Clean Rivers Trust.

Seminar 4 of the Thames series; held at Allied and Morrison, London. 1st December 2011.

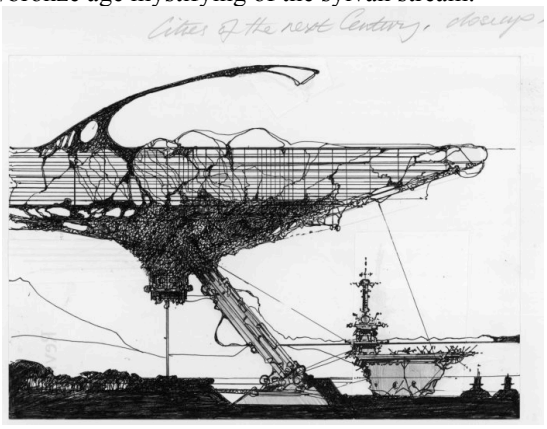
This 4th event continued the theme considering the issues of design and development along the river. In Practise this was mainly relating to the London Thames. The notion of river as participant seems to be a vital part of any future development. The river is an attraction, and a site to be viewed; much poor design does not add to the visual amenity though uses it. The speakers were all of one opinion as to the Thames as an asset to London and the three appear to live by or close to it and feel forms of proprietorial involvement with it. Their views were divergent but had this common thread, the respect that a living entity might induce.

It is a noticeable element to all these talks that the practitioners have all said that their power point illustrations were put together in a hurry, they, when they have been displayed have all though illustrated their points adequately; I wonder what gems would have been seen if a few had been produced with a modicum of time to allow consideration. Somehow one expects the same visual stimuli would have been shown.

The first of the three speakers was from UCL Bartlett School of Planning; Mathew Carmona. It is always hard to start an event which he managed with gusto and announced that he winged about the river to his wife. He reminded those present that the Thames was the only physical feature present on the tube map; it was once removed and the public outcry was such that it was promptly returned to its place. He went on to remind us of the estate agents view of Battersea as South Chelsea and the fact the city has always been north of the river and been serviced by the lands to the south. Entertainment, theatres, brothels and other pleasures whilst to the north of the river the industry of merchants and commerce were the order of life.

I enjoyed his mention of dynamic awareness of the river, planners putting green tarmac cycle routs by it; a feeling of planning awareness of such heightened empathy. His mention of flooding was good, the periodic visitation by ones neighbour maintains links with the living being. It is not an edge to planning but a space to be handled and curated. There is the idea that the river is a viable and accessible space. Richard Rogers having a vision of the Thames possible function. Questioned the north shore floating board walk as an edging tool and not an addition of merit. A need for pro-active planning that was not mean.

Roger Barker of BACA was second up and was full of the vision of giving to the river; the frontages that were set in, on the water. Allowing buildings and space to contribute, an analogy between calligraphy; the space between the symbols being of equal or greater relevance than the characters imposed on the surface. Allowing river features to appear on the ebb tide to disappear on the high; a form of transient being, existential planning. Now you see it, now you don't. All very thought provoking and, if not new a re-awakening of an almost iron/bronze age mystifying of the sylvan stream.



Memories of Archigram came to the fore.

There being a need to develop an understanding of the location of where plans are being developed. Much of the Thames development area are liable to flood or are least on the flood plain. The ability to work designs up that may sit constructively within these dynamic environments. This would appear to require not flood banks that cut the river off from the land as much as embracing the challenges of being part of the ebb and flow. This appears to require a bolder approach than many planners would like to attempt to support and the other agencies would find their perceptions transported well outside their comfort zone. The exciting juxtaposition of allied and alien environments, the river does not require designs to be approved by SPAB or other worthy group but it needs protection from the second rate.

The last to speak was Graham Morrison of Allied and Morrison, who finds the power of the river frightful in the old sense and is in awe of it. Power and its ability to not conform to any control mechanism. He said that as a Commissioner of English Heritage he was looking towards a way of giving the Thames status, a 'Listed Area' status, though unsure exactly how he would achieve this goal. There is a need to make the rivers planning a central issue so that the whole could be considered and not just its constituent councils varying approaches. The concept of development would be served by one entity. The whole tidal range of the waterway might be possible, but up stream of Teddington Lock would become another issue. Planning concerns dealt with by a central river administration concerning riverside development in Marlow or Lechlade would be alien and unpopular to residents. Consider the distaste of Oxford dons if their Isis administered in London or worse still in Reading.

The questions that failed to arise that surprise me are mainly related to the European Rivers and Waste Waters directives; the geomorphology of the river, its engineered form; with the exception of Bazalgette's works and their effects on the statutory view from Europe of the river. Its classification as a heavily managed waterway will always mean its ecological status amongst European rivers will always be low. Remarkably this can not be altered however many seahorse colonies develop; salmon return to spawn, or if native Crayfish spawned off the House of Commons terrace.

The natural river is missing along both banks for most of its length; the East Thames and its marshland habitats are the main remainders of what this great thoroughfare once was. Even these have been extensively remodelled through the centuries, Roman forts, Norman castles, Napoleonic and later military structures that abound along the foreshores. The prospect of locating an airport in the only major vestigial environment on the river does make the gaining of permissions somewhat doubtful.

Harvey Wood.

Director, Clean Rivers Trust. 5th December 2011.