



## A Franco-British Workshop

Sebastian Loew contrasts regeneration efforts in the Paris and London regions

Some thirty built-environment professionals from the Paris and the London regions met on June 9th and 10th to try and understand how difficult brownfield sites were being regenerated on either side of the Channel, and to learn from each other's practices. The Royal Arsenal in Woolwich and Rochester Riverside in Medway were chosen as examples in the Thames Gateway, the Plaine Saint-Denis and Paris Nord-Est in the Ile de France region.

The idea for this workshop originated at a conference held in Paris in November 2007 which looked at large regeneration projects in Europe. Paul Lecroart of the Institut d'Aménagement et Urbanisme de la Région Ile-de-France (IAURIF) and Sebastian Loew conceived the idea of bilateral exchanges to study in much greater detail the how and the why of a limited number of cases. No institutional funding was behind this event and all invited participants were asked to give up their time and pay for themselves. As a result a number of potential contributors declined (mostly on this side of the Channel) but some ten professionals from Britain and twenty from France, agreed to participate.

During two packed and very productive days, we visited the sites, heard presentations from those involved in the projects at different levels of responsibility, debated and questioned, and managed to deepen everybody's understanding of how a major project fraught with difficulties evolves from conception to different levels of completion. In England the two regional development agencies involved (LDA and SEEDA), the local authorities (GLA through Design for London and Medway through Medway Renaissance), English Heritage, a consultant (EDAW) and a developer (Crest Nicholson) explained their roles in the schemes visited. In Paris, the Ile de France region, the city of Paris, Plaine Commune (a partnership of local authorities), a provider of social housing, a mixed economy organisation were represented by their chief executives and their consultants. In addition, a couple of French elected representatives joined them on the first day in England.

Taking well documented projects, we analysed them under four headings:

- Who decided and carried the project through (governance, decision making, consultation)?
- How did the project evolve and how is it being implemented (masterplanning, partnerships)?
- Who paid for what (land, decontamination, development, infrastructure, amenities,...)?
- What are the results (urban quality, sustainability, wider impact,...)?

All the schemes considered were difficult to start with as they weren't in areas where the market was interested. The public sector therefore needed to create the conditions to attract a market by reducing risks, addressing in particular issues of decontamination and accessibility.

All the projects were on brownfields but whilst in the Thames Gateway they were on the edge of the urban area, on a river front and had strong historic connections (and in the case of the Royal Arsenal, listed buildings on the site), the Parisian sites were urban and had in most cases little historic interest. There were great similarities in that all the projects had a long time span, they involved several tiers of governance and needed partnerships for their implementation. Physically they all represented a gap in the urban fabric and their regeneration involved the creation of something new, different from what had been there before, and with greater intensity of activities.

There were also important differences, mainly in the role and attitudes of the public sector vs the private. The French seem to be able to have a longer vision over a wider territory and to invest upfront in the infrastructure (particularly in public transport) and a public realm of quality. This is mostly undertaken by a Société d'économie mixte, a public sector developer with the right to borrow on the money market, which then recovers its investment by selling land for development with a specific brief. These organisations are under the control of the



**Opposite page** LDA's Tom Keady explaining the Woolwich Arsenal scheme  
**Above** Visiting a new neighbourhood in the Plaine St. Denis  
**Above right** presentation around the model of Paris Nord-Est  
**Right** Medway Renaissance's Sarah Beck at Rochester Riverside  
 All pictures courtesy of Paul Lecroart.



elected Mayor of the area, and the role of this character as leader is essential for the success of the projects. A Mayor with a vision will push for the project to succeed and will negotiate with public and private developers to achieve this goal. The Mayor also negotiates with other levels of government to get investments. So for example, when the football Stadium was located in the Plaine Saint Denis, the local Mayor negotiated and obtained a number of benefits for his area: the decking of the nearby motorway in order to link two adjacent districts, the relocation of a RER station, and the creation of a new square adjacent to the Stadium. The subsequent regeneration of surrounding areas was triggered by these investments.

On the other hand it appears that the French system is slower than the British in involving and understanding the needs of the market. The two Thames Gateway schemes are carried out by the private developers as much as by the local authorities, even when these initiate them. This was particularly clear in the case of Rochester Riverside where at two occasions the project had to be abandoned because of lack of financial viability; it was only when the public authorities understood that they needed to remove part of the risk that they managed to get private investment. In France some schemes never got off the ground because of unrealistic expectations.

Some concerns seem to be common to both areas: quality is important to make the scheme successful; sustainability plays a growing role in the design of schemes. Mixed-uses are also becoming more common though the approach is different, as is the mix. The English schemes are dominated by housing; the French attempt at least to create neighbourhood centres with activities, often made possible because of higher densities. Schools and other social amenities are almost always included in the French schemes, but not in the English ones. This difference is startling and seems to be rooted in the different cultures of the developers, the English specialisation making it more difficult for housing developers to think of anything but housing (or shopping, or employment,...)

Both sides of the Channel are developing partnerships and attempt to be creative in the form and type of partnerships but England seems to be ahead of the game in that the private sector has a stronger presence in them. In France partnerships are frequently between public and public organisations and there tends to be more bottom up procedures: pressure for action starts at the most local level where consensus is achieved, and then ascends towards central government. The private sector is then invited to participate in the project. Collaboration between private and public sectors, though coming from different directions, is increasing in both countries and the know-how to help this collaboration increasing as well.

The results? Although we weren't comparing like with like, the French examples seemed more alive; they felt like neighbourhoods; streets had mature trees, public transport was noticeable, local shops were open and there was some sense of civic presence (though this is admittedly difficult to gauge). In the British examples - and of course Rochester Riverside has not been built yet - the project was mainly one of housing with decent public realm and some other uses; the objective was to increase the latter, but to a large extent this was wishful thinking.

A few months after the event, the economic context has completely changed and the position of the market is a very different one. A series of new questions can be raised such as will the English schemes survive the credit crunch or will they have to be rescued by the public sector? Issues such as this should be discussed at a further meeting.

The experience of the workshop was invaluable for all those that participated. There was sufficient time for interaction and for learning from each other. It is hoped to continue this kind of exchanges involving other countries.

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