

Words Mark Hillsdon

Photographs New East Manchester, Joel Chester Fildes, Urban Splash

BEHIND THE FACADE

How local residents are living with East Manchester's massive regeneration project.

With their ornamental gables, multi-coloured brickwork and intricate balconies, the 23 homes that make up Islington Square are a world apart from the monotonous brick boxes of the Cardroom Estate which they have replaced.

These houses – variously described as something between a Turkish ghetto and a set from Balamory – are the first to be occupied in New Islington, a £250 million development in Ancoats, on the edge of Manchester city centre.

“The hairs on the back of your neck stand up when you look at them,” says Liam Ryan, who recently moved into one of the idiosyncratic dwellings with his wife Sandra, after 24 years on the Cardroom. “They’re absolutely brilliant.”

Yet it’s not just the designs that are turning heads, but also the process that saw these surreal homes jump from the studio of an avant-garde London architects to the side of canal in what was once one of Manchester’s most rundown estates.

The last time this corner of Manchester reverberated to the whirr of cement mixers and the crash of the wrecking ball was in the late 1970s, when the council set about building the Cardroom, whose name has nothing to do with gambling, and everything to do with weaving.

As the Observer’s architectural correspondent Deyan Sudjic recently wrote, the Cardroom “represented town planning’s backlash against the tower blocks of the previous decade, which were themselves a reaction against the hideous slums before them.”

Rita Lord was one of the Cardroom’s original tenants. “For the first ten to fifteen years, the estate was all right, everything was fine,” she recalls. “It was only the last ten years or so that it went down.”

During the 1980s the traditional manufacturing units that had employed so

many local people disappeared, unemployment soared and the inevitable depopulation followed.

With few people left to maintain basic facilities such as a schools and shops, they too closed, until in the end over half of the 200 homes were boarded up and unoccupied.

Crime soared until even taxis were refusing to enter the labyrinth.

“The mistake was that they built a row of houses one way, and some going to the side, and some to the side of that one, it was like a puzzle,” says Lord. “There was no direct route. It was mixed up and that was a problem, because people (including criminals) could get access from anywhere.”

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ABOVE: FACADES; NEW ISLINGTON AND THE ‘CHIPS’; RITA LORD.



ABOVE: LIAM RYAN; FACADES; 'CHIPS' AND CANAL.

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But a small community did hang on and in 2002 it was with a sense of trepidation that they greeted the news that the UK's third Millennium Community, New Islington, was to be built on a 12.5 hectare site that included the Cardroom Estate.

A partnership including the national regeneration agency English Partnerships, the Urban Regeneration Company New East Manchester, lead developer Urban Splash and Manchester Methodist Housing Association (MMHA) took up the challenge. With the failure of the past right before their eyes, they knew that things would have to be done differently this time around.

“If there is one lesson that has been learnt from some of the failures of the last few decades,” explains Tom Russell, chief executive at New East Manchester, “particularly around the slum clearances and rebuilding programmes of the 1960s and 1970s, it is that deciding for people what they are going to have in terms of housing just stores up problems.

“There are no guarantees for success in regeneration and development but the one real safeguard we've got is making sure that people that you expect to carry on living in an area... have a direct involvement in how their neighbourhood and their streets are designed and built. It's absolutely fundamental to everything we are doing across East Manchester.”

The tenants who had chosen to move across from the Cardroom suddenly found themselves empowered. They got organised and Urban Splash's original plans for a series of waterside apartments were questioned and then jettisoned.

A competition was organised by the Royal Institute of British Architects to find a new set of designs and the residents plumped for FAT (Fashion, Architecture, Taste),

giving them a remit to design 23 social housing units, Islington Square.

On paper it was a partnership fraught with danger – a team of architects whose one major commission was an, albeit startling, security hut in a Dutch bike park, paired with an eclectic mix of Mancunians whose watchword was ‘traditional’. Yet incredibly it worked.

“The reason the residents selected them was that they felt very comfortable with them,” explains Kate Faye, assistant regional manager at MMHA, who manage the social housing on the site.

“What FAT created was a very good relationship with the residents from day one... (they) were very good at communicating and really listening to what people said.”

What happened next was a series of meetings, workshops, focus groups, and even a trip to Amsterdam to allow residents to see at first hand what could be achieved by housing built next to the water.

“At first we didn't know whether we were going to benefit from it (the consultation) or not,” says Lord, but with much negotiation, and a good deal of compromise on both sides, FAT came up with what Faye describes as “a product that the residents felt really proud of, and were really excited about moving into.”

As well as the eye-catching front facade, the houses met the residents' desire for a simple interior layout, with large open plan rooms and high ceilings. They have also been grouped as pairs around a ‘courtyard’ space that can be used as a parking bay, an open terrace or front garden.

FAT had successfully interpreted the residents' ideas, taken on board their concerns and still produced architecture that fitted in with Will Alsop's much publicised vision for New Islington. The first of the site's individual plots was now complete, leaving just 24 to go.

In all there will be around 1,400 new homes, around 80 of them for social housing. All will be designed by a variety of architects, loosely based around Alsop's master plan, and completed over the next ten to 15 years.

Further housing schemes include Chips, Alsop's first residential scheme in the UK; 12 apartments in the Dispensary, the only remaining section of Ancoats Hospital; and a series of Urban Barns, a new concept in family homes.

Old Mill Street, the main thoroughfare through New Islington, has already been transformed, with pavements and kerbstones replaced by level surfaces, delineated by changes in the colour and material of the road surface. Benches and willow trees now line the street.

Crucially there will also be a new school, health clinic, bars, restaurants and office space, all vital elements if New Islington is to become a truly sustainable, mixed community.

Water will also play its part. “The most important thing (that

came) from Alsop,” says New East Manchester's Russell, “was in a way the simplest.

“He looked at the area with a fresh pair of eyes and said: ‘you've got two fantastic bits of heritage here in the waterways, why don't we bring water through the estate, take fingers of land off it, and build round the water.’”

And that's what they did, with one of the first new waterways to be built in the UK in over 200 years. It links the Ashton and Rochdale Canals across the front of the site and offers developers the chance to build on some 3 km of prime waterside land.

There's also a new water park, which will be open to the public and is central to the development. It will include islands, decking and boardwalks, all framed by a reed bed, as well as a beach, community orchard, follies and an area of public open space containing a range of trees and wildflowers creating a variety of habitats for wildlife.

There's also a mooring ‘island’ for up to six narrow boats, rowing boat hire, fishing and picnicking areas.

But ironically, it's the water park that has recently driven a wedge between the developers and the tenants. Liam Ryan, a leading light in the tenants' steering group explains:

“I don't think they (the developers) have listened enough to the people. That's one of the reasons why we no longer attend the meetings.”

Ryan believes that the site's social housing has been marginalised, pushed to the edges to make way for more lucrative private apartments. And that wasn't made clear in the original plans. “We're on the periphery,” he says, “we're not in the middle of it.

“I've always loved the idea of the lake... but we're stuck at the back not being able to enjoy it.”

The development has also come in for criticism from outside the area, most notably the Oxford Institute for Sustainable Development (OISD), which warned that developments like New Islington were creating transient rather than sustainable communities.

The report's author Professor Tim Dixon also argued that there was a danger that regeneration areas could become victims of their own success, with local people priced out of the market as the drive to higher densities leads to ‘apartment living’ dominating over affordable housing. This would continue to force families out to the suburbs and away from the city centres that local councils are trying to regenerate.

But while Russell agrees with Dixon's sentiments he denies it's something that's happening in East Manchester, where initiatives such as the ‘Right to Return’ have striven to keep old communities together. “We did a guarantee which basically said that any resident (from the Cardroom) who stood to lose their home as a result of improvements

to the area would be guaranteed a place within their existing neighbourhood and, what's more, we would make it affordable for them, with no significant increase in their housing cost.

“I suppose when we got started a lot of people were suspicious about gentrifying the area and bringing in higher income groups. And while the improvements of East Manchester does involve attracting people with medium and higher incomes to come and live here, it's not at the expense of the existing community, and those guarantees have made it clear to people that that's not what we are about.

“We're not designing housing estates here, we are designing neighbourhoods.”

And Russell believes that the new school is testimony to this. “(It) isn't just an estate school, it's intended to cater for the whole city centre population. And specifically it's for the next generation. It's how you keep people who enjoy city living in the city when they start having families.”

It will be years, if not decades, before New Islington can be deemed a success or a failure. But whatever the outcome, it's certainly had a better start in life than the developments that preceded it.

And while Ryan may have gone lukewarm on the developers, he's in no doubt as to the improvements that have already taken place in Ancoats. “I've lived most of my life in this area. And it's absolutely brilliant what's happened to it... the people have embraced it.”

MORE INFORMATION:
www.neweastmanchester.com

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