

Rowland Byass

## From public garden to corporate plaza: Piccadilly Gardens and the new civic landscape

This essay is an appraisal of a major recent public space redevelopment, seven years after completion. The redevelopment of Piccadilly Gardens forms part of a regeneration masterplan that has reshaped the urban core of this great former industrial city. Based on observation of the Gardens and the way that people use its spaces, it characterises the design language and experiential qualities of the place. The Gardens' aesthetic qualities – in particular the use of a 'motif' geometry designed to be viewed from above and in reproduced images – relate to the policies that informed the space's redesign. These policies represent an attempt to reinvigorate central Manchester by fashioning it as a marketable location for business, leisure and consumerism – a 'world class', 'twenty-four-hour city'. As a major part of the regeneration of central Manchester, the new Gardens have been a success in economic terms – but this has been achieved by an approach that privileges strategic planning priorities over human-scaled design ones. The space now forms an extension of the surrounding urban commercial districts, but this connectivity has brought about the loss of the space as a bounded, contemplative retreat from the city – a 'garden' in the original sense of the word.

*Urban regeneration / urban planning and design / public space / postmodernity / aesthetics / ideology*

### Introduction

Piccadilly Gardens is the largest public space in central Manchester. Strategically located between the city's business, shopping and entertainment districts, it is a gateway to Manchester for rail travellers arriving in the city at Piccadilly station, and the terminus of bus and tram routes from outlying suburbs.

The Gardens were redeveloped between 2001–2002 as part of a larger masterplan for the regeneration of central Manchester. On completion, the scheme attracted awards and publicity for Manchester, winning the Landscape Institute's 2002 Public Design Award and the Prime Minister's Better Public Building Award. In the words of the Landscape Institute's judges, it "drag[ged] British landscape design kicking and screaming into the twentieth century."<sup>[1]</sup> The scheme's inclusion in the landmark 2005 *Groundswell* exhibition of international landscape architecture at New York's Museum of Modern Art was cited by Manchester City Council as evidence of the city's renewed 'world class' status.<sup>[2]</sup>

### The old Gardens

The site has been a focal point for the city since the eighteenth century, when the Manchester Royal Infirmary was established on the former site of 'Daub holes' – sources of clay for the medieval city's wattle and daub buildings. In the nineteenth century, the Infirmary overlooked a broad space for promenading along Piccadilly. The Infirmary was demolished in 1910 when it outgrew its central site, leaving a large open space. In 1936 a garden of cherry trees and rose beds was created (Fig. 1). The simple garden (Fig. 2) took its form from the sunken footprint of the former Infirmary's basement. Benches lined the perimeter, facing inwards to the centre where a stone fountain set in an octagonal basin was installed in the Jubilee year of 1953. Flowering cherry trees punctuated the top of the sunken embankment, with railings and a hedge around the southern boundary. In LS Lowry's 1954 painting (Fig. 3), the neatly tended flowerbeds mirror the smartly dressed citizens to present the Gardens as an expression of Manchester's civic pride and identity. However, from the 1960s they entered a period of decline. Increasing levels of traffic isolated the Gardens from the surrounding districts, which had also declined in prosperity along with

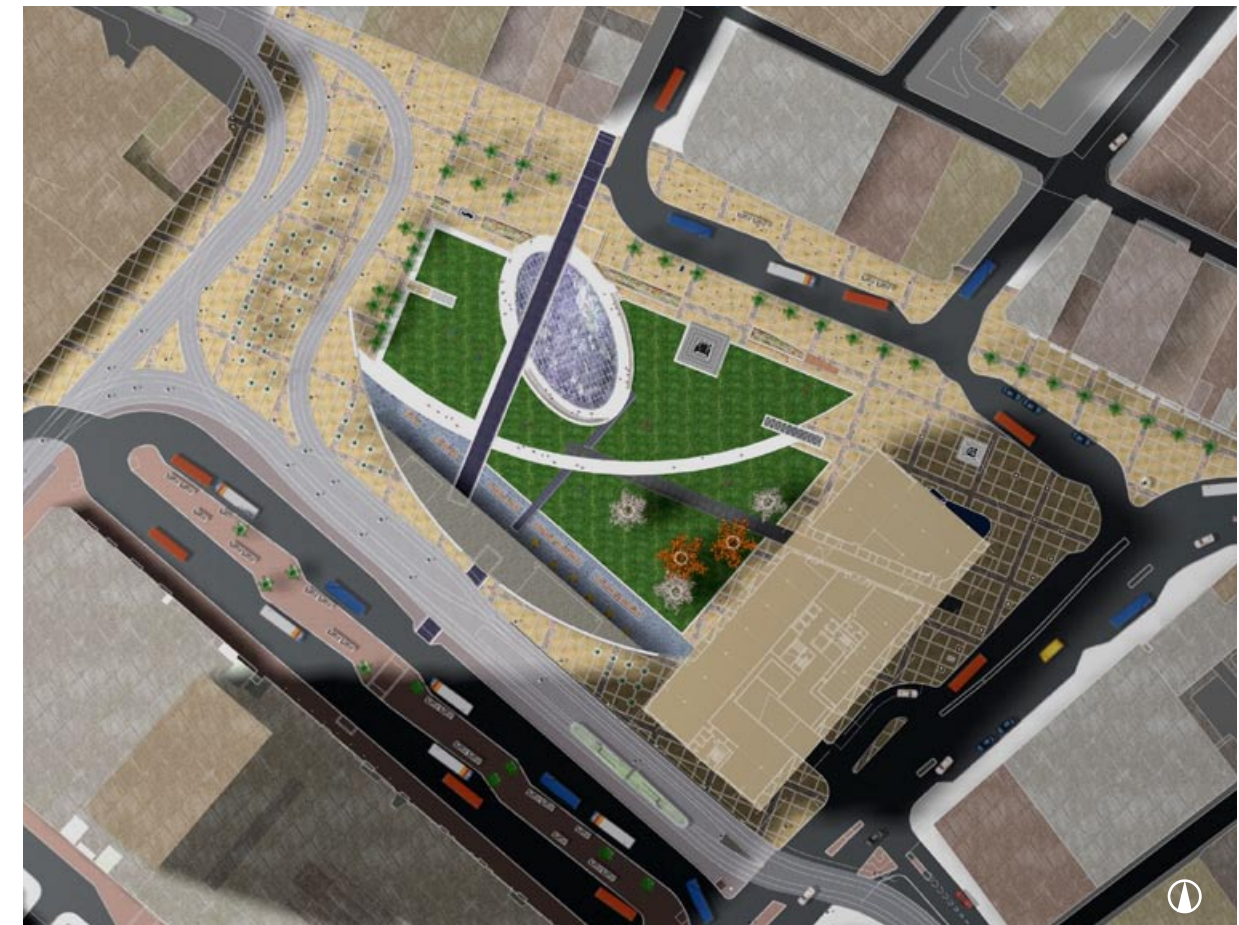


Figure 1 Rendered masterplan showing redevelopment proposals.

NAME OF THE  
OPERATION  
Piccadilly Gardens

LOCATION  
Manchester,  
United Kingdom

CONTRACTING  
AUTHORITY  
Manchester City Council

PRIME CONTRACTOR  
Designed by EDAW,  
London, UK  
in collaboration with  
Tado Ando Architects  
& Associates, Osaka,  
Japan and Chapman  
Robinson,  
Manchester, UK

CONTRACTOR  
Balfour Beatty  
STUDY PERIOD  
July–September 2008

CONSTRUCTION DATING  
2001–2002  
DIMENSIONS  
55,000 m<sup>2</sup>  
GLOBAL COST  
€ 20.7 million

Manchester's industrial base. Between 1971–1997, more than one in four jobs were lost in the City of Manchester. Problems of homelessness, alcoholism and drug abuse also became evident in the Gardens, exacerbated by its bounded spatial character and sunken central space.

In 1996, the detonation of a large IRA bomb in the centre of Manchester became a catalyst for the city centre's wholesale regeneration. This included the redevelopment of the Gardens. The city's 1997 Piccadilly Regeneration Framework called for a new civic space "befitting of a twenty-first century European Regional Centre." EDAW, who won a design competition for Manchester's post-bomb masterplan, also designed the new Gardens, which re-opened in 2002. EDAW (now part of AECOM) are a global design and planning consultancy, known for their work on large scale projects encompassing planning, urban design and landscape design.

### A walk through Piccadilly Gardens

Approaching the site from the city's main rail terminus, Piccadilly, the visitor enters the Gardens at their northeast corner (Fig. 4). From here a central flat plane of lawn, crossed by paths, unfolds. One path, surfaced in smooth sandstone, describes an arc across the lawn, orbiting a large oval fountain plaza to meet a curved *in situ* concrete wall, part of a pavilion designed by Tadao Ando along the south of the square. Straight routes, surfaced in blue Welsh slate, also cross the lawn. These straight and curved lines and shapes work to draw the eye in continuous movement through the space. Similarly, the Ando pavilion along the southern edge of the lawn is in the form of a giant funnel, designed to gather pedestrian traffic from the central Gardens and disgorge it towards the transport facilities on Parker Street. From above, the logic of all these routes is clear, but where they intersect on the ground their form seems more arbitrary (Fig. 5).



Figure 2 top Aerial view of Piccadilly Gardens

Figure 3 bottom Piccadilly Gardens, L.S. Lowry, 1954.

This central space of the gardens is bordered on all four sides by streets. To the north, Piccadilly is lined with an avenue of London planes (*Platanus x hispanica*) and a series of statues remaining from the old Gardens, punctuated by raised planting beds faced in sandstone. To the south, the Ando pavilion embraces the central space. A grid of fastigate native oaks (*Quercus robur* 'Fastigiata') set into paving makes a permeable boundary with Mosley Street to the west. Eastwards, No 1 Piccadilly looms, with bars and restaurants occupying its ground level adjoining the gardens. This seven-storey office building, designed by Allies and Morrison, stands apart from the buildings surrounding the square, inside the body of the gardens. Its construction, on what had been part of the old Gardens, helped to fund the new landscape scheme.



Figure 4 Aerial view of the redeveloped Gardens, looking from the south. Taken in 2002, this image shows No 1 Piccadilly (right) under construction.

The grid on which the oaks are arrayed forms an organising principle across the Gardens. Evident in the alignment of the sandstone paving around the square, it takes its alignment from the existing orientation of the statue of Queen Victoria – itself a legacy of the former Esplanade here. The grid extends a single surface across the disparate, irregularly shaped paved zones of the Gardens – what Peter Walker describes as “seriality – a repeating pattern which visually dominate[s] the non repetitive elements of its environment.” [3] Viewed from above, the grid achieves this. But at eye level it fragments, seeming less meaningful in smaller paved zones, particularly where they are visually separate from larger expanses.

Piccadilly Gardens is very heavily used on good days in the summer months. The highest concentrations of people seem to be along the benches lining the southern side of the lawn, around the fountain and on the western side of the lawn. This raised tablet of grass gives views west to Market Street and north to Piccadilly where the principal movement of pedestrian traffic takes place. Here, as throughout the Gardens, people locate themselves where there is something to watch – usually other people passing. The lowest concentrations are in the corner formed by the pavilion and the No 1 Piccadilly building, and in the area overlooked by No 1 Piccadilly (Figs. 5 & 6). Although No 1 Piccadilly casts some shade onto the lawn in the morning, the relatively low usage of this area continues through the day. It seems that the presence of the building itself, with its seven floors of large windows looking down onto the Gardens, does not create a sense of ease for people sitting beneath it. Although this part of the Gardens is farthest from any streets with their associated noise and traffic, it is the least attractive to people.



Figure 5 top left Path intersection in the Gardens. / Figure 6 bottom Looking across the lawn – panorama. / Figure 7 top right Bosque

It is actually the 'Bosque', situated at the far western end of the square, which offers a more attractive place to linger (Fig. 7). This zone of the Gardens is the most exposed to large volumes of pedestrian traffic and trams, but it is the only place in which one can feel relatively secluded from the surrounding buildings, thanks to the canopy formed by the oak trees. Their clear trunks and regular spacing allow visual permeability and free movement in all directions. The shelter offered by the trees, the clear ground plane and the strong urban character contrast with the agoraphobic openness of the central space and the programmed lines of movement imposed by the paths crossing the lawn.

#### The fountain plaza

The oval form of the fountain plaza mediates between the central lawn and the pedestrianised Piccadilly running alongside (Fig. 8). It consists of a large raised oval plinth faced in dark grey granite, encircled by a paved surround and seat-

ing in smooth, buff concrete. A grid of fountain jets shoot intermittently through holes in the granite plinth. The atmosphere here varies according to the weather conditions. On sunny days in the summer months children run about in the fountains as they come on and off, animating the Gardens with playfulness. Without the fountains, this is a less inviting place. The scale and monolithic surface finish of the oval plinth makes for a large, bleak expanse of grey stone.

#### Piccadilly: the Boulevard

The fountain plaza is positioned alongside Piccadilly, the principal east-west pedestrian thoroughfare across the northern side of the Gardens (Fig. 9). A series of narrow raised beds, faced in sandstone slabs, divide Piccadilly from the central lawn, with a line of plane trees providing high level enclosure. The public pavement, surfaced in the sandstone grid that extends across the Gardens, has a generous, leisurely width along its northern edge.



Figure 8 Fountain plaza from Piccadilly.

The statues – John Peel, James Watt and Queen Victoria, with Wellington at the eastern end – are, apart from a small section of low Victorian wall alongside the tram stop on the south side of the Gardens, the only surviving elements of the old Gardens. Early design proposals called for them all to be moved from the square. The awkwardness of their current siting, cluttered by the intervening raised beds, appears to be the result of a later compromise. As part of the previous esplanade they formed a definite sequence, now disrupted by the raised bed. The redevelopment of the Gardens has recontextualised these Victorian monuments: the contemporary landscape’s smoothness and lack of ornament heightens their weighty, Victorian aesthetic. From being elements within a clearly articulated narrative, they have been relegated to the status of historical props.

#### Using Piccadilly Gardens

Piccadilly Gardens is a transit point for public transport, a major node for pedestrian traffic moving through central Manchester, and a green public space offering restorative experience in the centre of a major city. It is heavily used by a range of people, the majority of them crossing the Gardens to another while moving around the city. Others use the Gardens as a destination: a place to eat lunch, meet others, and for children to play. Small and large events take place here, such as the weekly farmers’ markets along Piccadilly and an annual ice rink that occupies the square over the winter.

However, the majority of those who stop in the Gardens for any length of time seem to use it to do nothing in particular. Urban public space like this offers a chance to stop and

watch the passing show of people and events. In the contemporary city, filled with purposeful activity, the opportunity to stop and do nothing is an important respite. This ‘passive’ recreation is arguably the most important single purpose of the Gardens for its users, and the extent to which the landscape design facilitates it is a good index of its overall success. Seating is provided throughout the Gardens – but in almost every case, seats are located as islands surrounded by open space, exposing the sitters’ backs. The resulting sense of unease means that these are not seats on which one feels tempted to linger.

#### The planning and design context

If we are to account for the surface forms of the new Piccadilly Gardens, we must also understand the processes that led to its redevelopment. Like many urban regeneration schemes, the roots of Manchester’s efforts at economic and cultural revitalisation relate to a long-term process of de-industrialisation. Urban regeneration – an assortment of measures that includes financial and tax measures, social policies and the physical renewal of the city’s infrastructure by projects like the new Piccadilly Gardens – represents urban governance’s attempts to address this process. The purpose of such schemes is to stimulate investment and development by improving the desirability, property values and economic activity of their surrounding districts. Also important is their symbolic role, representing the city’s reinvention as a “post-modern, post-industrial and cosmopolitan city, standing in Europe’s ‘premier league.’”<sup>[4]</sup>



Figure 9 Along Piccadilly.



Figure 10 Sketch from the 1945 City Plan, showing the Gardens as part of a new ‘amusement centre’ (to left).

Manchester’s adoption of an entrepreneurial regeneration model, in which local political and business elites co-operated in achieving flagship redevelopment projects, dates from the late 1980s. After the defeat of the Labour Party in the 1987 General Election, the formerly socialist-dominated City Council came to accept market-based arguments about competition between cities and the role of local authorities as facilitators of investment in order to secure prosperity for their inhabitants. The city’s strategy for the regeneration of Manchester was strongly informed by this, seeking to repopulate the city centre and foster a consumer base that would support an economy of restaurants, hotels, shops and cultural venues. EDAW’s masterplan for the city centre, together with its detailed design of the Gardens, formed the means by which this strategy would be implemented.

Piccadilly Gardens have been of strategic planning importance since Manchester’s 1945 Nicholas City Plan. The Nicholas Plan envisaged the space as a pleasure garden, a “people’s place” with fountains, floodlighting and “trees festooned with coloured lights” (Fig. 10) as an adjunct to a large new building devoted to entertainment along the southern boundary. But like much of the comprehensive redevelopment of the city in the Plan, these proposals did not come to fruition. Policy towards the Gardens shifted towards more functional priorities: the provision of transport facilities and the promotion of economic activity. The large Piccadilly Plaza complex housing shops, a hotel and offices went up on the south side of the Gardens and their importance as a public transport hub increased.

By 1984 the City Centre Local Plan set the agenda for the planning objectives that eventually informed the 2002 redevelopment of the Gardens: improving accessibility, integrating public transport and structuring development in

surrounding districts as a ‘gateway site’. This emphasis on infrastructure and facilities to attract investment is also evident in the 1997 Piccadilly Regeneration Strategy. In this, the Gardens’ improvement is intended as a focal point for investment and a means of raising the city’s profile as a European Regional Centre. It calls for the creation of “quality linkages and seamless routes” between Piccadilly Station to the east and the city’s retail core to the west. It is at this point that the idea of a new building development within the site of the Gardens is first mooted.

These planning objectives in turn influenced EDAW’s 1998 Piccadilly Gardens Regeneration Outline Design Strategy. Like the firm’s masterplan for the city’s retail core, the Strategy focuses on the Gardens as a driver of economic activity, restoring the surrounding area as a “new distinct commercial quarter that is centred on, and draws character from, the Gardens.” Its other strategic objectives – refurbishing the Gardens as the city’s “premier public space”, the creation of strategic links with adjacent districts, redefining the square’s transport infrastructure, refurbishing key buildings and creating a new building in the Gardens – also relate to the planning context outlined above. A new commercial building on part of the Gardens would fund the public space redevelopment and demonstrate the city’s “commitment” to the area, thus encouraging further investment.

These shifts in planning policy towards the site through the twentieth century mirror wider changes in urban governance across the western developed world. The change from a vision of the Gardens as a “people’s place” for recreation to a “distinct urban commercial quarter” and movement hub is one manifestation of changes in the role of urban governance, from comprehensive planning and provision to the more limited provision of infrastructure and other facilities



Figure 11 Sitting on the benches in the Gardens, spring 1949.

in order to attract investment. The geographer David Harvey ascribes this shift, from ‘managerialism’ to ‘entrepreneurialism’, to the “erosion of the economic and fiscal base of many large cities in the advanced capitalist world.”[5] In Manchester’s case, this point is underscored by the necessity for a private building development on a part of the Gardens to fund the public landscape scheme.

#### Abolishing the island, engaging the edges

EDAW’s design strategy [6] emphasises the functional importance of the site as a connecting movement hub and its symbolic importance as central Manchester’s principal public space. It envisages the new Gardens as of “world class status”, communicating city’s identity as a “European regional centre”.

The perceived problems of the old Gardens are their isolation as a sunken ‘island’ surrounded by traffic, the poor quality and state of repair of the facilities, ill defined pedestrian routes and difficulty of access. In response to this, the design strategy extends the Gardens into the surrounding streets. The island is abolished, extending the usable space of the Gardens to “engage the frontages of the buildings.” Strategic north-south and east-west linkages extend across the central space to connect surrounding districts.

This design strategy is intelligible as a part of Manchester’s planning and regeneration policies, but it also contains potential conflict between the policy of ‘engaging the edges’ of the space to open it up to the city and the creation of a green space in which ‘quiet contemplation’ is possible. The proliferation of descriptions of the new Gardens in the 1999

EDAW report accompanying the planning report suggests a conceptual uncertainty as to what kind of public space this is intended to be. It is referred to variously as a “twenty-four hour park”, a “key public transport interchange”, a “City Garden”, “the essence of a European plaza” and a “square”. [7]

The major shortcoming of the design strategy is that it focuses on the Gardens’ contextual significance but neglects to consider the quality of the space itself. It consists of an ambitious list of abstract aims, conceived in the terms of strategic planning and the projection of an image of Manchester as a contemporary European city. The implicit viewpoints of these aims are those of the outsider and the expert, not the citizen and the user.

#### Interpreting the changes to the Gardens

What kind of public space has been created here? Its design language can be described readily enough: this is a functional landscape – in the designers’ words, a “movement hub” for a city centre, realised in mannered geometrical forms which make most sense when seen from above. So too, can its explicit message: the new Gardens are intended to evoke a new vision of Manchester as a specifically European city of commerce, entertainment and fashion – a park for a “twenty-four hour city”. It is a direct comparison between the old and new forms of the Gardens, however, that is most revealing.

The 1930s rose garden layout adapted the sunken landform that was a legacy of the former Infirmary building and preserved the Esplanade, the space’s most enduring historic feature. While this may have been the serendipitous result of a scarcity of resources, it maintained a sense of historical con-



Figure 12 Sitting on the City Bench, August 2008.

tinuity, representing an evolution of the site’s character that preserved the successive layers of its history. The new scheme makes a decisive break with that continuity. Only the statues (which EDAW initially proposed to remove) and a fragment of low wall in the southeastern corner of the square remain. The remaking of the Gardens contains nods to its past – the fountain plaza as an ‘echo’ of the original site of the Daub Holes, or the City bench. But this *tabula rasa* approach to the site rejects an authentic continuity in favour of a re-fashioned, fictive version of the past.

For the user, the changes to the Gardens are most tangible in the layout and orientation of seating (Figures 11 & 12). The perimeter benches lining the space of the old central garden were arranged ‘in the round’ so that their occupiers looked inwards to the centre of the garden over the flowerbeds. In form and layout they contributed to the inward-looking, bounded nature of the old Gardens and they had a communal, if somewhat regimented, character.

By contrast the new Gardens’ seating appears to cater for a more atomised, fast-moving public life. Handles along the benches create a series of distinct, defensible personal spaces.

Benches are arranged in groups scattered around the square, almost all of them located as islands surrounded by movement. This provides visibility and presumably deters undesirable behaviour such as sleeping on the benches, but the more restful character of the seating in the old Gardens has been lost.

The redevelopment of the Gardens has, as intended, increased the total pedestrian public space. Surrounding streets are no longer dominated by traffic, which must count as a significant improvement. A new zone of public space has been created around the Bosque where previously there were tramlines and roads. However, when offset against the loss of some 11% of the total area for the No 1 Piccadilly building, there has been a net increase in public space in the square of just 2%. An increase in the accessibility and quantity of public space was cited as a benefit that offset the loss of part of the old Gardens for redevelopment. This statistical increase in space masks the fact that about a quarter of the central public garden has been lost to private development, and it says nothing about the quality of the place that has been created.

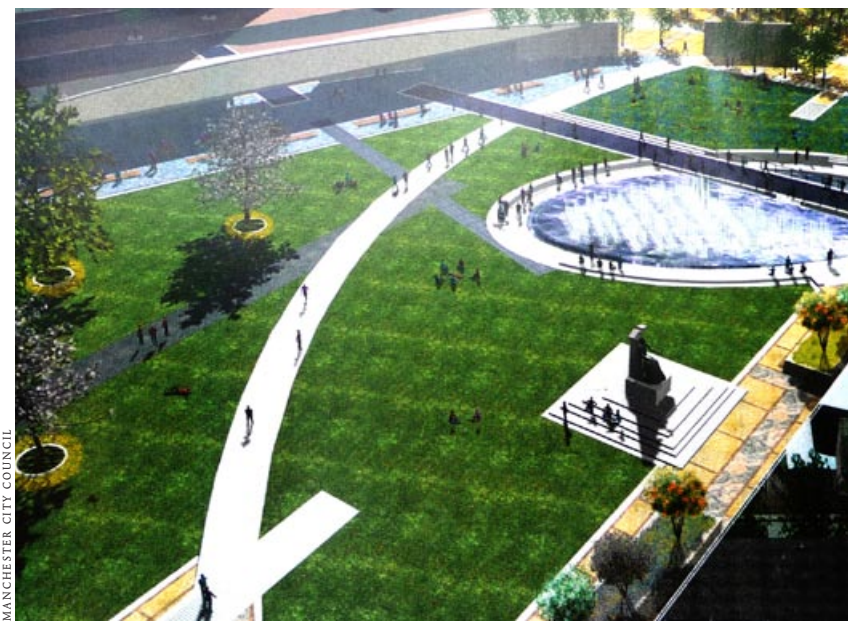


Figure 13 Detail from leaflet publicising design proposals, 1998.

Figure 14 Detail from Aerial view showing the Fountain Plaza and Catwalk with the Victoria statue at top right, 2002

### Reading the Gardens

The design language of the new Gardens is characterised by its smoothness and studied simplicity. Hard materials, with a few exceptions, are smooth sawn, deployed in grid based tiling patterns on horizontal and vertical surfaces. At eye level one's gaze passes without interruption over the ground plane. The design does not hold and contain the eye, which is drawn straight to the buildings surrounding the square with nothing to intervene. As the structural trees come to maturity over the next ten to twenty years this effect will be mitigated. But at present, the openness and permeability of the design prevents any modulation in atmosphere between different zones. Like much contemporary architecture, the Gardens' geometric forms and surfaces have something of a 'cut-out', virtual look to them. The shiny, seamless surfaces of digital design and visualisation software (Fig. 13) have transferred into the real world (Fig. 14).

This is a landscape defined by movement – an outdoor atrium that funnels a flow of people between adjoining urban districts. The abolition of the old sunken island of the Gardens has changed the nature of the Gardens fundamentally, creating a space that is an extension of the streets around it. Just as planning policies intended, a “commercial quarter that is centred on, and draws character from, the Gardens” has been created. In practice though, it is not so much that the commercial quarter draws its character from the Gardens as the other way round. The most significant observation one can make from walking through Picadilly Gardens is the absence of a strong sense of having passed through a space distinct from its surroundings – a sense of ‘here’ and ‘there’. The ground plane is open and level, the paths channel pedestrian traffic across the space with brisk efficiency. They do this so effectively (intentionally or otherwise) that they discourage lingering. There are open paved expanses around the outside of the Gardens, whose spaciousness creates a leisurely feel that encourages one to linger and walk more slowly. But the paths crossing the lawn are too narrow to allow one to stop and look around without obstructing the flow of people. They help to foster a transitory and essentially functional experience of the space.

The efficient programming of movement through the Gardens ensures that they are populated throughout the day and into the night, as envisaged in the designers' vision of a “twenty-four hour park for a twenty-four hour city.” But this success has also placed physical strains on the landscape infrastructure, necessitating alterations to the paths since the



Figure 15 Dynamic Suprematism, Kazimir Malevich, 1915 or 1916.

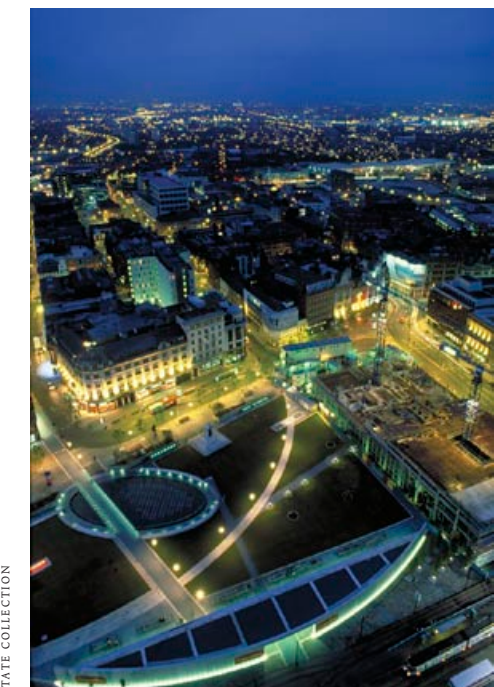


Figure 16 Aerial view of the Gardens by night, 2002

Gardens' opening in 2002. It has also erased the sense of difference in tone or atmosphere between the Gardens themselves and their surroundings, so fully do the central space and the surrounding streets run into one another.

The design's spatial strategy of “full accessibility” (EDAW 1999) brings almost the entire space up to one level, abolishing the island and extending its edges. What was a ‘garden’ in the original sense of the word – an enclosure, set apart from its surroundings – has become a movement hub. The design attempts to cater for the Gardens' role as a restorative place, with the provision of a lawn, trees and flowerbeds. But it places a higher priority on the movement function. This is a restless, open and transparent landscape.

It is a highly functional scheme, in many respects apparently Modernist: a *tabula rasa* approach to the site's existing features, a conscious lack of ornament and a visibly rational problem-solving design approach in which each element has a clear function in respect of a particular design problem. Also typical is the porosity and integration of spaces, in particular between public and commercial space, making the Gardens an extension of the business and shopping districts that surround it. The rationality of the design solution for a ‘movement hub’ is overlaid with a rather self-conscious geometry redolent of early twentieth-century Russian Supremacist art. Whether or not this is a conscious reference is debatable; nonetheless the parallel is instructive. What both

Picadilly Gardens and Supremacist art (Fig. 15) have in common in this context is their rejection of historical context – what Kazimir Malevich described as the “the dead weight of the real world” [8] – replacing it with a conceived patterning of pure form in order to signify a new era (Fig. 16). The landscape scheme seems designed to replace the old image of the drab, industrial city of Manchester with the clean, simplified forms of the post-industrial era. All the key elements of this new Manchester are represented: business (No 1 Piccadilly), leisure (the lawn with its cafés and bars) and urban European living (the fountain plaza and Boulevard).

Despite this quasi-modern aesthetic, the Gardens are perhaps better described as postmodern in spirit. Harvey identifies the tendencies of postmodern architecture and urban design towards an aesthetic of fragmentation and the quotation of past forms and styles so that “history and past experience are turned into a seemingly vast archive, instantly retrievable and capable of being consumed over and over again.” (Harvey 1995)

There is the ‘Bosque’, whose name references Baroque formal groves, and the ‘City Bench’ representing a continuation of the linear seating around the edges of the old Gardens. The concept of the ‘Catwalk’, taken directly from the fashion world, relates to an idea of the street as a theatre of consumerism. The pedestrianised section of Picadilly running along the northern side of the Gardens is renamed ‘the Boulevard’

where, according to the designers, the adjoining pavements would house “shopfront cafés and bars representing the essence of a European plaza.” These monikers can be interpreted in the light of Manchester City Council’s vision of regenerated Manchester as a distinctly European regional capital. They also relate to what has been termed ‘Euro-urbanism’ [9], a strain of postmodern historicism based on a nostalgia for the public life represented by continental models of public space, in particular those found in France and Italy.

As the first European nation to industrialise, nineteenth-century Britain led in the creation of public parks, intended as places of refreshment for the inhabitants of its industrial cities. But these stylised naturalistic landscapes were always conceived in opposition to the urban environment. Britain has much less of a tradition of distinctively urban public space. The streets and squares of European cities have thus been long held up as a model in Britain by designers and commentators. But despite the designers’ attempts to conjure up visions of the sunny café-lined streets of France and Italy it is not possible to recreate this vision in a country with a different tradition of urbanism by design alone. Britain’s tradition is of dispersed urban sprawl rather than compact densification, in which the street has a more utilitarian than social function, with a concomitant emphasis on private space, inside and out. Furthermore, it rains more in Britain than in Mediterranean Europe. As yet the seductive vision of the ‘essence’ of a European plaza seductive has not been realised. Discount stores and amusement arcades are more in evidence along Piccadilly than European pavement cafés.

Postmodernity, according to Harvey, is more than just a repertoire of stylistic devices. Its real significance is as a description of a distinctive economic regime that became increasingly prevalent from the 1970s, characterised by increasingly mobile capital with both dynamic and destructive effects – industrial relocation and downsizing – on industrial economies. Postmodern aesthetics in architecture and design represent an attempt to negotiate the disorientating effects of these economic shifts through an appeal to past historic forms and their emphasis on surface and spectacle. Piccadilly Gardens, then, is postmodern in both senses – in its surface style, and in its purpose – as part of an urban masterplan designed to negotiate a new economic future for a post-industrial city.

### Conclusions

In appraising the Gardens we should begin by evaluating the scheme on its own terms. Has the design succeeded in its intended purposes? The Gardens were conceived as an integral part of the economic regeneration of the Piccadilly area following a long period of decline. By this measure the scheme is a success; the surrounding area has received significant further public and private investment since 2002. It is difficult to isolate the Gardens’ contribution to all this relative to other policies and external economic factors, but the dis-

tricts around the space – the Northern Quarter with its ‘creative industries’, the shops and restaurants of Chinatown, the shopping core to the west and office development activity along Piccadilly to the east – look busy and are apparently thriving. The large numbers of people moving around and through the Gardens is one measure of their success as a strategic ‘movement hub’.

The Gardens are designed as a landscape of spectacle, both in the sense that they host large and small organised public events and that the landscape itself is spectacle, a place in which a mix of commerce and pleasure acts out the marketable dream of sophisticated ‘European’ urban living. This image has helped to drive new development and economic regeneration in central Manchester over the last decade, attracting corporate tenants, city centre residents, visitors and the businesses which service them. The design’s attention-grabbing geometry is eminently reproducible; it is a landscape of representation with one eye on a wider audience who will view it in images rather than in the experience of the space. The presence of the Gardens in the Museum of Modern Art in New York’s 2005 Groundswell Exhibition, the awards it has received and its reproduction (almost always as aerial views) in published images (Figure 15) would seem to suggest the success of this role. Jonathan Meades calls architecture like this ‘sightbites’ – edifices intended to be “instantly and arrestingly memorable and extraordinarily camera friendly.”[10]

From the planner’s eye aerial view the new Gardens are a success. But this point of view omits the qualitative experience of the space at pedestrian eye level. The design has attempted to accommodate both the larger scale planning-led goals of movement and connectivity, and the Gardens’ previous principal role as a restorative place that derived its character from planted soft landscaping. These two functions are in conflict in the new form of the Gardens, as evidenced by the management’s constant battle with lawn erosion due to the numbers of people walking through the space. The winner in this conflict is the movement function.

Although still called ‘gardens’, the word no longer seems apposite for the nature of the landscape. The landscape scheme and No 1 Piccadilly building have changed the nature of the place. It is now a plaza with soft landscape elements. The presence of the No 1 Piccadilly building relates to a persistent sense, when standing in the Gardens, that the scale of the central space is not quite right – that the landscape design has been squeezed into the remainder, into a space that is slightly too small for it to work properly. The Gardens suffer from an identity crisis: are they a park or an urban square? The relatively greater success of its more urban zones suggests that the landscape as a whole might have worked better if it had been designed as a definitely urban, tree-lined square, rather than an unsatisfactory hybrid of park and square.

The new Piccadilly Gardens need to be understood according to their purpose as a part of the urban regeneration of central Manchester. But they should also be interpreted on another level, as an expression of the values of their time. In its original form, the Manchester Royal Infirmary and Esplanade expressed the civic power and progressive ideals of Victorian and Edwardian Manchester, the “first and greatest industrial city in the world”[11]. Later schemes – the 1930s sunken garden and the grand ‘people’s place’ of the unrealised 1945 Plan – attested to this civic pride with an emphasis on public leisure and welfare characteristic of municipal socialism and the welfare state. The 2002 scheme for the Gardens co-opts them into a strategy to secure a new economic future for a post-industrial city, catering to a service-based urban economy with employment generated by corporate offices, bars, restaurants and nightlife. The landscape’s smoothness, its skewed, non-figurative geometry, and its contrived depthlessness all assume a distance between the landscape and its viewers. Dependent on aerial display for its supreme appreciation, the landscape salutes the corporate occupants of No 1 Piccadilly, a commercial building on what used to be public land. This is the consequence of the new economic regime of flexible accumulation and mobile capital, more recently referred to as globalisation, and it is the price that cities like Manchester have had to pay in order to attract investment and secure jobs for their citizens. The Gardens were funded by a formula that necessitated the sale of part of the public realm for commercial development because, increasingly, civic authorities no longer have the financial resources to achieve such large scale civic schemes.

Against this background, it is not surprising that the landscape design does not make, or attempt to make, any meaningful connection with Manchester’s identity. This city was the “first, and greatest, industrial city in the world.” It was here that Engels observed the social consequences of nineteenth-century industrial capitalism that informed *The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844*, one of the intellectual cornerstones of modern Socialism. In the late twentieth century, the city gave birth to the impassioned music of the Smiths and Joy Division, and later British dance club culture in the form of the Hacienda club. Mancunians are known in Britain for their strong identification with their city, and their endless ability to mythologise it. None of this strong sense of place and identity is evident in the largest public landscape project in the city in the last decade.

Outmoded though they were, the old Gardens had a history of incremental development that was at least an expression of Manchester’s complex, composite historical identity – a part of the body politic. In its eagerness to present the city as a ‘world class’ investment location, the new landscape scheme makes as little reference as possible to the distinctiveness of Manchester. Instead, it seems to want to be as reassuringly similar as possible to the other cities with which it is competing. What has been created is a competent, if uninspired, work of technocratic planning, articulated in a global corporate design language. Because the design process was largely driven by strategic goals relating to its contextual significance on an urban design scale, there is a lack of resonance at the human scale. It signifies the erosion of the notion of public space as a part of the body politic and its replacement by space as *tabula rasa*, one site amongst many competing as the location for ever more mobile capital.

### Notes

- 1 Landscape: Journal of the Landscape Institute 2002
- 2 Manchester City Council Press Release 2005
- 3 Walker and Blake 1990
- 4 Robson 2002
- 5 Harvey 1989
- 6 The design strategy’s objectives:
  - 1 Reconnecting Piccadilly Gardens to the City
  - 2 Creating a contemporary green identity
  - 3 Delivering a vibrant and functional public space
  - 4 Providing full accessibility
  - 5 Ensuring quality in design detail (EDAW et al. 1999)
- 7 EDAW 1999
- 8 Malevich, K (1927) *The Non-objective World*, quoted in [www.tate.org.uk/collections/glossary/definition.jsp?entryId=291](http://www.tate.org.uk/collections/glossary/definition.jsp?entryId=291)
- 9 Brill 1989
- 10 Meades 2007

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### Biographical Notes

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