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# **Three Stories of Salford: transformation, identity and metropolitan peripheries**

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## **Abstract**

This paper suggests that, using evidence from a case study of Salford, transformations in urban identities have been associated historically with how cities have connected to wider socio-economic flows. The impact of those connections has had uneven and unpredicted consequences on city spaces, from creating squalor and overcrowding to dividing and marginalising some spaces. These impacts created a specific identity for Salford. Future transformations may depend on the way cities shape their identity.

## **Keywords**

Urban identity, peripheral cities, urban transformation, spatial connections, Salford.

## **Introduction**

This paper offered an introduction to themes at Net-TOPIC's Salford seminar *Building New Urban Identities* held in October 2009. Net-TOPIC is a European network of peripheral towns in transformation (Commission of the European Communities, 2009). Such 'peripheral' towns stand in close relation to dominant cities, such as Salford's relationship to Manchester, and have traditionally supported the functions of those dominant places. Their location means that they are suffering from "industrial decline, territorial fragmentation, social polarization." (Barreiro, 2009, 4) As part of their transformation, these cities are striving for a new identity.

This transformation can be associated with what Sassen has called the 'new geography of the centre' (Sassen, 2001). She argues that globalisation, and the consequent need for services, has displaced traditional manufacturing and low-value functions from the metropolitan centre, and that technological change has contributed to the 'de-centring' of central functions by, for example, the location of head offices and call centres in peripheral locations, such as derelict manufacturing sites or old docklands. These factors can be combined with the dominant European planning discourse of 'compact cities' which has led to the concentration of 'brownfield'<sup>1</sup> development within metropolitan areas (Blowers and Pain, 1999). In order to settle flows of investment into their spaces, cities have adopted a number of strategies, including place-marketing

(Harvey, 1996). Place-marketing is a project to promote a particular identity for a city to attract flows of resources to it.

But the use of the concept of 'identity' for place promotion is a narrow one. It is worth commenting on and justifying this notion of identity in this context. Identity is about how we see ourselves and how others see us (Woodward, 2000). Castells has pointed to three ways in which identity is useful to thinking about cities (Watson, 1997): legitimising identity (where residents identify with a place), resistance identity (where groups form around social issues) and project identity (where the identity of a place is consciously constructed to achieve some goal). This classification draws attention to the rejection of the simplistic notion of place identity as representing a bounded, homogenous space. Cities have multiple identities and individuals and groups within cities are perpetually creating and re-creating identities at different scales. Oktay (2002), for example, has stressed the importance of individual districts within cities as the source of identity. There may be merit in seeking to overcome or supplement such identities by promoting a wider attachment to the city as a whole to generate that sense of 'corporate feeling' alluded to by Barreiro (2009). Thus, for example, Manchester has cultivated the identity of a 'cosmopolitan' city (Young et al., 2006), but Manchester has also sought to promote an identity based on its music, the gay village, or its football.

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1 Brownfield land is that which has previously been developed. Greenfield sites are on previously undeveloped land.

It is, therefore, also important to bear in mind how the many spaces in the city can offer a range of meanings (and marketing opportunities?) to different groups.

Awareness of these factors will make us sensitive to the danger of the totalising tendencies of project identities. But project identities are an imperative for urban managers seeking to distinguish their cities in the face of global competition. The influences on city identity have changed over time. Pre-modern cities had identities tied to the natural resources they drew on; industrial cities' identities were related to their dominant form of production. In the post-industrial world, these associations are no longer available and identities are actively constructed to attract resources (Erickson and Roberts, 1997). This historical perspective on the identity of cities is one which this article will explore. It offers an insight into Salford's past through three stories about key transformations in city spaces. It poses issues about the future by looking at the vision the city has for the future transformation of those same spaces.

## Context

Figure 1 is a satellite view of Salford. It is pertinent to note how powerful identity can be. Salford sees itself and is seen by others as predominantly urban area. Plans talk about urban design, and funding often comes from subventions targeted at urban areas, and the city label is unreservedly metropolitan. And yet the image in Figure 1 shows a city which is predominantly green. Some 60 per cent of Salford is open space and large proportions are open farmland. Officials do not rush off papers briefing the Council on the latest rural initiative or the impact of European agricultural policy. So powerful is the impact of Salford imagining itself as urban, that considering the rural fringe barely occurs. The east of Salford lies adjacent to Manchester city centre; the cities join along the River Irwell which forms much of the northern boundary of the city towards Bolton. The southern boundary of the city is marked by the Manchester Ship Canal which is fed by the Irwell. The three places important to the stories are marked on Figure 1. The Bridgewater Canal runs through the city from the west, passing through Worsley to the centre of Manchester. Exchange Railway Station was situated on the banks of the River Irwell directly opposite Manchester Cathedral. Salford Quays lies on the Ship Canal on the site of the old Salford Docks.

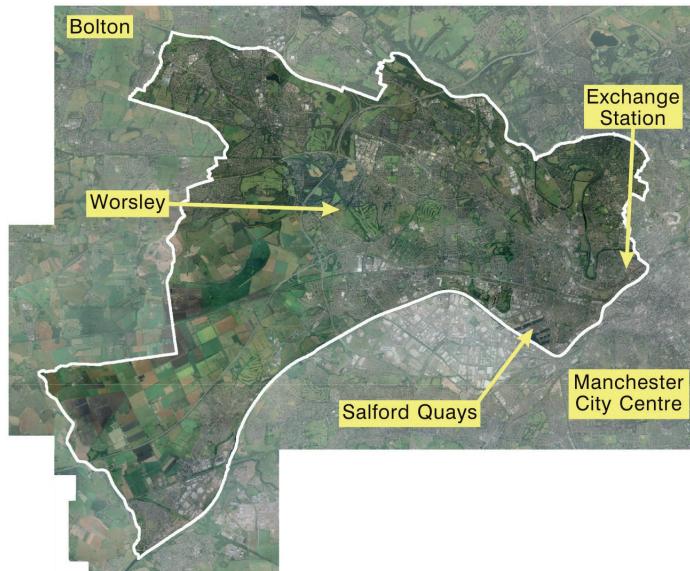


Figure 1

### Story 1: The Bridgewater Canal

Francis Egerton, the third Duke of Bridgewater, built the Bridgewater canal to transport coal from his mines at Worsley to the industrial areas of Manchester. Opened in 1761, the Bridgewater Canal has a special place in history as the first canal in Britain to be built without following an existing watercourse; it was the model for much of the future canal network. Coal from the Duke's mines was transported to the surface at Worsley by a series of underground canals and then loaded onto barges. They travelled along the Bridgewater Canal to the centre of Manchester. The use of the canal halved the price of coal (Deane, 1965, 76) and thus literally fuelled the industrial revolution. Later that decade Watt refined the steam engine and the technology and economic realities combined to make cities in general – and Manchester/Salford in particular – the privileged sites of transformation (Mumford, 1966, 518ff; Hunt, 2004, 16ff).

Medieval Salford was a pretty town with orchards, market gardens and homes of quite prosperous people arranged around a street called Greengate where the market square was to be found. Greengate joined the main highway which is today called Chapel Street and Gravel Lane in a triangle which was the basic urban form of Salford, nestled in a bend of the River Irwell. Goodman (1999, 32) comments on a 1760 sketch of this area: "There is no hint yet of the great changes which would soon transform this serene image beyond recognition." But it was transformed by this new connection of the Bridgewater Canal. Salford's orchards and market gardens were lost as the new investment as money flowed into mills and factories. The change in identity was not lost on contemporaries. As one early 19<sup>th</sup> century resident put it:

Houses have now displaced the verdure in all directions, and the pellucid character of the river has been destroyed by chemical refuse, and although the old localities still retain their favourite names – names suggestive of ‘Flora and the country green’ – they form so odd an amalgamation with the new streets to which they are wedded that the contrast raises our mirth along with our melancholy. Wheat Hill has not an ear of corn to bless itself withal; Springfield has lost every trace of the vernal season; Garden Lane, Posy Street, Blossom Street and the Old Orchard lead to anything rather than fruit and flowers. Even Paradise [Vale] and Paradise Hill are shorn of their primeval attractions; and as to the Green Gate that once guarded Salford’s pastures – where shall we look for that? (Hampson, 1930, 213-4)

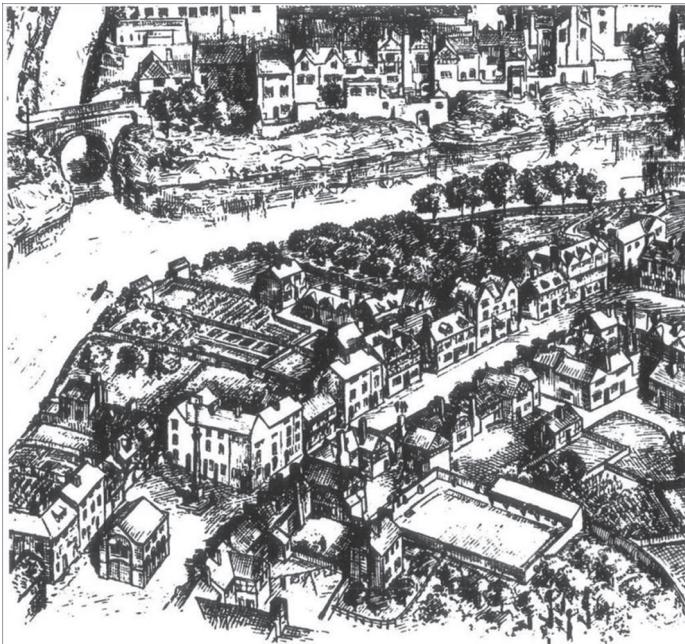


Figure 2

## Story 2: The Railway Age

The second story dates from a time when Salford was the archetypal industrial city. Figure 3 shows a plan of the city with the huddled factories and back-to-back houses and – in the bottom left hand corner – something else that was typical of the new industrial cities: a brand new prison built on the scientific principle of Bentham’s panopticon. In 1838 a railway line from neighbouring Bolton had been built and ended at what is today Salford Central Station. For the early years of the 19th century, that district of Salford was a hub. The rail station was alongside the wharves of the River Irwell. The surrounding area had been developed for factories. Workers’ housing packed the surrounding area and the main thoroughfare of Chapel Street jostled with shops, pubs and public buildings.

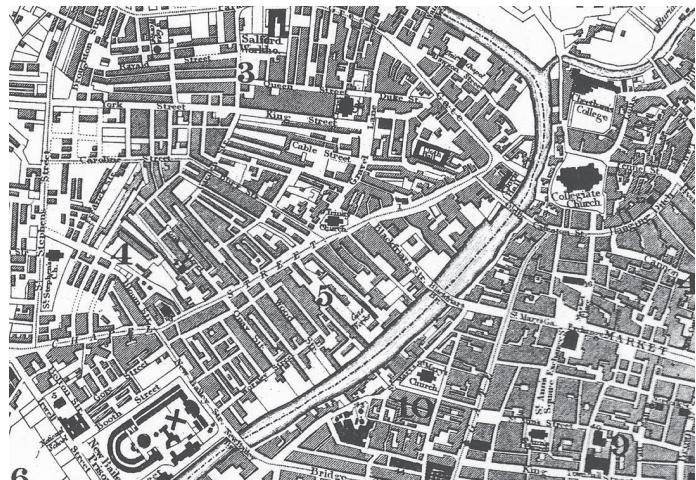


Figure 3

The medieval town gave way to the industrial city. People flowed into Salford and the population grew rapidly from less than 5,000 in 1773, to 60,000 within 50 years, and to over 250,000 at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Greenall, 2000, 1-2), and with it the overcrowding and squalor which Engels so powerfully described in the 1840s (Engels, 1892). The identity of Salford as a city which suffered from the Industrial Revolution was cemented in the social study *The Classic Slum* (Roberts, 1973). But the sense of identity was ambiguous; the civic elite embarked on a reform agenda which gave Salford a reputation for improving conditions. It was also a forcing house for innovation. The flow of coal along the canal (and flows of other technology – the selection of one connection is intended to illustrate, not explain) stimulated flows of people, materials and money and transformed Salford’s identity. The identity of the industrial city became the overwhelmingly dominant representation of Salford.

The river had traditionally separated Manchester and Salford but that disconnection was made much worse by the

building of the railway viaducts. Salford's main thoroughfare declined; it became a place that people passed through on their way into Manchester and no longer a place to go to. The greatest indignity was that Exchange Station became one of Manchester's car parks, clearly shown in Figure 4. There are further car parks to the right in the area called Greengate – once the ancient market square of Salford. The city lost any sense of having its own centre which moved into Manchester and this was reinforced by public disinvestment from Chapel Street after local government reorganisation shifted the administrative centre to Swinton. So in this example the connections along railway infrastructure marginalised Salford, disconnecting it from the activity at the core and isolating its communities. Salford's identity was partly indistinguishable from Manchester, partly in the shade of Manchester.



*Figure 4*

### **Story 3: Salford Quays**

The third story is about the transformation of Salford Docks. The docks were opened in 1894 the terminus of a new connection along the Manchester Ship Canal to Liverpool. By the late 1970s it became clear they had no future; trade was shifting towards the eastern ports and the container ships were becoming too big to pass along the canal. The closure of the docks and the loss of its 3,000 jobs in the early 1980s symbolised the end of industrial Salford. The economic restructuring saw the effective end of heavy engineering, mining and textile industry in the city. The shift to a post-industrial city was underway.

Services were the fastest growing sector, and if the city was to benefit, it would need to connect to new investment to accommodate that sector. The regeneration of the docks as Salford Quays symbolised the third transformation. The docklands were bought by Salford City Council and agreements were made with a private sector company, Urban Waterside, with the aim of attracting private investment; all that was to be achieved within a vision set out by the Council. The original plan, conceived by Shepheard, Epstein and Hunter, set out a strategy for water, roads and services to provide development spaces for commerce, residential and leisure. Key principles were the innovative processes for cleaning the water, quality design of public realm and the connection of the Quays to the heart of Manchester through the Metrolink light rail system.

By 2002 the public sector had invested £145 million into the Quays which had generated £505 million of private sector investment. There are now more people – some 10,000 – working in the dock area than in its heyday as a port. Most are in the service sector, including the Lowry which has transformed the identity of the area into a theatre and tourist destination. Indeed, *The Times* of April 29<sup>th</sup>, 2000, commented on the change that this transformation had made to Salford's identity: "The city is not rejecting its flat cap and pipe puffing past. Rather it has found confidence to build a new identity upon its industrial heritage. The Lowry will transform Salford, by capturing its grimy past and gleaming future." (Salford City Council, 2002) This story has demonstrated the transformation of Salford's identity through the disconnection of its historic trade links through the docks and its new connections to the flows of global finance which underpinned the economic shift of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Future transformations**

These three transformations were connected to flows of materials, people and money; all of these helped to transform Salford's identity. The restlessness of contemporary capitalism and the endeavour of city managers to secure prosperity for their citizens mean that transformations have not ceased. But it is worth revisiting the scenes of the three illustrations to see what is in store for them.

- Worsley, was re-invented in the first decade of the 20th century as a mock Tudor village complete with its own green. As part of the council's regeneration strategy, Worsley is seen as a magnet for tourists drawn to its industrial heritage and rural pursuits. There are (controversial) plans for a racecourse and ecotourism.

- Exchange Station car park is the site of a major redevelopment project which will link Salford into the heart of Manchester across a new footbridge. New squares, which include a homage to the medieval market of Greengate, will link under the rail viaducts which will be opened up to welcome footfall from Manchester, thus re-uniting the two cities as a single central city space.
- Salford Quays is undergoing a further transformation by connecting with and becoming a key node in the global network of media cities – a project which is the primary driver of the city's continuing transformation.

## Conclusions

There have been many transformations in Salford of which these three are representative examples to draw out the nature of transformation and its implications for the identity of a place. First, all transformations are about how connections are made to spaces beyond the city. Too many people think of the city as a container, and that governing a city is about managing what is inside the boundary. A spatial imagination is needed to see the city as a place where wider flows – of money, people and materials – settle. Second, connections can have uneven and unintended impacts; for example our Victorian forebears thought that having a railway station connected to Salford was inevitably a good thing. New connections to the wider economy can unsettle local communities and disconnect them from familiar spaces without connecting them to the new opportunities.

The challenge for urban managers is that they are responsible for the connections. In the case of Mediacity a range of local, regional and national actors were co-ordinated to ensure that the anchor business, the BBC, settled here. But just as important has been orchestrating the new local transport connections and ensuring the new opportunities are open to local people.

The transformation to an industrial city was around physical connections which led to Salford's identity as a 'dirty old town'. Connections were managed in the interests of capital, and the workers suffered. Connections such as the railway viaduct reinforced Salford's image as a twilight zone. The failure of the spatial imagination saw connections that isolated Salford. The post-industrial transformation was of a different character; the balance had shifted to create pleasant spaces that would attract key workers and footloose investors. Metrolink re-connected Salford to the regional centre in Manchester.

Salford has been represented in the past as a place of pollution and deprivation. This has been reinforced in the popular media and in serious social investigation. It is in the paintings of L S Lowry, the novels of Walter Greenwood, social commentators like Robert Roberts, and the TV soap Coronation Street. Most emblematic of all is, perhaps, Ewan MacColl's song 'Dirty Old Town'. Ironically, Salford is not known for producing the artists and thinkers who have promoted that image.

Salford is shaping its own identity. The use of pink by the Council, and on the road signs and street furniture in Salford, is a deliberate attempt to give Salford a young, dynamic, 'cool' image. It raises the interesting question of the extent to which we can say that past transformations gave our cities their identity; future transformations may depend on how we shape our identity. The emphasis by many city managers is about the quality of life, interpreted as how city spaces are fit for the young aspiring middle class.

There is a danger that urban discourse focuses on the importance of creativity to transform cities and leads urban managers to create the 'cool' spaces that the creative class require. But the success of cities will also depend on sustainability, on the confidence of investors that their developments will be able to withstand the shocks of climate change – flooding, heat waves and violent storms – and will have secure supplies of power and water. Cities which identify themselves as resilient may very well be the privileged sites of future transformation.

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