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Local government responses to grassroots music venue displacements: Manchester and Liverpool council assistance during and after COVID-19

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Introduction

Grassroots music venues (GMVs) have been fundamental for the musical development of the UK. The inspiration behind this thesis comes from the Hacienda's fate in Manchester. Once a world-renowned venue, central to the Madchester and Britpop movements of the 90s and early 2000s, hosted names such as Madonna, The Smiths and Happy Mondays. This landmark of music and cultural innovation has since been reduced to luxury apartments bearing the same name felt like an echo of disregard for the very movement that helped revive Manchester from being the gloomy industrial ''up there'' of Thatcher's England. Its closure opens a conversation on the recurring tensions between musical heritage and processes of urban development.

This led to a more in-depth research of how the UK has been treating grassroots music venues in times of crises, as such moments often provide clearer insight into systemic vulnerabilities. From the 1990s onwards, the North West has been widely acknowledged as a major contributor to the UK's global musical reputation, even as the region experienced uneven patterns of economic regeneration. Successive shocks, such as the 2008 financial crisis, placed pressure on venues dependent on private landlords, as 93% of GMVs in the UK operate under rental contracts (Vittozzi, 2024). However, it was the COVID-19 pandemic that most acutely exposed their fragility. Lockdowns suspended live performance, disrupted the social function of venues as community gathering spaces, and intensified financial vulnerabilities most GMVs had already been struggling with. Between 2020 and 2022, at least 125 UK venues ceased hosting live music, with over half closing permanently. Attendance levels remain below pre-pandemic figures (Savage, BBC, 2023), while rising rents and operating costs continue to undermine recovery.

COVID-19 is therefore chosen as the central period of analysis because it destabilised both the economic and social foundations of grassroots music. GMVs depend on two interrelated conditions: accessible space and sustained community participation (Byrnes, 2012). The pandemic halted both, revealing structural weaknesses that earlier crises, such as 2008, had only partially exposed. Whereas community resilience had previously masked these

vulnerabilities, COVID-19's prolonged restrictions stripped away the social dynamics that kept venues alive, underlining their precarious position within neoliberal urban development[1].

The goal of this thesis is to examine Liverpool and Manchester, two of the UK's most musically significant cities according to UNESCO and National Rail, in order to answer the research question of how have the two city councils responded to the pressures faced by grassroots music venues during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, how have they allowed their local policies to be influenced by national schemes and to how have these responses safeguarded GMVs' right to urban space. Above all, the thesis seeks to see the extent to which councils recognize the inherent cultural and social values of venues that, as the thesis will show, have long been shadowed by their economic contributions.

To do that, the study maps the period from 1990 to 2019, identifying key events that supported GMVs, including policies such as the Agent of Change, which redefined the authority of urban developers over communal cultural spaces, and exploring the effects of neoliberalism on rental prices and property access. The pandemic years of 2020–2022 underscored the precariousness of most GMVs, revealing that many were exposed to the same fate as the Hacienda. During this period, at least 125 UK venues stopped hosting live music, with over half closing permanently. Urban displacement played a central role: rising rents, redevelopment projects, and gentrification increasingly pushed venues out of city centres, while zoning conflicts and resident complaints further limited their ability to operate. The combined pressures of economic strain and spatial displacement created an environment in which grassroots venues struggled to survive, exposing the fragility of cultural infrastructures within urban development frameworks.

By situating this policy analysis within theoretical frameworks that deal with social and economic concepts as that of neoliberalism, monopoly rent, the right to the city, and the commodification of culture, the research investigates whether councils have acted to safeguard GMVs' right to urban space or have instead continued to subordinate their cultural value. By examining the social and economic dimensions of venue closures, this study seeks to show how urban policy can either sustain or undermine the grassroots music infrastructure essential to the UK's cultural vitality.

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[1] According to Pinson (2021), neoliberal urban development, or the "neoliberal city," refers to the way urban policies and city spaces are increasingly shaped by neoliberal economic principles, primarily market-driven approaches, privatization and a focus on competitiveness and investment attraction rather than solely by public welfare or social equity goals.

The thesis is structured to linearly examine grassroots music venues (GMVs) within the UK's urban and cultural context. Chapter I reviews literature on the social and economic value of GMVs and the impact of urban regeneration and how it intersects with property and policy. Chapter II will outline the theoretical frameworks the thesis will employ to better structure the post COVID-19 policy analysis, including the Right to the City and spatial value, alongside the methodology. Chapters III and IV present case studies of Liverpool and Manchester alike, tracing their respective music scenes, displacement of popular GMVs, and council interventions from 1990 to 2019. Chapter V is focused on the analysis of the impact of COVID-19, evaluating local and national policy responses in the two cities. Lastly, Chapter VI synthesises findings, discusses spatial and cultural displacement, and considers how urban governance can support GMVs' sustainability.

Chapter I. Literature Review

This chapter works to provide a comprehensive rundown on the already existing literature that helps answer the research question of what socioeconomic threats GMVs are usually up against. It explains how the inherent social and cultural values of GMVs are often overshadowed by the economic ones, and why that is increasing their precarity when it comes to urban processes such as gentrification and the changing landscape of city's social composition. It engages with the concepts of the creative city and the creative class, the neoliberal foundations of the monopoly of rent and how cultural vibrancy is both a blessing and a curse for urban districts. All of these concepts work together to explain GMV displacement and make clear how important it is for governing bodies to consider the wider influence of these spaces in order to protect them accordingly.

1. **Venues and urban cultural vibrancy**

Defining GMVs

Following Arias (2018), venues can be divided into major commercial, independent, and Do-It-Yourself (DIY) categories. For the purposes of this thesis, the latter two are treated collectively under the term grassroots music venues (GMVs), as both share vulnerabilities linked to property precarity, limited resources, and reliance on local cultural ecosystems. They can be split into small (<350 person capacity), medium (351-650) and large (>651)

GMVs and their economic output also differs according to size, with large GMVs being more profitable and more likely to own their property (Music Venue Trust, 2016: 6). Increasingly endangered are DIY venues because they are run by volunteers and supported by interested parties. Instead of the focus being on the creation of shared memories between community and artists that gives the venue a collective sense of belonging (Bennet & Rogers, 2016: 493), DIY venues are the first to be threatened by urban policy adjustments, city planning and gentrification due to the fact that they are not official structures but makeshift spaces of expression.

DIY, particularly in relation to punk, functions as a form of collective resistance to mainstream, commodified culture like in the case of CBGB, a legendary small live venue in New York city. Defined by its rejection of corporate influence, DIY punk emphasizes autonomy, authenticity, and grassroots creativity. Participants view their involvement as a political and cultural statement that ignores popular ideals, without necessarily rejecting them. They see the scene as an alternative space where they can actively challenge dominant social values and consumer culture. Through their participation, individuals are politically socialized, meaning they develop and express political beliefs, often rooted in anti-capitalist, egalitarian, and community-oriented ideals, in the form of what Hebdige (1979) describes as "semiotic resistance."

These spaces in the context of urban planning are referred to as ''cultural brownfields''. (Andres, 2011), spaces that emerged as ''organic cultural projects in derelict sites'' (ibid, 2011). Existing literature already covers the benefits these places offer to not only artists but also the wider area they are located at (Klamer, 2004; Andres, 2011; Gainza, 2018). Andres' definition of cultural brownfields also awards GMVs with a cultural dimension, which adds substance to the space and can act as an initiative for protection and preservation from possible threats brought by the change of urban surroundings.

1.1 GMVs: The space and its values

Before looking at the threats to those spaces, it is important to establish what the values they carry are. Arjo Klamer, a Dutch cultural economist, combines cultural, social and economic values in a triptych where the three coexist dynamically to maximize the output potential of a cultural asset (Klamer, 2004; 148). Since GMVs have been established cultural assets as explained above, they can also be viewed through Klamer's tripartite value system. In order better grasp the extend of the cultural value a cultural asset possesses, it is important to

understand how distinct the cultural value it produces is from values delivered by a social or an economic asset.

Social values of GMVs

The social values of live venues are summarized by Var der Hoeven & Hitters as such: Social bonding, public engagement and identity (Van der Hoeven & Hitters, 2019: 266-267)

Specifically when it comes to DIY venues, sociologist Culton and Holtzman have investigated types of ''free spaces'' and the cultural value of the scenes they foster (Culton & Holtzman, 2010). Francesca Polletta's (1999) sociology-rooted concept of free spaces offers a compelling framework for understanding the political and cultural significance of DIY punk venues like the CBGB in New York. Defined as grassroots settings that are voluntarily entered, autonomous from dominant societal control, and capable of generating cultural resistance, free spaces serve as incubators for identity formation and collective action. Polletta identifies three types of free spaces: Indigenous spaces (local, showcasing strong solidarity, limited outreach), transmovement spaces, (broad, long-reaching networks but weak recruitment and leadership) and prefigurative spaces that are movement-born, model future ideals with egalitarian relations, without a dominant hierarchical position. According to Culton and Holtzman, Polletta's approach to free spaces differs from others as it 'recognizes that the analysis of the character of social ties is of much more explanatory value than simply depicting free spaces as structural entities' (Culton & Holtzman, 2010: 271).

GMVs are also important as they often serve as arenas for protest and political expression (Van der Hoeven & Hitters, 2019; 267). Many venues and festivals act as platforms for countercultural movements and alternative communities, also frequently collaborating with charities or organisations that advocate for the interests of minority groups, solidifying the social role of grassroots spaces.

Measuring the value of cultural assets and the cultural value of grassroots live venues

When it comes to the cultural values of cultural assets, Klamer raises concerns on the difficulty to explain the exceptionality they possess, which sets them apart from other economic and social goods. According to Klamer, one cannot equate cultural goods against other goods. For economic commodities, the standard test would be to put them against each other and determine their value according to price tag, or social products according to their wider impact, but for cultural goods there is no method of doing so. The mean of measure of

the value of a cultural good Klamer suggests is the way people talk about it in the contexts of 'valuation, evaluation and valorization', making their value a third person issue and not a standardized award. Because of cultural value being assigned depending on the impression cultural goods like a statue make to an outsider, Klamer also alludes to the appreciation being a social matter. For example, he discusses, a Rembrandt valued as 'alright' by the Dutch exponentially doubled in value, not only economic but also cultural, after the American and the Russians got interested in it during the 19th century. Cultural capital generated by cultural products, even though it doesn't depreciate in usage, it only generates more value for the third parties experiencing it, as ''to value something is to have complex positive attitudes towards it'' (Anderson, 1993: 2). This process of valorisation, Klamer argues, should be taken more seriously in the efforts of protecting intangible cultural assets. Unlike Throsby who is an adamant cultural economist and argues that even though the aesthetic, artistic and such values are recognized but can't exist outside the realm of economic commodification, Klamer explains that economic theory goes as far as deciding price tag value without understanding the functions of cultural goods. The cultural sociologists Bennet and Rogers however, although they agree with Throsby in the fact that aesthetics and emotional labour are recognized values, they defend that they can 'surpass any economic imperative' (Bennet & Rogers, 2016: 493).

According to van der Hoeven and Hitters that specialize in the department of cultural identities and memoy, live venues' most distinct cultural outputs are musical creativity, talent development and cultural vibrancy (Van der Hoeven & Hitters, 2019: 267). Cities often influence creativity and the direction of music, acting as ''fertile grounds'' (Garzia, 2013) that provide musicians with proximity to one another (density), diversity and the benefit of affordable spaces. Low rents are especially important to talent development and vibrancy of neighbourhoods, and also the two most vulnerable when it comes to urban change.

The precarious nature of the music industry is deeming musicians as high risk of losing their jobs due to low income while rents are getting higher (Terril, 2015). At the same time, opportunities for emerging musicians to perform in spaces they can afford, are shrinking (Van Vugt, 2018) partly due to the closure of smaller venues unable to cope with expenses related to soundproofing, regulatory demands, and escalating rents (Van der Hoeven & Hitters, 2019).

Live music is ''the cultural life of cities'' (ibid, 268), and according to the aforementioned scholars, ''cultural vibrancy concerns live music's connection to the wider cultural ecology and its contributions to a thriving cultural sector''. The more cultural spaces emerge, the more they boost the vibrancy of neighbourhoods. What threatens this vibrancy is the displacement of musicians and whole music scenes when affordability of space is diminishing due to gentrification. According to Ballico and Carter that specialize on popular music studies, ''strategies, which work to enhance the vibrancy of cities, and often position arts and culture activity as being a vital component – often displace and/or cause tensions for the spaces in which cultural and creative activity takes place during and after such regeneration'' (Ballico and Carter, 2018). What the authors call for is the conservation of the cultural vibrancy of a neighbourhood without it being instrumentally diminished to an economic strategy.

Economic values

When it comes to the treatment of cultural assets, the main feature prioritized is their economic output (Yassai, 2023: 49). Grassroots music venues often do not prioritise profit and that leads to low generation of revenue. (Whiting, 2021). As a result, they often are not considered by the city when it comes to public funding or urban planning (Gainza, 2018: 808), despite their cultural, social, and symbolic contributions. Including both direct revenue and in the grander scheme the 'relevance of live music for cities in monetary terms' (van der Hoeven & Hitters, 2020: 155), cultural consumption is also big part of what drives social and cultural value creation for certain assets. In an example using the CBGB in New York, its open-door policy for artists allowed for more gigs to be played by the neighbourhood's favourites, which drove more traffic through the doors of the venue. This created a well sustained economic interaction between the cultural consumer and product, put the CBGB on the live venue map for even bigger performers, and allowed for its impact in the music scene to be recognized and sustained until today. Adversely, when economics are not prioritized by a venue's management, despite its cultural impact the venue won't be able to sustain long-term losses. Whiting, who is a cultural sociologist, argues that despite a venue's intrinsic cultural value being exchanged for a price 'over the bar or through a ticket vendor' (Whiting, 2021), that should not overshadow its initial desired production, which isn't revenue but community closeness and perhaps an accidental cultural impact.

Whiting differentiates between the two by referring to them as 'intrinsic values' and 'instrumental outputs', and focuses on bridging the gap between them by bringing into the discussion of cultural value the wider concept of neoliberalism, how venues despite being able to operate independently from government intervention find themselves getting 'instrumentalized' by outsiders despite not aiming to do so themselves (ibid, 2021: 560). Since, he identifies, there is a strong trend toward instrumentalizing culture and furtherly justifying cultural funding and support on the basis of economic or social outcomes rather than intrinsic cultural value, venues that have established themselves as profitable are more likely to be protected. His findings are also supported by Van der Hoeven and Hitters who also acknowledge that established venues typically have more economic support due to their recognized contributions to job creation, tourism, and consumer spending, but argue that it's crucial for urban policies to also recognize and support the less tangible, yet equally important, social and cultural values live venues provide.

Klamer isn't the only one to inquire about the favouritism of economic values of cultural assets. In the case of live music venues, Var der Hoeven and Hitters have also investigated the phenomenon, concluding that the favouritism of economic values of venues hinders the policy making for their protection (van der Hoeven & Hitters, 2019: 264 – 267).

Klamer's model is not just diagnostic but also prescriptive as it highlights the need for a culturally embedded way of evaluating value that recognizes narrative, tradition, and ethical context that policymakers must engage with on its own terms and not reduce it to instrumental inputs and outputs, especially when it comes to protecting brownfield spaces from gentrification driven by cultural vibrancy.

1.2 The process of making a neighbourhood vibrant and culturally relevant

Creativity tends to cluster geographically. Lazzeretti et al. attribute the clustering to a combination of geography, history, cultural endowments and productive diversity amongst others (Lazzaretti et al, 2009). This concentration of talent can be positive and negative. On the one hand, creative individuals can access support through grants and pilot programs designed to encourage risk-taking and innovation (Landry, 2000: 28). Landry and Bianchini, two prominent figures in urban regeneration academia, established the concept of a creative city centres places that fosters creativity in all aspects, through policy, urban planning, business, and everyday life. Their ''toolkit'' encourages local governments to rethink city assets, governance, and collective imagination as means to solve urban challenges (Smolka-

Franke, 2021). On this positive side of vibrancy, the role of GMVs as properties is recognized as the facilitator of music scenes. David Byrne defines a scene as "a creative flowering that issues forth from a social nexus" (Byrne, 2012). Drawing on his time as frontman of Talking Heads in his 2012 book 'How Music Works', Byrne identifies the conditions that enable music scenes to thrive. His case is rooted in the unnegotiable need for property existence in order for a music scene to flourish organically and influence the social nexus.

1.3 Weaponizing vibrancy for profit

Sky-high rents today are threatening the foundations of scene-building and endanger the cultural impact of music venues because they are being found to be one of the main reasons why GMVs cease to operate (Van der Hoeven & Hitters, 2020; 5). Without affordability of space, musical impact and clustering becomes impossible because the spaces that allow its flourishing cannot survive. Cities often try to preserve the social vibrancy of GMVs by branding neighbourhoods around them, but neglect the property security these venues need, ultimately compromising the very social impact they were meant to sustain. This is the downside of cultural vibrancy brought by GMVs and how cities utilize it. Music is seen as a relatively low-cost, high-return cultural strategy by city councils to attract investment. (Brown et al, 2000: 447). Cities use iconic music scenes and venues, even long after their peak moments, to brand neighbourhoods with labels like "Jazz Quarter" or "Bohemian Quarter," or more obvious examples such as Harlem and the Northern Quarter in Manchester, often reducing rich cultural histories to simplistic marketing tools while implicating the accessibility of music especially when it comes to marginalized groups. What may appear as an inclusive and grassroots-friendly industry is driven by economic interest and not social interconnectedness (ibid, 447). The economic benefits of this cultural capital are not evenly distributed, as found by Brown. Wealth generated by music scenes seemingly tends to flow into broader speculative processes, such as property development and tourism, rather than directly supporting the communities that created the music culture in the first place.

As cities brand themselves "creative," cultural production becomes increasingly subjected to market logics and economic instrumentalization as explained in earlier sections. The over-focus on economic output through art is also killing creativity. In the creative city, the artist is no longer primarily the producer of cultural value, but increasingly becomes the consumer of the city's curated creative identity. Cities rebranded as "creative" focus on attracting talent by packaging cultural life as an amenity rather than fostering the organic, grassroots processes

that actually produce it (Adorno, 1975: 13). This shift encapsulates the whole process of instrumentalization of culture, where cultural spaces and scenes are expected to deliver measurable economic outputs, ultimately constraining the very creativity they are supposed to enable.

2. The Creative City: The promise, the contradictions and the blind spots

2.1 Creativity for who?

The very word ''creativity'' implies innovation, inventiveness and originality that streams through imagination, and the main when to enable this stream is through providing the artist with the tools he needs to channel it. Imagining a ''creative city'' would allude to an urban arrangement where artists could engage freely with their art. Better yet, a creative city would endorse them to engage freely with their art.

However, the notion of ''creativity'' has been contested twice as much when it comes to urban policy debates (Boren & Young, 2013).The reason why is because by associating the term ''creativity'' with urban policy, or exploring creativity through urban policy, equates to exploring it through an economic lens. The work of many urban theorists (Florida and Tinagli, 2004; O'Connor, 2005;Kong et al., 2006; O'Connor and Xin, 2006, ibid, 2014) have as a central theme that creative cities must ''attract the creative class'' because in this way they will streamline investment capital, this more money to be poured into investing on culture. In theory, it may sound that this model could work. Creative cities must be made attractive not only to the creatives themselves, but also to those that want to invest in creativity and in this way, capital generated will be able to back creative flourishing. Florida encapsulates this model through the three 'T's': talent, technology, and tolerance. Crucially, the theory posits that firms follow creative people not the other way around (ibid, 2013).

One may argue that the contestation of the term ''creativity'' when discussing urban policy is nothing but an attempt to theorize further a straightforward plan. The significance of economic involvement in creativity might not seem like a hefty challenge at first glance, as economic capital truly can streamline innovation through resource disposal and therefore still keep the city creative. The contestation comes not in the definition but in who it addressees. If a creative city wants to attract a new social class that doesn't only comprise by artists but also investors, then who is the city actually for? Scholars like Markusen (2006) and Evans (2009) have pointed out the lack of analytical clarity in how terms like 'creative class' and 'creative city' are deployed in policy practice. This ambiguity often obscures who exactly

benefits from creative-led urban renewal, and what forms of creativity are prioritized. In practice, policy tends to favour highly visible, economically lucrative cultural sectors while marginalizing less commodifiable forms of cultural expression, such as grassroots music venues or DIY spaces that are the main focus of this research.

As cities rebrand themselves around creative capital, the cultural ecosystems that initially make neighbourhoods attractive such as independent music scenes are often the first to be displaced. While the creative city model champions cultural vibrancy and wide acceptance, it paradoxically creates conditions where affordable cultural spaces are eroded and replaced by commercial development. This tension forms a central concern for this thesis: how cultural policy overlook the structural precarity of grassroots cultural spaces, treating them as engines of growth rather than cultural infrastructures that need protection.

2.2 Two tales of creativity: Of the City and of the Class

There is a contextual difference between the creative city and the creative class, as the first one, developed mainly by Landry and Bianchini in 1995, lays out the urban conditions for the creative city, while Florida's Creative Class of 2002 mainly deals with who is served by it. Both act as important manifestos of urban policy development, however the former serves as an idyllic blueprint in its infancy and the latter as a testament of the sell-out of creativity to capitalism.

Landry and Bianchini's vibrant cities

Landry and Bianchini's concept of a creative city centres places that foster creativity in all aspects, through policy, urban planning, business, and everyday life. Their ''toolkit'' encourages local governments to rethink city assets, governance, and collective imagination as means to solve urban challenges (Smolka-Franke, 2021). Landry and Bianchini write that creativity often stems from cultural intersections, where scenes such as Afro-Caribbean Scousers or Chinese Glaswegians exemplify how hybrid identities foster new cultural outputs, also pushing for the inclusion if immigrants when discussing what makes a city diverse. However, this can be challenged when fragmentation happens without communication, which risks cultural stagnation and marginalization (Landry, 2000: 28). In urban policy they write, policymakers must ensure that cultural diversity becomes a dynamic process of exchange and not a set of parallel existences.

On another note, creative individuals themselves need support through grants and pilot programs designed to encourage risk-taking and innovation (Landry, 2000: 28). Local authorities should recognize and embrace a concept they refer to as 'creative deviance', providing space for ideas that may not initially align with mainstream economic or cultural agendas. Once again, Landry emphasizes the role of settled immigrants in revitalizing urban life and streamlining new entrepreneurial models through cultural practices, and business strategies that reshape neighbourhoods (Burke, 1997; Landry, 2000: 28). The challenge lies in balancing integration with the preservation of distinct cultural contributions, allowing for creative hybridity to flourish organically.

Richard Florida's ' Creative Class '

To flourish organically would mean that flourishing comes through authentic processes that don't selectively target particular purposes such as economic growth. In Richard Florida's creative class, the driving force behind a city's economic growth comes from targeting a group of professionals defined by their capacity for creativity and innovation. This "creative class" includes scientists, engineers, artists, designers, technology experts, and cultural entrepreneurs, all workers whose primary job tasks involve generating new ideas and intellectual labour. According to Florida, cities and regions that succeed in attracting and retaining this class of people outperform others in terms of economic dynamism, innovation, and cultural vibrancy. Central to his framework are the "Three T's" also mentioned earlier, summarized as talent, technology, and tolerance. Florida asserts that strong economies are built where there is a high concentration of skilled and creative individuals (Talent), robust technological infrastructure (Technology), and an open, inclusive social environment that values diversity and supports individual expression (Tolerance). However, his theory has faced criticism for its emphasis on a privileged social group and for contributing to gentrification and inequality, as efforts to attract the creative class can sometimes neglect or displace other segments of the urban population. It also comes to a direct clash with Landry's organic flourishing of creativity, as the whole point of attracting the creative class is to generate economic income through creativity that isn't exactly ''forced'' but is arising through an inorganic clustering. Nevertheless, Florida's concept remains highly influential in discussions of urban economic development and city planning because despite its internal clashes with what creativity actually entails, it serves as a map to designing cities that positively influence artists.

Florida's plan about creativity optimization driven by inorganic concentration of labour in specific places can have several effects. One is creative clustering and the other is instrumentalization of culture. Both share a common driver: neoliberalism. Florida's master plan for attracting the creative class and David Harvey's (2006) definition of neoliberalism are the same sides of the coin, where neoliberalization is described as a ''tidal wave of institutional reform and discursive adjustment, entailing much destruction, not only of prior institutional frameworks and powers, but also of divisions of labour, social relations, welfare provisions, technological mixes, ways of life, attachments to the land, habits of the heart, ways of thought, and the like ''. (Harvey, 2006)

2.3 Neoliberalism and commodification of culture

Neoliberalism changed two crucial factors that contribute to the loss of grassroots live venues: culture, through commodification, and rent, through monopoly.

Commodification of culture has been a long-standing phenomenon in the field of cultural research. Adorno in 1975, writing with Max Horkheimer, argued that the so-called "culture industry" transforms all cultural expression into standardized, commodified products designed not to challenge but to pacify and reproduce the dominant social order. In his view, even seemingly oppositional or innovative cultural forms become neutralized once they are funnelled through the mechanisms of mass production and mass consumption. Under this system, cultural products lose their critical, emancipatory potential and become predictable, consumable experiences that reinforce conformity. The process happens from above, where the market is the one controlling the consumer and administering concentration (Adorno, 1975: 13). He weighs on the usage of the word 'industry'. 'Not to be taken literally' he explains, as it cultural production like film-making, music and books, isn't always physically industrial, as it's not always produced on factory assembly lines. The logic behind it however, is industrial. Referring to a process of standardization of a products itself, like Western cinema, everyone knows what to expect from a western film in terms of plots, characters and style. If a product is standardized, even when new products are made, they follow a fixed pattern. The term 'industry' also involves product distribution, as for Adorno the "rationalization of distribution techniques", how things are marketed, is also unimaginative and repetitive.

Lastly, and most importantly, Adorno explains that the neoliberal system is designed to absorb difference, extract the radicalism and return it to consumers as novelty. For example,

punk fashion appearing in Cosmopolitan in 1977 after the Sex Pistols' success was not a surprising twist, but rather an illustration of how the culture industry flattens the political and aesthetic charge of rebellion into "style." Adorno's insertions however, can be arguably considered much more pessimistic than Hebdige's[2] for example as the loss of radical edge isn't simply an indication of commodification, but also makes one question if there can ever be progress for other cultural goods. What he describes as 'a parade of progress in the culture industry' in the eyes of offer it 'remains the disguise for an eternal sameness' (ibid, 1975).

Within this neoliberal modernity, culture, the substance of the venue, becomes a product, and resistance is pre-emptively defused through its assimilation into the market. This raises urgent questions about whether authentic cultural resistance is possible in a system that so efficiently commodifies even its own critiques.

2.4 The monopoly of rent

David Harvey explains how monopolizing rent is affecting those engages in cultural labour. Monopoly rent, a term borrowed from the realm of political economy, t's the extra income someone can make because they control something as an asset, a property for example, that is unique and non-replicable (Harvey, 2002: 94). The uniqueness allows the owner to charge more over time as the rent is extracted from the unique qualities of a resource or a product, or even a location. Harvey supports that even though the neoliberal ideology endorses competition as the guardian of efficient markets, competition inevitably leans toward monopoly or oligopoly, since weaker firms are eliminated by stronger rivals [3]. This paradox is starkly visible in the contemporary urban development, where competition in property markets accelerates the concentration of land ownership in the hands of large developers, corporate landlords, and financial investors. Just as the liberalization of global markets has produced corporate giants like Microsoft or Murdoch's media empire (Harvey, 2002: 96), urban liberalization and deregulation have facilitated waves of mergers, buyouts, and speculative investment in land. In the case of GMVs, which typically rent rather than own

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[2] Dick Hebdige through his work on Subcultures: The Meaning of Style, addresses some of the dangers of using symbols to communicate an ideal. Clarke (1976) observed that 'The diffusion of youth styles from the subcultures to the fashion market is not simply a 'cultural process', but a real network or infrastructure of new kinds of commercial and economic institutions' (Hebdige, 2005: 91-2). Through mediums like small record shops, indie music labels, fashion boutiques, and even very small-scale production efforts run by just one or two people, what Hebdige refers to as "artisan capitalism'' acts as the bridge between the underground subcultural scene and the commercial market.

[3] Observation by Karl Marx, summarized in Harvey's ''The Limits to Capital'' chapter 5.

their spaces, we can argue that this dynamic creates acute vulnerability: as property consolidates into fewer hands, landlords with little interest in cultural value escalate rents or repurpose buildings for higher-yield uses. Thus, while GMVs generate much of the "special quality" Harvey talked about, that makes neighbourhoods attractive and culturally vibrant, the monopoly rents derived from rising property values are exploited by developers rather than the cultural producers themselves, leading to gentrification, displacement, and the erosion of local cultural infrastructure.

2.5 The birth of the Rentier City and the case of developers

As cities rebrand through creativity to attract affluent professionals and global investment according to Florida's creative class, they prioritize high-profile cultural projects and property development over social inclusion (Miles, 2013: 4). . This process changes the social fabric of neighbourhoods, pushing out local communities and small businesses in favour of the new class (ibid, 6). The creative model then, while presented as beneficial for artistic development and culture, begins serving private interests, using culture as a tool to raise land values and justify redevelopment, ultimately marginalizing those who can no longer afford to remain.

This shift in urban priorities sets the stage for what scholars describe as the rentier city (Sanghera, 2021; Rose, 2024; De Jong; 2019). In this model, the city's economy becomes increasingly dependent on property speculation and rising land values and the extraction of rent comes above creativity. The result is a city where value is extracted not through creation but through ownership and access to property, accelerating displacement of DIY live venues in the process.

Matt Wilde uses London to show how state-led regeneration reshaped the city, more than culture-led examples (Wilde, 2019). In the early 1980s, London had extensive council housing with lifetime tenancies, but Right-to-Buy (RTB) policies from 1980 drastically reduced this stock without adequate replacement (Wilde, 2019: 65). Many homes entered speculative property markets as buy-to-let assets, eroding security (ibid, 67). Since the late 1990s, the housing market has become heavily financialized, turning London into a global hub for real estate speculation. Local councils deepened this trend by working with private developers to demolish estates and build mixed-income, often luxury developments, prioritising profit over social and cultural needs. This displaced low-income communities and fuelled rent rises (Wilde, 2019: 68).

Similar priorities appear in cultural policy. Behr et al. (2014) show how public resources flow toward large-scale projects such as Leeds Arena or Glasgow's SSE Hydro, and to high culture institutions like Opera North or the Royal Scottish National Orchestra (Behr et al., 2014: 5). Councils also partner with promoters like Live Nation to run council-owned venues, keeping them profitable while limiting financial risk. These strategies fit wider urban planning goals that use music branding for economic development (ibid, 2014).

Martinelli et. al (Martinelli; Moulaert; Gonzalez, 2010: 216) further use the examples of Olinda, City Mine(d), and the Ouseburn Trust to showcase the dynamic between community and private firms. By emphasizing the contrast between community organisations that use contradictions as a resource for adaptability and resilience against the structural power of private developers, they find that community-led initiatives face significant constraints. In the case of the Ouseburn Trust, while it successfully positioned itself as a mediator with local government, developers actively disregarded its role and negotiated directly with city authorities, proving how market actors can undermine participatory governance structures.

This exposes the persistent imbalance between communities that rely on social capital and collaborative practices, and developers, whose direct access to political institutions allows them to set the terms of urban transformation. Far from being neutral, developers operate as gatekeepers of urban change, often rendering community voices secondary in planning processes, even as those very communities are responsible for producing the cultural and social vibrancy that enhances the area's appeal.

3. The role of councils in protecting GMVs

The proactivity of councils when it comes to supporting large-scale, commercial cultural projects because of their alignment with economic capital, leaves grassroots cultural spaces like independent venues vulnerable. Policy tends to be reactive at best and neglectful at worst, as it has been prompting advocacy after displacement has already occurred, rather than through pre-emptive measures that preserve cultural infrastructure (Behr et al, 2014: 5).

A proactive cultural policy would involve recognizing the social and economic value of small, independent venues before they are at risk, integrating their protection into planning frameworks and licensing decisions through urban development strategies. This could include tools like the "agent of change" principle, where new residential developers must account for existing noise environments, or specific protections for venues under heritage, cultural, or zoning policies.

Currently, councils' proactivity is often selective and market-driven and tends towards favouring projects that produce short-term economic returns and higher land values which align with the logic of the rentier city. For policy proactivity to be truly balanced, local authorities would need to shift from seeing culture as just a tool for economic growth and instead adopt a holistic approach that sustains the entire cultural ecology, from grassroots to mainstream. This means embedding the protection of independent venues into long-term planning, recognizing their role not just in economic terms, but as vital spaces for community, creativity, and social cohesion. Without this shift, cities risk undermining the very cultural foundations that make them vibrant and unique.

3.1 The current landscape

The increased operating expenses together with increases in utilities such as energy, and above all the cost to rent the space started bearing heavy on the shoulders of live venues across the UK (A2D2, 2025). According to the Music Venue Trust, 89% of live venues rent their space, with an annual salary of £20,400 and monthly rent payments just over £3.000, almost double their entire monthly income (MVT, 2022) . As a result, around three-quarters of businesses in the night-time economy were at risk of insolvency as a result of outstanding rent debts. As a response to many other cultural assets being threatened by rising costs, the government initiated the Cultural Recovery Fund.

The neglect the live music scene faced after the lifting of the lockdown was disproportionate to the efforts made by the government to restore other sectors, even if its contribution to the general UK economy being over £500m (ibid).

As shown, GMVs are central to urban cultural vibrancy, fostering creative clustering, local identity, and community engagement (Arias, 2018; Byrne, 2012; Lazzeretti et al., 2009). Yet their visibility and cultural value also make them vulnerable to gentrification and unannounced property pressures. As Smith (1987), Lees (1994), and Gelbard (2023) show, GMVs often consist of gentrifiable properties, where rising rents and ownership instability threaten their survival. Wilde (2019) and Behr et al. (2014) demonstrate that policy frameworks and urban regeneration frequently prioritise larger or commercially aligned venues, leaving grassroots spaces exposed. The section thus pinpointed what the introduction referred to as ''misalignment of values''. While GMVs generate significant social value alongside some economic value, their protection depends on targeted measures addressing the economic dimensions of ownership and urban planning.

Chapter II. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

This chapter will provide the reader with the frameworks through which the policies of the Manchester and Liverpool council's will be analysed through in Chapter 5, to answer the question:

How have Manchester and Liverpool city councils responded to the pressures faced by grassroots music venues during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, and to what extent have these responses safeguarded GMVs' right to urban space

The Right to the City and the spatial value both are comprehensive concepts that take into account the socioeconomic conditions that contribute to the survival of a GMV. The Right to the City is a more theoretical framework that targets the abstract right a space that culturally enhances a city, has to exist and protect. The spatial value on the other hand, engages with the conditions that threaten a GMV materially, with displacement which makes easier to target them through policy.

1. The Right to the City as a normative frame

Henry Lefebvre's 'Right to the City ' (1967) provides this research with an insightful framework for 3 main reasons. It situates the right, justifies it and addresses it in relation to the city as an incubator.

Grassroots music venues embody "space as oeuvre": they are lived, social infrastructures that enable collective creativity and cultural participation. Yet when policies treat the city as "space as product" subject to branding and rent extraction, grassroots venues do not have a way out of vulnerability. Understanding this dynamic helps frame the loss of grassroots venues not just as market failure, but as a form of cultural alienation resulting from the commercialization of urban space. As a movement, the Right to the City encapsulates a democratic approach to managing urban space, accessible to everyone and managed by everyone equally. From his writings, one gathers that for Lefebvre the right to the city is not just about access to housing or public services but about reclaiming the urban way of life as a collective and participatory way of existence. He argues that cities are where human flourishing happens through social encounters, cultural differences, political dialogue, and shared spaces for experimentation and expression (Lefebvre, 1996: 75).

The right to the city is compromised by current market forces that allow some to enjoy the city more than others, often replacing foundational aspects that made the city in the first

place. Harvey through his work on Lefebvre's right to the city, critiques how many groups fight for affordable housing and against displacement or for cultural rights without having yet converged on the structural issue of who governs urban surplus and space (Harvey, 2008: 14). This is awarding the thesis with a new dimension, the success to reclaim the right to the city is tied to the identification of who is responsible for the governance of space and how they are proactively managing the crisis. Real decisions about spatiality, who stays and who gets pushed out, are mediated by policy and local governance. By making the targeting of authorities conditional to reclaiming the right to the city, tackling the music venue crisis moves from blame to accountability. Observing therefore the right to the city as a tool that goes beyond diagnosing the crisis to evaluating solutions, we can reframe the loss of GMVs not an outcome of market forces but as a policy choice and responsibility of urban governance which will then beg the question of what councils could, and should, be doing differently.

By investigating council productivity in relation to whether they safeguard GMVs' right to urban space positions grassroots venues as a good litmus test for urban democracy. If councils are proactive, they will be able to translate the importance of GMVs into concrete policy protections through interventions that counteract market pressures that displace them. If councils will be found to be passive or inconsistent, then GMVs' displacement illustrates how cultural rights are subordinated to property logics and development priorities.

2. Spatial value

Spatiality, meaning the surroundings of a place, influences the impact and longevity of a music venue (Wang & Zou, 2021). By looking at the degree to which local policies embrace the surroundings of a venue, we not only get a better understanding about how much councils value the existence of GMVs within a society, but also how successfully they can harmonize GMVs with elements of urban development that alter the urban terrain.

2.1 What is spatial value

Spatial value (Van de Hoeven & Hitters, 2020), as the term would suggest, refers to the significance of a location and the value attached to it through its interaction with other elements within a space. In the particular case of live GMVs, spatial value is helpful because while encompassing social, cultural and economic values of live venues, it investigates how such spaces are part of the urban environment and how the urban environment itself affects

them in return (ibid, 156). When these spaces are closed or redeveloped due to rising rents, entire musical pathways are severed.

Spatial policy must reflect GMVs not just as entertainment sites but part of embedded cultural memory into specific locations (Finnegan, 2007). Recognizing this complexity ensures that venues keep acting as cultural anchors for the wider community in urban space. Without it, cultural ecosystems risk permanent displacement.

2.2 Opportunities and Threats to spatial value

Van der Hoeven and Hitters through their research have constructed the below table of challenges and supporting actions for the spatial value of live music. This will act as a guideline when evaluating the proactivity of Manchester and Liverpool's city councils when it comes to recognizing not only the important role spatial value plays in regards to the cultural output of a neighbourhoods but how vulnerable it is amidst spatial change. The limits of the below table, especially regarding the threats, that Van der Hoeven and Hitters seem to present them as categories and not processes, risking the table becoming static and not accounting for temporal and contextual differences between cities that might want to take it as a reference for their urban policies. Nonetheless, despite these limits, the table remains a valuable guideline for assessing council proactivity and understanding the vulnerabilities of cultural spaces in urban change.

Main themes	Dimensions	Manifestations in the data
Challenges to achieving spatial value	Impact of the environment	• Gentrification • Lack of affordable spaces • Lack of activity around venues
	Impact on the environment	• Noise issues • Unavailability of public spaces during events • Negative impact on flora and fauna
Supporting spatial value	Building networks	• Connecting actors with different interests and identifying common ground • Creating interdisciplinary networks through lobbying by music advisory boards
	Establishing strategies	• Mapping live music stages • Creating dedicated policies • Allocating resources and having a single point of contact at town halls
	Creating and sustaining places for live music	• Securing spaces and finding under-used spaces • Including music in the plans for new developments • Addressing noise issues (e.g., the agent of change principle, informing prospective neighbours, and mediation between venues and neighbours) • Measures to mitigate the effects of gentrification (i.e., supporting socio-cultural values instead of maximising profits; imposing conditions when selling buildings) • Using special designations (i.e., a heritage status or creating entertainment precincts)

Van der Hoeven and Hitters (2020: 158), the challenges to achieving spatial value include gentrification, lack of affordable spaces, and conflicts over public space use, Geoforum, 117, 154–164

3. Methodology – Mixed Approach

The thesis will look at local and national policies that target the displacement of GMVs caused by the above threats, to better assess how city councils are safeguarding the venues' spatial value and affordability of space.

The chosen case studies are Manchester and Liverpool as they are two cities with similar music legacies but different policy responses. As per May 2025, Liverpool has been reported to be the worst hit city with 74 fewer events (A2D2, 2025). When it comes to affordability of space, the housing market in the beginning of the 90s was also similar for the two cities, with Manchester rentals showed to be slightly higher, costing around £65 to £75 per week (Gillespie et al, 2021) and Liverpool £35 to £45 per week (Pygott & Crone, 2018) .

Musically, both cities experienced the cultural buzz in the 90s, with Manchester on the frontlines of the ''Madchester'' movement, and both cities successfully influencing the Britpop movement and Cool Britannia cult sensation of the 2000s, notably through the infamous live venues Cream in Liverpool and the Hacienda in Manchester, both of which have now been demolished and repurposed into luxury apartments.

The decision to also look at the years between 1990–2024 was taken in order to holistically capture economic, political and social changes that might have impacted rent trends and the urban fabric of the two cities. Post-Thatcher's urban North, the 2008 financial, the Brexit impact, the COVID-19 pandemic aftermath and the current cost-of-living and property crises will give this thesis a change to also view the state response to other crises such as the 2008 financial breakdown, in order to view how live venues kept up during the times of rental uncertainty. The majority of the research however will focus on the eve of and after COVID as this is the time period where the majority of venue closures began to occur. Looking at this will help determine what has changed, or remained stagnant in policy and what that left venues vulnerable, making Liverpool one of the worst hit cities.

The way the thesis will investigate council proactivity in regards to safeguarding the operation of GMVs amidst increased socioeconomic turmoil will primarily be done through policy comparisons. By comparing two cities with shared post-industrial trajectories but different cultural policies, the research examines how different governance styles either affirm or deny the Right to the City and based on that, how they safeguard the spatial value and security of GMVs. The goal is to emphasize the accountability of councils not only to

economic imperatives but also to the cultural and social infrastructures that sustain urban life. The thesis will look for three things.

i.   Local measures and initiatives supporting GMVs

ii.   Harmonisation with national measures that target GMVs, primarily the Agent of Change

iii.   Response toward displacement by looking at how councils ensure affordability of space.

For the third part of the investigation, the thesis will also use quantitative data, specifically housing prices and their fluctuations as observed by the Office of National Statistics (ONS), in order to measure the impact of the housing crisis on the two cities and see whether ensuring that GMVs can continue to operate during rental pressures is a struggle acknowledged by councils or not.

Chapter III. Liverpool's Cultural Urbanism and the Changing Landscape of Music, 1990–2019

This chapter aims to provide a comprehensive overview on Liverpool's urban transformation from 1990 up until the wake of COVID-19, while focusing on how this transformation has been interacting with Liverpool's live music scene.

1. Post-Industrial Liverpool and Cultural Rebranding from 1990–2003

Before discussing the urban regeneration processes that dominated the 1990s in Liverpool, there needs to be an appropriate foundation layering in regards to the socioeconomic arrangements of Liverpool.. During the 1980s, Liverpool's urban policy was defined primarily by two things: the Merseyside port decline due to the increase in trade with Europe which was mainly done through southern ports and the subsequent abandonment of port industry, and by the Thatcher government's emphasis on private sector-led regeneration through the creation of Urban Development Corporations (UDCs) (Lauria, 1994). The Merseyside Development Corporation (MDC) was established with broad planning powers to attract private investment and revitalise the declining port city. However, the market-driven approach dominated by large developers struggled to deliver when it came to industrial growth. It is estimated that between 1981 and 1991, Liverpool experienced a sharp decline in both employment and population, with the number of jobs falling by 23% (around 59,000

jobs lost) and the population decreasing by 12% (approximately 60,000 people). During this period, social and economic disadvantage, once concentrated in the inner city, spread outward to encompass the city's outer council estates as well (Meegan, 2004: 147). Paradoxically, one of Liverpool's most infamous live venues, The Picket, emerged from the People's Centre, an unemployment resource hub established in 1979. By 1984, it housed a live music venue, a recording studio with equipment donated by Pete Townshend of The Who, and a music information service. The Picket became a vital space for local talent, hosting acts like The La's and Rain (Lashua, 2011: 143).

After the MDC failed to stimulate industrial interest, it focused on developing the social and economic sectors. As the city's economic decline persisted and national policy shifted toward closer ties with Europe, Liverpool became eligible for European Structural Funds (Meegan, 2004: 140). These included the Objective Two programme and the Merseyside Integrated Development Operation (IDO), which marked a shift toward more collaborative, multi-sector governance and laid the foundation for a more partnership-focused regeneration strategy in the following decade (ibid, 147).

In 1995, the multisector plan had become the central approach to regeneration in Liverpool and its wider city-region. This shift was formalised in 1995 with the creation of the Liverpool Partnership Group which brought together the chief executives of 18 key public, private, and voluntary sector organisations including the city council, housing associations, the Employment Service, and local universities (Meegan, 2004: 149). This collaborative approach was later reinforced by the Local Government Act of 2000, which solidified the powers of local authorities, allowing them to take any actions necessary to promote the economic, social, and environmental coherence of their respected areas.

Although the late 1990s to 2007 saw economic growth, inward migration, and a brief reversal of outward migration, the city's inner areas still faced persistent population loss (Nevin, 2010: 721). Demand for new-builds increased, but older housing remained undesirable, as many chose to relocate to more affluent neighbourhoods. Even during the economic boom, there was no resurgence of interest. Between 1991 and 2001, Liverpool experienced a net increase of 8,500 dwellings despite stagnant household growth, leading to a rise in vacancies. This deterioration accelerated after 1989, when funding shifted from renovation support to means-tested grants, exposing a concerning recurring pattern: every time large-scale public investment ceased, neighbourhoods declined in the blink of an eye (ibid, 721).

What signified the shift to more affluent areas was the closure of The People's Centre early 2000s, prompting a high-profile "Save the Picket" campaign (Lashua, 2011: 143). The Picket itself eventually found a new home in another area of the city, the "Independent's Quarter" initiated to support "indie" arts and cultural groups'' (ibid, 143). This closure was categorized as one of the ''examples of gentrification'' Liverpool underwent, alongside the heavy over-exposure of Liverpool's association with the Beatles and underground music culture (Lashua, 2011: 145).

1.1 The European Capital of Culture and Urban Revitalisation

In the wake of the 2000s, Liverpool bided to become European Capital of Culture (ECOC) in 2008. The bid won in 2003 and became a major driver for Liverpool's regeneration and cultural visibility. During the years leading up to 2008, a number of concerns were raised regarding Liverpool's bidding victory. Some argue the success was to be awarded to the fact that Liverpool was ''the people's bid'' (Jones & Heeg, 2004), as the local community felt like everyone was equally in on it. On the other hand, Liverpool as the ECOC 2008 would bring economic benefit for the deprived communities, create jobs, and be used as a plank for a wider urban renaissance (ibid, 342). Jones & Heeg have explored the two sides of the victory bid as rather dichotomized. The top-down economic rebranding versus a bottom-up community engagement. While rebranding can help post-industrial cities like Liverpool attract visitors and investment and better the quality of life for its people, it can also lead to prioritising tourists over residents. Mitchell (2000) calls this a "culture war" were there is evident battles between local elites promoting a marketable city image and local communities seeking to preserve authentic cultural identities and spaces (Jones & Heeg, 2004).

''The World in One City'' was the slogan used to promote Liverpool as the upcoming ECOC. Ironically, at the time, Liverpool was among the most segregated cities in the UK (Gifford et al., 1989), suggesting that there may have been a gloomy truth behind the optimistic branding. Despite the inclusive rhetoric, the city council failed to meaningfully address multiculturalism or the persistent inequalities between communities, both in policy and in the city's public image. Instead, the large-scale development of retail centres, arenas, and supporting infrastructure for the ECOC vision often exacerbated existing social divides, rather than bridging them. The height of this tension between new planning policies and marginalized communities is clearly shown in the struggle over Quiggins, a creative retail hub home to around 50 small, independent businesses, which was targeted for demolition

under the Paradise Street Development plan (Jones & Heeg, 2004: 355). Replacing it with high-end retail spaces threatened to displace local businesses and weaken the very cultural foundations the city claimed to celebrate, essentially undermining the organic cultural ecosystems that made Liverpool an attractive bid to consider in the first place (ibid, 2004).

Opposition to the buying of Quiggins by private contractors resulted to big petitions considered in the House of Commons. The traction this redevelopment gained was even realized in an independent report by RICS, which supported that inviting big retail brands into city centres can lead to rising rents and homogenization, making it difficult for small creative businesses, like Quiggins, to survive as alternative businesses often cannot compete financially with large chains (Jones & Heeg, 2004: 354). The result is often exclusion from redeveloped areas or complete erasure, just like in the case of the Picket, which although instrumental for the promotion of local bands like The La's and The Coral, was valued at around £3 million sold off to redevelopers to turn to loft apartments (ibid, 2004).

1.2 The Year 2008

Between 2000 and the end of 2008, Liverpool city centre saw nearly £4 billion invested in its physical infrastructure. The year 2008 marked the height of this development boom, with approximately £1.5 billion worth of projects completed.

Liverpool 08, as academics refer to the city during the particular year, was met with both successes and failures. It attracted many first-time visits, the arts infrastructure benefited from increased direct funding from both Arts Council England and Liverpool City Council (Garcia et al., 2010) and individual artists and organisations also received additional support for specific projects (Impacts 08, 2009: 2). The Impacts 08 report that solely focuses on the year 2008, notes that the most supported sector was the arts, also boosting the city's reputation and attracted both visitors and locals to its cultural world. By the end of 2008, 51% of local cultural peers believed Liverpool had been repositioned as a 'world-class city', while at least 15 ECOC events were rated 'world class' or 'excellent' by expert reviewers. The city became home to 1,683 creative enterprises employing 11,000 people , an 8% increase since 2004, and the largest cultural institutions collectively reached an audience of over 5.6 million (ibid, 2009).

On the downside, criticism of the 2008 programme includes the volume of international artists to boost traffic, instead of uplifting and investing in local musicians. Apollo magazine raises that ''questions of infrastructure affecting Liverpool's artists – such as a lack of studio

space – have still not been confronted'' (Harris, 2018) by the Liverpool council. Combined with the replacement of many original venues, this focus on marketable cultural identity for the sake of economic growth, albeit not ill-hearted or intentionally malicious against local musicians, has resulted in a city that is now paying the price with most live venue closures as of May 2025.

2. Housing Inflation post-2008 and the decline of grassroots culture

The ''Capital of Culture'' effect significantly raised the house prices from 2003 to 2005 (Impacts 08, 2009: 11). The very fast booming partly driven by the anticipation of regeneration for the 2008 year created a speculative market, raised prices based on future improvements, often even before any actual work began (Nevi, 2010: 722). Surprisingly, the biggest price jumps happened in areas scheduled for demolition ("clearance areas"), which according to Nevi had more to do with entrepreneurial decisions than gentrification. On the other hand, in the inner city there was a substantial influx of investment from private parties which increased the sales volumes of terraced properties in Liverpool's renewed areas by 53.8% (Nevin, 2006).

As it can be seen in the below graph, chronic stagnancy in housing prices begun resolving as soon as Liverpool was announced as ECOC in 2003, for all types of property (detached, semi-detached, terraced and flat), with sharp increases during key periods of regeneration as the city prepared for 2008.

Average Property Selling Prices in Liverpool (£000's)
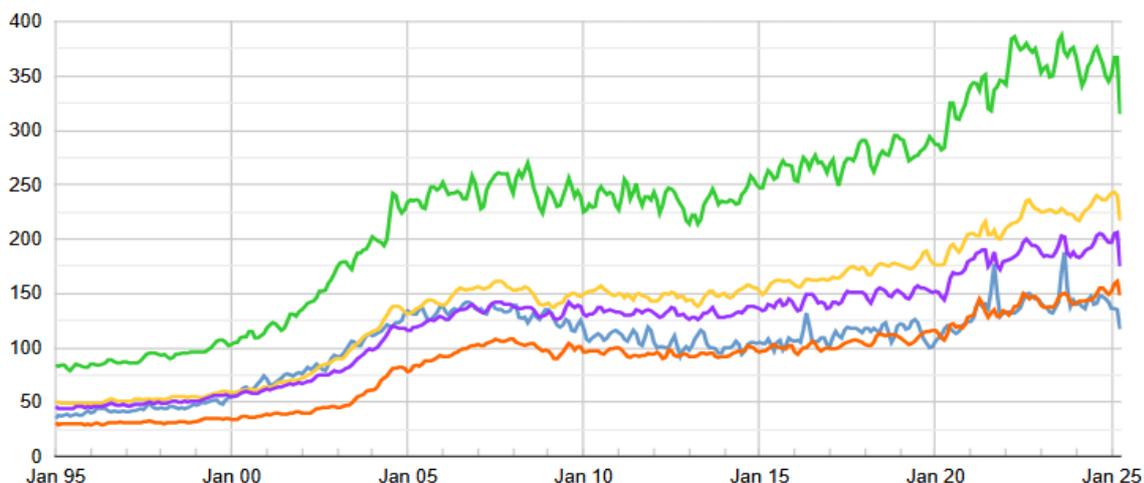
Average property selling prices in Liverpool 1995-2025 via Home.co.uk

Combining insights from the previous graph (average property prices) and this one (number of properties sold in Liverpool), a clearer picture of the property market's transformation emerges. From the early 2000s until 2007, we see both a steep rise in property values and a surge in transaction volumes driven largely by regeneration incentives for 2008 and
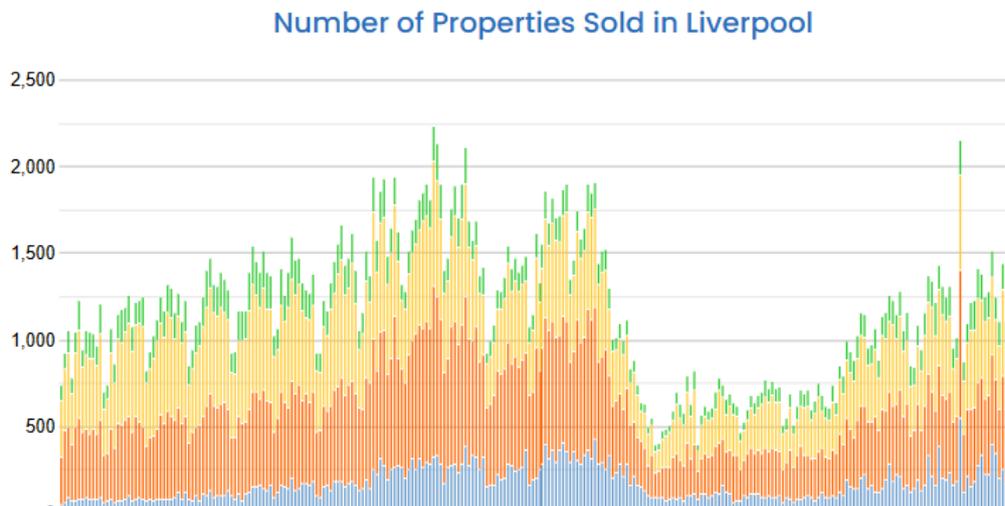
Number of properties sold in Liverpool 1995-2025 via Home.co.uk

speculative investment. Yet, following the 2008 financial crisis, transaction volumes have seemingly plummeted while prices, although fluctuating within equal boarders, remained relatively high and resumed climbing by the mid-2010s.

The main reason for the dive in property sales was the austerity measures as a result of the financial crisis of 2008 (Kennet et al, 2015). Since then, it has been reported that the council has reduced public spending by £420 (Local Government Chronicles) and a loss of nearly 9,000 public sector positions. As property prices rose and buyer competition remained relatively low, the city became increasingly attractive to foreign development firms. While initial investment up to 2008 helped fuel a cultural renaissance, this wave of development eventually gave way to a booming speculative property market. The result was not only the transformation of entire neighbourhoods, but also the displacement of the very grassroots venues that had fostered the cultural vibrancy which made Liverpool appealing to investors in the first place. Remarkable losses include that of Mello Mello in 2014 and the Kazimier in 2016.

In the case of Mello Mello, one of the most unique ''pre-bars'' according to the Liverpool Guide, the venue closed because the building it occupied was sold to an unnamed buyer who outbid the community-led campaign to save it (Get In On This, 2014). Despite months of

public support and fundraising, the receivers accepted a higher private offer. In the case of the Kazimier, another popular live venue of Liverpool, the large-scale redevelopment of the Wolstenholme Square area was a direct blow (The Guardian, 2015). As part of the regeneration project, the building that housed the venue was slated for demolition or significant alteration, forcing it to shut its doors on New Year's Day 2016. While the owners were offered a new location within the redeveloped area, the closure reflects the sly cultural displacement that looms behind commercial and residential expansion, even when the value of venues to the local community is widely recognized (ibid, 2016). The venue was replaced by flats, and was forced to switch locations.

3. Council reactions to cultural displacement and main changes in urban cultural policy 2015–2019

The closure of Mello Mello opened the door to the greater debate on council proactivity regarding the arts. In a commentary offered by online music magazine 'Get In On This' was reported that the community felt as if there was a growing disconnect between Liverpool City Council's stated cultural ambitions and its actual urban development practices (Get In On This, 2015). Despite plans such as the Strategic Investment Framework (SIF) and the Liverpool Cultural Action Plan 2014–2018 which all articulate a vision of culture as central to urban regeneration, community well-being, and economic sustainability, the wave of closures including Mello Mello, Static Gallery, Drop the Dumbbulls and Wolstenholme Creative Space, all small live venues that hosted multiple local bands and DJs, suggest that the policy framework is not being meaningfully enacted (Get In On This, 2014). Council officials although having expressed strong rhetorical support for Liverpool's independent cultural life and pledging to empower creative industries as part of a broader civic renewal, have allowed for grassroots venues to be sold off despite community resistance and active crowdfunding efforts.

Cultural support around the time of austerity appears to exist more in rhetoric than in actual binding policy mechanisms. The implementation of austerity policies in the UK and specifically the significant cuts to local government funding, directly affected Liverpool City Council's ability to commission or support cultural research, including the Beatles Report of 2016 (Jones, 2020: 83). The delay in starting the particular report is symbolic consequence of the broader issue of the financial weakening of local governance due to the austere fiscal strategies of 2010 (ibid, 84).The council's use of culture hints towards strategy and not authentic concern, in an attempt to attract investment and rebrand Liverpool. The interest in

unique cultural values of venues has not been matched by protections that ensure cultural sustainability once property values rise. Instead, venues are displaced or shut down, clearing space for high-end developments (Get In On This, 2015). Despite the profound correlation between affordable space unavailability, climbing housing prices and venue displacement, the council was reluctant to address the issue head on.

3.1 The 2015 UNESCO City of Music

Instead, Liverpool placed a bid for UK City of Music, and won in 2015. In a new effort to place Liverpool back on the cultural map after the ECOC 08 relapse, and perhaps draw in some more investment under the name of culture, Liverpool this time would focus on their musical contributions as a city.

To boost musical heritage, a Liverpool Committee report on the economic values of the Beatles was released in 2016, commissioned by the council itself. The legacy of the Beatles was grand, reportedly adding £82million to the Liverpool economy each year, and creating around 2,400 jobs (Yates, 2016). Risking the ''eventification'' of the city and the commodification of one of the most famous bands to have come out of Liverpool, the report also focuses on the Cavern City Tours that was established in 1983 with aim to provide tourists with a full-packaged Beatles experience (Beatles Heritage Report, 2016: 14). The company runs Magical Mystery Tours daily, year-round Beatles excursions, the annual International Beatleweek Festival, and manages the Cavern Club and Cavern Pub, both of which host live music every day, often featuring major pop acts (ibid, 2016). Although overall benefitting Liverpool's economy, the over-reliance on the Beatles has been impacting live music negatively. Only £0.75m of £7.2m turnover goes to live music (ibid, 2016), a disproportionate allocation of cultural capital where institutions like CCT can attract international attention and policy favour, while small, innovative spaces that do not cater to cultural economy struggle to survive, especially amid rising rents and redevelopment pressures. Secondly, these venues only hire a limited 55 local musicians, but these are largely for Beatles-related gigs, not original or genre-diverse music, compromising artist creativity in return for a pay check. Grassroots venues, by stark contrast, often rely on volunteers or operate at losses, without this level of state or tourist support.

One could argue that Cavern City Tours targets a very specific market segment, mainly tourists seeking a curated Beatles-themed experience, so consequently it would be a generalisation to claim they directly harm grassroots venues. In fact, their success isn't

inherently negative. Rather, the issue lies in the broader system that enables such ventures to thrive while undervaluing the organic cultural activity still taking place in the city. When a council prioritises the export of culture to attract recognition and investment, especially during times of economic instability or as a fix against them, it can jeopardise the quality of life for local residents. By consistently favouring heritage branding over nurturing present-day cultural production, the council risks undermining its own credibility as a champion of culture.

3.2 UNESCO Creative Cities Network Report 2019

The 2019 UNESCO Monitoring Report (UCCN, 2019) portrays Liverpool as a thriving music city with both historical significance, largely the Beatles, and ongoing institutional support. It highlighted the city's active efforts to strengthen its music ecology through the establishment of a formal music strategy, the creation of a Music Board, and funding injections to local music organisations aimed at inclusion, education, and enterprise growth. It also celebrates a diversity of venues, genres, and festivals that reflect Liverpool's dynamic grassroots scenes (UCCN, 2019).

The report wished to ensure music was a driver of inclusive urban regeneration, yet it largely avoided confronting the conflict between cultural sustainability and speculative development. It focused on cultural output and strategic frameworks but underemphasised land use pressures, gentrification, and the failure of policy to protect grassroots spaces like Mello Mello or Nation during periods of intense urban transformation. This disconnect supports the thesis argument that Liverpool's cultural policies, while symbolically strong, often lack teeth when tested by real estate and housing crises. In striving to maintain global cultural recognition, the city risks prioritising external image over internal resilience. The report thus mostly reports on Liverpool's cultural ambition but not on limitations of a strategy that doesn't fully integrate cultural protection into housing and development policy during turbulent times of housing price fluctuations, a key tension this thesis continues to explore in both Liverpool and next , Manchester.

Chapter IV. 1990-2019 in Manchester: Mappin the sociopolitical fabric the city and its contribution to music

The following chapter is aiming to lay out the musical ecology of Manchester and how it helped transform the city from an industrial ara to vibrant music center. It also analyzes the rental market and how it was impacted by the 2008 crisis and the changing of the urban terrain, and sets the ground for the thesis to later discuss how the city is continuing to engage with its musical heritage.

1. Manchester's Cultural Economy

While Liverpool was a port city, Manchester was usually referred to as the city responsible for the North's industrialization, but both faced with economic struggles and urban renewal in the 1990s. Historically, there has always been rivalry between the two cities that extends beyond the pitch, despite them engaging in similar economic patterns. Misselwitz supports that the main difference between the two lay in ''the way issues of decline and regeneration have been approached'' (Misselwitz, 2004).

1.1 Manchester as a city of music

Manchester is synonymous with music. The musical terrain it has been cultivating throughout the years arguably gives Manchester the advantage of cultural policy maturity. As it will be realized throughout this section, Manchester's utilization of its musical culture began way earlier than that of Liverpool, and without reliance on large-scale projects.

The music scene in Manchester in the wake of the 70s was dull, impoverished and limited to visiting acts, lacking local talent and inspiration that comes from within. Acts were big enough names of the likes of David Bowie, Led Zeppelin and Iggy Pop to fill arenas and big venues, serving the reminder on the downside that local bands could probably never bridge the gap between themselves and their idols. Manchester, proclaimed by academics as ''no-man's land of the middles'' in the 1970s, was a place of little interest to the rest of England, a liminal ''up there'' and for its own musicians, ''a dizzy success that was never expected to happen'' (Albiez, 2005: 143-147). Albiez names this the 'Pre-Pistols' Era, conquered by the ''celebrity status'' that would grant big names agency signings, record production and live shows in places that couldn't afford their own, monopolizing the musical culture of the UK and limiting it to the London market and to a ''scheme of things that had no space for local bands'' (ibid, 2010).

In 1976, Peter McNeish and Howard Devoto, two Mancunian students and foundational members of the newly at the time established Buzzcocks, were swept by a Pistols performance they had watched in February of '76 in London and decided to combine their efforts to bring them for a show in Manchester. The Free Trade Hall, Manchester's classical music hall, was mainly a hall where big names such as Bob Dylan and Ella Fitzerald had been invited to perform**,** but the upstairs Lesser Free Trade Hall could be booked at a price of £32 pounds a night. McNeish and Devoto, although still inexperienced as Buzzcocks to open for the Sex Pistols, brought to Manchester what NME called 'an experience about sex, violence, insolence and anarchy', and what the Sex Pistols called 'not music but chaos'. It was an experience McNeish and Devoto though was needed to awake a city's potential that had been lethargic for too long. The talent was all there, and the Lesser Trade Hall was one of the reasons Manchester became a musical power house later on. During the first Pistols performance which only gathered around 40 people, amongst which you would have Bernard Sumner and Peter Hook of later Joy Division, Morrisey later of The Smiths, Malcom McLaren (The Pistols' manager) and of course the prototypical scheme of The Buzzcocks (Botta, 2009).

The musical legacy of Manchester began with a venue and was consolidated thanks to another one. The establishment of the Hacienda in 1982 didn't only give the opportunity to artist to perform their music, but also provided shelter of expression for many marginalized groups of the Mancunian society. The club's impact wasn't constrained within Manchester but extended globally during mid to late 1980s by popularizing house music (Kidd, 2009: 39). Alongside influential local artists like The Smiths and Morrissey, Simply Red, and the Happy Mondays, it helped rebrand Manchester as a hub of musical innovation and youth culture, earning the nickname "Madchester." Despite its iconic status, the club closed in 1999.

Before delving into the conditions that lead to tis closure, it is important to establish the grander impact in had on investment and regeneration of the inner city. While the Phoenix Initiative, a government-backed scheme in the early 1980s that was appointed by the council to drive in investment, failed to do so, the baton was passed to the Central Manchester Development Corporation (CMDC) to push for regeneration (Haslam, 2009; 90). According to those involved, it was the city's rising global cultural reputation that ultimately catalysed urban renewal, not the corporations themselves. International media coverage of Manchester's music scene around the time of the rise of The Stone Roses and The Smiths,

helped build the city's brand, indirectly influencing politicians, investors, and developers (ibid, 92). This is an important point in Mancunian history. An organically established cultural momentum can precede and even facilitate economic regeneration efforts, setting a tone that local authorities later capitalize on.

1.2 1990s: Hacienda's closure, posthumous recognition of value and Madchester

The Hacienda's popularity was not an accident. It was, as a property, a building reflecting the industrial dullness of Manchester alongside the lyrics and melodies of the prime bands like Joy Division and The Fall around the time. When MDMA took over the UK, the Hacienda evolved alongside the tastes and interests of the youth while still being the same shell of a building.

The Madchester scene is what the world described ''hedonism in hard times'' as. (Redhead, 1993). Musical creativity, experimentation, rave parties and drugs are what solidified Manchester's distinct approach to musical innovation. Haslam supports that the verification of Madchester being a cultural moment and bearing an influential legally, comes whenever a Mancunian prototype emerges. Liam Ghallager, Shaun Ryder and Tony Wilson to name a few, frequent in discourses surrounding that era of cultural making, and are often awarded the titles of icons (Milestone, 2018; 8).

Giacommo Botta claims that Manchester was ''creative and did not know'' (2009). While the youth of Manchester was enjoying the care-free entertainment that the Hacienda made so accessible, authorities were not looking to protect it. The Hacienda saw the first drug-related death in the UK with the arrival of ecstasy, and the Greater Manchester police was looking for the first chance they could get to remove the Hacienda's license of operation because of the gang traffic it attracted (Hook, 2010; 196). The arrival of ecstasy significantly lowered the above-the-bar sales of alcohol, and the Manchester Council failed to renew the venue's license due to the outstanding dept of £18m (ibid, 272). It would later become clear however, that organic scenes as the one that developed around the Hacienda, despite the activities that accompanied it, also helped the local economy grow without any intervention.

The Hacienda was eventually bought by Crosby Homes, and was developed to a multiplex of luxurious flats in 2002 (Ward, 2002). The uproar was to be expected, as the development firm kept the name ''Hacienda'' as an ode to the club, despite the original building being knocked down to give way for the Hacienda Flats (ibid, 2002), which in the eyes of the community,

seemed like more of an attempt to capitalize from the name than to honour the historical venue.

2. Strategic moves in the early 2000s for safeguarding cultural integrity

David Haslam, a local DJ playing at the Hacienda that has now moved on to become a writer and academic particularly on the impact of the Hacienda on Manchester's cultural influence, explains that the Hacienda became so popular that student applications for Manchester universities increased, ancillary businesses boomed and there was much more revenue coming from fashion and record sales (Haslam, 2002: 91). The CMDM got the confidence it needed to pursue regeneration. Haslam also distinguishes the fact that the CMDM was fully aware that pioneering happens in the run-down areas, and thus they began by focusing on areas that had already began getting popularized by the musical culture, paying attention to not disrupt this organic process so that it can continue to grow (Haslam, 2002: 91). Because of the process of such cultural movement being bottom-up and the process of cultural policy being top-down, Haslam supports that the clash is inevitable, and it is usually attributed to the fact that when authorities try to intervene, they often get it wrong (ibid, 2002). UK policy, at least in the 90s, had equated culture with the high arts and its attempt to also include grassroots culture ended up sanitized its authentic flourishing.

2.1 Gay Village and Northern Quarter regeneration 2002

Manchester's approach to regeneration is essentially what differentiated it from Liverpool. Although both cities faced deprivation, inequality but despite all, a booming cultural growth especially in the music sector, it was Manchester that focused on who needed music the most. Earlier it was mentioned that Liverpool, at least up until 2019, hadn't addressed the inherent inequalities that were rooted in its suburban as well as central communities (Meegan, 2004; 157), and this negligence led to a deeper chasm.

The Gay Village in Manchester emerged spontaneously in the 1980s, rooted in central Manchester's availability of affordable space after de-industrialization. Rather than being planned, the area developed organically as a nightlife and cultural hub for the city's gay community and even became recognized pan-Europeanly (Kidd, 2002; 70). The Council quickly realized its importance and by 1991the district was officially recognized as a separate planning area, marking a significant shift in local policy by accounting for the LGBTQ+ community as a legitimate component of urban development.

On the other hand, the Northern Quarter (N4) was met with more strategic promotion. The 1994 Northern Quarter Regeneration Study marked the City Council's belated but strategic decision to brand the area as a cultural quarter, with a focus on popular culture. While the area's cultural vitality preceded official recognition, the Council supported it through planning tools and promotional frameworks that work to preserve the cultural outputs of the area.

These two examples are important because they highlight the Council's priorities and the realization that economic development alone is not enough, but it has to be tied to social justice and quality of life. As the N4 was one of very run-down deindustrialized areas and musicians took advantage of its cheap dwellings to move in and create, the Council isn't only looking to make it economically fruitful by regenerating it, but also a place open to such musical experimentation despite its developed state.

2.2 N4 Development Framework Report 2003

The 2003 Report estimated around 610, majorly creative businesses active in the N4 area (N4 Development Framework Report, 2003), one of the very few locations to boost this concentration of creative industries in one place. The report focuses on creation of a dedicated N4 common coordinator and reinforcing partnerships between social agencies, local businesses, and the council's decisions designed to stabilize the area while supporting organic cultural activity. More specifically, the framework calls for planning protections to ensure affordable business space, especially around Thomas Street, acknowledging the vulnerability of creative enterprises to rent-driven displacement. This is achievable by using targeted redevelopment tools such as Compulsory Purchase Orders (CPOs) to address dereliction without inviting aggressive speculation. This attempt in institutionalizing cultural infrastructure in a way that maintains the social and spatial conditions in which grassroots music can thrive is contrasting with Liverpool's failure to translate cultural branding into long-term policy protections amid housing and affordability pressures.

2.3 Cultural Strategy, Strategic Marketing, Events and Visitor Services 2007/08-2009-10

Another report by the Council approaches cultural policy through performance management. The plan focuses on supporting cultural infrastructure (like Band on the Wall, Zion Arts Centre), enhancing creative industry growth (via Northern Quarter initiatives), and ensuring value for money through strategic investment and business planning support (Business Plan Report 2007/08-2009/10: 37). The Manchester Cultural Impacts Toolkit was developed to

ensure that cultural organisations whether small grassroots venues or larger institutions had flexible, locally responsive metrics to demonstrate the aforementioned value. Additionally, the report signalled for partnerships with regeneration zones and Housing Market Renewal Areas, intending to ensure long-term sustainability of cultural spaces despite market pressures. This included funding, planning coordination, and evaluation mechanisms that collectively helped cultural organisations to stay viable (ibid,37).

More importantly, the review of grant frameworks ensured that funded organisations maintained alignment with council priorities such as inclusivity, which indirectly helped protect them from rent-related vulnerability by reinforcing their public value and justifying continued or increased support Business Plan Report 2007/08-2009/10: 30). In sum, the selected parts reviewed of the Business Plan show a commitment to culture through pragmatic frameworks that don't just promote culture in the abstract but embedded it strategically on a neighbourhood-level economic planning, using tools and partnerships to buffer venues from displacement amid urban change.

3. Rent increases and displacement indications

As the Manchester Council and affiliated organisations worked to ensure that culture is visible and unthreatened by the housing market, the demand for affordable accommodation in the creative neighbourhoods began growing. Comparing the below with Figure 1. one can see that both Manchester and Liverpool saw steady rises in property prices, but Manchester's increases were more dramatic, particularly after 2015, where prices consistently rise past £400k in some sectors, much higher than Liverpool's peak around £350k. Additionally, as one can see from comparing Figure 2 with Figure 4 depicting the number of properties sold in the   two


Average Property Selling Prices in Manchester (£000's)
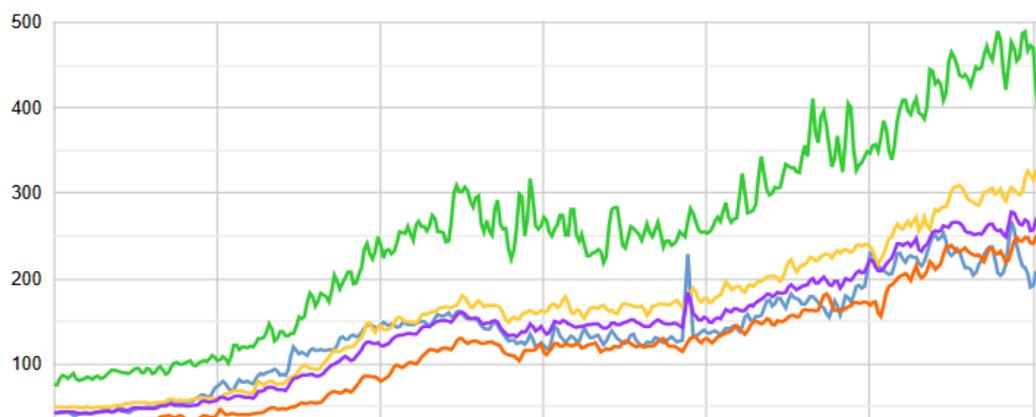
''*Average property selling prices in Manchester''1995-2025''* via Home.co.uk

cities, the takeaway is again that both housing markets were severely affected by the economic crisis and met with similar decline rates. Although there has been a gradual recovery post-2013, sales volumes have not returned to early 2000s levels for either city if we exclude the 2018 unexpected peak, and growth has remained relatively stable rather than exponential. Compared to the sharp and continuous increase in property prices, the number of property sales being stable is suggesting that rising prices are not driven by increased volume, but possibly by higher demand, investment speculation, or reduced housing supply.
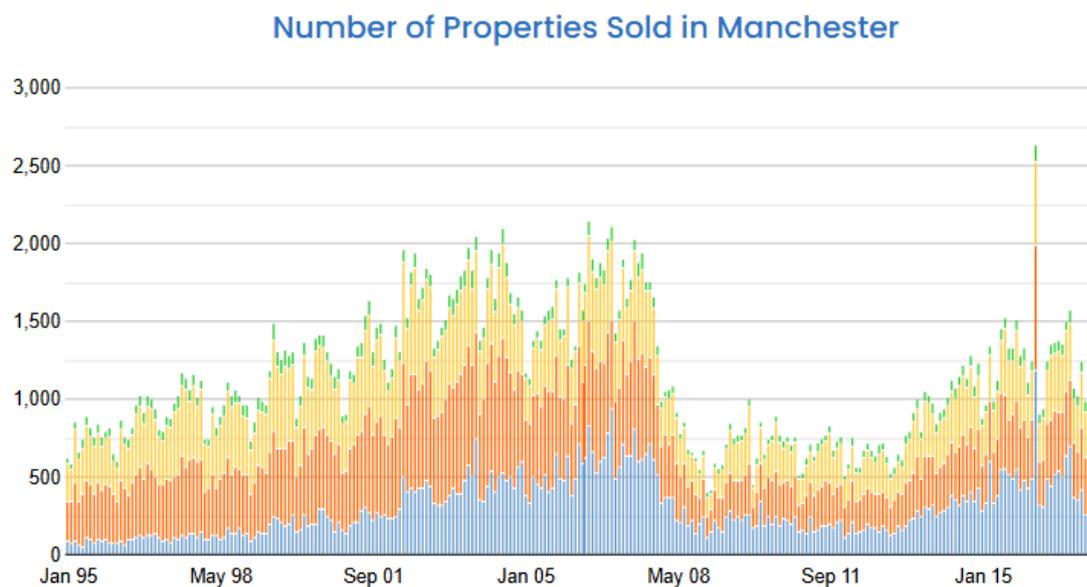
Number of properties sold *in Manchester 1995-2025'* via Home.co.uk

2015 – First wave of mass closures

The Music Venue Trust, a charity established to advise, support and promote live music venues across the UK, reported that from 2008-2018, 35% of grassroots music venues closed across the UK (MVT, 2018). News sites report that beloved live venues such as ''The Roadhouse, Sankeys, Sound Control and, most recently, Antwerp Mansion have all closed their doors to adoring punters in the last four years alone''. (Timan & Hall, 2018). The news article also reveals that all properties are subject to Compulsory Purchase Orders (CPOs). CPOs were earlier addressed as tools to support live venues, as when a large scale development takes place, venues that fall within that area can be compulsory purchased in order to maintain their spatial value and evolve with the neighbourhood. However, as development strategies evolve over time, venues are vulnerable to being bought and swept by developing plans that have as a goal to significantly a whole neighbourhood. MP Michael

Dugher acknowledged this chasm, and furtherly supported that should the neighbourhoods be developed, they must make sure to acknowledge the venues and be ready to '' pay for the soundproofing of those flats and deal with any issues because of it''. Since 2017, he has stepped up as CEO of UK Music and has been campaigning for the protection of venues (UK Music, 2017).

Ministry of Housing – Agent of Change 2018

This is where the agent of change is beginning to gain traction. The UK Music organisation drafted a National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF)consultation for the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Governance. Recognising the increasing demand for property across the UK which created a highly competitive residential market and resulted in rising rents has prompted many landlords to sell their properties to developers. The report explains that venues already operating on tight margins are made more vulnerable by a liberalised planning system that tends to favour new developments and in response, the "agent of change" principle has emerged as a protective measure, requiring those initiating new developments to take responsibility for mitigating any negative impacts (UK Music, 2018). By 2019, the ''Agent of Change'' principle is ''enshrined in law''

The above might be good news for venues operating in newly developed residential zones, but it doesn't take away the danger that high rental costs pose. All of the above can be considered to be key signs of gentrification pressures. Conversations and policy measures as a response to rising rents as a result of redevelopment and gentrification specifically do not emerge as starkly until 2023, as after COVID-19 the losses became too visible to ignore. There are however articles that only get more and more frequent, and we can pinpoint the start of the live venue closure crisis around 2019.

Chapter V. Policy Analysis and Comparison of Liverpool and Manchester post-COVID19

Introduction

Up until here, the thesis has provided a comparison between Manchester and Liverpool when it comes to their live music ecologies, how they have been affected by socioeconomic dynamics (gentrification, urban development, economic crisis), and the respective policies that target the safeguarding of their presence in the area of their establishment. Due to the fact that COVID acted as an accelerant for rent-driven redevelopment threats, the previous

background was important in order to supply the thesis with a fair comparison of past versus present, as in the past even though the housing prices have been steadily going up, such large scale closures hadn't been noted since after COVID-19 took place. The choice to focus on Liverpool and Manchester as the two case studies isa awarded to the fact that despite their equally important industrial (economic) and musical (cultural) backgrounds, Liverpool is the city most affected by venue closures post 2022. The present section is focusing on policies of the two councils that specifically target the two threats the property is facing. Sky-rocketing rent prices and displacement by urban development. In the first case the section is looking to investigate how the councils ensure property safeguarding and initiatives that financial relief and in the second case how they protect them from displacement. That could be done through investigating potential planning agreements that adjust noise-levels, relief of zoning conflicts and the perseverance of a live music scene. Finally, the section will look at how these targeted policies interact with nation-wide frameworks, whether they are influenced or influence them individually. The goal of this section is to evaluating if the councils have been proactive in meeting those goals and whether that is done through engaging with venues as businesses or cultural assets.

1. COVID-19 and its impact on venues

The COVID-19 pandemic began with an outbreak of a respiratory virus in 2019, and quickly spread worldwide and the official ending of the pandemic was marked by the WHO in May 2023 (Northwestern Medicine). Governments enforced public health measures such as lockdowns, social distancing, and travel restrictions to slow transmission, profoundly altering daily life.

Socially, the pandemic disrupted normal interactions, forcing isolation and reducing in-person contact. Many experienced increased mental health challenges, including anxiety and loneliness, while families and communities adapted to new ways of communication and work, such as remote working and online schooling(National Library of Medicine). The closure of public spaces affected social cohesion and cultural life worldwide due to prolonged periods of inactivity.

Economically, the pandemic triggered an unprecedented global downturn. Lockdowns and disruptions to international supply chains caused widespread job losses, particularly in sectors like hospitality, retail, and travel. Governments responded with fiscal stimulus packages and unemployment support to mitigate impacts. However, inequalities were exposed and

exacerbated, with vulnerable populations bearing the brunt of economic hardship. Many businesses shuttered permanently, while others adapted to changing consumer behaviours (World Bank,2022) .

1.1 In numbers

The 2020-2022 COVID years proved to be detrimental for live venues. Not so much during lockdown, but rather after as live venues still haven't bounced back in pre-COVID levels in terms of attendance, revenue and use. For the years where everyone was locked inside, relaxing of lockdown rules allowed some businesses to operate during specific hours, such as supermarkets, essential shops and occasional food courts. Venues however, despite being businesses first for some, and social hubs second, were not allowed the luxury of reopening, as they couldn't safeguard reasonable social distancing. This led to a 90% drop in revenue during 2020, as UK Music reports. (UK Music, 2020).

As of August 2021, 86% of grassroots music venues had reopened, but ticket sales were still down 67.5% compared to pre-pandemic levels. To offset losses that amounted to around £90 million in debt accrued during lockdown, venues raised ticket prices by 12.2% from 2019, though this may further discourage attendance. Nightclubs faced similar struggles, with pandemic adaptations like virtual concerts and takeaway drinks generating only about 5% of normal revenue. What is evident from the numbers above is that more than half the venues that managed to reopen, operate at a loss in comparison to their pre-covid levels. Numerous media sites have reported on the issue, with the number of articles regarding live venues only exponentially growing since. As the BBC reported, the most challenging year for venues was 2022-2023 (BBC, 2022). The financial strain led at least 125 UK venues to completely abandon live music, as per the MVT, and over half of them shutting permanently. The neglected the live music scene faced after the lifting of the lockdowns was disproportionate to the efforts made by the government to restore other sectors, even if its contribution to the general UK economy being over £500m (ibid). In another article by the Guardian, a plan to remove venues from private ownership and hand them over to the public, is beginning to take shape.

The conversation around structural issues, i.e. cost-of-living crisis, rent increases and ownership questions, widely opened up after exposure to the media. Big reporting agencies such as the BBC and the Guardian, local newspapers and online blogs begun weeding out the main threats that infected the urban ecosystem leading to mass closures. A2D2 names the

rising costs as the primary reason why venues close down. The increased operating expenses together with increases in utilities such as energy, and above all the cost to rent the space started bearing heavy on the shoulders of live venues across the UK (A2D2, 2022). According to the MVT, 89% of live venues rent their space, with an annual salary of £20,400 and monthly rent payments just over £3.000, almost double their entire monthly income (MVT, 2022) . As a result, around three-quarters of businesses in the night-time economy were at risk of insolvency as a result of outstanding rent debts. As a response to many other cultural assets being threatened by rising costs, the government initiated the Cultural Recovery Fund.

2. National Policy Mapping Post-2020

2.1 The Cultural Recovery Fund

The Cultural Recovery Fund is a bundle of £1.57 billion to be distributed to cultural heritage organisations by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) . Out of the sum, the Department allocated £2.25 million to support 150 music venues across the country. Through an application portal, businesses for-profit or not, could apply for a percentage of a portion of the grand that was allocated to their geographic area (MVT, 2022; 4). While it may sound like a solid initiative, for live venues it did not make a significant difference. Firstly, some grassroots venues could not qualify. The CRF's eligibility criteria required that an organisation's primary role be the creation, presentation, or support of recognised cultural genres, with a formal, auditable business model (ibid, 2022). While this ensured accountability, it excluded many vital parts of the grassroots music ecology, such as pubs hosting occasional gigs, informal venues, or musicians whose main income came from outside music. These spaces and individuals, though integral to local scenes, did not fit neatly into the official definitions, meaning national funding mechanisms often failed to capture and support the full scope of live music activity. Secondly, even if some of the venues acquired part of the fund, the MVT reported that 67% of the money went to landlords holding building freeholds, not to the venue operators who actually run live music spaces and who often face insecure tenancies (MVT, 2022).

2.2 The Agent of Change (AoC)

Not owning the premise leaves the venues vulnerable to two threats: rising rents and evictions, and takeovers. The role of CPOs (Compulsory Purchase Orders) was for years presented as a safety net for declining venues, despite the order existing to primarily serve the

development of public housing (Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government). CPOs allow the purchasing of properties by developers in order to renew them and develop them as long as they are in the designated zone of redevelopment. On the one hand, deteriorating venues that have been compulsory purchased by developers sometimes are repurposed instead of closed down, are active parts in regeneration projects.

On the other hand, CPO venues might face disruption of operation likely due to noise complaints by the redeveloped residential area.

The Agent of Change principle fronted policy discussions in 2018, with a promise by the Government to amend the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) and protect venues. By 2025 the Bill isn't only included in the NPPF, but on 12 June 2025 the Chair of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, stressed that the AoC principle should also be adopted by the Government's new Planning and Infrastructure Bill (UK Music, 2024). What the AoC does is that it places the onus on the developers to merit for the protection of the venues from legal noise complaints. For example, if a venue receives a noise complaint, the onus rests with the developers to soundproof the apartments that they own which are nearing the live venues (UK Music 2018). This is approach directly interacts with the spatial value of the GMV and while it might not be protecting it against change, it makes sure that even if the neighbourhood around the venue transforms into something different, then the venue has the luxury to not compromise its usual way of operating.

2.3 Own Our Venues

The Agent of Change principle may offer grassroots music venues some security regarding their spatial existence, yet it leaves the issue of escalating rents unresolved. While it can help venues avoid costly legal disputes with developers, it does not address the vulnerability that comes with leasing premises subject to landlords' discretion. For the Music Venue Trust (MVT), this underscored the danger of not owning the freehold. Their proposed solution was the creation of Music Venue Properties (MVP), a Charitable Community Benefit Society established to buy venue freeholds and safeguard them as permanent spaces for live music. Through the Own Our Venues campaign, MVP raised funds from the public via community shares, enabling the society to act as a benevolent landlord. By offering "cultural leases," MVP provides fair and sustainable rents while also supporting venues with maintenance and operational costs, a model designed to ensure long-term stability and shield venues from closure due to rent hikes or landlord pressures (MVT, 2025).

By 2023, MVP had raised approximately £2.3 million from 1,261 investors, securing venues including The Snug in Atherton, The Ferret in Preston, Le Pub in Newport, The Bunkhouse in Swansea, and The Booking Hall in Dover (Moshville, 2025). Alongside this, the Assets of Community Value (ACV) framework, introduced under the Localism Act 2011, provides communities with the right to bid on properties of recognised cultural importance when they are put up for sale. While ACV status alone does not guarantee financial sustainability or force a sale, when combined with MVP's ownership model it creates a stronger preservation tool, ensuring venues remain on the MVT's radar. Importantly, ACV designation operates locally, as it is the responsibility of councils to assign GMVs this recognition of cultural value. Examining the number of ACV listings in cities such as Liverpool and Manchester therefore offers a valuable measure of local council proactivity in safeguarding live music venues (Localism Act, 2011).

3. Manchester's post-COVID19 live venue recovery – A localized approach

Manchester on the wake of COVID-19 was a city already introducing live venues into development plans through the AoC scheme. Rent-wise, the housing prices in Manchester were steadily fluctuating around the national standard, however from 2022 onwards, the rental market spiked and has remained until now, well above the national average. Between 2015 and 2023, commercial rent prices in Manchester's city centre increased by approximately 30%, pushing grassroots venues such as the Night & Day Café to renegotiate leases, downsize, or relocate. In the Northern Quarter, where average rents rose to about £40 per sq ft, Band on the Wall cited the rent increase as a key factor in its closure,
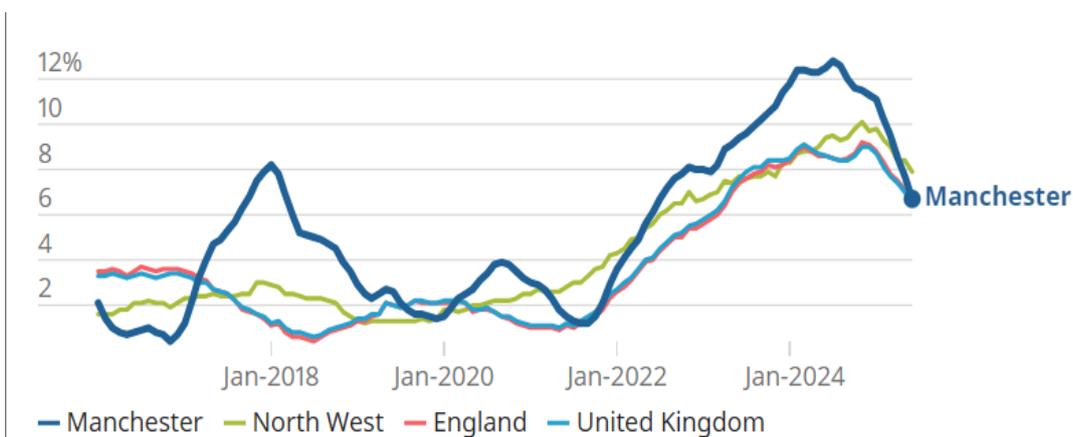
ONS, 2025: House Prices Manchester   while Gorilla shifted its programming to higher-ticket events to meet monthly costs (Benoit Properties, 2024).

The average rental price for a private flat was £1,312 in June, a 6.7% rise just from June 2024, and around only £32 cheaper from the average UK private rental cost (ONS,2025). While Manchester saw one of the biggest yearly increased among UK cities in 2023, there hasn't been an exclusive mention on where it ranks in regards to venue closures. Unlike Liverpool that has been reported to be the worst-hit city, Manchester tend to be included in the broader are of the North West, which has been the most affected in total. This section will look at how, despite sharp rent rises, Manchester contained the crisis and regulated the course of action targeting the survival and resuscitation. If there aren't any exclusive measures that target the question of ownership and rent, then the policy research will look at how the council is addressing the underlying cause of such spikes, meaning gentrification caused by development and how venues are assisted in a changing area.

3.1 Local policy standouts - NTE Strategy 2023

Post-COVID strategic documents mainly include the Night-Time Economy (NTE) Strategy 2023 and the Cultural Strategy Refresh 2024-2034. The latter is a holistic framework that focuses more widely on the importance of culture for the prosperity of Manchester, and although it acknowledges the unprecedented financial pressures cultural organizations face, it does not explicitly bring up the struggles GMVs are facing. On the other hand, the night-time economy strategy offers an active response to the financial stress.

The NTE Strategy is focused around seven key priorities: ''safety; diversity; workers; transport; national and international partnerships and campaigns; regeneration; and business and sector support'' (NTE 2022; 20). In the report it is cited that by 2024, the Greater Manchester Council (GMC) will be collaborating with other boroughs on the Creative Improvement Districts (CID) project, build on the success of Oldham. The CID is a not-for-profit, cross-subsidy model that allows for collaboration with leading creative businesses and research institutions while also supporting smaller and grassroots creative and cultural organizations ensuring that they are included in policy-making processes (Culture Commons, 2022). The Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) has been actively developing the CIDs, and of the latest available information in 2025, CIDs are considered by the GMCA to be a transformative policy framework that clusters creative, cultural, and night-time economy businesses within clearly defined geographical areas which helps to stimulate and measure more clearly the economic growth and job creation across Greater Manchester (ibid). Progress can be seen through the Stockport and Rochdale councils establishing

ambitious CID plans, securing millions in funding (£4.2m for Rochdale, £2.6m for Stockport)(RDA, 2025). As of now, there is no publicly available breakdown specifying how much of the CIDs funding has been allocated directly to GMVs but it is typically distributed across various creative and cultural initiatives, including infrastructure development. The inclusion of the expansion of the CIDs in the NTE Strategy is crucial because it enables better monitoring and evaluation of the NTE's impact on venues as they gain visibility if an area is under creative improvement frameworks.

3.2 Venue Impact and Support

Advocacy for Manchester's music scene preservation includes all types of venues, from big arenas to small stages that are facing extinction. Lobbying for investment, infrastructure, and cultural recognition supports the full spectrum of musical activities. More importantly, Manchester is utilizing its grand venues such as the Co-op Live (3,500), the Manchester Arena (2,300) and Heaton Park to host big names (MCC, 2025). Council leader Bev Craig emphasized that although big concerts get headlines, grassroots venues are foundational to the city's vibrant music ecosystem. So in 2025, the Manchester Council set up a fund of reinvestment as a part of a broader effort to sustain Manchester's diverse live music scene and cultural heritage. From the big gigs the city hosted this year, including Oasis, Robbie Williams, Charlie XCX and Olivia Rodrigo, the ''What's The Story? Grassroots Glory'' fund was set up reinvesting £250,000 generated from the above acts to supporting smaller venues (MCC, 2025). Recognizing that these smaller venues form the essential "launchpads" for emerging artists who later play in bigger arenas, as goes the story with Oasis and their success, Manchester has established a positive feedback loop linking tourism-driven revenue back to grassroots infrastructure, reflecting recognition of spatial value in line with Byrne's scene theory (Byrne, 2012) where the 1.3 million tourists that visited Manchester for its music scene, actually give back to the musical community in return.

The council's partnership with the MVT ensures accountable fund distribution and rapid response, highlighting effective coordination between local and national actors. This approach reflects partial proactivity: the city not only recognizes cultural value but integrates financial mechanisms to support it alongside national policy. Despite the decision to collect the funds being a localized one, the integration of the national organisation to ensure that the money is directed towards the designated goal, is a crucial move. MVT can distribute funds quickly, avoiding bureaucratic delays and conciliar red-tape, ensuring that the money is used

effectively. It is a rather practical example of coordination and information-sharing between local government and national cultural organizations as not only it showcases how local bodies have the power and agency to inform national strategy, but also that a collaboration as such is possible as long as the desire is communicated.

3.3 Property support and the case of Night and Day Café

It isn't however to argue that having a national body to cater to the specific cause of GMV's protection is enough. While it might act as a booster to local policy and an advocate for the cause, a council bares the largest amount of responsibility especially when it comes to managing the space of music itself. As seen above, the Culture Strategy aims at recognizing and protecting the essence of the venue, and the NTE Strategy the financial side of the night-time logistics. However, they both promote a common threat: gentrification. When the neighbourhood changes tenants, GMVs as we've seen aren't only affected by the spiking rents, but also threatened by the misalignment of values between them and the newly moved-ins.

Planning – Mayor's guide to planning navigation for venue owners

The Greater Manchester Music Commission in collaboration with the NTE Office and the MVT, have put out a guide for Mancunian venue owners to consult when dealing with planning issues, most commonly noise complaints. Another goal set out in the NTE Strategy mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, is the continuous push for the AoC in the city centre and developing areas. The planning guide therefore does two things: Firstly, it explains what venue owners should look for when examining a redevelopment application, and secondly it stresses the importance of the AoC.

For the first part, when a planning application is submitted near a grassroots music venue, it should carefully reference 5 key local policies on: grassroots music venues, culture, the night-time economy, noise pollution, and the AoC principle (Planning Guide, 2025: 10). If an application fails to mention or engage with the Local Development Plan or Cultural Strategy, and omit to include one or more of the above policy considerations, this omission should be highlighted in case of conflict with the venue. Similarly, if the application selectively uses parts of the Local Development Plan or Cultural Strategy to support its own interests while disregarding policies that protect the venue's cultural and community value, this can be used as a strong argument for rejection of the redevelopment planning.

As many planning applications fail to reference or properly apply this principle, it results in inadequate noise impact assessments and puts grassroots music venues at risk from neighbouring developments. In 2024, a significant portion of cases brought to the Music Venue Trust's Emergency Response Service involved noise complaints and redevelopment threats where the AoC guidance was overlooked (ibid). Effective application of this principle involves developers working collaboratively with venue operators to implement mitigation measures before new flats are occupied. Adherence to these guidelines is essential for preventing venue closures and ensuring the sustainability of grassroots music spaces amid urban growth. The planner should be clearly stating the mitigating measures they will be employing and while they might not be able to stop noise complaints from individual residents, the first step of compromise between developer and local business has already been achieved.

The Night and Day Café Success Story (?)

The above tension is reflected in the case of The Night and Day Café in the Northern Quarter. Operating since 1991, the café was a hotspot during Madchester, and has hosted early gigs by the Arctic Monkeys and Wet Leg (Topping, 2022). In 2000, the warehouse that occupied the plot adjacent to the café, was redeveloped into flats. According to the owner, a resident who relocated during the quiet period of the 2020 lockdown lodged a noise complaint, leading Manchester City Council (MCC) to issue Night & Day with a noise abatement notice (NAN). The neighbour's complaints originally focused on live music, after the COVID 19 reopening in July 2021. In the cafes defence, the NAN only applies to DJ sets played after hours, not to live bands performing before midnight, however the main income comes from DJ nights on the weekends, which fund the live gigs. The café received another five noise complaints from four different properties (Topping, 2022).

The noise complaint's legitimacy was questioned in court in the end, on the grounds that there should have been adequate sound-proofing in the original development plans of 2000. The Judge dismissed the cafes appeal to withdraw the notice but decided to modify it instead on the premise that the venue must abide to noise restrictions suggested by an expert hired by the venue itself. While these restrictions will affect over half of Night & Day's events, the venue stated that complying with them will still enable it to remain open and continue operating (ibid, 2022).

The problem lies not only in the modifications but also in the ruling. For the modifications, there is a visible disregard for constructive dialogue between developers and venue owners and an disproportionate distribution of responsibility. For the ruling itself, multiple sources, the MVT included, have weighted on Judge McCormack's judicial commentary. The Judge stated that ''the Northern Quarter should not be considered to have a cultural focus, but is instead a 'mixed use' area'' and that ''the club nights that caused the noise issues did not have 'community value'' (Press Release, 2024). This rightfully raised the alarm for the GMV community of Manchester, as it exposes the two main themes this thesis is investigating: the right to the city and cultural displacement. GMVs are seeing their right to the city being threatened by the very ruling, which redefined the Northern Quarter from a cultural quarter to one of mixed-use, effectively stripping GMVs of their cultural value and replacing it with that of entertainment that fits the standards of the ones that now have the power to shape rather than it being shaped by the ones who produce it. The ruling legitimises a shift toward property uses that are economically higher-yield but culturally void.

Thus, we can now realize why the Planning Guide stressed that the AoC must be explicitly stated in planning applications of developers, and its absence must be challenged and lead to project sanctioning. Arguably, since the AoC came into force in 2018 and the complaint was filed in 2020, the developer might have been unaware of their need to update their deeds to include the AoC, or dismissive towards its existence. Even with this policy in place however, venues in Manchester still face legal risks. The ruling is worrying because it shows that the protection offered by the AoC isn't guaranteed especially in cases where the court has the power to question the spatial value of a venue in a way that it weakens its legitimacy as a cultural asset of a neighbourhood.

4. Key Findings

4.1 Proactive measures

The £250,000 fund, initiated by the Manchester City Council in July 2025, funded from revenue generated by large-scale concerts shows that there is a strong local alignment with the MVT's mission, going beyond passive endorsement to active support. Adoptions of Own Our Venues and the subsequent acquiring of The Snug in Atherton is showcasing that the council is open to working alongside the MVT on national campaigns and not dismissive towards it, integrating the MVT to its own local cultural policy agenda. Lastly, stressing the

adoption of the AoC principle in planning guidelines, at least in theory, is protecting existing venues from closure due to resident complaints.

## 4.2 Gaps identified in Manchester's cultural policy

However, regarding ownership, MCC's alignment MVT goals is partial, particularly around ownership. The city has supported publicity for MVT initiatives, but local uptake is limited, with only a handful of venues moving toward community ownership. In the Night & Day court ruling, the NQ's cultural value as a neighbourhood was undermined, which compromises the cultural framing that MVT and local advocates push for in regards to changing areas. This feeds into a broader misalignment between MCC and AoC. Despite being in planning guidelines, the principle failed to protect Night & Day from costly operational restrictions (new operational guidelines plus a £200,000 legal fee). There is no strong enforcement mechanism and the implementation appears loose. Moreover, apart from supporting Own Our Venues conceptually, the Council has not yet rolled out a structured, city-led venue acquisition or cultural lease scheme to secure property rights against rent-driven displacement. Lastly, despite the fact that the Night Time Economy Strategy ensures visibility and potential economic spill-over benefits for GMVs and is a city-wide cultural programming, it promotes nightlife as a commercial draw and GMVs are often framed more as economic assets than cultural institutions.

4.3 Alignment with national policies

What the Manchester council is seemingly being successful at is making sure that new Manchester's council has been relatively successful in ensuring that new development projects align with national policies such as the Agent of Change. Although the council has not yet developed a comprehensive monitoring system to evaluate these projects, its planning guide provides direction for developers and informs GMVs of their rights as cultural spaces. However, whether these rights are upheld ultimately depends on legal judgment, and as seen in the Night and Day Café case, they are not always prioritised. What this reveals, and it is crucial when it comes to understanding the problem with GMV displacement, is that while national policy is influential enough to shape local decision-making, it does so mainly by imposing a framework; it has yet to penetrate the everyday practices, habits, and attitudes of other stakeholders within the community.

5. Liverpool live venues post-COVID19 – A case of national reliance

Multiple sources are reporting Liverpool as the city worst hit by venue closures across the UK post-COVID19 (A2D2, 2025; LEP, 2025; The Guardian, 2024). Notably, in only 2024, Liverpool saw a decrease of 36 venues hosting live music, with 22 full closures and 14 venues either stopping music programming or changing ownership (Liverpool City Region, 2025). Among these were two MVT accredited grassroots venues, Jimmy's rock venue and Melodic Distraction, a community radio station and space (MVT Annual Report, 2023). In the year to April 2023, Liverpool's average rent rose by £60 (8.5%), significantly lower than Manchester's £110 increase, and over a longer timeframe from 2020 to 2025, rents saw a 35% increase, which is lower than the North West regional average of 45% (ONS, 2025).
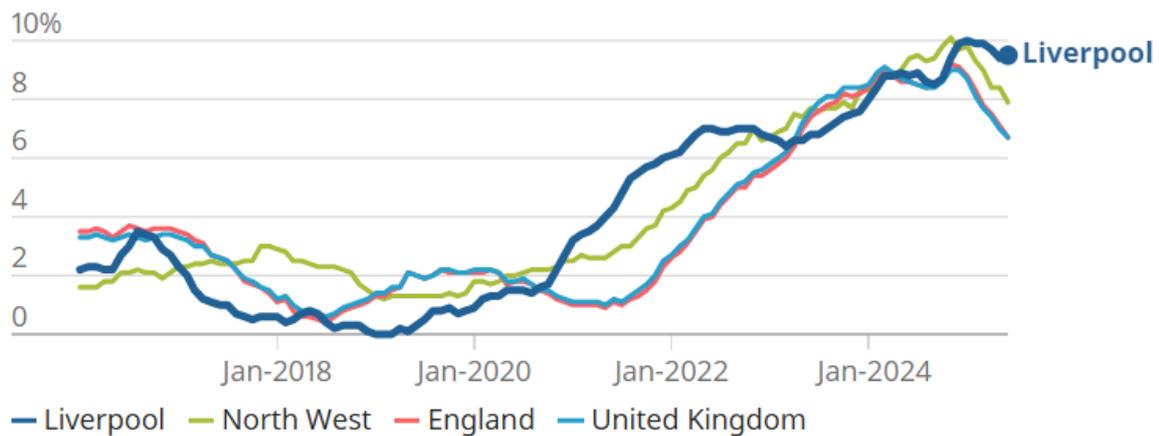
ONS, 2025: Liverpool House Prices

Liverpool's rent trajectory though upward, has been less steep that Manchester's, making its rental market comparatively more moderate. However, Liverpool is more reliant on cultural tourism than Manchester. It attracts over 60 million visitors each year, and most investment goes towards destination marketing, major events, and infrastructure improvements to sustain and grow this economy. By comparison Manchester's economy is more diversified with strong business, financial, and tech sectors. This heavier reliance on tourism in Liverpool meant that when the pandemic disrupted visitor flows, music venues, many of which depend directly on tourist footfall, were more exposed to revenue loss. The result was a sharper post-COVID impact on venue survival, even without rent increases being as steep as Manchester's.

5.1 Regional Board

The LCR Music Board is the main strategic body behind Liverpool's cultural policy since 2019. The priorities of the Board are set out clearly, and they explicitly identify "safeguarding and protecting music venues" as a top priority. This includes sector advocacy and annual data collection to support informed interventions (LCRMB Action Plan 2019). The Combined Authority of Liverpool also acted quickly in response to COVID19 related closures, raising a £2m investment fund to go towards the Music Board. As COVID19 was deemed a pressuring matter, the Board was given the first sum of £150,000 to support 50 music businesses that were in critical condition. The remaining sum is distributed across all functions of the musical sector, internships, campaigns and industry training (ibid). The Board has since assisted the physical development of Future Yard, an important GMV for Liverpool's music ecology and the first carbon-neutral grassroots venue in the North of England, and has lobbied for the adoption of the Agent of Change (AoC) in council plans.

While the LCR Board's priorities are covering a range of factors that contribute to the overall music ecology, there is significant leveraging of past international titles (UNESCO City of Music, ECoC, Eurovision 2023), and a heavy focus on music tourism.   The LCR Combined Authority openly states the goal is to "grow the visitor economy to £6.5bn by 2030" as part of its strategic development plans (LCRCA, 2025). The Beatles are a major focus of Liverpool's cultural and tourism economy, with extensive investment in heritage sites and events like International Beatleweek (Porter, 2022). While venues like The Cavern Club receive extra time to shine due to its association with the band, the city actively manages efforts to balance the worldwide Beatles brand with nurturing local contemporary music scenes through infrastructure improvements such as employing night-buses (LCRMB, 2023).

5.2 Venue Support & Collaboration

Within the LCR Board, there is a specific subsection dedicated entirely to GMVs. The sub-group reports that in 2024, 36 closures occurred while 18 new openings were made possible. The reasons behind the closures were listed as change of ownership or management for 14 of them, while the rest closed without providing a reason, so the group accounts for these closures as financial (LCR, 2024).

The Caledonian – An exception to a seemingly effective policy?

Significant losses include the Caledonian, a pub in the Georgian Quarter that has provided years free access live music for the people of Liverpool. The cost-of-living crisis made it impossible for the owner to keep the pub running, as operation costs continued to rise and customer numbers were failing as they were struggling economically too. The owner made a series of pleas both to the council and the local government, including accountability of the council to implement strategies that are already available and local intervention (Carubia, 2025). The Caledonian now is planned to be converted to a 12-bedroom boutique hotel according to the local papers, a change that fits Liverpool's heavy promotion of visitor economy rather than community cultural infrastructure.

To make matters worse, The Caledonia had been designated as an Asset of Community Value (Alan, 2017). As explained earlier on, ACV status protects venues from demolition or abrupt retail conversion, but it doesn't combat operational financial struggles Liverpool CAMRA, 2020). On the other hand, that very recognition might ironically make it more likely to be overlooked by the MVT, as the MVT targets venues that have close to none communal support. A building being a recognized ACV should be a safety net in itself, as it signifies a higher level of community appreciation.

The lack of any protection is particularly relevant because the Liverpool City Region Music Board's own strategy explicitly calls for ownership models and protection from landlords changing the use of buildings. Yet, in practice, here we have a textbook case of a landlord-led change of use affecting a long-standing grassroots venue. Even with formal protection under the ACV legislation, GMVs in Liverpool aren't protected against changing neighbourhoods.

Ten Streets and private ownership as both threat and opportunity

The Caledonian being repurposed to a boutique hotel is highlighting the right to the city conflict and how Liverpool is catering to. The though process doesn't have to be binary, either the tourists or the venues. It can be both, but the shutting of the Caledonian is a stark answer to the paradox. The exact opposite however is also beginning to take shape. The Ten Streets development project promises a ''pioneering "creativity district'' that will develop the old docklands and redefine parts of Liverpool that have been left neglected (LCR, 2024). The area is pre-planned to become Liverpool's ''emerging creative district'' that will focus on cultural enterprises and accommodate the needs of artists in a dynamic environment. However in the process, the luxury residential developments have so far resulted in some grassroots venues being pushed out or forced to relocate. In 2024, DIY venue Quarry closed

down due to a planning permission to turn Love Lane into a luxury apartment complex (Liverpool Echo, 2025). In the Quarry's case, it managed to relocate to the former premises of another historic club, The Magnet, offering a glimpse of hope for the locals (The Guide, 2025).

On the other hand, there are good sides to private investment. One of Liverpool most important performing spaces, the Arts Club, was yet another venue hit by the crisis COVID19 brought. A social hub since 1928, the club is a valuable place for grassroots music that was unfortunately shut down by its then operator. However, Manchester's Tokyo Industries, a private firm operating clubs world-wide, bought Arts Club and redeemed a somehow negative reputation circling clubbing firms, making it better than ever before (Liverpool Explore, 2024).

5.3 Agent of Change and the case of Meraki

In view of so many developmental changes in Liverpool, question remains if there is anything actually regulating the venues and aiding for their survival. As the above section revealed, there is a clash between what is promised by the LCR Music Board and what is actually been done to safeguard GMVs, not only in view of development projects, but from other general economic threats. Since there has been no proof of actual results from local policies, this section will see how the LCR Music Board is utilizing national resources.

In the Ten Streets development plans, the development firm is promising to protect ''residential amenities from noise'' (SFR/SPD/SEA: RENIVRONMENTAL REPORT; 19/41), however there is minimal publicly available evidence that the AoC principle has been invoked by developers to meet an agreement with venues in regards to music noise. The only known case is that of Meraki.

5.3 The Meraki – Agent of Change in action

Meraki is a GMV located in the northern docks. In 2021, a nearby property was earmarked for conversion into housing, raising the risk of future noise complaints that could restrict or shut down the venue (Ryder, 2022). Under Liverpool's Local Plan (2022) and the 2018 NPPF revisions, AoC places responsibility for soundproofing on developers rather than existing cultural premises. During the planning consultation, Meraki lodged a formal objection, arguing that the proposed noise mitigation measures were inadequate (Guttridge-Hewitt, 2023). The overwhelming response of the community to the SaveMeraki campaign, put the

venue under the LCR's radar (Ross, 2022). The Board supported the objection, emphasising the venue's cultural significance and warning of a dangerous precedent for redevelopment in the area. Liverpool City Council's planning officers agreed and refused the application, explicitly citing the AoC in their decision in 2023 (Guttridge-Hewitt, 2023). This was the first documented case of AoC being used to protect a grassroots music venue in Liverpool (ibid). What Meraki's survival showed is that AoC can be effective, but only when venues are aware of the policy and councils of its importance when considering development plans.

6. Key Findings

6.1 Vision but no proactivity

The cultural framework compiled by the Liverpool City Region Music Board sets out a comprehensive game plan for the endorsement of musical ecology in the city. When it comes to GMVs specifically, the there is little evidence of systematic intervention or tangible, on-the-ground outcomes. Most threatened venues have not been saved through local action, despite even being recognized assets of community value. The Caledonian was still bought and planned to be developed into flats even though a big portion of the LCR Board's section is dedicated to active safeguarding against redevelopment. Meraki is the only clear example of a venue benefiting from explicit policy protection, and even in this case the protection comes from a national policy, not a localized initiative.

While the goals the LCR sets out are all beneficial for the safety of GMVs, they are long-term commitments that are a result to a short term reactionary plan. Here, proactivity as a policy tool is highlighted as it shows that if a policy is reactionary, then when the action that causes it fades into oblivion, the policy itself will not be useful as it is not supported by the general climate.

6.2 Scattered policy indications

The difficulty of implementing consistent venue protections in Liverpool reflects a fragmented policy environment. GMV protections are spread across multiple strategies (the LCR Music Board, Local Plan commitments, and national legislation such as ACV and AoC), making them harder to coordinate and less effective in practice. As the Caledonian case exposed, ACV status provides only symbolic recognition without addressing financial or ownership vulnerabilities. Meanwhile, the subsequent survival of the Meraki underscores that real protection has come only through leveraging national planning frameworks, not through

locally designed interventions. The result is a system that generates ad hoc, case-by-case responses rather than a coherent long-term safeguarding strategy.

6.3 Tourism and international policy influence

Liverpool's policy direction has been heavily influenced by international frameworks that prioritise global visibility. The UNESCO City of Music designation, along with events like Eurovision 2023, positioned Liverpool as an international cultural hub. These frameworks shape local policies by encouraging the council to prioritise heritage promotion, large-scale events, and creative industry branding. However, there needs to be caution in the degree to which councils are implementing them. While these agendas bring economic benefits and align Liverpool with global "music city" discourses, they can inadvertently direct resources away from grassroots spaces. Funding streams and cultural strategies become oriented around maintaining international recognition and delivering flagship spectacles, rather than safeguarding the day-to-day survival of GMVs.

This emphasis is evident in regeneration schemes such as Ten Streets, which market creativity as a development tool in ways consistent with international policy models. But, this framing reduces music to an economic asset, an urban branding strategy that attracts investors and tourists, while the venues that sustain Liverpool's musical ecology are left exposed. The closure of Quarry confirms this contradiction: international status enhances the city's brand but does not translate into protections for grassroots venues. In effect, Liverpool's cultural infrastructure is increasingly designed to meet the expectations of global frameworks, where grassroots venues are acknowledged symbolically but not structurally supported.

Chapter VI. Discussion

The purpose of Chapter 5 was to investigate how the councils of two seemingly similar cities, Manchester and Liverpool, supported grassroots music venues (GMVs) during the post-COVID crisis. Using a comparative lens, the research examined how national frameworks such as the Agent of Change (AoC) principle were locally applied, and how councils balanced economic regeneration with cultural preservation. The central question was whether local governance safeguarded GMVs' right to urban space or reinforced their vulnerability.

The findings show that while both councils rhetorically celebrate their cities' musical heritage, they struggle to protect venues materially, but this is beginning to change. GMVs

are framed as cultural assets yet treated as expendable when they conflict with development priorities. This tension is particularly visible when crises expose the fragility of the sector.

1. What was different about COVID-19?

Chapter 3 and 4 individually focused on the two cities and how grassroots venue culture was celebrated amongst communities. Without any real safety net, musical culture was arguably a part of the leisurely amenities offered by the city to entertain locals and tourists respectively. Liverpool's rebranding from 1990-2003 focused on developing the areas infrastructure through music, bidding to become the European Capital of Culture in 2008 and refurbishing whole districts to cater to outsiders more than the locals. Despite the financial crisis of 2008 and the Brexit talks that initiated in 2015, Liverpool continued to use its musical heritage as a scapegoat for development, bidding for the 2015 UNESCO City of Music and being names as a ''thriving music city'' by the 2019 UNESCO Creative Cities Network Report of 2019. The paradox here is that despite the 2019 triumphant title, in 2023, Liverpool was the worst hit city by the venue closure crisis.

This irony encapsulates why grassroots venues require an actual safety net. The pandemic was uniquely damaging because, unlike the financial crisis of 2008 or the uncertainty of Brexit, COVID-19 removed the possibility of operation altogether. GMVs had always survived on precarious models where bar sales and ticket revenue kept them alive and when that disappeared overnight, their lack of assets, savings, or institutional support left them exposed in a way that larger cultural institutions were not.

Despite crises like 2008 and Brexit reshaping the economic environment, they did not impose total shutdowns. GMVs could still adapt or rely on community audiences, and when the essence of community was also halted. COVID was cathartic for policy, as it stripped away even those coping mechanisms that relied on community closeness. The collapse of dozens of spaces in Liverpool after 2019 shows that celebrating just the idea of music as leisure is unsustainable if its cultural infrastructure depends entirely on commercial survival rather than guaranteed protection.

2. Right to the City: Whose Right, Whose Music?

Venue closures and the extended struggles they are facing at times of economic instability show whose rights are prioritized in a city that is trying to adapt and survive as a whole. The divide most prominent in this thesis was property developers vs. cultural communities. In

both Manchester and Liverpool we saw rent increases and weak council intervention when it came to rent regulation, which is understandable as rent can't be adjusted en mass unless there is a public authority of ownership. In most cases, venues were owned by private landlords, which is why a rent-regulating strategy might not be possible just yet. As we saw, there are alternative schemes of ownership such as the one offered by Own Our Venues, but it's a rather selective and time-consuming process. Therefore, weak council intervention in this sector limit communities' ability to claim urban space for cultural use. This leads to venues being easily absorbed in larger developments which not only risk their special autonomy but their existence as a whole.

In both Manchester and Liverpool, venues are treated as commodified entities to be branded for tourism or displaced for more profitable development to differing degrees. In Manchester we saw a more development-friendly stance, prioritizing economic regeneration over cultural rights, and in Liverpool a more comprehensive approach that targets many areas but with insignificant regulating bodies and no material support. It would be wrong to assume that Liverpool's approach is unsuccessful in relation to Manchester, because Manchester begun leveraging its musical heritage earlier than Liverpool did. Liverpool's approach thus can be considered unripe, but the vision is promising musical integration in developed areas which shows that the social function of music venues is not ignored. Both cities rhetorically acknowledge culture but in practice property logic dominates, confirming Lefebvre's critique that the *right to the city* is often denied to the unconventional (for developers) cultural groups.

3. Spatial Value and displacement

As per Van der Hoeven and Hitters (2020) emphasise, venues cannot be understood in isolation but only through their interaction within the urban fabric.

Displacement becomes especially pronounced when large-scale development projects intersect with these venues. In Manchester, the local council has implemented more structured initiatives like the AoC principle and the Night-Time Economy funds to support GMVs. However in this case as well displacement risks persist, driven less by rhetorical neglect and more by private property ownership and the housing market and zoning conflicts. In both cities the musical pathways created by spatiality are disrupted when GMVs are displaced, severing cultural routes that support local music ecosystems. The difference between the two cities is that the MCC explicitly calls for developers to consider the AoC,

and hopefully this will not only stay confined in developing policies, but also a consideration for when matters take legal dimensions.

In relation to the Night and Day Café ruling, spatial value theory also encapsulates the above by arguing that GMVs are not just sites of entertainment but vital nodes within the city's social and cultural infrastructure. Their displacement represents something bigger than just a broken housing market, it represents the erosion of both tangible and intangible urban value.

4. Vision but absent mission

The Right to the City brings forward the exclusion GMVs face from urban decision-making while the spatial value shows a mismatch between what communities see as valuable and what councils protect. The two councils presented very different approaches.

Liverpool has a rich musical history that has been celebrated worldwide, through international titles and a tourism circuit that capitalises on heritage branding. Yet GMVs in Liverpool were almost never accounted for before the 2008 financial crisis, with landmark venues such as Cream and the Kazimier closing, and others like the Cavern at risk. In the years that followed, council attention was directed elsewhere, such as in major dockland developments, and a defensive race to retain UNESCO World Heritage status. GMVs, as a result, were never prioritised. Post-COVID, council capacity has become even more limited, with regeneration and tourism taking precedence over cultural infrastructure. While strategy documents articulate ambitious visions, they lack the dedicated funding, acquisition schemes, or enforcement needed to materially protect GMVs. The issue is not the absence of cultural vision but the premature and underdeveloped nature of sector-specific policy, and an overstretched council. Things are beginning to take a more positive turn through the case of Meraki and the Ten Streets plan, but this is said with caution as the thesis has also explained why marketing districts as creative might compromise their authenticity and accessibility.

Manchester, by contrast, drew on its music scene not for heritage tourism but for cultural capital during the Madchester years. With the establishment of the Music Venue Trust as a synchronising body, the MCC had already engaged with strategies to safeguard grassroots venues well before COVID-19. Its approach has been more structured, aided by the adoption of the Agent of Change principle into planning law. Yet, their programme isn't contradiction-free. While Manchester's rhetoric is aligned with proactive measures, large-scale development projects and zoning conflicts still expose GMVs to displacement. The city's

music policy thus sits uncomfortably alongside its development agenda as showed in the case of the Night & Day Café.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

What the analysis of the two cities showed is a micrography of the global trajectory of live music since the pandemic, a trajectory from which recovery remains incomplete. To frame the displacement of venues as exclusively social or economic would be reductive, as such spaces emerge and persist through a complex interplay of cultural, social, and economic dynamics. Grassroots music venues (GMVs) exist because of the human need to create and communicate, and their success or failure depends on how these multiple dimensions intersect.

COVID-19 reshaped communities primarily on a social level. This was reflected in how GMVs were perceived and treated by their own communities, often divided between those who sees them as vital cultural infrastructure in need of protection, and those who reduce them to sites of leisure and entertainment. In reality, these functions are not mutually exclusive: GMVs simultaneously sustain the work of creatives and provide entertainment for local audiences. During COVID-19 both ceased and a new third objective that had been looming since the 2000s, entered the equation of people to satisfy. In the landscape mapped and analysed, GMVs acted as a point of intersection between the interests of artists, local audiences and the interests of newly established properties and urban projects that manifested during a period of social stagnation split into multiple lockdowns. The thesis attempted to show how city councils that implement local, national and international schemes, either directly or influenced by, are balancing those multiple interests in a way that not necessarily centres, but protects the interests of live venues that up until now have been occupying an underdefined role in urban policy.

The reasons for this under-definition were identified to be an uneven focus on the economic outputs of live venues as opposed to their cultural and social values, a heavy focus by local governments on the vibrancy GMVs bring to a neighbourhood but not on the conditions that ensure this vibrancy, and its weaponization in extend through creative city-branding. Arguably, the three are interconnected in a form of economic reductionism, a shallow focus on profit but not on the symbolic values of live venues. This was an effect that was exacerbated by the rise of neoliberalism and how it affected housing prices and the affordability of space. Following Harvey's crucial 'monopoly of rent' theory, what was

bound to and has happened since the moment cultural value is harvested by developers and not cultural producers themselves, is gentrification and the subsequent displacement and erosion of cultural infrastructure.

The thesis looked at how the long-running musical and cultural city hubs of Liverpool and Manchester have dealt with the above root causes of the many GMV closures. While the above section highlighted how the local councils have responded to the crisis through acknowledging particularly the theoretical frameworks of Lefebre's Right to the City and their consideration towards the spatial value of live venues, it also revealed the limits to their practice. Hereby, the biggest obstacle to overcome for councils is to find the correct balance between all these differences in value and priorities, parties that coexist in today's Liverpool and Manchester.

As proven, the Agent of Change has been a vital sign for GMVs threatened with noise complaints that are a result of a refurbishment of areas that used to serve a communal purpose as opposed to a residential one. As good as the Agent is, it is not but a bandage to a bigger problem. It offers a solution to a symptom, but does not address the illness or comes up with a cure. Although fully addressing the vulnerability of a property within the dynamics of the rental market presents significant challenges, potential strategies can be explored to mitigate the associated risks. Therefore, some recommendations are here considered for GMVs development:

In regards to achieving secure tenure as best as possible, councils should rely more on the Asset of Community Value designation that deem properties important for the viability of neighbourhoods, and endorse more public ownership models as the Own Our Venues. The above not only helps with establishing the importance of these spaces, but also gets the community involved by placing their viability in their hands, maximizing their perceived value and making them an issue of collective protection, thus collective responsibility. On the technical part, long-term leases must be employed and rent caps for landlords that rent cultural property, to prevent sudden displacement and unprecedented rental price rises. The above will be easier if GMVs are treated as cultural infrastructure on par with libraries and theatres in planning law. It is important to point out however that the reason they are not, is because of the noise they produce which some might deem antisocial (thus the creation of the Agent of Change). What can regulate this is more careful zoning planning by new urban projects that don't place residential units too close without adequate protection, or that zones

that include more cultural and leisurely infrastructure and less residential, shouldn't be functioning according to residential standards.

On the question of funds, there needs to be secure allocation of funds distributed by the MVT or other parties, on the respective GMVs and GMVs alone if set for the specific cause, and if cultural funds are available, designated GMVs should be claiming their fair share. Adding to this, if an area is under redevelopment and there are funds dedicated to maintenance, GMVs should be also accounted for if in the designated zone to reduce reliance on volatile private income. This also acknowledges the question of spatiality. To prevent redevelopment that fragments cultural pathways, there needs to be adequate mapping of cultural clusters in the city. Also the consideration of cultural easements must be taken into account to protect a venue in the possibility of displacement.

Lastly, on the question of exploiting vibrancy, live venues should not be the place where the line between commodification and genuine appreciation must be drawn. They are spaces primarily for cultural and creative expression, and their value emerges from the freedom of artists to experiment, communicate and engage without external conditions that value their art. Treating them as spaces-objects to be managed or marketed strips away their qualities and reduces their dynamicity into static. What is argued here is that they are not for anyone, developers, councils, markets, to dictate how they should function or what their value must be. Treating them with some type of formal recognition as cultural properties according to their wider community impact resists branding them for tourism. Policies or commercial pressures that prioritize aesthetics without officially recognizing their cultural value is what turns some GMVs such as the Hacienda, to be treated as products and not ecosystems.

If an ecosystem is to continue yielding life, it must be accounted for as more than a product with an expiry set by those disengaged from its existence.

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