

Working with Europe can teach us
a thing or two about regeneration.

INTERNATIONAL RESCUE



LIVERPOOL SAILING CLUB TAKES SHAPE NEXT TO THE RIVER MERSEY

Words Mark Lupton

Photographs Terry Mealey, Dave Willis

This September saw people from three European countries converge in Herdecke, Germany, for a chance to reflect on three years of regenerating riverside sites under the EU's Artery project. At the Hotel Zweibrücker Hof delegates met to consider their achievements, their mistakes, the lessons they have learnt and the friendships they have formed. And to think about where their attempts to breathe new life into four waterways might go from here.

During the conference, Klaus Mandel, regional planner at Germany's Rhine Neckar region, treated delegates to a presentation on the common themes which had united delegates working under the umbrella of Artery since 2003.

Mandel explains: "My final slide was a picture of all the members of Artery under the description: 'Artery: you'll never work and walk alone!' I think that summed up the success for me of Artery; that when problems arose we all had the basis and the will to overcome them. It really felt like it wasn't an assembly of egoists but of actors who each wanted to build and add value for all of the partners involved."

Artery set out to assist the process of regeneration alongside four key waterways in England, Holland and Germany. Each has its own unique challenges but all had seen a number of common difficulties that had emerged during the industrial decline of the second half of the twentieth century.

When the old uses for the waterways – transport and industry – had been lost, decline had set in. Each was characterised by neglected, overgrown and inaccessible embankments, the destruction of natural habitats for wildlife, poor water quality and local people who had turned their backs on the rivers. Most people seemed hardly aware that the river in their midst had once been their region's 'artery'. Under Artery, riverside regeneration would have one overriding aim: getting people to 'turn back to face the water'.

Artery has covered 10 projects over its short lifespan – across five regions, three countries and four rivers. With a budget of £12.5 million it set out to

transform river landscapes in the Ruhr, Rhine Neckar and Stuttgart Neckar in Germany, the Mersey Basin in the UK, and the Hollandsche IJssel in the Netherlands.

Here in the Northwest the key driver has been the loss of the transport, shipping and distribution industries which once dominated the River Mersey, leaving a legacy of environmentally damaged land and derelict sites. Two projects have been underway for some time but have truly taken off under Artery: Speke Garston Coastal Reserve in Merseyside and the Mersey Vale Nature Park in Stockport.



Across Europe the loss of traditional industries is still being felt. Riverscapes that were first brutalised and then abandoned by industry are a barrier to investment and do little to improve the quality of life for local people.

For some time now turning around the fortunes of these areas so they become a resource for local communities – an artery once more – has been a priority for regional and spatial development strategies. Indeed before Artery a number of ambitious projects had been started in each of the regions. What Artery has succeeded in doing is bringing the different organisations involved in these projects together at a European level to share best practice and find common ways of working which can be to the benefit of all.

Klaus Mandel, whose Rhine Neckar

region has initially concentrated on building up sustainable river landscape developments, says: "I think Artery shows that what the EU can do best is to bring people together to build up networks. The problems we faced were wide and varied: some had environmental issues, some social problems such as the vandalism at Speke Garston, for others economic concerns were paramount, and for us it was quality of life issues and promoting access to water.

"What we've learned therefore is a whole range of lessons which can be applied to a wide range of riverside regeneration projects which are very different indeed. Ultimately we would all have probably done a lot of these things alone. But in the end the investment of each partner was influenced by the knowledge of each of the others."

The key way this was achieved was through Artery's adoption of four common themes which each of the projects would utilise to deliver its objectives and to ensure their sustainability. These 'strategic approaches' were: public participation, public-private partnerships, regional strategies and public awareness. Each of the themes shared a common objective of reaching out to include local communities, local business, and local councils/authorities.

[CONTINUED OVER]

“Only now the project is over can we fully appreciate how much we have learned from each other, and how we have inspired each other.”



“It’s about working together on projects with unique local circumstances but which have a great deal in common – all underpinned by these four common strategic approaches,” says Sarah Wallbank, European projects manager at the Mersey Basin Campaign. “Sharing experiences and establishing contacts in other countries has been crucial to Artery’s success. We’ve worked with partners from different cultural and political backgrounds, which has definitely led to more creative thinking.

“The German partners have told us that they really learned from the way in which we work in partnership with business – for example Peel Holdings at Speke Garston Coastal Reserve. And I’d say we have definitely learnt from the creative thinking of one of the projects which involved the restoration of a windmill in Holland – rather than just restoring a windmill they have linked in a social enterprise and housing company to manage the project in the long term.”

The four regions were each designated as lead partner in one of the thematic areas; with the corollary that they were ‘learning’ regions in each of the others. Interaction and learning was facilitated by workshops, reports and personal exchange.

“It’s all brought about much greater understanding between the countries involved and the creation of a truly cross-regional network,” says Wallbank. “And the end result is the successful realisation of 10 truly European pilot projects which can have important lessons for future EU regional development projects.”

The Northwest was an expert region on the theme of public-private partnerships (PPP) with the lessons learnt here being seen as of great value to the other Artery partners. The Mersey Basin campaign has worked closely with Peel Holdings, which owns much of the 65 hectare site around the site of the former

Speke Airport. This potentially attractive coastal area at the mouth of the River Mersey had been in a badly vandalised, neglected and dangerous state for many years.

Initial work, which has been overseen by a steering group made up of the Mersey Basin Campaign, The Northwest Regional Development Agency (NWDA), the National Trust and Liverpool City Council, has seen the area fenced off and cleaned up and paths, car parks, signage and waymarkers put in for recreation. Funding has come from the NWDA and Artery, and the project will also see a new home built for Liverpool Sailing Club. Additional funds of £100,000 were secured from Peel to create a wildlife meadow.

“The involvement of the private sector was critical here,” says Iain Taylor, research and development director at the Mersey Basin Campaign. “Peel are building a business park on the edge of the site and for them getting planning permission or attracting investors wouldn’t have happened if the environment here wasn’t improved. We, meanwhile, thought it wasn’t right that Liverpool’s only stretch of natural coastline had become a no-go area for the public. So having the will there on all sides really helped: and Artery helped make it happen.”

At the other end of the Mersey, the creation of the Mersey Vale Nature Park has seen the return of privately owned derelict land to create a community green space next to the river. Public consultation has been a crucial element of the project, which is currently nearing completion and has involved the creation of wildflower meadows, footpath

improvements to link residential areas to the Trans-Pennine trail, an entrance sculpture designed by local primary school pupils and a new footbridge.

“It’s all so new perhaps it’s too early to say if it’s a success,” says Wallbank. “But we’re confident that through regular reference group meetings with local residents and interest groups what has been achieved reflects the aspirations of the local community.”

While Artery has led to real change on the ground, its achievements are also about facilitating the exchange of ideas and co-operation between nations with sometimes very different ways of working.

For Mandel the international workshops proved an excellent forum to share, debate and discuss.

“The workshops we did on public-private partnerships in Manchester were excellent,” he says. “Someone said the first thing you should answer is: you need to first establish who should talk, with whom, at what moment and at what place. I’ll never forget that phrase and the extremely instructive explanations of PPP I took away from them. You can learn from other partners some of these golden rules of how to work.”

Mandel adds: “Throughout



“You need time to facilitate team building in a project. We started out as partners, at the moment we are friends.”

the process I’ve found everyone to be very open minded – which gave us the basis for a common understanding. So we began to take an interest in how the other partners were working, what their circumstances were. That doesn’t mean you have a blueprint for regional development – because the circumstances and the actors are different for each region.

“But we all have the same aims: a good environment, good quality of life for people, an economic basis for the future of these riverside regions. The way you realise those goals is sometimes different.

“I think ultimately this has improved the competency of those working in Artery – and that’s not competency bought by an external consultant, but competency won by the organisations and staff involved in the project.”

Albert Koffeman of the Hollandsche IJssel project says many of the benefits of the ‘learning’ and ‘expert’ regions approach are yet to be felt: “The fact that each of the three pilot projects were part of a European project increased the pride of local groups and municipalities for the sites. It fostered the motivation to successfully implement the pilot projects.

“But in my opinion not many

of the lessons and experiences of our transnational partners were implemented in the three pilot projects, because all pilot projects were being implemented at almost the same time. The real result of the “learning” regions is only now noticeable.

“So these lessons will probably have more influence on our coming projects than on the pilot projects within the Artery project. That’s not necessarily a bad thing. As a matter of fact, I sometimes think that only now the project is over, can we fully appreciate how much we have



learned from each other, and maybe even more importantly, how we have inspired each other. In my opinion this transnational learning is as a result more visible at the level of the regional lead partners and less at the pilot project level.”

Ironically Koffeman also says the different nature of each area proved to be both an advantage and a disadvantage.

“The regions were always analysing if it was possible to implement the advice and best practices of other regions in their region or if they were just too different to be successful. A big advantage of this structure, was that an ‘expert’ region of a certain theme were themselves forced to really dig deep into that specific theme, not only in

theory, but also in practice. I sometimes had the feeling that the ‘expert’ partner himself learned even more about a theme than the learning partners.

“In my opinion the best example of the use of the lessons we learnt, is the preparation of a possible Artery 2. In the discussion it is now very obvious how far we have come; not only as regions but also the persons working on the project.”

Artery is now approaching a period of transition with funding due to end in October 2006.

Sarah Wallbank adds: “This is the end of the first phase of the project but there are plans to do more – you’ve not heard the last of Artery. We’re doing funding applications at the moment for what will essentially be a quick fix to keep us going for an extra year. We then hope this will lead us on to a large, joint funding application next year which will enable us to do a further three or four years of the project.”

“It’s a time of bridge building – from Artery 1 to Artery 2” says Mandel. “We are in the process of establishing what the guiding idea will be for Artery 2. I’m confident it will continue. I think the common theme in Artery 2 will be how to maintain the standards of the investments we have already begun – how will we get the action plans and instruments to keep the ball rolling.

“What it has showed is you need time to facilitate team building in a project. We started out as partners, at the moment we are friends. And what’s important is we want to stay that way.”

MORE INFORMATION:

www.artery.eu.com

A guidebook on the Artery project is available to purchase. Contact Sarah Wallbank 0161 242 8217

Mark Lupton is a freelance journalist with a special interest in the environment. He lives in the North West.