

The Church in the City Centre – the emergence of the City Lite

My talk this morning will be in three sections. The first will give an overview of the key changes that have taken place in North American and European cities in the past twenty years. In the second, I look at three aspects of city centre living; housing, shopping malls and culture. I will end with some gently provocative observations on the identity of the post-modern city, and how it might shape the theological agenda .

Cities – The Last Twenty Years (Case Study: Manchester - from Cottonopolis to Ideopolis)

Manchester used to be a city of manufacturing and production; a Cottonopolis. It emerged on the world scene in the early nineteenth century as the first city anywhere to be created by the processes of industrial capitalism; namely the large scale importation, processing and exportation of cotton and other textiles to national and global markets. These manufacturing processes meant the construction of things never been seen before; railways, ship canals, eight-storey mills that employed fifteen hundred workers, industrial estates, mass terraced housing for the new urban working class laid out in grids, huge warehouses built like Italian palazzos to signify the growing wealth and status of the capitalist entrepreneur. As well as these icons of industrial architecture, there were also financial and cultural symbols; Manchester's huge Cotton Exchange built like a basilica with domes and colonnades, banks and clearing houses, theatres, libraries, orchestras, zoos, pleasure parks. Manchester's population grew from 20,000 in 1780 as a market town to 320,00 by 1850, swelled by Irish and Italian immigrants, Jewish families from eastern Europe and Russia and former slaves from the Caribbean; all come to make their fortune in the Shock City of the Industrial Revolution (as historian Asa Briggs called it)

Manchester at this point was a globalising, industrial and modern city. It was *globalising* because it was the epicentre of a global trade and had the critical mass of financial infrastructure to maintain its economic pre-eminence. It also exported new technologies and ideas. It was a *modern* city in the sense that it was constructed on notions of modernity; technology, economics, education and increasingly secular notions of progress. And it was *industrial* because its whole identity was built on the idea of mass production. Up to the cusp of the twentieth century it was still in the top ten cities of the world, alongside London, Paris and New York.

The rest of that century sees the decline of Cottonopolis, brought on by cheaper imports and new advances in technology from America and India, markets that Manchester once dominated. The period from the 1960s to the late 1980s saw the greatest deindustrialisation and social decay with the loss of 150, 000 jobs. Industrial areas became urban wastelands blighted by unemployment, high crime, deteriorating housing and mass migration.

But during this period, similar changes had been taking place globally. The decline of manufacturing in the Northern hemisphere was replaced by a new economy based on flows of knowledge, ideas and financial investment. Advances in internet and computer technology (originally commissioned by the American defence industry) led to the creation of a 24/7 real time global market which worked virtually. These virtual flows carried the new logic of late capitalism; namely the ability of capital investment

to connect in ways that, in the words of Manuel Castells, no longer 'depend on the characteristics of any specific location for the fulfilment of their fundamental goals'. Rather, businesses came to adopt merely the 'dynamics of information generating units, while connecting their different functions to disparate spaces assigned to each task to be performed.' (Castells, 1989: 348) This allowed transnational corporations to source their production efficiently to any part of the global market where labour costs were cheapest, while also outsourcing other parts of the production process such as marketing, design, accountancy and so on.

This new economy based on high-tech communication infrastructure and cheap air travel, means that people also have to 'follow the flow', either as managers or as workers, uprooting themselves and following patterns of migration in search of employment in newly restructured industries. Castells notes, 'The new professional managerial class colonises exclusive spatial segments that connect one another across the city, the country and the world; they isolate themselves from the fragments of local societies.' In his elegant theory, the *space of flows* is replacing or overlapping significantly *space as place*. (Castells: 1989: 384)

By the late 1980s, Manchester, in common with several other British industrial cities, has reached rock bottom. So it's 'Goodbye Cottonopolis; Hello Ideopolis.' Ideopolis is an American urban theory based on a twenty-first century metropolitan version of the Italian renaissance city-states (Westwood and Nathan, 2002). Its key elements are an international airport, a university and the capacity to generate new ideas. Where once land, minerals or mass industrialisation were primary sources of economic capital for cities, now it is knowledge capital. More specifically Ideopolis has:

- Hi-tech manufacturing
- Knowledge services
- Universities with strong networks to commercial partners
- An airport and other major global communication hubs
- Architectural heritage and iconic new physical development
- Flourishing service sector and SME/micro-business sector
- Large numbers of highly-skilled professionals
- Vibrant city culture and diverse population
- Ethos of tolerance and liberalism
- Good local governance and policy/political autonomy

For Manchester seeking to fulfil the criteria of an Ideopolis, the most significant event was the city council's decision to abandon municipal socialism (in June 1987 after the third election defeat of the Labour party) in favour of a pragmatic acceptance of property-led strategies for urban regeneration and the need to introduce business competition into council operations. Thus the 'Manchester Mafia' was born; an alliance between prominent members of Manchester's Labour council and its executive, and the city's business community which constructed bids for both private and public money for physical regeneration schemes such as City Challenge and the Olympic and Commonwealth Games. This process of 'boosterism' was carefully marketed and orchestrated to convey the story of Manchester's rebirth, epitomised in the swift response to the IRA bomb in the city centre in 1996. 'According to the Manchester script, the city has been reborn as a post-modern, post-industrial and

cosmopolitan city standing in Europe's premier league. New Manchester is vibrant and culturally diverse – well connected to take advantage of the emerging information economy.' (Peck and Ward, 2002: 91) Ideopolis is a script that Cardiff is also keen to embrace, with the added dimension of portraying itself as a pre-eminent capital city of a confident nation slowly emerging onto the European stage. For example;

In 2005, Cardiff is celebrating its centenary as a city and its 50th year as Wales' capital. It is a vibrant, cosmopolitan city and has undergone enormous regeneration over the past decade. Its traditional attractions – a fairy tale castle...a fine museum housing one of the best Impressionistic collections in Europe.... the world's renowned Museum of Welsh life – are now complemented by a stunning waterfront in Cardiff Bay and world class venues such as the awesome Wales Millennium Centre and the iconic Millennium Stadium, the biggest under-cover stadium in Europe. Testimony to Cardiff's growing reputation is that it is now a designated Centre of Culture, and accolade received for being short-listed for the title of European City of Culture 2008. (Hood, South Wales RSS Local Group, 2005)

So in Manchester, it's goodbye to factories and mills; welcome to cafes, bars, nightclubs, huge retailing hubs, cultural and heritage industries, urban lifestyle apartments, university mergers and 74,000 fulltime students, research and small-business incubators, a 24/7 party culture fuelled by its own self-referencing rhetoric (e.g. the film about the late 1980s 'Madchester' music and club scene, entitled *24 Hour Party People*). The attempt to create a city of 'liveability' based on cultural diversity, leisure and high-quality architecture has seen significant economic and urban shifts. 11% of all jobs in Manchester are now retailing based, with thousands more employed in bars, restaurants, hotels, cultural industries and fitness clubs. Sankey's Soap factory in Ancoats is now a state of the art dance club; Canal Street once the hub of industrial transportation for Cottonopolis is for Ideopolis the thriving gay and lesbian club quarter. Other factories are now trendy apartment blocks for young single professionals named after that 1960s movie epitomising urban chic, *La Dolce Vita*.

Using Manchester as a case study, but also with reference to changes in Cardiff we have seen how these cities are making the rapid transformation from cities based on manufacturing to cities based on consumption (i.e. industrial to post-industrial). The emphasis on consumption, choice, the ability to construct one's identity and world-view from a ever-widening menu of experiences and cultures is also one of the classic hallmarks of *post-modernity*. Therefore one of the key roles of the post-modern city, is to offer its citizens this menu of experiences and cultures. We shall explore this theme as we look at three aspects of the city centre – housing, retailing and culture.

Housing

The main aim of housing in Manchester's regenerated city centre is to attract people back to live as residents. It's part of the urban renaissance blueprint devised by the architect Lord Rogers whose report to New Labour in 1997 became the basis of the urban White Paper in 1998. He said that city centres needed to have a living

community at their heart to sustain a sense of being and identity after the pubs and clubs have closed (except now of course, some of them don't close anyway). As part of the whole rebranding of city centres along the lines suggested by the Ideopolis (i.e. as cultural and entertainment centres attracting young creative professionals with high levels of disposable income), city centre housing has acquired new importance. Fascinating research by estate agents has identified two social groups in our new city centres; young people seeking a short 'experience' of city centre life and what they call 'authentic' city centre dwellers that stay long-term. This latter group is composed of three subgroups; 'Successful agers' who use the equity of their suburban properties to purchase expensive 'duplex' city centre apartments when they have done the 'family thing'. They are drawn by the 'thriving' high cultural scene of the city centre (theatre, galleries, restaurants). 'Counter-culturalists', such as gay and lesbian people are attracted to city centres by the existence of gay communities which provide a tolerant environment for supposedly non-traditional lifestyles. 'Lifestyle changers' have either done the marriage thing or deliberately chosen not to enter a long-term relationship. The city-centre accommodates their 'single lifestyles'.

The large numbers of young city dwellers, fuelled by clever advertising campaigns has produced an over expansion of the buy-to-let market which dictates small high-density, studio apartments that can be let at competitive rents. These tend to be poorly built with low noise pollution thresholds. The 'authentic' city-dwellers group can afford the more luxurious conversions of old mill buildings for example. However, they will be deterred from city centre living if there is perception of crime or lack of security. Their living quarters therefore tend to be further away from the main drags and are more security intense. The short-term client group basically put up with poorer accommodation more noise, crime etc because research shows they will only intend to stay an average of three years before moving out to the suburbs to settle down and have families. This data shows that it is tricky to establish stable city-centre communities. Estate agents in Manchester reckon as few as 25% of city-centre residents are there to stay. The other 75% of people are those on short term lets or passing through as part of a lifecycle/lifestyle experience. (Allan and Blandy, 2004)

Retailing

Retailing and lifestyle sector industries (such as fitness clubs, restaurants, pubs, cinemas etc) lie at the heart of Manchester's new identity as a city based on consumption rather than production. Retailing also accounts for a growing amount of low pay-low skill part-time employment. There is much entertaining literature about the cultural and social significance of retailing and shopping malls, which I'm not sure how seriously to take. Anyway, here is a flavour of some of the utopian and dystopian views of shopping malls.

The case for them revolves around ideas that consumerism gives us a limited but politically important space in which to live out our fantasies of autonomy and identity. Rather than passive consumers, we are according to John Fiske, 'secondary producers' finding value in our consumption and making use of capitalist products for our own ends.

Eric Kuhne, designer of the Bluewater shopping mall claims that well designed centres like his, with plenty of light and space, a variety of different spatial designs

and plenty of areas to sit and have coffee are important places of social gathering within a safe and pleasant environment, be it for families or groups of friends, just so long as you don't wear a hoodie! His implication is that within fragmented communities and frenetic lives, opportunities to this are increasingly limited. He claims the average stay in his mall is three hours compared to 45 minutes in the average shopping emporium.

The case against shopping malls is essentially a Marxist critique; that consumerism is exploitative in its means of production and its manipulation of consumers, who are perceived as 'cultural dupes'. Consumerism also encourages commodity fetishism so depoliticising us as citizens. Shopping malls are places of surveillance and control, serving the Foucauldian agenda of criminalizing those already on the margins. I came across a fascinating cultural dissection of the work of American cult horror director George Romero who has made a cycle of zombie films. One of these, called *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) is set in a shopping mall. Four protagonists are surrounded in this mall by zombies and most of the film is a nail biting battle to rid the mall of them. In the brief interlude that follows with the shopping mall at their mercy the three men and one woman engage in a series of consumer rituals including supermarkets sweeps and fighting over clothes in a sale. The heroine of the film, Fran, in a deliberately mixed feminist critique and who during the battle scenes has dispatched zombies with great resourcefulness, succumbs to making a reconstruction of a bourgeois living room in a furniture store, cooking for the men-folk, before slumping in a chair in front of television, make up and wig askew. This horror film is thus also a social satire and critique of the *zombifying* power of consumerism, that certainly in Fran's case is not seen as liberating, but life-sapping.

A more middle of the road analysis suggests that most consumers in shopping malls carry with them both an enjoyment of consumerism as well as some of sort of critique of it; in other words the ability to hold oppositional perspectives in a creative tension. There is however clearly an issue over the power of shopping malls and hypermarkets to quell diversity in city centres as represented by small family businesses supplying niche markets and communities. Is there also a sense in which they offer a sanitised shopping experience in which the small personal interactions and verbal and non-verbal communications one finds on real streets are no longer present? Jane Jacobs in her classic book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* talks about the importance of preserving what she calls her 'ubiquitous' principle; the need of cities 'for a most intricate and close-grained diversity of uses that give each other constant mutual support, both economically and socially.' (Jacobs, 1962)

Culture

Both Manchester and Cardiff have set huge store on becoming globally recognised by selling themselves as cities of culture, especially Cardiff which has the additional agenda of promoting itself as a worthy capital city for the Welsh nation. However, I think we as Christians need to always ask what the purpose of culture is? The reference I made earlier to Cardiff being designated a Centre of Culture should possibly ring alarm bells. The city of Liverpool, following its successful bid to become *City of Culture* for 2008, has set up the Liverpool Culture Company (LCC) which employs eight-five staff and has a budget of twenty million a year. One and a half million visitors are expected to attend the events and festivals leading to 2008.

The fifty projects funded so far cover tourism, creative communities, volunteer training, health, music, gay, lesbian and black initiatives, heritage, sport, etc.

An Anglican colleague of mine, Rod Garner, working in the city, gives a telling critique in a forthcoming article for *Crucible* journal. He writes, 'A weakness of the LCC strategy lies in its blanket endorsement of all manifestations of contemporary culture. No distinction is drawn between popular and mass culture; no critique is offered of the trivial, ephemeral and banal; no attempt is made to question the contemporary blurring of the boundary between high and low culture or define the difference between good and bad artistic endeavour. There is no evidence of discernment at the heart of its mission or space for informed reflection where proposed activities can be evaluated by something greater - for example, the story of God, the 'best that has been thought and taught' (Arnold's classic definition of culture), or the world's agenda, particularly in relation to the poor. Any sense of global interconnectedness is absent and the internationalism advocated by the LCC is geared essentially to the expansion of tourism or ... the fostering of emerging cultural links with other cities on the basis of their mutual promotion and economic development. (Garner, 2005)

No one from a faith community is on the LCC board and only one information-giving meeting has been arranged between LCC and faith groups. In Garner's words, 'the subculture of religion has been informed as part of a wider communications strategy.' (Garner 2005) He finds the LCC's approach is a missed opportunity to dialogue with other groups such as faith communities as to the true purpose and nature of culture. This could move the debate beyond a functionalist shopping list of cultural items. He believes churches should contribute to the City of Culture debate in a way that is generally supportive, but they should also ask 'what is really happening under the aegis of the Capital of Culture, the power relations that inform the projects and decision-making and how it promotes the furthering of humanity, particularly those who have suffered the sentence of history and know what it is like to be displaced or forgotten.'

A Coda – The City Lite

It is time to collect up the themes we have been exploring in our overview of cities in the last twenty years. We have seen how cities like Manchester and Cardiff have made the transition from cities based on production to cities based primarily on consumption. We have seen how in order to be competitive within the restructured global market cities, they have had to rebrand themselves as creative, iconic spaces where those with research, design marketing and financial skills will want to live. We have seen how Cardiff and Manchester are in the process of restructuring their city centres to accommodate these people, mainly young professionals and students, with the emphasis on 24/7 entertainment, and enhanced opportunities for culture and retailing for the rest of us. Manchester has its Gay Village, its Chinatown, its Northern Quarter, its Curry Mile. Cardiff has got its Sports Village, its Cafe Quarter, its Welsh Millennium Centre.

But what is this doing to our cities? What do we as a church want to say about what makes a good city? I finish with an idea from Thomas Bender who devised the notion of the City Lite. Lite (as in Bud Lite) is an advertising signifier well understood by all

consumers; it's a word that tells the consumer that the product they are about to buy is a watered down version of the original. It will have less fat, alcohol, sugar, it probably won't taste as nice, but it will be much better for your health because all the nasty bits have been removed. It is a carefully managed product that bears an approximate relationship to the original. Bender writes of the post-modern city, 'It seems that our best vision of the city today is that of an entertainment zone – a place to visit, a place to shop; it's no more than a live-in theme park... It offers scenes of city life, not the city itself. The City Lite is safe, orderly, simplified. It demands little and it gives little.' He develops this idea of the city as a theme park with its specific quarters and zones; 'the City Lite does not age; it is consumed and replaced. It is any time and any place – it no longer holds culture nor provides an orientation to past or present for its residents.' (Bender, 1996)

The reference to holding culture refers to the thinking of American planner Lewis Mumford who in the 1930s, saw the function of the city as a stage set; a theatre for social activity. The richness of that social activity depended on the extent to which cities provided social infrastructure and a variety of cultural activities; cities were in his opinion, the containers by which one measured the depth and richness of a civilisation's culture. It is perhaps too easy to return to an uncritical nostalgia for some imagined past when reading Jacobs or Mumford. It is perhaps too easy to denigrate the choice and consumerism of the post-modern city – The City Lite. Perhaps the truth lies somewhere in between when we look at our changing city centres and ask, 'Do they make a good city and by what criteria do we decide such a question?'

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