



Lesson 5 reading – Three campaigns for an alternative to property-led regeneration in Manchester

Ancoats Dispensary Trust

When the company Urban Splash began the regeneration of the Cardroom Estate in Ancoats, which would result in the neighbourhood's rebranding as New Islington, they filmed an advert that featured their Chief Executive Officer, Tom Bloxham, stood atop the Ancoats Dispensary building, proclaiming 'If I get this wrong, I'll never work in the city again'.

The Ancoats Dispensary was built in the 19th century to provide local healthcare. Described by Isaac Rose as 'a pre-NHS health centre', it was a prominent feature of the Ancoats neighbourhood and was central to many residents' sense of place as a building with community heritage and an important role in community health and wellbeing. Rose writes that 'almost everyone locally had an intimate memory of it' (Rose, 2024, p. 188).

The community had defended the Dispensary previously, saving it from closure in 1987 with a 200-day sit-in organised by Cardroom Estate residents. After its final closure in 1989, the dispensary and its attached hospital wings were sold to the developer Urban Splash, which removed the roof in 2010, before announcing plans to demolish the building a year later, and the community again rallied to defend the Dispensary.

Local residents launched the Ancoats Dispensary Trust, and began a daily vigil outside the building. They also initiated a people's history project to gather stories about the important role the building had played in people's lives, with the intention of making clear how important the Dispensary was to their sense of place, identity and belonging. Their daily vigil ran for four years.

The community-led campaign was successful in defending the Dispensary. The council gave them the opportunity to bid for ownership of the building. However, with the roof having been removed, the maintenance and repurposing costs would be extremely high. In 2018, the building reverted back to council ownership. At present, the building is being partly renovated into social housing with the building itself kept intact.

Ancoats Dispensary Trust demonstrates that heritage architecture remains prominent in people's sense of place and identity across Manchester today, especially where this heritage is linked to the provision of services such as healthcare that have been vital to community wellbeing. In these circumstances, residents can successfully organise to defend buildings and infrastructure from development. However, accessing the resources to be able to repurpose and develop community assets can be a significant challenge.

Block the Block, Hulme

The Hulme area of Manchester has undergone several waves of regeneration. When the old back-to-back terraces were demolished and replaced with the modernist Hulme Crescents housing blocks in the late 1960s and early 1970s, there was initially great optimism. However, cost-cutting in the build and ongoing economic deprivation meant that the Crescents became seen as a place of social blight. In the 1990s, these were demolished via a City Challenge regeneration project. Slowly, Manchester's universities moved further into Hulme and the area underwent 'studentification', whereby students made up an increasing proportion of the local population.

Property developers were quick to respond to this social shift, and Hulme became the site for several Purpose-Built Student Accommodation (PBSA) developments. Since 2018, at least three PBSA developments have been built in Hulme, several on sites that had formally been community assets, including local pubs.

For the past 15 years, a conflict has been waged over the site of the Gamecock Inn, a pub in Hulme that closed in the early 2000s. Developers have been keen to build high-density accommodation on the site. In 2008 and 2012, plans were put forward and rejected by the council's planning committee. In 2020, new plans for a 13-storey development with space for over 200 beds were proposed for the pub's small footprint.

The local community felt that their area did not need further PBSA and high-rise developments. Instead, they called for a lower-rise development to include supported housing for the elderly, and healthcare services. This, they argued, would better meet the needs of people in the area. Community members who had lived through successive waves of failed urban change became determined not to allow another development to neglect their needs. Weekly protests, gatherings and leafleting garnered support.

Between 2021 and 2023, the Block the Block campaign were successful in blocking the developer's plans for the Gamecock Inn three times. However, in 2024, revised plans were accepted by the council. In response, the Block the Block campaign used a crowdfunding model to raise over £5,000 in order to take the decision to the High Court for a judicial review.

While a High Court ruling in May 2025 favoured Manchester City Council, this campaign shows that community-led alternatives can prevent planning permission being granted for developments in the short term, and also that community members can work collectively to put forward their own proposals for alternative developments. However, it is also a reminder that repeated resubmission of plans to the council can eventually overcome opposition by community groups.

Central Retail Park: 'Trees Not Cars'

Central Retail Park is a large, now derelict, inner-city space in Ancoats beside the New Islington Marina and close to a number of Manchester Life developments. Located on Great Ancoats Street, the site (as its name suggests) was formerly home to a number of large retail units. By 2015, the units were empty and, in 2017, Manchester City Council purchased the 4.2 hectare site for £37 million (a rate much higher than they themselves had charged the Manchester Life and other developers for land in the area), and proposed to build residential and office spaces, potentially in partnership with the ADUG.

In 2019, the council announced their intention to use the site in the short term as a temporary car park development. Local residents, who had been hoping the land could be developed into an urban park and green space in the midst of the many new high-density developments, saw irony in the fact that the announcement was made on the same day as the council declared a 'climate emergency'.

In protest, the residents organised themselves into a community group under the banner of 'Trees Not Cars'. The group held regular demonstrations at the site and collected over 12,000 signatures on a

petition. Part of their protests involved 'guerilla gardening', where they dug up some of the concrete at Central Retail Park to plant saplings. The group also worked with students at the University of Manchester to draw up alternative plans for how the space might be used. In September 2019, a climate change demonstration brought thousands of people to the site and increased public awareness. The campaign won support from local Labour Party councillors.

In late 2019, the council's planning committee passed the proposals for car park development, but the campaigners launched a judicial review, and, in 2021 the Court of Appeal noted that the council had failed to take into account of the impact of increased air pollution, especially as the development is sited next to a school.

The campaign successfully halted the proposals for a car park on the Central Retail Park site. In 2022, the Home Office expressed interest in developing the site in order to move some of its offices to the north of England. When they submitted their development plans, they included a small park area, a clear sign of how effective the community campaign had been in changing the narrative over how this site might be used.