

## Urban Life, Public Space and the Role of Urban Design

### Scottish Universities Insight Institute

#### Discovery Point in Dundee - Monday 1 December 2014

*The Knowledge Exchange programme brings together practitioners, policy makers and academics involved with waterfront regeneration in three of Scotland's cities which account for a substantial part of overall urban regeneration activity currently under way in Scotland. These three initiatives are evolving in parallel, developing their own independent approaches to city-building and to shaping the new places where people will live and work.*

*Through sharing experiences, the programme aims to contribute to the future development of the waterfront areas directly involved in the programme as well as other waterfront regeneration processes emerging in Scotland. In addition, it aims to guide a debate over issues surrounding economic, social and environmental aspects of regeneration activities in the country, in order to inform policy development and implementation.*

*The programme includes 4 workshops over 6 months, each exploring an aspect of development from each city (and including a field trip), with a final workshop providing the opportunity to draw together conclusions and identify next steps for an ongoing knowledge exchange network of policy-makers, practitioners and academics.*

***This note provides a summary of the second seminar in the series on Dundee which took place at Discovery Point in Dundee on Monday 1 December 2014.***

**Allan Watt, Dundee Waterfront Manager,** described how Dundee's growth is predicated on its relationship with the river; how an unintended consequence of the 1966 road bridge was to isolate the city from the river. The waterfront regeneration project is therefore about re-connection. The central waterfront area ("*ludicrously ideal*", Stephen Fry) has been a confusing entry /arrival point and first impressions of the city have been poor. Dundee has been transforming over the last 20 years (e.g. Overgate shopping centre, public realm improvements,



refurbishment of the City Square, demolition of Tayside House and the rail station).

The 8km long Dundee waterfront regeneration involves £1bn investment (already at £500k) and will help to create up to 9000 jobs across a number of zones:

**1. Riverside** – the former city dump is now an attractive park. Attracting and retaining talent (e.g. top cancer research; gaming industry) requires the creation of high quality places. The airport acknowledges that global communities need global connections.

**2. Seabraes** (where the rail bridge comes in) – creating the right kind of environment for new and established gaming industry businesses to grow and expand; e.g. District 10 welded containers; new pedestrian/cycle bridge to connect city with waterfront.

**3. City Quay** – two large bodies of water (Camperdown and Victoria Docks) where the Council will invest in new tidal dock gates (by mid 2017) to help establish a new marina; Apex Hotel

restoring the former Custom House into upmarket hotel; speculative office development linking with overheated Aberdeen market (only 1 hour from central Aberdeen, but rentals are half the price).

**4. Dundee Port** – installed a new road network and bridge to improve access and egress. The port is well positioned to cater for offshore renewable fabrication, maintenance and servicing.

**5. Central Waterfront** – everything has been demolished and cleared (Tayside House, Olympia swimming pool, railway station, bridge ramps and slipways, and overbridges). Changed from a dismal environment to lots of developer interest in plots coming to the market; north/South streets and central open space being laid out; planting commencing.

The Dundee Central Waterfront masterplan was approved in 2001, supported by a Planning & Urban Design Framework. This is further supported by a Strategic Infrastructure Plan along with site specific infrastructure information. Additional site specific development briefs are available for each site. The aim is to provide certainty to developers.

The masterplan seeks a mix of uses, active ground floors and variation in design. Building heights will reflect traditional heights. Dundee Council is the land owner and can exert ownership as well as planning control. There is desire to keep the experience unique and support local traders (i.e. avoid retail chains); this may require cross subsidy and lower rentals. The flagship V&A proposal will sit with its prow out into the Tay. There is a challenge to handle the scale of the central public space; to make it formal/informal; urban yet playful – a summer beach replaced by a winter skate park.

Redevelopment of the rail station will include mixed use (hotel, office, supermarket, restaurant/bar) and is being financed through partnership funding from Dundee City, SGov, ERDF and prudential borrowing on basis of year contract with hotel operator.

The project has attracted considerable public interest and has been built into the local school curriculum. Every Department is aligned to assist delivery; there is a feeling that the City has been down and there is now a chance to do something.



Allan reflected on whether the waterfront regeneration project has been smart practice?

a] smart scale – has operated at a transformational scale (project included in NPF3) to change the fortunes of the local economy; investing in the project is an investment in Scotland

b] smart engagement – the 2001 masterplan achieved long term cross party political support to provide project certainty; “don’t get blown off course”; strong school and university engagement

c] smart marketing – through Scottish roadshows, and working with Scottish Cities Alliance

D] smart employment – identify likely future employment opportunities; social benefits built in to contracts

E] smart visitor experience – new rail station, city park, unique bars and shops; V&A (five hundred thousand visitors estimated for first year after opening)

A subsequent Q+A included:

- The importance of pedestrian controlled crossings to slow traffic and enable links to the water edge from the centre.
- Funding represents £100m for central waterfront (roughly 1/3 each from SGov, Scottish Enterprise and Dundee City), and £1bn across all the zones. The 2002 Cities Growth Fund, allocated to this area (Fife, Angus, PKC) was targeted to Dundee waterfront project.
- There is a relationship with an overheated Aberdeen economy; though there may eventually be a downturn there’s no predicting when oil/gas will run out; decommissioning work will remain; new renewable industries will emerge.
- Work to deliver the masterplan – don’t change; picking it apart will result in chaos!



Allan led a walking tour through the central waterfront area; points raised in discussion included:

- a fierce loyalty to a city which has been through tough times and determination to change Dundee for the better
- the scale of the city and the project means it is possible to get on first name terms to build relations and working partnerships
- there is a strong informal network
- “put hope back into the house” – give people belief that there is opportunity
- scale of space will require activation through event management – it may be a challenging environment to live next to / people need to know
- the importance of ensuring quality walking and cycling environments – particularly if car parking is located remote from residential

Lars Gemzøe, Gehl Architects, presented on international experience of designing for urban life and public space, and divided his talk into four sections:

### 1. People and Public Space

Two case studies were contrasted to evaluate environmental quality and demonstrate different ‘people and public space’ outcomes. In Oerestad, an area of Copenhagen is being developed along a new town concept with good infrastructure and superconnections with elevated metro, rail and public transport and motorway connections. However, there are no places for people. The shopping mall has a blank frontage; few places to sit; water features aren’t useable; long distances between buildings and entrances; no transition external/ internal activities. A monitoring of the roughly 8000 people passing noted that the average number of people staying is 5.5.

In contrast, the waterfront at Aker Brygge in Oslo offers sheltered external spaces protected from the climate, and a variety of rich edges to mixed use developments. Where 5000 pedestrians pass through it every day the average number of people staying is 212. The fact that people enjoy doing things is down to the design and quality of the environment. Aker Brygge in Oslo thinks about people; the focus of Oerestad was on buildings and forgot about life!

### 2. People – Space – Buildings

A new approach is necessary that starts with life, then space, then buildings: *It’s not what the city can do for the building, but what the building can do for the city!* A public space plan is required that considers differing uses and activities, rich edges with functions that relate to public life, uninterrupted pedestrian links and car-free environments. Public space is for all to enjoy.

Bjørvika is a neighbourhood of Oslo that has been undergoing redevelopment and transformed from a container port into the city’s cultural centre with the national opera. The building achieves more by allowing easy public access and a chance to walk across the gently sloping roofscape to enjoy the relationship with the context. This increased footfall benefits the restaurants, cafes and economy.

### 3. Different Strategies for Waterfronts

Cities used to be at the waterfront but other things got in the way! (e.g. roads, train lines, industry...) Ideas for how this might be overcome:

- Working harbour - (e.g. Hobart, Tasmania) is a great asset; work with it!
- Office harbour - (e.g. London and Copenhagen) mono functional city districts; lifeless in evenings, nights and weekends.
- Housing harbour - (e.g. former free port in Copenhagen) mono functional; privatised ground floor areas – can’t do public things!
- Entertainment harbour - (e.g. Baltimore and Sydney) tourist entertainment industry - not a place to go to as a local.

Granville Island, Vancouver was proposed as a good lively waterfront which enables other things to happen. The strategy was to use what exists: diversity of places and landscapes: boat repair and house boats, art college and working cement factory; an incredible mix of things; small ferries; local character and true local identity; keep it unique; everything made or sold on the island is from the local area.

Islands Brygge is a harbourfront area close to central Copenhagen noted for its waterfront park which is now one of the most popular areas along the Copenhagen harbourfront, and has an open harbour swimming baths. It was formerly an area where no-one wanted to go; dense housing with narrow courtyards and no parks or playgrounds. A local action group made the park (sign: *"the park is yours – take care of it"*); a waterfront for the people made by the people, based on what the people needed.

There are a series of overlapping activities, where walking past one leads to another; immense possibilities to do unexpected things. Multiple things: lawn, picnic tables, seats, BBQ grills, beach volleyball, ping-pong, skateboard park, play areas/things, water activities. The swimming facility allows many different groups to enjoy. There are 1000 users in the park on a regular summer weekday. With the swimming facility it becomes a regional hot spot. People want to live there; build new housing

#### **4. Life on the Waterfront?**

What would you come there for? What is there for you? How to get there? What to do when you get there? What are other non-planned activities/possibilities? Overlapping activities – spatially and visually; surprising mix of uses; rich edges with open interfaces; invitations to enter, sit down, stay and enjoy. e.g. Western Harbour Malmo.

**Mike Galloway, Dundee City Council**, offered a personal reflection on a learning journey that has influenced the Dundee waterfront project. Early planning training emphasised 'big architecture', but changed to focus on systems theory and socio-economic factors. A subsequent post graduate urban design course was a "fortuitous move".

A career starting in Glasgow City Council in the design team quickly revealed that specialist influence can be curtailed in a big organisation; this led to a transfer to the city centre team where worked on Merchant City (1981): the best urban regeneration projects that happened in spite of rather than because of the system; going counter to the establishment! Key points were the project was 'big building' led, but the quality of space, public realm and streetscape between was poor.

Time with London Docklands Development Corporation gained experience about how lots of money can ride roughshod across community



interests, and the importance of working with politicians. A move to Manchester to work on the city centre showed the importance of incorporating planning, design and other disciplines.

Back to Glasgow where an initial focus was on a strategy for the River Clyde (but which ultimately didn't lead to places for people/the public!). The Crown Street/Gorbals regeneration was residential led and could have been more mixed use. Key to the project's success was land ownership; an ability to put in infrastructure which informs the basic street pattern that guides and implements further development. This allows design freedom within the context of a block pattern.

A return to Dundee focused on an urgent need to tackle the central waterfront: "an embarrassment but a fantastic opportunity"; south facing over the estuary and close to thriving city centre.

Initially different scenarios and a range of masterplanning options were drawn up and consulted on, to consider what the place might look like in 30 years. Feedback on different options (like/dislike?) identified successful components and distilled to a preferred option, and ultimate endorsement with a 97% approval rating. The process took 2.5 years to complete.

Entrenched thinking was challenged to pursue the notion of boulevards (e.g. 'can't do street trees as it interferes with underground services'; 'can't do pavement cafes because of licence regime'). The project seeks a balance between mixed use buildings and exciting, dynamic public space, with interaction along the water's edge; all being recognisably of Dundee.

Mike referred to Toronto where barriers have been overcome and a series of interlinked projects takes the city to the Lake edge; each with its own character/approach within an overall strategy. In City of Bilbao benefited from the V&A Guggenheim effect; but only in terms of one night stay. The city

wanted to deepen the strategy and worked with the wider city and region, to extend leisure into business tourism. This has turned the economy and brought business inward investment of which only 1/5th is tourism.

The major focus for the Dundee waterfront project is to change the perception of the city which is equidistant between Edinburgh and Aberdeen. The Dundee Partnership will complete infrastructure investment in 18 months. The site briefs call for a high quality environment with active ground floor where people stay and linger. The size of streets is relative to the heights of buildings (same scale as Edinburgh's New Town). The Partnership is prepared to take a long term view: to participate in the development; get more return on asset; take share in the profit; part of management of area in the longer term. There is a desire to stick by the principles and to deliver to the people of Dundee what they voted for 15 years ago.

A Q+A session raised the following considerations:

- The challenge of ensuring mixed use: normally only have planning controls and 'powers of persuasion'; however, ownership and installing the infrastructure can exert greater influence to achieve quality of outcome.
- Changed contexts - 16 years ago it was harder to refuse planning consent.
- What is the art of the possible? Move it over time to a position of greater influence.
- The importance of understanding and working with the politics of place.
- East/West routes will cater for 40k car movements; the boulevards can take the scale.
- Taken a financial hit to achieve socio-economic benefits; won't get direct financial returns on investment; but will realise indirect benefits.



**The group reflected on lessons** from the site visit and presentations to identify factors contributing to increasing the quality of urban life and public space in waterfront regeneration in Scotland in relation to three areas of discussion:

### Resources

*What resources are needed to achieve good quality public space and urban life in waterfront regeneration and development?*

*What resources do waterfronts already have that may contribute to this?*

Key considerations included:

- Need time – this is a big masterplanning exercises that took 2.5 years to pull together.
- Involve the right people at the right time
- The importance of having land in public ownership
- Space is limited – need well planned circulation that considers modal split – cars, pedestrians, cyclists + public transport
- Close proximity to city centre – how best to link with and use it?
- Need to attract a mix of people
- Public space – how best to use it? Continued public use on regular basis may require management

### Rules and Organisations

*What organisational arrangements and inputs can foster good quality public space and urban life in waterfront regeneration and development?*

*What rules / regulations may contribute to providing good quality public space and urban life on the waterfront?*

Key considerations included:

- Leadership champion
- Vision – believe in future long term
- Joined up thinking – teams and departments
- Move away from blueprint masterplan
- Continuity and clarity of vision – need political support
- Ownership – land and infrastructure investment – provide quality for future investors
- Good site briefs
- Good communication – council+ agencies
- Different layers of considerations: macro, meso, micro – big picture + getting down to nitty gritty of fine grain

## Ideas and Mindsets

*What constitutes good quality public space and urban life on the waterfront?*

*What attitudes are in place to contribute to good quality public space and urban life in waterfront areas?*

Key considerations included:

- Good quality public space – different types: both linear and destination
- Visibility (to water)
- Protection (weather + safety)
- Accessibility (to water edge and to water)
- Land / sea interface
- Quality of public space
- Responsive to user requirements – formal/informal
- Importance of sequencing – different overlapping activities
- Scale
- How to manage edges
- Quality of water important

## Mindsets

- Changed aspiration
- Use of spaces changed over time – flexibility and adaptability over time
- Importance of data and evidence
- Professional roles / political mindsets
- ‘Top down’ view? What is the ‘Public view’?
- Rethink approaches
- Changing perceptions – from industrial to cultural
- Have a ‘can-do’ mentality

## Attitudes

- Permission to do, to occupy, to inhabit, to enjoy
- Allow to use in different ways
- Responsive to different ways of use
- Council approach to masterplan – seek agreement and follow through to delivery
- People who live here will have to have attitude to the commercial use of public space
- Be opportunistic, entrepreneurial – be prepared to take advantage of opportunities as they arise

