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Manchester's Regeneration and Adaptive Reuse in the Twenty-First Century

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Abstract

Adaptive reuse of Manchester's abandoned areas and buildings has been a catalyst for the city's regeneration. Manchester's transformation was initiated at the end of the twentieth century and accelerated in the twenty-first century. The research significance lies in generating new knowledge and advancing our understanding of how adaptive reuse of the historic urban fabric can create resilient, inclusive and sustainable communities. Manchester's regeneration is a pilot study, and the lessons learned from this can inform decision making in the future for interventions, in other historic built environments. The paper examines the challenges in "recreating this city", looking at award-winning adaptive reuse projects that had a profound impact on the communities, and the city's fabric: the built and natural environment. The study emphasizes the city's historic significance as an industrial hub, in the eighteenth to nineteenth centuries, and follows the city's regeneration journey; how its deprived areas were transformed into affluent and vibrant neighborhoods in the twenty-first century. The study presents testimonies of the protagonists, the architects, who played a pivotal role in the city's prosperity, and testimonies of the public. It aims to identify the challenges and opportunities for adaptive reuse and 'constructive conservation': national legislative framework, local authority's strategies, communities' engagement, innovative interventions, investment, etc. The paper looks at the strategies that aim to secure the city's resilient and sustainable future. Manchester's adaptive reuse journey continues, the city's historic fabric is still being regenerated and transformed, and the city's footprint is continuing to grow. In conclusion, Manchester's regeneration success is credited to the partnership between local people, local authority, entrepreneurial investments, private and public, and the architects, who regenerated the city's urban fabric and recreated the cityscape.

Keywords: Regeneration, Adaptive, Reuse

Introduction

Recreating the city; Manchester's regeneration and adaptive reuse, is the main topic of this paper. The research emphasizes the city's historic significance as an industrial hub in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and follows the city's regeneration journey in the twenty-first century. This study aims to present the significance and impact of regeneration, which lies in the quantity of the adaptive reuse projects and the quality of the urban fabric. Adaptive reuse of Manchester's dilapidated areas and buildings has been a catalyst for the city's regeneration. This was initiated at the end of the twentieth and accelerated in the twenty-first century. As a result, Manchester has attracted significant investment, from

private and public sectors. The city's prosperity and growth are evident in its urban fabric, and the continuous significant changes to its skyline. This research focuses on identifying the extent of Manchester's regeneration in the last three decades. It includes a survey that captured the testimonies of architects/planners and the public, who contributed to the city's prosperity. The survey identifies the complex challenges and opportunities for adaptive reuse and "constructive conservation", as defined by Historic England in the "Conservation Principles and Guidance" (Historic England 2010). "Constructive conservation" embraces a holistic approach in building conservation, that focuses on people and place. What lessons can we learn from Manchester's journey of regeneration that can inform interventions in other historic built environments? This paper aims to advance our understanding of how adaptive reuse of the historic urban fabric can create resilient, inclusive and sustainable communities, and inspire innovation. The challenges in 'recreating this city', are examined, looking at award-winning adaptive reuse projects that had a profound impact on communities, the built and natural environment. The study enhances our knowledge on strategies that can be achieved to respectfully revive the industrial city's urban fabric and drive innovation, economic growth, progress, and social equity. The study concludes by highlighting the importance of local people's empowerment, and engagement in decision making, in driving change, regeneration and innovation. These qualities are applicable elsewhere nationally and beyond.

People and Place; Survey and Responses

To identify people's perceptions on the city's regeneration, a survey was carried out. The survey aimed to identify the complex challenges and opportunities for adaptive reuse of historic buildings: legislative framework, local authority strategies, innovative interventions, investment, communities' engagement, etc. The questionnaire was designed to record the testimonies of professionals, architects/conservation architects/planners, who contributed to the city's prosperity, the public, residents, users, professionals and academics who work in the city and its universities. The interviewees were recruited from the author's professional and personal contacts. The survey included: poll and open questions. The poll questions identified the interviewees' background (age, gender, occupation, education), their association with the city (working, living, role in regeneration), their perceptions (interest in the city's past, present, future) and sense of belonging. The open questions captured their experiences, challenges and opportunities, and their vision for the city's future. Interviewees were asked to consider; legislative framework (building regulations, planning, Listed building consent, etc.), technical issues (sustainable design requirements, construction materials and techniques, skills), social issues (public engagement, etc.), environmental (biodiversity, green zones, etc.), cultural (local history, heritage, etc.) and economic (public and private funding, investment).

In their majority, the seventeen interviewees were between the ages thirty to seventy, more female than male, living or working within Greater Manchester, in the last ten to twenty-five years. Architects and conservation architects demonstrated particular interest in completing the survey. The architects' and planners' responses highlighted the significance of gaining grant funding for public projects, the difficulties during planning procedures, and the need for construction skills for repairs to the buildings' historic fabric: "planning is a hurdle", "construction skills exist but limited choice of contractors". Most of the architects worked

on various regeneration schemes, repair and restoration of churches to large private and public regeneration schemes (a few hundred thousand to half a billion sterling pounds). They emphasized their positive experiences, their enjoyment in helping communities from deprived areas, and the benefits of collaborating with professionals from other disciplines, the exchange of knowledge. They expressed their love for the people and the place and the social value of the adaptive reuse projects. They highlighted the importance of partnerships between communities and stakeholders in regeneration projects. They praised private investment and government's initiative for funding, and the recent improvements to the city's infrastructure. Their future visions focus on people and communities for a healthy, affordable future, infrastructure and services, and more green public spaces. Their recommendations focus on the significance of scale, proportions, respect for the place history and character: "the city needs better planned public spaces, affordable housing, more creative architects". They highlighted their concerns that as the city becomes "denser, it needs planned public spaces" and noted that "some recently built tower blocks" deviate from any "reference to the city's character", and skyline.

The public's response focused on the recent prosperity and growth, vibrancy of the city, and opportunities for work and leisure. They highlighted the international reputation of the city as a cultural events venue (science, football, concerts, etc.), and the high-quality tourism industry. The public had positive experiences and have a sense of belonging in the city but were less interested in surveys. Academics, who worked at the local universities, and professionals who have been working for decades in the city, expressed an enhanced sense of belonging. They characterize the city as "a crossroad of different civilizations". Manchester has become even more significant as an education and science laboratory, nationally and internationally, and its reputation is fast growing.

Manchester's Historic Significance and Milestones

Why is Manchester's heritage significant? Manchester was a cotton industry center in the eighteenth to nineteenth centuries, known as the "cottonopolis", with a network of canals, and over a thousand warehouses used for international trade. The city was well-known for the "Battles of Styles" (Neo Gothic, Classical, Italianate, etc.) which was directly linked to its status as a protagonist at the heart of the industrial revolution. A plethora of styles characterized the city, at the time.

What are the milestones in Manchester's adaptive reuse journey, in the last three decades (1996-2025)? What has driven regeneration? In 1996 the city center was destroyed by a terrorist bomb, and this has ignited a "sense of duty" of the local authorities, to revive the city. In 2002, the city hosted the Commonwealth Games, and the northern outskirts were transformed into several sporting venues. In 2010 and 2015, the "Northern Powerhouse" Government's initiative, a substantial funding, has improved the local and regional infrastructure. This attracted significant private investments, local initiatives.

Manchester's Growth and Prosperity

The city is still growing. The indicator of growth is the increased density of the population in the city center; from five hundred people in 1990, to one hundred thousand, in thirty-five years. Manchester is becoming more international, as two hundred languages are spoken, forty percent of young people, and almost half of the adult population are multilingual.

According to the University of Manchester research, Manchester is considered "Britain's city of languages" (University of Manchester, 2013). This reflects a continuation in the city's heritage. The city was at the heart of the industrial revolution, attracting international interest, and today it is, again, a multicultural and international.

Adaptive reuse of Manchester's urban fabric has ignited and accelerated economic growth and prosperity in the last three decades and attracted further development. Economic growth has funded improved infrastructure projects and public services (cycling routes, electric buses, Metrolink), revived and adaptively reused dilapidated areas and buildings. Many existing buildings are under renovation or reconstruction. Several have been lost; they were demolished and recently replaced with skyscrapers. Manchester City Council's ambitious strategies and plans for the next five years include further protection and offer incentives to adaptively reuse buildings and to create a more sustainable infrastructure (Greater Manchester, 2025). The Council encourages public engagement in decision making and partnerships between communities and stakeholders.

Manchester's Significant Adaptive Reuse Projects

Many local architects, national and global architectural practices and firms established their architectural offices at Manchester's center and its outskirts. In the last twenty years, the city's people witnessed substantial investment for regeneration and new developments. Investment by developers (i.e. Urban Splash), private initiatives, local authorities, and public organizations such as Heritage Lottery Fund, funded heritage adaptive reuse projects, and the city's public realm regeneration. Many regeneration projects received multiple awards (Fig. 1) since 2015, including RIBA-Royal Institute of British Architects, and MSA-Manchester Society of Architects.

Awarded projects include renovations of warehouses by Urban Splash, such as the Albert Mills, which was restored and converted for residential use by Maurice Sapero Architects, and Stubbs Mill, which was adaptively reused for commercial use, by Nick Moss, Sixty-two Architects. Previously significant industrial areas, that fell into disuse, in the twentieth century, were also revived, such as Ancoats, New Islington, Mayfield, NOMA, etc. These are large scale urban regeneration projects and include public realm, landscape schemes, new developments, and adaptive reuse of significant heritage buildings. Representative examples of adaptive reuse of the historic buildings in the city center (known as NOMA) are: a) the Hanover Building, a warehouse and office building built in 1904 and 1909, which was converted into Amazon headquarters, and b) New Century Hall built in 1963, converted from offices to multiple use facilities: restaurant, events venue, educational music center, music recording studios. Mayfield Park and New Islington became significant redevelopment residential projects, with new infrastructure.

Regeneration has continued with larger restoration and conservation projects. Recently (2025) completed are the Science and Industry Museum, John Rylands Library. Currently under renovation, are the Manchester Town Hall, (expected cost over half a billion pounds), Manchester Fire Station (to become a hotel), etc. Manchester's success has inspired regional regeneration projects in Greater Manchester, in its ten metropolitan boroughs. Recent successful heritage-led, community-led regeneration projects (2024-25) include Oldham Town Hall, and Rochdale Town Hall. All these projects focus on social and economic value and environmental impact. They consider sustainable design and reduce net zero carbon.

RIBA NW Awarded projects 2015-2025

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EAHN-ICAR Conference, Pisa, 2025

RIBA NW Awards	Adaptive Reuse/Conservation	Architectural Practice
2025	**Aviva Studios**	OMA Architects
2023	**AVRO**	Stephenson Hamilton Risley STUDIO (Urban Splash)
	Manchester Jewish Museum	Citizens Design Bureau Architects
2022	RHS Bridgewater	Stephen Hodder Architects
2020-1	**Murray's Mills**	Feilden Clegg Bradley Architects
	Halle St Peter's	Stephenson Hamilton Risley STUDIO
	Wythenshaw Hall	Buttress Architects
2019	**Mustard Tree**	OMI Architects
	Ordsall Cord	BDP Architects
2017	**Chetham's school of Music**	Stephensons Studio Architects
	Oldham Town Hall	BDP Architects
	Stubbs Mill	SixtyTwo Architects for Urban Splash
2016	**Library Walk Link**	SimpsonHaugh Architects
	Manchester Central Library	Ryder Architecture
2015	**Whitworth Gallery**	MUMA Architects

Fig. 1. Table of RIBA NW awards (Maria Yioutani-Iacovides, 2025)

To evidence adaptive reuse significance, the paper discusses, three successful projects: Halle St Peter's, Castlefield Viaduct, and Central Library. These differ, in scale and function, but have been extremely impactful on the people and the place.

Evidencing Adaptive Reuse Impact on People and Place

Halle St Peter's (Fig. 2) was originally a church, built in 1859 for the Irish industrial working-class population, and was abandoned in early nineteen ninety. It was designated as a Grade II Listed in 1974, as part of the Ancoats Conservation Area. The church and the surrounding area were left in a dilapidated state, until 1995, when an initiative by local community, formed the Ancoats' Building Preservation Trust. They expressed an interest in restoring the building in 1998, and in 2003, they secured Heritage Lottery Funding. In 2013 the renovations were completed. Then in 2019, the Oglesby family funded an extension on the first floor, for the Halle youth orchestra rehearsals. The restoration enhanced the interior spaces with advanced acoustic design. The design concept considered sustainable principles and building performance. The project had an environmental, social, and cultural impact. It has been a very popular national events venue for concerts, weddings, exhibitions, etc. More importantly it had a profound economic impact on the regeneration of the neighbouring area, Ancoats', and the extended area, Northern Quarters. The population from completely abandoned has increased to fifteen hundred thousand, in seven square kilometres, in fifteen years. The area now has a vibrant and active community. New infrastructure (schools, transport connections, new green public spaces, etc) has improved dramatically.

The Castlefield Viaduct was built in 1892, as a railway line, close to the Great Northern Warehouse, at the centre of Manchester. Until its closure in 1969, it used to carry heavy rail traffic. The Castlefield viaduct, a Grade II Listed designated in 1988, is a significant example of structural engineering representing the innovative technologies of Industrial Manchester, in the nineteenth century. The viaduct was designed by Heenan and Froude,

the designers of Blackpool Tower (inspired by Eiffel Tower, 1889). In 2020, the National Trust renovated the site and created a sky park. It is a heaven in the city "fig. 3", which has no other parks. Local volunteers played at integral part in the creation of the gardens and their maintenance. Plans for the sky park's expansion, towards Salford, which will include a cycling route, are due in the next few years. Castlefield's regeneration reflects the "spirit of place". This project has a significant impact on biodiversity in the city.

Manchester Central Library was designed by Vincent Harris in neoclassical style, inspired by the Pantheon in Rome, and opened 1934. In 2014, it had major refurbishment to the interior (forty million pounds) by Ryder Architects, and an exterior addition a glass 'Library

Fig. 2. Halle St Peter's (Maria Yioutani-Iacovides, 2023)

Fig. 3. Castlefield Viaduct promenade (Maria Yioutani-Iacovides, 2023)

Fig. 4. Manchester Central Library (Maria Yioutani-Iacovides, 2023)

walk' by SimpsonHaugh architects. The project was funded by Manchester City Council, Heritage Lottery Fund and private initiatives. The interior was completely transformed "fig. 4" into reading and exhibition spaces, and innovative technologies were introduced for public access to the building and the archives. The library is an integral part of the city's public realm. Public engagement in the decision making with consultation and social equity were at the heart of the project's brief. Evidence of its success is the people's 'pride of place' and use of its resources.

Unlocking Manchester's Future for the People and the Place

Recreating the city has created more inclusive communities, sustainable and resilient. Adaptive reuse in Manchester is a representative example of the "*genius loci*", the "spirit of place", connecting the "traces of the past" with the present and the future. A notion that is highlighted by Plevoets and Cleempoel (Plevoets, Cleempoel 2019, 25–26). Adaptive reuse can be identified as "conservation for continuity", a response to complex challenges and respect for cultural heritage and local identity. Regeneration of Manchester's heritage buildings has been a catalyst that subsequently unlocked the city's potential and future. Adaptive interventions were guided by Historic England's 'constructive conservation principles" (Historic England 2010), and have considered "ICOMOS Burra Charter, (ICOMOS 2013, 7) on having "minimal" negative "impact on the cultural significance of the place", have respected and enhanced the city's historic significance and retained its authenticity. The city's regeneration influenced an increased interest for investment which has accelerated rapidly its growth and prosperity. Innovative new developments that consider current sustainability standards are currently under way throughout the city and beyond. However, challenges seem to continue, as in the last five years, the increased cost of living and reduced opportunities for affordable housing, has changed dynamics. Locals have started to relocate to the outskirts, and commute for work and leisure. The future seems hopeful but unpredictable.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the reasons Manchester's regeneration success are; a) resilient, inclusive and sustainable communities, b) the partnerships between communities, authorities, stakeholders, architects/planners, and investors, and c) the sympathetic adaptive reuse interventions that enhance the city's significance, respect its cultural heritage, built and natural environment, and create liveable spaces and public realm. It has been shown that partnership initiatives and investment, lead to success in the regeneration of the historic built environment. Adaptive reuse projects have considered social value and social equity, eceonomic value, and sustainable design. These conclusions can be applicable to the urban regeneration of other culturally significant cities in the future.

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