Background
Over the last fifty years or so, many port cities in the North Sea Region have experienced fundamental changes to their traditional ship-building and shipping industries. Port industries in these cities have declined because of shifting demands and competition from other parts of the world. Where they have thrived, port industries have mostly moved away from the city centres to expand and develop better facilities. And throughout the region, traditional “dirty” industries, such as tanneries and dye works, have moved away from urban centres. These are just some of the factors that have left port cities with large areas of abandoned, and often contaminated, industrial sites on or near their waterfronts. But port communities have discovered that their abandoned waterfront sites are a valuable asset that, when redeveloped, can provide the city and its local people with new jobs, new investment and a new sense of civic pride.

Aim
Formed to improve approaches to such waterfront development, Waterfront Communities Project (WCP) is a partnership between nine gateway cities around the North Sea: Hamburg in Germany; Oslo in Norway; Aalborg and Odense in Denmark; Schiedam in the Netherlands; Gothenburg in Sweden; and Edinburgh, Gateshead and Kingston upon Hull in the UK. Together, these cities aim to influence local, regional and national planning policy-making by testing innovative approaches to the redevelopment of waterfront sites. Special focus will be placed on sustainability and social inclusion. Each partner plans to implement the best practice they have identified throughout the project, and make their findings available to other European cities wanting to develop their own waterfront areas.

Activities and Outcomes
WCP will bring urban development professionals from the partner cities together to address common challenges that they face in connection with the development of waterfront areas. To reach its goals, the project aims to develop a network in which the partners can learn from each others’ successes and failures. WCP will document successful waterfront development strategies and techniques in a user-friendly “toolkit”, to include tools such as guidelines on neighbourhood urban design, and technical specifications for economically sound developments. In this way the partners, together with other cities in Europe, can continue to benefit from the project’s work after WCP has ended in 2007.

Did you know... Long before road, rail and air routes connected the North Sea Region a network of sea routes provided the basis for trade, transportation, communication and the exchange of culture and ideas between the North Sea countries. A new book about Odense’s historic connections via the seaways to the many European ports around the North Sea tells the story of this cooperation which is extended now under the partnership of the Waterfront Communities Project. In the past permanent passenger transport and fixed routes linked Odense and Newcastle (Gateshead) to the design of transport links and systems so that cities can be reconnected with their waterfront areas (Oslo).

Although the project is in its first year, the partners are already putting new concepts to the test.

In Schiedam, the project is helping to address the problem of how a city can integrate “old” and “new” communities at a new leisure complex, which is being built at a regional and international transport hub. Local project manager Dennis Stroombergen said: “As the majority of the visitors will be transitory, the vitality of the area will depend on local residents “buying in” to the scheme. We are looking at a number of ways to achieve this, one being the appointment of an independent “Social Supervisor” who has a neighbourhood development role to boost acceptance of the scheme before construction begins.”
The WCP project has already funded the production of a brochure featuring examples of harbour heritage in Hamburg’s waterfront district to publicise the area’s historic significance. A new observation tower allowing visitors to watch the progress of construction works has also increased citizens’ awareness of their local redevelopment work. In 2004, an observation tower was constructed that allows visitors to observe the progress of construction works, and the project also helped fund the restoration of historic harbour cranes and bridges.

In Gothenburg, local planners are using visioning processes to build consensus on how to redevelop the Östra Kullabäcken waterfront hinterland area. The area is characterised by a wide range of uses, and faces difficulties such as housing shortages and crime. Because of the potential clash of existing stakeholders’ views on the redevelopment of the area, it is essential to reach a consensus in the early planning stages. Activities to explore a vision for the area include walking tours to familiarise stakeholders with the current uses of the area; focus groups and workshops. To support this, a newly created working party has brought together members of local government, local property owners, the Development Authority, and the local City District Administration. Local planning and architecture students are also investigating social inclusion in spatial planning.

Oslo is focusing on the theme of transport, and is responding to the challenges of determining new land use and integrating three new waterfront areas into the city’s urban realm. This involved setting up the Tempo Fjord Network, which connects public and private organisations that can promote temporary activities, improve accessibility and organise cultural events and installations on the waterfront. The Oslo Charette* was also organised in November 2004, bringing together teams led by architects to develop three different scenarios of Oslo 2030 at public meetings and increasing participation of local stakeholders in the planning and development of the waterfront. Other activities have included a transport study, which investigates the relationship between urban development of the waterfront area and the demand for transport infrastructure. An international architectural competition was also organised in October 2004, which highlighted the issue of design and use of public urban spaces in Bjørvika, the Fjord City’s largest area currently under construction.

The Future

In the long term, WCP aims to shape planning policy for waterfront areas in the partner cities, at national level, and throughout Europe in general. The Gateshead and Gothenburg projects will serve as models for future housing, visioning and consensus building initiatives, and the project’s best practice database will be available beyond 2010. The partners hope to continue working together after the project finishes in 2007.

Transnational Cooperation

The partners not only hope that the transnational dimension of WCP will help to raise each of the cities’ profiles and help bring in foreign investments, they also believe that the ability to work with cities in other parts of Europe is crucial to the overall success of the project. The project’s manager, Sara Thiam said: “By working on an international scale we are able to gain access to the knowledge and experience of a wide range of institutions and individuals involved in waterfront developments. In addition, considerable time and money would be wasted if each city decided to set up and develop a best practice database.”

* A Charette is an intensive effort (usually performed in a collaborative atmosphere) to solve any architectural problem within a limited time.