

## **Want a flat in Salford? They're not as cheap as you'd hope. Joel Goodman tried to find a home for less than £50,000...**

Moving home is a struggle. Discarding the familiar, the struggle to find a decent living space and the irritation of packing and unpacking barely poke at the surface of the horrors awaiting me. Yet now is meant to be the time and, for a flat hunter like myself, Manchester is meant to be *the* place.

You would have to have been on Mars not to notice the burgeoning number of "contemporary loft" developments and "city spaces" springing up in and around town. Every fallen factory, empty estate and desolate space is prey to the crane as steel frames pop-up overnight in readiness to house the next generation of Mancunians. What happened to the previous generation is uncertain. Perhaps the working classes fell down the back of the sofa along with the industry, the terraces in which they lived now boarded up or colonised with southern students – £20,000 wont buy a room on the outskirts of London, let alone a three bedroom house a mile from the city centre. Lancashire's community seems to have devolved into brokers and dot-commas in a single generation.

Today was the second time in a week that an invitation to sell my home has invaded my letterbox. Unsolicited and anonymous, I am told that everyone wants my flat, so I feel totally justified in wasting some of the agent's time and I have applied for a valuation.

It was only a few months ago that I had set about looking for a new home. They're more expensive than ever and my middle-class media, obsessed with stories about property ladders and valuation surveys, says they're going to get even more costly. A home in Britain will now cost an average of £100,000 – and that's before the oak-effect wood floor has been laid and the chrome fixtures installed. With a miserly budget of £45,000, will I even be taken seriously?

The first call I made was "Julie Twist" – one of the better-known city property "specialists". They sum up everything about the new loft-owning dream with their industrial metal staircase and blueberry MAC computers; surely they'll find something for this middle-class boy?

Ordsall is up-and-coming, I'm told. What with the council boarding up the last of the estate and the sexy new "Boxworks" flats around the corner, properties are being snatched up as speculators predict soaring prices. There are local amenities such as a branch of Sainsburys (newly refurbished organic food range inside, a Cashpoint outside - you wouldn't use it without an armed guard at your side) and a Metrolink stop in Trafford Park. No post-office or bank though, and little in the way of nightlife. "But the city is only a mile away" I'm reminded, "and there's always a security guard in the car park".

That'll keep the hooded 'n' capped ones away, and if you have a car you wont even have to walk past the half-empty estate and the poster-boards promising new ski-slopes ("due for completion Summer 2002" yet currently a four acre

pile of rubble “at the heart of Salford”) or the adverts for Channel Four’s nightly “outing” with Graham Norton.

The flats themselves are dull. Bought from the council by Barrett Homes fifteen years ago, the buildings were gutted and rebuilt – apparently intended as weekend apartments for the city slickers, solicitors and soap stars who work nearby.

Oddly, Ordsall didn’t appeal to these uber-yuppies. Was it the abandoned road works or the dusty pavements or the gutted, burnt-out car carcasses that put them off? Either way, they felt Alderly Edge might be more suitable. The legacy: colourless flats in neat rows - a sign at the entrance warning residents not to place plant pots on ledges or dry laundry outdoors. How thrilling.

The rooms were tiny anyway, interlinked with a narrow corridor and a kitchen big enough to cook for one. These are not family homes and families would not be welcome. Yet these are “all the rage” according to my guide. I ask “Who with?” People like me, apparently. Single men – the flats are known by many as “Fairy Towers”, ‘nuff said – with cars. The car, of course, is so that we can drive somewhere more interesting after work. The flat is merely functionary – not a home, more a dwelling unit with a secure car-parking space thrown in with every purchase.

The crunchy sound of broken glass underfoot betrays the true efficacy of the security and the whole concept seems a failure. No wealthy businessman would live here for fear of getting his Lexus nicked. These soulless “units” sell for twice the price that they did two years ago – now £50,000 a whirl. I decide to move on.

Here I am excited, for on the next rung up I find “Boxworks”. How cool is this: a chunk of space with just the outside walls, floor and ceiling. You get to sit down with an interior designer and plan your home from end to end. Just the thought of it is thrilling - and the great thing is I don’t have to travel far. A mere 300 metres from Fairy Towers stands this grand vision, complete with its own glass and steel sales podule on stilts outside, (web address across the front in plain view of the queuing motorists on the adjacent Mancunian Way).

The show flat is stunning. Reclining leather chairs, washed stone flooring with scattered rugs and glass tables and each hooked up with high-speed Internet access. This is the future – and it’s here, in Salford! This is why the council are so proud of the investment they’ve brought in – a shining beacon declaring that Salford is a forward-looking, vibrant, Blairing example of the North West’s regeneration; from the industrial, Victorian wasteland of yesterday to the super-highway dynamism of today. All I’ll need is a rimless-glasses-wearing designer and £165,000. And that’s before they put the walls in and plumb the loo.

“How can this be?” I ask, “When a complete flat on a similar scale a mere 300 metres away is less than a third of the price.”

Not for long though. With the Boxworks on the market all the property in the area is increasing in value. The local church has already been sandblasted and converted into £175,000 haunted-homes, while across the way, Bellway are building sterile flats for about £125,000.

If I want to buy a flat in the area for £50,000 I'd better do it quick!

Finally, I checkout the "Regents Park" estate. Not far from my first call, it borders the edge of Manchester city centre sandwiched in a schizophrenic world between the Ordsall Estate and the grander projects of urban renewal, converted Mills and offices. The agents are full of homes from this cul-de-sac, constantly turning them around to new owners at prices ranging from £30,000 to £50,000 – seemingly ideal.

And what a shock! Two minutes walk from the grit and decay of Ordsall stand four blocks of flats, each four floors high and set in landscaped gardens, surrounded by protective fencing and security. Although directly off of Regent Road (one of the main routes into the city), once you turn into the car park, you find yourself inside a tranquil setting which is totally at odds with the local environment. All the flats have balconies – some with greenery planted by caring owners. Even the grounds are attractive; covered in grass and planted with trees and shrubs.

Inside, more surprises await me. All the walls are real and the rooms a sensible size. This has none of the pretentious, anal styling of the Boxworks and none of the eerie tumbleweed dryness of Fairy Towers. I have a choice of five flats to view on an estate of approximately 200 homes. They are all the same shape inside and so I chose the highest available – better views, increased security and more privacy. On the top floor at the end of the corridor is my ideal, ensuring that no one would be passing noisily by my front door.

Admittedly, being an older development, it lacks some of the modernities. There is no lift, no electric gates at the entrance – not even a fully equipped gym and solarium in the basement. But it is warm, inviting and has a character and matured feel about it which the ultra-modern Boxworks couldn't and wouldn't touch. And here's the real kicker - £35,000 on the nose – it's been on the market for over a year (how I just cannot understand), and so I have cheekily chucked in an offer.

Home prices in Manchester are starting to spiral upwards as they have in the South East, and the massive construction work – far from keeping prices affordable with the glut of accommodation – is pushing prices further up all the time. Looking at it you've got to wonder if the market isn't teetering on the edge of collapse – after all, how many people want to buy contemporary apartments in this city and stay beyond the Commonwealth Games?

As for me, for £30,000 I picked up a comfortable and secure flat a mile from the centre of Manchester and have dressed it to my tastes. In a matter of

months, it has increased in value to nearly £50,000 but, more importantly, it has become a warm, secure home, walking distance from city life.

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