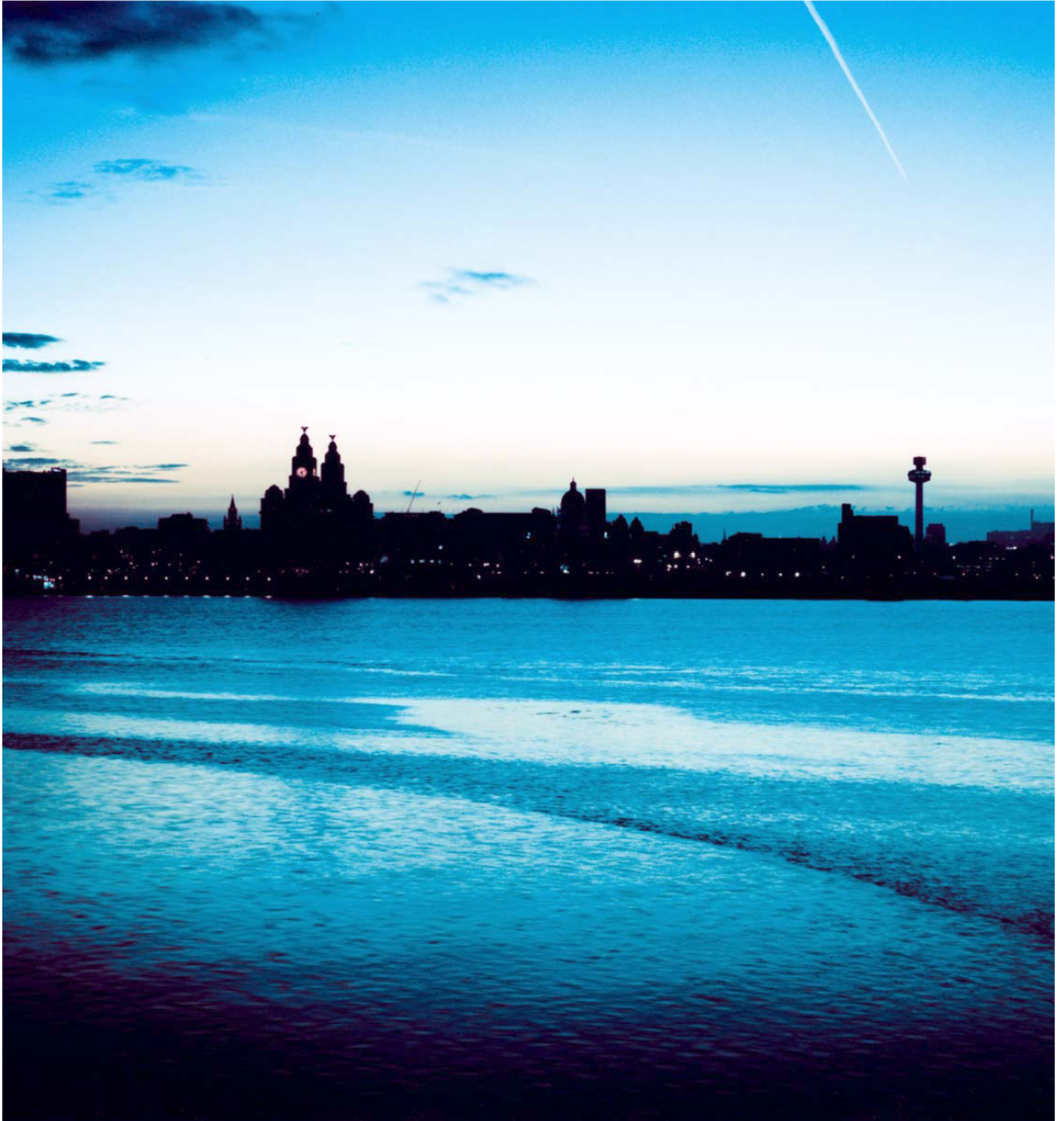


ON THE



Tin shed factories are out - quality is the name of the regeneration game.

Words David Ward. Photograph Jan Chlebik.

WATERFRONT

If, by a bit of a stretch of the imagination and some bending of metaphors, you can see the Mersey as a cake, then the Mersey Waterfront Regional Park exists to put the icing on it.

The Mersey Basin Campaign has been successfully cleaning up the region's mucky waters for 18 years. Now it's time to do something about the edges of those waters, to begin to exploit their significance as an asset for both business and pleasure.

Of course, many know and admire the Liverpool waterfront, with its three splendidly contrasting architectural landmarks, known as the three graces (and with a fourth on the way). But there is much more to the Mersey than that.

The Mersey Waterfront Regional Park (MWRP) has been established to create a framework for the renaissance of the wider, 70-mile long waterfront and make the rest of Britain, and much of the world beyond, realise its quality and value.

The initial brief runs until 2005 and the vision is clear (if ambitious): "To transform, energise and connect Mersey Waterfront and all its assets in producing a unique sense of place which acts as a key attractor of people to live, work, visit and invest in Merseyside."

Louise Hopkins, deputy chief executive of the Mersey Basin Campaign, was brought in as the MWRP's director a year ago to turn this vision into reality.

"Our waterfront is one of the great assets that we have on Merseyside, the one thing that sets us apart from any other city or region," she says. "We need to build on those assets and shout from the rafters about them, to use the whole waterfront to celebrate the modern Mersey region."

She already has £8.75 million from the Northwest Development Agency (NWDA) and that will help lever in an extra £50 million from public and private investors. But she is not in the business of sticking up tin shed factories which create a few new jobs with watery views.

The Mersey Waterfront Regional Park is a long-term initiative designed to raise expectations and ambitions, to bellow from those rafters that Merseyside no longer has to accept the workaday and the ordinary. Its message is that a great waterfront deserves better than that.

"We are there to make projects extra special rather than average. We are starting to raise the ambition, the quality and the collaborative effort rather than treat things on a site-by-site basis. We want to celebrate the whole of the Merseyside coast and use that to re-position Merseyside."

The MWRP has looked round the world for the best ideas. "We have to look at international benchmarks and find who are the world leaders in the kind of thing we are trying to do. There is no one region that can teach us everything. So we have drawn on examples from Toronto, San Francisco and Bilbao."

All this is a sign of the growing confidence of Merseyside as it emerges from its years as a Sleeping Beauty who has dozed for far too long but woken up in time to bid to be European Capital of Culture in 2008.

Ms Hopkins and her team will have an input into the fourth grace (she is an unapologetic supporter of Will Alsop's controversial Cloud, which prompted howls of protest in the Liverpool Daily Post). But much of the MWRP's cash will be spent on giving regional or national significance to projects already in the pipeline or boosting the quality of design several notches up the scale.

So Southport is going to have its new Marine Parade bridge. But the extra cash available from the MWRP has ensured that a bold architectural statement has been created rather than just a utilitarian crossing with no aesthetic value.

Up the Mersey in Speke, the MWRP will embrace a Mersey Basin Campaign scheme to create a park from derelict land near the airport now used for fly-tipping and burning cars.

At the same time, studies are looking at the scope for regional parks in other parts of the Northwest. These include parks located on both the River Weaver in Cheshire and the Ribble estuary in Lancashire.

The partnership at Speke involves the NWDA, which has given £540,000 for preliminary work, Peel Holdings, which has given the 65 hectares of land, Liverpool City Council, the National Trust (Speke Hall is close by) and Liverpool Sailing Club, whose former clubhouse lies decaying and roofless on the site following an arson attack.

An application has been submitted for £500,000 from a European partnership project and that cash will be matched by £500,000 from the NWDA.

"It's a tremendous site," says Iain Taylor, development manager with the Mersey Basin Campaign. "The view across the estuary is fantastic. The place really means something to local people who grew up in the area. They really miss it as an area where they used to play as children and where they would like to wander now."

"The river's improved water quality creates a valuable asset. So now it's a question of taking that asset and doing something with it. It's the logical next step. Let's turn our attention to the water, not have our backs to it as we used to."

But the MWRP does not exist simply to be an umbrella for projects. It has a strategic role and will ensure that local councils work together on complementary schemes rather than duplicating good ideas because they do not know what anyone else is up to.

A key function will be marketing. "So we will add resources to the Mersey River Festival to help it bring in more attractions and then help market it outside Merseyside," added Ms Hopkins. "We will be advertising the festival to places within a two-hour drive of Liverpool."

Whatever the project, a bridge, a park, a billboard, quality will be the priority.

"It's a very simple approach. If you think about it, it's absolutely common sense. But I think it is important that it should be recognised that this is a long-term initiative. It does not stop in 2005."

CONTACT:
LOUISE HOPKINS
MERSEY PARTNERSHIP
0151 237 3097

IAIN TAYLOR
MERSEY BASIN CAMPAIGN
0161 242 8209
i.taylor@merseybasin.org.uk