



[Mad for IT: Manchester listings and reviews online](#)

Reviewed by [Simon Belt](#) December 2012

I moved to Manchester when it was a buzzing place, in the early 1980's when being Northern meant doing it for yourself, and the likes of *The Fall* had put it on the cultural map as **proper independent**

. To find out where to go, what to see and what to do, meant asking for recommendations from those with their finger on the pulse.

Ed Glinert (now of *Manchester Walks*), Andy Spinoza (now of *PR Agency SKV*), and Chris

Paul

(now a

Labour councillor for Withington

) were a few of those people with their finger on the pulse and helped pull together a mixed bag of hippies, aspiring journalists, and above all

doers

to produce the

[City Life](#)

magazine, that established a strong reputation across the city and beyond. Some of the cultural landmarks from those heady days may still be around, but alongside the broader demise of radical politics around the millennium, culture has become safer, packaged and generally stripped of its independent spirit.

Here I take a look at what's filling the space vacated by the demise of City Life.

*"For Manchester is the place where people do things.... **'Don't talk about what you are going to do, do it.'***

That is the Manchester habit. And in the past through the manifestation of this quality the word Manchester became a synonym for energy and freedom and the right to do and to think without shackles.

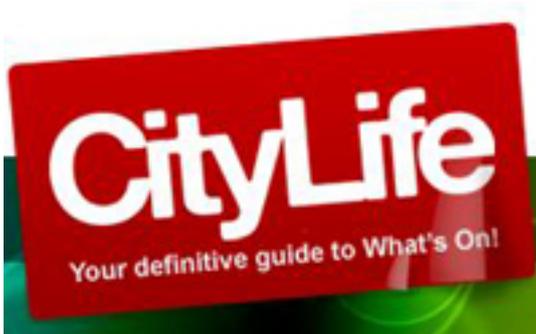
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From "What the Judge Saw" by Judge Parry, 1912.

I'm actually a big fan of talking about things so that we don't waste each other's time by just doing *something* for the sake of it - especially if it makes things worse. There's a mix of doing something for the sake of it, and lacking sufficient independence with some of these online listing and review sites which is frustrating, but even with those there are some glimpses of

what's innovative and worth replicating.

City Life



The relaunch of the name, though with a very different ethos and organisation from the original printed version. The Manchester Evening News (itself owned by the Guardian) bought City Llife out of administration and now run as an online magazine - with the tagline of '*Your definitive guide to What's On*

'. It's certainly

not

a definitive guide, rather silly to suggest it and very geared around representing advertorial Press Releases for

some

events, alongside the deals it offers its visitors.

The brief is clearly advertorial and not a hint of independent editorial and fails for me because of it, though surely must be used by some and of some use for the MEN to post what there is there. A sad case of a corporate cashing in on a brand and gutting it in the process like a Thatcherite asset stripper.

Manchester Confidential



[Manchester Mule](#)

MULE

Manchester Mule probably regard themselves as being at the other end of the spectrum to Manchester Confidential, describing themselves as providing 'News with a Kick' and primarily campaigning in focus. Their pitch is to eek out a personality and profile in the gap left by the decline in traditional broadsheet journalism, which is also regarded as too commercially focussed in favour of the interests of their wealthy owners in any case. It's an interesting and appealing pitch, yet the question that jumps out at me is why has there been a decline in serious journalism, which doesn't seem to be answered by focussing on the commercial interests of newspaper owners. Focussing on stories that aren't aimed at selling something is clearly going to lend itself to better journalism, but there must be more to critical thinking than focussing on poverty and disadvantage, so how successful are they at filling the gap?

The site is technically very well structured and refreshing for not being heavily laden with advertising so embedded in many sites - a sign of some integrity and principle, and the elegant design reflects a focus on the audience rather than the developers or writers. Although the site says it wants to be campaigning without being lecturing or preachy, I find the repetitive focus on people not receiving enough support from various state or quasi state bodies more dispiriting rather than liberating and in stark contrast to the self-starting presentation of the site. There are some interesting news stories and reviews, but there does seem to be an underlying script to uncover how hard done by people are, with the solution being more support and continued dependency. If the journalism can break out of the niche it's carving for itself and be intellectually freer then it could do something truly useful.

[GQ \(Green Quarter\) Central](#)



A new kid on the block review site with a clean modern website design. Although it's not a newspaper type site, like the Manchester Mule or City Life, it has an informed and broader feel

about its reviews as though it belongs in a newspaper site. And just because it's new it doesn't hold back from being bold and brassy with an aspirational confidence that could drive it to become a worthy contender for website for the urbane reader, and love the claim to be 'a one-stop-shop for everything and anything that is happening in central Manchester'. It doesn't meet that claim as yet, but it's definitely the best site for thoughtful content describing places and events around Manchester, and deserves to have a whole lot more content on it. I love the absence of advertising and no apparent commercial agenda, or at least not in terms of each of the articles.

The site is funded by Lend Lease, who are property developers across the country and presumably own a fair bit of real estate across Manchester and want the city to prosper so its investments do well. It'll be interesting to see how the content develops and whether it attracts other writers to contribute, which I hope it does, as there's the beginnings of a new City Life magazine here, where the honesty and depth of writing is what builds its reputation. Helen Nugent, the main writer producing reviews is a trained and time served journalist with a broadsheet background and it shows from her writing, and I just hope that Lend Lease continue to support the site or that a broader consortium of businesses managing to fund it in some way as there is some real scope for this to go beyond a subtle background review site to draw people into the city.

[Manchester Evening News](#)



The online version of the printed newspaper that dominates quality reporting across Manchester - part of the Guardian stable of papers. It can though represent some very lazy journalism and follows the conformity of New Labour with the usual lack of passion, but at least it is wide-ranging in its scope and coverage. The comment pieces usually solicit a fair amount of commentary which helps capture some key strands of thought around issues in the news. It's good to see that a lot of the journalists have put themselves about on twitter to help develop a wide network for responses and help them get a useful sample of the conversations taking place online. The advertising is relatively low key so it doesn't feel like a hard sell on reviews, though being transferred to the City Life website to read them with no way of getting back to the MEN site is frustrating. Coverage of politics is good but rather overly focussed on the more institutional side of things like Town Hall and parliamentary politics, but useful to have none the less.

[Pride of Manchester](#)



This is a series of interconnected websites across related subjects and repeated for other cities. Although it comes across as rather formulaic, it does incorporate a structured approach which is useful, and aims to entice reviews from readers which helps introduce some variety and a degree of balance to the content. The sites have an extensive range of venues covered, including restaurants, hotels, bars, theatres and music. In the **restaurants of Manchester site** there is certainly some quite detailed information that's surprisingly up to date, and includes the option to book tables online. A very useful series of websites and listings of venues from a practical point of view, but in its corporatist approach doesn't look likely to fill the gap of yesterday's City Life word on the street reputation.

[Manchester Theatre Rewards](#)



Describing itself as providing 'independent informed reviews by the region's most experienced critics', it was established to fill the gap created when the Manchester Evening News retired from organising its annual theatre awards in 2011 - a service it provided since 1981, and quite prestigious given Manchester has been at the heart of some of the quality end of theatrical production in the country. I'm not familiar with how the critics involved in establishing these replacement awards have formed themselves as a group, but are actively involved in establishing their credibility but reviewing a variety of productions in and around Manchester. There is something of a focus of the more established organisations producing theatrical performance, which is quite understandable, so will be interesting to see how balanced and broad the reviews are over time. It looks to be one of the best attempts at providing some critical feedback to theatre performances in Manchester at the moment, and hope it maintains its momentum and throughput which is admirable.

[Creative Tourist](#)

creativetourist.com

Originally the site was established with collaborative funding by the museums and galleries of Manchester to produce some quality preview and review content, ensuring visitors to Manchester received a good impression of what was available in Manchester culturally. The importance of the task was very well grasped by the team involved, delivering and presenting some great content in a well organised site. It was a joy to visit the site and find properly written articles that weren't directly selling a product but engaging the audience in a proper conversation.

The site is now in transition as funding from the big cultural organisations is drying up and the site is being forced to become self funding, and despite not being a fan of dependency on state funding because of its tendency to develop dependent thinking, this site had eeked out an approach that express some real maturity and independence. How it will survive is anyone's guess, but at least the people behind it have form in producing quality in a very difficult environment. To assert its transition to a new phase, it is applying a reorganisation and make-over of the site. I like the feel of the new template but think it's lost some of the purpose and structure for me, or at least it's too subtle and in the background to immediately engage in the conversation as was the case. If only the best of the designers and content producers of these various sites could be fused into capturing the spunk and joy of yesterday's City Life, and use the latest techniques available to online publishers.

[New Manchester Walks](#)



Not until I started looking at the listings and commentary pages of Manchester did I realise how many tour and walking guide sites there are for Manchester. Maybe when you live and work around Manchester you just don't notice the number of tours, or maybe they're just not as structured, centralised or garish as some other City Tours, but those in Manchester have rather passed me by. The *new Manchester Walks* site expresses a passion for Manchester wrapped in a passion for telling a story. The *Walks & Tours*

section gives a glimpse on seriously fascinating and enticing looking tours, and a wealth of knowledge thankfully not lost, though too little discussed these days. The aspect of having histories passed on by relatively self regulating and appointed, and outside of more officially sanctioned bodies is really quite exciting, yet raises a challenge to the institutionalised form of passing on histories.

[Manchester.com](#)



Priding itself for being the longest running website for Manchester, and even having so many pages built up over its years, alarm bells rung in my head looking at this. It's rather unclear what the real point or focus of this site is apart from hosting a variety of commercially focussed comparison and search sites - you know the thing, accommodation, jobs etc etc. It's a magnate front-end to a confusing array of other listing and advertising focussed sites. I'm in no way opposed to selling online, and most others aren't but I don't like the succor you in approach that this sites smacks of. I'm not sure if it's developed by people who rarely talk to humans, but it has a very heavy case of coders from far afield being let lose for short periods on the site to acheive a short term commercial goal, only to be replaced by some other coders equally unfamiliar with anything other than a spreadsheet or algorithm to relate to. The Manchester United only focus for football speaks volumes. This site might well attract traffic and probably applauds itself for keeping that traffic clicking endlessly on links to try and make sense of it. If only a responsible adult could ask the coders to do something socially useful.

[View Manchester](#)



Another of the corporate style listing sites that segment to different formal sites for the listings and reviews of restaurants, pubs and bars, clubs, cinemas and hotels, and replicated in form across other cities. The more cultural and critical aspects of what I look for is downplayed or probably more conscious excluded in favour of short pithy content to facilitate the commercial

promotion of venues and their events. It makes use of dreaded star rating so liked by those keen to reduce the rich tapestry of life and experience to a tick box mentality. I presume the main impulse of these sites is the desire to use an interest people have in finding out about the city they live in to sell advertising through their footfall or clickfall. They leave me wanting more, though not of the same.