

The role of Manchester's Gay Village in the Northern Powerhouse

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How does local identity really interact with mobile capital?



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There's been a distinctly 'straight', masculine tone to the rhetoric of the Northern Powerhouse so far; all manufacturing, technology and transport, buoyed up with football analogies. Apart from giving a veneer of solidity to a still vague political conceit, what this tone has concealed is whether Manchester's reputation as a centre of LGBT culture will have any role to play in the Powerhouse. It's an unusual omission, given how central the city's Gay Village was to its last round of economic reinvention in the 1990s and 2000s.

A long time ago I wrote a piece that looked at the role of the Village in Manchester's market-led regeneration. I concentrated on a planned development in the Village called Origin. It was to be the usual glittering melange of mediocre luxury – offices, retail units, 'boutique' hotel plus apartments. Origin, it could be said, evoked what a satirical Facebook group has recently dubbed the 'boring dystopia' of neoliberal Britain. The fateful year was 2008; I finished the piece just as the financial crisis reached its peak, pulling the foundations out from under my conclusions.

Origin evoked what a satirical Facebook group has recently dubbed the 'boring dystopia' of neoliberal Britain. The development stalled. Morgan Stanley bought out Origin's parent company West Properties in the feeding frenzy that followed the crash. One contention of mine still seemed to hold: as long as the identity of the Village was based on business investment with links to a globalised economy, the fantasy of Canal Street and its surrounds as an enclosed community space would remain a fantasy.

This was a fantasy clearly espoused by pink entrepreneur Nigel Martin-Smith, the former manager of Take That. He accused West Properties of 'dropping a straight bomb' on the Village, despite the camp and faintly homoerotic advertising employed by the company. You could see how Martin-Smith came to this conclusion though. The village was part of an earlier wave of attracting investment from outside that paradoxically marketed the allure of a particular place, creating the illusion of a self-contained world. It's that illusion we need to look beyond, so as to understand how places like the Gay Village link up to a bigger picture.

What happened to the site of Origin? Aside from the car-park being completed, not much. Though it never amounted to little more than a symbolic hole in the ground, the vivid pink and green hoardings remained. The upwardly mobile imagery of suave suit-wearers gradually became more and more absurd as it was spattered with vomit and takeaway remains. Eventually, someone graffitied the legend "hurry up and finish the changing room – I'm bloody freezing, I've been stuck here for eight years" next to an image of a pouting man in a jacuzzi.

Those hoardings seemed like a monument to past folly that was 'all fur coat and no knickers', as we might say up north: profit-driven, subject to cycles of boom and bust, out of touch with deeper needs and desires. That last point was brought home by a set of stickers attached to the hoardings, which invited passers-by to write down their view of what should be done with the space. Alongside wackier suggestions, the clear winner was 'a park' – not surprising considering the severe lack of green space in the city centre.

Now the hoardings have been replaced and there is finally movement on the site. It has been bought by the London-based investment and property company Urban & Civic, with plans for a 'vibrant' development that 'sensitively reconnects the area to its surroundings'.

Citing 'changes in the economy and property market', the plan is similar in usage terms to Origin, though with a notably less frivolous and campily 'aspirational' aesthetic. There's a very 2010s focus on what the brochure describes as 'artisan' retailers, once again generating a fantasy of localist authenticity at the same time as it gestures to 'keep calm and carry on' austerity-chic.

Is this, then, a signal of the role of the Village in the mirage of the Powerhouse? A re-run of its earlier function in Manchester's 'municipal entrepreneurialism', though this time with a more sober, downplayed style more befitting of uncertain economic times? Major work on the site begins next year.

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