

Leeds city centre south – a report from the future

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*Leeds has an established city centre that has been evolving for hundreds of years. It also has a huge area on the south side of the River Aire that was dominated by industry but has already changed to be less industrial: engineering works, warehouses and the brewery have closed; flats, offices, hotels and other uses have been introduced. There are many other buildings and sites that are either already derelict or likely to change use. But to what? **How might Leeds City Centre South look and work by 2030 and what will people think of it?** We can all think about the influences on our city, **consider possible alternative futures** and think about whether we could and should help to move towards or away from the multitude of possible options for our future.*

*Here is one **vision**. It's quite idealistic and wouldn't suit everybody. But it does take on board some of the very significant changes that we are going to be facing in the next few years and imagines a city centre that has adapted to emerging challenges. It's quite a resilient, safe and inclusive place.*

At 8.30am on a May morning in 2030, I am gazing over the city from the viewing platform on the roof of the 'Feed Leeds' vertical farm that was built ten years ago near Leeds College in Hunslet. Between the blades of the locally manufactured windmills on this 10th floor, I can see a high speed train nosing into the station built on stilts above Victoria Street.

Students of various ages are already at work in the farm, learning hydroponics, protein simulation, algae culturing and farm maintenance and turning out a small but useful percentage of the city's food supply.

I can see steady streams of students of all ages walking and cycling along the tree-lined 'Hunslet Stray' towards the College in the old printworks. Commuters are moving along that route and along other paths to places of work dotted around amongst the new and converted buildings that now cluster in the whole of the area between the River Aire and the motorway. The sun glints off the windscreens of the zero emissions vehicles in the park and ride down at Elland Road and the other one round at Stourton. Most of these cars don't come from very far away. Since recognising in about 2010 that cheap oil was a thing of the past, we surprisingly rapidly reorganised our lives so that we didn't need to travel such great distances for work, education, shopping and leisure. Our next door neighbours used to live in a village up in the Dales but now, instead of spending hours going to and fro by car to school and work, they can spend some time on the allotment at each end of the day at this time of year. Many Leeds people make time for such things since the crash of 2008 helped people to see that quality of life is more important than the high growth rates that come from working long hours and buying yet more gizmos to save time. The teenagers will later walk over to the Ruth Gorse Academy (opened in 2014). Many of their friends have been there since they were 3 years old and an extension of the kindergarten is planned now that so many families are living in the expanded city centre. Mother will pick up a Véleeds bike from the nearby stand and cycle to her job in the West End, where she's employed in a small firm that

designs building components from 100% recycled materials. It's an example of the vastly expanded environmental goods and services sector that helped to lift Leeds and its city region out of the doldrums. It's much bigger than banking and finance. Father works from home, designing the third generation of 3D printers which are prototyped here in Hunslet. The designs will probably be exported all over the world. There are still global connections, but much more of daily life happens within a short range of home.

This used to be the badly-named 'rush hour', but now many more people work part-time or flexi-time, work from home or commute by bike, on foot or by electric vehicles. All this means that there is no congestion and very little noise or pollution. Changes to parking rules and charges, along with high petrol prices, helped to kick start a change in commuting behaviour as early as 2010 and these changes were supported by greatly improved public transport. When traffic was re-routed in 2016 so that the 'loop' no longer passed through City Centre South, we all wondered how we'd put up with that race track for so long. Whereas ease of access by car used to be a major selling point for any business building, the much more tranquil feel of the city centre has helped to stave off relocations to business parks and indeed, several firms have moved back into the city centre.

Tower Works became one of the first exemplary 'green' developments, built to the highest environmental standards. This is just one part of a much greener scene than I remember from the days of the early 21st century boom when development proposals rarely met sustainability criteria and hardly ever included green open space. We have a new city centre park, just south of the river. There are miles of green paths, extra trees and many rooftops covered in sedum or turned into gardens – all helping to reduce heat on a summer's day like this. Improving the 'green infrastructure' created quite a few jobs, and there are many more gardeners tending the city centre nowadays. Greenery also takes up carbon dioxide and helps to reduce run-off during the heavy storms that we often get these days. The flood defences were finally completed in 2020, so we all feel safer and property values are no longer adversely affected by the threat of flooding.

Not that property prices are such an obsession these days because so many more people rent their flat, town house or 'flexi-Airepod', invented in 2015 by a Leeds architecture graduate to respond to the need for households to expand and contract without moving house. My partner and I live in one of them now that we're in our 70s and semi-retired. When our grandchildren come to stay, we can rent an adjacent pod instead of having a guest room lying empty most of the time. Neighbours who live in a town house often have 'sofa surfers' staying with them. Visitors and city centre residents enjoy the range of museums and cultural events that have been opening at a steady pace over these last few years. Temple Mills is one of several sites of the West Yorkshire museum of textiles, clothing and fashion.

Coming down from the vertical farm, I pass the time of day with several old friends and acquaintances, who like me are now past retirement age but are carrying on with part-time work. Many of us, who started off in the Leeds Sustainable Development Group, have devoted increasing amounts of our time over the last decade to 'downloading' our accumulated experience by helping younger people to learn the timeless skills required for success in the work place. I'm still engaged in research on the ever-changing city and the two universities have become much more closely linked into city life and the economy, particularly via the now well-established Innovation Zone.

I have a number of meetings this morning. The first is in the 'virtual' city hall at 9:30 in which anyone who wants to comment on the latest proposals for waste treatment can join in a 3D webinar. Then I meet up with a student carrying out a research project on the history of local procurement of food for city centre restaurants. After lunch in one of the independent cafés in City Square, I meet with a firm of surveyors who have sponsored another survey of the green buildings of Leeds. Next month, Leeds is hosting the largest UK conference on green building, having gained a reputation in this field and put in place excellent conference facilities. By the way, there are no buildings over 32 storeys in the city centre and most are much shorter than this. It was realised that financing and running very tall buildings was not possible with the new energy situation and stricter environmental performance criteria.

In the evening I meet friends at a waterfront café and as usual we see an otter, this one with cubs. The south Indian chef and his English wife serve stunningly tasty and well-presented vegan food, some of it, such as the coriander, spinach and chillies, grown in the vertical farm. Many people are prepared to eat less meat and dairy products these days as it is so energy-intensive and expensive. We have to part with personal carbon credits as well as real money for every purchase, so it makes us think about environmental implications.

After a concert in the park, powered by electricity from the local Combined Heat and Power system, we mix with people of all ages, some of whom are campaigning for the local elections. Others are enjoying various games in Briggate and may well move on later to one of the five-a-side football pitches dotted around the city centre.

A minimum price for a unit of alcohol that took effect in 2014 meant that binge drinking and its associated anti-social behaviour are distant problems. Another factor has been that all young people now do a stint of six months as a community warden, either in the city centre or in some other part of the city. Another six months is spent helping to manage green spaces or working in retirement communities.

Back at home, allotments are still being tended in the twilight and parakeets are coming home to roost in the numerous trees. It's now quite hard to remember what the neighbourhood used to look like when so many sites were unused and the traffic made it a noisy and dangerous place.

Postscript:

Back in 2013, some people thought that it might be a waste of time to think about the sort of future we could all help to build. They thought that we needed to knuckle down and try to get back to 'business as usual' as soon as possible, not acknowledging that the world was becoming a different place. But others, fortunately, realised that we needed to be far-sighted, ambitious and innovative, even if our ideas turned out to be wide of the mark in many ways. Unless notions of the possible are stretched, we are highly likely to miss opportunities and make mistakes because we've failed to dare to look over the horizon and engage with the forces of change. People are always resistant to change, but it happens anyway. Better to steer toward the future with open eyes than to be swept towards it with blinkers on?