



## ➤ Press Cutting

14 November 2008  
New Start, page 18-19

# It'll take more than fine words...

It has a compelling story to tell, but the Thames Gateway often struggles to find the right words. Some areas draw you in while others have simply lost the plot, says **Charles Landry**

Last month I spent seven days criss-crossing the Thames Gateway, by train, by car and on foot. Out from Stratford and the Olympic sites to Barking, Dagenham, along the dispiriting A13, to Rainham Marshes, Purfleet, Pitsea, Thurrock, Tilbury, Grays, along London's riverside, to Basildon, Southend and then across the river to the Medway towns, back to Ebbsfleet, Dartford, Thamesmead, Gravesend and Woolwich.

I had been asked by the three regional development agencies that cover the area to see if there was a story to tell that could enrich its inward investment prospects, help galvanise local people and project this vast place with verve and imagination.

The Thames Gateway is a complicated construct invented by government as London's major opportunity and expansion to the east. It seeks to reinforce London's position as the global city. It means a lot to them, the two regeneration delivery mechanisms and the seven partnerships across the region. A touch of institutional congestion I sense. To those who live there the Gateway does not mean much. They identify with where they live. Southend or Strood or Stratford.

When you try to get a grip on what's happening you get confused. I read reports, strategies and policies and measured them – in total they were two feet high. The weasel words are everywhere: 'Developing sustainable communities', 'consulting stakeholders', 'delivering through partnerships', 'building 40,000 homes' or was it 80,000? Is the Thames Gateway simply a huge housing estate? Figures are thrown at you, investment plans proliferate. Billions are being invested and billions more will be leveraged from the private sector, so the reports say. Of course, the credit

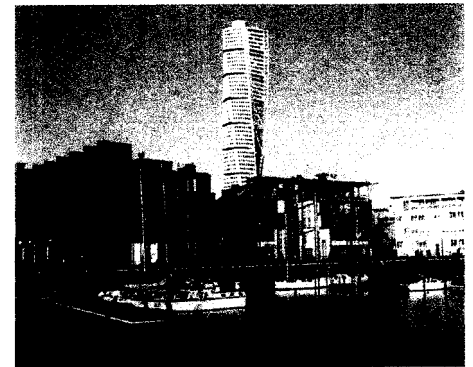
crunch will put much on hold. Yet still I couldn't find the compelling story even when I talked to people on the ground. I had a failure of imagination.

I said to myself 'if we forbid the use of the words strategy, policy, frameworks, target, outputs, outcomes, stakeholders, partnership and joined up thinking will the story become clearer?'. Too often lifeless language blurs and masks intent.

The problem is that so much is still to hit the ground. So much is still about to be done and the frustration of the 'doers' is palpable, 'the time for talking, strategising and planning has to stop', said one. The Olympic sites, once built and if done well, could electrify us and give the wider world a sense of a project in motion. Here we can be sure something will happen as 2012 is a deadline.

### Moving beyond the 'world class' rhetoric

The Thames Gateway, the documents say, will be 'world class' and we are involved in the 'biggest regeneration project in Europe'. Rather than saying those words let others say them once things have been achieved. What is the reality? I am not sure. My tour threw up many positive surprises and disappointments. Too much is ordinary and not at the cutting edge of sustainability. Where is the knowledge of world class inspirational design, highest quality, creative responses to the challenges of urban development or the ability to communicate intent? Rarely were people aware of what is happening elsewhere in Europe and the wider world. Britain unfortunately remains an island.



**The Emscher Park project in Germany's Ruhr Valley (top) and Malmo in Sweden (above) successfully draw on the past to shape the future**

The best European cities have moved from aspirational planning to intentional planning. They mean what they say. Take Malmo, its multilingual website says it all. Not one Gateway website gave you a choice of understanding the Gateway project in another language. But Malmo has achieved things. It has little sun, but uses it well, it has district heating systems, 60,000 homes are powered by wind energy and there is more. Malmo has understood the circular economy. What about the famous Emscher Park project in Germany's Ruhr area? This blended the old with the new, it reused industrial structures and turned



## ➤ Press Cutting

14 November 2008  
New Start, page 18-19

them into icons artistically drawing on the past to help create a future. Physical regeneration was mixed with economic transformation to develop an environmental healing sector that employs over 50,000 people. Regulations and incentives were used creatively to drive a new economy.

Perhaps there should be a regional observatory that spreads and communicates knowledge and inspires and gives our Gateway professionals the energy to make great projects happen.

### The high points

Yet there were delights along the way. Who would have thought that Barking is so interesting? The new town centre with its library complex and 'useless' folly was a bold initiative. Barking Riverside, with its strong input from the Dutch, eschewed the simplistic profit-maximising approach. It will have a green aesthetic. This will help drive behavioural change. It is looking at long-term yields rather than short-term returns. High quality pays.

The RSPB Centre in Rainham is another gem. The Royal Opera House proposal to build its production centre in Thurrock linked to a creative skills academy will shift our view of Thurrock. And given that this needs vast spaces, let the shed be the best shed we have ever seen. Dubai Ports is building a massive port at the new London Gateway in Tilbury. This has global significance. They are imaginative and will provide space for training and advanced research in logistics. The Medway towns are already developing a critical mass and better transport links will

increase their lure; run-down Dartford could use its cheapness as an advantage. Rather than thinking of traditional town centre renewal based on retailing a focus on attracting young creative industries types might be a better option. The same applies to Gravesend.

But Ebbsfleet disappoints and we need to await how the housing developments and business district turn out. It claims it wishes to become a real city, but with the functions segmented – retailing at Bluewater, offices near the station and housing in between – where will urban vitality come from when functions are not mixed? The station claims with a massive sign it is 'the Gateway to England'. Really, should it not announce a bigger story of the Gateway?

Has Britain lost the art of thinking big? Terry Farrell's office has produced one of the few comprehensive and thematically interesting stories called The Parklands by allowing us to see how the river and green spaces can be linked into a pattern.

### Gateway as an eco beacon

Perhaps the most compelling story is that of the Gateway as an eco-region, a beacon of the new ecological age. This has emblematic resonance – a place that turns problems into opportunities and flips the past into the future. The east of London was always the city's dumping ground and the site for dirty industries. Pollution was rife. Waste can be turned into a resource as we move into the circular economy where everything is reused. The proposed

Institute of Sustainability with its proposed research activities, located mainly in Dagenham Dock by Ford, could be the motor. The connection with Ford sends out a symbolic message.

We could see the Gateway as the place where we move towards one planet living, where we fast-track reducing CO<sub>2</sub> emissions reduction by 80%, where we think of being self-sufficient in renewable energy and in food, where we gather, treat and recycle water and retrofit cities and towns. A place that creates green jobs and employment by attracting new technology companies linked to universities and attracts the 'recycle, re-use and re-manufacture' business.

'Healing the world' is a message for the global inward investment community and one that can inspire the locals too. It is one that will leave a legacy by being imaginative and creative for the world and also by generating jobs. But many sustainability initiatives are invisible, hidden in the way we build and in high-tech gadgetry that make things work more eco-effectively. This is where the artistic imagination can come into play to communicate iconically and to drive the changes in behaviour that are necessary by making the invisible visible.

Let the artistically inspired redesign the entrance to Ebbsfleet station with imagery that shows how you move from living as if there were three worlds to the one we have; let's rethink the A13 leading up to the Institute of Sustainability, currently it could not be more depressing in spite of the now finished A13 Artscape project; let's develop a new green aesthetic that inspires us to do better.

## ➤ find out more

**Charles Landry** advises cities worldwide on their futures and is speaking at the Thames Gateway Forum on 26-27 November 2008, go to [www.thamesgatewayforum.com](http://www.thamesgatewayforum.com) for details. He is the author of *The art of city making*, *The intercultural city* (with Phil Wood) and *The creative city*. Details: [www.charleslandry.com](http://www.charleslandry.com)