

Discuss the evolution of the given area in Hulme.

Why did the Hulme Crescents fail and was it solely due to its architecture?

The residential district of Hulme, situated within central Manchester, has undergone three large development projects over the last 200 years. The first came during the Industrial Revolution of the 19th century, when Hulme grew from a village to a mass of uniform, Victorian, brick-terraced houses, packed into a grid formation as shown in *Figure 1* (Hartwell, 2002). Then, the development of the 1960s and 70s, which saw Hulme become a sea of low-rise, concrete apartment blocks, seen in *Figure 2*. And finally, in *Figure 3*, the regeneration scheme of the 1990s which reconfigured brick-terraced housing into a contemporary scheme of varying heights, which can still be seen today. The 1960s and 70s regeneration scheme which focused on four curved blocks called the Hulme Crescents, nicknamed the “worst features of Hulme” (Granada TV, 1978:4min 13) played a key part in how Hulme is today. Specifically, the failures of this project, the many design, construction & social problems, ensured the reattempt of the 1990s paid more attention to research and community involvement, contributing to its continuing success. This essay will evaluate the failures of the Crescents, as well as the role that architecture played in this process.



Figure 1: 1930s Hulme.



Figure 2: 1980s Hulme.



Figure 3: Hulme today.

The redevelopment of the 1960s and 70s was intended to replace the slum-like terraces of Hulme, that had been built for the new, rapidly-growing, urban population of the Industrial Revolution. The 1945 Manchester Plan declared that almost 60% of houses in Manchester were too densely packed, crammed in at over 24 dwellings to an acre (Parkinson-Bailey, 2000). Over half were confirmed unfit for habitation. This initiated Manchester’s huge slum-clearance programme of its residential districts, including Hulme.

Coinciding with the slum-clearance programme came the demand for fast-built housing – due to the destruction of many homes during World War Two, and the subsequent beginnings of the baby-boom. New revolutionary techniques for mass housing came over from Europe, including system-built construction, where elements of a building are pre-fabricated and assembled onsite, thereby speeding up the process of construction. Also introduced from Europe was the method of using concrete visibly, as a key material for the facade of buildings, having previously been used only as a structural material hidden behind brick (Parkinson-Bailey, 2000). This started the 1950s and 60s architectural movement of

Brutalism in England, where concrete was a key feature. The combination of this industrial style and a fast construction method initiated innovative, block housing schemes. Using concrete and often including exterior walkways on each level, labelled 'deck-access', these became known as 'streets in the sky'. They became popular amongst architects and local authorities, as the designs allowed for high density housing (Granada TV, 1978). Many council housing estates were built in this style, such as Park Hill in Sheffield (see *Figure 4*) and Robin Hood Gardens in London.

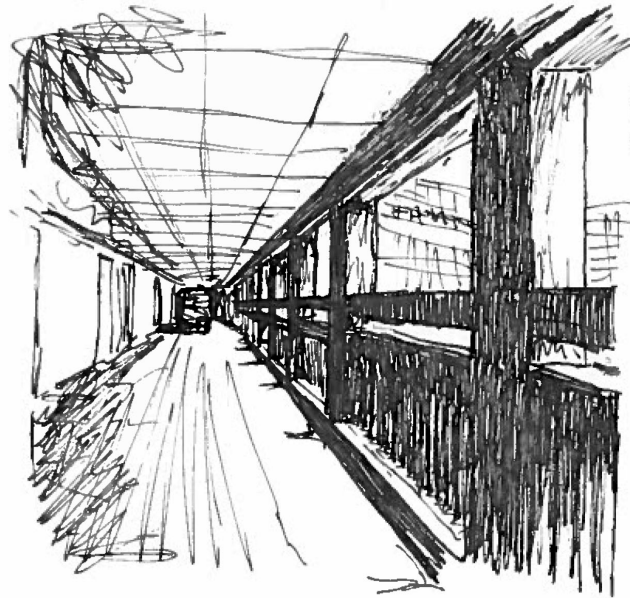


Figure 4: Deck access in Park Hill, big enough for milk floats.

The Government, funding housing projects across the country, pressured Manchester to replace their slums with system-built, concrete towers. Manchester resisted, rejecting high-rise homes outright. However, under consistent pressure from the Government, namely the Ministry of Housing, and the apparent success of system-built housing elsewhere in Britain, it was only a matter of time. Following a design contest in 1965, Manchester Council, also known as Manchester Corporation, chose this popular industrial style (Parkinson-Bailey, 2000).

The focus within the Hulme redevelopment was four, huge, u-shaped blocks surrounded by green space, named the Hulme Crescents. They replaced the original shopping street of Hulme, which was deemed no longer necessary. At six-storeys tall, they were at the maximum height allowed by Manchester's Housing Committee: the 1967 Urban Renewal Manchester publication had made sure of this, "dwellings must not be put into 'office-block' arrangements, and... no buildings higher than six-storey maisonettes" (Parkinson-Bailey, 2000:192). In the fashionable Brutalist style, system-built and with deck-access, it was the Government dream. The architects, Wilson & Womersley, had previously built this type of social housing, such as Park Hill in Sheffield, with apparent success. The deck-access was supposed to "encourage a neighbourly spirit" (Dennis, 1970:online) and remind residents of the intimacy they had enjoyed in their former terraced homes (Granada TV, 1978). The design also allowed the Government to save money; lifts required cash and the walkways meant less lifts (Granada TV, 1978).

Construction on Hulme and the Crescents commenced. At the same time, a national backlash against high-rises and system-built housing began. This was mostly caused by the Ronan Point gas explosion of 1968, in which all 22 floors of one corner of the London tower block collapsed, as the structural support failed (Building Research Establishment, 2002). Following this, the 1969 Housing Act “encouraged the renovation of existing buildings” (Parkinson-Bailey, 2000:193), and soon system-built construction lost all credibility. Nonetheless, Manchester Council continued to proceed with the project.

Construction on the Hulme Crescents, which had started in 1968, was completed in 1972. Across 38 acres, 918 dwellings were built, using a structural system of both precast and in situ concrete, together with concrete facade panels (The Architectural Review, 1968). The proportions and curved fronts were intended to imitate the elegant Georgian terraces of Bath, but it had the opposite effect. The Crescents were bleak and forbidding, as seen in *Figure 5* (Sacha Lehrfreund, 1991).



Figure 5: Hulme Crescent in mist (Source: Sacha Lehrfreund, 1991).

Initially a major success, residents were excited to move into these famed, futuristic homes. Compared to the slums and the houses in unfamiliar neighbourhoods where they had been temporarily rehoused, they were a fantastic improvement. Homes were spacious, with modern interiors, fitted kitchens, and internal bathrooms (REELmcr, 2017). A new community was created. Children played together on the decks, and neighbours became like “un-biological extended families” (REELmcr, 2017:13min 41), due to the proximity of their homes (shown in *Figure 6*) and a natural inclination to help one another.

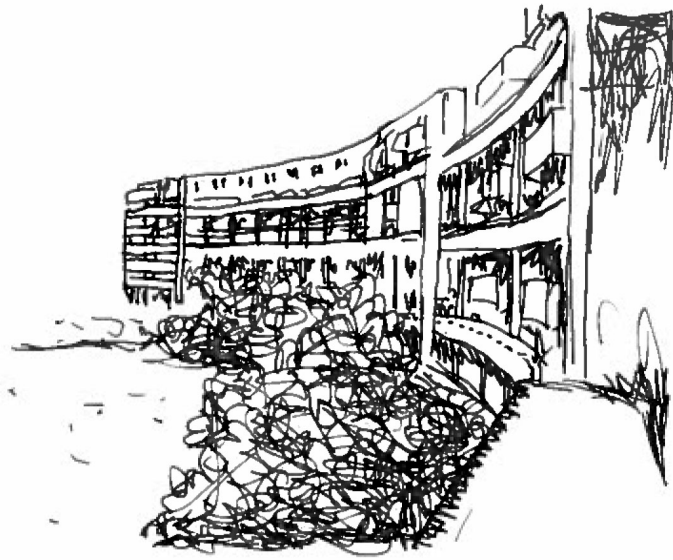


Figure 6: A view from one of the Crescents.

However, all was not as it seemed. It was obvious even upon completion, that the Crescents were poorly constructed. The non-traditional method of system-building was completely unfamiliar to the local builders. Additionally, the urgency to have the structure ready for immediate habitation meant the building process was rushed and badly supervised. Walls and ceilings did not align correctly, resulting in leaks and the spread of vermin, and some ties and bolts reinforcing the structure were missing (Parkinson-Bailey, 2000). The blocks started to deteriorate almost immediately. The concrete spalled, most likely due to a combination of its poor quality, faulty assembly and various maintenance issues (Concrete Preservation Technologies, 2017). Lumps of concrete started to fall away, and holes appeared in walkways, creating a hazard for residents and visitors (REELmcr, 2017). Children were prevented from playing on the pathways and kept indoors.

Not only did construction problems start to show upon finish, but within months design problems became obvious. The social impact of the concept of 'streets in the sky' had not been thoroughly researched, and the Crescents soon became a social disaster. The design of the estate focused on pedestrian priority; the main shopping street had been removed altogether, thus isolating residents and destroying their link with the city (Hartwell, 2002). This was reinforced by the large main roads that encased the estate. Additionally, the authorities' distrust of the community was immediately apparent. For example, the youth centre was enclosed by a twelve-foot-high fence and alarmed (Conn, 1973), resulting in the community becoming similarly distrustful of the authorities. Within the buildings themselves, the walkways were a no-man's land, encouraging anti-social behaviour. They can be seen in *Figure 7* (eXHULMe, no date:online). Due to their elevated distance from any roads, the police did not patrol them as they would normal streets (Granada TV, 1978). This fact and their hidden visibility from below meant robberies could be carried out completely unnoticed. The walkways became perfect mugging territory; it was easy to corner people and assailants could easily escape by bicycle. Vandalism was abundant. Milk and newspaper deliveries ceased. Many residents, especially women and the elderly, refrained from leaving their homes (Parkinson-Bailey, 2000). The noise levels of children playing on the decks,

amplified by inadequate acoustic insulation, irritated residents and contributed to their stress (Granada TV, 1978). There was a decline in the mental health of residents, with high levels of loneliness, anxiety and depression (Parkinson-Bailey, 2000). The impersonal bleakness of the design, with the dark and gloomy walkways, added to people's unhappiness.



Figure 7: The Crescents' walkways (Source: eXHuLMe, no date:online).

In 1974 a five-year-old child fell from a top-floor deck and died. This was a turning point in the Crescents' history. The blocks were declared to be a "monster of a mistake" (Conn, 1973:online), and a 1975 survey showed that 96.3% of tenants wanted to leave (Parkinson-Bailey, 2000). Families petitioned to the council to move out and the council agreed. With a reluctance to destroy something that had so recently been built, attempts were made to improve conditions. The walkways were divided up every 50 yards in the hope of diminishing crime. The families and elderly and disabled residents were rehoused, and replaced by an all-adult population: singles, students and young couples (Granada TV, 1978). Despite all the improvements, problems continued to escalate, and crime only got worse. On the estate you were "thirty times more likely to be mugged or murdered than the national average, and three times more likely to show symptoms of clinical stress" (Granada TV, 1978: 0min 43). After almost ten years of protests, campaigns and talks with the council, it was finally agreed in the early 1990s that all of the 1960s and 70s redevelopment would be replaced. In a reaction against concrete, brick became the chief building material once again. The rows of terraced housing were brought back, each with a front door directly onto the street, helping to prevent street crime and burglaries. The destroyed shopping street on Stretford Road was reinstated. The project involved the community from start to finish, and with careful planning and thoughtful architecture, it resulted in a much more successful housing scheme.

The 1960s development, by contrast, was a complete failure, proven by its demolition. Architecture played a key role in this failure (as seen by the many design issues previously

discussed), but there were also other factors. Poor construction, due to the Government pressure on Manchester Corporation for fast-built homes, also played an important role. In fact, it could be argued that the Crescents' would still exist today if not for its hasty construction. Park Hill in Sheffield (shown in *Figure 8*), designed very similarly and by the same architect J. Lewis Womersley, still exists today (Parkinson-Bailey, 2000). The estate had various social problems, as did the Crescents, but it has always been structurally sound (The Concrete Company, no date).



Figure 8: Park Hill estate in Sheffield.

Government pressure was also responsible for much of the design. According to a Hulme resident, the Corporation was wholly against the idea of deck-access blocks, but the Government would only fund a particular type of housing (REELmcr, 2017). Choices were limited, and the Corporation was coerced into selecting the 'streets in the sky' design. Furthermore, the money available for council housing was only £3,400 per dwelling: an "absurdly low" (Dennis, 1970:online) figure according to architects at the time. Inevitably, this meant a standardisation of design, leading to an impersonal and repetitive scheme.

Nevertheless, the Corporation must bear some of the responsibility. The designs were not socially tested and there was no attempt to include residents in planning. The estate was poorly managed, with little attention paid to the maintenance of the public areas. A Hulme resident stated the council "never had any time" for residents (REELmcr, 2017:28m 59). This lack of trust and cooperation exacerbated social issues. The attempt to improve the situation by removing vulnerable residents, as well as moving in problem families who could not be housed elsewhere, unbalanced the community and destabilised the population (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 1994). The cycle of deprivation continued.

There were also unforeseen circumstances concerning the energy supply. After the Ronan Point gas explosion, an electric, underfloor heating system was hastily installed. The fans and pipes that propelled warm air into the flats never worked very well (Hunt Thompson Associates, 1993). Following the oil embargo of 1973-4, fuel prices increased dramatically.

The heating system became too expensive for residents, and they turned to paraffin heaters and compact gas stoves, which led to condensation problems (Granada TV, 1978).

In conclusion, the 1960s development of Hulme, particularly the Crescents, failed – this was partly due to its architecture, but also due to mistakes by both the Government and Manchester Council, as well as some unforeseen circumstances. The failure could perhaps have been prevented with community involvement, a researched design and better construction methods. As a result, however, it has become a model of what not to do for housing schemes across Europe and led to the successful 1990s redevelopment. One can see this by walking around the neighbourhood. Individuality is obvious immediately, with a large variation in facades and styles of home. Small blocks of flats, often with their own private balconies (such as in *Figure 9*), as well as commercial buildings, line the re-established Stretford Road. Reminding you of a traditional high street, it encourages a feeling of community. The street has become a key route out of Central Manchester (as seen in *Figure 10*), and is often busy with vehicles and pedestrians, thus discouraging crime. The added green space is thoughtfully landscaped, connected to the main road and dotted with trees and flowers. Opposite lies the Zion Arts Centre, shown in *Figure 11*, one of the oldest structures of the area. Formerly derelict, it is now a thriving youth centre and charity (source). Hulme now feels like a town centre and a neighbourhood that people can be proud of. Cul-de-sac styled streets of small gated communities and charming houses lead away from the main road, where it is safe for children to play. *Figure 12* shows how each home feels personal, with small front gardens and different coloured bricks and details. Almost every home looks different. Hulme, although lacking many vital shops and businesses for the area to thrive, and possibly still with a few problems, it has truly a clean, safe and stress-free community.



Figure 9: Private balconies along Stretford Road.



Figure 10: Hulme Arch, marking the entrance into Hulme.



Figure 11: The Zion Arts Centre from the park.



Figure 12: Houses along Rolls Crescent.

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