

26 November 2013

Remarks by John B Richardson at the opening of the WHaMM campaign

My introduction to the maritime world was my work on the creation of an Integrated Maritime Policy for the European Union.

When we produced our consultation document in 2006, it had this to say:

“Any European will remember learning about the great voyages of discovery which opened the eyes of our forebears to the vastness of our planet, to the diversity of its cultures and the richness of its resources. Most of these voyages were made by sea.

Most of them required for their success openness to new ideas, meticulous planning, courage and determination.

As time went by, they not only opened up previously uncharted areas of the globe, they also generated new technologies such as the chronometer to allow for the exact calculation of longitude and the steam turbine to bring independence from the tyranny of prevailing winds.

Many Europeans have always lived beside or close to the sea.

It has provided them with a living as fishers and mariners, it has given them health and enjoyment, new horizons to dream of and a rich vocabulary of words and metaphors to be used in literature and their daily lives.

It has been seen as a source of romance, but also of separation, unknown perils and grief. It has provided us with a constant challenge and a deep yearning to understand it better.”

It is this romance of the seas which is the traditional driver behind visits to a maritime museum. And it is surely the first task of a maritime museum to communicate the magic of the maritime world to all its visitors, old and young. But there are other, perhaps more important drivers, and other important tasks.

Today, as the EU seeks to revitalise its economy, it is important to recognise the economic potential of her maritime dimension. A significant share of Europe’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is generated by marine based industries and services, without including the value of raw materials, such as oil, gas or fish. The maritime regions account for over 40% of GDP.

Despite this, our citizens are not always well-informed of the importance of the oceans and seas in their lives.

They know how crucial water is, but may not make the link with most of its being recycled from the oceans as rain or snow.

They worry about climate change, but may not always see the key role of the oceans in modulating it.

They benefit from their ability to buy cheap products from around the world, without realising how complex the web of logistics is, which brings them to us.

So how can we contribute to a new awareness among Europeans of the greatness of their maritime heritage, the importance of the oceans in their lives and their continued potential to provide us with increased wellbeing and economic opportunity?

I think this is the key question we are trying to answer this evening.

Aquariums may provide an insight into the beauty and wonder of life below the waves, but few manage effectively to explain how fragile the oceans are, what activities threaten them and what efforts are underway to safeguard them.

Maritime museums may help to understand the achievements of the past, but have more difficulty in passing on a sense of the advanced technology which characterises maritime activities today.

Associations dedicated to keeping alive the traditions of the past often do not link them with the commercial reality of the present, never mind the excitement of the future potential of the oceans.

It seems to me that there is much to be gained by encouraging a sense of common identity among all those who earn their living from maritime activities or whose quality of life is significantly connected to the sea, and associating them as active stakeholders in a project such as a new maritime museum. They should come to see the museum as their ambassador to the rest of society.

This can not only foster the understanding of the relationships involved and of the importance of the seas for human life, it can ensure a broad basis of support in the community.

And it can ensure that the activities of the museum are grounded in today's maritime world and look to its future as well as celebrating its past.

Over the last five years I have chaired the committee deciding on ESPO's annual award for the best project dedicated to the social integration of ports. The rationale for this award was defined as follows:

"The economic function of ports can only be sustained in the longer run, if the societal function is taken seriously.

More and more port authorities are therefore becoming aware of the need to devise innovative ways to develop co-operative synergies with cities, to improve the quality and accessibility of port areas and to generally promote a positive image with the general public.

The Award wants to stimulate the sustainable development of European ports and their cities."

For this year's award the theme 'Heritage' was chosen. As it says in the invitation to apply for the award,

"Societal integration of ports also means focusing on the contemporary use of port heritage. The public interest in heritage has increased considerably in recent years and has gained strong tourist potential.

Most ports boast rich collections of industrial and other heritage, including equipment, buildings and monuments.

This potential can be used in an innovative way not just to explain a port's history, but also to make the connection with present and future development.

The iconic value and contemporary use of port heritage can also be employed as a strong promotion tool."

This year Antwerp's "Breadcrumb Trail" won the award. It takes the visitor on a tour of Het Eilandje, from one heritage site to another, leading also to the port authority building, on which the new structure by Zaha Hadid will soon rise.

At the recent GreenPort Congress here in Antwerp I argued that when we think of what legacy port operations of today will leave behind we should have as our aim that future generations will regard them with pride as their valued heritage.

Some ports are easily recognizable by iconic buildings from the past. The example which springs to my mind is the medieval crane in Gdansk. Another is Liverpool's Royal Liver building. Ports are building now the icons of the future, whether it is, the Ricardo Bofill- designed hotel on the Barcelona waterfront, the Erasmus bridge in Rotterdam or Antwerp's new port authority building.

In other words the legacy of today's maritime activities will be the maritime heritage of our grandchildren. So when we talk about a maritime museum I would like to see it dedicated to both topics: the heritage of the past and the legacy of the present. It needs to look forward as well as back. In the new Red Star Line museum you can see not only the stories of those who left Antwerp in search of the new World, but also video footage of refugees arriving off Lampedusa.

We live in difficult times in Europe. Public budgets are stretched, private fortunes deliver lower returns than in the past. More and more projects that depend on these sources of finance are in financial difficulties. The temptation will be to trim this project, to compromise and to lower ambitions. In my view this would be a mistake.

Flanders has one of Europe's foremost maritime clusters. Antwerp is Europe's second most important port. It should not have a city museum, nor a national museum. It should have Europe's best maritime museum, celebrating the maritime heritage of Europe.

It should have an iconic modern building housing a dynamic set of activities and become recognized as a leader in the reestablishment and reaffirmation of Europe's maritime identity. It will need to have an appropriate budget, not only for a building, but also to finance and curate all those interactive activities which will fill it with life rather than dust and connect it to the maritime communities of Europe and the rest of the world.

If it can do this successfully it can draw in visitors to Flanders, just as the Gehry Museum in Bilbao has done, in their millions. Anything less is not worth doing. And anything less would not be worthy of this city.

