

The Regeneration of a Naval City : Portsmouth

Lorraine Farrelly RIBA Principal Lecturer
Dr. Fabiano Lemes de Oliveira Senior Lecturer

School of Architecture , University of Portsmouth, Portsmouth, United Kingdom
Lorraine.Farrelly@port.ac.uk
Fabiano.Lemes@port.ac.uk

Introduction

One of the key themes in contemporary urban design debates is the redevelopment of Brownfield sites. It not only refers to the restructuring of specific sites and districts of post-industrial cities, but also to the redefinition of the urban form and its functions in naval urban contexts. Despite being different phenomena, these processes of spatial change fit within major global economic, financial and technological structural shifts.

Whilst specialized sites were necessary for the capitalist industrial model of development with regard to production, distribution and transportation (Castells, 2003, p.23); the development of the global economy and ways of communication, particularly since the last quarter of the 20th century, led them to obsolescence, frequent dissolution and abandonment. Not only former industrial plants and dockyards have been affected by these processes, but also significant historic sites associated with military use have been closed after having gone through periods of rationalization. In brief, the decay of these sites in many cities around the world and the economic pressure for their redevelopment is an observable fact which offered the opportunity for re-shaping extensive urban territories. Amongst many interesting examples, the redevelopment of Gunwharf Quays is one of the latest most interesting transformations in the United Kingdom and will be the object of analysis in this paper. Not only is of interest to explore its role in the context of contemporary Portsmouth, but also to include it into the wider debate on urban regeneration of Brownfield sites.

Towards urban regeneration

The changes in the world urban economy were accompanied by new ways of looking at the urban space. While large-scale plans were the basis upon which laid the development of urban planning as a specific discipline until the crisis of the modern movement after World War II, urban design has defined itself as a new approach towards the transformation of the urban fabric. The totalitarian ideas and historical process that finally led to the war put at stake the very same belief in the progress as the path to social equity, as visible in the writings of Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Giedion (1999, 1969), and instigated the reaction to top-down decisions and plans. One

of the foremost criticisms to the paradigmatic modernist master plans and their generic buildings were posed particularly by human geography and urban sociology, opening the path to the conception of the city as a fragmented place, to the understanding of the importance of history and diversity in social, local and community needs. (Jacobs, 1961; Harvey, 1989; Lang, 2005). Therefore, the understanding of the city as a complex phenomenon and the necessity to face immediate local problems led in the post-war period to the emergence of the urban design as a new disciplinary field, an answer to the *Zeitgeist*, which would be able to produce new spaces responding to the needs of the society.

It is worthwhile to stress that, evidently, several trends have developed based upon these premises and distinct objectives have been set up since then. It is remarkable, though, how, in the Laissez-faire attitude of the 1980's, the role of private sector started to be decisive in a world wide context, to the development of cities. Instead of the focus on the community life of the previous decades - ultimately on the public realm of the welfare state – urban design interventions started to follow a new agenda. No need to say that industrial and maritime heritage became key business opportunities for private developers. Evidently, the public sector has been interested in attracting investment and renewing entire parts of cities, particularly in Britain; and urban regeneration, in this context, has been one of the most common strategies to give new uses to decayed sites, while promoting profitable investments particularly to the private sector. Under the conservative government of Margaret Thatcher; Canary Wharf, in London, was a prominent example of urban regeneration of an obsolete site, ruled mainly by private investors. Several other examples followed the case of the East London, frequently revising the aspects of the project that led to the failure of the redevelopment in its first phase. Still, today, the reconversion of Brownfield sites is essential to the growth of the cities in the global economy and to the change in their images, as can be seen in contemporary complex strategies, such as in Barcelona's 22@ project.

The relationships between private investors' interventions and public control have been a way to combine public interests with economic viability of developments. Urban regeneration, therefore, theoretically, needs to combine collective needs with private interests. New paradigms have consolidated its importance in every typology of urban design in the last decades and are almost consensual, such as the need of diversity in use, sustainability (as a development of the eco movements of the previous decades), accessibility and the importance of connections with public transport. However, some are controversial and reflect how much society is dependent on the "market" and on consumerist behaviours, in such a way that it has been seen as almost unconceivable that new urban regeneration projects escape from the need to create large areas for retail and from increasing property speculation. Public life has been linked so tightly to consumption that this new scenario of economic crisis might also establish new perspectives towards the production of the urban space.

In the following sections this paper will discuss how Gunwharf Quays can be analysed within the premises discussed above, how it became a successful development and how it might face difficulties within the current recession scenario. Within this framework, key arguments, such as how this project attempted to respond to the context of the site, city and region as part of its strategy to enhance local cultural and socio-economic aspects, are of special interest. Moreover, it is fundamental to look at the discourses on sustainability that informed this development.

From HMS Vernon to Gunwharf Quays

In the past few decades, regions and cities across Europe have had to re define their identity and suggest possibilities for commercial investment. In particular industrial centres and cities associated with particular activities have had to deal with this challenge. Portsmouth is a city that for many centuries has identified itself through its relationship to the sea. It is one of the major ports on the south coast of United Kingdom, originally a Roman port, where goods entered the island of Great Britain. It is part of a natural harbour and its relationship to the Isle of Wight allows it to be easily defended and so it developed a Naval history , it is still one of the important strategic ports of the UK and is still the home for Naval ship building.

Over the last few decades as the Navy has redefined itself needing less manpower and focusing on more sophisticated ships and weaponry, the Navy has rationalised, and as a consequence required less manpower and less space for storage of resources . In 1981 the Ministry of Defence undertook a review of the defence provision in the UK. ' The Way Forward 'considered the future of the Navy . It recommended closure of naval sites within Portsmouth and adjacent Gosport . Gunwharf, which was originally HMS Vernon , was put on the open market. There are additional development sites in Priddys Hard and the Royal Clarence Yard which have developed subsequently.

Whole areas of the city which once serviced the Navy have needed to be redefined . The identity of the Naval city and its future depended upon this redefinition. The Navy was a major employer in the area and there are associated industries which depend locally and regionally on the future of the city. This regeneration needed to deal with the site directly , but also needed to stimulate the area and create a new momentum for employment through mixed use of living leisure and retail. This was intending to build on the existing tourist base that relates to the region as a gateway to France and Spain, through its ferry connections. This site was a key part to the ' Renaissance of Portsmouth Harbour', a bid was put to the Millenium Commission, a major government funding body that supports regeneration projects, by the local business consortium. The Renaissance of Portsmouth Harbour had the following key aims:

To transform Portsmouth Harbour into an international heritage arena and in doing so, create a world class

attraction. Act as a catalyst for the economic regeneration of both Portsmouth & Gosport;

To create new, highly accessible amenities (e.g. Public open space/performance areas), in addition to create five kilometres of new promenade to form a trail around the Harbour mouth to open up land closed off for centuries.

Linking new/enhanced attractions on both sides of the harbour to reflect the area's maritime history.

Developing new facilities, including the landmark Harbour observation tower which create future development opportunities. To mark the renaissance of the Harbour from one dominated by the defence industries to one where leisure, commerce and defence are all important elements. Within this proposal, Gunwharf was identified as a key development site.

In addition to this, a Heritage bid has been compiled and submitted to the World heritage committee in 2006 for consideration as a world Heritage site, the world's first 'cultural seascape', if successful this could lead to more heritage led investment and regeneration

Gunwharf Quays was a Brownfield, disused naval storage area, on the sea edge, previously inaccessible, which has been transformed with the creation of housing, shopping office, leisure equipments and public space. Today it is, however, more than a successful mixed-use scheme. It is a collection of experiences moulded through a large process of collective work by public and private sectors, which has had a significant impact upon Portsmouth's social, cultural, economic and physical contexts. It is important to highlight that site was developed through a range of projects executed by various architectural practices over a whole decade.

Gunwharf Quays were formerly known as HMS Vernon, used as a naval ordnance yard from the late 17th century onwards. It expanded to its current size in the 1870s. In 1981, the government's defence review suggested closing several MOD sites, as the armed forces went through a process of rationalisation. The MoD sold the site to the Berkeley group in 1996, which started to envisage a redevelopment plan.

Dealing with the dilemmas of permanence and change, the master plan urged to incorporate existing historic structures that had been part of the original storage area of Gunwharf, as the planning brief required its restoration as well as the boundary walls from the 1870's. Older buildings on the site, which needed to be retained included the Vulcan Building, the Infirmary building and the Board of Ordnance offices.

The development of the site was included in the local plan as a mixed-use residential, retail and office area. Further requirements listed in the brief, included a Millennium promenade, a Millennium boulevard, a City Quay and a 170m tower, which had a separate brief. An outline planning application was submitted in 1997, which included details of the proposed layout, siting and design of the main buildings. There was extensive consultation in Portsmouth and Gosport, as the site is a key waterside area for the city and the region, as well as extensive

studies and investigations into the impact of the retail proposal locally and regionally to determine its viability. Soon after the construction started.

The project and the definition of uses

The choice for a mixed-use development is a common option in several other urban renewals experiences, as discussed previously, and was a key argument to achieve diversity in use and economic sustainability. The 'mixed-use' included housing, restaurants, the Aspex gallery and leisure facilities such as cinemas, health clubs and bowling. Moreover, its location – alongside Portsmouth Harbour – provides waterside views, a canal and a marina facility, which provides berthing facilities for a limited number of boats, also allowing tall ships and pleasure boats to moor alongside.

The canal is a fundamental landmark in the organization of the site. It is visually connected to a tower block on the edge of the site, articulates the public space around it and defines clear boundaries within the project. Moreover, it reinforces the project's waterside condition, of articulation to its historical background. However, its most important function is to delineate two different moments within the project: the residential units, on its south side, and the main shopping/leisure areas on the northern side.

As a result, there is a definite sense of calmness within the residential areas, which also benefits environmentally as most of the units have south orientation. There is a wide range of building types which accommodate many housing configurations, from single-bedroom or studio units to townhouses for families. The homes are located around a variety of different spaces, from formal courtyard gardens to smaller streets and squares. The residential areas are grouped around 2 main areas, with a series of streets and pedestrianised areas to the southeast of the site incorporating the historic structures, including the Vulcan building. These are organized around a formal garden arrangement and the main axis through the Vulcan building.

The retail/recreation area, on the other hand, anchors the project and is a dynamic and multifunctional space. Normally, this sector is successfully used, especially during the day and particularly by those willing to shop. The closeness to the sea and the interstitial public space are also a key element of its success, as it also attracts people who just want to walk along the sea edge. This area is connected to the canal by generous links, both by the seafront and by the tower block. Other public spaces leak into the commercial areas, and there is a clear gradation of scale from the canal side, to the central square and finally to the pedestrianized streets.

The scheme mixes the restoration of historic buildings with a range of contemporary architecture and the layout and massing of the development is variable. Alongside the three-storey blocks of the historic naval structures, the housing is limited to three stories to respond to this existing context. The scale increases towards the water's edge and canal side to six stories. There are larger-scale structures across the site near the newly constructed retail areas, including social housing and a new hotel. This massing is dominated by two elements: the Spinnaker tower, approximately 170 metres tall, and the latest development, Number 1 Gunwharf, a 29-storey apartment block. Both of these structures offer incredible views across Portsmouth Harbour. They are monumentally sited on opposite sides of the site and are clear reference points that act visually, to cite Kevin Lynch, as important elements of legibility to the construction of mental maps of the city's inhabitants. (Lynch, 1960) Sculptures and art pieces were incorporated into key open spaces, mainly reinforcing the naval character of the site.

The various elements of the scheme use a range of materials, which mainly aimed to relate to the materials and shapes of the old existent buildings, to respond to technological needs and to produce a contemporary architectural expression. An example of the first, is the use of local brick both by the existing Vulcan buildings on the site, which used to be naval storehouses, and by the surrounding new buildings of apartments and townhouses. The newer houses and apartment blocks use rendered panels, while the newest building, Number 1 Gunwharf, is a concrete framed structure with a proprietary glazed system. Construction across the project uses a basic concrete frame, allowing the larger block to use a standard glazing system; the smaller blocks have rendered panels, brick, metal and terracotta panel systems.

Gunwharf Quays and its links to the urban context

Urban regeneration projects need carefully to respond to several needs, within which establishing strong links with the city is included. These links can assume several dimensions, with special regard to creating visual links and to enhance the physical connections to the territory; but also, in a more intangible way, fill a gap in the urban fabric sensibly enough to attend social wishes and expectations. The respect for history - observable in many of the buildings and in the urban design proposal to Gunwharf Quays, as previously discussed – is a feature of Gunwharf Quays which is both unquestionably related to gain local population's approval and to boost their sense of belonging. This last argument has been discussed previously, and it is important now to explore how the insertion of the project onto the territory has been planned at different scales.

In a large-scale context, it is part of the Millennium Promenade, a route along Portsmouth's water edge, from Clarence pier to the historic dockyards. It is three kilometres of promenade that crosses through the territory connecting key cultural points and the most significant Portsmouth's historic monuments and sites, including the

historic battlement in Old Portsmouth and the Spinnaker Tower in the Gunwharf Quays development. The route also opens up the waterfront land that had been previously closed to the public.

Following the Millennium walkway and to enhance the pedestrian's experience within the site, the canal-side edge and the main shopping area in Gunwharf Quays were completely pedestrianised with ground level walkways along the marina and walkways at upper levels connecting bars and restaurants.

Good links to public transport have become fundamental to the success of any urban design/regeneration project. Firstly, it allows great numbers of people to use the site, encouraging diversity of social groups; and secondly, as it faces automobile dependence, it contributes environmentally to a more sustainable city. Gunwharf Quays benefits from very good transport links to train and bus stations all within walking distance. The site is adjacent to a major transport interchange in Portsmouth, the Hard - the main bus terminal for the city and a major railway station. There are ferry services to the Isle of Wight – a 15-minute journey – and Gasport – approximately 5 minutes.

The site has two road access points: one for shoppers and the waterfront area and another for the housing part of the development. This allows access to an underground parking area and to a private road with surface allocated parking for residents. The residential part of the site is laid out with clear pedestrian areas and clearly defined roadways.

Conclusion

The main Gunwharf retail and leisure area went into business in 2001. It opened up an area that had been in naval ownership for over 300 years, providing access to the sea front. The area is used for local events and has been developing its own character with street markets, festivals and performances scheduled all year round. The success of the Gunwharf Quays development lies in the integration of a range of living, working and leisure facilities on a unique site. The previously walled quays have been opened up to the neighbourhood, creating new routes along the water edge and through its main pedestrianised shopping areas. It is fair to say that a new community has been created from nothing, providing self-contained living in a range of property types, from one-bedroom apartments to townhouses. The various aspects of the scheme complement one another to create a particular urban experience that has proved popular and successful both as a place to live and a destination for a day out.

The important issues of this project are that it connects to a much larger regeneration scheme, that of the Portsmouth Harbour and the region. This project is a catalyst, to encourage new employment and identity for the city and the region. It is also connected to future development ideas of the Harbour to become a world heritage

site, this scheme at Gunwharf is part of a story that connects the site to its past and future success., it works within a local and regional context to redefine the future of the city.

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