

# **MAKING CONNECTIONS: Transforming People and Places in Europe**

**Research by URBED for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation**

## **Background Paper**

**Round Table Symposium, October 19<sup>th</sup> 2006**

### **1. SCOPE OF THE RESEARCH**

The aim of the **Making Connections** project is to draw possible lessons for UK urban policy from experience in Europe. It is based primarily on case studies of three large-scale urban regeneration projects in cities (Gothenburg, Rotterdam and Lille/Roubaix) which have had to deal with the collapse, or wholesale relocation, of their principal industry – a situation faced by many industrial towns and cities in Britain. In addition to looking at the approaches taken to urban regeneration and economic restructuring in the three cities, the study also explores the connections that were made between the physical transformation of the areas concerned and improvements to the prospects of local people, especially those who were adversely affected by the industrial decline.

This study has been funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and forms part of its new research programme *Transforming People and Places*. **Making Connections** is one of several projects that seek to draw on experience in other countries to inform the on-going policy debates on urban regeneration and regional development in Britain.

### **2. CASE STUDIES**

The case studies look at major regeneration schemes in three northern European cities:

- Norra Älvstranden, Gothenburg
- Kop van Zuid, Rotterdam
- Roubaix Town Centre, Metropolitan Lille

The three countries concerned (Sweden, the Netherlands and France) are all industrialised northern European countries which, like Britain, have had to face sudden industrial decline after a period of post-war growth. While there are, of course, great differences (which may also help to provide a new perspective) from Britain, we were able, in each case, to think of British towns which might be quite similar to the areas we were studying:

- Gateshead – across the river from Newcastle, in a former shipbuilding area away from the centre of Europe, like Gothenburg
- North Southwark – a former port area close to the city centre but cut off from it, like Kop van Zuid
- Bradford – a former textile centre which was in the shadow of a larger regional capital close by, like Roubaix.

None of the European case study cities was the capital of the country, as capitals have characteristics that do not apply to ordinary industrial towns and cities.

Each case study was written with the help of a locally based researcher. The findings were discussed at a 2-day workshop in the city concerned, which was attended by people involved in the regeneration scheme and by officers, and where possible a politician, from the UK local authority which we had invited to act as UK Partner for that case study (i.e. Gateshead, North Southwark and Bradford as above). The UK Partners took an active part in the workshops and were able to probe differences and similarities between the case study scheme and their own experiences in their city.

*Condensed versions of the case studies are included with this Background Paper, and the morning sessions of the Symposium will consist of presentations on each of the three European schemes, with the participation of experts from those cities as well as a representative from the UK Partner concerned.*

### 3. ROUND TABLE SYMPOSIUM

The main remaining task for this research project is to explore how far the messages which appear to be coming from the case studies might be relevant – or even applicable – in the UK. While Britain has often been at the forefront of urban regeneration over the last 30 years, and although there is a definite renaissance occurring in the centres of our largest cities, it is still widely agreed that more must be done, especially in the next tier of industrial towns and cities to spread the benefits, reduce regional disparities, engage those who feel socially excluded and create places that are truly sustainable.

Are there lessons for UK urban policy that can be learned from Europe Experiences as described in the three case studies? The aim of the Round Table Symposium is to discuss this issue, so as to inform the report to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

## 4. EMERGING CONCLUSIONS FROM THE CASE STUDIES

While there is clearly no single European model for successful urban regeneration and accepting that there are major differences between countries, there do seem to be some common themes that emerge from the three case studies.

### a. Local Authority roles and responsibility

In all three cases, a strong and competent local authority was clearly responsible for, and in control of 'place making' and strategic positioning. They seemed to see that the **strategic economic positioning** of their city for the future was of fundamental importance (and a fundamental responsibility of theirs) and that urban regeneration schemes provided an opportunity to take this process forward. Thus the sustainable economic development of the city, in a highly competitive world was an underlying concern, and the local authorities were all responsible for economic development – and for transport.

Economic development went wider than the traditional municipal boundary. Even where the city had expanded (as in Gothenburg) its economy was still part of a larger sub-region or city-region – and it was the positioning of the city-region that really mattered. Only in Lille, however, was there an established Metropolitan – local authority which covered the city-region. In the other cases they just collaborated with the neighbouring authorities over economic development, and all parties saw this as being in their common interest. (The income of local authorities depended substantially on the health of their local economies and there were sometimes opportunities for revenue sharing.)

While, in all cases, economic development involved diversification and developing modern/high-tech industries, it was also thought important to be distinctive (especially Gothenburg's 'defensible niches') and to build on traditional strengths where possible. A great deal of attention was also paid to changing the image of the city in order to attract the people and businesses that were seen as vital for the future.

### b. Joint working

Collaboration – across boundaries, across sectors, across professions – in pursuit of the common good appeared to be almost a way of life. Although the local authority, or one of its agencies, was in charge of each case study scheme, they put great stress on collaboration (and actually appeared to put it into practice). Businesses were very much involved as successful and responsible businesses were the key to economic growth, and universities, training and research organisations were also brought into the regeneration process as they helped to create the environment for economic success.

In all cases urban regeneration (or strategic positioning/repositioning) was seen as a long-term (if not permanent) process. It was also subject to the effect of external forces and competitive trends which meant that it was 'non-linear' requiring adjustment and flexibility. (This was another reason why local control and responsibility were required in order to navigate through changing

conditions.) All three cities had permanent development agencies as part of the local authority. (At city-regional levels in the case of Lille/Roubaix)

### **c. Spreading the benefits**

While there was a strong focus on using urban regeneration to promote the economic success of the city, it was also accepted that other factors were important in creating a city that would continue to attract and hold key people. Indeed one of the main purposes of having successful businesses was that some of their success could be used to improve the city as a whole and to spread the benefits more widely, especially by tackling concentrations of deprivation (except in Gothenburg).

### **d. Culture**

In some places it was clear that the development of culture – both high culture and street culture – was becoming seen as part of the mainstream of urban regeneration (not just a desirable add-on). Some of the UK Partners stressed this too and spoke of ‘culture-led urban regeneration’. In some of the case studies cultural projects were being used to help change the image of an area, of building local confidence and of promoting social inclusion – all of which were seen as vital for successful urban regeneration. Does culture have a more fundamental role in urban regeneration than is currently recognised?

*These themes will be the topics for discussion in the afternoon session of the Symposium*

- *city-regions*
- *joint working*
- *spreading the benefits*
- *culture*

*The discussions will focus on:*

- *Are these emerging conclusions valid?*
- *What are the implications for UK urban policy?*

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