

# Regeneration in European cities: making connections

Findings  
Informing change

April 2008

European cities can provide valuable insights into how to tackle deep-seated urban problems, such as the regeneration of run-down industrial areas. This research is based primarily on case studies of major urban regeneration schemes in Gothenburg (Sweden), Rotterdam (The Netherlands) and Roubaix (in Metropolitan Lille in France) and draws conclusions for UK policy and practice.

## Key points

- There is no single 'European model' for successful urban regeneration, but a consistent approach runs through the case studies – a powerful local authority is in charge of the regeneration scheme, and is using it not just to revive a run-down area but also to change the whole image of the city and transform its strategic economic position.
- The authorities realise their city-regions are competing with other places and have developed coordinated long-term strategies for making their cities places where people choose to live, invest and do business. Their strategies include practical actions to give vulnerable groups of people access to new opportunities.
- Successful city development requires long-term commitment and genuine collaboration between many agencies and interests.
- For devolved government to work, control over resources, as well as responsibilities, needs to be transferred from central to local government.
- In France and the Netherlands, long-term contracts between central and local government provide joined-up funding and motivate local authorities to work together.
- In all the case studies, much of the local authority's income comes from local taxes that are directly linked to the success of the local economy, providing a powerful incentive for successful city development.

## The research

By a team from URBED (Urban and Economic Development), with researchers at Chalmers University (Gothenburg), Erasmus University (Rotterdam) and University College London.

# Background

Many towns and cities in Britain have had to cope with the decline of their principal industries, as have their counterparts in northern Europe. This study examines how urban regeneration schemes have been used to transform the former industrial cities of Gothenburg (Sweden), Rotterdam (The Netherlands) and Roubaix (France) and draws out lessons for the UK.

These schemes were chosen because they were being carried out in countries which have similarities to the UK, and in places facing similar problems to those found in equivalent British cities. They have all been under way for many years and are widely seen as successful. The case studies were written with the help of researchers based in the cities concerned. They look at the approaches taken to urban regeneration and economic restructuring, and explore the connections between the physical transformation of the run-down areas and improvements to the prospects of local people, especially those who were adversely affected by the industrial decline (who are referred to as 'vulnerable groups' in this study).

## Case study: Norra Älvstranden, Gothenburg

Gothenburg (population 500,000) is an industrial centre on Sweden's west coast and the country's second city. Norra Älvstranden ('Northern Riverside') was the site of Gothenburg's shipyards, where about 15,000 people worked until the 1970s, when foreign competition and the effects of the oil crisis led to their closure.

The yards were nationalised and run down in an orderly way. Other employers rallied round to create new jobs, and redundancies were avoided through retraining, redeployment or early retirement. The redevelopment of the derelict site took many years to get off the ground, but the public sector confirmed its faith in the area by investing in a range of educational and research facilities and by holding major events (such as pop concerts) there to change its image. Eventually, when the City Council gained control of the whole site, a proactive city-owned development agency began to create a stylish mixed-use quarter. Although far from complete, Norra Älvstranden already provides more jobs, more housing and a much better environment than it did in its industrial heyday.

What makes the scheme special is the way that the Council, the universities and leading companies (including Ericsson and Volvo) have worked together to create a cluster of knowledge-intensive firms, along with the facilities and environment to help them flourish. This is a key part of a plan to establish Gothenburg as a world leader in selected niche sectors, create a diversified local economy, and to attract and retain the talented people that such businesses need. Other notable features include:

- the strategic view taken by the City Council and other stakeholders to use the regeneration scheme to reposition the city's economy;
- the Council's decisive role in leading the regeneration process;
- the way in which all interests were prepared to work together for a common long-term goal;
- the strong incentive that the Council had to promote the economic success of the city as most of its revenue came from income tax – a local tax in Sweden – which is clearly related to local prosperity;
- the realisation that making the city attractive and user-friendly was an indispensable part of the regeneration and economic development strategy;
- the stress on quality in all aspects of the development;
- the commitment to education (particularly technical education) and job-related training, so that all the city's residents would have access to good jobs – with new university campuses located on the site;
- having systems in place to cope with plant closures, which meant that the decline of the yards did not lead to mass unemployment.

## Case Study: Kop van Zuid, Rotterdam

Rotterdam (population 600,000) is Europe's largest port. In the past it suffered from a poor image and a declining population. Kop van Zuid ('Southern Headland'), across the River Maas from the city centre, used to be an important dock area, but the port moved out to the mouth of the river during the 1960s and 1970s. Initial plans to build social housing were replaced by a bolder vision for a new mixed-use quarter that would help to change Rotterdam's image and open up the south side of the city.

Central government provided funding for the iconic Erasmus Bridge, a new metro station, the extension of the tram system, and putting underground the railway lines that used to cut off Kop van Zuid from the adjoining residential areas. However, under the Dutch Major Cities Policy, the City Council was clearly responsible for developing and delivering the

regeneration strategy. Furthermore, the early public investment in infrastructure – and the accessibility it created – convinced the private sector that it was safe to invest. Kop van Zuid now has a new waterfront with many striking commercial buildings, high-quality housing, a first-class environment and a mixed-use central area that complements the city centre. It is attracting creative people, and its success has prompted improvements in neighbouring areas.

In addition, the City established a Mutual Benefit programme to spread the benefits of the new development to poorer areas nearby. Engaging with local people also helped to secure breakthroughs in the way the environment is looked after and to overcome resistance to change. Other features of the scheme include:

- the realisation of the strategic impact that the regeneration of Kop van Zuid could have on the development of the city as a whole;
- the leading role taken by the City Council in developing and carrying out the scheme;
- the fact that the national government devolved responsibility and resources for joined-up urban regeneration to local authorities – first just to the four largest cities, but eventually to 30 towns and cities;
- the use of the City's Development Corporation to manage the scheme and get a whole range of public and private partners to work together;
- recognition of the importance of early investment in high-quality transport and other infrastructure, architecture and the public realm in changing the image and connectivity of the area and creating confidence among potential investors;
- the concerted effort to involve the surrounding communities in the plans for the scheme and to spread the benefits of regeneration to poorer areas.

## Case Study: Roubaix, Metropolitan Lille

Roubaix (population 100,000), once a major textile producer, is one of the larger towns in the Lille conurbation (population 1.1 million). After 30 years of post-war boom, the French textile industry began to collapse in the 1970s. In Roubaix, unemployment rose sharply in the 1980s, and the population fell. The town became very run-down, but since then has been making a significant recovery.

Roubaix's revival has been part of a wider strategy to reposition Metropolitan Lille as a top-ranking city in the commercial heart of Europe. To achieve this, all the local authorities in the conurbation agreed to work together (and share revenues) in the interests of the city as a

whole. Projects included major transport investments and the regeneration of all the main centres. The vehicle for doing this was a city-regional authority, Lille Métropole Communauté Urbaine (LMCU), overseen by an assembly representing all 85 elected municipal councils in the conurbation. LMCU entered into a series of long-term agreements with the central and regional governments that provided joined-up funding for the city's physical, economic and social regeneration.

The main projects in Roubaix included revitalising the town's economy, bringing retailing back to the town centre, improving the housing stock, creating a safe and attractive public realm, and delivering a range of cultural projects. These were carried out in partnership with LMCU by the Municipality of Roubaix, which has worked hard to link employment and training opportunities for local people (including 'vulnerable groups') to all new investment in the town. Other significant aspects of the approach to regeneration include:

- the understanding that the regeneration of Roubaix depended both on the success of the wider city-region and on the transformation of the town into a place of opportunity not just need;
- the leading role taken by the city-regional authority (LMCU) and the local mayors in planning and driving forward regeneration;
- long-term persistence and collaborative working across sectors and across centres;
- the willingness of the municipalities to agree on priorities for regeneration throughout the city-region;
- the use of long-term funding contracts between central and local government to secure collaboration at city-regional level and enable the implementation of a locally-driven development strategy;
- the value of an efficient, integrated public transport system;
- recognition that culture is a central part of urban regeneration even in the most deprived areas;
- the imaginative re-use of landmark buildings and the use of colour to brighten up the town centre.

## Conclusions

Although there is no single 'European model' for successful urban regeneration, there is a consistent approach running through all the case studies. Most notably a strong local authority was in charge of each regeneration scheme, and was using it not only to improve a run-down area but also to change the image of the whole city and transform its strategic economic position.

The research highlights ten key messages for current British urban and regional policy debates:

- 1. Recognise that cities are in competition** – especially in attracting sustainable, wealth-generating companies and enterprising individuals. Setting and managing a strategy to make a city attractive, user-friendly and distinctive is crucially important.
- 2. Focus on the wider metropolitan area (or city-region)** – a city's economy, residential catchment area and local transport systems almost always spread out beyond its municipal boundaries.
- 3. Work together across boundaries, sectors and professions** – successful economic development, and linking disadvantaged people to the new opportunities it creates, need long-term commitment and genuine collaboration between many agencies and interests.
- 4. Devolve real power and resources to city authorities** – since city-regions compete, it is at this level that strategic control needs to be exercised. The case studies show that the local authorities (working with neighbours as appropriate) clearly accept responsibility for both urban regeneration and the future development of their metropolitan areas. They also have access to resources to match their responsibilities.
- 5. Provide incentives for sustainable success** – linking a sizeable part of the city authorities' income to the prosperity of the local economy (e.g. through local taxation) encourages collaboration and commitment to making the strategy succeed.
- 6. Create attractive and balanced residential neighbourhoods** – transforming the prospects of a place depends on creating environments which people would choose to live in and which provide benefits for existing residents.
- 7. Invest in high-quality infrastructure and public realm** – to change the image of the city and attract private investment and new residents.

## **8. Spread the benefits of regeneration and economic development throughout the community**

– people in all parts of the metropolitan area need to feel that they benefit from the development of the city and are proud to belong to it.

**9. Build permanent delivery organisations and skills** – because city-regional development is likely to be a permanent activity.

**10. Value the role of culture in regeneration** – cultural projects can help change the image of an area, give local people (particularly young people and other vulnerable groups) access to a wider range of opportunities, generate local pride and build social cohesion.

## About the study

The research was carried out by Christopher Cadell, Nicholas Falk and Francesca King, assisted by Vassiliki Kravva, with Professor Lisbeth Birgersson of Chalmers University (Gothenburg), Dr Marco Van Hoek of Erasmus University (Rotterdam) and Claire Colomb of the Bartlett School, University College London (and formerly with the INTERREG IIIB Programme based in Lille). It involved an extensive literature review; selection of appropriate case studies, local researchers and UK partners; preparation of the case studies; two-day workshops in each city; and a round-table symposium to discuss the research findings with policy-makers and experts.

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## For further information

The full report, **Regeneration in European cities: making connections**, by Christopher Cadell and Nicholas Falk, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. It is available as a free download from [www.jrf.org.uk](http://www.jrf.org.uk).

Further information is also available from: URBED, 26 Gray's Inn Road, London WC1X 8HP, or [n.falk@urbed.co.uk](mailto:n.falk@urbed.co.uk)

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