

On the WATERFRONT

The development and branding of Dublin's Docklands

Over recent years, Ireland has been experiencing significant economic growth, fuelling a major influx of workers from all over Europe. In Dublin, a major development programme is underway in the city's Docklands area, to provide much-needed new residential, commercial and public space. Peter Coyne, CEO of the Dublin Docklands Development Authority, explains how the project is benefiting from, and enhancing, Dublin's powerful sense of place.

Like all destinations, Dublin's attributes are of as much importance to the way it is perceived as the way it is experienced. It is a city that is well understood around the world, and which is still undergoing massive change. This, inevitably, is having an impact on Dublin's familiar characteristics.

Ireland's merits as a business location are well established. Amongst other attractions it is the English speaking gateway to the

euro zone with a highly educated young workforce - over 40 per cent of the population is under 25 years of age. Operating costs in Ireland are lower than virtually any other European country, and with economic growth averaging over seven per cent per annum during the last decade, combined with a corporate tax rate reducing annually to 12.5 per cent in 2003, it has proven to be an attractive destination for inward investors.

Aside from business growth, tourism is a major driving force behind the growing economy. Since 1988, visitor numbers have grown by 150 per cent. Bord Failte, the Irish Tourist Board, predicts that by 2006 Ireland will play host to over eight million tourists a year, compared to the current level of approximately 6.4 million. During 2002 the growth has seen a bit of a shake, but that is being viewed as short-term fallout from the American market.

Classically, Ireland has known only emigration, but over the last five years it has discovered immigration. This has been a combination of homeward migration by Irish people returning to participate in their nation's economic growth, and the normal international immigration understood by the rest of cosmopolitan



Europe, only now impacting here. The net result of this has been huge growth in resident populations throughout the country but particularly in Dublin, putting pressure on housing at the same time as providing a substantial new work force to feed further the economic growth. For some foreign visitors to the city, the mythological aspects of its Irishness are somewhat compromised now by the classic European profile of foreign workers in the hospitality industry. But Dublin is still unmistakably Irish, and classic Dublin Irishness continues to dominate and brand the new cosmopolitan city centre.

Close to the heart of Dublin is one of the most significant and ambitious development projects ever undertaken in the city. It involves strategic partnerships between the public and private sectors, working together on the regeneration of 520 hectares in Dublin's east side. Within the heart of this Docklands area, which is home to the city's International Financial Services Centre (IFSC), is some 93 hectares of prime riverside land. This is undergoing comprehensive and intensive property development to create a new world-class city quarter that fits snugly into the profile of the existing city, wrapping around an impressive River Liffey frontage.

New offices and retail outlets, hotels and homes are being built beside high quality public realm and leisure facilities. The development is based upon a masterplan launched in 1997. The 15-year project will result in the population of the Docklands area alone increasing by 25,000 - 42,500 by the year 2012 - and the construction of some 11,000 new homes and 40,000 new workspaces.

Now, five years into the project, the first major phase of development has been completed, and a further major phase has commenced on the south side, in what is known as Grand Canal Docks. The nature of the Docklands has changed irrevocably from being considered a peripheral area with a core of derelict or low value land, and a place of unemployment, social deprivation and

alienation. It is now becoming a new and rapidly developing city centre area with massive economic capacity. There is also significant growing self-confidence in the local community, who have grasped participation in the project with enthusiasm. The Dublin Docklands Development Authority has worked hard to ensure participation and inclusivity in the process of strategic planning and in implementation. The Authority has also invested in education and positive employment policies for the existing community, so that they may be equipped to participate fully in the economic growth generated by the massive development project. The development will also include the new National College of Ireland, which will radically alter the dynamic of the area, introducing some 1,500 students to the streets on a daily basis.

The Authority has taken a quality approach to area development, not only ensuring high standards of urban design and services planning through its carefully developed Planning Schemes (a form of accelerated planning permission through special powers), but also investing directly in the roll-out of public realm, particularly along the river banks, and promoting and investing in the regeneration of leisure and tourism on the river, activity that is still in its infancy. The Authority has also implemented a major destination development within Stack A, an iron and stone warehouse dating from 1810 at the heart of the IFSC. It has invested €40 million in developing it into a mall, comprising outlets for high quality international fashion and related retail brands with 50,000 square feet of vaulted restaurants below. This development will be open and trading towards the end of 2003, and follows the opening of many new restaurants and bars already completed within the mixed-use development. Locum has been assisting with the development and use of public spaces within the Stack A development.

A major issue for the Authority at present is location branding. The focus up to this point has been on getting the project implemented by driving forward with physical development into



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frontier territory. However, now that we are five years into the project and businesses are operating both in the office and hospitality environments, and in anticipation of a massive visitor profile change arising from the Stack A retail mall development, the need to develop a sense of place is paramount. A multi-stranded approach is being taken, including a range of physical improvements targeting visitor movements into and out of the area, and linking the Docklands area - and in particular the prime riverside area - with the traditional footfall areas for tourists and other visitors. These projects include introduction of a street-based light rail system and an Amsterdam-style waterbus service, the introduction of new high-level footbridges over the River Liffey, and the enhancement of footpaths and walkways from the Docklands into the traditional city centre. The Authority is also investing in new operational activities by expanding its festival programmes and its incidental street entertainment. To put the new area firmly and positively onto the mental map of Dublin and by extension to enhance the world's view of Dublin as a destination. This is our objective.

Hitherto, there has been no east side to Dublin in the minds of Dubliners. But the Docklands project is reversing this, creating new mass on both banks of the Liffey east of the city centre. Notwithstanding its scale, the project's relationship with Dublin is the main ingredient in developing its own sense of place. The Docklands area must build on the strengths of Dublin as a destination brand, and it is important that we ensure that it delivers new capacity into the Dublin tourist market, in addition to all of the new capacity that it provides to the general economy of the city and the state.

Docklands, and in particular its development core in the riverside area, can draw parallels with another Dublin project completed in

the last decade, the Temple Bar project. This saw the transformation of a more or less derelict city centre quarter into a vibrant arts quarter. The project has been hugely successful, and is now undoubtedly the focus for much of the short stay visitor activity in the city. The Docklands riverside area will not be another Temple Bar. It offers a different proposition, and its appeal and function must extend beyond the tourist market. Docklands will be a modern, mixed-use, high-amenity, self-confident, socially inclusive city quarter in which to live, work and relax. It must capitalise on its natural resources and particularly its extensive waterfront, and on the opportunity that it provides for a major brownfield development that is at the same time awesome and yet welcoming on the human scale.

Each of us recognises excellent destinations as we travel around the world. They express a unique style through urban form and cultural distinctiveness. They are characterised by the interaction of resident and visitors, demonstrating accessibility and welcome. In these places, you may be content to do very little whilst knowing that there are many opportunities for active engagement. These places stimulate our senses whilst providing a sense of wellbeing. As the Docklands project unfolds, the realisation of these attributes will consolidate the strengths of the area within Dublin, generating huge new business and tourist capacity within a unique riverside environment, and lifting Dublin towards new heights as a world-class destination.