

Pomona for the people?

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We should be imagining the present, not the future, in our public spaces.



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There's a small window of time, at early evening in the right weather conditions in the late-English summer, where swimming in the sea feels like swimming in the clouds. Sunset and skyline become one with sea and surface. Your hand movements cause the molten pinks, reds and oranges to ripple, enveloping your body entirely in the place and moment.

Visiting Pomona feels like visiting the sea, it is a place where the landscape and senses unite. It has a vividness, of colour, of smell, of place. On the Manchester side, it is possible to lose yourself in the ragged, rampant expanse of greenery that is the Pomona promontory, saturated in colour and almost psychedelic, yet confined as an island by the linear Bridgewater Canal. There's a tangible link to local psychedelic pop heritage here too, with the Mock Turtles releasing the Pomona EP early in their career.

Yet the *Manchester Evening News* recently reported a campaign calling on Manchester City Council to reject a bid to build on Pomona island, a former dockland that is now home to teeming wildlife. Controversial developer Peel want to build 160 apartments there, and a further 2,000 homes could follow: "Hundreds of shops, offices, apartments and a hotel", could soon be built by Peel around Cornbrook Station. The town hall has issued compulsory purchase orders to the three last businesses

in the way, as resistance to the Pomona bid continues.

We have more to say about Peel in this series, but what we want to explore here is the automatic neoliberal approach to any 'empty' city space: build flats, shops, hotels and car parks. Pomona is not 'empty', it is full of life, and not the living dead of 24-7 shopping and work. Much of what we have to say here is about the death of the imagination.

We argue that we should actually stop 'demanding the impossible', specifically the futurology of urban forecasting, and return the 'relevance' of city life from the past and future to the present. We argue that this kind of futurology on autopilot dovetails with the hedging and risk of finance capital, and that at least some spaces in the city should be left relatively open. Not lawless or dangerous, but in process, and 'of the people', of evolving nature and everyday hybridity, and definitely not a park of any kind, either.

Of course, our example is the island of Pomona, part of the emerging 'Northern Powerhouse' vision by default.

Nations and Wealth of Cities

The Nations and Wealth of Cities project inaugurated a new phase in UK public policy, laid out in a publication by two men, both confusingly called Greg Clark. One was the government minister for cities, the other a World Bank and OECD figure. The remit was steep. Researchers were asked to try to predict what cities might look like in 2040 and 2065.

We want to argue here that this kind of 'futuresology' is barely disguised shamanism. The detailed answers the researchers were supposed to give around how cities will look in 2040 and 2065 would have been stillborn, even if they could have left their mouths in the first place.

Greg Clark was both MP for Tunbridge Wells and minister for cities, something that stands as a cipher for a Conservative government that is always essentially suburban.

Michael Heseltine attended the launch of the Nations and Wealth of Cities project too. His enthusiasm for the regeneration of Liverpool when facing economic disaster is well known. The old Garden Festival sites, which Heseltine and staff created as a response to inner city rioting in and around 1981, ghosted this project. There are clear lines through time from these projects to the English riots in 2011.

The old Garden Festival sites were essentially ideological sticking plasters on a country being bloodily forced to re-emerge from a dying industrialism, and in this there are parallels to the Northern Powerhouse, with Manchester linked to 'Silk Road 2.0', to stitch it into China's ethically skewed global-infrastructural space.

The launch of new garden cities in Britain was suggested at one Foresight writer's workshop. It seemed a real and tangible possibility. But we don't want Pomona to become this either. We want to suggest that, rather than try to predict the future through 'science' and 'policy', we might access our resources of art, poetry and making to 're-imagine' the present, rather than predict the future.

We are not arguing that we might access these resources 'instead', because we actually don't think the line between them is a very significant one: predicting what cities will look like in 2065, however well-informed, is always already a kind of imagining.

Greg Clarke, minister for cities, suggested that to the concept of a 'foresight unit', we might need to add a 'hindsight unit', although a lot of the more naive left are already fulfilling this role. What we actually need is a 'unit of the present', by which we mean people actively working on and in the moment, and trying to understand what its 'units' are, epistemologically, and in terms of city spaces.

Translated into a practical example, this could mean making Pomona a more open space to be curated

by the multicultural citizens of Manchester.

We want to advise that 'futurology' might be taken up as a challenge. But by every citizen, not just the privileged actors of state, capital and local governance. Rather than ask it to provide 'facts' or 'answers' – or future disclaimers – we want to ask it to give us a richer, more open, imaginary approach to urbanism and global cities in 'the now'. Because the one place where the future actually exists is in the mind, and the district of 'the future', in the mind, is the imagination.

Nick Dunn is also trying to do this. At a Future of Cities writers' workshop he presented findings from a goldmine of urban 'futurity'. Images from the past which try to imagine the future, in order to give us more creative nourishment. Images which might become fact, once transformed.

Our inevitable utopia

Here lies the idea of 'Utopia', not in the sense of Thomas More's strange, semi-parodic, sinister moral text, but as a place which we have no choice but to move towards, in light of various potential crises, of climate, ecology, mobility, infrastructure and politics.

Late in summer, you can return from Pomona with crimson hands, tubs filled with juicy, sweet-sharp blackberries and fingers streaked with purple juice, a ritual more often associated with the rural idylls of the English countryside. On the Salford side, a long wall shimmers with the lurid gloss paint of constantly changing graffiti, an industrial remnant reborn as a giant, collaborative artwork contributed to by the almost constant presence of local young people. They fill the air not just with aerosol but an atmosphere of intense, serious concentration. Pomona already suggests its own future, but like a wayward adolescent, it will doubtless be 'corrected' by patrician capital and neoconservative state. Those people see spaces such as these as sites of global infrastructural potential, particularly in relation to the 'Powerhouse' of China.

Robert Galeta explores ancient Greek poetry to investigate its key role in its communities. Galeta is a translator of the philosopher Gilles Deleuze, but also a scholar of ancient Greek poetry. He asks us to explore our 'symbolic resources of art and poetry' to ask how we might reinvest in new city places (not 'spaces') psychologically, in ways that draw on cultural tools – art and poetry – in relation to hybrid citizenship, identity and belonging, in order to re-invigorate them. Galeta asks for what he calls 'a relevant city'.

He explains how the 'relevant' comes from something Richard Rogers said when he gave a presentation of the Lloyds building project, at the Royal Institute of British Architects in London, 1980. He said 'there has been a lot of talk about postmodernism', but 'I thought to be modern meant to be relevant, and I don't see how you can get post-relevant.' Galeta goes on to explain that, for our purposes, the meaning of 'relevant' has to be re-thought again. He is of course also playing on the current neoliberal sense of fiscal 'realism'.

Galeta explains how at one time it was the poets, not the technicians, who would lay out cities. In the 8th century BC certain Greek cities sent out colonists to found new cities in southern Italy and Marseille. Perhaps because of over-population, or to protect trade routes, it isn't fully known. So they sent out, say, six or seven ships with families. But they sent a poet with these ships, who would lay out the topography of the city. He would speak or sing its layout, thus validating and authorising it. Because the poet, for these communities, had a special relationship with the gods. The first line of Homer's Iliad, 'Menin aeide thea', 'Sing to me Goddess of the wrath of Achilles', is a typical imbrication of divine authority already inside the poet's poem. The cities of Chalcis and Corinth and others wanted the new cities to be autonomous, so they had to be authorised in this way by a poet's voice.

The idea of making cities more autonomous is part of the Foresight policy re-think, but it isn't 'real' autonomy, in the sense of new migrants singing new city spaces into life. Galeta's insight into Bradford's long troubling failure to regenerate itself colour his thinking. He suggests that there are

currently limits to contemporary neoliberal responses to city spaces, place-making, communities and governance. Galeta suggests that the technicity of human science discourses may actually be a hindrance to them addressing any potential alternative urbanisms. He was involved for several years around the millennium with an arts group in Bradford involved in debates about regeneration, from the ground-up, which went nowhere.

The basic pragmatism of science's 'technicity' often shapes, and therefore proscribes and limits, its eventual outcomes. Galeta describes how his input at regeneration meetings, with councillors and other city players, were very often rebuffed with 'you don't understand', and the apparently decisively authoritative phrase 'Be realistic'.

At which point we must invoke Lacan and his three-part model of the condition of subjectivity, the imaginary, the symbolic and the Real. The point is that the radical gap between symbolic language and the Real cannot be pre-validated by a call to 'realism' as if we know what that is.

To planners and politicians it seems nothing more than a financial consideration, not even as substantial as a properly economic one. To perhaps trigger Lacan again, the 'real' question, it seems to us, is how do we initiate new urban projects with this kind of 'originary' moment? How do we do this 'initiating' in a way that is also hooked up to the need to think through the potential catastrophes of climate change and other dystopian scenarios, which were also being sensed at the writer's workshop? And so Pomona.

The Future of Cities project, it seems to us, was in its early stages located somewhere in this impossible to validate beforehand gap, but along with the assumption that some of us might know where 'the gap' was. We didn't and never will. It was fakely pre-validated. We were asked to predict 2040 and 2065 via our respective 'scientific' disciplines, something that actually asks, we think, for an explicit move away from science discourses, and into the imaginary.

What is 'relevant' for the city in 2015?

Yet we all kept our best science poses up, and our ties on, for most of the day. We need to continue to respond to urban environments that are characterised by incredible difference. How might we do this, and what is 'relevant' for the city in 2015? What kind of imaginary and poetics are needed? How might we create a kind of 'harmonious form' that is open and inclusive, but which also doesn't conceal the core issues of urban life, food, policing, governance, education, under total naive abstraction?

What we can't do here is invoke 'the poets' in a romantic sense, after Wordsworth, as the keepers of great metaphysical depth, or channels of powerful emotion. In the same way, we can't return to the Husserlian philosopher who retreats from the world to return with great truths. We can't return to a supposedly neutral, fakely cold science discourse either, which routinely excludes feeling, the body, anger and love from its discourses. But neither, we want to argue, can we tolerate the opened-out ultra-relative narratives of postmodernity any longer, which only make sense now when placed against earlier economic prosperity bubbles in the west. Put more simply, postmodernity is all surface, and floating over these surfaces is a privilege for the salaried.

Bruno Latour, via Peter Sloterdijk, describes modernity as containing a core drive of 'emancipation', and argues that we need to move beyond that, into a situation of 'attachment', to the ecology, to each other. So how do we create 'attachment' in cities and processes of identity, citizenship and belonging, via our resources of art and poetry? It is clear to us that the Peel investment in Pomona is about the 'emancipation' of the ladder climbers, and not attachment.

Fredric Jameson's work on Utopia describes how particular works can be 'utopian gestures' producing 'a whole new Utopian realm of the senses', within a physical space that he describes as a 'semiautonomous space in its own right.' Adorno was very keen on this in art. Because of course what can no longer happen – ever – is recourse to representational strategies that assume a 'national

character' in some thin, patronising sense. It strikes us very strongly at this point that we need to return to art and poetry that does not directly 'describe'. Because to describe is to designate and to nominate, and to do either of these things is to exclude. We need an open poetics of place that is not so abstracted that it conceals contemporary interconnected forms of urban life, but one that critically enlivens its processes.

We also have to acknowledge that thin, market-led versions of these kinds of processes are already happening. Gary Warnaby argues that the city square, 'through its role as an urban node', can form 'an urban place product'. He urges for 'the creation of a genius loci', a 'spirit of the place', which 'can be capitalised on for place marketing purposes.' The example he deploys is St Ann's Square in Manchester, where regular events incorporate spectacles to draw in consumers, Jazz bands, French and German markets, with all the symbolism of middle class taste and cosmopolitanism.

Yet in St Ann's Square, in Manchester, this summer, it was possible to see people sipping Prosecco by the tents of the homeless who were about to be aggressively cleared out. Paul Watt describes what 'regeneration' actually means to low-income tenants and youth. He offers further evidence that "for a month of 'festivities and goodwill' in London, the price for the winning Olympic city appears to be 'displacement'". In Manchester city centre tents are now illegal, but they are more illegal for some than others.

The Polish-American artist Krzysztof Wodiczko imagines a house where the past and future live together. Wodiczko explained that the citizens of this place "would need to learn to function as a nomad sophist in a migrant polis, providing new language tools", as a practitioner of democracy in this place "called 'public'", which is "politically guaranteed but effectively non-existent, because empty". For Wodiczko, "the new sophist, like his counterpart in ancient Greece", must "recreate an agora or forum every time he or she wishes to speak or listen." In a democracy, "the most important right is that of representation."

This is where we must begin, essentially at the Lefebvrian "right to the city". We don't need to predict the future of cities, in 2040 and 2065, we need to make it shape itself into the forms necessary for what remains of a 'good life' in the face of a series of deep, continuing crises. And that means recalibrating our relationship with 'techne' and 'poesis', but it also means recalibrating the class of those doing the 'place-making' in cities. Urban policymaking needs to shift away from a 'futurology' that mines the past to impossibly try to predict the future.

We need to return to 'utopia' via a need for much more open and inclusive representational strategies. Many of the symbolic and communicational resources are in place to do this, but they are currently being used in fundamentally provincial ways. Previously excluded classes can be engaged and enlivened via imaginary urban and representational processes.

Pomona is already a process. Pomona is a part of the city where sensory experience is heightened, where it is impossible not to feel aware of the landscape and environment around you. Through its abandoned roads and paths to long-ago demolished places that no longer exist, which are often busy with dog walkers, joggers, cyclists, and couples out for a romantic wander. It is also one of the rare spaces where the city opens out to allow space for calm, silence, stillness and reflection. But it could be so much more. It needs to be sung into existence, inaugurated as a series of agoras, or situations.

Manchester and the sea

Though ostensibly landlocked, Pomona is a striking reminder that, through the Manchester Ship Canal, the city forged links to the sea at the Mersey Estuary, near Liverpool, some forty miles to the West, at the height of its nineteenth century industrial ambition. It is part of something much bigger than the highly populated and enclosed areas around it, national and global networks and histories of trades, cultures, transport and commerce.

This link to the sea is apparent in the flow of the water and its blue-green-grey sheen, which, unlike the brown murkiness of the nearby Bridgewater Canal, holds up a mirror to the Mancunian skies. It takes on the sunset colours in the evening, and ominous bruised charcoals in stormy weather, as heavy clouds engorge before breaking apart to pour down on the city. The smell which pervades Pomona, too, is muddy, earthy and metallic, linking the Ship Canal to somewhere more open, more basic, or more natural, a place far beyond the arterial roads, high-rise blocks and semi-detached rows of the city and its suburbs.

One of the most striking views in Manchester can be found at the green-painted Woden Street footbridge, which links inner city Manchester, Hulme, and Pomona on one side of the ship canal with inner-city Salford, Ordsall, on the other. Behind you, the river Irwell winds its way towards Manchester city centre. Ahead of you is a regenerated Salford Quays. Here, it is now possible to swim outdoors in a large, deep and cold pool of inky blackness created in a cleaned-up dock.

This type of open-water swimming, around a 300-metre course with the city life of trams and cars going on above you, is a feat of physical and mental endurance that can't help but remind you of the tiny size of humans in comparison with the scale of the docks and the ships which once docked there. Looking into the distance from the bridge, the postmodern architecture of the Quays dissolves into a barely discernible haze, as the Ship Canal embarks on its long journey to meet the sea. You could be just about anywhere, not a stone's throw from the centre of a major city. Pomona could be so much more than even this, yet Peel and Manchester City Council want it to be so much less.

Pomona, we argue should remain a space of open process, policed, but not tightly curated, sung into being, but not by any one single ego or doxa. There are resources in place to draw on already, the Centre For Urban and Community Research's 'Urban Biotopes' project, and Chantal Mouffe's text *Agonistics*. However, we might distill all this complexity into a series of slogans: Hands off Pomona Peel! Pomona for the new People's Agora!

But sadly, Fat Cats always arrive with Fat Chance.

POSTSCRIPT: As this article goes live, announcements are being made, that Pomona will be turned into a space for private housing and consumer amenities.

This article is part of our [Northern Powerhouse series](#) with Manchester Left Writers.