

Thames Gateway perceptions – giving meaning to an idea



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John Worthington. Co-founder of DEGW, Graham Willis professor at the University of Sheffield and Board member of London Thames Gateway Development Corporation. John currently chairs the Urbanism advisory panel for the Dublin City manager, is on the DCLG Thames Gateway Executive strategic panel for the Parklands initiative and a member of the CABE advisory group reviewing guidance for sub-regional urban design. He is a professorial fellow at the University of Melbourne and consults on urban issues in Scandinavia, the Netherlands and Asia Pacific.

John Worthington points out that establishing the Thames Gateway as a distinctive region within greater London is at least a thirty year project.

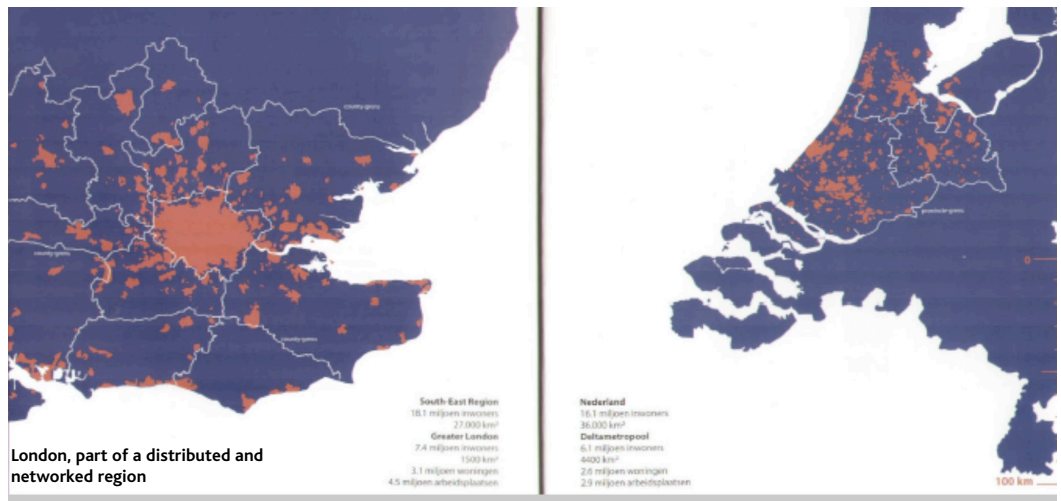
To some the Thames Gateway is a symbol of the perils of global warming and the shoddy excesses of developer's greed. To others it is recognized as a new quarter of a metropolitan London growing well beyond its political boundaries. In reality it is both a geographical locality and a political idea. London's growth east is not new.

The marshlands and fruit farms of Essex and Kent have since the 1920's been the playground and the place of opportunity for Eastenders to escape. Forty years ago Peter Hall in London 2000 prophetically recognized it as part of the network of expanding London. Twenty years later SERPLAN identified the Thames as a corridor for growth, which, soon after, was nationally recognized by Michael Heseltine with his commitment to Docklands. However it has been the

present Labour Government's sustainable communities programme, planned to meet the growing demand for housing in the south east, that has re-ignited the designation of the "Thames Gateway" as a focus for investment. Politically it is a clear commitment to absorbing the growth of metropolitan London, whilst redressing the balance between the riches of the west and the deprivation of the east. Culturally it looks outwards, with its seafaring tradition, and has continually absorbed new ideas through the waves of immigration. It is perceived both as an area of deprivation and opportunity. Geographically the estuary is both a divider and a focus. The Gateway's common identity is defined by the river valley bounded at its edges by a road and rail corridor with a common purpose of servicing

the city and acting as a conduit internationally for goods. Today the Gateway is part of distributed city within a networked region with a population of over 18 million. The Thames "valley to the west and the "estuary" to the east forming the east west axis with a north south axis stretching from Brighton to Cambridge. London, like other major metropolitan conurbations is shifting from a single dominant centre to a distributed network of centres, connected by a transport system that byes passes the historical centre.

Major cities are changing from single centres to networked conurbations. At a global scale cities to compete need sufficient critical mass to provide diversity and the widest choice of opportunity. In Europe the phenomenon is clear. Amsterdam may be the name we know but it is



S.E. REGION
Population 18.1 million
27,000 Km²
GREATER LONDON
Population 7.4 million
3.1 million households

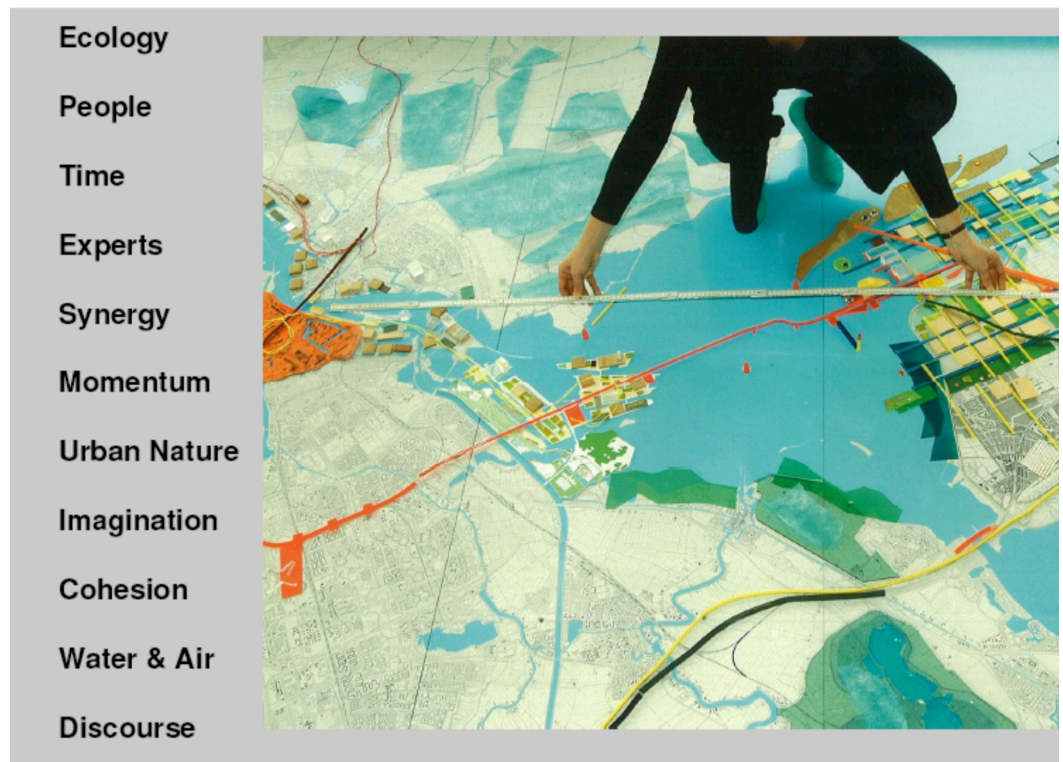
NETHERLANDS
Population 16.1 million
36,000 Km²
RANDSTAD
Population 6.1 million
2.9 million households

the six million population of the Randstad, Amsterdam, Utrecht, Rotterdam, the Hague, and the “inner city” airport of Schiphol, which provides the competitive critical mass. Similarly the 11 million inhabitants of the Rhine-Ruhr (Dortmund, Essen, Dusseldorf, Cologne) have created a powerful city region. The Oresund with the completion of the bridge linking Copenhagen and Malmo, crosses political boundaries and with a population of 3.5 million is establishing another globally competitive centre. These new urban conurbations (Fig 1) are too big to conceive as one entity. They have blurred and overlapping boundaries, express multiple meanings and are an idea rather than a precise geographical area. The idea is invariably given form by topography, reinforced by transport infrastructure. San Francisco bay area around its bay, Copenhagen, Malmo around the Oresund, or Kobe/Osaka/Kyoto focused on the features of water.

Arguably each of us has our own personal definition of our city, reflecting our values, expectations and demands. We have “the city of our imagination”, which can be explored virtually on the web from the comfort of our home. Secondly we have the “city of convenience” a portfolio of outlets which reflects our unique demands. We may drive outwards to an Ikea to give us convenience, choice and a competitive price, or to the historical core to enjoy the experience of browsing to find the perfect present. Lastly we define our city through “place” the neighbourhood we know, e.g Kings Road Chelsea, Marleybone High street or the City of London. How the city or a segment of a city is perceived depends on whose eyes it is perceived through, and what is expected.

The Gateway focused around the defining theme of Estuary crosses

ENVISIONING THE RANDSTAD



political boundaries, with three regional development authorities, two development corporations, 18 Delivery agencies and 26 local authorities.

It's strengths are its paradoxes. It is flanked by the well connected A13 and M20 corridors with the isolation of the marshes beyond. It is both integrated by its heritage of the sea but divided by the topography of the estuary. It has pockets of wealth and privilege alongside areas of social and economic deprivation. It offers the intensity of an urban lifestyle alongside the emptiness of the marshes. It hosts the transient holiday communities of Canvey and Allhallows alongside the historically rooted communities such as at Cliffe, Leigh or Sheerness. Terry Farrell's “big idea” for the Gateway recognized the opportunities of these differences and aimed

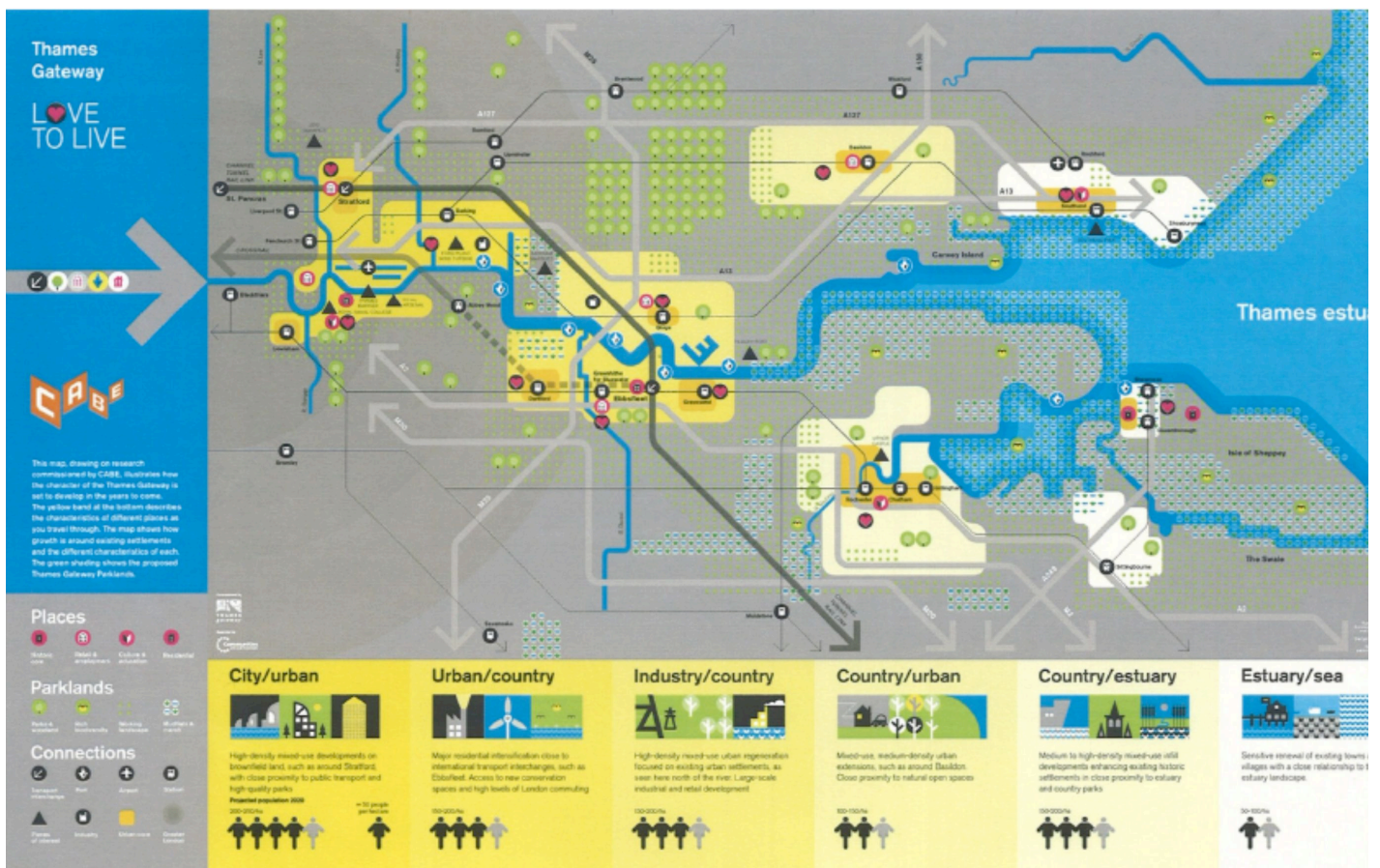
to intensify existing areas of development and intensify the natural areas between. What the Netherlands has achieved so successfully with the Randstad, which they typecast as a low density city in a high density landscape. Farrell's vision is more than a park. The green is a metaphor and rallying flag for accessibility for all to a sustainable life style which integrates work and leisure in a self supporting local economy.

We are familiar with articulating the meaning of towns through the physical structure of their centres. Dublin straddling the corridor of the Liffey and bounded by the canals, though low density, has a recognizable structure. Metropolitan regions such as Melbourne, or the Randstad are harder to articulate. New functions are emerging along transport corridors, but they often lack

identity. They are not distinctive places.

The Dutch with their strong tradition of making and shaping the land have not been afraid to envision regional planning as an exercise in urban design. Jo Coenen when he was appointed State Architect drew together a number of design teams to envision the Randstad. Teun Koolhaas, an urbanist and architect who had been instrumental in the planning of the new polders and the establishment of Almere new town was given the opportunity to envision the northern sector of the Randstad. The municipalities of Amsterdam and Almere funded the establishment of a studio overlooking the IJ where focus groups were held to plan and discuss opportunities for the area, reflect these in rough models and establish a vision (Fig 2). Teun tragically died of

CABE – GIVING MEANING AND IDENTITY TO THE THAMES GATEWAY



cancer earlier this year, but the vision for a networked city region linking Amsterdam, Almere, Hilversum and Utrecht is established and the city of Almere within this wider context is exploring its future for 2030.

Emscher Landscape Park covering an area of 3.5 million population and 20 municipalities, has used the overarching idea of a series of landscape projects to integrate, give meaning and instill pride in a declining industrial area, which till the end of the second world war was the engine room of Germany. To kick start the regeneration of the area from 1990 to 1999 a series of events,

such as the garden festival and an exciting cultural biennale, in association with a series of major regeneration projects were initiated under the banner of the IBA. Fifteen years later the transformation has been dramatic, with a small team, a master plan has been prepared which all the municipalities are committed to and sets the strategy through to 2010. Emscher has many lessons. It gave strong intellectual and political leadership from the centre, whilst allowing the maximum local initiative. It set aspirations and defined values. It was visionary in its thinking, but delivered successfully by acting

incrementally at a local level. It built confidence through events, which ran parallel to major reconstruction projects that have changed the landscape. Finally through major public sector commitment, to strategically located infrastructure projects, it created a critical mass to change perceptions and attract private investment.

The Government's Thames Gateway Executive has been learning from abroad. CABE has been given the task of teasing out the meaning and identity of the Gateway to articulate the opportunities and "make new things happen" (Fig 3). Farrell's

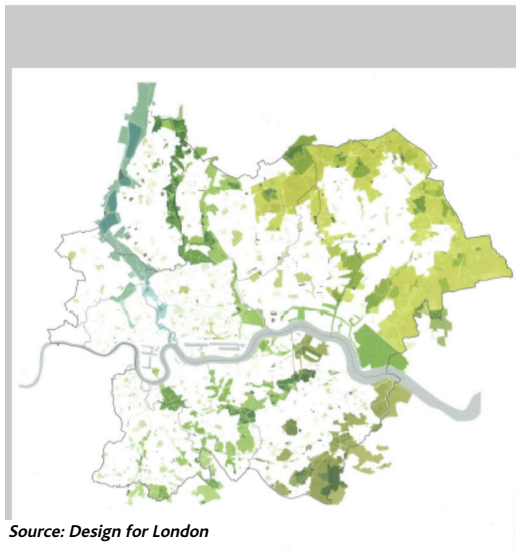
"big idea" of the estuary national park, has stimulated the "Parklands" programme with Terry as the champion. The Parklands initiative, with vision can give aspiration, form, meaning, and goals for the region. The green grid plans already prepared for East London, South Essex, and Kentside, are the fruitful beginnings of an overarching spatial plan to integrate the specific, building, site and area initiatives. Parklands, supported by the green grid, has the opportunity to be more than a park. It can be the physical expression of the aspirations and values of an emerging sector of metropolitan

London, through the environmental standards it sets, the quality of design it aspires to and the new patterns of working and living it supports. Ken Livingstone, the Mayor of London in his introduction to the plan for East London's Green Grid describes its value as offering 'scope for solitude and sociability, physical activity and engagement with nature. By catering for a range of expectations and by addressing the environmental challenges ahead, it will grow to become the living thread that weaves together the communities of East London-new and old' (Fig 4).

In four years the Gateway has matured in articulating its distinctive role as part of metropolitan London. The High speed rail link from central London, via Stratford and Ebbsfleet to the continent is open. The proposed container port at Shellhaven has planning permission. The Olympics will open in 2012, and the Gateway is on the map. Yvette Cooper at last month's Thames Gateway Forum set out a proposed spending programme for 2008-11 of £500 million for regeneration and £100 million for local transport improvements within a total Government investment commitment of over £9 billion. The three major themes for positive change she identified as: a strong economy, improvements in the quality of life and the development of the Gateway as an eco-region. The challenge will be to come to a common understanding of what each of these three themes will mean, and the potential trade offs required to achieve our expectations.

London Thames Gateway Development Corporation is committed, in addition to delivering the Government's targets, to changing perceptions of the east of London (Fig 5). The proposed Sustainable Industries Park proposed at Dagenham dock, will be a beacon for the transformation of what were

EAST LONDON GREEN GRID – GIVING MEANING TO A COLLECTION OF PLACES



Source: Design for London

“The East London Green Grid will offer scope for solitude and sociability, physical activity and engagement with nature. By catering for a range of expectations and by addressing the environmental challenges ahead, it will grow to become the living thread that weaves together the communities of East London – new and old.”

Ken Livingstone, Mayor of London

perceived as blighting industries, to clean, productive uses. The marshes at Rainham have been transformed and sensitively opened to the public as a managed nature reserve of regional significance. The village of Rainham, with the amenity of Wildspace (Rainham marshes) close by, its historic character and good access to central London by C2C is being nurtured as a high quality location for family living. The 10,800 home, 324 hectare, joint venture development by English Partnerships and Bellway Homes at Barking riverside, aims to create a diversity of settings for individual expression and the opportunity for a thriving community to grow.

Establishing the Thames Gateway as a distinctive region within greater London is at least a thirty year project. We can build rapidly but it takes far longer to grow a community. The next ten years whilst focused on the political imperatives of delivering homes and houses should not lose site of the need to change perceptions and invest in the

cultural, recreational, educational and environmental projects. In an era of rapid change it is perhaps foolhardy to make long term blueprints for the future. Plans need to be flexible and opportunistic. Plans are increasingly a portfolio of projects, some big some small, long and short term, stand alone and integral, some soft (events) others constructed. The integrating feature is the statement of purpose (vision) and the long term public investment of infrastructure, utilities and structure landscaping, invariably

given direction by a strong political or intellectual champion. In metropolitan New York the New York port authority provided an overarching spatial strategy. In San Francisco Bay area rapid transport (BART) became the integrator. Similarly metropolitan regions have been given focus by charismatic mayors (Daly in Chicago). Modelled on Transport for London, could there be a regional infrastructure planning group integrating infrastructure and utilities?

GATEWAY VISION: Combination of Product and Process

Source: Nigel Coates, Mixtacity

