

Claiming the Waterside – Challenges for Urban Design July 2014 Conference Report

Watersides are among the most intriguing urban places, sometimes defining whole towns and cities. They are also the most challenging tasks for urban designers and planners. Claiming the Waterside brought together a wide range of delegates from the build environment arena to explore these issues with some fascinating speakers. Suggestions, solutions and future thinking were debated throughout the day. This report summarises the presentations from the conference. Full presentations can be found at www.utm.org.uk

Sabine Coady Schaebitz, Director CCBE, University Northampton - Welcome and introduction

Sabine outlined the context of the conference within the *University Town Northampton* Project, which brings together the town Northampton and its University as a twice founded place of higher education in the town <http://follownorthampton.co.uk/follownorthampton/innovation-centre/>. With regard to the conference topic Sabine referred to the historic roles of watersides both as areas for utilitarian (transport and water-related industry; defence) and representative purposes. While the latter also traditionally supported the opportunity for good urban design, Sabine pointed out that the re-use of previously industrial areas provides a more difficult challenge. Here new and specific urban forms need to be developed for a new link with historic places previously not integrated with its waterfronts as is the case in Northampton and its Waterside Enterprise Zone.

Henk Bouwman, Urban impulse, Academy of Architecture, Amsterdam – Urban Waterfronts as Places of Connection

Henk began by introducing the nature of ‘urbanists’ making the point that the arena encompasses many facets and disciplines working in waterside settings involve if it is to be successful. He introduced the ideas of the variety historic narratives which underpin watersides in various European cities, along with an introduction to technical solutions to challenging waterside issues such as flooding, typologies and tangible assets. Henk went on to challenge Northampton to think clearly about claiming its waterside, most of all to think about its context, its narrative and the potential value to it can add to the town in order that the town can ‘design a story’ for its waterside. He suggested a useful matrix model for considering context and values in order to clarify aspirations. A key message was that the waterside should be ‘for all’ which has implications for the position the university will play in the town.

Discussion followed on the observation that people are often quite ambivalent to watersides, especially in the context of flooding – whereas it is often assumed they will be positive. Discussions touched on ideas of city vs flooding and the additional technical development costs.

Sue Bridge, Head of Planning, Northampton Borough Council – Northampton and the River Nene

Sue outlined the Northampton story so far outlining the impact of the River Nene on the town, the character set for the waterside area by the Avon building and the town's rich heritage. She went on to highlight the town's need to maximise the opportunities offered by its waterside - in short to establish a cultural and economic centre for Northamptonshire. The aspiration is outlined in key strategic documents. Sue also commented on the need to combat value engineering and address negative stereotypes about student behaviours. Discussion flowed about how was the town thinking about generating thriving creative industries and SME activity?
A short discuss of how public art being integrated into the site followed.

John Best, Canal and River Trust, Academy of Urbanism – Waterways and Wellbeing, A Users Perspective

John led us through the dynamics and complexity of Place-making noting his opinion that students are 'gold-dust'. He took us through various typologies showing waterside as edges, setting, canvas, lever or his preferred view 'the stage'. He suggested waterside is either ignored or embraced and showed examples of where watersides had played a great role in place offering well-being and public health benefits, social and economic growth and cultural life. He touched on ideas around festivals, canals, volunteering, community usage, conservation and greenspaces.
Discussion followed about the nature and quality of the Northampton waterfront - and of course, the role of otters! Also the potential for the development of a second 'golden age' for the town focused around the leisure and culture offer, of which the waterside can place a part.

Christer Persson, Malmo University – Malmo University and its Location at the Harbourside

Christer talked about Malmo's development journey which started back in 1995. The journey was focused on developing a higher level workforce for the town, new educational programmes, support for the business community and making the town a regional growth engine. He outlined the importance of strong, visionary leadership, shared stakeholder goals, local investment and cross-disciplinary working. He also spoke about the issue of integrating the campus into a town as demonstrated by Malmo University which sees itself as not having a campus but rather being an element of the town. He urged the audience to consider how this might work in the Northampton setting.
Discussion followed about what Christer's points meant for Northampton in relation to politics, edge design, use of mobile technology and business engagement.

Matthew Lapin, David Lock Associates – Waterfronts as part of area based regeneration

Matthew offered a wide range of examples of UK and overseas waterfront development – Norwich, Leicester, Ilfracombe and Lincoln, and the types of regenerative outcomes they had effected. He talked through some of the development challenges facing watersides such as historic past usage, contamination, road access, tough market conditions, cost, technical issues and relation to town and city centres. He cited the imperative of using creativity to develop distinctiveness. Matthew summarised lessons learnt as focusing around the nature of the contact with the water, clarifying the opportunities of various waterside settings, partnership working, community ownership, outcomes and more importantly 'flexible outcomes' and the need for robust consideration of viability and the understanding of costs.

Discussion of 'robust viability engaged the delegates.

Murdoch Cameron, Moses Cameron Williams Architects – Three Projects for a Waterside Campus

Murdoch presented his work to date around university masterplanning and design at Lincoln and Suffolk. Initially with no client at Lincoln focus became very much around place making in the town centre whereas in Suffolk issue a round learning commons, and physical constraints were dealt with creatively. He followed on to present early thinking around the Northampton waterside 'campus, exploring the nature of complex partnership and stakeholder needs and voices, and developing creative approaches to learning environments in 2014. Key lessons were around the nature of universities as clients, the place of wellbeing and fun set against the need to develop places of endeavour both in the face of potential flooding, and other water focused issues.

Discussion followed about the opportunities the new campus offered the town and county.

Paul Simpkin, Architect and Urban Designer, ARUP – Water Sensitive Urban Design

Paul led delegates through the history of waterside settings in the UK as background to some of the best current thinking about water sensitive urban design which focuses on integrating water supply and treatment into new urban settings. He showed us best practice from around the world, some great UK examples and some cutting edge projects in development. Citing difficult partnership working as key to great place making he challenges us to do more to integrate the water industries into regeneration discussions.

Summing up and discussion led by Sue McGlynn

Standout issues for Sue were -

1. The relationship between rivers and town centres. Rivers are significant linear spaces that could provide alternative off-road routes through the centre of towns and cities. Historically they have had restricted access and complex land ownerships and these issues need to be resolved if the potential for these routes can be realised.
2. Issue of water-sensitive urban design. Dealing with complex urban and natural systems and this requires new thinking and cross-disciplinary working.
3. The need for vision and leadership came through strongly from most of the speakers' presentations.
4. Riversides and waterfronts as 'learning landscapes' and the potential for cultural, social and economic transformation.
5. Unite partners through creating a strong and shared story of benefits. Also need to articulate benefits and align them with those who are paying! Have to be able to turn ideas into money!
6. Essential to shape urban sites by reconnecting them with the water and safeguard future connections.
7. Otters as indicators of healthy rivers!

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