

Arts-led Waterfront Regeneration: The Gateshead Story

John Devlin

**Director, John Devlin Consulting Limited
Creative Development & Enterprise Consultancy**

"Cultural projects like Gateshead quays require faith and considerable teamwork.....it beggars belief: a bridge, a world class concert hall and art gallery, new hotels and homes; places to shop and eat, stop and stare on the banks of the Tyne....",

Transforming the Image

Can the arts be used to regenerate an urban area?

The answer is an unqualified yes!

Gateshead Quays is a prime example of how investing in major arts facilities, to serve a defined need, can kick-start urban regeneration and change the image of a town.

Gateshead remains a relatively small local authority but, ~~but~~ by carefully investing in a unique offer, the arts, has transformed its once-derelict quayside and kick-started a substantial regeneration programme which is rippling outwards to the town centre and beyond. The arts projects are of regional, national and international significance, but are also founded in an identifiable local need. Because of the arts projects and the high quality public realm, others want to be associated with the area and live and work adjacent. This has resulted in the creation of 4600 new homes in the immediate vicinity and in the trebling of the scale of proposals for the Baltic Business Quarter – a new flagship regeneration area adjacent to the Quays which already includes the relocated Gateshead College and an International Centre for Design.

Gateshead, once almost unknown nationally, is now renowned internationally and has an image almost entirely built upon the arts-led regeneration of its quayside. A remarkable achievement.

Background

Gateshead is a small local authority on the south side of the River Tyne in the north of England. It forms the southern half of the Tyneside conurbation with its

slightly larger neighbour, the regional capital, Newcastle-upon-Tyne forming the northern hemisphere.

For more than 15 years before delivering Antony Gormley's iconic Angel of the North sculpture, Gateshead had been investing in public art. It was the first local authority in England to appoint a full time arts officer and all through the troubled – at least for local government – Thatcher years Gateshead maintained its arts investment programme.

These public art interventions were created to enrich the lives of the people of Gateshead and to add value to projects undertaken or promoted by the Council.

Fig 1. The ~~Angle~~ Angel

The Angel

The Angel of the North has in its short 10-year life become THE symbol of the North East of England. The Angel was not the beginning of the arts-lead renaissance of the north but rather it marked the end of the beginning. The significance of the Angel is in its delivery. Wishing to mark the end of 1996 Year of the Visual Arts and to symbolically represent the impending renaissance of the northeast, Gateshead Council wanted to commission a significant public sculpture to be set on the cap of an old deep-mine shaft. Something that would rise, phoenix-like, from the old coalmine and both signify the past and signal a new future.

The preferred proposal was that submitted by Antony Gormley, for the largest free-standing sculpture in the UK. To create a steel sculpture the size of a Boeing 737 standing on its tail-end was a considerable engineering challenge.

100% funding for the project was secured from the Arts Council for England and the project delivered on time and on budget. That was the significance of the Angel. By having the bravery to proceed with a bold, technically challenging structure, against sometimes-stiff opposition and to deliver the project within the agreed time and cost parameters gave Gateshead Council a great reputation within the chattering-classes in the London arts scene, where such projects are assessed for funding support. This was to prove useful with the next major initiative – Baltic – The Gallery for Contemporary Art.

Industrial Legacy

Meanwhile, the area along the rivers edge downstream of the Town Centre was of great concern. Gateshead had been at the forefront of the industrial revolution. It was here that the first commercial coal mining in the UK took place, and on the back of that, the early experiments in steam engineering and consequent industrialisation of processes and raw materials began. By the early 1970s most of the industries were gone and with them the jobs, leaving behind a

landscape of derelictions, pollution, unemployment and deprivation.

The first proposals for the regeneration of East Gateshead did not envisage any particularly “spectacular” use for the zone now known as Gateshead Quays. Indeed, the entire report never acknowledges the river as a positive asset, and for good reason. For most of our industrialised history the river was merely seen as a convenient vehicle for disposing of, in many cases toxic, unpleasant waste. It was not a place that one would naturally seek out to visit. It was the installation of the interceptor sewer system in the 1980s that diverted waste from being dumped in the river and instead being taken for processing which triggered the change that made the river an acceptable place to be. In a remarkable self-regeneration, the **River** Tyne, relieved of this burden of acting as a waste outlet, has transformed itself into the best salmon river in England.

Fig 2. The Baltic

The Baltic

There is probably much truth in the claim that the Arts Lottery was in danger of focussing too much of its grant expenditure in London and needed an early significant win outside of London. The bid for Arts Lottery funding to convert the redundant grain silo into a gallery for cutting edge contemporary art was well timed.

The project was first given life in a report to Gateshead Council’s Policy & Resources Committee in December 1992 and was far-seeing in being entitled “Baltic Flour Mills – Urban Regeneration through the Arts”.

Before it had been established there was no significant contemporary art gallery between London and Edinburgh. A gallery that would be at the cutting edge of art and, in being so, be at the cutting edge internationally. The vision was for a gallery which would not have a collection but rather be an “art factory”, commissioning the newest and best in leading-edge artists, pushing the boundaries of what was possible and, inevitably, challenging the visitor with its contents.

One must remember how risky the proposals for the Baltic building were, when viewed at that time. In the early 1990s the Baltic building sat, empty, surrounded by dereliction on an almost inaccessible site overlooking a polluted river. Hardly the optimum location for a gallery which would be filled with the type of art that most of the populous would probably find challenging to relate to.

The first director of the Baltic was Sune Nordgren, the acclaimed Swedish curator of the Malmo Gallery and, upon his appointment, a review of the design proposals was undertaken. Sune successfully “placed” the Baltic Gallery on the international visual arts map.

*Fig 3. The **Gateshead** Millennium Bridge*

The Gateshead Millennium Bridge

The Millennium presented Gateshead with an opportunity to bid for funding for a project to mark the year 2000. The logic of the positioning of the bridge is rehearsed here later under the section headed “Need”.

Whilst not an “arts “ project, the lesson to learn from the bridge is that good design matters. Six architect/engineer partnerships were invited to submit proposals for a new pedestrian and cycle crossing to link the Newcastle & Gateshead quaysides. The unanimous winner and the one that achieved the highest public vote was the submission by Wilkinson Eyre/Giffords, for a double arc design which operates rather like an eyelid. When fully open, the suspension and deck arcs provide as much clearance to shipping as the Tyne ~~Bride~~ **Bridge** further upstream.

The bridge design and its principle of opening was so compelling that every potential obstacle or hurdle in the complex process of delivering a new structure over a waterway in the UK was readily overcome (with the notable exception of the Harbourmaster of the Port of Tyne). Good design “sells”. People wanted to see it happen and were very supportive of the project.

Before there were any developments opened on the Gateshead side of the river, over one million people had passed over the bridge just to say they’d done it!

The Sage Gateshead

Starting life as the tortuously titled “North of England Concert Halls and Regional Music School” what is now known as the Sage Gateshead – the concert hall and music school complex on the south bank of the Tyne – began life as a project based in Newcastle, to house the local chamber orchestra, The Northern Sinfonia. The Sinfonia, established in the early 1960s was ageing, and so were its clientele. To survive it had to raise its game, establish a new, younger supporter base and find a venue of superior acoustic quality than the Newcastle City Hall, where buses and passers-by could regularly be heard during performances. Nor was there a hall of high acoustic quality anywhere north of Birmingham, and that was a symphony hall, altogether a much larger space.

*Fig 4 The Sage **Gateshead***

Years of attempts to make the project happen in Newcastle came to nought and, losing patience, the promoters of the project (the Sinfonia now being joined by Folkworks, the north’s folk music development organisation) offered the initiative to bids from other local authorities in the region. Having the Baltic bid well under way, Gateshead decided that the symbiotic relationship of the visual and

performing arts centres could be beneficial to both and decided to offer to take over and manage the project, secure a site for it on the quays and deliver the building. Gateshead's bid was successful.

The fundamental brief was simple:

- 1 A main hall of world class acoustic quality for chamber music (to be one of the 12 best halls in the world)
 - 2 Housed in an iconic structure
- ...but the execution was complex.

A competition was held to select the design team. Unlike the Baltic project where the competition was to find a winning design, the competition in this instance was to find a team who would work with the client briefing team and help evolve the brief that would be translated into the building.
i.e. a competitive interview.

Foster & Partners were appointed as architects & engineers, and Arup Acoustics appointed as acousticians.

IFig 5, The area with GQ1 and GQ2

Gateshead Quays Commercial Leisure development: GQ1 & GQ2

Fundamental to the arts projects was fulfilling an identifiable need. The two arts projects were not inventions of the Council, but rather responded to local and national needs. The trick was to elevate them onto an international scale so that their presence was felt around the globe.

Having the Baltic project under way, the next issue for the planning team to consider was where to locate the new concert halls.

Originally it had been planned to co-locate them with the Baltic Gallery, on the adjacent site, thereby concentrating the mass of arts facilities. The team then considered what if the two arts buildings – the visual arts centre and the performing arts centre – were to be pulled apart. Would they work like the anchor stores in a shopping mall, generating a flow of people between them, thereby adding a footfall to any development that occurred between them? The concert halls were therefore positioned on the edge of the escarpment, half way between the two pedestrian bridges over the Tyne, creating a development opportunity between them and the Baltic Gallery, along the line of a potentially natural pedestrian route. This then gave value and opportunity to the development site that was created between the two arts facilities.

The first phase of the Gateshead Quays commercial site, GQ1 was earmarked for early release as a residential development site. The masterplan, such as it was, had predicted a perimeter development of the site but the developers, Bryant Homes (part of the Taylor Woodrow Group) unexpectedly proposed a “lazy-S” plan form, mixing medium and high-rise dwellings, with the towers

angled to look “round” the Baltic and grab views up and down the River Tyne.

Fig 6, Gateshead Quays commercial site

Before aiming any critical comment at the architectural product of GQ1 one must remember what the site was like when the decision to commit to delivering the housing scheme was made. It was not the dynamic regeneration area that we see now. It was a desolate wasteland which nobody had lived in or worked on for decades. The Baltic was a half-demolished shell. The concert hall project was still in the early design stages. It was a brave decision to build any form of housing on that site and establishing the likely sales values for the apartments was pure hope and guesswork.

In the event, by the time the first apartments went onto the market, the Baltic Gallery was open, the Sage Gateshead on site and the Gateshead Millennium Bridge open and operating. People could believe in the area and risk the investment. Selling prices defied all predictions, achieving between 30% and 100% over predicted values. In terms of profit - a great success.

The downside of this success was that the quality of the products did not reflect the selling prices.

The remainder of the site – between the housing and The Sage Gateshead – is known as Gateshead Quays Phase 2 (GQ2). This site was earmarked for a commercial leisure development, including bars, restaurants, hotels, commercial premises, limited shopping provision and more residential development. The site also had to contain the entire car parking for the commercial development itself plus 300 spaces for public use too. Further, it had to require no public subsidy but generate a return for the Council, who owned the land.

STOP! – some new thinking is required!

After years of revisions, redesigns and negotiations it was concluded that the scheme of GQ2 in its final form was not what we wanted to happen. In the intervening years the world, and Gateshead’s place in it, had moved on. Some new thinking was required.

By mutual agreement, the Council and the preferred developer, Taylor Woodrow, parted company and the development put on hold pending a re-think. A “Summit” of the great and the good in the local and national development scenes, along with Council officers, came together to game-out the options and potential of the site. Given Gateshead’s new position on the international cultural map and the buoyancy of the riverfront development market world-wide, fresh thinking was applied, both in terms of content of the scheme – especially the lanes, squares, streets and stairs aspects of the public realm and site permeability – but also in terms of the expected quality of the physical product of the redevelopment, learning from the GQ1 experience.

A revised set of planning guidance was produced, reflecting the aspirations of the “Quays Summit” and the site put to market in early 2006.

The Masterplanning Argument

Two arguments rage within the Council. One says that the lack of a proper masterplan has hindered the development of the Quays. The opposing argument is that the presence of a pre-determined masterplan would not have allowed Gateshead to respond to the opportunity to land projects such as The Sage Gateshead, i.e. it would have been engineered-out.

The balanced view would be to suggest that a flexible masterplan, able to change and morph to accommodate the unexpected could have been evolved and, by pre-determining the principles of the types of development packages and land-uses, plus committing to the transport and public space infrastructure, could have given developers earlier confidence to invest in the area. Flexible masterplanning and rolling-design briefs are well documented in research but new to our thinking has been the “Servant-Plan”, mooted by the respected local architect Cyril Winskell. His Servant-Plans are responsive to, rather than determining of, development interest. In reality, the development of Gateshead Quays can be seen as an inadvertent application of the Servant-Plan concept, pushing for a coherent, logical arrangement of urban blocks and forms, yet flexing and moving to cope with new opportunities and change, but without losing the basic principles of hierarchy and detail.

No minority reports, no dissention, no moving backwards – only forwards.

As previously mentioned, the risk for most of the projects lay fully with Gateshead Council and this resulted in the development of rigorously applied, sophisticated risk monitoring and contingency management systems. It would have been easy to bankrupt the Council with even modest cost overruns, due to the sheer scale of the projects.

A key principle has been in the unanimity of decisions. Having debated, sometimes at great length, key issues then, collectively, the officer, member and project partner groups would move forward. No minority reports, no dissention, no moving backwards – only forwards. The discipline of this behaviour and the trust of both Council Members and external partners in the high quality officers leading the projects has been remarkable and rewarded with great success.

Within all that there were people with vision. Perhaps a number of visions rather than a single one, but with the flexibility to adjust their vision as new opportunities arrived because much of what happened arose from Gateshead being in the right place at the right time. Serendipity. Vision, unity and determination are fundamental to delivering regenerations such as those at Gateshead Quays, venturing into uncharted territory and with no pre-existing proof of success.

Taking calculated risks and constantly monitoring exposure allow dramatic ventures to proceed. Also, not being afraid to say “no” or stop. If something is continually going wrong or simply doesn’t feel right, then stop! Pause, review, and change direction. There is never a right time to make a hard decision, but you may regret forever not having been brave at that moment.

Key elements in arts-led regeneration

Gateshead, once almost unknown nationally, is now renowned internationally and has an image almost entirely built upon the arts-led regeneration of its quayside.

From the Gateshead experience it can be concluded that to deliver arts-led regeneration requires a number key elements, such as:

- 1 A demonstrable need for the “arts” facility in that general location
- 2 A firm belief and commitment in the project by the promoting organisation
- 3 Project management skills within the delivery organisation to ensure tight control over cost, time and specification
- 4 Relentless vigilance and determination on the part of key officers of the promoting organisation to keep the project joined-up and coherent
- 5 A realistic and robust business plan for the facility that can be rigorously tested to ensure longevity
- 6 Keeping buildings in public ownership to protect the investment of public monies and enter into a landlord & tenant relationship with the operators. That way if the operators of a facility fails then the buildings cannot be called on to repay any debt.

John Devlin