

## The North Bank

Prof Richard Kimbell, Goldsmiths University of London

Before Christmas I was interested to read that some of the great champagne houses in France are starting to buy up property in Kent and Sussex. "Champagne house Taittinger buys Kent apple orchard" (BBC News 10th Dec 2015). Apparently the south facing chalky hillsides are ideal for growing Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Pinot Meunier vines. I have been mulling over this north bank issue for some time, and Taittinger can be blamed for finally tipping the balance and forcing me to formalise my thoughts.

The map shown here is of medieval London. The Thames at this point is more-or-less an east/west river and London is seen developing out of the old Roman city on the north bank. London bridge is clearly identifiable along with the ends of the old Roman roads that it linked together: the A1 going north (Ermine Street) and the A2 going south (Watling Street).



Taking another of our great cities, this map is of Newcastle in the 18th C. Once again the city is seen emerging on the north bank and again a bridge of sorts is visible spanning the river Tyne and linking the north/south route of the old A1.



At the risk of becoming monotonous, this map is of Glasgow and the Clyde - again in the 18th C - and it shows the heart of the old city emerging on the north bank between the major east/west highway and the river.

The two maps below tell exactly the same story. Preston and the river Ribble in the 19th C, and Marlborough in the 18th C. In this latter case the town is basically one street that follows the north bank of the river Kennet.

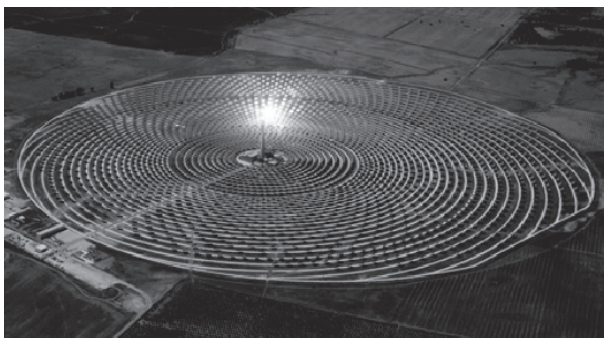
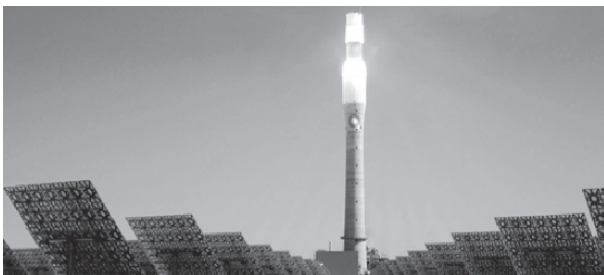


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You will have to take my word for it when I say that I have looked at dozens of old city maps and the story is repeated over and over again. And the point of all this map-gazing is to pose a question. Why do these towns so often emerge on the north bank of the rivers on which they sit? What's wrong with the south bank? Interested observers might like to look at exactly the same tendency at Cambridge, Chester, Exeter, York, Bath, Northampton and Richmond (Yorks).

I'm quite sure that in some cases the south bank will have some serious disadvantages. It might be too boggy or too craggy or too something or another. But the list of cases is so one-sided that it cannot be down to just that, since there will equally be cases where the north bank is too boggy or too craggy. My argument is that – all things being equal – when a river in Britain flows east/west (or west/east) then towns seem more likely to develop on the north bank. WHY?

I came across a completely different – and entirely modern – example of north-favoured development associated with an astounding solar energy plant in the south of Spain – near Cordoba. As I was driving across the flat plain, what appeared to be an alternative sun was glowing fiercely on the horizon, visible from 20 miles away. It's a tower surrounded by 2,650 mirrors in a 185 hectare circle. All the mirrors are computer controlled to track the sun and direct the radiation at the top of the tower. It is an astonishing piece of solar technology that generates electricity 24 hrs a day! See the details at [www.torresolenergy.com/TORRESOL/gemasolar-plant/en](http://www.torresolenergy.com/TORRESOL/gemasolar-plant/en)



The point of raising it here however is just to note that the circle of mirrors is not really a circle. If you look at the rings of mirrors (heliostats) you will see that there are more layers in the top right sector than the bottom left sector. The top right sector is the northern side of the tower! More of the sun's energy is being collected and reflected back at the tower from the northern side than from the southern side.

Solar energy is (I believe) the key factor underlying the north-favouring tendency. We are in the northern hemisphere, and – in Britain at least – we are well up in the northern region of the hemisphere (latitude 55 degrees north). So Taittinger buys up a Kent apple orchard with a south-facing hillside to maximise the collection of solar energy for their vines.

I have a final old map to reveal – of medieval Lincoln. It's more of an illustration of the old city, and the square structure at the top of the slope is the old Roman settlement. The section running down the hill to the river is the medieval development. And once again we can see the old highway (the Fosse way) and the bridge crossing the Fossdyke. The medieval development has been built on the same south-facing slope of the kind favoured by Taittinger. And – I am arguing – for the same reason. Way up in the wild northern hemisphere we need all the sunlight and warmth that we can get, so south-facing slopes are preferred territory for settlement. And south-facing slopes is what you get on the north bank of rivers. Rivers are natural attractors for settlement, and particularly where there are crossing points for major arterial highways. At these key crossing points, my argument is that the north shore is more often the preferred settlement site for reasons that run far deeper than the detail of the terrain. The motivation penetrates deep into our psyche - the human desire for warmth in a cold climate.





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Intriguingly, in January 1788 when Captain Arthur Phillip first sailed into Sydney Cove to find a base for the new British penal colony that would become Sydney, he settled on the north-facing, south shore near what is now Circular Quay and The Rocks. I'm sure there were many reasons for that choice, but it's worth noting that - in Sydney - the sun is in the north!

If you are persuaded by my solar-energy thesis, there are a couple of matters arising that are of some significance. And the first concerns the issue of hidden (or non-explicit) motives for our actions. Taittinger were very explicit about their desire for a south-facing slope, but I somehow doubt that whoever first established a settlement in Lincoln or Northampton came with an articulated list of priority concerns. They probably used a less self-conscious approach loaded with intuition, habit and desire. Designers would be foolish to down-play these hidden urges to action. No-one buys a Rolex watch because they want to know the time...or an Aston Martin because they need to get to the shops... or builds the 163 floor (828 m) Burj Khalifa because they want a new hotel. We'd like to believe that cool, rational, decision-making leads our actions, but so often it's more about intuition and deep-rooted desire. Desire drives us and designers just have to work with it and find a way.

And my second matter arising is the extent to which design decision-making is disenfranchised by history. We have only a hesitant grip on our destiny because so many critical decisions were made a decade ago – or a hundred years ago – or a thousand years ago. However much we might want York to be somewhere else, we're stuck with it being where it is. And consider the design of classrooms. The very forward-looking 'schools-of-the-future' programme produced some terrific architecture, but from the outset it assumed 30 children in a class. Why? Because the 1870 Education Act (that spawned the mass of Victorian Primary-schools across Britain) required classrooms to accommodate 30 children. 145 years ago someone decided on the matter and designers today have to live with it. (See Education Department (1887) Planning and Fitting Up Public Elementary Schools, HMSO, London). Heathrow is another interesting case. If we were starting from scratch, it would be frankly daft to put a major international airport where Heathrow is located – close in on the west side of London. With our prevailing SW air-flow, it forces huge, packed aircraft to lumber low across the centre of the city all day (and most of the night) – with a degree of vulnerability that should scare us all. But the decision to locate Heathrow where it is was made in the 1920s when aircraft and flying were both utterly different. So now we are forced to spend £billions

trying to make the current aviation-world fit into a straight-jacket that was created nearly 100 years ago.

The bottom line on my north-bank speculation is that we should be realistically humble about design. It's terrific that our students should challenge themselves as they explore radical futures. But they need equally to recognise and understand two existential wild-cards that could upset their apple-cart. First the unseen, unspecified, and sometimes downright flaky desires that drive the motives and ambitions of clients. And second that so much of what we might ideally want to do is deeply compromised by history.