

CELEBRITY MAKEOVERS

Two new reports try to sprinkle a little stardust over the Lancashire hills.

Words David Ward

Photographs Len Grant and Don McPhee

Not long ago, The Times carried a feature on doorstops. One was the work of international designer Philippe Starck and very nice it was too. But it cost £150.

If Starck can charge that for a simple device for keeping a door open, how much would he ask for an exclusive shed on an allotment in Accrington?

Questions of price were far from the minds of Anthony Wilson, the man behind Factory records and the Hacienda, and his partner Yvette Livesey when they were commissioned to do some blue-sky thinking about the future of east Lancashire.

As they prepared their report, they toured

all these crappy, run-down, brown, wooden sheds and I suddenly realised: 'Are you going to want to hang out in an allotment like this?'

That's where Starck made his appearance among the broccoli and the runner beans. "British Steel," mused Livesey and Wilson in their report, "might well be

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the region, sometimes thinking not just what had not been thought before but also the unthinkable. And sometimes the utterly heretical.

"I have been trying to encourage allotments," Ms Livesey told the Guardian. "But, driving through Accrington [home town of both Ms Livesey and Holland's Pies], I saw

interested in designing a steel frame and do colourful powder coating; maybe a domed roof, not a hipped roof. Designed by Philippe Starck maybe..."

This idea was not greeted with delirious enthusiasm on Baxenden Ley allotments, 1000ft up near the Alma pub on the southern approach to Accrington.

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- Anthony Wilson, the man behind Factory records and the Hacienda, and his partner Yvette Livesey were commissioned to do some blue-sky thinking about the future of East Lancashire.
- Their report, *Dreaming of Pennine Lancashire*, contains a wish list of ideas including allotment sheds designed by Philippe Starck, a fashion tower in Burnley, a curry mile on the banks of the Leeds-Liverpool Canal and a football theme park.
- Predictably, reactions to the report have been mixed, but arguably that is partly the point – to get people thinking in new ways about East Lancashire.
- Meanwhile, the West Lancashire town of Skelmersdale has also had the celebrity makeover treatment, this time by Red or Dead designer Wayne Hemingway and his wife Gerardine.
- The Hemingways take a more hands on approach to regeneration. Wayne Hemingway launched into the development business by writing angry articles on the “Wimpeyfication” of Britain.
- That led to an offer to work with Wimpey to produce new homes in Gateshead – one of which the couple now live in – and they have designed the apartments in the Birchin redevelopment in central Manchester.

ABOVE: PENNINE LANCASHIRE WOULD HAVE TRENDY NEW ALLOTMENT SHEDS

BELOW: WAYNE HEMINGWAY IN ONE OF THE APARTMENTS HE HELPED DESIGN



“I don’t hold with that in any shape or form,” said Brian Watts, 40 years an allotment holder and chairman of the Baxenden plots.

The blue-sky duo did not stop at chic sheds. They also suggested, in a list they call “a series of consummations devoutly to be wished”, a fashion tower, a curry mile on the banks of the Leeds-Liverpool Canal and a football theme park. And they also want to embrace Blackburn with Darwen, Burnley, Hyndburn, Pendle and Rossendale within the generic name Pennine Lancashire.

While Livesey and Wilson have been causing sharp intakes of breath with ideas that are certainly original if not obviously practical, another designer couple have had the builders in.

Wayne and Gerardine Hemingway, founders of the fashion label Red or Dead, have joined with developers to carve 90 apartments from the Birchin, a 70-year-old office block next to Manchester’s Affleck’s Palace, the emporium where they launched their fashion empire. They have already worked with Wimpey to produce new homes in Gateshead and now have a few ideas about restoring the original vision for Skelmersdale.

So are the trendies taking over from earnest local council planners and regional regenerators? Not quite. But they can attract attention. And that’s the point.

“Having a familiar name helps, which is a shame for those people out there whose ideas are as good as or better than ours,” said Hemingway, who is not just a rag-trade man: he has a degree in geography and town planning.

He launched himself into the development business by writing angry articles about the “Wimpeyfication” of Britain. Wimpey then invited him to talk and the result is his Gateshead housing scheme, real bricks on real ground. The Hemingways are so pleased with the homes that they have bought one themselves.

Livesey and Wilson did not have to worry very much about practicalities and costings, brick colours and roof lines. That was not their job; they were imported to the Lancashire mill towns to set hares running. “Bringing in a celebrity does get people talking, whether positively or negatively,” suggested Mike Damms, chief executive of East Lancashire chamber of commerce. “It has a catalytic effect and the outside world takes more notice.

“The Livesey-Wilson report was part of our collective review of the area. Of course some of it is a bit silly. But sometimes you need to look at things rather differently. The report has caused a proper debate about what should be the values, almost what the brand should be, of east Lancashire over the next 10-15 years.”

The Hemingways are already being judged by those who live in, or are thinking about living in, the homes they have designed. You can wander round the bijou show apartment at the Birchin and think the kitchen/diner/sitting room is a pretty efficient use of space even if you can’t stand the stripey wallpaper.



MORE INFORMATION
www.elevate-eastlancs.co.uk
www.skelmersdale-vision.co.uk

But with Livesey and Wilson, it’s the ideas that are judged by councillors and corporations, allotment holders and newspaper readers. Gladys Robinson, from Great Harwood, was not at all happy about the Pennine Lancashire label. “East Lancashire is a good, solid sensible name,” she wrote in an indignant letter to the Lancashire Evening Telegraph. “Who wants a posh name? The people who live in East Lancashire are not posh. They are good, intelligent, hard-working citizens and like the name East Lancashire.”

But Roger Frost, mayor of Burnley and chairman of the town’s civic society, said many people seemed to like the proposed new name for the region and added that the report had certainly set people in councils, commerce, industry and education arguing and discussing. Personally, he was a little wary about the fashion tower, fearing it was a throwback to the town’s textile past, which is rapidly becoming only a memory.

“The report has both its supporters and detractors,” he said. “A number of people like the ideas. Others think they are just a lot of Tony Wilson and are not too keen. But he has latched on to the issues we are talking about in the area. He has made us think about how we see

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ourselves, about our heritage and what our future should be.”

Baxenden’s allotment holders, who collectively represent the diversity of humanity and the way it organises its vegetable patches, are happy to do some thinking but will not be easily convinced about chic shacks and stylish uniformity. Their existing sheds are made from anything that comes to hand – old windows, old doors, old timber. “We are recyclers of the first order,” boasted Frank McVan, allotments society treasurer and, with his wife Sheila, grower of amazing dahlias and chrysanthemums. “We were recycling before anyone thought of it. Much of the pleasure you get from an allotment is making do and mending. You spend as little as possible and you get the benefit.”

“I’m happy with the way things are,” added Brian Watts. “You could call it an organised muddle. Everyone does his or her own thing. That’s the way it is.”

Pennine Lancashire (or whatever you want to call it) has to preserve its sturdy individuality while considering big questions about its destiny. Which is why Livesey

“There were lots of things that annoyed us that we thought could be better. One of those was housing and the liveability of environments.

Anyone can have ideas on how to live. It depends on what position you have whether you can put those ideas into practice. When you are in the public eye, you have access to be able to do things.”

One thing was not just to develop the Birchin but also to make sure that some of the apartments, with prices starting at £80,000, would be made available to key workers and first time buyers.

“Because we were reasonably well known as designers, people thought they could link up with us and gain some economic advantage,” added Hemingway. “That has ensured that the projects we are doing reach fruition, that we can make money for people and ourselves. That gives companies like Wimpey confidence.

“People look at our development in Gateshead and say it’s not that special. But we say that if it has gone two per cent in the right direction, we’ll be singing and dancing in the streets. We have met housebuilders on their terms and worked with them to inch their way forward. We realise they have to make money.”

A fashion designer might call that cutting your coat according to your cloth. 

David Ward is the Guardian’s highly-respected Northern correspondent. He has worked for the paper in Manchester for almost 30 years.