Thames Gateway: when IT really matters

By Professor James Woudhuysen

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Do you know what a *sustainable community* is? If the communications of the government are to be believed, a large-scale residential community such as Thames Gateway can be sustainable, yet devoid of IT.

Go to the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) website. There, in its treatment of sustainable communities and the Gateway, it discusses 'Investment across Government' – that is, investment going beyond that made in Gateway housing. The DCLG runs short items on the following extra investments that surround Gateway:

Education
Environment
Health
Transport.

There is no item on IT. Thames Gateway, John Prescott's office appears to believe, is not a development that needs investment in IT.

The scale of official neglect of IT

Perhaps this is just an oversight. But in the Cabinet Office's Web discussion of e-Government, there is no agenda about housing, construction or cities. [1] If you lend money on property, the Cabinet Office's www.govtalk.gov.uk – 'setting standards for seamless electronic government – will tell you how to square your electronic documents with those of Her Majesty's Land Registry. [2] To register for online government services, you are also directed to the Government Gateway website on www.gateway.gov.uk. But the Cabinet Office has opened no gateway to IT in the Thames Gateway.

We have here a dialogue of the deaf. Outside a few savvy architectural engineers – Arup, Buro Happold, Whitby Bird – not many construction specialists have a reputation for being expert in IT. On the other hand, few in IT have any interest in housing, construction, or a major large-scale community such as Gateway.

It's the same story with the influential New Local Government Network (NLGN), a Blairite thinktank which talks up localism the more the Government destroys it. In *Seeing the light? Next steps for city regions*, NLGN board member and Queen Mary College historian Tristram Hunt discusses the international competitiveness of British cities whose 'economic, cultural and demographic reach can extend beyond the political boundaries of the city itself'. He writes:

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1 See www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/e-government/

2 See Land Registry, Interface specification electronic services, on
www.govtalk.gov.uk/schemasstandards/schemalibrary_schema.asp?schemaid=236

> 'To build pragmatic, powerful City Regions we need to develop a variable geometry of autonomous authorities across urban Britain. By following a model not dissimilar to Barcelona, we can try to construct for individual areas a coalition of local, regional and national authorities. These regional coalitions must enjoy a series of Parliament approved freedoms which provide for local tax distribution, regional planning, and powers over transport, skills and training. In turn, City Regions need to provide clear lines of leadership together with the active involvement of civil society. The needs of Bristol will be different to Glasgow will be different to Liverpool: but each would profit from a locally-tailored tool-kit of regional powers to help raise its global competitiveness.' [3]

Ah, variable geometry among local authorities! Ah, the Barcelona model! But IT is not a tool that can be found in the NLGN's locally-tailored tool-kit of regional powers to help raise global competitiveness.

For *Seeing the light?*, competitiveness in a place like Gateway is a matter of governance, not IT. With this kind of bureaucratic approach providing New Labour with its ideas, we can expect little official thinking, until it's too late, about what IT could do for the economy of the Gateway. Thus IT does not figure among the London Thames Gateway Development Corporation's 'engines for growth' in the Lower Lea Valley and London Riverside. [4]

So much for the kind of productivity revolution Gordon Brown would like to bring about. And yet, and yet… it would not quite be true to say that the establishment ignores what IT might do for communities such as Gateway. For the NLGN, the progressive local authority of the future should 'lead the development of mobile lifestyles' for its community, and should use mobile IT to go about 'forging' what is termed 'a new relationship with its citizens'. [5] This desire to use IT to include everyone in New Labour's Big Tent is widespread. Even without mentioning IT, prime-minister-in-waiting David Miliband, currently in charge of communities, has set out a framework in which Gateway IT would be a lever of the therapeutic state. Miliband has called for – you guessed it – 'neighbourhood institutions that forge a different relationship with citizens'. [6] There is a whole lot of forging going on.

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3 Tristram Hunt, 'Foreword', in New Local Government Network, *Seeing the light? Next steps for city regions*, December 2005, p5, on www.nlgn.org.uk/nlgn.php

4 London Thames Gateway Development Corporation, *Engines for growth: our vision for the Lower Lea Valley and London Riverside*, 1 December 2005, and on www.ltgdc.org.uk/aboutus/publications/

5 Michael Cross and James MacGregor, *Cutting the wires: mobile IT and the transformation of local services and governance*, New Local Government Network, February 2006, p9. Chapter 1 is on www.nlgn.org.uk/nlgn.php

6 David Miliband, speech at the Cleaner, Safer, Greener Conference, *A Vision of Respect*, 13 March 2006, and on www.odpm.gov.uk/index.asp?id=1164236

Wealth creation and infrastructure

So with the government and Gateway, as with the Whitehall conception of IT in general, e-participation beats e-productivity every time. Yet Gateway desperately needs the economic benefits that IT could bring. The Centre for Engineering and Manufacturing Excellence, in Marsh Way, Rainham, has struggled to revive local manufacturing in the wake of Ford's evacuation of Dagenham. At the time of writing, CEME's website is being redesigned; it's certainly out of date. [7]

Meanwhile Gateway service organisations, running offices and retail outlets, must have a strong IT base if they are to stand any chance of competing with rivals in London Docklands and the City.

Altogether, IT, in the business sense of CAD, advanced manufacturing tools, great broadband connections and a proper system for payments and transactions, will be vital for wealth creation in Gateway. But there are two other issue to consider. The first is *the proper relationship between IT and other infrastructural service*s *over the whole geography of the Gateway.*

Near the Isle of Dogs, Telewest runs an enormous 'farm' of computer servers, backing up its cable services. The farm uses a great amount of energy, but the developed, urban west end of the Gateway area can supply that energy contains the physical infrastructure to handle *all* today's utilities – energy, water, IT and, importantly, *transport*.

In my view, the less developed, more rural east end of the Gateway stands in just as much need of robust utilities provision as the London end. The landscape architect and environmentalist Chris Baines seems to miss this. In his vision for Thurrock in 2024, Baines argues that IT will by then have 'turned geography on its head' and that Thurrock, seen for years as inconvenient or inaccessible, will benefit from IT:

> 'Living "in the sticks and out of touch" simply no longer applies. The two hour daily commute has become a thing of the past for most of us, and although there is still an occasional need to travel to London, people who live and work in Thurrock really have the best of all worlds. There are close cultural and communication links to continental Europe, easy access to some of the wildest natural countryside in England, settlements that have the strength of character of traditional market towns and villages, and a population proud of its history and of the improved environment that it has helped to bring to life.' [8]

In his praise for tradition and history, Baines ignores the long-established fact that the advent of IT links to places such as Thurrock tends to promote *more* business and leisure travel out of Thurrock, and not just to London, either. We ought to know by now that IT in an area like Gateway will mean *more* calls – and that a call tends to prompt a visit, just as much as a visit prompts a call. Gateway, then, begs for *joined-up thinking* about *all* the utilities it needs *everywhere*.

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7 www.ceme.co.uk

8 Chris Baines, '20/20 vision for Thurrock', on
www.visionarythurrock.org.uk/docs/artists/baines.html

Plug-in housing

The second issue that goes beyond the creation of wealth is very obviously connected to that of infrastructure. It concerns the *role of IT in housing*. While John Prescott only talks of 200,000 homes being built in the vast Gateway area, it could be a city the size of Tokyo. [9] The reform of planning, and the granting of Type Approvals for certain kinds of manufactured homes, has come on to the political agenda in Britain. [10] And something else has happened: the Verbus system of modular home construction. [11]

In China's Pearl River Delta, Verbus, a company jointly owned by Buro Happold and George & Harding, has contracted with the world's largest manufacturers of conventional containers to export part-insulated units up to 45ft long, lined with plywood, as modules for housing in the UK. In due course, 6000 of these a year will be turned out equipped with GPS and RFID tags, because if you want to stack and lock containers up to make blocks of flats maybe 16 stories high, queueing items on site becomes a very important matter.

IT will play a big part in the production and distribution of Verbus units. But whether they come to Gateway or not, the Verbus approach also underlines that *IT in the Gateway must accommodate different, fast-changing forms of housing over the future*. Some homes will be low density. Others will be high-density, forming what Ian Abley and Jonathan Schwinge describe as manmade modular megastructures. [12] IT must be able to reach and do its work over both kinds of settlement.

In both instances, the management of local housing will become more tagged by component, and more IT-intensive, the more housing numbers are racked up by the application of manufacturing techniques. It should be that much quicker to order a new bathroom pod from a local retailer, once he knows what Type you're keying in to his Website.

Finally housing in the Gateway must take account of the growing convergence between broadcast and cable television, broadband telecommunications and mobile telephony. That is what the IT industry calls 'quadruple play'; it will have a big impact on the desirability of homes in the Gateway. Sky TV has brought high definition TV to British screens, and HD will be important in the Olympics of 2012. In the same year, the switch to digital television will be complete. Screens

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9 James Woudhuysen and Ian Abley, *Why is construction so backward?*, John Wiley & Sons, 2004.

10 James Woudhuysen and Ian Abley, *Homes 2016*, Blueprint Broadside, 2005, and on www.woudhuysen.com/index.php/main/C14/

11 www.verbussystems.com/default.htm

12 Ian Abley and Jonathan Schwinge, editors, *Manmade modular megastructures*, Wiley-Academy, 24 February 2006, available on www.amazon.co.uk/exec/obidos/ASIN/047001623X/qid=1143050749/sr=1-1/ref=sr_1_0_1/026-3048831-3247648

are moving toward 50-inch diagonals, whether we like it or not. Among houses with gardens, Wifi will be even more useful than it is inside the home.

Manufactured homes will be best-placed to accommodate such developments.

Build IT in, and the people will come.