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IRWELL RIVER PARK

The Rediscovery of Manchester's Lost River

The image of a city is very much represented by the relationship of the urban fabric and its river. The industrial decline in Greater Manchester led to the almost complete isolation of the River Irwell. The vision for the Irwell River Park aims to transform the river from a backwater into a spine and focal point at the heart of the city.

The 2020 Vision for the Irwell River Park illustrates the scale of the long-term concepts and reintegration of the river corridor into the urban fabric of Greater Manchester.

Most of the world's great cities are river cities: they are born on their banks; fed, cleansed, connected, and protected by rivers; and over time, the shapers and expropriators of rivers. The relationship between a city and its river is a symbiotic one, and one of the primary defining factors in its evolution and identity. There are inherent tensions in this relationship: firstly, between the functional role of the river – provider of water, power, transport, waste disposal – and its spiritual or symbolic value; and secondly, between the inherent magnetism of the waterfront and the ever-present threat of flooding. The sense of awe and fear inspired by a river underlies a permanent ambivalence in the relationship between a city and its river, which is the stuff of mythology and religion. The way in which different cities have resolved these tensions has as much to do with the particular topography of their watersheds as it does with the cultural values of their society and the economic and political structures prevalent during their periods of growth. The qualities of the urban fabric in relation to a river say much about the collective cultural values of a society over time. The waterfront is the architectural expression of this relationship.

Manchester and the Irwell

The relationship of the conurbation to the river is a classic expression of what could be termed the "utilitarian waterfront," one in which the pragmatic values of the watercourse have outweighed considerations of monumentality, sociability, or beauty. The River Irwell and its late-Victorian reincarnation, the Manchester Ship Canal, was central to the city's emergence as an industrial powerhouse. Once known as "the hardest worked stream in the world," the Irwell was the city's link to the Mersey and the sea. It powered the textile mills which created wealth, and flushed away the waste they generated. During the rapid growth of the city in the Victorian era, the shallow river was progressively canalised to make it more navigable, and the riverbanks were turned into an urban canyon, lined by mill buildings and with little linear access. The ownership of the riverbanks was fragmented and largely privatised, and with the creation of the Ship Canal in 1896, much of the watercourse itself passed into private ownership. The decline of the vast docks at Salford and Pomona from the 1960s onwards



Cathedral Square is a key proposal for the Irwell River Park. The intention is to create a large new public space pedestrianising a busy section of road, and linking the Medieval Quarter of Manchester back to the riverside.

led to the almost complete isolation of the river from a city which turned its back on the dereliction and decay along the river's banks. Today it is hidden, often inaccessible and largely forgotten. Somehow, the Irwell has been scrubbed from the mental maps of the twin cities on its banks, Manchester and Salford. This condition has been further exacerbated by the political fragmentation of Greater Manchester. The Irwell-Ship Canal corridor forms an administrative boundary between the authorities of Manchester, Salford, and Trafford, which has led to a political perception of the watercourse as an edge or boundary rather than a hub or spine.

Reclaiming the waterfront

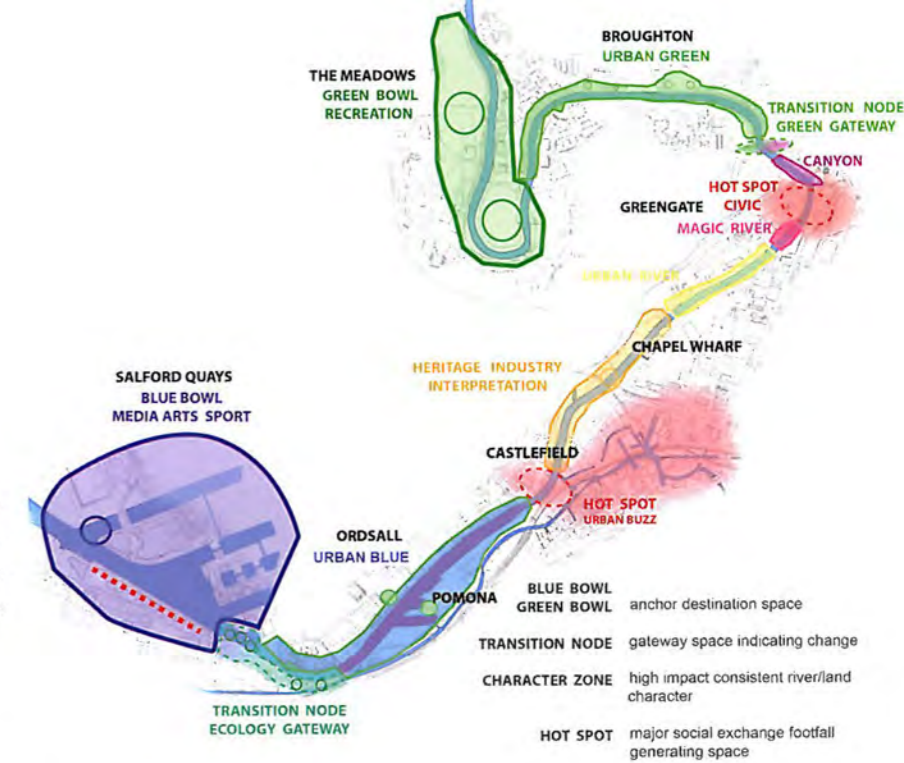
From the mid 1990s onwards, the local authorities of Manchester, Salford, and Trafford began to recognise the importance and potential of the river for the cities' regeneration. Investment in the docks at Salford Quays created awareness of the potential of the waterfront, but remained an isolated case. Partial attempts to create sections of riverside walkway and improve access deteriorated quickly due to their fragmentation and insecurity. It became clear that the only way to address the web of interconnected issues

was through a holistic approach to the whole river corridor. The Central Salford Urban Regeneration Company (CSURC), set up in 2005, identified the waterfront as one of its greatest assets and opportunities, and set about building a partnership between the local authorities, the private landowners, and the key public agencies to address the issue.

Irwell River Park

The project itself took shape over a four-year period in two main phases, first developing the partners' outline vision into a full design concept and subsequently working up specific proposals for the core elements of the design. Both phases of work were led by a team of landscape architects from Broadway Malyan and Form Associates, supported by Gifford engineers. The team identified the project not simply as an exercise in the creation of a pragmatic linear route, but as a symbolic process of reconnection and reintegration of a fragmented urban centre and reappropriation of a lost waterfront.

Two further central considerations were those of climate change and economic dynamism. Attracting private investment and development along the river corridor was seen as an essential means of providing



The concept drawing above highlights the structure and the different characters of the park. The Cathedral Walk, a new serpentine bridge, connects the riverside route through and across the "urban canyon" (below left). New connections and newly designed spaces also enhance the city centre.



“Rivers are the last open valleys of the urban terrain, the last remaining paths where man may re-establish his rights of access and enjoyment.”

Rivers in the City, Roy Mann



focuses of life and activity, as well as passive surveillance along the route. It was also vital to ensure that this development did not further isolate the river from the rest of the urban fabric. The river corridor was also identified as a critical element of Green Infrastructure, and there was an aspiration for the project to act as a benchmark of best practice in relation to urban cooling, sustainable drainage, tree planting or habitat creation.

The vision that emerged aimed to transform the river from a backwater into a spine and focal point at the heart of Greater Manchester, and was comprised of three main themes: connecting communities along and across the river; reintegrating the river corridor into the urban fabric; providing focuses of activity along the routes. These themes will be progressively achieved through the creation or enhancement of eight kilometres of footpaths and cycle routes, eight new footbridges, and ten new or vastly improved public spaces of varying characteristics. These bold ambitions rely on a close partnership between the public and private sector for their delivery, and the complexities of ownerships and governance along the river corridor make such cooperation essential. The current climate, both politically and economically, is not favourable, and the original timeframe for delivery by 2020 now looks very ambitious. Two key public bodies, the CSURC and the North West Development Agency – the primary funder – have both been dismantled by the new government. However, the project is still being driven forward, primarily by Salford City Council, and the partnership has been very successful in establishing the river corridor as one of the key focuses of future growth in the conurbation and, more importantly, in putting the project on the mental maps of politicians, developers, and local communities.

The emerging waterfront

The huge momentum behind the idea has slowed but not completely come to a halt. First steps have been taken towards the realisation of the Irwell River Park idea, some small but some very significant. The completion of Media City UK in Salford Quays, the new northern headquarters of the BBC, has consolidated this area as the new economic driver of the conurbation, and provides a strong incentive for the

Trafford Wharf Promenade by Form Associates establishes the southern end of Irwell River Park. The new waterfront public space connects the Imperial War Museum North to the river and links the Media City footbridge by Wilkinson Eyre Architects to the existing Trafford Wharf.

Left: At Trafford Wharf Promenade terraced seating leads down to the waterfront. Below: Ordsall Hall Boulevard is the proposal by Broadway Malyan for a public space in a new residential development. It connects the recently renovated 16th Century Ordsall Hall and grounds to the waterfront.



creation of improved linkages to Manchester city centre and for new growth along the river corridor between these two nodes. Two completed projects illustrate how the vision is starting to transform Greater Manchester's relationship to its river.

The Trafford Wharf Promenade, designed by Form Associates, was completed in 2010 and, with the adjoining Media City footbridge by Wilkinson Eyre Architects, delivers an important new strategic circulation loop in Salford Quays. The loop helps to transform the experience of walking in the area through linking four major hubs of activity: Media City UK, the Imperial War Museum North, Manchester United Stadium, and Lowry Arts Centre.

Form's design of the quayside plays with convex and concave geometries, creating an imaginative public realm complementing the designs of both the Imperial War Museum North and the new footbridge. Importantly, the promenade also reorients Daniel Libeskind's museum building towards the waterfront. A newly constructed deck and stepped area built over water delivers generous pedestrian and cycling connectivity, as well as a series of public-realm spaces that serve as informal performance space for the museum. Terraced seating leading down to the water's edge provides excellent views of the area, making the new quayside already a popular destination both during the day and evenings.

Further upstream at Ivy Wharf, Broadway Malyan has collaborated with architects Shed KM in the design of a new linkage and small public space, reconnecting the waterfront back into the nearby Ordsall neighbourhood. This is the first step in the complete transformation of this disused Colgate factory into a contemporary mixed-use development, which will begin the process of opening up and enlivening the waterfront and generating confidence for future developers in the viability of this approach. Other projects in progress are the enlargement and reconnection of the Chapel Wharf space by the Lowry hotel and the new Spinningfields footbridge.

All these proposals illustrate the gradual realisation of the principles of the wider IRP masterplan in reconnecting previously fragmented and often isolated places, overcoming severance to movement, and in reorienting the city towards the water.

IRWELL RIVER PARK, MANCHESTER, UK

Lead client: Central Salford Urban Regeneration Company

Irwell River Park Partnership: CSURC (above), Salford City Council, Manchester City Council and Trafford Borough Council + North West Development Agency, Red Rose Forest, The Manchester Ship Canal Company, Environment Agency + ASK (representatives of developer and landowners) and community representatives for all affected neighbourhoods

Project team: Broadway Malyan Manchester, FoRM Associates, Gifford (engineering), Davis Langdon (project managers and quantity surveyors)

Other design and technical input: Urban Vision, Salford