

**Ay Up? — Manchester** is booming with so many city centre developments that the sky is a forest of construction cranes. But caution and chill are tempering the city's confidence. What does the proliferation of residential projects say about Manchester's future?  
Words by *Herbert Wright*





**There hasn't been as much sheer energy in the** Manchester cityscape since the nineteenth century, when the world's original industrial city was known as 'the workshop of the world'. Now, so many skyscrapers are under construction, some are calling it 'Manhattan-chester'. But it's not just high-rise that's transforming the city. The centre is repopulating at breakneck speed, entire new mixed-use districts are shoe-horning into its fabric, and industrial heritage seems to switch from derelict to chic as if by the wave of a magic wand. Whilst vast projects are underway in the academic and cultural sectors, it is the residential sector that is at the forefront.

But questions loom as Manchester booms. Is the explosion of residential building delivering what's fair and needed? Is it a bubble about to burst? Can the future remain bright as the dark storm-clouds of Brexit remain on the horizon?

In Castlefield, Manchester's mainly Victorian downtown core surrenders to railway viaducts and canals to the south. It was home to the legendary Hacienda club until 1997, opposite where SimpsonHaugh set up shop at Knott's Mill in 1987. Its offices are now a few streets away, looking out on its scheme that signposts Manchester's boom more than any other: Deansgate Square. A residential development under construction, its towers rise from a new terrace and cafe beside the Matlock (more of a brook than a river), which gurgles down into a culvert at one end. Amenities include a tennis court and cinema as well as the contemporary standards like gym and pool, but no shopping centre – 'I can walk to Harvey Nichols in 15 minutes', says founding partner Ian Simpson. The four towers have 67, 53, 47 and 40 storeys, and the tallest has been topped out at 200m, taller than any UK tower outside of London. The towers' forms are square in plan with extended corners containing winter gardens (enclosed balconies between glazing), creating concave facades indented by a metre. That's unlike almost all towers in Manchester, which are rectangular boxes, including Manchester's hitherto tallest, the practice's own iconic Beetham Tower (2006), where a wider box dramatically cantilevers over a narrower one.

Of the residential mix in Deansgate Square, Simpson says: '[They] will range from very highly paid professional footballers through to a buy-to-let space being let to a student. They're not gated communities. Everybody gets in the same lift. There is no poor door.' >

2



1 (previous page) A model of Hodder and Partners' mixed-use scheme, St Michael's, set to rise in the heart of the city

2 & 3 SimpsonHaugh's designs for the four-tower residential scheme Deansgate Square

3



2 & 3 - SIMPSONHAUGH



Then again, what is affordable? In Manchester, affordable rent or mortgage is deemed as 30% of average household income across the city, but the poor will fall substantially below that average. And the city wants a fifth of new homes to be affordable when 15 units or more are developed – but as elsewhere, it’s a target not an obligation, and the affordable doesn’t need to be in the development. At the start of 2018, Greater Manchester Housing Action found zero affordable housing in 15,000 recently completed city-centre units. That is starting to change. Simpson points out that his practice’s 30-storey Swan Street tower, approved in February, has affordable ‘embedded’ in it – ‘it’s just seamless’, he says.

The population of what is now Greater Manchester – the city proper and surrounding towns that make the conurbation – has been around 2.5 million for a century, but its economy has doubled in the last 20 years. The population of central Manchester, too, has doubled in 20 years from 10,000, when Simpson reckons that in the business core itself, just 400 people lived there. Deansgate Square will expand the area of city centre further and its 1,508 homes could add some 4,000 residents. With 23 residential towers planned or underway in the centre’s southern fringe alone (including SimpsonHaugh’s 51-storey Elizabeth Tower on Castle Street), that’s just a fraction of the pipeline. A February 2019 survey by Deloitte concluded that 14,480 residential units were being built in Manchester and adjacent Salford in 2018. Is it a bubble about to burst?

In fact, along with the growth of Manchester’s population, the city’s demographics are changing. Manchester City Council leader Sir Richard Leese told Blueprint that the growth is ‘families with children, the biggest is the 25–40 age group. It’s people who are active, with relatively high skill levels. All of this is fuelled by economic growth.’ New residential is far from dominated by bed-sits – Deansgate Square’s flats are about two-thirds two-bedroom. Students are staying after their studies – Stephen Hodder, principle of Hodder and Partners, ex-RIBA president and 1996 Stirling Prize winner, points out that ‘we have 100,000 students in the city, now we’re approaching 75% retention... They’re no longer gravitating to London. People are staying.’

Nevertheless, residential schemes have been driven by city-managed, low-rate loans to developers from the government’s Northern Powerhouse initiative, and four-



5



fifths of the fund must be repaid after a decade. ‘I can see the boom slowing down when that happens,’ Hodder says. ‘On the residential side, build-to-rent is low risk for developers,’ he continues. ‘I don’t think office developments have caught up. It’s better than it was. The take-up of offices in the city centre is higher than it’s ever been.’ When Spinningfields was developed in the last decade, it was almost all offices, such as Foster + Partners’ 3 and 4 Hardman Square (2007) plus Denton Corker Marshall’s Civil Justice Building (2007, Blueprint 298). Now, however, offices usually come in a mix with residential.

There are huge city-centre, mixed-use schemes with high-rise underway. Circle Square was masterplanned by FCBStudios and includes hotels, office and residential blocks, one a 34-storey tower, all on the old BBC site on the Oxford Road. Billed as ‘an innovation quarter’, it will mark the start of the Oxford Road scientific-academic axis, now branded as ‘Corridor Manchester’, which includes the Jestico + Whiles-designed National Graphene Centre (Blueprint 332), and the 238m-long, Mecanoo-designed Manchester Engineering Development Campus (Blueprint 360) now under construction. Another scheme is St John’s, masterplanned by SimpsonHaugh, comprising workspace for creative industries, two 36-storey residential towers and OMA’s cultural showpiece The Factory, all on the former Granada Studios site bounded by Spinningfields and the River Irwell. The most distinguished mixed-use scheme is probably the Hodder-designed St Michael’s, set to rise in the very heart of the city, which we shall return to.

Manchester’s often-derelict, vernacular, nineteenth-century mills enable a steady supply of loft conversion schemes. Hodder and Partners’ Hotspur Press development (named after the boys’ comic printed there when it was Medlock Mill) has parts dating back to 1801, but as Hodder says: ‘The floor heights are so poor, you just can’t fashion apartments from the fabric.’ Facades will be retained and a tower rising to 27 storeys is planned, while an 1885 element is to be left intact and repurposed. With new public realm, the development would act as a link between the new First City quarter (with Mecanoo’s busy cultural hub HOME (2015, Blueprint 341)), hidden behind a railway viaduct, and Oxford Road. >

4 Hodder and Partners’ Hotspur Press scheme incorporates elements of 19th-century heritage and introduces a 27-storey tower

5 SimpsonHaugh’s 30-storey Swan Street tower, including affordable housing, was approved in February

6 & 7 Masterplanned by FCBStudios, Circle Square includes hotels, office and residential blocks, and is billed as ‘an innovation quarter’

8 (following spread) The site of Hodder and Partners’ St Michael’s scheme is on the corner of Albert Square overlooked by the 19th-century gothic Town Hall with its clocktower

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5 - SIMPSONHAUGH









9 Crusader Mill, shedkm's adaptive re-use of a mill from 1830 into 126 homes around a cloistered garden, with another 75 in a new block

10 Manchester's iconic Toastrack (1960) by Leonard Cecil Howitt is being converted by local practice Sixtwo into residential with a roof garden and ground-floor retail

11 Two Victorian semi-detached homes on Zetland Road have been converted by Ecospheric to exceed Passivhaus standards



Of course, not all residential schemes include skyscrapers. An industrial conversion currently onsite is Crusader Mill, a vast 1830 complex. Liverpool-based architecture practice shedkm has designed its current transformation into 126 apartments around a cloistered garden, with another 75 in a new block. Two factors are unusual – firstly, its location in the East Village, hitherto ignored despite being just behind Manchester's main Piccadilly station and beside where HS2 will build a vast new one. Secondly, local developer Capital & Centric is selling all units strictly to people who live and work in Manchester, a move addressing the growing issue of buy-to-let and its prospect of overseas investors merely parking money in UK property, as they do in London.

Manchester's residential sector is seeing transformations in other typologies too. Out in the genteel, leafy suburb of Chorlton, two 1894 semi-detached homes on Zetland Road have been converted by local eco consultants Ecospheric to exceed Passivhaus standards, promising zero energy bills. The street facade is precisely restored to Victorian appearance, but from the garden, wooden cladding and a shallower roof pitch indicate re-engineering. Inside, there is a clean, contemporary family feel but every element – from graphene-infused paints to a mechanical ventilation with heat recovery system – is ecologically leading-edge. Meanwhile, south of the Oxford Road academic strip lies the Toastrack (1960) by city architect Leonard Cecil Howitt, an extraordinary building under parabolic structural arches which was once a catering college. Emerging local practice Sixtwo is converting it into residential with a roof garden and ground-floor retail, and rents are expected to be at city-centre levels. >





Capital & Centric's biggest scheme, Kampus, co-developed with Henry Boot Developments, also recycles an academic block, but it was far plainer – a 1962, 12-storey, square concrete tower by city architect SG Besant Roberts. It seemed ripe for demolition, but as Capital & Centric founder Adam Higgins says: 'How many buildings have waffle ceilings?' It will be reclad in aluminium with three different Corten steel-like textures ('I'm hoping that it will give a subtle patchwork look and also catch the evening sun with a warm glow,' says Higgins). With 120 apartments, it is just part of a high-density development of 533 apartments, masterplanned by Mecanoo, delivered by architect Chapman Taylor and completing next year.

Just south of Piccadilly, the complete site is a city block once occupied by a Manchester Metropolitan University campus, adjacent to Canal Street. It incorporates two listed warehouses, reanimates an alley between them, and masses itself up with two further new mid-rise buildings, with pitched-roof penthouses echoing MVRDV's Didden Village (2006) in Rotterdam. Even duller than the 1960s tower was, a single-storey building faced the canal on a raised platform, but that too is repurposed as a central feature of a hidden but public garden served by non-chain outlets. 'We want the bungalow to be almost like a village hall,' says Higgins. Like Urban Splash a decade ago, Capital & Centric – which is also Manchester-based – is building a reputation for unusually creative regeneration, and Kampus may just achieve a holy grail that has evaded countless developers: a bohemian-by-design neighbourhood.

Marketed for their lifestyle offering, new developments usually bypass bohemian for trendy. Truly bohemian neighbourhoods arise organically where low-rent or derelict, gritty inner-city areas are colonised by outsiders and creatives, and inevitably evolve, become trendy and then gentrify. This is happening in Manchester's now-vibrant Northern Quarter, with its cityscape of decay and swathes of car parking now in retreat. High-rise apartments have reached its border, led by the new HAUS Collective-designed Angel Gardens with a 35-storey tower, with Swan Street likely to follow. 'A city can't exist on its Northern Quarters,' insists Simpson. 'There's also a need to make a big leap in terms of transforming acres of car parking.'

There are a few parking spaces inside the site of St Michael's, but it is just such a big leap – and the most central of Manchester's big schemes. Footballer Gary Neville is behind the development, which has proved controversial from the start. The site is at Jackson's Row on the corner of Albert Square which is overlooked by Alfred Waterhouse's magnificent gothic Town Hall (1877) with its 85m-high clock tower. It hosts the Abercrombie pub which predates the 1819 Peterloo Massacre, a 1953 synagogue and a pre-war police station. >

12 Capital & Centric's Kampus development comprises 120 apartments, but forms part of a high-density scheme of 533 homes, masterplanned by Mecanoo and delivered by Chapman Taylor

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12 - ASDL





Make Architects designed two dark bronzed towers which would have seen all that go, and the reaction was vociferous – over 1,700 letters of objection were filed. The city called Hodder to review the scheme. Talking in his canalside practice in Castlefield, he recalls that ‘Ken [Shuttleworth, principal of Make] took on board some of my comments. Then we had a very difficult meeting with Historic England. They concluded that despite the way I had tried to moderate some aspects of it, it would still cause substantial harm on the heritage assets.’ Hodder put forward an alternative masterplan, with active street fronts, and entered into collaboration with Make, but eventually, the design that was approved last June was entirely Hodder’s. The practice will work with SOM, subsequently brought in to deliver it.

In the scheme, the Abercrombie pub is saved, but the synagogue will be replaced – ‘the Jewish community felt it was past its sell-by date and they had moved on,’ says Hodder. Essentially, the design is two volumes. A nine-storey office touching the Albert Square side behind the retained Portland stone facades of the former police station will have ground-level retail and a rooftop food market, which cascades down to level 6. That is the top of the podium of the 38-storey tower rising to 136m on the west side, with 20 residential apartment floors above 12 storeys of hotel. The podium will contain the new synagogue and amenities including a conference hall.

The tower is a masterpiece. Its form is slim, angled to its narrow ends like Gio Ponti and Pier Luigi Nervi’s Pirelli Tower in Milan, and the facades are a light, thin lattice immediately reminiscent of Seifert’s Centre Point. ‘The egg-crate is a means that addresses natural ventilation,’ says

Hodder. Instead of opening windows, fins in the facade will breathe (similar to those on Foster’s Bloomberg HQ in London, Blueprint 356). ‘Gary wanted us to be a little more challenging,’ explains Hodder. ‘We took the fins and almost sculpted them in this hexagonal way, so as the sun comes round, it’s like a jewel: the light will reflect on the profiling of the fins. During the day, the elevation will change.’ At ground level, a colonnade will run along Jackson’s Row, increasing its width, activating the street, and addressing the 4.5m ground-height change across the site. Hodder also notes another benefit to the colonnade: ‘It does rain in Manchester!’

St Michael’s should be Manchester’s most dazzling skyscraper, and Hodder gives much credit to Neville for demanding design quality – ‘that terrier-like quality he has in football, he brings to us as a client’. Even so, SAVE Britain’s Heritage has compared it to the infamous Montparnasse tower in Paris and maintains it will overwhelm the historic fabric. It’s doubtful Simpson would agree – referring to his Castlefield projects, including Deansgate Square, he comments: ‘You get that juxtaposition of old and new in New York. No one worries about a cathedral next to a skyscraper there.’

There are signs that Manchester’s boom may be already slowing. Apartment sales to August 2018 dropped a fifth from the previous year, and in January, a proposed 53-storey tower at St John’s was cancelled. Factors including Brexit may bring uncertainty, but Manchester is resilient – Leese comments that it has ‘jobs in tech, advanced manufacturing, financial and professional services, logistics, health, innovation, education. In the current circumstances, a number of those sectors will be less vulnerable to more hostile global trading conditions.’ Manchester is still looking up. ■

14



13 Ian Simpson,  
co-founder of  
SimpsonHaugh

14 Stephen Hodder,  
founder of Hodder  
and Partners