3
JUST ADD WATER

Waterfront regeneration as a global phenomenon

Sue Brownill

Summary

From the Inner Harbor in Baltimore to the Canary Wharf in London Docklands, from Darling Harbor in Sydney to the Victoria and Albert Waterfront in Cape Town, from the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao to Wan Chai in Hong Kong, it seems that no city is complete without a revitalized waterfront. Not only are such developments seemingly ubiquitous but they often bear a striking resemblance to each other, suggesting that a formula or ‘instant mix’ recipe for regeneration is being followed. Increasingly, this trend is not just restricted to post-industrial cities in the West but is also seen in the fast-developing economies of Latin America, the Gulf States and South East Asia. This chapter explores this global phenomenon by focusing on two inter-related issues: how this ubiquity can be characterized and understood, and the international mobility of regeneration ideas and practices. The chapter begins by outlining a brief history of waterfront regeneration and some general characteristics and trends. It then goes on to critically explore – through a number of case studies – two ways in which the global reach of waterfront development has been understood in the literature, namely (1) as the international transfer of ‘models’, or (2) as the expression of a universal urban policy, linked to competitiveness and neo-liberal urbanization. The chapter concludes by arguing that an alternative analysis based on the concept and practices of assemblage – the bringing together of different elements, actors and ‘ideas from elsewhere’ in the creation of urban space – can play a useful role in framing studies of waterfront regeneration. In particular, it argues that such an alternative analysis can ensure that the interplay between the local and the global and the tensions and contradictions often found within such schemes are recognized.

Introduction: waterfront development as a global phenomenon

The liminal spaces of waterfronts have played a particular role within processes of urban transformation and change. The edge where water and city meet has seen a succession of innovations, experiments and phases of development linked to global economic development, technological change and local aspirations (Schubert 2011b; Hein 2011; Shaw 2001). The history and development of the worldwide trend in waterfront regeneration is well documented in the literature and there is room for only a brief review here (but see for example, Breen and Rigby 1996; Marshall 2001; Shaw 2001; Desfor et al. 2011; Hein 2011; Smith and Garcia-Ferrari 2012). Shaw (2001) notes a number of phases in waterfront regeneration, starting in the 1970s with Baltimore and Boston in the US, where port areas abandoned by the changes
resulting from containerization along with associated de-industrialization were redeveloped into high-profile developments. Usually characterized by a mix of office, shopping and leisure, festival shopping and residential uses, and delivered through the mechanisms of a public-private partnership, this recipe was repeated in places such as Darling Harbor in Sydney and the Victoria and Albert Waterfront in Cape Town. By the 1980s, the focus had shifted across the Atlantic particularly to London where the London Docklands Development Corporation (LDDC) was pursuing an ideologically driven agenda to sweep away planning and encourage private sector investment. Developments such as Canary Wharf came to solidify perceptions of waterfront regeneration as consisting of mega-projects linked to global economic investment and activity with the ability to turn around perceptions of places as well as bestow world city status. London Docklands also pointed to the controversy and conflict that waterfront regeneration could engender and to the role that private housing could play in waterfront revitalization (Brownill 1993; Ward 2011).

Schubert (2011b) notes a third phase, linked to continental European sea ports such as Barcelona, Gothenburg, Hamburg, Amsterdam and Rotterdam. These entailed a more participatory planning approach linked to a wider city or regional strategy, which sought to integrate the waterfront into an overall vision for regeneration. A fourth phase can be noted (Shaw 2001) where the idea went ‘viral’, simultaneously spreading globally and to many smaller towns and cities and different types of waterfronts, including rivers and canals. The urban renaissance developments in the UK in the 1990s such as Brindley Place in Birmingham and the Granaries in Leeds are examples of this. In this phase, the phenomenon goes beyond the re-invention of post-industrial cities to become a symbol of modern global city status itself, with places such as Dubai, Buenos Aires, Rio de Janeiro, Hong Kong and Shanghai using their waterfronts to establish their identity within the global economy (Yiu 2011).

Alongside physical projects, Ward (2011) has identified a variety of international networks and practices focused on waterfront regeneration. Some of these were more informal, including visits, the work of international consultants and conferences and symposia (see for instance, Marshall 2001). More formally, the AIVP (Association International Villes et Portes), which brings together port cities from around the world, held its first annual conference in 1999 to share knowledge on ways of integrating city and port and responding to development. Later developments included a Waterfront Expo held in a variety of cities in Europe bringing together developers and policy makers and knowledge-sharing projects, for example, the Waterfront Communities Project funded by the European Union (Smith and Garcia-Ferrari 2012).

While historical accounts are important in summarizing and describing the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of waterfront regeneration and its global reach, they do not engage with explaining ‘why’. In what follows, a number of different ways of answering these questions are explored alongside more detailed case studies.

**Models, universal global policy or assembling waterfronts?**

It is possible to see a number of ways of characterizing and understanding the emergence of waterfront regeneration as a global phenomenon in the fairly extensive literature that exists. More celebratory accounts see it as a worldwide story of success (Breen and Rigby 1996) with the global spread an indication of the success of the strategies adopted in creating the post-industrial city (Bruttomesso 2001; Marshall 2001). The setting-up of the US-based Waterfronts Center involving Breen and others built on this. These accounts are themselves often a result of international networking, combining academic and practitioner contributions from a wide range of waterfront projects (Marshall 2001). They often emphasize aspects of urban design, delivery and architectural features, functioning almost as handbooks of how individual projects were put together for other places to follow (see for instance, Breen and Rigby 1994). This analysis suggests therefore that it is possible to explore the global spread of waterfront regeneration through tracing how ‘models’ and knowledge are transferred between nations and places by a range of actors and processes.
Models and policy transfer

The classic example that illustrates this transfer approach is Baltimore, often taken as the city where waterfront regeneration came of age. The story of the transformation of how a ‘rust-belt’ city ‘rekindled its spirit and created a distinctive international image for itself through a systematic, entrepreneurial and beautiful makeover’ (Millspaugh 2001: 75) through the redevelopment of the abandoned Inner Harbor is well known (Millspaugh 2001; Ward 2011). However, just as interesting is the way this came to be seen as a ‘model’ promoted by those involved and transferred to other places. For example, Martin Millspaugh, who was one of the key actors in Baltimore, contributed a ‘players’ manual’ to the Marshall collection (2001) in which he sets out the elements of Boston’s ‘success’. Such elements, he suggest, comprise a public-private partnership, a mix of uses and investments (including the offices of the World Trade Center, the Harborplace festival shopping complex [itself copied from Boston], open space and a marina) and the commitment of the City. Ward (2011) has traced how the ‘Baltimore’ model was made mobile through a variety of mechanisms and actors. Primary among these was the Enterprise Development Company (EDC), jointly run by Millspaugh and James Rouse, a developer whose company was responsible for the festival marketplaces in both Boston and Baltimore. The EDC went on to be involved with a variety of other schemes including Darling Harbor in Sydney, Rotterdam in the Netherlands and Port Vell in Barcelona, Spain. Ward also traces how other actors, including architects who had worked in Baltimore, were involved in different schemes around the world. Similar stories can be told about how the developers behind the Victoria and Albert Waterfront in Cape Town went on to build similar schemes around the world including Gun Wharves in Portsmouth, UK, showing how the ‘Baltimore mix’ was grounded, developed and then re-exported as a different brand (Ward 2011).

These accounts are important in bringing to our attention – through often very detailed empirical work – the many examples of the role of the international circulation of planning ideas and actors which underpin the ubiquity of waterfront regeneration. But there are limitations. Many of these accounts are uncritical; for example, the celebration of the Baltimore model does not take into account how, despite the revitalized waterfront, the city continued to suffer economic decline. Simplifying ‘models’ (or historical eras as in the previous summary) can overlook the contradictions and different elements that are often inherent within such models and the way they can change over time, as was the case with London Docklands which is typified as a model of market-led, top-down regeneration, but which in reality went through a variety of phases in its 17-year life (Brownill 2011). McCann and Ward (2011) have pointed to the limits of this traditional ‘policy transfer’ literature and its tendency to ignore the ways policies are remade in motion and the complex interactions between local and global that they depict. Only by ignoring and under-theorizing the less positive impacts of waterfront projects and the more complex issues of the relation of these schemes to the wider city and underlying processes of urban transformation can the narratives of success of waterfront regeneration be perpetuated.

Water, capital and mega-projects: the spread of neo-liberal urbanization?

In response to such arguably simplistic narratives, more critical accounts of waterfront regeneration have emerged, which see such projects as reflecting global trends in the processes of economic restructuring and urbanization (Hoyle and Pinder, 1988). Malone (1996), for example, takes a political economy approach in exploring the relationship between city, capital and water, arguing that ‘the waterfront is not a unique realm of urban development, but rather a frontier on which common processes have taken a contemporary form’ (1996: 5) and suggesting that such areas present ‘ . . . a place where the forces of capital are currently exercised under a new guise’ (1996: 3). This analysis led to a focus on the waterfront as one form of ‘urban mega-project’ (Díaz Orueta and Fainstein 2008: 761), linked to economic de-regulation, profit maximization, the relaxation of planning and the introduction of ‘streamlined’ governance structures.
These powerful critiques present a more conceptually grounded understanding of waterfronts and of how and why ideas spread around the world. For example, in a study drawing on examples including the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain, Moulaert et al. (2003) portray such projects as products of a universal neo-liberal urban policy. Such a policy, they suggest, is aimed at promoting market-led development and competitiveness rather than addressing socio-economic needs, is governed by agencies which shift power to the private sector and higher spatial scales and away from local democratic processes. In this way, places become commodified and homogenized as cities use their waterfronts to establish an identity that can compete globally for investment and attention and spaces are opened up to global economic trends such as the restructuring of the financial services sector. Waterfront developments, with their festival shopping schemes, office towers and high value residential developments, are seen as ‘elite playgrounds’, providing evidence of the polarization that accompanies such urbanization. Lehrer and Laidley (2008), in writing about the Toronto waterfront, also show how such projects are ‘depoliticized’ with schemes presented as meeting a variety of needs to diffuse conflict and secure consensus. According to this analysis, the international spread of waterfront development is therefore a manifestation of these structural and global processes, with individual waterfronts being remodeled to reflect the priorities of neo-liberal urbanization.

One example of waterfront regeneration that is frequently taken as illustrating this interpretation most clearly is the London Docklands Development Corporation (LDDC) and the Canary Wharf ‘mega-project’. Set up in 1981 by a radical right government (the Conservative Government led by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher) the LDDC typified streamlined governance structures with decision makers (largely from the private sector) appointed by central government and taking powers from democratically elected local government, with no requirement to consult with local communities, many of whom vociferously opposed the Corporation and, initially, the Canary Wharf development. The LDDC was also set within an ideological commitment (from central government) to introduce market relations to the waterfront by taking over publically owned land and ‘replacing the red tape’ of planning with a ‘red carpet’ for the private sector in the form of investment in infrastructure and ‘opportunity-led’ planning (LDDC 1982). The fact that the 14 million square feet first phase of Canary Wharf was in an Enterprise Zone and therefore needed no planning permission while receiving generous tax relief was testimony to this (Brownill 1993).

The LDDC set out to change the identity of Docklands so as to attract investors and a different population of professionals, introducing substantial residential development (24,000 units between 1981 and 1998) into the mix of waterfront uses (Ward 2011). The evolution of the area into an extension of the City of London is seen by some as ensuring London maintained its position as a world financial center (Greater London Authority 2004) and by others as evidence of the spread of neo-liberalism (Fainstein 1994). That communities surrounding Canary Wharf are still within the most deprived in the country and that cleaners working at Canary Wharf had to campaign for a living wage is seen as indicative of the polarization that is a hallmark of such mega-projects (Brownill 2011). Similarly, evidence of the universal nature of such projects can be found. For example, the original consortium behind the Canary Wharf (including First Boston Credit Suisse and developer G. Ware Travelstead, whose family firm had been active in Boston waterfront developments) saw an opportunity to initiate a scheme inspired by US waterfront regeneration, and in 1987 Canadian developers Olympia and York who had previously built waterfront schemes, including Battery Park City in New York, were brought in to complete the development, bringing with them the same architect (I. M. Pei) and many of the same design features (Gordon 1997). Similarly, the Development Corporation model was later followed in a variety of cities in Australia, including Perth and Melbourne. However, how these ideas spread and the role of individuals and networks within this is of less interest than the fact that they provide proof of the universal thesis.

Notwithstanding the strengths of this approach there are some dangers in typifying neo-liberal urbanization as a global ‘conveyor-belt’ (Massey 2007), with waterfronts being powerless to stop its
inevitable march and thereby becoming the victims of global forces. This denies the possibility for alternatives, such as the Coin Street Development on a different part of the Thames in London, where a community development trust controlled a key site and provided a different mix of uses including social housing, open spaces and community uses (Brindley et al. 2005). It also denies the contradictions that occur between the rhetoric and reality of such projects. For example, far from being ‘market-led’, many schemes depended on continuing and significant state investment and involvement – up to £6 billion in the case of the LDDC (Brownill 2011). Also, while Canary Wharf might be put forward by some as a model of how to achieve World City status, it was not, according to one ex-LDDC board member, the result of deliberate strategy but ‘an idea that walked in the door’ (personal communication with the author). This suggests the need for caution in accepting post-hoc rationalizations as ever-powerful ‘models’, and that the way ‘models’ are constructed and used is more complex than either the policy transfer literature or the universal policy thesis suggest.

Further evidence of this complexity is the way in which models can be contested and viewed differently. Opinions on London Docklands, for example, remain deeply divided to this day (Brownill and Kochan 2011) and as such it is seen both as an idea to be rejected as much as one to emulate (Ward 2011). Writing about Canary Wharf in 2009, Anna Minton refers to it as ‘the architecture of extreme capitalism’ (2009: 5) whilst Tristram Hunt (2009) calls it ‘one of the most successful examples of planning in Western Europe’. British architect Richard Rogers was highly critical of the LDDC in 1987 (Rogers 1997), but called it an ‘exemplar’ in 2005 (Carpenter 2005). On its closure in 1998, the LDDC published a number of monographs that attempted to re-position its legacy away from market-led regeneration, conflict and polarization and towards inclusivity and social sustainability (LDDC 1998; Florio and Brownill 2000). In this way ‘models’ should be seen not as recipes to be followed but as ideas of places that get made and re-made over time within particular contexts. Other waterfronts are defined in opposition to some, or in homage of others, with both the redeveloped spaces and the ‘models’ being transformed in the process, rather than this being a mechanistic transfer.

A final criticism of the ‘mega-project’ thesis is that it can overlook how projects can reflect an interaction between the local and global rather than just being expressions of global forces. Of interest here is the ‘Cool Sea’ network, funded by the EU and initiated by Edinburgh City Council, which was keen to ‘get it right’ when it came to its own waterfront regeneration. Cool Sea brought together nine port cities from six countries around the North Sea, with each tackling a different regeneration issue, including, for example, integrating transport, involving communities, visioning and consensus-building. Rather than imposing a universal model, this project has sought to build on innovations and approaches developed in each city within an overall aim of producing more sustainable places through the involvement of local interests:

> the biggest overall challenge to waterfront regeneration is to achieve an integrated approach which can simultaneously address a range of key issues – from the strategic to the very local, and from the physical design to the realization of the economic and social potential of the area.

(Carley et al. 2007: 12)

This also shows an alternative approach to the ‘mega-project’ version of waterfront development that has been followed elsewhere in Europe (Schubert 2011b). Examples include Hamburg, where a more market-led ‘String of Pearls’ project-based approach was replaced by the more plan-led, mixed use, participatory HafenCity scheme (Schubert 2011a). However, such schemes are not without their own controversies and contradictions. For instance, in Hamburg the ‘flagship’ Opera House has over-run costs and in Gothenburg ideas of a ‘mixed city’ with diverse, localized activities and multiple landowners clashed with the consolidation of landownership and large injections of capital required to get development going (Carley et al. 2007: 54). This suggests that the aims summed up by the Association Internationale
de Villes et Ports (AIVP 2012) to ‘provide a forum for the men and women who make the port cities progress towards stronger competitiveness (sic) whilst improving the quality of life for their inhabitants’ are inherently contradictory. For some, these tensions show that the moves towards social inclusion and participation in later schemes are evidence of ‘rolled-out neo-liberalism’ (Peck and Tickell 2002) or post-political regeneration (Baeten 2009). In other words, they illustrate mere accommodations to the failures of previous schemes, whose apparent consensus is a mask for the continuing assertion of the power of economic elites. But such schemes may also suggest that waterfront regeneration is characterized by complex and contradictory discourses and processes (Raco 2005; Brownill 2011), which are played out differently in different places. In this way, waterfronts are not all identikit developments subject to universal economic forces and governance arrangements intended to lead to top-down imposition of neo-liberal urbanization, but neither are they places where local issues and participatory planning can predominate.

**Assembling waterfronts**

As a way of recognizing the complexity and dynamics of waterfront regeneration, more recent work has emerged around the themes of relations, flows, networks and assemblages (Desfor et al. 2011; Hein 2011; McCann and Ward 2011). This echoes other work such as that of Massey (2007) who explores the relational geography of world cities, arguing against seeing places as victims of global forces and arguing for exploring how places are inter-connected and how different and alternative localized relations can emerge through this as well as Harvey’s (1982) focus on the interaction between local and global. As a result, waterfronts have been approached in a more nuanced way, often focusing on the dialectical relationship between the ‘fixity’ of places and projects and the ‘flows’ of ideas and economic and other relations between such places (Desfor et al. 2011), or the dynamics between the contradictory discourses and modes of governance entailed within specific projects (Brownill 2011; Raco 2005). Another example is Dovey’s (2005) exploration of the ‘fluidity’ of the Melbourne waterfront. This is based on a Deleuzian reading of how waterfronts are transformed by the ‘deterritorialization’ of existing spaces and identities and their ‘reterritorialization’ through flows of meanings, identities and desires (desires for waterfront views, ways of life, investment, power and identity), which are made real and commodified in waterfront projects. Waterfronts are thereby characterized by ‘the perpetual movement of flows and transient moments of “fixities”’ (Desfor et al. 2011: 5), with even these ‘fixities’ being themselves ambiguous, contestable and dynamic. Such work does not ignore relations of power or capital but sets a framework for exploring waterfronts as contested arenas bounded in space and time in which the local interacts with global processes in a way that is mediated by unequal power relations, but does not in itself have to lead to a particular outcome or follow a pre-described model.

This work has been significant in acknowledging the complexity of waterfront development and presenting a more dynamic account of the interaction between local and global. However, it has tended to ignore the international flow of ideas and policies that has been shown to have been such a significant factor in waterfront regeneration. It is here I would argue that recent work on assemblage and policy mobility can make a valuable contribution (McCann and Ward 2011). Such work also aims to explore the dynamics of relationality and territoriality. It looks at how ‘global policy networks are fundamental to the construction of apparently local responses while at the same time apparently global phenomena, globalized policies, only exist in particular, grounded localized ways’ (Cochrane, 2011: x).

Assemblage is a term used to emphasize the ‘composition of diverse elements into some form of provisional socio-spatial formation’ (Anderson and McFarlane 2011: 124). An assemblage is not static, but ‘an assemblage is a whole of some sort that expresses some identity and claims a territory’ (Wise 2005: 77, quoted in McCann and Ward 2011: xv). However, these territories are not fixed, but are made and re-made as assemblages themselves. One implication of this is to see waterfront projects as assemblages of ‘flows’ of ideas, desires, policies, strategies, ideologies, capital and cultures. These
elements can be in constant tension with each other, and can be added to, making assemblages dynamic and provisional. This enables understanding of waterfront projects to move beyond dichotomies such as local and global, and to progress beyond seeing them as monolithic expressions of neo-liberalism.

Significantly, assemblage also demands a focus on the way a project or policy is brought together and held together: ‘the idea that the institutionalization of specific projects involves the work of assembling diverse elements into an apparently coherent form’ (Newman and Clarke 2009: 9). Li (2007), for example, brings attention to a variety of practices of assemblage and the role of the actors or ‘situated subjects’ such as publics, developers, planners, policy makers and consultants within this. In this way, the mobilization of ‘ideas from elsewhere’ or ‘models’ become one such practice of assemblage in the work of putting together a waterfront project. This calls for detailed empirical work as undertaken within the policy transfer literature.

The development and mobility of ‘models’ is therefore part of the de-territorialization and re-territorialization of ‘the waterfront’ as a worldwide project; places are put forward as best practice to be exported elsewhere, or ideas are drawn upon to justify or inspire a vision for a different place. As we saw with the London Docklands, this ‘idea’ of a place is not static, but is itself remade in the process of mobility and it will therefore not result in an identikit project but will interact with other elements of the assemblage to lead to something that is relationally linked to other ‘assemblages’ but has its own dynamics and balance. In turn, assemblages will influence the development and spread of ideas and practices in the constant interplay of territoriality and relationality. In addition, seeing assemblage as a process highlights the inherently messy, contestable and contingent nature of the governance of projects – entailing practices such as managing contradictions and attempting to bring various stakeholders into the assemblage – rather than seeing their spread as unstoppable and driven by a powerful logic. Hence such projects are open to challenge; for example, publics can either be reconstituted to populate the re-created waterfront landscapes or they can resist. As a result, assemblages are constantly evolving as different elements are introduced in an effort to overcome the contradictions inherent within them. One such practice identified by Li (2007) is ‘rendering technical’, namely replacing political arguments with technical procedures. The use of ‘tool-kits’ for waterfront regeneration can be seen as one such practice of assemblage.

The way such ‘ideas from elsewhere’ can become part of new projects can be illustrated by revisiting Melbourne. Dovey (2005) uses the conceptual approach set out previously to trace how the remaking (or reterritorialization) of the waterfront into a symbol of a modern Melbourne became a focus for the re-positioning of the city. Ward (2011) explores the role of policy mobility within this, and both focus on the role of the Committee for Melbourne (CFM), a boosterish organization made up of representatives from the public and private sectors. Following a familiar story of a declining port, a failed Olympic bid for the site and stalled plans, the early 1990s saw the election of a more market-oriented right wing party coming to power and a changed approach to Melbourne Docklands. Ward (2011) shows how Pamela Warrender, a key member of the CFM, actively sought out examples of development in other cities to use to lobby for a change in direction.

In 1988, the CFM commissioned Reg Ward, formerly Chief Executive of the LDDC, to produce a plan for the Melbourne waterfront. Although not adopted, Dovey (2005) notes how the Committee’s proposals for increased global competitiveness, top-down governance and flagship projects set the scene for later developments. It is also noticeable that the Melbourne waterfront uses Docklands in its title (one of the few places to readily make reference to London), and a Docklands Authority similar to the LDDC was formed in 1991. However, this should not be seen as a ‘transfer’ but the use of references to other places in the ongoing process of assembling the waterfront in Melbourne. Dovey’s analysis shows how the Melbourne Docklands were de-territorialized and rebuilt in the shape of ‘flows of desire’ related to competitiveness and attracting foreign investment and positioning Melbourne internationally. By bringing in Ward’s meticulous research on the agents and mechanisms of policy mobility, it is possible
to add to this by showing how ideas from elsewhere became both a practice of assemblage and an element of the assemblage itself. In this way it is possible to reinterpret models not as top-down imposed visions but as elements within an on-going practice of regeneration. The fact that such models are themselves only ‘moments’ in or ‘snapshots’ of an on-going assemblage that has been held together (but is unlikely to be repeated), only underlines their contingent nature. Thus the idea of transfer from one place to another or response to global economic processes is replaced by a focus on dynamics and contestations.

Robinson (2011) points out that there can be multiple policy strands or competing models in motion around particular ‘fields’ of policy which are themselves in tension. For example, the Barcelona, Baltimore or Hamburg ‘models’ of waterfront regeneration can be seen both as expressions of different approaches to regeneration and of the contradictions inherent within particular projects (or assemblages). Schemes such as the Kop Van Zuid in Rotterdam, for example, sought to combine or assemble a number of different approaches. These approaches included a festival shopping scheme built by Millspaugh and Rouse’s EDC but also a ‘social return’ project securing local benefits, and a more planned strategic approach to regeneration linking the waterfront with an integrated regional development strategy. This suggests that waterfront schemes are neither the manifestation of neo-liberal urbanism nor the expression of participatory mixed-use schemes, but an uneasy combination of potentially conflicting objectives, prone to conflict and needing constant work in holding them together. Schubert (2011a) has noted these contradictions in the ‘north European model’, namely between competitiveness and more socially oriented and integrated projects, and we have seen how networks have sought to render this technical through toolkits such as the ‘Cool Sea’. Exploring empirically the tensions within these different elements of the assemblage and the practices of assemblage that agencies and actors need to adopt to overcome them provides a valuable direction for future work.

Assemblage can also usefully explore the evolution of waterfront regeneration over time. As we’ve seen, far from being only characterized through mega-projects, London Docklands was assembled differently in different parts of the area and at different times (contrast the suburban housing estates of Beckton in East London, for example, with the towers of Canary Wharf in London Docklands). Similarly, following the 1987 UK general election a new discourse of regeneration emerged as local opposition moved to compromise and the LDDC sought to include attention to social regeneration as a stated regeneration objective (Brownill 2011). If assemblage blurs the concepts of near and far as some claim (McCann and Ward 2011) then it can also blur past, present and future. The way in which ‘Docklands’ has been re-interpreted over the decades, as it is used to justify or to refute newer waterfront projects, is a case in point here. In effect, the past enters the present to influence visions of the future, but in this process is made and remade. Assemblages may become realized on the ground in various projects but this is not static: they influence the emergence of other assemblages and can themselves change or are reinterpreted.

For example, after the closure of the LDDC in 1998, regeneration in East London was no longer territorialized around ‘Docklands’, but a new assemblage emerged focused on the Thames Gateway. This brought together new and old actors with the aim of combining competitiveness, cohesion and networked governance within a regional growth strategy (Brownill and Carpenter 2009). Large-scale aspirations for 180,000 new jobs and 120,000 new homes between 2005 and 2016 were set out in a series of strategy documents and particular sites were earmarked for development. One of these, the Lower Lea Valley (between Stratford and Canning Town) shows how waterfront regeneration was reassembled in this phase using a combination of new and old discourses, practices and actors. A ‘Vision for the Lower Lea’ was published jointly by the London Development Agency (a regional economic development agency) and a new Urban Development Corporation (the London Thames Gateway UDC, one of the new UDCs brought in by New Labour to deliver its plans for the Thames Gateway). These were labelled ‘benign’ in the sense of being public sector dominated and with a remit for addressing local needs as well as securing global investment, but included on the board were at least two previous LDDC board
members. The vision mobilized ideas from elsewhere (and from the future) to talk of a ‘new water city for the 21st century’ and an ‘East End Amsterdam’ (Butler, 2006). The narrative was aiming to achieve environmental and social sustainability based on a network of inclusive schemes linked by water, through planning gain and other mechanisms. However, the same 1980s practices of ‘strategic flexibility’ and opportunity-led planning were employed. Factors including the recession and a focus on the Olympics 2012 have stalled this vision, with the complexity of the networked governance arrangements set up by New Labour also being implicated. This led some to re-cast the LDDC as an ‘exemplar’ of delivering regeneration, showing again how places and eras are mobilized and re-interpreted in response to current contexts.

There is also the potential for a focus on assemblage to open up new areas for research into waterfronts. Robinson (2011) sees assemblage as a way of moving beyond the focus on western cities or colonial flows of planning ideas from the so-called center to the periphery. This would entail exploring how waterfronts have been assembled in a range of places and the discourses, practices, elements and actors involved in this, taking the work beyond a focus on responses to de-industrialization or the spread of neo-liberalism. Work such as that of Ramos (2010) on Dubai and Yiu (2011) on Hong Kong has already indicated the possibilities of this. It would also be possible to explore new elements as they emerge and are introduced into waterfront projects, the focus on climate change and responses to the likelihood of raised water-levels being an important issue here.

Conclusions

This short review has shown that, far from being liminal, waterfronts can reveal much about regeneration and the ways in which we can analyze and understand the processes of urban change. It has also explored the value of framing analysis around assemblage and its associated practices as a way of avoiding monolithic and uni-directional accounts of change and of highlighting the empirical exploration of individual waterfronts while also recognizing the connections between them. There are dangers that the current academic popularity of assemblage could see it used as ubiquitously and uncritically, and that the focus on how elements are brought together ignores outcomes. This is why it needs to be clearly placed within an ‘analytic’ (Li 2007) that also acknowledges fields of power and wider social processes (see also Dovey 2005 and Desfor et al. 2011). Nevertheless, there is scope for using assemblage in future research on waterfront development, particularly in non-western locations, on new practices such as responses to climate change as well as in more detailed empirical exploration of the mobility of the practices and ideas of waterfront regeneration. Whatever the approach taken, such work will show that waterfronts continue to be spaces of innovation and experimentation, with important lessons for wider interpretations of regeneration and urban change.

References


Just add water: waterfront regeneration