Urban space and civic identity in Manchester 1780–1914: Piccadilly Square and the art gallery question

James R. Moore

The recent controversy over the construction of an office development on part of Manchester’s Piccadilly Gardens has highlighted the emotional value of open space in modern urban centres. Critics railed at the loss of open space and the replacement of gardens with concrete rafts ‘full of litter and unruly yobs’. Civic society members condemned the development as ‘banal, fourth-rate, uninspired crap’ and attacked Manchester corporation for ‘an ignorant and scandalous use of local power’. Yet disputes about Piccadilly are not new and would have been familiar to Edwardian Mancunians. Squares and urban open spaces have long been recognised as important, emotive parts of the urban fabric and are probably as old as urban society itself. They have classical predecessors in the shape of the Greek agora and have long served as multi-functional spaces for meetings, markets, political demonstrations and civic ritual. In some respects one might expect disputes about urban open space to be more acute in Britain, given its relative scarcity in early industrial cities. Unlike America, few provincial British cities have green parks located close to their urban core, making public squares

1 The Manchester plan: The unitary development plan for the City of Manchester (Manchester 1995), pp. 105, 123; Newsletter Piccadilly Gateway (Manchester 2000).
and gardens especially important components of urban public infrastructure.\(^6\) This article will trace disputes about open space in Manchester—‘the first industrial city’—to the earliest days of proto-industrialisation and show how modern controversies reflect the economic and cultural development of the pre-modern town.

The early development of public squares in Manchester began almost by accident, associated with transitory commercial activity, fairs and markets. At first they were often liminal spaces, land left aside by developers, or owned by trusts and corporate bodies seeking to protect the land surrounding their own private property from incursions. Yet by the mid-nineteenth century squares had been appropriated for a multitude of uses from places of quiet resort and relaxation to places of transport interchange and political demonstration. It was in this period that ‘the Piccadilly question’ first emerged, with successive attempts to organise, rationalise and improve not only the physical fabric of the square, but also the activities of those enclosed within it. Sir William Fairbairn’s 1836 scheme to turn Manchester’s central square into a grand classical piazza, inspired partly by the work of Stuart and Revett, aimed at the creation of a majestic gateway to the city’s commercial hub.\(^7\) Fairbairn’s objectives were remarkably similar to those of the twenty-first century planners who sought to use buildings to establish Manchester’s identity and provide an impressive gateway to the city’s heart.\(^8\)

Although Fairbairn’s scheme was unsuccessful it marked the beginning of more than seventy years of debate about the use of Piccadilly, the problems of reconciling the conflicting demands of those who passed through it and the differences of opinion about the image of the city that Piccadilly should represent. In the Edwardian era the site became a battleground between those who wanted the square to become the city’s commercial hub and those who viewed the site as the ideal site for an art gallery that would become emblematic of the city’s high culture and artistic taste. Ultimately


\(^8\) *The Observer*, 23 May 1999; *Newsletter Piccadilly Gateway* (Manchester, 2000).
The Manchester Infirmary and Piccadilly at the beginning of the nineteenth century (unknown artist). Courtesy of Manchester Archives and Local Studies.
neither vision was realised, even though the bitter dispute lasted almost a decade and destroyed the career of the city’s leading Liberal politician. However, in order to understand the significance of the debate it is first necessary to outline the symbolic position of public squares in urban development and the role they have played in processes of urban governance and the formation of local identity.

The character and function of public squares and open space

Planners and historians have long understood the importance of central squares and piazzas in the development of cities. Lynch’s groundbreaking study of urban identity noted how squares operate as focal points or nodes of human attention. Their position at the meeting places of key routes give them a special strategic prominence, making the physical characteristics of squares important in shaping the overall identity of the area or city to which they belong.9 The importance of squares is also a function of the scarcity of free open space in urban cores. Traffic circulation prevents human gatherings in anywhere other than marginal places where throughput of activity is limited; thus squares act as refuges for a variety of human interaction. Crucially they are places were people may freely congregate to see and be seen. The urban fabric, from monumental architecture to street furniture has, of course, an important impact on these patterns of congregation and association. They may be places of lively informal sociability or windswept piazzas used only intermittently for shows of formal governance.10 In some respects the physical characteristics of a square may do much to create new patterns of sociability and communal activity, from the promenading typical of the eighteenth century aristocratic resort to the sunbathing of the modern city.11 Indeed, many squares are important precisely because they foster new forms of interaction. Robert Vaughan’s The Age of Great Cities celebrated the city as a place of

voluntary association, contact and mutually beneficial exchange. Free association and exchange was the essence of liberal freedom and progress. Nowhere was this type of activity more evident than the grand squares of the city.

Open spaces became more important as urban public space became increasingly privatised in the early part of the nineteenth century. This process of privatisation was partly the product of a general increase in land prices consequent on urban economic expansion. In some cities, including Manchester, the inflation of land values was exacerbated by the tendency of a few large landlords to withhold land for development, or collude with others to keep prices artificially high. In Glasgow landlord syndicates operated as late as 1903. The inevitable consequence was that land development was intensive leaving little scope for the municipal authorities created after the 1835 Municipal Corporations Act to develop central parks and gardens. However the privatisation of public space was also encouraged by the new municipal authorities, which increasingly sought to restrict the more unruly aspects of urban popular culture, from street football to public fairs. The governance of urban public space became a feature of urban social regulation. Even radical politicians conspired in the regulation of crowd behaviour and mass sociability. While early reformers celebrated the open air meeting place, often located away from the town, as a location of freedom, by the second half of the century many of the most important mass public meetings were held indoors in newly-built public arenas, with admission by ticket only. Even St Peter’s Field, the sacred site of the Peterloo massacre, was built upon and turned into a public hall.

---

16 T. Wyke, *A hall for all seasons: A history of the Free Trade Hall* (Manchester, 1996). The privatisation of the controversial site has now been rendered complete with its conversion into a hotel.
Where new public spaces were created they were often focused on a narrow definition of the public. While eighteenth-century coffee houses and taverns were open to all, many of the cultural institutions of the early nineteenth used fees, memberships and subscriptions as barriers to entry.\textsuperscript{17} The Royal Institutions of Liverpool and Manchester were effectively barred to all but the upper middle class, while the new Mechanics Institutes also required membership fees that were beyond many in the ‘respectable’ working class. Even churches could operate exclusive policies. Expectations of respectable dress were often cited as a reason for working class reluctance to attend city centre churches while in some cases pew rents provided a formal system of exclusion. However, even where there were no formal systems of exclusion the nature of middle class culture could often impose social limits on an individual’s access to the cultural resources of supposedly public spaces. Gunn’s recent study has demonstrated just how complex the nuances of Victorian culture were and the selectivity inherent in the patterns of civic associational life.\textsuperscript{18} Outdoor activity and association thus provided one of the few universal experiences of urban social interaction. Yet even here this interaction could be limited. In the suburbs the middle classes constructed physical barriers to limit access to their private estates.\textsuperscript{19} In the cities commercial pleasure gardens controlled entrance to those who could pay.\textsuperscript{20}

The public parks movement of the mid-nineteenth century went some way to creating new and universal social spaces. Supported by important legislative changes, such as the Town Improvement Clauses Act 1847 and the Public Health Act 1848, voluntary bodies and corporations worked to create new green lungs in the industrial cities.\textsuperscript{21} However in most cases these new parks were located on the outskirts of the urban core, using undeveloped land on the edge of major industrial suburbs. By the mid-1850s

\textsuperscript{17} P. Clark, \textit{English clubs and societies} (Cambridge, 1996).

\textsuperscript{18} S. Gunn, \textit{The public culture of the Victorian middle class: Ritual and authority in the English industrial city 1840–1914} (Manchester, 2000).

\textsuperscript{19} See, for example, Victoria Park, Manchester. M. Spiers, \textit{Victoria Park, Manchester} (Manchester, 1976).


Manchester was ringed with public parks, from Peel Park in Salford to Philip's Park near Harpurhey, yet there was no green space of any appreciable size in the urban core.22 The only park located within a mile and a half of the city centre was Whitworth Park and this, the gift of the legatees of engineer Joseph Whitworth, was not opened until the 1880s. Yet many clearly craved a universal space in the centre of the city, where all classes could mingle, associate and, of course, spend their increased leisure time in 'rational' and 'self-improving ways'.23 The new cultural institutions of the second half of the nineteenth century provided the spaces for new forms of leisure and social regulation. Art galleries and museums could provide carefully regulated locations for collective improvement, 'free' social interaction and visual education.24 Free libraries, similarly, provided public spaces of recreation and association and were, in some cases, even interpreted as a form of 'winter park'.25 Even the great town halls of Victorian England were rhetorically constructed as 'people's halls', although here restrictions on access and regulation of behaviour were even more obvious than elsewhere.26 Only in the streets and squares of the city was there a relative absence of formal constraints. Public squares, in particular, could be appropriated by all classes and for many uses. They were the province of the street-hawker and the beggar, the socialist agitator and the royal parade.

Of course, it was often the patterns of land use around the perimeter of a square that defined its primary character and purpose. With local planning in its infancy, city governments often made only limited attempts to regulate commercial development of strategic sites. The fragmented nature of urban

property-holding meant that the streets and squares of a city were characteristic more of historical accidents and market forces than a reigning liberal moral order of progress and Benthamite rationalism, although this moral order could be important. For example, despite the permanent presence of temperance reformers and religious moralists, ale houses and 'low' theatres abounded throughout the Victorian urban landscape. While liberal local government did seek to rationalise and reorder the city through street improvements, water provision, public lighting, sewer construction, market regulations and public health measures, these improvements were incremental and rarely changed the fundamental characteristics of a street or district. Rarely did local government action result in commercial activity being concentrated in a particular area, an area of poor housing being gentrified or a substantial industry relocating. The basic street plan and traffic flow through cities was seldom changed dramatically, even after the coming of the railways and the massive expansion of vehicular traffic. Before 1850 there were no new streets of any significance constructed in central London and no systematic attempts at traffic regulation. In Manchester some large-scale new street construction was attempted, such as the laying of Corporation Street in the 1840s. However this tended to be associated with relatively localised redevelopment or specific commercial pressures. For example, the development of cotton distribution district south of Piccadilly saw the construction of Whitworth Street to provide a new link to the major railway stations.

A few urban corporations did attempt large-scale reconstruction plans of parts of their city centres, sometimes in conjunction with private bodies, such as railway companies. Where this happened, the sites concerned often became symbolic of a city’s progress and its broader cultural identity. The redevelopment of Liverpool city centre around the grand St George’s Hall is one example of this process, with new municipal buildings such as art galleries and public libraries being constructed around a grand central square alongside high-class private clubs and hotels. Such developments inevitably reinforced Liverpool’s self identity as a centre of high commerce and high culture, of sophisticated merchant princes.

striving to emulate their Florentine predecessors. The reconstruction of Birmingham city centre by Chamberlain is an example of an even more ambitious project with a new town hall, library and art gallery being incorporated into a broad plan of civic reconstruction. The Birmingham schemes not only memorialised ideas of cultural progress but also specifically Liberal notions of civic responsibility and paternalism, with the Chamberlain family becoming synonymous with the city's politics. However despite the dramatic transformations of central Liverpool and Birmingham, it would be wrong to assume these were typical of nineteenth-century cities. The notion of 'town planning' took some time to become widely accepted. The Liverpool and Birmingham schemes of civic reconstruction were famous precisely because they were rare. Most cities—even Manchester—adopted much more piecemeal plans of urban rebuilding. Even the Liverpool and Birmingham schemes were geographically very limited. In the main they were limited to the reconstruction of a central square containing the main civic buildings. Even within these squares the doctrines of the inviolability of private property ensured the transformation was rarely complete. Private business premises stood alongside the new civic buildings, ensuring the gospel of commerce could never be completely usurped even in the most prestigious locations.

Joyce and others have highlighted how civic liberalism can be understood as a series of tensions between its component privileges and rights. Nowhere is this more obvious than in regulation of strategic open spaces such as public squares. Just as private property rights often existed in tension with civic improvement, the moral regulation of space existed in tension with traditional rights of free association. One might argue that rights of free association were always much more powerful following the Peterloo atrocity. Although, in the short term, the massacre may have encouraged radicals to hold meetings outside urban areas, the right of free assembly in the city was to become a central tenet of urban liberalism, celebrated, of course, by the construction of the Free Trade Hall itself. The power of tradition was often important with

30 G. Cherry, Town planning in Britain since 1900 (Oxford, 1996), pp. 1–42.
key open spaces often becoming arenas of expression and protest. In London Hyde Park became not merely a location but a symbol for free speech. On a smaller scale, in Manchester, Stevenson Square became the classic location for working class orators, from the earliest Chartists in the early nineteenth century to the Independent Labour Party and Communists a century later. Similarly Manchester’s Piccadilly had its own traditions that had to be reconciled with any plans for future redevelopment.

The early history of Manchester’s Piccadilly Square

Analysis of the historical development of urban open space is essential for an understanding of subsequent debates about its use and organisation. Manchester’s Piccadilly Square was always a problematic space. The site had varied historical associations and had developed in a piecemeal fashion, as a multi-functional space for all classes of Manchester’s population. In 1776 the site was little more than a field at the end of a country road to Stockport and London. On one side of the road lay Manchester Infirmary, which was to remain on the site in various guises for almost a century and a half. On the other was Lever Hall, the home of Sir Ashton Lever, a dignified black and white structure fronted by a garden with trees. Until 1774 Lever Hall had been home to one of the most distinguished natural history collections in the country, attracting visitors from around Britain. However after the removal of the collection to London, the impressive Hall was rented out for a number of uses, including a coach house and a place of lively entertainment in the form of the White Bear Hotel.

Much of the land around the site was still in the hands of the manorial landlords, the Mosley family, who leased the land on which the infirmary was built. Indeed it was the Mosleys who effectively created the area as a place of public resort. The conditions of the lease required the infirmary to retain the land for free access by burgesses forever. Thus in front of the infirmary a large pond was laid out, made from an old watering hole, with railed off walkways

34 *Gentleman’s Magazine*, May 1773, p. 219.
for promenading. Manorial influence also shaped the rapid development of land around Piccadilly. The Mosley family were keen to ensure the development of the area as a high-class residential district. The process of gentrification was assisted, in 1812, by the renaming of the area, formerly called Lever’s Row, as Piccadilly, after, of course, the London square of the same name.36 Soon new high-class cultural institutions graduated to the area, including the Portico Library and the Royal Manchester Institution in nearby Mosley Street.37 The celebrated portrait painter Daniel Orme lived at 40 Piccadilly for a time, while the musician James Bennett gave lessons from a house that stood at the corner of Port Street. The streets around Piccadilly also attracted the town’s leading citizens, with Oldham Street becoming home to the famous radical printer Abel Heywood and Dale Street becoming the favoured residence of the engineer James Nasmyth and mathematician James Wolfen­den.38

The pressures of urban expansion soon, however, placed the high-class residential district under threat. Indeed, almost from its inception Piccadilly represented the classic ‘contested’ urban space. Its status as a large well-maintained square meant that it was always a place of ‘official’ demonstrations, marches and rallies. The military volunteer movement, for example, used the square for recruitment on several occasions, most notably in 1777 during the American War of Independence and in 1803 in the war against Napoleon.39 The most important pressures were, however, commercial. Piccadilly lay on a key through route from the London and Stockport road to Market Street and the Manchester Exchange. Road improvements between 1820 and 1832, notably the widening of Market Street, further increased the popularity of Piccadilly as a through route, with Piccadilly itself becoming a key commercial gateway to Manchester.40 Hotels and public houses soon proliferated

36 Swindells, Manchester streets, p. 65.
38 Swindells, Manchester streets, pp. 129, 145.
39 Swindells, Manchester streets, pp. 85–90.
40 W. A. Shaw, Manchester old and new (London, 1894), vol. 1, p. 23.
around the square to cope with a range of commercial travellers. Some, such as the Queen’s Hotel in Portland Place, developed from grand town houses that had previously occupied the site.41 Some were even patronised by aristocratic visitors such as the Earl of Derby, who made the Albion Inn his residence during his annual visit to the town.42 However the majority were ‘low’ commercial hotels and inns aimed at the increasing number of trade visitors to the city. The White Bear became a centre of popular entertainment, while others became coaching inns, with daily coaches provided to London and major provincial cities. The establishment of the travel inns marked the start of the square’s development as a major public transport interchange. By mid-century Piccadilly was the terminal point of the most important rail link to London, serving London Road station and the giant Ancoats goods yard. Thirty years later it became the central tram and horse bus terminal, a place from where almost any destination in Manchester could be reached.43 Even the urban topography around the square was changing with large cotton warehouses testifying to the city’s development as a major storage, transport and distribution centre.

The commercial development of the area had a disastrous impact on the status of Piccadilly as a quiet residential district. Grand houses were gradually replaced by piecemeal commercial development and growing amounts of commercial traffic thronged the square. By mid-century the area had ceased to be a residential district and the high class residential facilities associated with this form of land use—such as the Manchester Spa Baths—also disappeared. Cultural institutions such as the Royal Manchester Institution, Athenaeum and Portico remained, although they were now physically overwhelmed by the warehouses and offices that surrounded them.

Fairbairn’s plans—from classical dream to commercial decline

Many were uncomfortable with these developments. Discussion with Lord Francis Egerton and James Nasmyth encouraged prominent engineer William Fairbairn to produce a plan for the complete reconstruction of the Piccadilly site. For Fairbairn the gateway to

41 Proctor, Memorials, pp. 79–85.
42 Swindells, Manchester streets, p. 99.
Fairbairn’s 1836 plan for the reconstruction of the square, viewed from Market Street. Courtesy of Manchester Archives and Local Studies.
Manchester should reflect an image of the city which highlighted its prosperity and cultural achievements. For Fairbairn it was essential that ‘Manchester, as the first commercial, and certainly the first manufacturing city in the world, should present an appearance equal to its wealth and importance’. Fairbairn’s plans were for a grand classical square. The Royal Infirmary had recently been improved with a large classical portico and there were already plans to erect statues in the square to a number of national and local worthies, including James Watt, the Duke of Bridgewater and Richard Arkwright—men who represented the technical and commercial progress for which Manchester was increasingly celebrated. For a neoclassicist like Fairbairn the symmetry and formal lines of Greek architecture would be the perfect complement to the fluidity, life and movement seen in the new statues. A curved crescent would face the Royal Infirmary at the Lever and Oldham Street end, the public baths would be reconstructed in classical form and the corner of Market Street and Mosley Street, the gateway to the city, would be reserved for a new Exchange, or possibly a new public university. This would be a large pantheon style building which would become the focal point of the reconstruction plan. However, perhaps aware that many would view this type of architecture as unsuitable for a commercial Manchester, Nasmyth also produced elaborate schemes to apply classical principles to beautify factory building and warehouses. Within such schemes smoke would be carried underground, eventually emerging in large central chimneys, disguised as grand classical columns and located at focal points within the street topography.

The failure of Fairbairn’s plans for Piccadilly probably lay in their ambition and the fact they did not acknowledge that the area had already developed into a largely commercial district by this time. Although his schemes attempted to reconcile classicism with the needs of industry, efforts to emulate the crescents of London and Bath seemed ill at ease with plans for classical chimneys spewing smoke over nearby inhabitants. The area was in transition and the wealthy inhabitants had already disappeared to the suburbs. It was unclear what authority would oversee the plans. The manorial authorities showed little interest and the Improvement Commis-

sioners, who had overseen extensive street improvements, were
being replaced by a new corporation. The powers of the new
‘reformed’ corporation were untested and the local Tories spent
almost a decade attempting to dissolve the new corporation by
overturning its charter. Even if the new corporation had enjoyed
undisputed power in the city, the costs of the Piccadilly scheme
would have been prohibitive. Fairbairn estimated the total cost to be
£250,000 but as urban land values were rising very rapidly it is likely
that the true figure would have been much higher. The proposals
would also, of course, require an Act of Parliament and there would
almost certainly have been a large degree of opposition from the
many businesses affected. The experience of the Market Street
reconstruction had shown that large-scale reconstruction generated
very large reparation costs and there is no reason to think that the
Piccadilly scheme would have been any less expensive.

Improvements to Piccadilly were, therefore, gradual and incre­
mental. Fountains were provided in the Royal Infirmary grounds to
mark the Jubilee procession of Queen Victoria in 1851. The success
of this event encouraged the corporation to make further improve­
ments to the square. An Esplanade was laid out and the first
monuments started to appear in the square. On 11 October 1853,
William Gladstone, then Chancellor of the Exchequer, inaugurated
an impressive monument to Peel. Three years later private sub­
scribers financed a grand statue of the Duke of Wellington. Smaller
statues of Dr John Dalton and James Watt followed. However, by
this time Piccadilly had ceased to be the main centre of middle-class
perambulation and contemplative leisure. Despite attempts to
protect the character of the area it had become a bustling area
frequented by those of all classes. The middle class had fled to St
Anne’s Square, next to the commercial heart of the city. In the early
part of the century St Anne’s Square had been known simply as
Acre’s Field and had been home to the boisterous Acre’s Fair.
However, following the opening of the new Exchange building on
the site in 1806, the area had attracted high-class shops and
businesses, keen to win the custom of the city’s leading tradesmen
and their families. It was the place to witness ‘ladies and gentlemen

46 P. Whitaker, ‘The growth of Liberal organisation in Manchester from the
eighteen-sixties to 1903’ (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Manchester, 1956)
pp. 211–12.
47 Fairbairn, Observations, pp. 26–27.
promenating quietly and doing their shopping' visiting places such as Hunts and Roskills, the celebrated jewellers, Cheshire and Parsons, the silk merchants and the fashionable footwear retailer, G. D. Wimpory. The art galleries of Agnew & Co. and Grundy and Smith also moved to the edge of the square and soon became the 'favourite resorts for the elite and people of artistic tastes'. Later the development of the grand Victorian Barton Arcade, leading onto Deansgate, further secured the Square's reputation as the district of leisurely middle-class shopping—one safely distant from the hustle and bustle of Market Street and Piccadilly.

The functional decline of Piccadilly as an elegant public square continued in the second half of the nineteenth century. The decision of the city fathers to build the city's new town hall to the south of the city centre, in a new purpose-built Albert Square, rather than utilise the already congested district of Piccadilly, meant that official business of the city could by-pass Piccadilly altogether. The city's urban elites could pass between the seat of city government, the commercial exchange and the middle class shopping district without passing through Piccadilly at all. When the city council began new public buildings, the Piccadilly district was largely forgotten. The new public free library opened in the rising banking quarter of King Street. The new fire and police station was constructed at the end of Whitworth Street, a new road developed to improve access between the east and west of the city centre. When a university for Manchester was developed it was located not in Piccadilly, as Fairbairn had suggested, but out in the suburbs on Oxford Road. Moreover the opening of the city's Central railway station, just to the south of Albert Square, meant that Piccadilly's status as a gateway to London was under threat. Of course, part of the reason for public bodies not building in Piccadilly was the fact that land values in Piccadilly remained high. Yet in some respects the physical fabric of the square improved in the second half of the nineteenth century. Piccadilly was commercially important as a mass retail centre and a transport exchange. The growth of grand warehouses on Portland Street to the south of Piccadilly testified to

---

50 A pattern that largely survives today, despite the recent opening of a McDonald's in St Anne's Square!
the area’s rapid growth as a major distribution district for the cotton trade. Indeed it was the growth of this district that was to revive the fortunes of Piccadilly. This warehouse quarter was physically isolated from the traditional commercial heart of the city around the Exchange. Traders faced a lengthy walk from their premises in the Portland Street, Whitworth Street and the Ancoats district to their ‘market place’ in the Exchange. It was this distance, and the drabness of much of the Piccadilly area, that brought increasing calls for the Exchange to relocate and for Piccadilly be restored to a position of prominence in the city’s urban topography.

**Plans for a public art gallery**

Many, however, favoured the development of the Piccadilly site as a centre of culture, rather than commerce. Following the success of the 1857 Manchester Art Treasures Exhibition there were a number of plans to develop a public art gallery for the city. A 1860 scheme for a new city art gallery, funded primarily by private capital, came to nothing following the near economic collapse of the region during the cotton famine. After 1860 the Royal Manchester Institution was never in a financial position to contemplate the development of a new gallery of its own, concentrating instead on the gradual development of its own small permanent collection, as funds allowed. By the 1870s Manchester’s civic leaders, aware of the success of the Walker Art Gallery in Liverpool, began to formulate new plans for a gallery in their city and eventually concluded an agreement to take over the premises of the Royal Manchester Institution for use as a permanent gallery.

As part of this takeover, the corporation agreed to spend £2,000 per annum on works of art for a period of twenty years. This boosted the permanent collection and persuaded some private citizens to donate their own works for public display. It also, however, revealed the inadequacy of the current gallery, which found it almost impossible to provide space of its permanent collection and for its prestigious annual exhibition. Initially plans were composed for a new art gallery building on Deansgate, to be erected on council-owned land and to be dedicated primarily to the annual exhibition. This site would have been close to the middle-class district of St Anne’s Square, private galleries on Deansgate and Albert Square and the town hall. The RMI, concerned that their old Mosley Street
headquarters would be downgraded, favoured the construction of a new gallery behind the old one. They argued that this would be much more cost effective than a new, entirely separate, gallery some distance from Mosley Street.\textsuperscript{51} Councillors agreed and the proposal failed to gain approval.\textsuperscript{52} It was clear that having agreed an annual endowment of £2,000, the corporation was reluctant to fund an entirely new municipal gallery—especially as the Whitworth gallery was being developed privately. Manchester did not have a civic leader prepared to drive the plans forward by force of personality and position, unlike nearby Liverpool where Philip Rathbone provided an important directional force.\textsuperscript{53} However the council’s Art Gallery Committee had a powerful ally in the middle class press. Both Conservative and Liberal papers criticised the continuing lack of progress and began to look in desperation for private patrons. The \textit{Manchester Courier} lamented that the city did not have a Walker like Liverpool for ‘The best work of the year goes naturally to the place where it is best exhibited, and Liverpool and Glasgow are preferred to Manchester.’\textsuperscript{54} Meanwhile the \textit{Manchester Guardian} observed a failure of public spirit. C. J. Pooley again went to press railing against ‘a want of pride of citizenship in Manchester’ and noting that it was ‘a most extraordinary thing, having regard to the number of patrons in Manchester and the neighbourhood, that so little help had been afforded to the Art Gallery.’\textsuperscript{55}

It was the purchase by the city council of the disused Manchester Royal Infirmary, at Piccadilly, that raised hopes for the development of a new gallery. The site had primarily been purchased to effect street and public health improvement, but the library and Art Gallery Committees saw the site as a possible location for future expansion.\textsuperscript{56} The unveiling of Onslow Ford’s memorial sculpture of

\textsuperscript{51} Minutes, Royal Manchester Institution Council General Meetings (hereafter RMI Council General), 26 Oct. 1891.
\textsuperscript{52} For discussion, see Manchester City News (hereafter City News) 22 Feb. 1890; RMI Council General, 12 May 1890.
\textsuperscript{54} Manchester Courier (hereafter Courier), 24 Oct. 1895.
\textsuperscript{55} RMI Council General, 23 Oct. 1895, Manchester Guardian (hereafter Guardian) undated cutting
\textsuperscript{56} Manchester City Council Art Gallery Committee minutes (hereafter Art Gallery Committee), vol. 7, 14 Nov. 1904.
Queen Victoria outside the infirmary marked the beginning of corporation attempts to improve and redevelop the entire area. Yet from the start members of Manchester’s art community were divided on whether the dream of a magnificent new gallery at Piccadilly was a realistic option. The Manchester Academy, frustrated at the constant postponing of plans for a new gallery were cautious and hoped that the city council would, in the first instance at least, find a way of constructing a temporary extension to the current gallery on Mosley Street. The city Art Gallery Committee established a special sub-committee to discuss various proposals. Eventually they came out in strong support of the infirmary site, concluding that any extension of the present building could not satisfy future requirements, although they also recognised that a new gallery could only be a long-term project. Consequently, in order to protect the annual exhibition they agreed to investigate the construction of a temporary extension at the back of the Mosley Street building on George Street. Unfortunately the city architect, Henry Price, was decidedly unimpressed by the sub-committee’s plans, arguing that the proposals could not be implemented without interfering with the light of the neighbouring Atheneum building and buildings on the other side of George Street. The proposed extension would also have been very expensive—particularly as it would have involved the construction of a tunnel over Back George Street. Faced with such an unfavourable report the sub-committee was forced to drop extension proposals and concentrated instead on investigating how newly acquired Heaton Hall, in north Manchester, could be used as a temporary overflow gallery.

Despite this setback the Art Gallery Committee was determined to pursue its interest in the infirmary site. As the Libraries Committee also favoured the infirmary site for expansion, thoughts naturally turned to how a completely new art gallery and central library could be developed jointly and the two committees came together in a powerful alliance to press for the redevelopment of the infirmary. In 1905 the Art Gallery Committee commenced what was in effect a grand tour of many of the major British and northern European art galleries, assembling a large amount of data for its own plans for a

58 Art Gallery Committee, 23 Feb. 1905.
59 Art Gallery Committee, 30 Mar. 1905.
60 Art Gallery Committee, 29 June 1905.
new Manchester gallery.\textsuperscript{61} The published report indicates just how ambitious the Art Gallery Committee was—it intended to establish a gallery that could bear comparison with the best provincial galleries in Europe.\textsuperscript{62} The tour took in, amongst others, the Royal and Municipal museums in Brussels, the Royal Museum of Fine Arts and the Planti-Moretus museum in Antwerp, the Municipal and Rijks Museum in Amsterdam, together with the major museums and art galleries in Hamburg, Berlin, Dresden, Munich, Frankfurt, Cologne and Lille. Just about the only major northern European city left off the itinerary was Paris—but that was simply because members of the committee were already familiar with the museums and galleries there.

The main conclusion from the tour was that Manchester’s collecting policy was too parochial and narrowly-focused, a view shared by many later critics.\textsuperscript{63} A new gallery would allow for development of a genuinely international collection that could match those of other European cities.\textsuperscript{64} The Manchester deputation sought inspiration from overseas in the design of the new gallery building. There was strong opposition amongst the committee to lofty rooms, with those galleries with lower rooms, such as the Kaiser Frederich Museum at Berlin and the Kelvingrove Galleries at Glasgow preferred. Great importance was attached to placing the gallery in an isolated location, to protect against fire and to ensure good light—hence the suitability of the Piccadilly site. However not all lessons from continental galleries were deemed to be relevant to Manchester. When German practice advised against the use of south aspects to protect paintings from over exposure, the delegation commented, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, ‘It may be doubted whether the Manchester rooms will be troubled with too much sunlight’.\textsuperscript{65}

Although the delegation’s report was accepted progress on the infirmary site was slow. The land in Piccadilly was commercially valuable and once the street improvements had been completed,

\textsuperscript{61} City News, 6 Jan. 1906.
\textsuperscript{62} Report to the City Council of visits to certain art galleries and museums in Belgium, Holland, Germany and Great Britain (Manchester, 1905) in Art Gallery Committee, 21 Dec. 1905.
\textsuperscript{63} Brindley, "Soul, p. 166.
\textsuperscript{64} Report to the City Council of visits, pp. 16–17.
\textsuperscript{65} Report to the City Council of visits, p. 16.
could have been re-sold for commercial use. Moreover, the Manchester Exchange building, the commercial heart of the city, was increasingly overcrowded and some looked to the Piccadilly site as an excellent area for re-location.66 These competing claims on the site prompted a number of prominent art lovers to try to mobilise public support for the Art Gallery Committee’s proposals. A conference was called by members of the corporation with the intention of starting a ‘Society of Friends of Art’—supposedly based on the models of the National Art Collections Fund and the Societe des Amis Louvre, although the Manchester organisation clearly had an explicitly political function. It was effectively a broad coalition of those interested in promoting visual art including J. D. Milne of the Whitworth, Elias Bancroft, honorary secretary of the Manchester Academy, Councillor T. Marr from the Ancoats Art Museum, E. W. Marshall from the RMI, and representatives from the Athenaeum Graphic Club.67 Membership was thrown open to all, with a relatively low five shillings per annum membership fee. Significantly, radical Liberal councillor Walter Butterworth, newly recruited chair of the Art Gallery Committee, took on its leadership.68 The Society under Butterworth aimed to be ‘a far more democratic organisation’ than other art bodies and to include the ‘mass of the people’.69 However, it succeeded in mobilising only limited support, attracting just 194 members. After just fifteen months of work Butterworth wound the organisation up, suggesting that members simply become governors of the RMI. Although the Society had begun with great potential, the dream of forming a genuinely democratic body to press the cause of public art had disappeared in a wave of apathy.70

The RMI, however, continued to be a powerful voice in promoting public art galleries. In the early months of 1907 it took the initiative and called upon the Art Gallery Committee to organise a public meeting and begin a city-wide debate on the new gallery. The Committee, somewhat embarrassed, declined.71 The RMI refused to

67 Courier, 15 July 1906.
68 ‘Manchester and Salford Society of Friends of Art’ circular in Manchester Academy cuttings, vol. 1904–12, Manchester City Art Galleries.
69 City News, 2 May 1908.
70 City News, 2 May 1908.
71 Art Gallery Committee, vol. 8, 30 May 1907.
leave the matter there and instead went ahead and organised their own meeting, inviting representatives from all major art bodies in Manchester. Supporters of a major new gallery, such as Professor Boyd Dawkins from Victoria University, were keen to emphasise that the gallery was not a mere middle-class fad. Instead it was a ‘a democratic question’ essential to promote the educational opportunities of the ‘toilers and the workers’.72 Similarly, social reformers such as T. C. Horsfall emphasised that it ‘would enable them to do what was urgently necessary to raise the low level of life in the town’ and in particular provide alternative forms of recreation to gambling.73 Cultural light would be shone into an area of social decline. However the public meeting only highlighted the fact that public opinion was very divided on the project. F. W. Cooper, the city auditor, condemned the ‘Apostles of Extravagance’ who advocated expensive prestige projects simply so that the town could compete ‘for the medal of importance’ with other towns such as Liverpool.74 Even the vice-chancellor of the University, Alfred Hopkinson, opposed the Piccadilly development, condemning the high rates as ‘a dreadful burden on the most deserving class of people’ and arguing that, in any case, open space was more valuable.75

The nature of the art gallery debate

Public debate revealed that there was a growing scepticism as to the didactic value of a new gallery. Although some social reformers such as T. C. Horsfall continued to view galleries as vital tools for social progress, others were becoming much more sceptical that heavy expenditure on art really was a very effective way of addressing Manchester’s undoubted social problems. Even some of Horsfall’s early supporters, such as Rev. W. A. Connor, had grown sceptical about the efficacy of art in tackling ignorance and social injustice.76 Similarly, the Manchester City News, widely regarded as the city’s

73 RMI Council Proceedings, 24 July 1907, Guardian cutting.
74 City News, 20 July 1907.
75 RMI Council Proceedings, 24 July 1907, Guardian cutting.
leading newspaper for artistic comment, was not convinced that didactic arguments held much weight:

we require convincing that the rough of Angel Meadow [a slum area] is to be transmogrified into a creature of ethereal beauty by looking at an Art Palace, or, in some very remote instance, by being induced to enter it. Art has its educational and ameliorative influence and its elevating power, but Art does not stand alone, nor will men be redeemed by Art and nothing else.\textsuperscript{77}

Working-class organisations showed little interest in the development of a new art gallery at Piccadilly and some were strictly opposed. Manchester Independent Labour Party spent much of 1909 and 1910 calling for a vigorous policy of school improvements and housing reform. In August 1909 the central branch made it clear that they would resist any more spending on the infirmary site until local elementary schools were brought up to the standards required by the Board of Education.\textsuperscript{78} At a time of high unemployment the building of a new art gallery seemed, to the ILP, at best an irrelevance and at worst a costly extravagance.

It was also questionable whether a city centre location would, in any case, be the most suitable place for a new art institution. While grand city centre locations typified many of the major galleries of Europe, this pattern was by no means universal.\textsuperscript{79} Even in the North West of England, parkland galleries were popular and some, such as the Royal Museum in Salford, attracted a very substantial number of visitors.\textsuperscript{80} Moreover, critics were questioning whether a single large centralised gallery really was the best way to deliver art to the people. Increasingly planners began to explore ways in which art could be brought closer to local communities. Branch libraries had been remarkably successful and some advocated the development of more branch art galleries, or at least the use of public halls for temporary local exhibitions.\textsuperscript{81} Horsfall’s own Ancoats Art Museum demonstrated what could be achieved for relatively

\textsuperscript{77} City News, 27 July 1907.
\textsuperscript{78} Minutes, Manchester Independent Labour Party, Manchester Central Branch, 1 Aug. 1909, Manchester Central Library, M42/1/1.
\textsuperscript{79} J. Pedro Lorente, Cathedrals of urban modernity: The first museums of contemporary art (Aldershot, 1998), pp. 15–47.
\textsuperscript{80} B. Mullen, The Royal Museum and Libraries, Salford: Their inception and development (Salford, 1899).
\textsuperscript{81} See, for example, letter from ‘Artisan’, City News, 14 Mar. 1908.
modest cost. Moreover the city centre was not a particularly pleasant place to study art. Some went as far to say that air pollution was so bad that major cultural institutions such as libraries and art galleries should not be located in city centres at all, but rather in open space in the suburbs. The success of the Whitworth gallery and the new gallery in Heaton Park suggested that utilising a city centre location could be a backward step.

Even if the infirmary site was to be adopted, there was still the question as to whether the existing building should be modified for library and art gallery use, or whether a completely new building should be constructed at greater cost. This issue became a central point of controversy in a local council by-election in December 1907, highlighting just how sensitive the cost of the proposed new art gallery was. The issue also divided the press. The *Manchester City News* did much to mobilise support for the retention of the original building. In July it gave over many column inches to proposals by Councillor T. Cook for a conversion programme. Despite the fact that the corporation's architect opposed conversion, Cook drew up plans which appeared to show the building could be modified at much less cost than developing an entirely new gallery. The infirmary would gain a new roof to allow for the toplighting of the upper floor, which would become the art gallery. The lower level would then be adopted for library purposes. In all the scheme would have allowed for sixteen new galleries to be built, giving 2,865 yards of wall space, compared to 1,736 in the Mosley Street gallery. The individual galleries would have been between thirty and nineteen feet wide and around eighteen feet high. While the *Manchester City News* was in favour of adapting the infirmary, the Liberal *Manchester Guardian*, in contrast, was outspoken in support of the construction of an entirely new gallery and launched hostile attacks on their own Liberal by-election candidate John Percy, who opposed a new building in his election manifesto. Despite protests from the

84 *Guardian*, 16 Dec. 1907.
85 *City News*, 6 July 1907.
86 *City News*, 13 July 1907.
87 *Guardian*, 12 Dec. 1907.
A high level view of Piccadilly, c. 1910, shortly before the demolition of the Infirmary, showing the blackened state of the major buildings. Courtesy of Manchester Archives and Local Studies.
local Liberal association in Rusholme, C. P. Scott, the Guardian editor, refused to restrain his criticism and condemned Percy's 'perverse attitude on the Infirmary site question'. The controversy demonstrated the strength of feeling that existed and how leading politicians placed the issue above party loyalties.

Meanwhile the annual exhibition, once an advertisement for Manchester's cultural achievements and highlight of the city's social calendar, was in terminal decline. With the permanent collection taking over most of the gallery, there was little temporary exhibition space for the annual exhibition and leading artists were increasingly reluctant to send their works of Manchester. The 1908 exhibition condemned as 'half-hearted and mediocre' representing 'only the second-class work of painters—like the second pick of the season's novels at a circulating library'. This criticism may have been a little harsh—the exhibition still attracted major 'named' artists such as Sir Hubert Von Herkomer, Sir Luke Fildes and Alfred East—but there was now no doubt that the Manchester modern exhibition had fallen a long way behind that of major municipalities.

Following vitriolic public criticism the committee was forced to rethink its plans for the coming year. With no immediate prospect of more exhibition space it was decided to abandon the open exhibition format completely. Instead the committee decided to concentrate efforts on organising a small, well-hung display of a select number of specially invited artists. This decision was practically forced on the committee by lack of exhibition space but there was, in any case, increasing doubt as to whether large-scale general exhibitions—often watered-down replicas of the Royal Academy—really achieved any useful purpose. Thus the 'huge bazaars' of the past were replaced by an exhibition of the works of just four modern artists. Inevitably not all were impressed by the change and accused the Art Gallery Committee of simply becoming dealers—'middlemen for the sale of a few London artists' second-rate works'. The experiment was continued, although the following year eleven artists were invited to contribute works. The most basic problem, though,

88 See letter from W. Bailey and editor's comment, Guardian, 16 Dec. 1907.
89 The Liberal defeat was probably more due to a Catholic rebellion on the education question. See Guardian, 19 Dec. 1907.
90 Guardian, 12 Sept. 1908.
91 Guardian, 8 Sept. 1909.
remained. Exhibition space was limited, enthusiasm was low and sales were disappointing. Falls in exhibition sales were not unique to Manchester and were, to some degree, a product of changing fashions. Experience showed that purchasing Royal Academy works from provincial exhibitions was not always a sound investment. Artists tended to blame the motor car craze for absorbing more of the leisure expenditure of the middle class, while taking families away from their homes and picture collections. However by this time Manchester had already obtained a particularly bad reputation as a market for pictures, the critic of the Manchester City News noting that the 'beggarly returns of sales from our public exhibitions is heartbreaking'.

Members of the Art Gallery Committee continued to believe that the only way to reverse the downward trend and restore Manchester's reputation as an art centre was to develop a completely new venue for exhibitions in a prestigious location. Continuing controversy over high rates made the construction of a completely new gallery politically impossible and so, by 1909, the Committee turned its attention to plans for the reconstruction of the infirmary building. The plans drawn up allowed for 3,800 square feet for the exhibition of pictures and 1,500 square feet for sculpture galleries, together with space for the display of prints, textiles, furniture and other miscellaneous works. There was also to be a library and a museum collection of antiquities, portraits and plans, formed in conjunction with the Lancashire and Cheshire Antiquarian Society. The basic design of the interior would follow that seen at Aberdeen—with a central sculpture court, arcaded with a balcony, surrounded by thematic galleries. Yet once more the council was concerned about the costs of the project and forced the Committee to reduce proposed gallery floor space by almost 10%. This meant a significant reduction in space for textiles, furniture and library facilities and the elimination of separate space for the Egyptian, Assyrian and Mycenaean collection.

96 City News, 16 Feb. 1911.
97 Art Gallery Committee, 28 Jan. 1909.
If the cuts in the planned gallery were not bad enough, several councillors began to look to reduce the overall budget to the Art Gallery Committee. Somewhat perversely it was reasoned that, as the Art Gallery Committee was continually complaining that it had insufficient exhibition space, it should not make any further picture purchases until a new gallery was completed. By this time, of course, the Art Gallery Committee’s legal obligation to spend £2,000 on pictures per annum had expired. Astonishingly, at a particularly rancorous meeting, a proposal to completely abolish the picture purchasing budget was passed, albeit by only one vote. Walter Butterworth and the Art Gallery Committee were naturally appalled and considered resigning, but fortunately agreed to stay and fight for the restoration of the grant. The decision to cut the grant was, of course, potentially disastrous for the art galleries in Manchester. Unless the corporation made purchases at its annual modern sales exhibitions, it was clear that private patronage would not sustain them—even in their much-reduced form. It was also clear that collectors would only make donations to Manchester if the city authorities were perceived to be taking art collecting seriously. Indeed Butterworth claimed that several collectors who had already contributed works threatened to cancel gifts or bequests unless the council changed its policy. The charge that pictures were being bought that would never be seen by the public was also somewhat unfair—in fact almost all of the permanent collection was on display in some form, either at the Queen’s Park museum, Heaton Hall, the School of Art, branch libraries or other public institutions. Standing orders of the council meant that the decision over the Committee’s budget could not be reconsidered for six months—effectively paralysing the Committee. Fortunately Butterworth’s arguments were eventually accepted and the grant restored by a two-thirds majority.

The Art Gallery Committee continued to try to keep the new gallery development on the political agenda, but public opinion seemed, at best, largely indifferent. When a poll was taken in the local press on how to best utilise the infirmary site, the most popular choice was for a new Royal Exchange, the second most favoured option was for open space, while the option of an art gallery and

99 City News, 2 July 1910.
100 Art Gallery Committee, 8 June 1910.
library was only the fifth most popular choice. The overall results seemed to suggest that the traditional characterisation of Manchester as a city that placed commerce ahead of the arts was not entirely unfair. Yet there were problems with the movement of the Exchange to Piccadilly. The original leasehold agreement of the Piccadilly limited the size of building on the site. In practice this meant that any new Exchange on the Piccadilly site could be no larger than the one already in operation. The directors of the Exchange took some time to agree to the move and, such was the emotional attachment to the St Anne’s area, many traders were reluctant to move to the increasing run-down Piccadilly district, whatever the practical advantages might have been.

Moreover the lobby for a new city art gallery continued to be powerful. In the face of growing public complaints about the state of Piccadilly the corporation had to try to resolve the dispute. In September 1910 the city council, after four hours discussion, finally approved, in principle, the development of a new library and art gallery on the infirmary site. The decision seemed to take even the art gallery’s supporters by surprise. Only a few months earlier the council had abolished the Art Gallery Committee’s picture purchases budget yet was now giving outline approval for a scheme that could cost £100,000. Sadly, for the Art Gallery Committee, the decision only seemed to spur on opponents of the new library and art gallery. The retail trading community launched an immediate protest. The traders in the main shopping area of Oldham Street and Market Street naturally wanted to see the Royal Exchange locate to Piccadilly as it would have undoubtedly brought large numbers of the commercial middle class to their doors. Meanwhile it was clear that a significant proportion of Manchester’s commercial community not only wanted to see the development of a new Exchange on Piccadilly, but were hostile to what were regarded ‘luxurious schemes’ of public expenditure at a time of increasing local and national taxation. Faced with this disquiet the city council

104 Guardian, 1–6 July 1910.
105 The precise net cost would have depended on the amount generated by the sale of land in King Street occupied by the reference library.
backtracked and decided to appoint a committee of inquiry into future uses of the infirmary site. Before the committee could properly report a requisition was got up to force the mayor to call a public meeting on the question. The resultant chaotic assembly revealed just how divided public opinion was. First the art gallery and library scheme was rejected, and then the plans for an Exchange. Finally it was decided that the site should remain open and not built upon for the following five years.

Walter Butterworth accused opponents of packing the inquiry, but his own high profile support for the new art gallery all but ended his political career. In November 1912 he lost his seat on the city council after being rejected by his Newton Heath ward—a defeat in which the art gallery question was a significant factor. This meant, of course, that he also not only lost the chairmanship of the Art Gallery Committee, but his seat on it too. Such was Butterworth’s standing that the Victoria University took the politically contentious risk of nominating him as their representative to the Art Gallery Committee the following year. The Committee even tried to elect him as their deputy chairman, despite his defeat at the polls, but Butterworth, perhaps anticipating criticism, declined to take this position. The art gallery cause was effectively lost and its most passionate advocate politically humiliated. By 1913 even art lovers admitted that the city’s public had yet to develop a ‘proper passion for art’ and that it might take a further half-century before public opinion would countenance the building of major new gallery. In fact it would not be until 2002 that a new purpose-built gallery extension would be opened, more than a century after the extension to the Mosley Street gallery was originally planned.

108 *City News*, 11 Nov. 1911.
109 *Daily Despatch*, 27 Nov. 1912.
110 See letter from Alfred A. Barlow, *Daily Despatch*, 11 Nov. 1912.
111 *Daily Despatch*, 18 Nov. 1912.
112 See editorial comment, *City News*, 12 Apr. 1913.
113 Although the city council did take over the former Manchester Athenaeum buildings for use as temporary gallery space.
Despite Manchester being the capital of probably the richest industrial region of the country, the RMI and the city art gallery failed to find a private sponsor. This may partly have been down to ill fortune—had Whitworth died a decade earlier his vast wealth may have been used to revive the RMI. It is likely, however, that there was a wide expectation that the city council would become a generous patron of art itself, especially after it agreed to an annual purchase fund of £2,000. However this expectation was not realised. Part of the reason for Manchester’s apparent parsimony was the growing annual rate bill brought about by major capital projects such as the Thirlmere water scheme. Yet this can form only part of the explanation as rising rates were a feature of most late nineteenth century cities.

The Manchester city art gallery authorities found that it was all but impossible to reconcile the interests of contrasting visions of social and cultural improvement. The leaders of Manchester city council feared that expenditure on art was perceived by its electorate as a luxury. Labour and socialist councillors opposed the scheme outright, arguing that it could not be justified at a time of recession and high unemployment. The didactic argument for public art galleries, so popular in the mid-nineteenth century, had been replaced by a certain scepticism about what institutions could actually achieve. While veteran social reformers such as T. C. Horsfall continued to believe in the regenerative value of art, others were less convinced as the belief in ‘art for art’s sake’ gained currency. Moreover if art did have a social reforming task, it was not at all clear that this was best achieved through the erection of lavish and expensive city centre galleries to hold exhibitions which would be primarily be attended by the middle class. Small-scale community based schemes, such as Horsfall’s own Ancoats Art Museum or the Queen’s Park Museum, seemed much more effective at attracting working class visitors, especially when combined with programmes of elementary education.

Perhaps attitudes may have changed if wealthy art patrons in the Manchester region had themselves spoken out more strongly in favour of the development of a public gallery. However this class was not known for its enthusiasm for the increasing collectivist public

114 The Thirlmere scheme almost bankrupted the Corporation in the late 1870s.
expenditure of the Edwardian era—indeed this was the period when many of the upper urban middle class were believed to have finally abandoned Liberalism for the fiscal economy of Conservatism.\textsuperscript{115} Only a small proportion of Manchester’s economic elite ever patronised the RMI or the city art gallery beyond paying an annual subscription or attending an occasional exhibition. While Manchester’s wealthier citizens were prepared to come forward with large sums to support large-scale prestigious events, such as the Manchester Art Treasures and Jubilee Exhibitions, this was often done as much because of personal ambition, civic pride and patriotic duty as because of a love of art. While prestigious public events easily attracted support, there was only limited private support available for the day-to-day operations of the major art institutions that represented the ‘bread and butter’ of artistic life in the city.

The reasons for the relative failure of Manchester’s middle class to support plans for a new city gallery were complex. In the 1860s it spent almost £1m on a magnificent town hall. Fifty years later rising rates and public cynicism meant that prestigious new developments had become symbols of corporate extravagance. The city’s artistic leaders were unable to challenge this view, perhaps fearing that they would suffer the same fate as the courageous, but ultimately unsuccessful Walter Butterworth. Robert Crozier and H. C. Whaite, successive presidents of the Manchester Academy, were universally respected as artists but were regarded as lacking the business tact and self-assertiveness necessary to represent the Manchester art community effectively.\textsuperscript{116} Councillor Charles Rowley, an outspoken supporter of the social benefits of visual art, was a somewhat difficult character who was denied an opportunity to stand for parliament because of his crotchety reputation.\textsuperscript{117} One may, of course, have expected some of the city’s leading entrepreneurs to have taken a lead. However it is clear that for many, ties with the city itself were lessening. The process of suburbanisation in Manchester began relatively early—with the development of private estates such as Victoria Park from the 1820s—and by the end of the

\textsuperscript{116} \textit{City News}, 22 Feb. 1913.
\textsuperscript{117} Letter, C. Rowley to C. P. Scott, 6 Dec. 1889, in C. P. Scott Correspondence, 118/134, John Rylands University Library of Manchester.
An Edwardian view of Piccadilly, looking toward Market Street, illustrating the congested nature of the district. Courtesy of Manchester Archives and Local Studies.
century few leading Manchester businessmen lived close to the city centre. Even those who continued to patronise Manchester art often spent little time in the city. For some, such as William Agnew, business and political success took them increasingly to the capital. For others, such as Manchester Guardian proprietor J. E. Taylor, retirement meant a move to the south coast. Even T. C. Horsfall spent much of his life residing in Macclesfield.

The historical development of Manchester’s city squares reflected the changes taking place in the wider city. The economic reorientation of Manchester and its growth as a major distribution centre saw the development of a warehouse quarter that fundamentally changed the character of the city’s leading residential district and with it, Piccadilly. Once a place of genteel promenading, Piccadilly soon became a busy multi-functional site—a centre of mass retailing and popular entertainment and a transport interchange. The middle classes moved on to colonize the area around the commercial heart of the city, the Exchange and St Anne’s Square, making this the higher-class shopping district. Piccadilly became a place of urban congestion and social decay. It was not surprising then that the city authorities sought to build their new town hall in a new square on a south-south-west axis that would obviate the need to travel through Market Street and Piccadilly when moving between the city’s seat of government and seat of commerce. Piccadilly became something of an embarrassment and successive attempts to ‘gentrify’ the area failed. By the time Fairbairn’s plans were brought forward the city centre had lost most of its residential middle class and thus few had a vested interest in promoting social improvements in this part of the city.

Edwardian schemes for Piccadilly reflected contrasting beliefs about the sort of civic life city corporations should attempt to foster. Many clearly felt that with the closure of the old Royal Infirmary, Piccadilly needed to be revived for reasons of civic prestige. The declining reputation of Manchester as an art centre, consequent on the near collapse of the annual Manchester exhibition, naturally encouraged some to try to secure the site as a centre of art and literary education. However, there was a tendency for the

118 Retailing is often indicative of patterns of social improvement. See, for example, J. Stobart, ‘Shopping streets as social space: Leisure, consumerism and improvement in an eighteenth century county town’, Urban History, 25 (1998), pp. 3–21.
public to see lavish plans as crude attempts to compete with other cities like Liverpool. Thus promoters of such schemes had to emphasise the popular and democratic benefits that would accrue. Such developments would not only promote the civic image but have a genuine educational impact on the citizenry. Yet at a time of rising rates and high unemployment many remained unconvinced. For many Manchester was, first and foremost, a commercial city and the needs of the commercial and trading community should come first. It was not surprising, then, that the Exchange should compete for the Piccadilly site—to be the jewel in the crown of the new city development.

Ruskin famously remarked that high art and tall chimneys were incompatible. The Piccadilly question showed that in Manchester, at least, the interests of art and commerce could be difficult to reconcile in the building of a new civic image. In some respects the history of Piccadilly is a history of planning failure. For a controversial development to be successful some level of consensus was required; yet in practice the highly public and relatively democratic nature of the planning process only served to reveal how polarised opinion really was. A city council under attack from all sides chose the easiest solution—to make no long-term plans.\textsuperscript{119} Thus Manchester's Piccadilly district made little contribution to the city's urban image. Of course, squares and buildings are only one aspect of a city's urban identity. Economic characteristics are crucially important and Wilson's recent work on Liverpool has shown how significant learned societies can be in transforming the image of a city.\textsuperscript{120} Since the eighteenth century, the development of the city's social life had reflected differences between those who viewed Liverpool as a commercial city and those who emphasised its cultural attributes.\textsuperscript{121}

Yet the urban morphology of a city, and particularly that of its key central districts, was also important in the formation, expression and transmission of urban identity. Conflict between different images of a city lay behind many urban development plans of the period, including those in London, where the development of

\textsuperscript{119} Some temporary buildings were constructed on the site to house a circulating library.

\textsuperscript{120} Wilson, 'Cultural identity'.

Regent Street saw conflicts between defenders of the city’s traditional aristocratic landscape and the promoters of mass retailing. In Manchester the conflict was equally intense. This was partly because the loss of the infirmary left a vacuum in an area with little identity. Broader debates about what sort of city Manchester should be could be focused on this relatively vacant space. However, the shape and location of the area under dispute was important too. Piccadilly represented a square at the city’s gate, a crossroads between retail, banking and working class districts. It was a central place where the city put itself on display. While squares can be rallying points and spaces of civic unity, they can also be relatively unordered places where groups congregate to display their differences. By leaving the site as open land a relatively consensual space could be maintained, one that refused to submit to partisan narratives of gentrification, culture or commerce.

Attempts to impose order, regulation and function on emotionally important multi-faceted urban spaces that have emerged largely as a result of market forces, naturally provoke a counter-reaction from users of the space. In the case of Piccadilly this was in the form of a debate about what sort of city Manchester should be—a city of culture and social improvement or a city of commerce. Elsewhere the two visions could be reconciled. Around the city grand warehouses stood alongside civic buildings. However in the symbolically powerful and finite central space that was Piccadilly, there was only room for one building and one vision of Manchester. The case of Piccadilly highlights how difficult it was for local government to build consensus and command authority at a time of growing cynicism about prestigious and expensive municipal projects. Manchester was a complex and pluralistic city where traditions of public debate remained strong and where there was a relatively high level of popular engagement in civic politics. The mobilisation of popular opinion and the use of that tool of ancient Athenian democracy—the ‘town’s meeting’—could wreck the most carefully planned project. Edwardian Manchester was still a city where a mass meeting of ratepayers could overthrow the most powerful civic lobbies.

Today's campaigners against the commercial development of public open space may wish that they too had similar resources at their command.

Acknowledgements

The images reproduced in this article are all held by Manchester Archives and Local Studies, Central Library, St Peter's Square, Manchester, and I am very grateful to the staff of the library for providing them.