



'Hulme and the Nightmare Scenario'

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Hulme and the Nightmare Scenario



The Roving Reader Files

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We all have our dreams. But what if they turn into nightmares?

Take the Hugh Wilson and Lewis Womersley firm of chartered architects and town planners. In the 1960s they dreamt of solving the problems of twentieth-century living by providing quality design and housing to a level reached in the eighteenth century for Bloomsbury and Bath. By using similar shapes and proportions, large scale building groups and open spaces, plus skilful landscaping and extensive tree planting, they hoped to make their dream reality. Where? Don't laugh when I tell you. Hulme in Manchester.

Yes, Hulme was to be the setting for pioneering brave new town planning. The slums were to be cleared and in their place would arise beauty. There was just one problem. The designers' dream became the Hulme residents' nightmare scenario. Leafing through the Centre's Hulme Study Collection, I came across Wilson and Womersley's hopeful musings on the cover of Manchester City Council's Survey Report *Hulme. A Position Statement September, 1987*.



The results of flattening Hulme in the 1960s didn't produce replicas of Georgian London. They led to an unprecedented disaster, leaving Hulme inhabitants and the City Council adrift in a sea of insoluble urban decay. The Council wrote: "Virtually all the property in Hulme is Council owned. Estimates for solving Hulme housing problems are in the region of £100 million – way beyond the Council's resources for the foreseeable future." Mine too. £100 million in 1987 was by no means a small sum...

What happened over the years is far too long and complex a story for me to tell. But what I can say is that if you want to know the details of the to-ing and fro-ing involved in the prolonged consultations between Council, tenants and the Thatcher central government, the Hulme Study Collection is where you need to look.



Courtesy Elouise Edwards

So, what is the Hulme Study Collection? Donated to the Centre in 1999, it belonged to Valerie Karn, Professor of Housing Studies at the University of Manchester. The Hulme Study was managed by a Supervisory Group (a partnership between the City Council, Hulme tenants and the Department of the Environment), and Professor Karn was appointed independent Chair of the Group, serving from 1988 to 1992.

The approach to solving the pickle Council and residents found themselves in set precedents for tackling urban problems in other cities round the country. Rather than having solutions dropped on them from a great height, residents were to be consulted and their views taken into account. Private sector money was to be brought in. Hulme, an inner city area like those Mrs Thatcher

vowed to cast her beady eye over when she won the General Election in 1987, was to be regenerated. Yes, really. Again.

Hulme people were a mixed bag. A fair proportion were Afro-Caribbean. Being close to the universities, numerous students lived there, many of them from overseas. Cheek by jowl were what you might call indigenous Mancunions, alongside immigrants from anywhere you care to mention. Strange to tell, despite the real hardship caused by the disaster Hulme had become, most of them loved it.

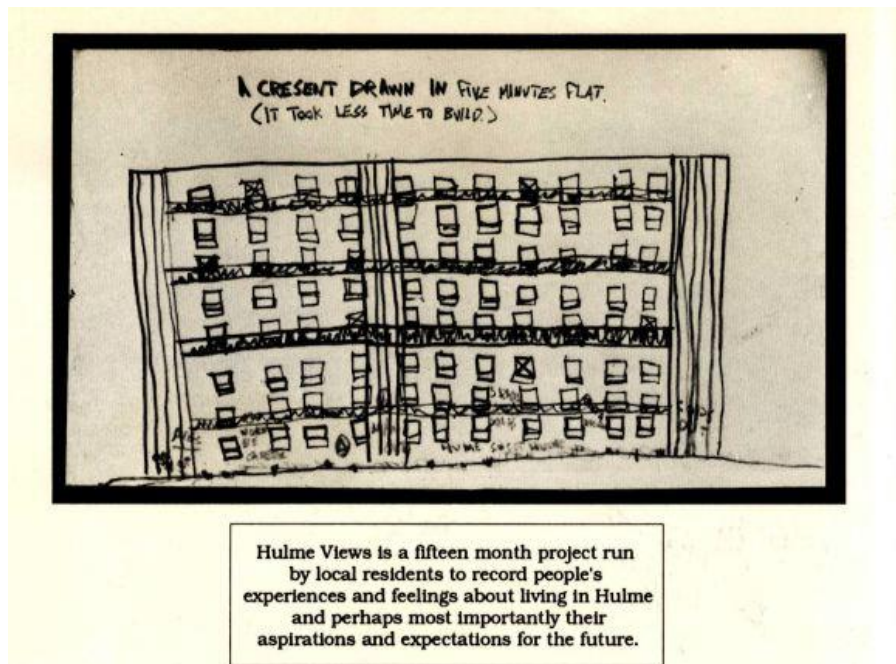
Take the occupants of Linby Street. In 1986 the City Council conducted an area survey there, aiming to identify the causes of tenant dissatisfaction. The Hulme Project (a precursor to the Hulme Study) held evening meetings to ask tenants what was really going on. Surprisingly, it was discovered that “a large number of tenants wanted to stay on in the estate but only if it was decapitated.”

Whoa! Hold on there! Decapitated? Were tenants pushing for mass murder? No. They wanted the top deck of their double decker maisonettes to be removed. Problems were plaguing those living on the bottom deck – sewage back up, noise, neighbour issues, filthy communal areas. 60% of tenants wanted decapitation, 98% wanted installation of gas central heating, and 92% wanted a quicker repair service. So it wasn't just sewage. It was also being cold and left with broken amenities for far too long...

Elsewhere in the Centre I found **Hulme Views. Self Portraits** (published 1990). 1990 was a critical moment. The area was on the brink of change, but exactly what was going to happen was still up in the air. With the Hulme Views Project, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation funded residents to record the feelings of locals about living in Hulme, as well as their aspirations for the future. The Project's results make fascinating, often amusing reading. One wit hastily sketched an infamous Hulme crescent. Under it was written, “A crescent drawn in five minutes flat (it took less time to build).” Ouch...



Courtesy Elouise Edwards



Black, brown, white, blue. Everyone piled in to record hopes and fears. Some anticipated being ignored. Others looked forward, hoping the communal spirit would be retained. Nearly all believed Hulme's reputation for violence, decay and urban failure masked the inner reality of the area they knew. Lisa (a young white woman) wrote: "The best thing about Hulme is the people... they let you get on with your own life and don't judge you." Darran (a young Black pirate radio station worker) mused: "I prefer Hulme to any other area because it is a place where status and greed and yuppies don't exist."

But let's leave the last word to Alison Ravetz. What did those responsible for designing Hulme think of their work in later years? Alison wrote: "I know the architect (now retired) who was mainly responsible for designing today's Hulme and I have heard him explain (apologise) how it all came about." Apparently it was "nobody's fault." All sorts of things had conspired together...

That may be true. But I'm sure we'd all like to meet the proverbial 'Mr Nobody' to give him a piece of our mind – he's been responsible for so many disasters round the world it's untrue. But there is a silver lining. And that's the multi-cultural, multi-racial community that hoped, dreamed and campaigned for something better. They never gave up.

If you want to check out the Hulme Study Collection, just let us know and you can come in to take a look. The documents I've mentioned are: *Manchester City Council Linby Street Area Survey Oct 1986* (Document 124 in the City Council Survey Reports Folder, Box 21); *Hulme. A Position Statement September, 1987* (Document 125 in the City Council Survey Reports Folder, Box 21). And don't forget to look at *Hulme Views. Self Portraits* (published 1990). It's a collection of writing and photographs by Hulme people and is a must-read for anyone interested in how urban planning affects real people.