The pros and cons of waterside developments

Can the gentrification of rundown riverside locations produce anything more than a scramble for profit?

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Butler’s Wharf on the Thames in London © Alamy

The world’s docksides have been transformed on a massive scale. Former industrial waterfronts continue to be reinvented as residential and cultural neighbourhoods to an extent that the history of the urban waterfront is, effectively, the history of contemporary architecture. Whether it’s the Sydney Opera House, Bilbao’s Guggenheim Museum, London’s Tate Modern, Oslo’s

Opera House or New York's Whitney Museum of American Art, these big statements have been instrumental in the metamorphoses of working waterfronts into commodified real estate.

These cultural blockbusters are almost inevitably lubricants for the insertion of huge urban residential redevelopment. In cities across the globe, harbours are being built over and huge towers are emerging, privatising views and imposing their dominion on the world's watersides. Every unit is advertised as a luxury property and an architectural masterpiece as shimmering water is co-opted into a marketing device. But is this huge regeneration of one-time working watersides producing anything more than a scramble for profit? Does the new residential architecture match its cultural cousins? Are cities opening up their harbours and creating a new generation of architecture or are they just monetising views for short-term profit and creating a legacy of over-tall and underplanned non-places, a globalised simulacrum of some metropolitan ideal which is homogenising the world's watery cities?

The first thing to understand is that the phenomenon of waterfront gentrification is nothing new. In 1959 architect Bertrand Goldberg designed Marina City in Chicago as a response to the phenomenon of downtown depopulation as wealthier residents moved out to the suburbs. It seemed a curious idea at the time, to focus a dense new development of the-then still filthy Chicago River and place it above a marina for pleasure craft. It was just not how cities thought. Yet it proved a visionary work of architecture that still defines downtown Chicago.

Even earlier, in 1951, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe had built the superb Lake Shore Drive apartments in the same city. With their astonishing views across Lake Michigan, this was arguably the first modernist apartment block to expose itself fully to the view, its glass curtain walls allowing a panoramic, floor-to-ceiling opening to the water. This had been done in houses and villas

before, but never in a block of this scale or height.

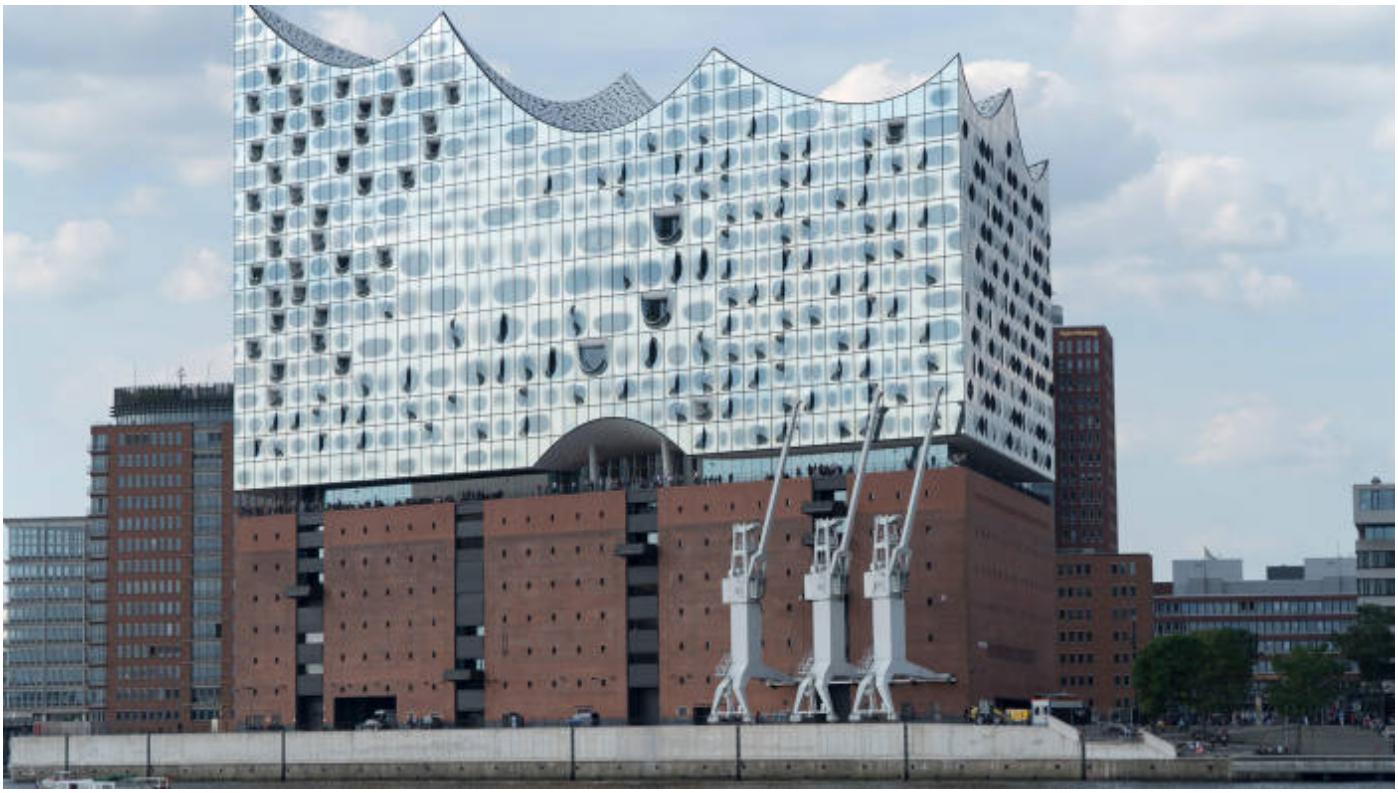
It might seem ironic to start a feature about waterfront architecture in landlocked Chicago but it also helps to explain how the exploitation of views across water have become an alchemic device, a recognition that the view across the water can transform almost any city centre site into a marketing mecca. Grimy, dense, industrial Chicago, the birthplace of high-rise modernism, was also, appropriately, the first city to understand the true potential of this transformation.

Hafen City, Hamburg © Alamy

The continuing depopulation of city centres and the inexorable growth of the suburbs meant that residential waterfront redevelopment remained patchy until the property boom of the 1980s. In the vanguard this time was London. The city's sprawling Docklands had been made defunct by containerisation and the construction of new deep docks to the east. Developers grasped the opportunity, encouraged by the creation of the London Docklands

Development Corporation (1981) that freed the territory from much regulation. The early results were patchy and have haunted the city ever since, with the strange, seemingly under-scaled red-brick developments that line the Thames looking like remnants of a much more modest vision for the city's future. But the success of some apartment blocks and the conversion of the remarkable Victorian warehouses of Bermondsey and Wapping into loft apartments set a template that was followed across Europe and beyond. Lofts may have originated in Manhattan with the artists and designers who saw the potential in these capacious leftover spaces, but it was in London that their proximity to the river made them uniquely sought-after. Butler's Wharf beside Tower Bridge is perhaps the most successful transformation, buildings that were once the setting for dystopian films such as David Lynch's *The Elephant Man*, reimagined as a yuppie lifestyle backdrop.

One of the curious results of the fetishisation of these remnants of industry was the emergence of a new style — neo-warehouse, chunky brick blocks that mimicked the scale and texture of dockside buildings. This kind of architecture — something almost diametrically different to Chicago's mid-century waterfront developments, has become a bit of a northern European cliché. In Hamburg and Amsterdam, in Copenhagen and across Belgium you can see rows of these loft-living archetypes, usually punctuated by glassier, more self-consciously contemporary towers. Hamburg's HafenCity is a particularly fascinating example because it is well-planned, sober, architecturally sophisticated and nevertheless deadly dull. It does, however, still have Herzog & De Meuron's monstrous and magical Elbphilharmonie, the city's new concert hall incorporating apartments, looking out over the docks.



The Elbphilharmonie in Hafen City, Hamburg © Alamy

The more familiar harbourside architecture, however, is those glassy condo towers with breezy balconies. Scraps of canal and little locks, once-silted up creeks and grimy inlets have been cleaned up and rebranded as glamorous waterways intended to bring the money in. In London, waterside living even extends to Hoxton with the huge new Canaletto Tower (designed by Dutch architects UN Studio) branding itself as a reinterpretation of the Venetian artist's glorious (and suspiciously Venetian-looking) Thames views, despite being miles away from the river and only adjacent to a scrappy remnant of the Regent's Canal. Other bits of once-neglected water from King's Cross to Wandsworth have been brought back into service as a marker of luxury. Paddington Basin, one of the city's great lost urban opportunities, is based around another unlikely waterway. Some developers are even building stagnant new bits of pseudo-canal to capitalise on spurious waterside credentials.

Where there are more dramatic waterfronts, from Vancouver via Helsinki to Auckland, architects and developers have been carving out new territories — in effect whole new cities. The best of them bring back once inaccessible waterfronts to the public realm and manage to combine public amenity with private wealth. Barcelona was the pioneer in bringing back the beach while Copenhagen and Oslo have extended and transformed their centres with wonderful new watersides. Auckland is working on a plan to be able to maintain a working industrial dock beside a leisure and residential neighbourhood.

Canaletto Tower, London © Alamy

In the tropics things have been easier, the watersides yet more inviting, although the recent queue of hurricanes battering the coastline might make potential buyers think again. Nevertheless, in terms of volume, optimism and architectural chutzpah, Miami is still ahead of the game. The skyline has become a museum of modern architecture with Foster + Partners, Renzo Piano, Zaha Hadid, Herzog & De Meuron, BIG, Rafael Moneo, Studio Gang and OMA all building towers with astonishing views and exotic architectures. Some are excellent — BIG's twisting towers at Coconut Grove reinterpret Mies's modernism for an age of shorter attention spans and Renzo Piano's Eighty Seven Park draws on the nautical metaphors of 1930s oceanfront blocks (Miami has, of course, a lot of practice in this).

New York has oddly lagged a little behind, perhaps because it just has too much waterfront, with too many good buildings already on it, perhaps because the city has always been more concerned with the Central Park view.

The buildings around the High Line have begun to engage with watery views and Hudson Yards will release a vast swath of waterfront property on to the market. Of course, on an island such as Manhattan, if any building is tall enough, it gets a water view.

Marina City, Chicago © Flickr Vision

Despite this deluge of development, the proliferation of waterside blocks has done little to advance architecture or urbanism. It tends to use accepted models and norms. Even where huge engineering projects have built entire new cities on the water through land reclamation, from Dubai to Guangzhou, there isn't much that's new. There are some questions about the new architecture of waterside living. If the view is everything and apartments are opened up with glass walls and balconies, is too much focused on the view and not enough on the interior? Are all these expansive open-plans a little dull, a little inflexible? Is there too much emphasis on looking out and not enough on looking in? It's difficult to find a distinctive style of waterside living as all these developments tend to meld into a kind of generic, glassy global architecture of luxury. One curious omission is transport. The grandest palaces were once on waterfronts so their gilded barges could pull up and avoid muddy roads. Where are the water buses and water taxis, the new infrastructure to put the water to use beyond just the view?

Arguably the one country that has really thought about the future is the Netherlands. As news hits us that many of Miami's starchitect-designed towers will be inaccessible in a few years as sea levels rise, the Dutch are building floating houses. Architects Marlies Rohmer's floating houses at IJburg are perhaps the most elegant and intelligent waterside housing of recent years. The Amsterdam neighbourhood is building a whole waterborne suburb, connected by bridges and responsive to sea levels. The houses are typically Dutch and modern. Other architects including dRMM and Carl Turner in the UK have proposed floating schemes and, although take-up has been slow, these look like they may well be the answer to waterside living in the future. After all, whether our houses are designed for it or not, many more of us may be living waterside soon.

Houseboat water villas in Amsterdam’s IJburg district © Alamy

Eighty Seven Park, Miami © Terra

Coconut Grove, Miami © Rasmus Hjortshoj

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