

THE REGENERATION OF IMAGE IN OLD INDUSTRIAL REGIONS: AGENTS OF CHANGE AND CHANGING AGENTS

Report of 4th meeting of the RSA Old Industrial Regions Research Network, 15th-17th Feb 2009, Lower Rhine University of Applied Sciences, Mönchengladbach, Germany.

A key challenge for old industrial regions seeking to recover from deindustrialisation is how they can overcome the baggage imposed upon them by history. Not only are these places endowed with an industrial structure more suitable for the twentieth or even the nineteenth century than the present day. These places also often have a reputation for backwardness which can be far out of kilter with the reality of pleasant, liveable and well-working cities and regions. A few regions have made the transition from old industrial region to acknowledged post-industrial cultural metropolises, such as Barcelona, Milan or Malmö. And yet for each of these exemplars are tens of aspirant regions seeking to regenerate their image and attract Florida's creative classes. Is this latest drive for city and regional marketing more of an empty vessel than a policy panacea for old industrial regions?

In the apposite venue of Mönchengladbach, in the former textiles region of Lower Rhineland, Germany, the Old Industrial Regions Research Network of the Regional Studies Association met for their annual meeting under the leadership of Professor Rüdiger Hamm and the Lower Rhine Institute for Regional Economics, part of the Lower Rhine University of Applied Sciences. In the fifth meeting of a network which has travelled through Newcastle, Gdansk-Gdynia-Sopot, Enschede-Gronau and Prague, around forty academics and local institutional representatives met to discuss these issues. Although the meeting was unable to discover the "Holy Grail" of regional image-building, over the course of an extremely intense yet nevertheless enjoyable two days, the network meeting sketched out some of the key contours of understanding this most ethereal and tenebrous of concepts.

The scene was set for the meeting in an opening session in which delegates were firstly welcomed by Professor Hermann Ostendorf, University President, who placed the University in its wider German context. Following an introduction by Aureliane Beauclair to the Regional Studies Association, Martin Lutz, of Standort Niederrhein (the local regional development agency) sketched out the detailed regional context for Lower Rhine area. He painted a picture of city-region at 'the edge of everywhere', surrounded by the Ruhr to the North East, Arnhem-Nijmegen to the west and the Aachen-Maastricht-Cologne cross-border region to the south. Given the broad spread of its regional industries and its peripherality but also proximity to many conurbations, an image emerged of a region with possibly difficulties in establishing its distinctiveness and uniqueness in an age of global competition.

The scientific content of the conference was opened by Gerald Wood, from the Geographical Institute at the University of Münster, who reflected on wider questions of regional image through a detailed case study of the Ruhr region, and the way in which image and marketing campaigns had been used as it evolved into an increasingly post industrial region. The key tension for the Ruhr has been retaining a coherence in its image, which was built on a common commitment of its cities to carboniferous capitalism along with the reality of forming a single large conurbation. The rise of city-marketing has challenged the idea of the Ruhr as a sensible region for marketing, but nevertheless and despite Essen's role as 2010 European Capital of Culture, city-marketing has yet to supplant this sense of regional identity, an identity

and image strongly tied to a very industrial identity. In the ensuing lively discussion, this relationship between local material identity and external image were explored, and in particular it was notable that it was not possible to pinpoint what local changes in identity and economy could meaningfully change external image.

In the remainder of the two days of the meeting, 24 papers were presented from authors from universities and research centres in nine countries. In the space of a short report, it is impossible to do justice to the depth and density of these presentations. A selection of papers will be published in the autumn under the University Academic Press for those with particular interest in the detail of topics covered. In giving a brief flavour of some of the topics emerging in answer to Gerard's question of the relationship between local conditions and external image, it is perhaps worth highlighting three emergent clusters of thinking.

The first was a general affirmation and agreement that external image of old industrial regions was tightly bound-up with local identity and dependent on authenticity for its success. Nick Clifton, Cardiff University, traced the rise of local branded products in Wales, and highlighted that the most successful products were the ones which traded on positive, traditional connotations of Welsh identity whilst avoiding kitsch. Martin van den Toorn, Delft Technical University, reiterated the importance of physical landscape to identity, and the need to consider mundane landscape details such as reclamation and infrastructure projects when supporting image development. Marta Jacuniak (Oldenberg University), Pierre Guilliams (Liège University), Christine Ryma-Fitschen (ILS Germany) and Gerd Lintz (Leibniz Institute) all in their separate papers highlighted the importance physical dimensions of image-building in the commonly encountered brownfield regeneration projects in old industrial regions.

A second issue was how to use *grand projets* in a nuanced way to improve regional image, without falling into the Bilbao model, in which cities' images' hollowly echo of other – successful – cities' narratives, immediately undermining their authenticity. Jaroslav Koutsky (Jan Evangelista Purkyně University) and Pavel Bednar (Ostrava University) highlighted that in the Czech Republic, undergoing transition to post-socialism, such projects always negotiated a tension between signifying 'economic and moral change', or being 'symbols of improvident exhibitionism'. Brian Doucet (Utrecht University) contrasted developments in Glasgow and Rotterdam, highlighting how a fear of the underclass had actually reduced the quality of Glasgow's redevelopment, whilst embracing all its citizens had led Rotterdam to develop the widely-lauded Erasmus bridge. Paul Benneworth (Newcastle University) used the case of Turin's Winter Olympic Games to question whether bidding processes did indeed build up useful capacity which could address OIRs problems with institutional lock-in and thinness. He concluded that institutional capacity was not an easily transferable quality, and bidding for festivals primarily build up capacity in bidding for festivals, and not in pan-city-regional management.

A third set of papers looked at the stimulus provided to regional images by new industries. Professor Martina Fromhold-Eisebeth (RWTH Aachen) told a compelling story of how the RWTH University institution, now awarded Leading University status in Germany, had built up a strong bio-sciences cluster as well as stimulating the regional economy through spin-offs to a level rarely in evidence elsewhere in Europe. Marco Trienes explored how RWTH had contributed to building a cross-border biosciences region. He highlighted using scientific collaboration data that the Aachen-Maastricht-Leuven region was genuinely cross-border. However the cleavage

between the Flemish and francophone parts of the Belgian sub-region were far deeper than those between Belgian, German and Dutch elements – culture matters and is not easily manipulated! Neil Reid (Toledo University, USA) highlighted the importance of leadership in building these new industries, and gave a very engaging case study of the thin-film industry sector in Toledo, strongly supported by a university management greatly committed to better university engagement as a means of supporting research strengths.

The scientific conversations that advanced our understandings of the state-of-the-art were greatly supported by a hospitable and enjoyable social programme, expertly arranged by Professor Hamm, Yasemin Schmitz and Christiane Goebels, with support from sponsors German Brown Coal Association, the University, Standort Niederrhein and Borussia VFL 1900 Mönchengladbach. There is always a risk on the ‘conference circuit’ that the experience takes place in the ‘un-places of the mobility economy’, such as airports, conference centres and taxicabs. The Regional Studies Association in general and our research network in particular have always strived to ensure that conference visitors acquire a good sense of place and locality. Professor Hamm and his sponsors followed this tradition ensuring that delegates were clear about the importance of industries in shaping the identity and image of the Lower Rhein region.

The pre-meeting tour provided the opportunity for delegates to travel into the heartland of the industrial Lower Rhine, to Krefeld. There, the delegates visited the German Textiles Museum, and under the expert guidance of the Museum Curator and local development agency manager, were able to sample some flavour of the importance of textiles to the region. Thanks to the support of the German Brown Coal Association, Professor Hamm was able to invite delegates to a conference dinner at the recently rebuilt stadium of the German First Division soccer team Borussia Mönchengladbach. A stadium tour guided by a passionate local volunteer, Georg, left visitors in no doubt of the importance of Borussia to local identity and to the authenticity of that identity. Finally, Professor Hamm invited those delegates not urgently rushing off after the end of the conference for drinks and dinner, to draw the conference to a very social close.

The message emerging from the conference was very clear, if not entirely positive, for policy-makers, which is that identity of old industrial regions is important, but it is not easily manipulable. Authenticity is key to the value of image to place-based regeneration, and authentic images which can be commodified and bundled into an effective tourist offer are rare creatures indeed. Whilst the creative classes might not *say* that they value that authenticity, away from increasingly discredited discourses of hyper-globalisation, the message is that ‘agents of image change’ do value the rootedness and certainties provided by place-based identity-image.

Thus, there is a call for a more nuanced approach to regional authorities in image building, understanding what both locals and visitors value, and creating projects, infrastructures and landscapes which augment and extend those strengths. This message creates a useful starting point for our next meeting, which will take place at the Centre for Urban and Regional Studies at the University of Birmingham, overseen by Professor Gill Bentley. On behalf of the series organisers, we encourage all those potentially interested to consider registering for our next event.

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