

URBAN

The hotly debated future of Manchester's Castlefield area raises fundamental issues over the nature of urban green space.

“More green space” is the cry that goes up whenever people are asked what they want in future cities.

Which is weird, because we seem almost entirely to have lost the skills to use it. Relative to almost any other decade in their century and a half's history, most of our Victorian parks are now deserted. They lack colour, investment, animation, maintenance and security. Today, most parks don't work.

Joggers and dog walkers use parks and green space. The more we are inclined to exercise our dogs and ourselves, the more of us head back to parks. The curious fact remains that for the time being, green space is under-utilised in cities, and therefore ill planned and under funded. Green space is not good for a city's net-to-gross. Needless to say, developers don't like green space, especially if they are the ones charged with providing it. One developer tells me that his way to deliver high quality public realm is to get somebody else to pay for it. That has been the case in New Islington, Manchester's Millennium community. The extensive water park that spans the space between the Rochdale and Ashton Canals, complete with orchard, island, reed beds and nesting boxes, is largely funded by English Partnerships. Don't expect to be picnicking here quite yet. Maintenance will be funded out of the eventual residents' service charges, and there aren't enough residents yet.

Before a community struggles to find money to establish and maintain high quality public space it is probably wise to question its appeal. Do kids climb trees? Do retired people play bowls? Do you enjoy a turn around the boating lake? Things come and go, and just occasionally come back again. Who is to say that the very real effects of global warming won't see the return of outdoor lidos? Or that we won't see publicly

funded olive groves and vines? There are very real question marks that hang over the unsupervised use of public space. There are health and safety issues in playgrounds and by water. And there is vandalism. Nevertheless, we say we want green space, so we'd better consider how we use it.

Ardwick Green was probably the first semi-public green space in Manchester. From as early as the 1820's it worked along the lines of London squares, and subscribers had their own keys. There was a fishing pond.

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Twenty years later, three public parks – created by public subscription, but with free access for all – opened on the same gala day: August 22nd, 1846. Peel Park in Salford opened in the morning, followed, in a promenade of dignitaries, by Queens and Philips parks later the same day. Peel Park is arguably the

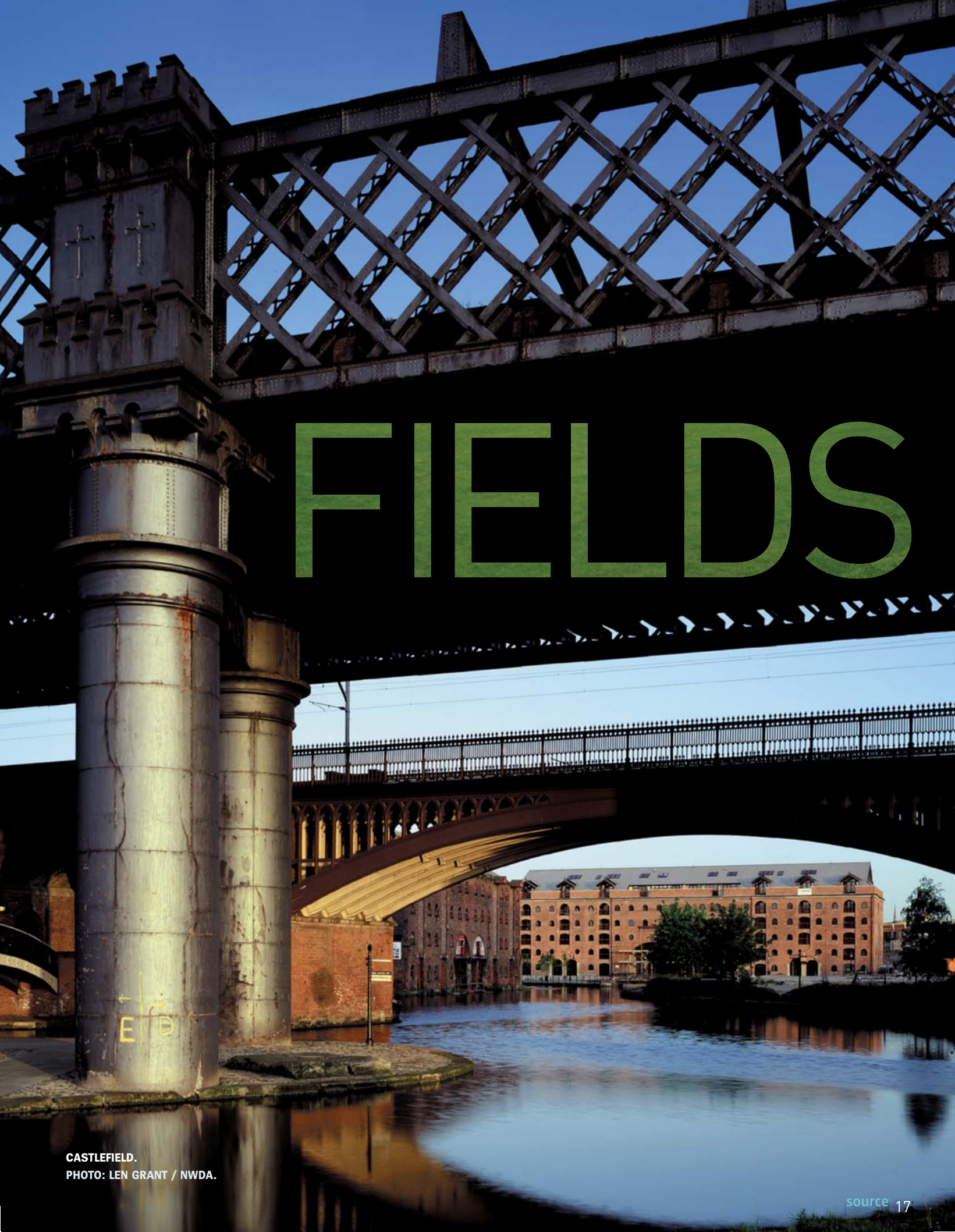
first public park anywhere in the world. Manchester has added more new green space recently, notably Cathedral Gardens and Hulme Park. Salford has created acres of public realm around the Quays. These spaces work well, but questions remain; are we making the best use of spaces available to us, and are they contributing to what we have come to call “place making”?

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(LEFT) **PEEL PARK, SALFORD.**

PHOTO: SALFORD CITY COUNCIL / NICK HARRISON.





FIELDS

CASTLEFIELD.
PHOTO: LEN GRANT / NWDA.



**CASTLEFIELD
BAR CULTURE.
PHOTO:
JONTY WILDE/
NWDA.**

Victorian parks did most of their business on high days and holidays, when thousands of people flocked to Alexandra Park or Platt Fields. They were resorts, with cultivated flowerbeds, arboretum, statuary and promenades. Most weekdays, they were deserted. Parks were show time, with bandstands, boating lakes and playgrounds. They were planted and programmed. Parks were spectacle, largely for audiences and promenaders. “Keep off the grass”. Improvised football pitches, bikes and joggers came much, much later. Right now there are good arguments to suggest that parks are becoming outdoor gyms, that organised sport and leisure has a real future and that public and private sector liaisons are the way forward.

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Public space in city centres is more problematic. Spinningfields, the new commercial zone between Deansgate and the River Irwell, appears to have plenty of ground-level food and drink provision, with a roster of tenants running from Café Rouge to Yo Sushi. Customers are thin on the ground. Chain outlets such as these, good and popular as they no doubt are, don’t tend to make memorable places. This is a different, more complex activity. A good place, somewhere people identify with, develop a relationship with, respect, defend and recommend, is a different matrix. A good place has history, geography, individuality, continuity and anecdote. People identify it, distinguish it from other places, feel comfortable with it and want to tell you about it.

In the 1950s city kids identified with bomb sites. These, more than parks and local countryside, were occupied, customised and improvised. Particular

corner lampposts were teenage hangouts, and bus shelters were for those of snogging age. Bits of the city centre – coffee bars with jukeboxes – were for pre-pubbers. Green space? There weren’t even sandwich shops, and it wasn’t until the 1990s that Manchester got its first pavement tables and chairs. “Green space”, like “public realm”, “regeneration” and “place making” is part of a new language, and a new way of using city centres.

By “green space” we often mean an area of the city where pedestrians have priority or sole use, and where some sort of landscape exists, perhaps along with grass, trees and plants. Parsonage Gardens, between Kendals on Deansgate and the River Irwell, is a high quality such space that has existed for 80 or so years. Cathedral Gardens is another such, created in 2002, with Urbis as its backdrop. You know this is a totally successful new

urban space because it is overwhelmed by Moshers and Goths. It’s a latter day street corner, close to public transport, and invisibly supervised.

Sadly, a well conceived public space in Manchester has recently been surrendered. The Manchester Plan of 1945 (the year of the birth of planning in Britain) envisaged a “Ceremonial Way” from the Town Hall steps (though admittedly a new “modern” Town Hall, closely resembling the one in Swinton Precinct), across Deansgate by John Rylands Library to the steps of the new Crown Court. This route provided an important piece of way-making in the city. It has finally been cut off by large chunks of Spinningfields, the new commercial district that is in mortal danger of itself being isolated from the city. Green space in cities need not be green. Properly constituted shared space is a city’s software. If you mangle the platform, the routes by which city life flows, you corrupt the programme.

Frederick Law Olmstead told the city of New York in 1872 that the park he was creating in midtown Manhattan would

be the “lungs of the city”. Central Park has turned out to be a sort of refuge from various pollutants as well as a carbon dioxide bank. A good thing then. London’s parks serve a similar purpose. Manchester’s needs in this area are probably quite well catered for by Heaton Park, and the fact that you can get to the countryside from the city centre, in any direction, within 20 minutes. In amongst the maddening buses on Oxford Road, air may be as sour as Mexico City, but it’s as sweet as the prairies once you hit Irlam O’th Heights.

Space in cities can be green, pink or technicolour, so long as it has identity, purpose and quality. They can be hard spaces, such as Grand’ Place in Brussels, Campo in Siena, and Trafalgar Square; programmed spaces such as Tivoli Gardens and Central Park; soft spaces like Rathaus Park in Vienna and Sefton Park in Liverpool. The crucial thing is that “space” as part of the public character of a city, should be properly conceived and well maintained. Space, it can be argued, lends more to a city’s heritage than the transient buildings it is defined by. Space, if it is properly protected, is perpetual.

Castlefield Basin is a great space just off Deansgate in the centre of Manchester. It is fed by the (culverted) River Medlock, and the Bridgewater and Rochdale Canals. The geography is attractive enough, with the outcrop of Collyhurst sand stone below Castle Street, and the gentle bend in the Bridgewater Canal. Not

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many places in the UK can outgun its history; Roman fort, first industrial canal, first passenger railway on the planet. Within 500 metres is the Museum of Science and Industry and Granada’s Coronation Street set. Walk west on the towpath and in less than fifteen minutes you are at the biggest football club in the world. This is a place maker’s dream. So why, for most of the day, most days of the year, is it more-or-less deserted? Why is it that two big new pubs, Quay Bar and Jackson’s Wharf, both built within the last eight years, are boarded up and abandoned? Another bar, Box Bar, in the undercroft of the lovely Italianate Baptist chapel on the viaduct, didn’t last two years. Only Dukes ’92, Albert’s Shed and Choice are well established and doing good business. This situation has been debated, and is being addressed by the city council and local interest groups. However, at least two additional

residential schemes are in for planning in the immediate area, and that is further cause for concern. Castlefield is too good and too rare an opportunity for the city to miss.

If you create nice places – as the Central Manchester Development Corporation and others did in Castlefield in the late 1980s – then pretty soon people are going to want to live in them. That’s only natural, and to the good. However, in this case, and critically, Castlefield has been handed to the city, and effectively taken away again. Kids are as rare as kingfishers down here, and old people might as well not exist. On a clear autumn day such as the one on which I write, Castlefield is beautiful. The lock keeper’s cottage is a post-card. Water cascades over the gates of lock 92, and I’m sharing the place with three other people. There are high days down here, and frankly, the quiet days are really rather a privilege. All public open space needs attention. It needs nurturing and promoting or it will go to waste.

We can walk from Castlefield past the Museum of Science and Industry and lovely St John’s Gardens. We can move across Quay Street to the newly created Hardman Square, down Hardman Boulevard, past the glorious new Civil Justice Centre to peek at the River Irwell. From Quay Street to the river is disappointing.

Spinningfields creates millions of square feet of high spec commercial space, and very little sense of space. This can and should be put right.

Other cities are learning how to connect their dislocated places back together in interesting ways (I’m thinking of Sheffield, for instance, from the Railway Station to the Town Hall). All towns and cities must do this as a matter of urgency, because if they don’t they will wither. Space doesn’t have to be green, though green space should be part of the mix. It is not “lungs” that we need (exclusively), it is variety of space, calm and cacophony, open and enclosed, hard and soft.

Most of all we need to be able to use space to navigate our cities, under our own power, and in our own time. Not just lungs but minds. Good cities are sensual places. We need high quality spaces to be able to appreciate that.

SEFTON PARK
IN LIVERPOOL.
PHOTO:
JONTY WILDE/
NWDA.

