Sites of sounds:
spaces of pop culture in Manchester's Northern Quarter

Katie L. Milestone
Manchester Institute of Popular Culture, Manchester Metropolitan University
Tel: 0161 247 3033
Fax: 0161 247 6360
E-Mail: k.l.milestone @mmu.ac.uk

Abstract----------

This paper focuses on the 'Northern Quarter', a part of central Manchester which has experienced mixed fortunes over the last thirty years. Historically a thriving commercial district, it suffered a period of economic, cultural and environmental decline in the 1970s and early 1980s. However, since the mid-1980s small businesses connected with pop and youth culture have been established. Explanations for this pattern of development are explored. In particular, attention is paid to sectoral clustering, the importance of place, grass roots regeneration and the threat of gentrification.

Keywords

cultural industries, pop culture, regeneration, gentrification, Manchester

> Although it is hard to believe, when looking at dull grey areas or at housing projects or at civic centres, the fact is that big cities are natural generators of diversity and prolific incubators of new enterprises and ideas of all kinds.
>
> (Jacobs 1964, 156)

Introduction

'Northern Quarter' is the name given to that part of central Manchester which is situated between Piccadilly Gardens (south-west), Ancoats - a dilapidated district of old mills, housing, businesses and pubs (north-east), the Arndale bus station (north-west) and Piccadilly train station (south-east) (Figure 1). The area has been known as the 'Northern Quarter' since Manchester City Council commissioned a report, an important part of which was to establish a place name to (re)generate interest in, and to bring to prominence, a part of central Manchester that had become obscured from many people's 'mental map' of the city centre (The Northern Quarter Regeneration Study 1994). This area is now being promoted as a 'cultural quarter' and is the base for a significant number of the small businesses connected with Manchester's pop culture. Many of these businesses were established when the area was in decline as a result of population decentralisation and retail restructuring. This paper explores the spatialisation of Manchester's pop culture in terms of regeneration, the importance of 'the local', and, the threat from gentrification to the Northern Quarter in its current guise.

(insert Figure 1 about here)

Culture and urban regeneration have become more closely aligned in the past two decades and there is a growing body of research on this issue (Bianchini and Parkinson1993; Wynne 1992; Wynne and O'Connor 1996). Pop culture has been the subject of both research (Street 1993; Frith 1993) and policy initiatives. For example, two of the major cultural industries' initiatives in Britain in the past two decades have had a distinct emphasis on pop culture, i.e. Sheffield's Cultural Industries Quarter (Frith 1993) and the Greater London Council's cultural industries strategy (Bianchini 1987). It will be argued that a laissez faire approach has characterised the pop culture-led regeneration of the Northern Quarter.

In the Northern Quarter, pop culture industries are mainly small to medium sized enterprises (SMEs) and micro businesses concerned with the production and dissemination of symbolic goods and cultural artefacts in the sphere of pop music, club and youth culture. Pop culture industries in the Northern Quarter have a highly visible presence. They also have a highly aural presence in that the music from the record shops, bars and clubs can be heard on, and lend character to, the streets of the district. The landscapes and soundscapes of the Northern Quarter sets it apart from the homogeneous corporate retail sites which dominate most town/city centres and shopping malls (Worpole 1992). The cultural businesses are visually striking with vivid shop and bar signs and eccentric window displays which are in effect a form of informal public art. These businesses are most visibly present on Oldham Street, the Northern Quarter's main thoroughfare. Although Tib Street is no longer the pet shop paradise it once was (Pritchard 1986) it is still renowned locally for its quirky specialist shops, including a joke shop, pet shop, candlemakers, fancy dress hire, army surplus store and a pop culture bar. In the neighbouring street, people sell fruit and vegetables from barrows at one side of the road, while on the other side of the road, there are open air market stalls

from which second hand records and books may be bought. These stalls provide a sense of what the area was formerly like (Davies 1992). The area is not only defined by pop culture. What is crucially important is that there are few chain stores in the Northern Quarter. The non-corporate character of the area is central to its role as a liminal and diverse zone in which creativity and invention flourish. It differs to many other city centre areas in that its street level facades are eccentric and jumbled.

This paper is drawn from doctoral research undertaken between 1991 to 1996, which examined how the pop culture infrastructure was established in the Northern Quarter, and how, more generally, Manchester developed a reputation as a 'pop city' (Milestone 1996). The research consisted of ethnography and over seventy in-depth interviews with pop culture traders and users of the area. Interviewees were asked to discuss their career history, their reasons for locating in the Northern Quarter, the importance of place, and their relationships with Manchester City Council and other (non pop culture) users of the district. This paper is a contribution the ongoing debate surrounding the process of culture led regeneration. It also considers the hitherto neglected issue of the spatialisation of pop culture industries within the city.

Before the Northern Quarter: the destruction of diversity.

Until the 1970s the area between Piccadilly and Ancoats was a busy shopping, commercial and leisure district. Oral testimonies from people who used the area in the 1950s and 1960s tell of illicit boxing matches, Whit walks, street traders and performers, and illegal night drinking clubs (Milestone 1995). Of crucial importance to the life blood of the area were its department stores, pet shops, public houses, and Smithfield and Shudehill produce markets (Pritchard 1986; Lynch 1985; Davies 1992).

During the 1970s the area experienced a period of rapid environmental, economic and cultural decline. This was a direct result of town planning developments that were occurring in adjacent parts of the city centre. Large-scale demolition was 'required' to make way for buildings such as the new Arndale shopping centre (Figure 1). Many of the large shops and department stores that had been based in the area moved to the Arndale Centre leaving behind a string of empty retail premises. The area's most prominent thoroughfare, Oldham Street, was particularly hard hit. Naturally, the loss of shops had negative repercussions for the cafes, pubs and restaurants, and many were forced to close. Furthermore, the markets were relocated to the edge of the city, and the area quickly altered from a state of bustling commercialism into a state of semi-dereliction:

> The old wholesale quarter and its produce markets have closed and moved to new sites and a massive redevelopment, the Arndale Centre, straddles the intricate web of streets in what was once the most interestingly Dickensian piece of central Manchester.
>
> (Rodgers 1980, 27)

The bulldozers not only destroyed Manchester's 'Dickensian' built environment, they also removed dozens of city centre sites of popular culture, social networks and small businesses. The area became increasingly grim and quiet. Heavy bus pollution, abandoned retail and leisure premises, and a lack of public open spaces became the distinguishing features of Oldham Street and the surrounding area in the 1970s and 1980s. Some textile wholesalers and manufacturers survived, but these contributed little to maintaining the street culture of the area. What remained was a district in

decline, altered by the planners and then seemingly overlooked and forgotten. Such spaces were not considered to have a future or a value. However, the decline of the area rests not solely with local town planners, but also with a set of broader political and economic shifts. This includes the demise of the manufacturing and textile sectors in Manchester and the North (Peck and Emmerich 1991).

It should come as no surprise, therefore, that similar districts throughout UK and elsewhere in the developed world shared the area's fortunes. Discontentment about the 'death' of thriving neighbourhoods and business districts at the onslaught of the town planning of ultra modernity was, for example, being articulated in North America (Jacobs 1964; Sennett 1973) during the period in which Manchester was (belatedly) modernised (Mole 1996).

The new breed of pop culture entrepreneurs

Concurrent with the transformation of Manchester's commercial landscape, the seeds of innovation were sprouting in pop and youth culture in Britain's regional cities. Where previously there was little alternative than to move to London to gain a career in, or to be at the cutting edge of, pop culture, by the late 1970s alternative pathways were being pursued in some regional cities. Punk rock played a major role in Manchester (Savage 1991; Laing 1985; Curtis 1995). Inspired by the Sex Pistols' concerts at the Lesser Free Trade Hall, a significant number of young Mancunians and students based in the city established themselves as pop culture producers, creating their own pop culture spaces (Milestone 1995). Manchester's punks and post punks (and those in other regional cities) played a crucial role in the redefinition of 'the North' as cosmopolitan and culturally diverse, as opposed to being unfashionable and parochial.

In the late 1970s there was a flurry of activity in Manchester with band formation, fanzine production and clothes designing and retailing. Significantly Manchester's Buzzcocks formed their own record label in the city (Savage 1991, 298) and increasingly Manchester bands used local designers for their record covers and flyers, thus establishing a strong Manchester pop design network (Chambers 1992). In addition to the impact of punk in spawning a new generation of 'pop Bohemians' (O'Connor 1991), the Northern Soul scene was also highly active. Both Manchester punk and the Northern Soul scene were premised on a rejection of mainstream (London-based) youth and pop culture (Hollows and Milestone 1998) and a commitment to emphasising rather than suppressing a local, northern and predominantly working class identity. They also contributed to the formation of a generation of pop culture entrepreneurs in the North West region. The northern soul scene provided many opportunities for underground pop culture careers, e.g. disc jockeying was of prime importance and it was from the Northern Soul scene that the cult of the DJ finds its origin. Trading in rare records, the production of fanzines and the promotion of Northern Soul nights sustained this scene.

Ignored by regulators and developers, the devalued inner city spaces - the old working class shopping districts, warehouses and factories provided the 'alternative' spaces that the city had previously been lacking. Manchester's pop bohemians were able to claim and use these areas to create over a period of time, their own cultural environment.

Finding a base was crucial in allowing Manchester's pop culture innovation to develop. By locating elements of an ephemeral and fluid music 'scene' within distinct geographical spaces the 'local' character of the Manchester pop culture scene was reinforced. As the 'Manchester' sound of the time was given a physical, visual presence by its producers and consumers, a new found confidence developed. The concept of a 'Manchester sound' was no longer premised on something fleeting and vague as this notion could now be fixed in space. The buildings and streets of the Northern Quarter operated as anchor points for the Manchester pop scene, which itself operated in numerous (ever-changing) spaces across the city. However, the distinct cultural sense of 'the local' was not only engendered by situatedness. That Manchester's pop culture was being played out in clearly defined sites that generated a 'northern', Manchester aesthetic was emphasised in many of the lyrics, sounds and sartorial style of those involved in Manchester's punk and post punk scene(s).

Pop culture at 'the Palace'

By the late 1970s, new businesses that were allied to the Manchester cultural scene were established in the Northern Quarter, e.g. band rehearsal space (ideal because of the plethora of empty buildings and the lack of people to disturb), Virgin Records (a congregation space for Manchester's punks and musicians) and the offices of City Life (a 1istings magazine which promoted Manchester's burgeoning pop culture scene). However, the opening in 1982 of Affleck's Palace transformed the district's status as a site for pop culture. This one-time department store, cum mail order depot (1960s) cum fashion boutique (late 1960s, early 1970s) had lain empty for the proceeding decade. James Walsh and Elaine Williams acquired a 25 year lease on the property and divided it up into a series of box like units. They then let the shop units on a weekly basis to people selling jewellery, clothing and antiques. Under these arrangements, it was relatively easy for people to set up business as it was affordable (e.g. there were no shop fitting costs) and virtually no long term commitment was required. Affleck's Palace was a starting point for a number of small businesses who later moved into larger premises in the area [see case study]. It also acted as a catalyst, attracting other operations into the area. James Walsh describes the area and why he decided to move to it in the following terms:

> It was dingy and outdated, nobody really came here but I could remember what it used to be like so 1 knew that it was possible for it to get going again. After it had been a department store it had been used for various purposes one of which was a youth fashion shop. We found lots of groovy old stock upstairs. We decided to call it 'Affleck's Palace' partly as a reference to when it was Affleck and Browns [department store] and partly because the word palace has connotations of escapism and excitement.

At the outset, Affleck's Palace mainly sold antiques and second hand clothes. There was a demand for theses products in the early eighties, particularly as the legacy of punk had turned many youths away from mainstream fashion toward 'do it your self' and second hand clothes. Affleck's Palace catered for groups such as fans of New Order and The Smiths. It was a space where you could buy locally produced designer clothes from people who were closely allied to the music scene. A sense of having a Northern or Mancunian identity was strong amongst the locally born pop culture bohemians. A clear example of this is Leo Stanley who was born and bought up locally and whose fashion business identity is tightly connected to the Manchester pop scene. It was Stanley who designed 'Madchester T-shirts with slogans such as *'Born in the North, Exist in the North and Die*

in the North' and *'On the Seventh Day God created MANchester'*. In the 1980s the relationship between Manchester music and Manchester fashion was strengthened as bands such as James, The Inspiral Carpets and The Happy Mondays produced their own T shirts, or used local designers to produce them. Affleck's Palace meant that it was no longer necessary for Northerners to go to places in London to buy such 'alternative' clothing.

At the height of the 'Madchester' phenomenon in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Affleck's Palace was firmly established as a youth or pop tourism site. What is interesting to note here is the fact that many of the businesses that outgrew Affleck's Palace relocated to other premises in the surrounding area, e.g. Design Goes Pop!, Eastern Bloc Records [see case study], Fat City Records, Vinyl Exchange and Identity clothes (whilst continuing its retail operation from Affleck's, Identity re-located its wholesale operation to Tib Street).

In-depth local knowledge of products and markets is shared by the pop culture entrepreneurs who perceive themselves as complementing rather than competing with each other. For example, that there are over ten record shops in the Northern Quarter is perceived as a strength rather than a potential weakness: each shop has its specialist market and collectively they share independence from mainstream chart records shops. As one record shop owner explained, *"the fact that there are lots of record shops gives people interested in underground music even more of a reason to come to the area"*.

Manchester City Council began to acknowledge the value of Affleck's Palace in the early 1990s. In 1992, the Economic Initiatives Group targeted pop culture businesses in the district and produced a brochure, 'Action Zone', which explained that grants were available to assist with rent, building refurbishment, property improvement, interest relief, security and technology. The focus on pop culture businesses was further catalysed in 1994 when Manchester City Council funded a feasibility study into the future development of the area. A 'bottom up' approach was adopted in recruiting a local feasibility study team who were familiar with the area. The report recommended an extension of that the area's pop culture retail base and an increase in the number of people living in the area (The Northern Quarter Regeneration Study 1994). The area has subsequently become firmly placed back on the central Manchester agenda and has experienced environmental improvements, public art initiatives, European and other public funding and private investment.

Beyond 'the Palace'

The pop culture infrastructure in the Northern Quarter developed steadily since the early 1990s. Many of the pop culture businesses are based in Oldham Street although there are other pop clusters in the area including three managed workspaces (Figure 1). Two of these workspaces actively promote themselves as offices and workshops for pop culture industries whilst the other has a number of pop culture businesses despite not actively targeting this market. Recent estimates suggest that there are over 200 SMEs in the Northern Quarter connected with pop culture (Hill and Purvis 1997**).** These include graphic and web site designers, band managers, recording studios, music retail, music venues, bars, clubs and those involved in the production and retail of products allied to the music and club industry including music journalism, fashion, jewellery and hairstyling.

The networking among of small firms working within the cultural industries sector is engendered by geographical proximity, which reinforces the social networks that develop from the cultural industries network. These embedded businesses/cultural/social relationships allow people involved in this sphere to identify and create new cultural products and spaces because of the intense and central involvement they have in the pop culture sphere:

> The location of this building is essential - we've got a client base here. Because Manchester's got a music industry there's a lot of networking and contacts. They press vinyl next door - it's the only one in the North - someone can literally come in off the street and write a tune, have it finished and mastered in here, take it to PURE and have a record ready from start to finished in two days. A DJ could come in, do an acetate, play it in the club that night, get a feel for how it goes down and decide whether or not to press any more.
>
> (Manager of digital recording studio, interview with the author)

The sense of being part of a clustered (pop culture) community is similar to sentiments expressed by those in Nottingham's Lace Market fashion quarter whose entrepreneurs' sense that their area is, "…alternative, not mainstream, a little avant garde and certainly markedly different from the conventional city centre" (Crewe and Haines 1996, 25), and that - unlike Dublin's Temple Bar (Montgomery 1993) or Sheffield's Cultural Industries Quarter (Frith 1993) – "The small, fledgling businesses which established themselves in recent years were pioneers in the urban regeneration process and were prepared to take a gamble and enter a neglected and partially derelict industrial space." (Crewe and Haines 1996, 53). Those involved in the Northern Quarter also perceive themselves to be pioneers, establishing an alternative to the mainstream city centre and who are deeply committed to the idea of the local, not global (not London).

Zukin (1991, 12) argues that market and place have become separated, in that markets are mobile with no attachments or commitments to specific locales, "as markets have been globalized, place has been diminished". This argument holds for those multinational, global corporations that are involved with the mass production of consumer goods. Zukin demonstrates in *Loft Living* that she is aware of avant garde cultural industries and their attachments to place, yet she views this as ultimately bound up with the ideology and power relations of capitalism. She offers no space for different articulations and no space between 'winners' and 'losers' in the game of globalized capital. However, place remains centrally important, with the emergence of smaller scale cultural industries and intermediaries in the production and distribution of symbolic and cultural goods a fixed locale. Manchester's Northern Quarter has a high density of cultural industries, in which production and consumption take place in close proximity. This gives the area vitality, animation and stability. In a place where consumption and production coincide, market cannot be easily separated from place. The notion of place - of Manchester or Northerness - is central. Fashion designers producing from workshops in the Northern Quarter sell locally. Some distribute nationally but it is their '*Manchesticity*' that gives them their symbolic status. Consumers are interested specifically in Manchester music, fashion and the political and aesthetic connotations that are embedded within. Bourdieu's cultural capital is inverted as working class pop culture is accorded status and value. As Wynne and O'Connor note, "Bourdieu's analysis may be less applicable today precisely because of the increased commodification of the cultural and the associated destabilisation of cultural hierarchies" (1996, 83).

The future: self destruction of diversity mark 2?

It was an absence of planning and regulation that allowed the metamorphosis of the Northern Quarter from are of decline to area of pop culture diversity. Interviewees from the Northern Quarter harboured a tension between feeling abandoned and wanting intervention. For example, while wanting better street lighting, less traffic flow, and easier access to grant funding, they expressed concern that too much interference could ruin its ebullience and cutting edge aura. Property speculation and gentrification is a potential threat. A recurring fear of many people was that those who owned the buildings in the Northern Quarter were merely hanging on to them until a property boom arrives. Landlords of buildings are notorious in the area for failing to maintain buildings. Is it possible that the area could be gentrified in similar terms to New York's Soho described by Zukin (1988) For Zukin 'landscape' refers to the imprint of the powerful on the environment and 'vernacular' to the cultural and spatial manifestation of the now disempowered and dispersed working class communities:

> The continuing erosion of locality raises a question about the future of the vernacular in postmodernity. If landscape becomes more abstract, reflecting the diminution of local production cultures, will the powerless be even more incapable of generating an imprint of their own?
>
> (Zukin 1991, 40)

Zukin adopts an 'all or nothing' approach. Nearly everywhere has been appropriated and manipulated into 'landscape', many 'vernacular' spaces are being gentrified, with the 'vernacular' remaining in places such as 'shanty towns and tenements' (1991, 16) and those places frequented by the homeless. Zukin mentions that cities such as Sheffield or Bradford retain an 'older vernacular' but goes on to argue that these are more likely to be 'Orwellian relics' (1991, 242) than spaces of opposition. For Zukin, there are 'landscapes of power', and 'vernacular' spaces which are either enclaves of poverty or 'old' places that have somehow escaped or evaded being 'landscaped'. The only other model that Zukin offers is that of the gentrified place (1991, 230). From this position the gentrifiers are the dupes of corporate capitalism who facilitate the transformation from vernacular to landscape.

It is over a decade since Zukin's pioneering *Loft Living* was first published (Zukin 1988) and there is now greater awareness of the problems associated with gentrification. Awareness may enable urban cultural pioneers to resist this process. Manchester is not New York - the types of gentrifiers Zukin described do not exist in large numbers in the Manchester region, as, for example, the market for urban living is still not particularly large in Britain. In Manchester there is a surplus of potential loft apartment space which may also prevent a property prices boom. Furthermore, the new out of town shopping centre which opened in 1998 (the Trafford Centre) is likely to effect a drop in property costs in Manchester city centre.

The Northern Quarter is, however, at a turning point. To some the district has realised its potential as a fully fledged pop culture quarter with street festivals, digital art, websites and recognition, as it looks better and busier with its own unique identity. Others are more sceptical that this moment is transitory and fragile. In Nottingham's Lace Market, Crewe and Haines articulate the dilemmas and conflicts experienced in an area undergoing a process of change:

> The early neglect of the area may ironically have been one of the mainstays in preserving the individuality and identity of the area and the difficult paradox now, in policy terms, is how to continue to regenerate and enliven the area whilst at the same time safeguarding this incubator of local talent and ensuring that powerful external national and international investment capital doesn't force up rents and push out the very uses which give the area its distinctive appeal and identity.'
> (Crewe and Haines 1996, 53)

A particular combination of often unpredictable cultural shifts, local and national policies have resulted in the emergence of the Northern Quarter as an 'alternative' pop culture space. The Trafford Centre may silence and destroy Manchester city centre or, perhaps, because of the Northern Quarter, city centre Manchester may become a thriving focal point for non corporate shops, bars, clubs and tourism sites. In this scenario, the cultural capital of the underground may be undermined by overexposure. In 1998 the building across the road from Affleck's Palace was converted into a series of loft apartments. The lofts are not overly expensive, but there are already signs of conflict between the pop culture economy and the young urban professionals who are moving into the lofts - a live music/club/1ate night cafe bar across the road from the lofts has started receiving complaints from loft dwellers about the noise of bands, DJs and revellers. The term 'mixed use' is a buzzword in terms of developing cultural quarter. The future may be but seem a series of inevitable conflicts between the noise of pop culture and needs of residents who want a good night's sleep.

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Case Study: Enterprise Allowance and 'Eastern Block'

When the Conservative government introduced the Enterprise Allowance Scheme (EAS) in 1983, pop culture businesses began to flourish. The combination of the EAS and spaces such as Affleck's Palace presented the perfect opportunity for people to set up quirky, experimental businesses with little personal investment or risk. Eastern Block records was established in 1985 by three young men from Bolton who applied for EAS. The business developed from their interest in underground dance music, which was scarce and expensive in Manchester at the time. They rented a stall in Affleck's Palace and bought £2,000 worth of records to sell. As they grew, they moved from Affleck's Palace to Affleck's Arcade. Eastern Block Records started their own record labels and released the first two singles for The Inspiral Carpets. Many of the shop staff were also involved in disk-jockeying and/or bands: it is typical for the Northern Quarter's pop culture entrepreneurs to be involved in a crossover of pop culture related activities, During the late 1980s and early 1990s there was a 'buzz' in the city which was concentrated in the Oldham Street area and of which Eastern Bloc were very much part. At this point in time, the sound, look and feel of the district Northern was dominated by pop culture;

> Eastern Bloc records was at the cutting edge of the new wave of dance shops. We quickly became internationally famous and were perceived as being bigger than we really were. All the big DJs were coming in to the shop, people who went to places like Singapore and Japan and [then] told people where [they'd] bought records from. We took a chance at being obscure. If people know they can find something in your shop that they won't find anywhere else you're guaranteed that they are going to come back. 'Be more obscure than every where else'. That was our whole philosophy really.
>
> (One of the founders and managers of Eastern Bloc, interview with the author)

Eastern Bloc expanded to the point where they needed a whole shop to themselves and in the early 1990s they moved to premises across the road. However after expanding the shop encountered a series of financial crises and was subjected to a take-over by a larger company. The financial crisis was blamed on repeated late payment by the shops creditors. This highlights a major pitfall facing many new pop cultural businesses. Because of a lack of formal prior business training and the scarcity and expense of business advice (for example in terms of accounting, effective use of new Information and Communication Technologies, intellectual property rights and marketing) many businesses that have emerged in informal and ad hoc ways are vulnerable to financial insecurity. Typically pop cultural industries personnel have arts or humanities degrees in which business studies is absent from the curriculum. Likewise those who have no post school education tend to lack business 'know how'. The company that took over eastern bloc (PWL) continued to leave the day to day running of the business to the original directors acknowledging their knowledge and (street) credibility in terms of underground dance music markets whilst keeping a tighter control on in-comings and expenditure.