

Annual Seaside LECTURE REPORT

BURA Annual Seaside Lecture
10 & 11 December 2007

Seaside regeneration: challenge and response

BURA has been at the forefront of thinking on the regeneration of coastal resorts. Last December's annual lecture offered a chance to take stock and revive the vision.

Introduction

Since cheap flights and package holidays became commonplace in the 1970s and 80s, the British seaside town, deprived of tourist income, has been in decline. While efforts have been made to revive some of them, the concentration of regeneration funding in urban areas with more obvious symptoms of deprivation has limited the resources available.

The British Urban Regeneration Association (BURA) launched its Seaside Network in Hastings in 2006, with the aim of promoting best practice in seaside regeneration; sharing experience, knowledge, contacts and ideas; and influencing policy and practice. Its 120 members represent seaside towns from all parts of the UK, facing a wide range of challenges.

A key issue is housing. Many coastal towns have small amounts of quality housing, and what does exist is often out of many local people's price range. Good quality homes are quickly snapped up by a few affluent people, including buyers of second homes, who in some popular resorts can hold a quarter of the housing stock.

Regeneration plans that depend on housebuilding can be constrained by topography. The sea on one side, and countryside, which may be protected, on the other, seriously limit the scope for building.

The economic situation of many residents makes them unable to afford decent homes. Many are in low paid, low skilled, seasonal and unstable work in what is left of the tourist industry. Others depend on incapacity benefit. The least settled are often housed in former hotels and guesthouses, many of them overcrowded and in poor repair. The low incomes and short residencies of many people can deter them from repairing or maintaining their homes.

Many coastal towns also suffer from poor infrastructure. Public transport and road links may be of a low standard, and they are geographically distant from major urban centres.

Few have educational facilities beyond high schools, so young people who want to study leave, and are unlikely to return. In a vicious cycle, industries needing educated or skilled workers avoid many coastal areas, keeping the job market small and narrow. An ageing population attracts a mix of goods and services which are uninviting to younger people, and the care sector older people support is rife with poorly-paid, unskilled jobs.

In December 2007, BURA and the Improvement & Development Agency for local government



(IDeA) held a conference to examine some of these problems and the way Seaside Network members are tackling them. The event, from which much of this report is drawn, included the network's annual lecture, given by Sir John Sorrell, chair of the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment.

The vision: the possibilities for seaside towns

As Sir John Sorrell stressed in the Seaside Network's annual lecture, the prospects for coastal towns need not be as bleak as some of their problems might suggest.

Our approach to seaside towns must, he suggested, combine a recognition that seaside resorts have 'a special place in our affections, in the national psyche even, with hard-headed thinking and urgent and co-ordinated responses' to address their decline.

With his architectural background, it is no surprise that Sir John highlighted the pivotal role of the built environment. 'Many of the city centre success stories are strongly associated in people's minds with striking architecture of the kind that has come to be termed "iconic" - the Sage on Tyneside and the Lowry in Manchester,' he pointed out.

Recognising that the scale and style of development needed in coastal resorts might be very different from such grand projects, he reminded listeners of 'modest buildings in a modest setting that lift the spirits,' like Lubetkin's Finsbury Health Centre.

'When it was built it represented a belief in a better life for people in a rather down-at-heel neighbourhood. That it remains in use and popular today is a testament to the value of investing in high quality design in the back streets as well as in the high streets.'

A three year, £45m government programme for culture-led regeneration in seaside resorts, led by CABI, starts on 1 April 2008. The funding should, Sir John said, act as a 'catalyst for renewal,' inspiring further action based on initial investment in the cultural and heritage infrastructure of historic high streets and public spaces, galleries or concert halls.



Picture opposite; Royal Arsenal development, Woolwich

The funding will not be a 'silver bullet', but an opening statement of the value of Britain's seaside towns and a magnet for further investment from the public and private sectors.

'Britain is an island. Its coast is, in some ways, its "face". It is part of how the world sees us and of our nation's identity. So, our historical identity is drawn in part from the varied and distinct identities of our many coastal towns. They have a wealth of history, of assets, that can be sparked into life – sleeping beauties awaiting the prince's kiss and some tender loving care,' Sir John continued.

An example is Cornwall's 'golden triangle,' where big projects like Tate St Ives, the Eden Project and Falmouth's National Maritime Museum are combined with high-profile leisure and residential developments.

'It is about masterplanning, it's about thinking spatially, and it's about thinking across sectors – joining the dots,' he said.

While £45m over three years is not a huge budget, government schemes such as the £45bn Building Schools for the Future programme have enormous potential if schools are seen not only as facilities for teaching, but as 'assets within their neighbourhoods, part of the built environment and the creative and cultural character of the place'. We should take full advantage of this opportunity to invest in quality building projects, he argued. Funding for health premises should be seen in a similar light, to say nothing of government plans to provide three million new homes by 2020.

'Imagine the possibilities if we start to see that level of investment as a whole package, combined resources that have the potential to be really transformational,' he said. Local authorities covering seaside towns should develop a 'clear vision of how we want our town to develop, and how that development can enhance the best elements of the very specific identities that characterise Brighton, Blackpool, Whitehaven, Scarborough, and other special seaside places.'

Margate, Sir John noted, has already seen the benefits of the planned Turner Contemporary Gallery, bringing developments that combine the heritage of the Old Town with a vibrant creative spirit. Further afield, the famous Guggenheim museum was cited as the iconic force

behind the revitalisation of the Spanish port of Bilbao, and the less well-known example of the Dia:Beacon modern art gallery in New York state, which combines an artistic catalyst with 'high quality residential developments that give people a reason to stay, not simply to visit'.

Nearer home, he praised the Horsebridge cultural development in Whitstable, Kent, for combining a wide range of creative, commercial and residential uses in a small area. Horsebridge was set within an existing historic quarter and remained 'in keeping with the existing character and identity, and the historic sources of Whitstable's wealth - shipping and its oyster beds'.

Public spaces can be as significant as buildings, Sir John reminded listeners. At Cleveleys in Lancashire, it was the coastal defences that were shortlisted for an award for better public building.

'Every new building should be designed and built to the same high standards of the award winners. Every new building and public space should be designed and built with the intention that it should come to be cherished,' he demanded. Every seaside development should be worthy of winning architectural prizes. Coastal towns like Hastings should be just as ambitious as the grand urban regeneration projects of Newcastle and Manchester, with 'smaller buildings certainly, but no less pride, no less aspiration'.

Littlehampton: school is cool

Littlehampton has, in a decade, gone from being a rundown seaside town to one of *Vogue* magazine's 'ten coolest' seaside destinations.

Miriam Nicholls, business development officer with Arun District Council, characterises the old Littlehampton as suffering 'the same general decline as many other seaside towns'. Home to two of the three most deprived wards in West Sussex, it was shabby and suffered from low incomes and poor school results.

The first phase of Littlehampton's regeneration came under the aegis of Littlehampton 2000,



Picture opposite; Royal Arsenal development, Woolwich

a programme which employed a range of tactics.

On one hand, 'early win' projects produced small changes that changed the town's overall atmosphere. Lighting was improved, the high street repaved and grants given to enhance shop fronts. A regular patrol reports new graffiti to council teams for quick removal.

These actions aimed to create a more comfortable and welcoming environment, and draw in revenue from the surrounding area. 'We're surrounded by affluence,' says Ms Nicholls, 'but one of the main jobs was to correct the incorrect perception that Littlehampton was an unsafe area.'

The second main tactic was longer term. Education 'can't be addressed in five minutes', Ms Nicholls says. 'We needed long term plans to create a workforce for the coming decades, developing young people with the qualifications that companies want.' Littlehampton's main school is now a centre of excellence in business and enterprise.

Arun District Council isn't resting on its laurels. A new strategic plan, Littlehampton Vision, sets out aims for the next 15 to 20 years. These include a larger shopping area and better leisure facilities, building on attractions such as the prizewinning East Bank development, which features a stylish boardwalk café area where there was once a disused timber yard.

Blackpool: getting back on the rails

The Blackpool Task Force report of July 2007 painted a grim picture of the famous seaside resort. Parts of inner Blackpool were within the most deprived 5% of the UK, and getting worse. Average wages were the lowest in the northwest, and the second lowest in England. One fifth of the adult population had no qualifications at all, and the town had the sixteenth highest levels of worklessness in the UK. Health indicators were worsening, and the town suffered from violent crime.

Blackpool Council's leaders were disappointed at the town's failure to win the UK's only proposed supercasino. Many of the local authority's regeneration plans had depended on

winning the bid, and a new strategy to attract investment was needed.

But Andy Foot, the authority's Fylde Coast housing strategy manager, says progress has been made. 'Raising the profile of Blackpool onto the national radar has been important in securing the funding we need, though more could have been done to pressure the government.'

Regeneration activity so far, co-ordinated by the town's urban regeneration company, ReBlackpool, has focused on public realm works. 'The focus has been on key gateways and the Promenade, and there has been a strong emphasis on high quality and distinctiveness,' Mr Foot says.

While some schemes, such as a £25m Lottery-funded 'People's Playground', have been turned down, hopes are high that others will succeed.

Some £35m is to be invested in a housing intervention programme, and £300m into upgrading the town's famous tram system. National programmes such as Building Schools for the Future will bring further investment into the town, while Mr Foot is also hoping for a further £60m-plus to bring housing in Blackpool up to Decent Homes standards.

Reflections and conclusions

An overarching theme in both Sir John Sorrell's speech and the discussions that followed was the importance of 'domino effects': the possibility of using comparatively small investments in iconic, but not necessarily grandiose, cultural or public buildings to inspire further development and attract businesses, new residents and visitors.

This drew out a second theme: the importance of joint working and partnerships between local authorities, statutory funders and the private sector. Successful regeneration of seaside towns like Littlehampton and Whitstable has happened through different sectors working together – for instance, publicly-funded cultural developments have been linked with private residential schemes.



Picture opposite;
Second day presentations

Tackling the issue of housing was emphasised repeatedly as the key challenge facing British seaside towns, and some were among the first to approach IDEa's strategic housing programme for advice. The proliferation of poor quality, temporary, multiple-occupancy housing was the major concern.

New developments had to be handled with care, ensuring that good quality did not mean high prices. New housing had, first and foremost, to meet local needs, so that dilapidated boarding houses and bed and breakfast hotels could be converted or renovated. Again the issue of a multi-layered approach was raised, with the need for local measures to be combined with national action, including possible legislation on second homes.

As Sue Burlumi, housing needs and strategy manager at Eastbourne Borough Council, put it, new housing had to be developed in a way that was 'creative and original: sympathetic to the seaside location and surrounding buildings without developing pastiche recreations of Victorian England – this will allow more adventurous designs that better lend themselves to mixed tenure'.

On a larger scale, issues such as an improved built environment, better transport infrastructure and better access to quality housing needed to be seen as part of a wider social agenda to make seaside towns more desirable. For younger people, this meant access to education and jobs; for older people, the need was better healthcare; and income-generating tourists required welcoming environments, interesting attractions and cultural opportunities, and good hotels.

BURA's Seaside Network has a key role in taking these ideas forward. The March 2008 symposium highlights the scope for private entrepreneurs and seaside local authorities to work together. Meanwhile BURA's continuing collaboration with national bodies like IDEa ensures the needs of seaside towns stay high on the government's agenda.

For more information about BURA's Seaside Network visit: <http://www.bura.org.uk/Events/BURA+Seaside+Network/>

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