is in palpable retreat here, but at the same time, hundreds of increasingly anxious people want as little to do with officialdom as possible, in case they suffer even more. “Families here are frightened of the state,” says McCarron. “They’re scared of losing their children; being judged. They’re terrified.”

In the Lalley Centre’s warren of rooms, I sit and talk to McCarron and a small handful of other people trying their best to improve Collyhurst’s prospects. “I think Manchester is two different cities, to be honest,” says Martin Roberts, the assistant principal of the Manchester Communication Academy, a new secondary school opened on the edges of Collyhurst, where 75% of the students fit into at least one of the categories for being at risk. “I lived in south Manchester as a student, and now I live in north Manchester, and it’s just a totally different place.”

“People over here are less empowered and they get less,” says Margot Power, the project leader in charge of Big Local’s work. “There’s a lot of money being generated in south Manchester through council tax, and people working and paying higher taxes, and I think that they are more empowered to demand more and insist their streets are better and they’ve got more facilities. I don’t want to emphasise the negative, but people in Collyhurst are not empowered in any way. And it’s not their fault: it’s just an unfair system. If they keep having things taken away from them and they’re living on the breadline, they don’t have the energy to fight.”

Power takes me on a walking tour of the area, past an overgrown patch of land where there used to be a youth centre, and on to a paved expanse opposite two closed-down pubs. Next to a vacant space where a set of maisonettes were recently demolished, we meet 41-year-old Anne Robson, a single mother of three, who’s unemployed and reliant on benefits, but says she’s now set on starting her own business, selling aloe vera products from home.

“I feel like Collyhurst is disappearing,” she says. “Our street is, anyway ... I don’t like what they’re doing, knocking stuff down and

moving our families and friends. I've lost my best friend, my uncle – we've been brought up knowing all these people, and now they've all moved.”

What does she think the area is losing? “We're losing ... *Collyhurst*. It's just not going to be Collyhurst any more.”

She gestures at the Urban Splash tower blocks, and the tall fence that surrounds them. “It must be students in those flats, with money.”

Does she know anybody who lives there?

“One person. He's American. He's my friend's friend. Whereas years ago, everybody knew everybody.”

She pauses. “There's nothing for the kids. Nothing. Why don't they build a community centre, or a rollerskating rink – something that's going to do the community good? It's all right going to town, but you're paying town prices. It's like £16 to go swimming. It's disgusting. Twenty quid to go to the cinema.”

She looks again at a couple of cranes in the middle-distance. Not for the first time, there's a sense of a regenerated wonderland slowly advancing in this direction, but still remaining untouchably distant. “Manchester's getting all funky-up, isn't it?” she says. “Like, *posh*.” Then she utters what sounds like a crisp definition of the modern urban condition: “You need money to do everything, don't you?”