

THE PEEPS ANCOATS

WHEN DAN DUBOWITZ WON A COMPETITION TO PROVIDE ART FOR THE REGENERATED ANCOATS DISTRICT OF MANCHESTER, HE ABANDONED HIS WINNING ENTRY AND SET ABOUT TURNING RELICS FROM THE CITY'S INDUSTRIAL HEYDAY INTO A UNIQUE SERIES OF INSTALLATIONS. **TIM ABRAHAMS** TAKES A PEEK INTO DUBOWITZ'S SECRET SUBTERRANEAN WORLD
PICTURES BY DAN DUBOWITZ AND LEN GRANT

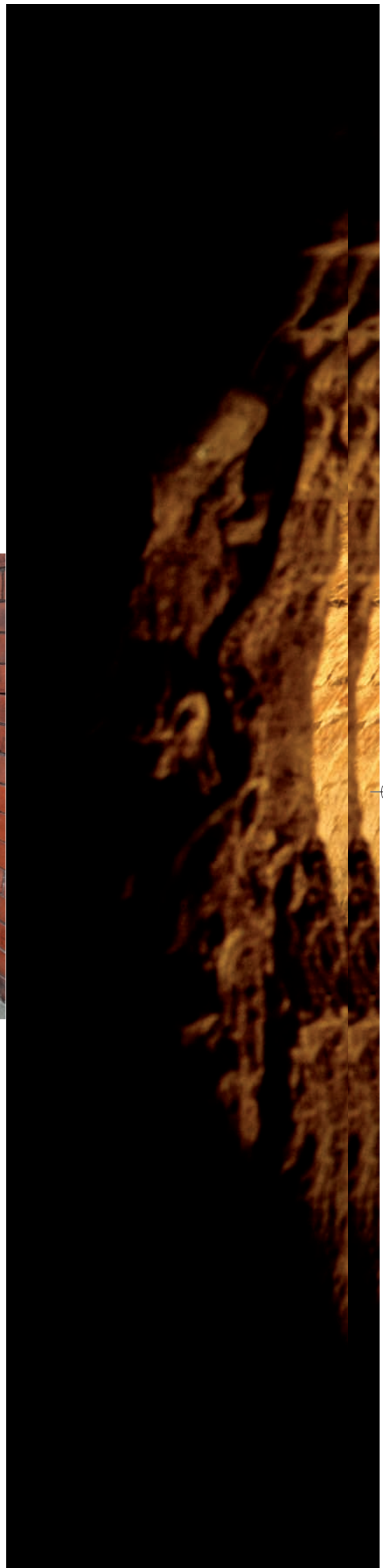
Friedrich Engels once wrote that he knew Manchester better than its own inhabitants, better than he knew Barmen in Germany, the town in which he was born. Sent to the city by his father – who unwisely thought it would cure him of his radicalism – Engels packed all his moral revulsion at the state of worker's housing into his book, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. He concentrated on Manchester's housing, opening his description with the courts of Long Millgate: 'In one of these courts there stands directly at the entrance, at the end of the covered passage, a privy without a door, so dirty that the inhabitants can pass into and out of the court only by passing through foul pools of stagnant urine and excrement.'

Yet within this impassioned evocation of squalor there is an occasional moment of awe. 'In... Ancoats, stand the largest mills of Manchester lining the canals, colossal six and seven-storied buildings towering with their slender chimneys far above the low cottages of the workers,' he wrote. If Engels

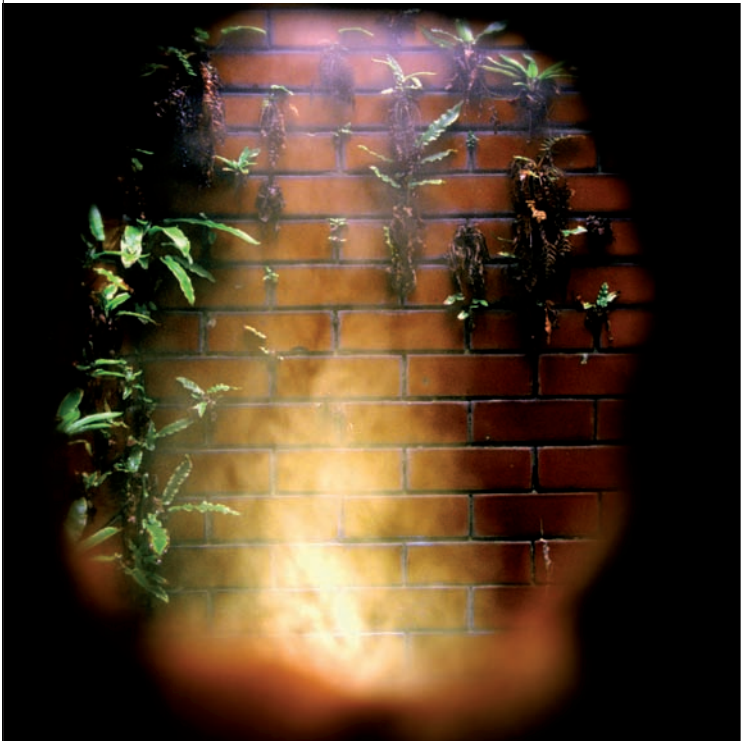


was right and Manchester was the industrial centre of the world in the 19th century, the mills of Ancoats were the most productive sites on Earth. By comparison, the complex of three water-powered mills built at the same time by Richard Arkwright in Cromford, Derbyshire, comprised 4,700 sq m of factory space. Murrays' Mill is just one of the factories in Ancoats. It stands 8 storeys high and provided 14,000 sq m of floor space. Unlike Arkwright's water powered looms, the mills in Ancoats vibrated with the deafening power of steam.

Ancoats today prides itself on being the first purpose-built industrial suburb, but that does the site little justice. Ancoats was a 20 hectare factory complex made up of New Mill, Beehive Mill, Little Mill, Paragon Mill, Royal Mill and Pin Mill. They weren't so much places where people went to work, but actual self-contained communities. Recent archaeological diggings in the area have discovered the remains of a row of roughly constructed tenement dwellings. >>





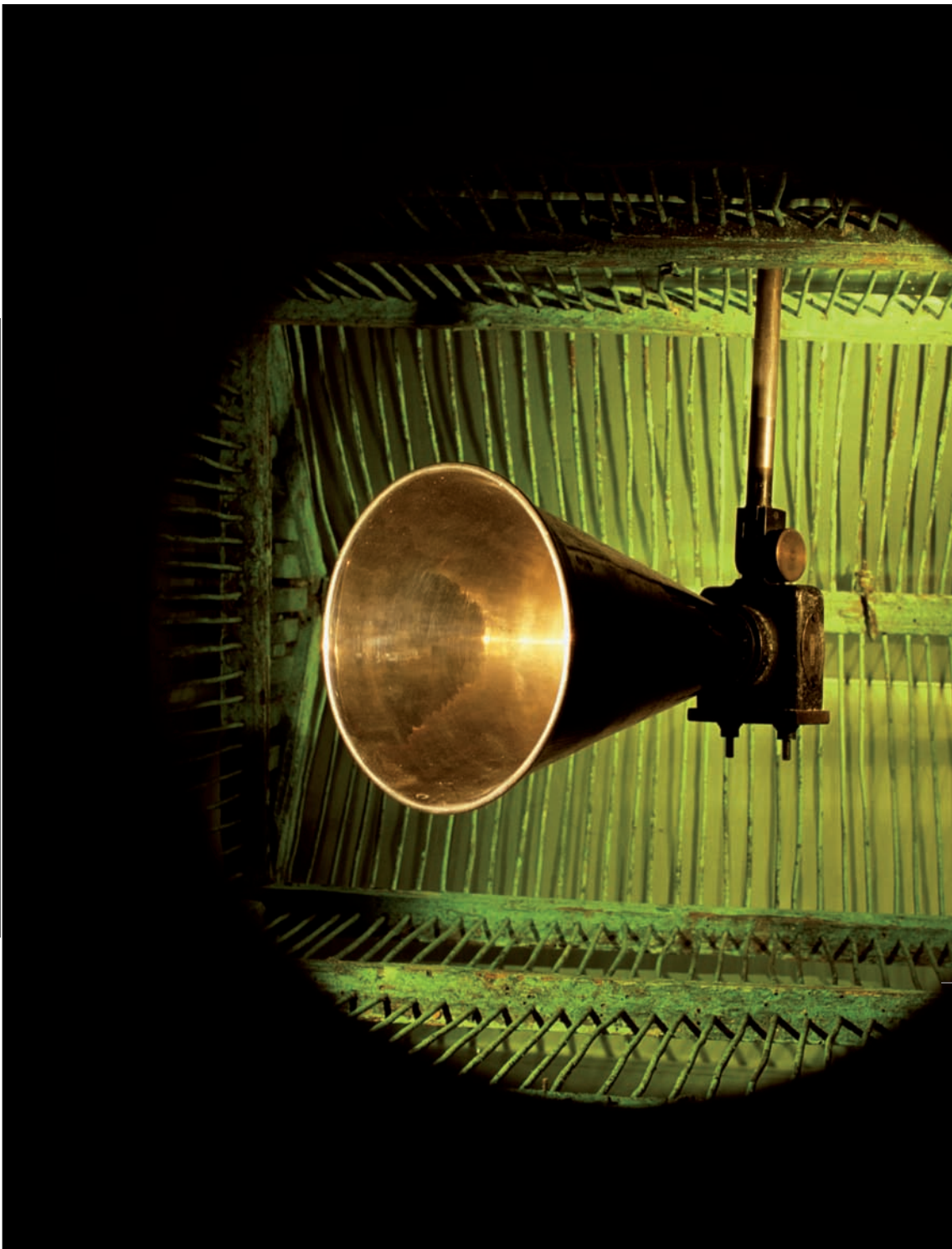


Above: Steam rises inside a bricked-up toilet by the Rochdale canal. One of the early peeps

Above right: Dubowitz rescued industrial artefacts from the mills for use in his work. This silver trumpet dates from the end of the 19th century, and was used for collecting or broadcasting a signal or radiation. There are four rows of tiny coils to its rear

Further excavation has revealed deep pits in the basement, suggesting chemical basins required by tanning processes. The conclusion is inescapable: Ancoats was a factory that people lived in. Today that situation has been reversed. After most industrial activity ceased in the Fifties and Sixties, Ancoats became an area for warehouses, illegal activity and some poor housing.

In 2002, the public artist Dan Dubowitz won a competition organised by Ancoats Urban Village Company, set up by the council to administer regeneration, to design a landmark piece of art on the south-east corner of the site. Dubowitz, a trained architect who works with photography, had created plans for an image which would sit above, and open at the same time as, the lock gates of the Rochdale canal. He blanches when he remembers it now. 'The reason they had the competition at all was because on the masterplan they had drawn a little penis which said "art here" with an arrow pointing to it,' he says.

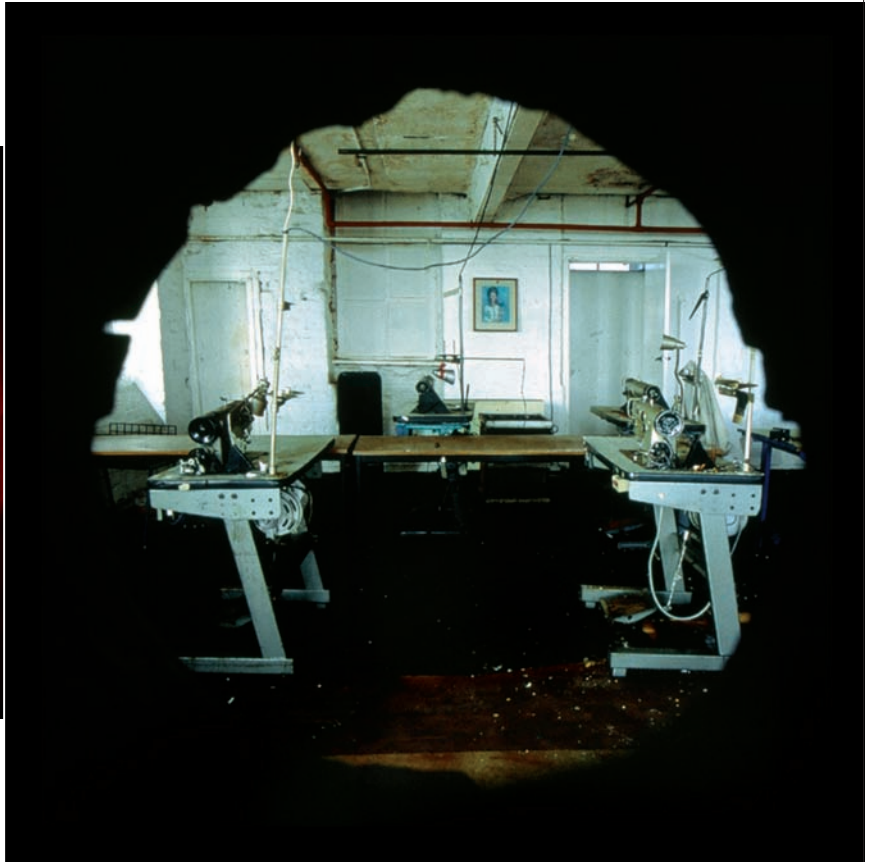
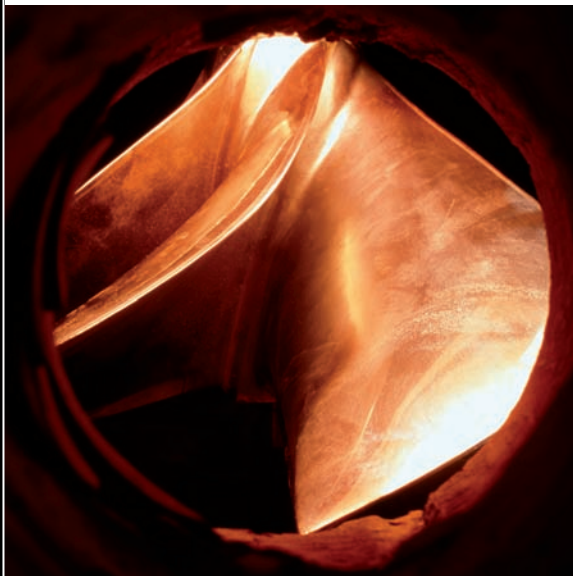
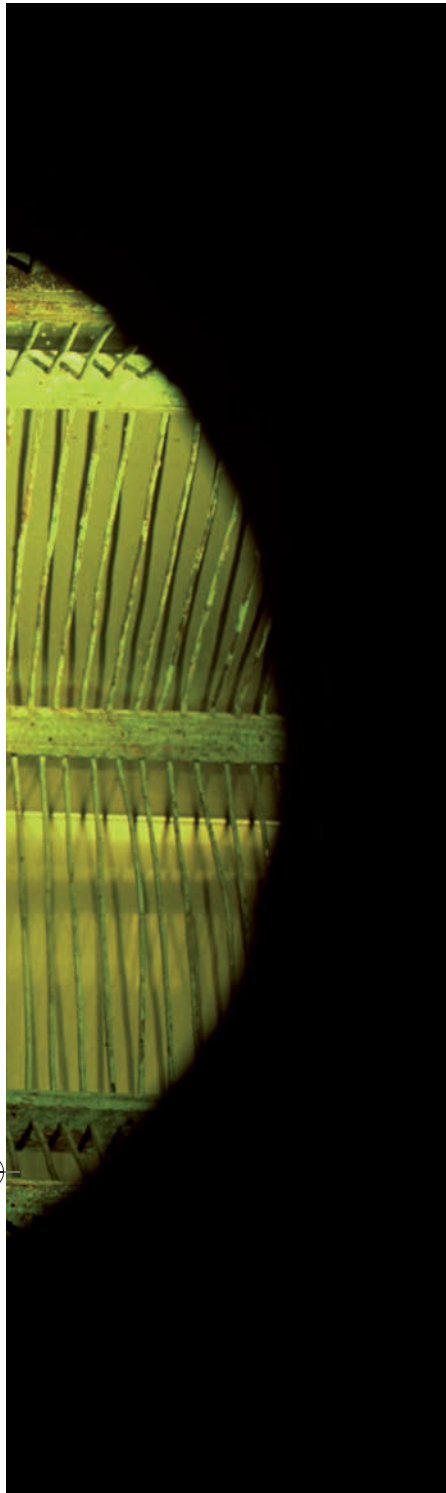


Although he had won the competition, he walked into his first meeting with his client, development director Lyn Fenton, determined not to create a landmark piece of art. Together with Matt Baker, his former creative partner in the company Heisenburg, Dubowitz had led the public art strategy for the Gorbals in Glasgow. But after the dissolution of his practice, he'd been striving to find a new approach. He was fortunate to meet Fenton. 'I wanted to walk into this meeting and say "I know I won a competition to design this thing, but I don't think you should build it." What I didn't know was that she was going to say "over my dead body are you building that,"' says Dubowitz. Fenton later admitted to being ignorant about commissioning art. 'I just felt passionately that art should be woven into the structure of the place,' she says.

Five years later and the district has The Peeps, a series of around twenty permanent public artworks embedded into the structure of Ancoats. Brass peepholes

have been attached to walls and salvaged foundation stones to provide views of blocked up rooms, photographs and video screens. Some of the images are positioned directly in front of the peephole, while others are filmed remotely and fed to the viewer by fibre optic cable. Dubowitz, who had prior knowledge of the area from his time teaching architecture at Sheffield, was given an initial 3 months to 'get under the skin of the place' as Fenton puts it. In March 2003, he was given £80,000 and a year to complete research which would result in a temporary project.

Dubowitz conducted over 200 interviews with inhabitants of the area. He was granted exclusive access to the mills, sometimes being the first person to enter a building that had been locked over 40 years. 'People had ceased trading, closed down the doors and not bothered to throw anything away. People's work was still on their desk; ironing was still on ironing boards; fabrics were still in sewing machines,' he says. He began squirreling away objects that he



thought might come in useful later. He put aside a buttonmaking machine with numerous armatures built circa 1880. The counter on it was about to turn over to 100 million. Someone later nicked it. Dubowitz had an even bigger haul of lanterns, steam governors and other industrial parts.

He also took countless photographs, 60 minute long exposures on a Hasselblad, at dusk or late at night. 'I was taking a picture of one mill where the upper floor had been completely colonised by trees. I was up there on midsummer's eve and I could see rabbits hopping around,' he says. He bought lightboxes and installed the photographs on the Metrolink platform of Manchester Piccadilly station. The pictures are visual imprints of a unique historical moment, fossils of the site's frantic energy, a memory of an industrial society which has gone but which still determines our sense of place.

This, however, was just the research process. What makes Dubowitz's work in Ancoats so amazing is the trust between

client and artist. After his photographic research and interviewing, he was commissioned to provide 20 units of art, although the nature of that art was never contractually proscribed. The work was delivered not through a public art budget, but as part of the £10 million dedicated to provide street furniture and paving. He clearly developed a close relationship with the site engineers Martin Stockley Associates and benefitted from sympathetic developers who didn't mind him drilling holes in the sides of their buildings. In October 2003, the engineers called him to say that their road excavations had unearthed a tunnel that had once connected two of the mills. On seeing the tunnel for himself, he realised he wanted to keep it.

It's hard to imagine an infrastructure engineering process being slave to the whims of an artist, but the response to his request by both the engineers and his clients was calm and supportive. 'As soon as he said "don't fill it", there was no big battle. We

just set about trying to do it,' says Fenton. The tunnel, Dubowitz realised, was hugely illustrative of what Ancoats was like in the 19th century. Streets were lawless and the owners wanted to keep their wares away from the people they employed. Dubowitz also secured the frame of a bridge between the same mills. And yet, The Peeps are not just the work of a glorified archaeologist. Although the tunnel was the first discreet space that Dubowitz secured, there is an artistic intervention in the work.

Our understanding of public art is based on regeneration. Into the alienating landscape caused by the rupture between one type of usage and another, the artist is charged to go. A public artwork like Antony Gormley's Angel of the North, manufactured in a way which recalls the defunct ship-building of the Tyne, promises the viewer a link between an industrial past with the present, even if the community itself has been fragmented. To be fair, Gormley's work is broad enough to question the idea. There >>

Above left: A propellor. This peep is embedded into the wall of a primary school

Above: One of the earlier research photos becomes a peep. The image is animated to give the effect the sewing machines are in operation



is a menacing quality to the Angel when seen up close. Most public art merely offers a comforting lie of continuity.

Dubowitz's multi-sited *The Peeps* operates within the visual language of industrialisation. The first of the peeps he created was the image of a system for clocking-in, complete with card holder. However, look closer and one can see that the clock is telling the right time and the second hand is moving. Surely, the clock has been embedded within the wall. And yet, look in the window adjacent and there doesn't seem to be enough space for a cavity that would accommodate what one can see through the peephole. Is the clock really there? Or is it somewhere else? 'The Peeps have several effects,' admits Dubowitz. 'Sometimes you are certain you know what's going on... Sometimes you don't.' Nor has the artist provided a map for his discreet works. They must be discovered.

Since these early peeps, Dubowitz has slowly developed the project over the past three years. As development continues – like nearby New Islington, it is now supported by New East Manchester regeneration initiative – Dubowitz has slowly been incorporating objects salvaged from further afield. Through one Peep embedded in the exterior wall of a school, a copper propellor underlit with a rosy pink light rotates slowly. Through another Peep, a machine of

Above left: Clocking in. A photograph taken during Dubowitz's period of research

Above right: One of the mill complexes in Ancoats expands beyond the established grid and swallows up a street

indeterminate origin rotates, trapped in a gold chamber. Because *The Peeps* was funded alongside street furniture and lighting, it has been easy to supply them with electricity – the budget has even been provided for their maintenance for the next 30 years. As Andy Firman, one of the technicians who works with Dubowitz, points out, the peeps inhabit their own time frame. An old toilet produces steam endlessly. Cog wheels turn. Each piece moves to its own rhythm.

There is no coincidence to this aspect. Together with Noel Sharkey, Professor of both Robotics and Public Engagement at Sheffield University, Dubowitz developed a logic to the site before setting about his task. They elected against using sound to convey the deafening power of the original mills. 'We talked about the energy of the place and that there was still a pulse of life that ran through Ancoats,' says Sharkey. Doesn't incorporating alien objects compromise the historic dimension? Sharkey disagrees. 'This is an artistic project,' he says. 'We are talking about creating an aesthetic which represents that feeling best.' Indeed Dubowitz himself is uncomfortable with the word 'aesthetic'. He prefers 'rightness'.

Indeed there is a tremendous 'rightness' to *The Peeps*. One of the first things that Dubowitz did was light the exterior of the St Peter's church tower and inhabit the interior with an illuminated sculpture of

whirling machine parts. The church, built in 1859, was the first Anglican church in a Catholic area, built in the Lombardic Romanesque style in an apparent attempt to win over Italian immigrants. It was deconsecrated in 1960 and fell into disrepair. In 1998 it was bought by the Council and passed to the Ancoats Building Preservation Trust. The nearby St Michael's Catholic church, little more than a brick shed, is adorned in fresh flowers daily as part of an effort to save it. St Peter's dominates the area, but Dubowitz describes it as a 'hollow gesture'. When the Preservation group tried to find the bell which had rung from the tower, they were unable to. Dubowitz thinks this is because there wasn't one.

The Peeps scrambles grand narratives of history in a way that the elder Engels would certainly not have approved. Public art still gives us a convenient reading of history, be it liberal, Anglican or even Marxist. *The Peeps* resist this without slipping into the pessimism or nihilism which the human cost of industrialisation could well provoke. What *The Peeps* does is to prompt us to learn. In the beautifully crafted twist of a propellor or the surprise of discovering a subterranean space, we are reminded suddenly that industrial production may have brutalised individuals, as much with its passing as its arriving, but it is a vital part of human experience ■