

The Role of Design in the Thames Gateway Initiative

The vision for the Thames Gateway has been rooted in a desire to create sustainable communities where people want to live, work, and visit. To attract people to this area, design has been established as a priority to ensure that spaces are appealing to people both on an aesthetic and functional level. With the creation of new buildings and the adaptive reuse of others, the goal of the design has been to create safe and inclusive spaces that contribute to a high quality of life, offer good services, and are sensitive to the environment.

According to the local government in London, "The Thames Gateway was designed to be a place people want to live in - cleaner, safer, greener communities. People want to be inspired by where they live. It is not just about the look of their homes, but how the community space functions and how different components of their community connect up with each other."¹

The Thames Gateway covers a vast territory, stretching east from Tower Bridge out to the M25. Since the project is so large, it has been designated as a top regeneration priority by both the Prime Minister and the Mayor of London. The project is vital to the city and its importance has mandated the assembly of a panel of international experts in the field of design by the London Development Agency (LDA).

With the goal of creating world-class architecture in the Thames Gateway, "the International Design Committee advises on the design quality of all LDA-led developments and masterplanning in the region. It is also tasked with ensuring that a co-ordinated and consistent creative design approach is adopted across projects. Honor Chapman, Acting Chair of the LDA said of the committee: "As one of Europe's biggest development initiatives, the transformation of the Thames Gateway will have a permanent impact on London and the lives of thousands of people. This distinguished committee will be crucial in ensuring that architectural and design excellence is at the heart of plans to create attractive and sustainable communities where people will want to live and work."²

To achieve design excellence in large-scale urban projects like the Thames Gateway, groups such as the International Design Committee consider a variety of criteria. For example, they recognize the importance that these projects have in creating a distinctive sense of place. To accomplish this, spaces are designed to be a memorable part of the city. In waterfront projects like the Thames Gateway these spaces are crucial because they are seen from water as well as

¹ Sustainable Communities-Why Design Matters. Essex Design Initiative. 1 Mar 2007 <<http://www.communities.gov.uk/index.asp?id=1161536>>.

² World Class Architects to Champion East London Transformation. British Design Innovation. 1 Mar 2007 <http://www.britishdesign.co.uk/index.php?page=newsservice/view&news_id=3703>.

from land; thus, they serve as symbols of the city. Often these projects even reach an iconic status.

According to “Coney Island: Renewal by Icon and Infrastructure,” it was not the new subways and bridges that transformed the identity of the city [of Bilbao] in the world's consciousness,” but the iconic Guggenheim Bilbao Museum.



According to the article, “The museum in all its shimmering titanium glory brings the tourists; it changes international investor attitudes; it encourages the talented and the productive to stay rather than leave.”³ In doing so, it has transformed the Bilbao waterfront into a highly attractive location for both tourism and living. Between the mid 1970s and mid 1980s Bilbao, once Spain’s northern center of shipping and steel, was facing major difficulty as 25% of industrial jobs were disappearing. Bilbao needed to find a new method of generating jobs and money, as is the case with many industrial waterfronts, such as those of eastern London which concern the Thames Gateway Project. The Guggenheim Museum Bilbao brings in over two million visitors a year from around the world, which generates a tremendous amount of tourism-related jobs and money. While the previous shipping industry was able to generate 4,000 jobs at its boom and only half that amount during the 1980s, the Guggenheim has created more than 3,800 jobs.

Coney Island’s new KeySpan Park is a clean new waterfront stadium which brought in 247,000 people to Coney Island for the Cyclones' first season. According to “Coney Island: Renewal by Icon and Infrastructure,” “it has already changed the perception of Coney Island as a whole, which still has the potential to reclaim its role not only as a waterfront playground but also as place to live.”

Similarly, Mayor Giuliani's controversial funding of the costly Yankees minor league stadium in St. George, Staten Island is more than just a stadium. It is an attempt to add overall value to Staten Island. The stadium boasts a spectacular view of the Upper Bay and the downtown Manhattan skyline and is used to hold not only baseball games, but concerts and film events as well. Through these activities, the park adds to the overall culture and enjoyment of Staten Island. It acts as a first



³Gastil, Raymond. Beyond the Edge New York’s New Waterfront. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2002.

step in an attempt to transform the area into a place people want to go to for fun – a place where the waterfront can be enjoyed.

Creating an iconic project can act as a springboard for community investment by creating a focal point that will bring the community together and prompt the interest of developers and investors in a region. However being “Iconic” is not enough, the sustainability of a project is very important for the long term success if such a project will really translate into economic benefits for a community.

In London, Project Eden is an interesting example of how an existing facility can be integrated into a larger scheme, in this case, a visual lights display designed to promote the summer Olympics in 2012. Built in 2001, the Eden project is a series of domes designed to house a variety of plant life that would normally be unable to survive in the climate. The visually interesting structure was lit up from inside on “2012 Day”, (20 December 2004) a day designated to show London’s



support for the Olympic bid. The visual representation is a distinctive message of support on one of the UK's most popular tourist attractions according to Eden Project Marketing Director Dave Meneer. He also said the success of the

project provided a blueprint for London 2012's plans for the regeneration of east London. "Eden is one of the nation's newest iconic projects; it does so much to promote the sustainable redevelopment taking place in the region."⁴

Iconic design is not always about style, it is also about innovation and the responsibility of a project to help spark future projects, not bleed the community dry of investment capital or other resources that should be used on improving the community with educational programs or subsidized housing. One recently unveiled project that would certainly be iconic is the Aquatics Centre. Construction for this magnificent facility began in 2005 and it contains two 50 meter pools and one 25 meter diving pool. Designed by architect Zaha Hadid,

⁴ [London 2012 Lights Up the Eden Project](http://www.london2012.org/en/news/archive/2004/december/2004-12-20-13-20.htm). London 2012. 4 Mar 2007
<<http://www.london2012.org/en/news/archive/2004/december/2004-12-20-13-20.htm>>.

this spectacular structure incorporates the flowing movement of water by using materials in such a way that would not have been possible just a few years ago.

The London Thames Gateway initiative contains several design proposals that, if built, will serve as a focal point for the development efforts taking place in east London. An example is the Silvertown Docks, a major mixed use development planned for the London Thames Gateway initiative project. This project is still in the design phase, but hopefully it will incorporate a variety of sustainable uses that are environmentally sound and sustainable over the long term. In the case of Olympic village, a major concern that must be addressed is how these grand facilities will be used after the games? Is there a need for such a structure if not can temporary construction techniques be used? Could a facility be disassembled after the games and reused in another location? Obviously facilities may need to be built for the games that would not otherwise be needed but it is very important to consider alternative uses for these structures prior to construction.



In addition to aspiring to iconic status, large-scale urban development projects like the Thames Gateway must also consider a variety of other criteria in design. For example, it is important that these projects be seen from the water, but it is equally important that these projects provide views of the water. It is necessary to incorporate these vantage points into the design for residents and visitors to enjoy. In the Thames Gateway, Southend has

done this in its Pier Hill area by developing a public space with a scenic lift, water feature, and viewing platform over-looking the Thames Estuary.

The inclusion of greenspace is also an important part of the design in these communities. Within the Thames Gateway, the London Riverside area is developing almost 11,000 mixed-tenure houses, a new primary school, and new sports arenas along with public parks and networks of walking and cycling paths. These greenspaces are vital because they bring people together and allow for leisure, exercise, and relaxation.



In large projects like the Thames Gateway, it is also important to create a harmonious relationship between buildings, streets, and landscapes. This is often achieved by designing private spaces, public buildings, and greenspaces that compliment each other through appropriate scales. This creation of a mixture of spaces is important both aesthetically and functionally. The

inclusion of work, leisure, and tourism in the design is vital in drawing people to the region. In the Bexley area, this is being accomplished by building 44 new homes along with a new shopping center, healthcare center, community facilities, and a hotel.

Blending new spaces into spaces that already exist is another important design consideration for these projects. Well-designed spaces can become part of a location's history. Instead of knocking down old buildings to build up new structures, buildings can be preserved, re-interpreted, and reused; yet the creation of new communities within existing and even historic neighborhoods can present specific design challenges. One of the challenges becomes the practical and aesthetic juxtaposition of these extremes. The creation of new communities both around and within existing communities also brings along the challenge of diversity and how design can be used to bring different groups of people together. To solve these problems, it is important that architects, designers, planners, developers, and the community work together and decide on an approach where design is used to create sustainable communities that improve the quality of life for all of the communities' residents.

It is the creation of "special experiences, which are defined by both program and design" that really add to a place and make it exciting and enticing.⁵ More attractive, well-designed environments are a win-win situation for everyone. Existing residents benefit, as do visitors and businesses. As more people are interested in an area, property and new developments become more profitable and new industries can grow and prosper.

⁵Gastil, Raymond. Beyond the Edge New York's New Waterfront. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2002.

Notes: Images and information used within were taken from the following sources:

http://www.artlex.com/ArtLex/m/images/museu_gug.bilb.1.lg.jpg

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<http://images.google.com/imgres?imgurl=http://statenilandusa.com/images/ballpark.jpg&imgrefurl=http://www.statenilandusa.com/pages/ballpark.html&h=402&w=500&sz=64&hl=en&start=1&tbnid=t75djYOVwU2r6M:&tbnh=105&tbnw=130&prev=/images%3Fq%3DRichmond%2BCounty%2BBank%2BBallpark%26gbv%3D2%26svnum%3D10%26hl%3Den%26sa%3DN>

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