

Review

MANCTOPIA

Billion Pound Property Boom

BBC Two: four episodes, screened August-September 2020

Available on Documentaries at BBC iPlayer



The handsome glass buildings towering over the rooftops on the right of this photograph are the latest in Manchester chic. Elegant and stylish, the towers of Deansgate Square have been built with concave sides which soften their severe modernism without ‘postmodernist’ palaver. They join the city’s roster of marvellous buildings from the Portico Library of 1806, on Mosley Street, to the Town Hall Extension of 1934-8, on Lloyd Street and St Peter’s Square, and Albert Bridge House built in 1959, on Bridge Street. The city is packed with late Victorian warehouses with frontages in any style you like, iron, brick, and stone, rear walls composed almost entirely of enormous windows for maximum daylight in the days before electricity. Massive no-nonsense brick rectangles,

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Venetian banks redolent of financial stability; railway bridges in cast iron gothic, or those boasting classical pilasters replete with metal garlands of fruit and flowers, together with lotus leaf columns evidently designed by engineers entranced with the temples of ancient Egypt.

Manchester has lots of lousy buildings too, and the result is a spectacularly ugly, yet visually dynamic city, in which everybody from Victorian cotton magnates to modern developers have jumbled exactly whatever they've aspired to on their own plots, without much regard for their neighbours. The result is a city centre with few public spaces – good parks are scattered around the inner city – but most of the principal public squares are poorly designed, and most are shabby and down-at-heal.

I moved here thirty years ago, and have no intention of ever moving. It's a marvellous place where the Labour council in alliance with property developers and central government have spent the last three decades in remodelling one of the world's earliest industrial cities into a centre dedicated to services, consumption, and entertainment. In the East they have cleared away a vast area of rubble-strewn ruins. The coalmine, factories, engineering works, and warehouses, have been replaced by a football stadium, training grounds, a supermarket, velodrome, apartment blocks and new houses, all served by our rather smart tram network. Canal basins and locks, once forgotten and forlorn, are now lined with new homes, and have become resorts for those looking for a meal or a drink. There are new theatre spaces and cinemas, and railway arches packed with bars.

However, despite the best efforts of planners, investors, and architects, the social stamp of the city is resolutely working class. It's a Labour city, and the middle class here shares with that of Liverpool, a determination to be boastfully proletarian, no matter how posh they get.

This is about to change as the glass towers go up, housing thousands upon thousands of high rent apartments aimed at young childless people earning around thirty-five or forty thousand a year, or the children of very wealthy

parents, studying at our numerous colleges, universities, and teaching hospitals. The shabby-chic beloved by the present crop of twenty-somethings, just out of ‘uni’, is in the next few years likely to be smoothed away with the glassy glamour of it all.

BBC Two’s recent documentary, *Manctopia: the billionaire property boom*, did its best to survey the extraordinary changes that are taking place in the two-square miles of the centre of the city, the astonishing remodelling of Salford, and the devastating effect these changes are having on low-paid workers living in Eccles, and Collyhurst.

People are being priced out as city-centre developments, and those at Salford Quays, at Blackfriars and along Chapel Street, result in big rent rises in neighbouring districts. In Collyhurst tenants of small seventies’ council estates face troubling disruption as the City plans to sweep away their homes and community to make way for new housing and apartments to serve between thirty and forty thousand newcomers.

Manctopia did well in discussing the difficulties of attempting to get an estate of affordable houses built in the grounds of Buile Hill, that has been a public park since 1903. The plan was to use the profits raised by building a small housing estate to finance the restoration of the badly decayed and derelict stately home built in 1827. In the event, despite the best efforts of Salford’s Mayor, Paul Dennett, and property developer, Tim Heatley, the local community refused to countenance houses being built on the park. So, the derelict mansion will continue to quietly rot away until money can be found for its restoration from some other source.

Meanwhile in Collyhurst, Anne Wood and Donna Liley, persevere in the struggle to get to know their fate, as the council finally reassure them that they will get new council houses within the massive redevelopment of the area. This doesn’t entirely blunt the scepticism of the two campaigners, but by the fourth and final episode of the series they’re cautiously optimistic, but continue to remain

unconvinced about the need to rip up Anne's smashing garden, or demolish their perfectly sound council houses.

However, there is not much progression in *Manctopia*, from episode to episode as the circumstances of the millionaires are tirelessly compared to the homeless and the destitute. The other contrast, the struggle by working-class people battling to preserve their communities are juxtaposed with Tim Heatley's attempt to create entirely new upscale communities of homeowners in Capital and Centric's Crusader Mill, and in the neighbouring new buildings the company is throwing up.

Strangely, we don't see much of the ordinary new tenants, of the glass towers rising throughout the city centre, those paying £850 to £1300 a month, because I suppose the marvellous contrast between the very poor and the very rich makes for easy comparisons. It's definitely more fun to show the princess and the pauper than to investigate why it is that a Labour council, and the town hall's permanent officials, have steadfastly opted for a high-rent policy.

Why, apart from the developments in New Islington and Collyhurst, has so little thought been given to the creation of mixed multi-generational communities, people with kids, living alongside single folk in their twenties, and with old-age pensioners too? Why exactly has the council sponsored the development of thousands-upon-thousands, of two-bed flats with open-plan kitchens, a building type entirely unsuitable for those with children, or older people who harbour the prejudice that one should not be able to see the fridge and the cooker from one's sitting room?

No thought has been given to these questions and the documentary makers of *Manctopia*, gripped by 'human-interest' contrasts have avoided most of the hard questions. Councillors, planners, and developers, escape scrutiny almost entirely. We briefly see the man from Legal and General, and hear quickly about 'Build to Rent', while the charming developer, Tim Heatley, attractive, and clubbable, in his thoroughly modern commitment to building well-heeled communities, is all over the place in every episode.

We hear almost nothing about how the transformation of the city is being financed, and why the Labour council has opted for a monoculture of prosperous lower-middle class young people, and made little or no provision for those who can pay rents ranging from £350 to £650 a month.

I love the city centre, but then I'm a well-to-do leaseholder and landlord, if I wasn't, I think I'd take a dim view of Manchester's development which is excluding most of the city's population. BBC Two and *Manctopia* shocks us with appalling contrasts and the brutality of inequality, but has failed to investigate how or why Manchester is being rebuilt.