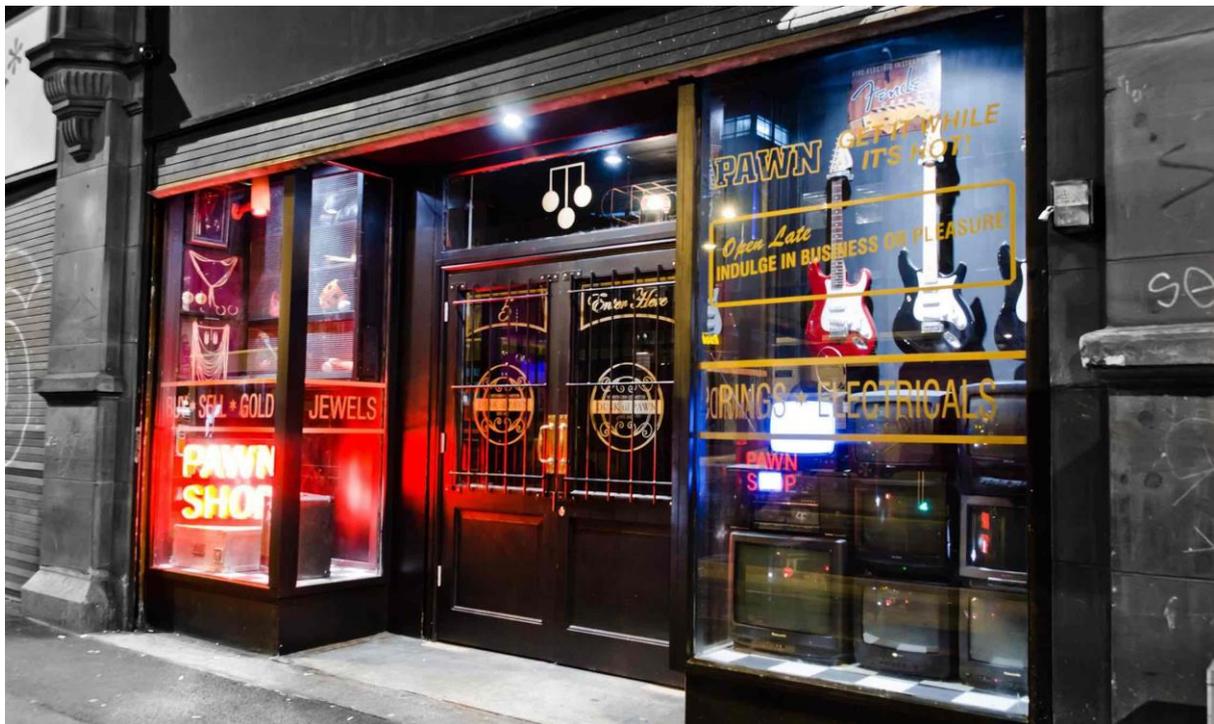


Pawn shop bars and poverty chic: how working-class life was colonised

From indie nights in working men's clubs to a bar inside an abandoned launderette, working-class life is being transformed into middle-class lols

<https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2017/may/02/poverty-chic-working-class-urban-life-colonised>



The Dusk til Pawn bar in Manchester's Northern Quarter serves cocktails including 'Greenback' and 'A million dollars'

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Dale Lately

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“Why’s there a telly in the window?”

It’s an odd question to be asking on a Saturday night in Stevenson Square, the booming heart of Manchester’s Northern Quarter. The questioner – a raven-haired clubber in her early 20s – looks puzzled. After all, we’re not standing outside an electronics shop, but a bar.

Dusk til Pawn is a theme joint with a vintage jukebox, barkeeps in 80s movie T-shirts and a gimmick: it’s modelled [on a pawn shop](#). Peer through the security bars and you’ll see old guitars, TV sets and jewellery. Inside are cocktails such as “Rolex in the Deep” and “Pawn Star Martini”.

The bar is leading a recent trend in northern cities that you might call poverty chic. Around Manchester alone there’s Dive, where you can [“chill, dance and party all under one roof”](#); the trendy music venue Soup Kitchen, only a couple of streets away from where [a number of real soup kitchens](#) dole out food to rough sleepers; and, in the former Palace hotel, Refuge, a restaurant run by DJs-turned-restaurateurs [offering “The People’s Lunch”](#) (“a big hearty bowl of amazing soul food”). If you’re feeling particularly *derelict*, you could opt for Favela, whose menu [features insects](#).

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Zoolander’s *derelict* ... ‘the fashion, the way of life inspired by the homeless, the vagrants ...’

But there is perhaps no better example of the phenomenon than at the bottom of windblown Shudehill, in an abandoned laundrette called the Washhouse.

Just how funny are jokes about precarity in a city of widespread food poverty and tent towns of homeless people?

The Washhouse, to those in the know, is [actually a bar](#). Guests have to track down an unlisted phone number to make a reservation; they are then taken through a giant washing machine door to the cocktail bar in the back. It’s run by local businessmen Jon Charles and Patrick Hall, Manchester’s kings of ironic poverty chic, who’ve created a small business empire out

of transforming working-class urban life into [middle-class entertainment](#), and have plans to expand to Newcastle ([where a branch of Laundrette is slated to open near a block of pricey student flats](#)), Leeds, London and Edinburgh.

“The owners were like, ‘Let’s just call it the Laundrette – it’s a cool thing to base our branding around’,” says Rebecca Pringle, head of menu development for the group. “In our new [city centre] branch of Laundrette we’ve got packs of our own brand of fake washing powder for show. We think it all adds to the atmosphere.”

But just how funny are jokes about precarity in a city of [widespread food poverty](#) and [tent towns of homeless people](#)? And are these new establishments cleverly repurposing urban life, or selling a theatrical form of slumming?

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The Job Centre bar on Deptford High Street in south London. Photograph: Andy Hall for the Observer

Sociologist Karen Bettez Halnon was one of the first to give a name to what she called “poor chic” in a paper in 2002, which she described as an “array of fads and fashions in popular culture that make recreational or stylish – and often expensive – ‘fun’ of poverty”. To it we might add various other kinds of downward impersonation: shabby chic, gang chic, blue collar chic – which allow people further up the social strata to “vacation” in a world of fictional grit. As Manchester has thrown off its Chartist roots and opened its doors to property speculators, [tech startups](#), sports stars and [media professionals](#), the city has found a lot of people wanting to vacation in this way, with uncomfortable results.

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“You’ve got this grand myth [about Manchester]: post-IRA bomb regeneration, Northern Powerhouse,” says PhD researcher and street activist Morag Rose, who spent 10 years [exploring Manchester](#) as part of an urban protest project, and has witnessed the city’s transformation from post-industrial wasteland into a creative industries hub. “But the success glosses over uncomfortable truths. Like when homeless people sit outside bars that flaunt shiny faux poverty chic.”

In the nearby [Chimney Pot Park, the developer firm Urban Splash](#) – well known for repacking grungy urban dereliction into expensive apartments – have converted slate-roofed terraces into a place where media workers [get to play at being working class](#): “Your very

own, very modern Coronation Street”, as the marketing blurb explicitly puts it. Travelling through Spinningfields, the city’s answer to the London Docklands, the writer Owen Hatherley noted in 2010 how luxury apartments there were [locally marketed as “credit crunch chic”](#) at a time when people feared losing their homes. An arts faculty in Manchester Metropolitan University recently published a glossy conference brochure called The Big Issue which aped the typeface and style of the homeless magazine, even as the same university was [turfing rough sleepers out of its grounds](#).

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The ‘Let Them Eat Cocktail’ at the Wash House bar in Manchester

“There’s a clear sense that the ‘old ways’ are being re-appropriated symbolically by the middle classes, right at the moment that the middle-class project has stopped expanding and has started to shrink,” says sociologist Steve Hanson, [author of a book about lifestyle tourism in Lancashire](#). Hanson sees the current scramble for authenticity as part of the same dynamic driving Brexit: a yearning among some people in a world of global brands and international trade for a [sense of roots](#).

“Middle-class people thrive anywhere, but do not feel they ‘belong’, like the lower orders, and they want some of that warm, sexy, gritty, authentic and real world for themselves,” Hanson says. “These bars are constructed in the same way: they’re imaginary spaces that collage together some symbolic material from working-class life, but they edit and ironise it.”

At a time when “belonging” [has become an urgent national issue](#), it’s perhaps no wonder that working-class life is being recycled – and not just in Manchester. Liverpool birthed a [grotesque parody version of Bingo](#) with motability scooter prizes and men dragging up as old ladies; Nottingham has an industrial take on the Washhouse called Boilermaker, a secret bar that [hides among grimy shop fronts and thrift stores](#). Working men’s clubs up and down the country have undergone conversions into trendy clubs and arts spaces. And the opening of a bar in London called Job Centre on the site of an actual former jobcentre sparked [widespread protests](#).

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Certainly the [mass recycling of ex-industrial spaces](#) or the [rise of American blue-collar fashion](#) could only take place in a world increasingly unfamiliar with the factory floor. People arguably feel comfortable quoting urban working-class life because it’s no longer “real” to them. Hanging out in a pretend laundrette signals you don’t need to use one; joking about

jobcentres is a way to signal wealth. But look closely and you'll detect a nervous undercurrent: one of the Washhouse's most popular cocktails is called Let Them Eat Cake.

Social realities, of course, have a way of bubbling up, as customers in Washhouse realised recently when locals [attempted to bring their laundry in](#).

“Some people did get a bit confused,” Pringle confides. “A lot of the real launderettes in the centre have closed now. I think they just Googled ‘launderette’ and we’re the first thing that comes up.”

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