

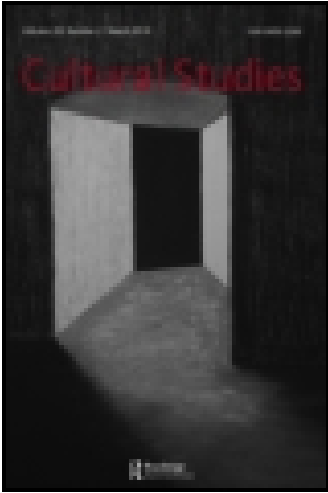
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# Steve Hanson and Mark Rainey

## THE URBIS BUILDING AS LOOKING GLASS:

### Viewing political and cultural change nationally and locally

*This paper uses the glass and steel Urbis building in Manchester as a prism via which we might look at cultural, political and economic change in England over the last twenty years or so. It takes stock of neoliberalism, museum and popular culture in England during that time, and tries to sense different political, cultural and economic turns, at the same time as it acknowledges that 'uneven development' on any landscape makes the attempt to describe macro change problematic. To deal with this, the paper introduces a particular figuring of the term 'degentrification', in order to think about the ways in which these essentially dialectical movements operate. We are soliciting a cultural dialectic here, which focuses on one site, but then uses the insights made there – in the tradition of Walter Benjamin and the Situationists – to think through wider cultural, economic and political temperatures in England between the early 1990s and the present day.*

**Keywords** urbanism; dialectics; popular culture; nationalism; geography; neoliberalism

The following paper is a discussion on how it is possible to use the Ian Simpson designed Urbis Building – as it has become known – as a kind of looking glass through which we might view political and cultural change over the last decade. We are both ex-Urbis employees and what follows is a reflection in and around this one particular site and how such a reflection can yield insight into wider topics including local governance and national politics, popular culture and economic recession, urban space and gentrification.

Urbis was a cultural venue in central Manchester, built in an area that was severely damaged by the detonation of a 3300lb IRA bomb in June 1996. This was the largest bomb to be detonated in 'peacetime' Britain and although no one was killed, it caused an estimated £700 million in damages to the city's business and retail core. Despite approximately 300 people were injured in the blast, no one was killed. Although, as we indicate below, redevelopment processes were already in place before the bomb and continued on long after

it, the 1996 bomb has taken on a symbolic status in Manchester, serving as a dramatic marker for the city's redevelopment. Urbis opened in 2002, at the height of New Labour and Tony Blair's Prime Ministership and it was finally closed in 2010 as New Labour fell apart and a Conservative-led coalition partnership entered government. The Urbis Building has now re-opened, housing the National Football Museum. We can therefore retrospectively view Urbis in three distinct phases; its initial function as the 'Museum of City Life' which included four floors of permanent interactive exhibitions, its transformation into a set of temporary exhibitions exploring urban and popular culture, before its closure and replacement with the National Football Museum, all of which map loosely onto the broader political and cultural landscape. In analysing this cultural landscape, we make continual reference to Manchester's own cultural scene and in particular to Factory Records, an independent record label operating in the city from the late 1970s until the early 1990s. The Factory Records label included bands such as Joy Division, New Order, The Happy Mondays and A Certain Ratio and the label also owned and operated the Hacienda nightclub. The cultural 'scene' surrounding Factory Records and other local bands and venues was dubbed 'Madchester' and subsequently led to two feature films being released; Michael Winterbottom's *24 Hour Party People* (2002) and Anton Corbijn's *Control* (2007). This cultural milieu brought with it an increase in civic boosterism and city marketing and extended beyond music and clubs to include redevelopment, regeneration and property, with the boundaries often being blurred. Key business and urban development players, such as local businessmen Bob Scott and property developer Tom Bloxham, CEO of Urban Splash, also rose to public prominence and we make reference to both in the following paper. As ex-employees, we cannot deny the Urbis Building its function as a glass splinter in our eye, through which, Adorno once advised, we might actually see better. (1951/2005, p. 29) Here, we have attempted to scry cultural and political change in Manchester through it, but also nationally. However, to do that, we had to begin before Urbis was built, in order to sketch in some of the processes that created it, and which continued on through it.

## Blast First

The BOMB itself became content, having had a short reign as environment.

Marshall McLuhan, (1969, p. 30)

A lingering survivor of the 1996 IRA bomb is the bizarre urban myth that it has been the best thing to happen to the city since cotton. This mantra acts as a

stand-in for much more complex processes that were active before the bomb and have continued since. The bomb, and the subsequent redevelopment of the blast-damaged area of Manchester city centre, had merely brought these processes into relief. 'Neoliberalism' provides a useful, but not unproblematic, point of access to these processes. We are wary that neoliberalism is primarily used in the pejorative sense and is deployed mainly by critics rather than assumed practitioners, and as Jamie Peck has indicated, it is 'nearly always seen in the rearview mirror'. (2010, p. 13) As a largely critical and retrospective term, its use may be limited beyond the critical circles in which it circulates and this may, in turn, limit the reception of the critique it provides. Noel Castree also warns against using neoliberalism as a form of academic 'consolation' or, more precisely, casting it as a monolithic hegemony against which scholars can then critically position themselves. (2006, p. 1) With these caveats in place, neoliberalism nonetheless serves as a useful 'explanatory term for contemporary forms of economic restructuring'. (Larner 2003, p. 509) In its broadest sense, neoliberalism is the pursuit of market rationality through the privatization of state assets and public services, the deregulation of finance and the disembedding of capital from state interference, trade liberalization and the 'correction' of state finances through managed debt crises. (Harvey 2005, Peck 2010) 'Success or failure' in the market becomes the paradigm for adjudicating governmental, and even individual, performance (Foucault 2008, p. 16) and takes on a certain 'taken-for-grantedness' in the absence of any articulated alternative. (Cresswell 1996, p. 20) Importantly, for our purposes in the account that follows, neoliberalism is increasingly being viewed as a 'fungible', 'hybridized' and 'polycentric' formation that operates on and adapts itself to multiple geographical scales: the global, the national and the local. (Larner 2003, p. 509, Cerny 2008, p. 39, Peck 2010, p. xviii) Although these scales are themselves socially constructed and are shaped and reshaped through inter-scalar interaction (Lefebvre 1991, p. 88, Brenner 1998, p. 468, 2001, p. 604, Castree, 2000, p. 283), there are specific iterations of neoliberalism on the local scale including the process of gentrification (Hackworth 2007, p. 123) and the increase of inter-city competition. (Massey 2007, p. 9)

The political restructuring of Manchester over the past thirty years, coupled with the redevelopment of much of the city centre and its surrounding areas, has been the subject of sustained critical study (Cochrane *et al.* 1996, Quilley 1998, Deas *et al.* 1999, Harding 2000, Peck and Ward 2002). Chief among these analyses is Manchester's broad shift from municipal socialism, however rhetorical, to a more entrepreneurial approach to city governance, a shift brought to the fore in the wake of the 1987 re-election of Margaret Thatcher, but also resulting from the harsh economic reality of Manchester losing its manufacturing core in the latter half of the twentieth century (Robson 2002, p. 36). The entrepreneurial city can be said to reflect, enact and adapt neoliberal market rationality to the local scale and includes the restructuring of local authorities away from executive power towards being

enablers of economic growth (Harding 2000, p. 57). Alongside this is an increased civic boosterism, participation in inter-city competitions for discretionary funding, the use of public–private partnerships to fund developments and the accompanying formation of an elite network of local politicians and business leaders through a series of overlapping, sequential partnerships that often operate informally and outside traditional structures of democratic accountability. The unabashed prominence of this elite network within Manchester has led to it being dubbed locally as the ‘Manchester Mafia’ (Cochrane *et al.* 1996, p. 1323). These formations are not unique to Manchester, but have occurred in the city and have been adapted to the local landscape. In view of Manchester’s former status as the ‘first manufacturing city in the world’ (Engels 1845/1987), the city has gone from being globalizer to globalized (Cochrane *et al.* 1996, p. 1323). The city’s success in winning discretionary funding, such as the 1992 City Challenge funding for the redevelopment of Hulme, can be read as being ‘signifiers of the conservative government’s approval of the city council’s approach’ (Robson 2002, p. 35). This approach continued on after the Conservative government. The IRA bomb, through which a large section of the city centre was destroyed and subsequently redeveloped, occurred just before New Labour’s 1997 election victory, a government who would fully develop the neoliberal partnerships which David Harvey described as state-finance nexus capitalism. (2009)

If the city was changing before the bomb, the form these changes took was very telling. The iconic Free Trade Hall became a Radisson SAS hotel. Built on the site of the 1819 Peterloo Massacre, it initially served as a meeting hall for the Anti-Corn Law League and later became the site of the first militant action of the Suffragette movement, before becoming a concert hall and venue for an influential Sex Pistols gig in 1976. Its reincarnation as a hotel was partly driven by the opening of the Bridgewater Hall in 1996 and the relocation of the Hallé Orchestra, who were rightly seen as a global draw for the city. However, privileging the Hallé over other players to display the city’s international credentials was also telling, as was re-titling the Free Trade site ‘Radisson Edwardian Manchester Hotel’, which privileged the broader ‘Edwardian’, the now consumable aesthetics of an era, over perhaps the more troubling ‘Free Trade Hall’ and its previously outlined associations with suffragism, protest and punk. The past was put out to pasture, by patrician council and business, like a senile relative unable to look after itself anymore. Similarly, in the wake of the IRA bomb, the blast-damaged Corn Exchange, home to independent market traders, became the Triangle Shopping Centre as big business moved in. The former Corn Exchange was filled with high-end retail and chain stores. The stallholders were cleared from the scene and yet the derided Arndale Centre was extended.

However, the past is always deployed in other ways too, and following the IRA bomb the mock-tudor pub Sinclair’s Oyster Bar was moved, beam by beam, a couple of hundred metres in order to preserve it amid the

construction of the world's largest Marks and Spencer store (now reduced in size) and a new retail avenue. The Hacienda, the flagship venue of the Factory Records music label, was demolished in 2002 to build private flats in its name. 'Now that's finished. You'll never see the hacienda. It doesn't exist. The hacienda must be built', wrote the poor, mad, proto-situationist, Ivan Chtcheglov in 1953 (p. 1). With reference to Chtcheglov, the Hacienda club had been established by Tony Wilson and other members of Factory Records in 1982, but in the early 2000s, as Urbis itself was being built and opened, the Crosby Homes advertisement for the flats eventually constructed on the site read, 'Now the party's over... you can come home'. An early Urbis exhibit showed sheet music from Strauss' 'Demolition Polka'. It is poetic that Chtcheglov was rumoured to have been caught heading towards another icon of a different fin-de-siecle, the Eiffel Tower, with a load of builder's dynamite, intent on reducing it to rubble as its lights kept him awake at night. He was attempting his own 'demolition polka' and we see how Schumpeter's 'creative destruction' saturates any players in these modernist games. (1943, pp. 82–84)

The Hacienda flats were without a doubt for the wealthy, as the Crosby Homes website 'City Living Reinvented' showed at the time. Yet, at the same time, in 1999, 43% of all households in the city were in receipt of Housing Benefit. (Herd and Patterson 2002, p. 194) In Castlefield, an area of the city directly linked to the early development of rail, the post-industrial city was reclaimed by the middle classes for a frisson of danger, without any of the wearisome poverty or actual threat of the back alley. Neil Smith describes how the 'new middle class does not distinguish itself on the basis of income so much as occupational, political or perhaps cultural criteria'. (1996, p. 98) Helen Hills has similarly described how the railway arches, literally by-products, left over from industrialization, were being reclaimed by high-rent urban-chic cafe bars and clubs (2002). The lure of the post-industrial became strong for the urban middle classes, wishing to bracket themselves away from the suburban middle classes. In all of this, Tony Wilson and other Manchester music glitterati, such as Simply Red frontman Mick Hucknall, can be re-cast as the unwitting foot soldiers of gentrification, the 'individual investors' of Hackworth's analysis, whose small-scale investment in derelict space was the precursor for the more sweeping gentrification brought on by 'corporate investors' and major property developers backed by local authority intervention (2007, pp. 126–128). Whitworth Street West, where the Hacienda once stood, is now lined with estate agents and up-market city centre flats, all capped by the new No. 1 First Street development. Another Factory Records venue, the Dry Bar, opened on Oldham Street in 1992 and helped set in motion the emergence of the Northern Quarter, Manchester's own civically branded bohemian area, while Mick Hucknall's former Barça bar was a centrepiece in the redeveloped Castlefield.

Here was a city of re-emerging divisions. All that remained was facade, but there are dialectical movements at play here, as these spaces were being completely transformed at the same time as they were being preserved leaving us with a fantasy future fiction assembled out of past images. Here was a city in which, architecturally, one could trace the changing nature of space. These iconic sites – the Free Trade Hall, the Hacienda, the Corn Exchange – were shifting from ones in which private bodies made themselves radically public, into ones in which bodies, and therefore minds, took themselves out of the public realm and made themselves private – conservatively – and their access to doing this was money, capital.

### **Urbis: 2002–2010**

The processes outlined above were controversial, conservative and undemocratic in places and Urbis was very much embedded in them. A cultural centre was first mooted in the EDAW and Ian Simpson led designs put forward by Manchester Millennium Ltd, a partnership between the city council, landowners and business tasked with redeveloping the bomb-damaged areas of the city centre. Urbis itself, also designed by Ian Simpson, was established through £20 Million of discretionary funding from the Millennium Commission and European Union, which was then supplemented annually by £2 million of council funds. Urbis opened in 2002, during the height of New Labour and Tony Blair's Prime Ministership. Yet, there is a dialectical movement here, the move to build Urbis, originally conceived as a 'museum of city life', was also risky and edgy. In some ways Urbis curated and then musuemified the culture which the Hacienda once hosted in its 'live' form, although in other ways it also carried the spirit of the radical city onwards. In 2007, Kevin Hetherington wrote that Urbis provided a radical, non-directing experience of the city itself, rather than of the city as a consumer space, which is true, but here also was the rise of 'culture', not as an iconoclast alternative to an incompetent or overbearing state, but as yet one more set of gears for capital and the state.

Urbis itself went through several key moments of change which also, it seems to us, mirror the wider cultural and political landscape. Urbis was initially branded as the 'Museum of City Life' and consisted of four floors of permanent exhibits. Apart from becoming increasingly worn with use, the exhibitions were inconsistent and lacked a cohesive narrative, jumping between a disparate set of themes, from local history and public seating to surveillance and the five world cities of Tokyo, New York, Paris, Singapore and Sao Paulo. When the new CEO, Vaughan Allen, took over in 2006, he shifted the institutional remit from a set of permanent exhibitions to an essentially temporary exhibition space, reflecting urban and popular culture.



This shift from holding staid, permanent exhibitions to curating a space in constant flux was a mammoth undertaking as the original exhibitions often formed part of the concrete fabric of the building. It also meant that the staff had to negotiate an ephemeral cultural space, somewhere between museum, art gallery, community centre and corporate venue, yet always none-of-the-above. This shift opened up the possibility for a wide-ranging set of exhibitions including *Arrivals and Departures: New Art Perspectives on Hong Kong*, *Reality Hack: Hidden Manchester*, *Black Panther: Emory Douglas and the Art of Revolution*, *Urban Gardening* and *Home Grown: The Story of UK Hip Hop* ([www.urbisarchive.org](http://www.urbisarchive.org)). In this, Allen succeeded in addressing some of the criticisms that Urbis was ill-defined – precisely what Hetherington liked about it – at the same time as he retained a relatively open brief.

SuperCity, Will Alsop's vision for a huge northern regeneration project, was also unveiled to the public at Urbis (Alsop 2004). This happened in 2005, but it soon afterwards provided a stark counterpoint to the Northern Rock crisis of 2007, which gave early signs that Alsop's vast ambition was a cartoon character walking over a cliff and out into the air. In some ways, then, Urbis could be inward looking. This criticism is not new and can also be mapped onto the way the building itself had to cope with its glass design. Due to potential heat and an architectural brief to keep visitor attention focused on the exhibits, the glass panels included an opaque glaze and a potentially fantastic view of the city was often compromised, a sentence that might stand as a metaphor for Urbis' existence. The only available panoramic view was from the rather exclusive series of restaurants and cocktail bars that occupied the top floor. However, around the time of the Northern Rock crisis the Visitor Programmes team at Urbis established Urbis City Tours. In the three years leading up to the building's closure, over 14,000 visitors were taken around the exhibitions and wider city to explore themes including radical politics, regeneration, music, feminist history and drinking culture, which, perhaps importantly, added an external facing element to the venue. Although they eventually received Enjoy England accreditation, the tours also operated as a sort of psychogeography by stealth. It was this sort of exteriority that helped make Urbis unique in some ways. In 2008, exactly a year later, Hetherington's comments on consumerism become interesting in a slightly different way, as entire western financial networks collapsed. In this, we feel that again, the changes which had taken place in and around Urbis can be taken as loose maps to wider, recent British history.

The death of Tony Wilson occurred during the run of Urbis' *Haçienda 25* exhibition, a retrospective on the cultural impact of Factory Records and the *Haçienda*. A public wake, consisting of 24 hours of continuous live music and debate, was held at Urbis in 2008 and prefigured the final closure of the institution in 2010, which also roughly coincided with the collapse of New Labour. At the event, it was possible to see the actor Steve Coogan, who had played Tony Wilson in the film *24 Hour Party People* (2002) attend the wake

of the man he so famously simulated. Wilson famously declared that he preferred myth to reality. For us, this poetic moment marked both the height and end of the reality-extinguishing postmodern excess: symbolic postmodern signifiatory practices which Factory Records insiders both encouraged in their artists and wallowed in themselves, which were being buoyed by a massive credit bubble that has now burst.

The credit crunch eventually became a full-blown recession, and it was during this time that Manchester City Council opted to close Urbis and replace it with the National Football Museum. The period of closure was a difficult one for many and the outgoing CEO, Vaughan Allen, likened it to a process of grieving (*The Guardian* 2010). There were also bitter absurdities attached to it. The Museums Journal declared Black Panther: Emory Douglas and the Art of Revolution to be a benchmark for future exhibitions at the same time that Manchester City Council was announcing Urbis' closure in the local press (2009). Added to this were the less than tactful performances of local councillors who effectively addressed the staff with: 'You'll be losing your jobs, but the National Football Museum is going to be great!'

### **Towards a new ancien régime?**

The National Football Museum has now re-opened in the Ian Simpson designed Urbis building, after a long hiatus, a gap which seems to mirror the almost interregnum-like quality of the Coalition government and the subsequent riots in England in 2011. When the Football Museum finally did open its doors in July 2012, they opened to a new 'state of play' in Britain, if you will excuse the pun. What follows is a polemical reading, rather than an insight, but the perceived shift of the Urbis building to a more 'mass popular' alignment is real enough and can, we think, be read in a wider historical sense. The new National Football Museum can be read as representative of the fragile state of Coalition-era Britain, as well as a country feeding nationalist and sports-based spectacles out through its media channels. The closure of Urbis and staggered sacking of over 100 staff during a massive financial crisis bolsters this reading.

The move from the 'museum of city life', via urban and popular culture, to the National Football Museum tracks a shift away from narrative celebrations of an everyday urban hybridity – of urban complexity itself – to often national and nationalistic narratives. Immediately after it opened in 2002, the funicular lift in Urbis led to a feature called 'Arrive' which shut visitors in a dark space and bombarded them and the four walls with the noise and fragmenting high speed vision of urban life. Although enclosed, 'Arrive' was outward-looking in that it gave us a representation – albeit couched in existing film language – of what it might be like for a migrant arriving in totally disorienting urban spaces in order to make and re-make them everyday.

The National Football Museum has now installed an additional, very provincial looking set of escalators, among various stairs, a vomit of conveyances, which deck the foyer out like a department store, in order to provide extra routes into the galleries. In one sense, these features simply anticipated a spike in visitor numbers, but like the shift from public to private, which could be viewed in the Free Trade Hall, Corn Exchange and Hacienda sites, the new stairs and escalators all have a much more conservative function: they are orienting rather than disorienting.

Paul Overy has explored how the new fin-de-siecle uses some of the shock Victorian vertigo machines in its funiculars and millennium wheels, but with the health and safety abiding tepidness which is a historical product of our era (2003). The new escalators in the National Football Museum have been installed next to the fantastic postmodern funicular feature, which, like millennium wheels up and down Britain, brought a trace of gentle, Victorian vertigo machine with it. The funicular was so singular, to then go plural with something as banal as an everyday escalator was an unimaginative move. Of course, when one starts talking about how the architectural purity has been sundered, it is more than possible to sound pompous. This is what usually happens when buildings change use, there are fudges, partitions, compromises, and we should not be either surprised or damning. However, this shift in function is as crucial to map as the shift of the Free Trade Hall from public to private, it is just that when you are talking about the National Football Museum the risk doubles, you become quite the opposite of populist. The point here though has been to map the changes in this one, prismatic building, against cultural and political changes in the wider landscape, and the recent stream of national cultural circuses – the Jubilee and Olympics – provided the ultimate incentive to write this article.

The shift from municipal socialism to the entrepreneurial city, which underpinned much of the critical literature on Manchester's political restructuring, seems to be fragmenting now. Returning to this subject, this time on the other side of a financial collapse, Harding *et al.* have argued that although the crisis in the financial sector was also immediately felt in property development and construction, it also quickly migrated to a weak manufacturing sector and brittle consumer services (2010, p. 988). Through this migration the casualties of the recession became vulnerable workers in insecure sectors. Within Manchester, this has served to entrench and exacerbate the divisions that existed during the 'boom years'. Expressed spatially, the more affluent south Manchester has coped better with the recession than the north of the city, despite the former being more readily associated with the initial causes of the crisis (2010, p. 988). Both urban and global life can be fragmenting in exhilarating or deathly ways, depending on who you are, your status and luck.

Culture also becomes more conservative during a downturn, a cliché with some unfortunate veracity. We argue that within this context gentrification is

more clearly turning into ‘degentrification’, and so there may be wider, unconscious reasons for this turn away from wilfully disorienting visions, which are traceable through all the sites we have presented here, towards perhaps more comfortable, orienting visions. By ‘degentrification’ we mean an urban landscape that exhibits ‘ongoing decline’ alongside ‘dynamic transformation’. (Peck and Ward 2002, p. 3) The essential question of degentrification is not whether decline precedes transformation, but rather if it proceeds it or even runs simultaneously with it. As we indicate below, Neil Smith’s theory of ‘uneven development’ becomes important in elucidating degentrification (2010). To think this through further, we might gaze through our looking glass towards Whitworth Street, where advertising hoardings surround the site of the Origin development, a projected complex of ‘state-of-the-art’ apartments, offices and a hotel. This project is not just unfinished, it is effectively un-started. The foundations are in place, but nothing else. Construction cranes once meant success. On a city skyline they were symbols of regeneration, redevelopment and investment. Then the recession hit and the old adage that you could measure a city’s success by counting its construction cranes became irrelevant. Many building projects went bust and some, like the Origin development, not only lacked the finance to finish the project, but also lacked the money to remove the cranes from the building site. For three years following the financial crisis, the towering construction cranes on Whitworth Street stood silently in the sky. They became reminders that work had ceased. They became symbols of the recession.

The advertising hoardings were also inverted by the recession, ‘détourned’, in the language of the Situationists, and began to speak of the new poetry of degentrification. It is still possible to walk to the empty site and read the advertising slogans: ‘30-something, ‘A’ list lifestyle & 5 star home’, ‘efficient, effortless & individual’ and the even more darkly poetic, ‘home-maker, risk taker & heartbreaker’. In his iconic text, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Guy Debord wrote that capitalism portrays itself as youth, as youth characterizes its dynamism. (1967, §. 62) The images of relationally and professionally aggressive young people that accompany the slogans along the hoardings of the abandoned development seem to act this out in the most obvious fashion. However, there is a bitter irony here – this portrayal of youth is, again according to Debord, ‘by no means proper to people who are young’ and the lost aspirations now symbolized by these out-of-date images reflects the loss of opportunities available to young people (1967, §. 62). The slogan, ‘Live, Relax, Work’, also on the hoardings, takes on a new and twisted meaning as unemployment reaches 2.68 million with young people hardest hit (*The Guardian*, 2012). The cranes have now been removed from the site, but the advertising remains and what once may have been fashionable, now seems embarrassingly out of place.

The ‘ancien régime’ is the political and social system that existed in France before the Revolution of 1789, but the term has also become shorthand for a

sociopolitical or other system that only exists in fragmentary or ghostly forms. It might be tempting to think, at moments such as these, that we are catching sight of the rise of a new *ancien régime* in the ruins of the present. The faces on the images staring out of the hoardings look angry, haunted, sociopathic even: they might be the ghosts of the new *ancien régime*.

We must take care with this kind of perverse triumphalism though, not only because recession causes suffering, but because it risks suggesting an erroneous map of the processes at play here. Neil Smith's theory of uneven development is underpinned by the 'seesaw movement of capital' (2010, p. 197) where capital is invested or disinvested from space according to its potential, or lack of potential, to increase the rate of profit. The movement is back and forth, 'from developed to underdeveloped space and back again' (2010, p. 199), and we argue that this can be read into the minute detail of urban space, with the Origin development as an example. There is a dialectical process at work here as decline always already accompanies transformation and while degentrification may be at its most obvious in a recession environment, it is also present as a possibility in the very process of gentrification itself. Similarly, Frederic Jameson talks of 'scarcity' as the condition of life in the west, even if one is rich, he says, this condition is produced by scarcity. (2010) It saturates all social life, because the 'individual' views the other through the lenses of scarcity. This un-reciprocated view must be overcome before the Origin development on Whitworth Street in Manchester can be declared a relic of the new *ancien régime*, although it is tempting to do so.

In 2002, as *Urbis* opened, Peck and Ward's influential collection *City of Revolution* appeared as the focal point of political economy literature on Manchester, and showed how the regeneration processes undertaken before and after the 1996 IRA bomb had little substantive effect on existing social divisions in Greater Manchester. Similar criticisms are still being put to the blue-sky advocates of the Olympics in the East End of London. In Michael Winterbottom's *24 Hour Party People*, the Tony Wilson character likens Manchester to 'renaissance Florence' while unveiling the Hacienda club. The Martin Hannett character retorts with 'this is dark ages fucking Manchester'. The Wilson and Hannett figures present negative and positive images of the same place, a Janus head looking in two directions at once, a duality recurrent even before Engels' pejorative account (1845/1987). Both Manchester and *Urbis* are usually presented as a glass half-full or empty, and it is often difficult getting reliable sources to even make a decision as to which it is.

The reason for this is regeneration itself: Peter Burke described Jacob Burckhardt's version of the Renaissance, presented in his 'Civilisation and Renaissance in Italy', 1860, saying that 'Burckhardt's mistake was to accept the scholars and artists of the period at their own valuation, to this story of rebirth at its face value'. Burke explains that 'the characters in this story, whether they are heroes like Alberti and Michaelangelo or villains like the Borgias, are all larger than life'. (Burke 1987, p. 2) The pre- and post-millennial Manchester

City Council works closely with business partnerships, the ‘Manchester Mafia’, and this inevitably brings marketing and boosterism, or spin and lies, depending on which half of the glass you look through. Pop entrepreneur Tony Wilson, property developer and CEO of Urban Splash Tom Bloxham and Olympic bidsman Bob Scott were such ‘renaissance’ figures. Yet in 2012, a neat decade after Urbis was opened, we seem to have gone full circle. At one point in *24 Hour Party People*, the Tony Wilson character is regaled by a homeless man with lines from Boethius’s *Consolations of Philosophy*, and later ‘Wilson’ explains Manchester and pop culture as moving via Kondratiev long waves. Again, there is a dialectical, ‘uneven development’ relationship here, as of course slump zones and poverty are always present at the same time as longer historical curves can be detected.

### The dialectics of popular culture

We could not stop thinking about the 2011 riots when we walked around the National Football Museum. It incubates the re-raising of the popular as ‘mass’ in perhaps the only way that remains possible now, rather than the mass as everyday-hybrid, edgy, deviant or avant-garde, which Urbis represented in its various phases. This may be a controversial statement, but there is a complexity to be negotiated here. We get twitchy when we read Owen Hatherley witheringly deriding Mancunian pop culture and ‘swagger’ – which risks deriding genuinely progressive working class culture – at the same time as we agree with him about, for instance, the utopian avant garde of Sheffield’s electronica scene (2010). At one point, we had both in one figure. As John Harris has explained, the northern working class, as encapsulated in a figure such as John Lennon, strode out to the edge of both outer and inner experience, both commercial and crass, esoteric and weird, in one figure and one lifetime (2010). This was the kind of culture Urbis celebrated, simultaneously mass-popular and totally maverick stuff, stuff which changed the landscape irrevocably, at the same time as it left it completely recognizable.

Urbis eventually followed the trajectory of many millennial cultural venues. These were venues built with architectural style over inner content and typically formed the photogenic centrepiece of an urban regeneration project. It is interesting to us that most have fundamentally changed their purpose or folded into obscurity. The Millennium Dome is now the O2 Arena<sup>1</sup>, the National Centre for Popular Music is now the Sheffield Hallam University Student’s Union<sup>2</sup>, The Public<sup>3</sup> struggled to ever open and the Earth Centre<sup>4</sup> is now defunct. The National Football Museum’s own looming bankruptcy in Preston directly led to Urbis’ closure<sup>5</sup>. They were all projects of a markets-will-correct, everything-free-floating, blue-sky-spouting world, which surely cannot continue, at the very least in the same form. They were all surplus

skimming exercises for particular key players, concealed as civic urbanism, but at the same time they also provided brief, incredible popular cultural moments, possibilities which will perhaps be gazed upon in the future like Dodo skeletons. It is easy to forget that Manchester's failed Olympic bids were undertaken by the same 'city mafia', Bob Scott being a key player, who were involved in the eventual transformation of the city centre. All generations sang along to 'My Generation' at the end of the Olympic closing ceremony, yet this 'eternal present' seems to be simultaneously thawing, as we enter the end of a long and quite literally mad period of the leveraging of business, the leveraging of everyday life, the leveraging of the leveraging and the leveraging of the leveraging of the leveraging.

The return of the monarchy to public life, in the Royal Wedding and Jubilee, can be added to the arrival of the National Football Museum on Manchester's landscape, and both can be read – polemically – as cultural turns of a particular sort. Danny Boyle's selection as director of the Olympic ceremonies in London, 2012, also illuminated the wider shifting of cultural capital in Britain, and the inclusion of 'counterculture' in this was telling. At one point, a bit of the soundtrack flashed up like a new national anthem. It was a rehashed fragment of 'Two Months Off' by Underworld, who put the music together, which ten years ago you might have heard at a rave, but here it was played like 'Ode to Joy'. Urbis, we feel, was a kind of dress rehearsal for this, an early movement in the process of making grass roots pop culture nationalistically symphonic. The sociologist Mike Savage fed back the results of the Great British Class Survey recently (2012), and he explained how our cultural capital references have shifted towards pop cultural ones, away from high cultural 'elitism'. Of course, popular culture, countercultures and subcultures, since their major rise in the 1960s, fragmented the 'us and them' situation of essentially Edwardian class relations in Britain, which lingered on until well after WW2. Yet, in another sense entirely, the idea that the counterculture has 'won' by entering the canon is misguided, the gap between protest culture and cultural capital has simply been shut down in 2012, by the nanosecond of reflection time, between the receive-and-send of interactive communication, and the corresponding speed-up of purchasing and cultural redundancy. Both 'radical' and 'mainstream' are winking out of existence via these processes, and we would argue that these processes were catalysed by the supposedly 'failed' millennial projects such as Urbis and the National Centre for Popular Music. We have seen a cultural Ouroboros pass by, the snake that eats its own tail. In some ways, Urbis had always done what the Radisson did to the Free Trade Hall. Urbis was a kind of airlock, or passport control, which finally 'let things in'. It incubated in muted form, the Great Exhibition colonial-and-other relationship, in its radical-conservative binaries. In the Olympic ceremonies we saw that happen in mass fashion, in the form of an essentially dialectical conversation the country could have with itself. In fact, watching the opening ceremony, we were reminded of Tony Wilson's wake at

Urbis, which was full of retrospective ‘Danny Boyles’. They were not radicals any longer, but were forming a new cultural plutocracy.

## Conclusion

The big blocks of time can only be seen from this distance – exactly at the moment when the eternal present thaws a little – their contours only become apparent now, and here we have tried to show that in and around one site, in one city, it is possible to put oneself in a meditation on the landscape which yields poetic reflections on time, space, culture and politics. What is interesting for us is the way in which immersion in one place over time can yield a narrative which does illuminate wider shifts. Contradictory, warring aspects of different historical and political processes are migrating towards and away from the surface of one single reality all the time, and in this we want what we say here to be methodologically exemplary, as well as culturally suggestive: the glass and steel of Urbis can be used as a kind of looking glass; there is a cultural dialectic to be accessed in and around sites such as this, via which we can see culture bend to its base, as it moves from ‘radical’ – with all the caveats we have put in place here – to conservative and nationalistic.

We also want to suggest that there is real traffic between these movements and wider political shifts, and that a return to the flaneurial practices of Benjamin and the Situationists should be considered again as a set of methodological temperature dials. At the same time, this kind of practice has some limitations. We must always step off in the eternal ruins of the present, but before we do so, we want to suggest some futures: both *Factory Records* and *Urbis* were essentially, inevitably, postmodern projects. They incubated postmodern signifiatory practices and showed fundamentally postmodern work. The recent V&A postmodernism retrospective placed the near and far end of its subject as 1970–1990, and this tracks the subject in its avant-garde phase, before its formal qualities and weird multiple endgames were simply translated directly into consumerism and everyday life; into another round of massive surplus-skimming.

At this point, we move towards choppy waters. Is it possible that postmodernism of the type that *Factory Records* indulged in was only possible under the economic circumstances of the post-war years, and only strongly so over the last twenty? It would be tempting to inscribe the media discourses of the crash here and say that it seems to be fragmenting, particularly with the end of crazy credit – it is no surprise to us that this narrative sat under a culture of irony and unseriousness – but Neil Smith argues that the laws of ‘uneven development’ ensure that crisis and crunch are not neatly defined in ‘eras’, but move in a see-sawing way. It was with this in mind that we have figured the term ‘degentrification’ into our analysis. However, degentrification is not simply



the decline of one area as capital is shifted elsewhere, but is the very possibility and condition of decline while a particular space is undergoing transformation. This was the case with the Origin development where the images advertising the development were unintentionally détourned, becoming twisted reminders of economic recession although these very possibilities were always already present in the pre-recession visions. In Britain, all of this, finally, in 2012, probably does mark the beginning of the end of the New Elizabethan age, but whether or not it marks the end of any larger economic, cultural and historical period is probably impossible to state, but we want to note finally that the former Corn Exchange site, the Triangle Shopping Centre, right next to Urbis, has been named the Corn Exchange once again, something which roughly coincides with the opening of the National Football Museum. It is trying to cover over the mistakes of the past with more of the same from that past, and this is actually a strong metaphor for what is happening right now, and one which again, we feel, maps on to the wider political landscape, in which neoliberalism remains the only game in town.

## Notes

- 1 Situated on the Greenwich Peninsula in South East London, the Millennium Dome was a cultural venue opened on New Year's Day, 2000. After disappointing visitor numbers in its first year, the original exhibitions were dismantled and subsequently auctioned off in 2001. In 2005, it was rebranded the O2 Arena and is now a sports and entertainment venue.
- 2 The National Centre for Popular Music opened in Sheffield in 1999 and initially featured exhibitions on contemporary music. It closed in 2000 and was eventually purchased by Sheffield Hallam University in 2003.
- 3 The Public is a cultural venue in West Bromwich. Its slated opening date in 2006 was delayed following financial difficulties and Alsop Architects dropping from the project. It opened fully to the public in 2010.
- 4 The Earth Centre in Doncaster, South Yorkshire opened in 1999 as a venue promoting environmental sustainability. It closed in 2004, after going bankrupt.
- 5 The National Football Museum opened in 2001 and was originally situated in the Deepdale football stadium in Preston, Lancashire. Following funding issues, it relocated from Preston in 2010 to Manchester's Urbis Centre and re-opened in 2012.

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