

The Manchester model: The industrial revolution's 'shock city' revives

The city's startling turnaround has triggered a debate about whether ordinary residents are benefiting, or it's become a playground for property developers and affluent newcomers.

Once described as the "shock city" of the industrial revolution, Manchester has long prided itself on its continental links. And today, the city is again proving an international test case for how humans can live together in the 21st century.

Despite a recession, pandemic and European war, the economic output, jobs and population of this northern English city have grown strongly this century. Dozens of skyscrapers have sprung up in the previously low-rise city center. But while this is a startling turnaround from industrial decline, for some, the pace of change has been disconcerting — particularly its older residents. Debate now rages about whether the rapidly changing city and its embrace of private sector investment — also known as the "Manchester model" — actually benefits ordinary citizens, many of whom remain poor, or whether it's become a "neoliberal" playground for property developers and affluent newcomers.

In keeping with its history, today's Manchester is cosmopolitan, with more than 150 languages spoken there. Created by soldiers from across the Roman empire who arrived at this damp location to build a fort around 79 CE, Manchester became at the center of an industrial revolution, regarded by many as the most transformative period in human history. Factory pioneer Richard Arkwright gave the city its first cotton spinning mill in 1781. And by 1800, there were dozens of such mills, turning Manchester into Cottonopolis, the center of an industry reshaping the world. Never before had such a global industry been built more than 2,000 miles from its nearest source of raw materials. And these factories created a new urban environment, new ways of working and living, ultimately helping generate sustained economic growth and wealth, as well as inequalities and some dire social conditions.

The factors that aided this transformation included textile skills and commercial expertise that was built up in the pre-industrial era, when cloth was spun and woven at home. The city had rivers to provide waterpower and was close to sources of coal for steam engines. So, as the revolution proceeded, most cotton production moved to surrounding towns and Manchester became the hub for marketing, distribution and engineering expertise. But like many industrial cities, Manchester suffered steep decline in the decades after World War II. And the city's resurrection was then hampered by a disastrous 20-year experiment with modernist architecture.

Since then, however, there's been an impressive rebirth — though recovery is still a work in progress. First, the city center was successfully redesigned after it was bombed by the Irish Republican Army in 1996. And following revival projects have involved prestige projects focused on leisure, culture and lifestyle. Manchester's music scene, boasting influential bands such as Oasis played an important part in this. And the city successfully hosted the Commonwealth Games, involving athletes from Britain's former colonies, in 2002.

Furthermore, the city's economic strengths today include financial, legal, business, and digital and creative services, as well as biotechnology, advanced manufacturing, environmental technologies, tourism, global sports brands, media and real estate — making Manchester a key location for foreign-owned companies.

The city — and its region — now needs to show it can broaden and deepen this revival. And if it can spread the benefits widely among the majority of its population, Manchester will have earned the world's admiration. Yet it still suffers from significant poverty. According to the U.K. government's 2019 Indices of Deprivation, Manchester is still England's second-most deprived city after Blackpool. "For the vast majority, the economy simply isn't good enough," said council leader Bev Craig in 2023. However, there's still little sign of Manchester giving up its embrace of property-led development. The city — and its region — now needs to show it can broaden and deepen this revival. And if it can spread the benefits widely among the majority of its population, Manchester will have earned the world's admiration.

Abridged from Brian Groom, politico.eu, opinion, May 2, 2024

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