

On the Waterfront conference, Liverpool

## Chequered histories and distinctive futures



*The On the Waterfront conference formed part of Liverpool's programme for European Capital of Culture 2008.*

Port cities provided the main theme for a number of conferences in the second half of 2008, including in France (see 'Picking up the threads in Lyon', *Context* 106, September 2008), Germany and the United States. This focus of interest reflects the fact that at least half of the world's cities were founded at locations that profited from trading and other links by sea, river or canal.

Perhaps the most prestigious of the year's international events, was On the Waterfront, a three-day conference held in November at the newly completed BT Conference Centre, immediately to the south of the Liverpool's showpiece heritage-led regeneration of Albert Dock.

Organised by English Heritage, *Cities on the Edge*, Liverpool City

Council and the University of Liverpool, the theme Culture, Heritage and Regeneration of Port Cities addressed issues that relate primarily to larger maritime ports. The conference included keynote presentations from such disparate port cities as Antwerp, Valletta, Lagos and Shanghai, and highlighted characteristics that are specific to the likes of Baltimore, Bilbao, Mumbai, Savannah, Singapore, Sydney, Toronto and Valparaiso.

On the Waterfront debated the distinct identity of historic port cities, the need for regeneration yet desire for authenticity, and their adaptability and cultural diversity. The relationship between a port's history and its emerging 21st century waterfront was also addressed.

In his introductory address, Sir Neil Cossons, former chairman of English Heritage, described Liverpool 'as the extreme metaphor of port cities around the world,' a city that has known both great times and tough times. Once a great transatlantic port at the centre of huge global economies, Liverpool was subsequently overwhelmed by the changeover in international shipping practices to containerisation, and by the gravitational pull of the south east of England and Europe. Noting the resourcefulness of its people, their resilience and humour, and a cultural richness, Sir Neil stressed the need for new cultural models that reflect the specific nature of historic port cities and do not replicate norms that may be relevant elsewhere.

Simon Thurley, chief executive of English Heritage, set out the logic for understanding heritage significance and sense of place as the basis for defining what we are trying to preserve in port cities: specifically, their evidential value (the physical evidence of past shipping activities), their historical value (the means to interpret their evolution), their aesthetic value, and their communal value (meaning and memory within the local community).

Andy Burnham MP, Liverpool-born and the first northerner to be appointed Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, grew up in the city at a time when its fortunes were at rock bottom and its future direction was unclear. Speaking of the riches of the built heritage and living culture of the city,



*The historic waterfront at Gdansk, Poland, one of the six partners of Cities on the Edge.*

he emphasised the relationship between identity, sense of belonging and security in a globalised world.

This relationship involved the rich mix of communities, races and faiths that characterise port cities generally, and the mood of confidence, tolerance and openness that has underpinned the recent success of Liverpool, as manifested to a global audience in the city's year as European Capital of Culture. Burnham spoke of heritage as a potent driver in the new economy of the city, shattering negative perceptions and reviving people's sense of hope and pride, providing a vision for the future and a platform for creative talent which are all symptomatic of durable regeneration.

Robert Lee, professor of economic and social history at Liverpool University, articulated the cycles of retreat followed by regeneration that have impacted on the waterfront spaces of port cities around the world, and how conservation as a construct has tended to purify the past of its social and ethnic plurality.

As waterfronts have been revitalised to encourage cruise ships, cultural tourism and the development of prestige apartments and offices, so have they become 'contested landscapes' from which traces of their traditional working class and anarchic vibrancy have been marginalised. Sanitised spaces, they have rejected the richness of their past and lost their distinctive sense of place. Lee urged greater understanding and a more balanced and consensual approach to the regeneration of waterfronts: one that creates social bridges rather than barriers, and embraces ecological considerations as well as conservation principles.

Sir Bob Scott, international director of the Liverpool Culture Company, addressed the significance of Liverpool as a European port city and as the principal port of emigration to the new world in the 19th century. Sir Bob was the inspiration behind Cities on the Edge, a cultural partnership of six port cities (Bremen, Gdansk, Istanbul, Liverpool, Marseille and Naples) all of which share vivid 'sailor town' histories; distinctive traditions and people; a dark side; an irreverent sense of humour; a passion for football; and an international image that is more favourable than their national one.

Franco Bianchini, professor of cultural policy and planning at Leeds Metropolitan University, commended the successful reconnection of the historic centre of Genoa (European Capital of Culture 2004), with its old



Above and below: Genoa, Italy, a city whose waterfront abounds with marginal, sailor-town colour and vibrancy.



harbour. The barriers between high and popular culture in Genoa are undefined. From the restoration of renaissance palaces to the conversion and extension of harbour-side warehouses for cultural and leisure activities, the common factor is fluid public access and use.

Standardised regeneration models for port cities around the world, whether the result of direct market forces or public-private partnerships, tend towards gentrification and the

erosion of local distinctiveness. One key question to come out of this conference was whether the specific characteristics of individual port cities offered an alternative to globalisation, or whether their chequered history placed them among the last places to globalise. If the latter, are they at risk of becoming anywhere places, clones of each other, especially at their waterfronts?

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