

LONDON.

a runway in the thames.

lord foster

Fulcrum: Over the last 40 years there have been at least four proposals for an airport in the Thames Estuary. What makes this river the best location for a new London airport, over, say, something like Terry Farrell's Park Royal scheme?

Norman Foster: Firstly, the Isle of Grain is the most sparsely populated area within the Estuary. One of the chief objectives of the Thames Hub vision is eradicating the pollution, noise and security risks created by aircraft over-flying London. Here, the approach from the north east will be over water. This means the airport could operate 24 hours a day, providing the increased capacity that is needed to reach emerging markets and to re-establish the UK as an aviation hub. Secondly, it is still within close proximity to London – at 55 km from the centre it can be reached in 30 minutes by high-speed rail.

F: With projects of this scale and scope, at what point does architecture become infrastructure?

NF: The two are inseparable, irrespective of their scale. In cities, the infrastructure of transport systems, bridges, public squares, parks and streets provides the "urban glue" that binds the buildings together. Although we tend to take it for granted, the quality of infrastructure determines the quality of our daily lives. In Britain we have a long tradition of transforming the utilitarian, of giving a civic or beautifying dimension to heroic works of infrastructure, think of the splendour of the Thames Embankment and the boldness of historic railway viaducts...

F: Foster+Partners described the project as "partially speculative" – what exactly does that mean?

NF: It's an unfortunate and misleading description. The proposals are self-funded and initiated by Foster+Partners and Halcrow. The project is driven by research and responds to a clear set of needs.

Britain faces a number of challenges. A fast-growing population and an evolving global economy demand that the quality of the UK's infrastructure be improved and its capacity increased dramatically, addressing rail, freight logistics, aviation, energy and its transmission, bicycle lanes, landscaping, flood protection and regional development. The starting point for the Thames Hub is an opportunity to address these issues comprehensively, and in doing so, to ensure their planning is economically and environmentally sustainable.

We know from first hand experience of larger and more challenging projects in Asia that our proposals are realistic and down-to-earth. Given political will with the airport part of our proposals for example could be realised in 14 to 16 years for a cost of £20 billion.

Our hope is that it will add constructively to the debate about the future of the UK's economy. Infrastructure is an investment for future generations. At the moment we are over-reliant on a creaking inheritance from our Victorian forebears. They anticipated, and provided for, needs beyond their wildest dreams. We now have a similar choice. In a democratic society we can elect to leap ahead or fall behind. It is a choice. If we have the opportunity we should at least have the courage to say we decided to opt out.

F: Generally, what role does speculation play in the office?

NF: We do not speculate for a profit. We either work for a client for a fee or undertake research for ourselves, which eventually feeds in to potential projects in the future... on further reflection, perhaps competitions for prestige projects, invariably publicly funded on the international circuit, are the closest we get to speculating (beyond the fees normally paid for such competitions) in the quest for these kinds of commissions. [CONTINUED OVERLEAF]

Norman Foster is one of Britain's most prolific architects. He is the Baron of Thames Bank and a Pritzker prize laureate (1999).

LIVERPOOL.

balancing the regions.

b.hatton

As well as his gifts as a designer, Norman Foster's strength has lain in positioning his work within a certain accord with an ascendancy that is rarely questioned. If we call that outlook "technocratic", we mean something more than that utopia of detailing once called "Hi-Tech"; it is a mindset at work throughout economic and political administration. Avoiding as "ideology" any ideal not operatively underwritten, it advances "pragmatically"; that is, only on such projects as those by which extant powers extend themselves. Yet "Hi-Tech" as image retains a certain use-value, as a metonym for overlooking the big picture and long view – less a utopia than myopia, wherein even megaprojects lack logic of larger purpose in a common good. Thus, in extolling the advantages of the Isle of Grain for another London airport, and advancing a case for its architectural enhancement, Lord Foster misses consideration that another London airport may not be good for anyone but City financiers.

To be sure, Foster's words are careful not to identify with "interests"; their ascendant notes are the consensual sonorities of received wisdom: "clear demands" and "challenges" to "improve infrastructure", be "realistic, down-to-earth", of course "sustainable", and – touching all bases – "to tackle the divide between the north and south." This last, however, may not function quite as it claims. On Halcrow/Foster's website, we see it as a map titled *Balancing The Regions*. Yet, repeating the cliché of a London-centric view of Britain, this map is so tilted and foreshortened that Northern England barely figures and Scotland is off it altogether. Any claim that another airport in the South-East is going to make North Britain grow faster than the South-East (because that is what "balancing the regions" must entail) is obviously

ludicrous. So why do Halcrow/Foster even try it? Answer can be inferred by reflecting on what kind of proposal their "Hub" is. It is not one of those visionary manifestos drawn up by radical utopians like Taut, Le Corbusier or the Soviet Constructivists. Nor is it like Broadacre City, which Wright claimed would "build itself, happenstance." It is, rather, a business proposition: a call for money. At least £50Bn. Foster says "there are always investors in search of good investments"; but he well knows much of the £50Bn must come from the Exchequer (he cites £20Bn over 15 years, the combined cost of Crossrail and Heathrow T4).

Yet, as government has to claim to act in the interest of all Britain, it must pretend that its every outlay benefits everywhere, even when, as shown by Newcastle University researchers John Tomaney and Andrew Pike [*Guardian* G2, 01/05], the biggest share of publicly funded construction has in recent years (£45.6Bn) gone to London. He therefore knows that to get government "onside", the Hub must genuflect to the pieties of "sustainability" and regionalism.

Meanwhile another "Hub", designed to let more and faster trains link cities across the North, is dogged by government underfunding. "Manchester Hub" is finally underway, but will not work unless those tracks are electrified. Northern England is Europe's most extensive area of unelectrified railways, though more UK citizens live within 90 miles of Piccadilly Manchester than Piccadilly London.

Deyan Sudjic's recent biography was unable to draw much insight from the Manchester childhood of Foster, an architect who, we might say, rose without trace. But then to be traceless is precisely the note, prevailing because it prevails, of ascendancy everywhere. We no longer talk much about class, or of "class traitors". But we do speak of regions...

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"Balancing the Regions" from *The Thames Hub: An Integrated Vision for Britain* ©2011 Foster + Partners

F: To what extent has the current political and economic situation influenced the proposal?

NF: It is central to it, though that was not the starting point at the time. Investment is more critical now than ever. There is a need to spur economic growth and to take a long-term look at Britain's trade capabilities. We need to be responsive to the rise of emerging economies and the changing nature of global trade. We also need to tackle the divide between the north and south of the country to make sure that Britain works together as an integrated economy for the benefit of the whole population. As in the nineteenth century there are always investors in search of good investments.

ALL CHANGE.

2011 was undoubtedly a very good year for news, practically in every field across the board.

At home, the big story was the economy: inflation and unemployment up (to historic levels), growth down (which we later discovered was the beginning of a double-dip recession, possibly caused by the Royal Wedding).

Hugh Grant helped bring phone hacking to the public eye, and Rupert Murdoch got hit by a cream pie in court.

London burned during the riots, St. Paul's was Occupied (see Fulcrum #32), the Coalition introduced higher school fees and lower rates of tax for the rich.

Global news was impressively complex and fast-paced: the "end" of the Iraq war, death of Osama Bin-Laden and tenth anniversary of 9/11 (see Fulcrum #21) all came back-to-back, while across the Arab world a series of revolutions rocked a geopolitical landscape largely unchanged for half a century.

It was generally a bad year for dictators (although Bashar Al-Assad got away with murder): first the death of Gaddafi, and a scandal that his son Saif had bribed the LSE, then the sad news that never again would Kim Jong-Il be looking at things.

I need hardly mention the Eurocrisis, Merkozy, the Greek and Italian technocrats, nor remind readers of the imprisonment

of Ai Wei Wei, the last Shuttle flight, Norwegian terror attacks, Thai floods, Japanese tsunami, or the (now quashed) possibility that neutrinos might be speeding faster-than-light.

The sociopolitical and economic news stories in Britain are indicative of the ideological vacuum created by Neoliberalism's staggering failure to deliver a "trickle down" of wealth to middle and lower classes, and the fact private investment cannot replace public spending.

It is unclear how the West's decline is to be reversed. What is clear is that, while London has become the UK's Monaco, the next decade will be one of poverty and hardship for much of Great Britain. **Ed.**