

A study of two grand civic buildings reveals depressing differences between the council that built them and the one that's just refurbished them, writes Owen Hatherley

Citizen Manchester: Manchester Central Library & Town Hall Extension Transformation  
by Dan Dubowitz and Alan Ward  
Manchester University Press, £45



## BOOK

From the clip-art of council logos and the bargain-basement signs affixed to housing estates, you would never guess that local authority design departments had once been hailed by the likes of Nikolaus Pevsner and Steen Eiler Rasmussen for their patronage of the arts. Citizen Manchester is, in the current dispiriting context, startling in its opulence. Based around a series of photographs taken and found by artists Dan Dubowitz and Alan Ward during the refurbishment of Manchester's Central Library and Town Hall Extension, it is a huge, beautifully printed, elegantly designed (and accordingly expensive) album. So for once, here's something that may offer a positive example of local authority design today – though it isn't just the price tag that suggests something is awry.

The original buildings, both of which were designed for the council by E Vincent Harris in the 1930s, are typically municipal in a pre-war "civic gospel" sense, rather than a post-war "utopian" modernist one. The Library is strictly neoclassical, the Town Hall Extension (adjoining Alfred Waterhouse's more famous high Victorian Town Hall) a freer, abstracted neo-gothic. They share a dominating scale, a grandeur of space and materials and, in Ian Nairn's description, "a total mastery in the juxtaposition of disparate forms". In between runs Library Walk, an atmospheric curved passageway. The book is in many respects every bit as official as the buildings, containing statements from the council's leaders Richard Leese and Howard Bernstein and the renovation architect Ian Simpson. They all seem convinced that the renovation will make the buildings more "democratic", less imposing and authoritarian. It's worth remembering that the council that built them



Above left Flux and Fillings, by Alan Ward

Above right Cut, by Dan Dubowitz

also built entire garden suburbs such as Wythenshawe, while the council that is renovating them undertakes an enormous programme of cuts and closures of public baths and branch libraries, but slaps itself on the back for merely upgrading its older buildings during austerity (the two buildings in question were built during the Great Depression). This all takes place in a city centre where there is now not even a single public toilet.

Happily, the material is so interesting that you can ignore the interjections of Leese and his ilk, as they recall the day when the council called the police on the GMB union (among other highlights). What makes Citizen Manchester worthwhile is that it doesn't document either the original buildings in all their splendour or the shiny surfaces of the new interventions by Simpson (in the Town Hall Extension) or Ryder Architecture (in the Library). Instead, the buildings are caught in between. The photographs are never merely picturesque, but capture juxtapositions of

grandeur and shabbiness – a door reading STRICTLY PRIVATE – MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL ONLY in front of a set of detached cisterns, a new steel frame being constructed amid faded woodwork, and several heavily damaged black-and-white found photos. Quotes from members of staff, from local historian Jonathan Schofield, and from users of the Library such as Morrissey and Ewan MacColl show the secret life of the beneficiaries and propounders of the civic gospel – there to flirt or to read the dirty bits in Henry Miller as much as to self-educate.

As a piece of design and architectural exploration, Citizen Manchester is exemplary – contemporary without being grinningly Blair-modernist, focused on history without heritage kitsch, local without being petty, serious without being scholastic. Even here though, the way that Manchester's leaders like to combine gestures to the radical past with relentless privatisation is hard to avoid. Simpson tells us that the floor of the remodelled Town Hall Extension will feature the names of the dead at the Peterloo Massacre. Meanwhile, against widespread protests, the same architect is designing a new glazed link blocking off Library Walk, enclosing a well-loved piece of public space. This combined immortalisation and destruction has become a Manchester speciality.