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From [The Times](#)

June 6, 2009

Mapping the economy: Can a cultural makeover restore Southend?

Carol Lewis

Pecha Kucha meetings are a Japanese invention in which people, usually from the creative industries, give presentations to an audience based on 20 images for 20 seconds each. It is a craze that is sweeping the world, with more than 200 cities and one English seaside town signed up to the movement. That town is Southend-on-Sea.

Southend, with its forlorn, empty 1960s office blocks, shopping centres and amusement arcades, appears an unlikely destination for hip, creative types. Yet the Essex town's aspiration is to become the creative capital of the East of England and Pecha Kucha is only one way it is trying to make a name for itself.

There are ambitious plans for the town, including a gallery or "cultural venue" at the end of the pier — when it is restored — a museum to be built in the cliffs alongside the ice cream parlours of the Golden Mile and a library-gallery-business incubator to replace a car park in the town centre.

Peter Thornton, a director of Arts Council England, East, says: "Art and culture is good for the feelgood factor — people want to live somewhere with a good quality of life and the creative industries are a really strong hook. They are a focal point for innovation and entrepreneurship." He believes that creative arts enterprises could become Southend's trademark.

Aside from tourism, the town is known for its financial call centres and high-end engineering companies, both of which are faring pretty well in the recession. Converso, the outsourced contact centre company, which employs 295 people in the town, has just announced record profits and says that it plans to create 400 jobs in the town by 2010. Olympus KeyMed, the maker of medical camera equipment which employs 815, hopes to "resume plans for growth" in 2009-10.

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"Innovation and creativity could take Southend through the recession," Mr Thornton says. "Empty retail spaces create the potential for temporary art displays. Southend has far more going for it than is first evident."

Yet Mr Thornton has hit on one of the key problems with Southend: its charms are not immediately obvious — not like, say, Brighton. As Scott Dolling, group manager for tourism at Southend-on-Sea Borough Council explains: "Brighton has lots of kudos. You mention Brighton and people's perceptions are up here." He raises his arm. "You mention Southend and it is ... erm ... somewhere else." He lowers his arm. "That's not to take away from what we have here. We have so many hidden gems we need to tease out."

Mr Dolling has been working on rebranding Southend "using real images of Southenders to encourage visitors to explore what there is beyond the expected". The town's strapline will be: "Town, shore and so much more."

It all sounds very positive, but will it encourage new business to Southend? The East of England development agency is pumping more than £30 million into regeneration locally over the next three years. Deborah Cadman, its chief executive, says that it is important to be able to convert creative ideas into "commercial reality".

For the past two years Southend has trailed at the bottom of a



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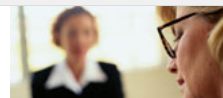
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league table of 50 UK towns ranked for new VAT registrations — an indication of the number of businesses being set up — by UHY Hacker Young, the accountancy. Last year there were two VAT de-registrations for every 10,000 people living in Southend. The report's authors commented that the town was suffering from a loss of business because it could not find a reliable way of replacing diminishing tourist spending.

Yet Rob Tinlin, the chief executive of the borough council, is bullish about Southend's ability to attract new business and bolster tourist expenditure. "We have a wealth of entrepreneurial skills and start-ups. Some might say we have a high death rate, too, but that is the Essex way: to run a business to get everything out of it, then sell up and set up something else." He says there is evidence that workers made redundant in London are looking to set up businesses closer to home. There are 27,000 workers who commute to London every day.

But it's not just small business Mr Tinlin wants to encourage. He hints that a Spanish company could open a large call centre in the town. "The core of the UK credit card market is here in Southend. We have an aeronautical hub at the airport, too, companies like Ipeco [a manufacturer of jumbo jet cabin seats] have their order books full until 2020. Yes, you can walk down the high street and see empty shops, but not as many as in other places."

The seaside town attracts 6.5 million day-trippers every year. "We want to re-educate people that actually Southend is more than just that bit of the market."

Mr Tinlin wants to attract visitors to stay longer and spend more. He claims that, with more of us holidaying at home and the weak pound encouraging more foreign tourists to travel to the UK, Southend is expecting "a strong year this year ... There is a market there and what we have got to do is tap into that. We have a stock of B&Bs, small private hotels and budget chain hotels and in the next five years we need to take that market up to the next level." The Rezidor Hotel Group is opening a 150-bedroom hotel on the sea front — a revamp of the Palace Hotel that has stood empty for ten years — and there are plans for a new hotel and casino at the new football ground when it is opened and a large new quality hotel at the airport.

Southend is also keen to get itself into pole position to receive visitors to the Olympic Games. It is hoped that spectators will fly into the revamped London Southend airport not only to take advantage of fast train links into East London but also to watch events closer to home. Nearby Hadleigh has been announced as a venue for the 2012 Olympic mountain bike events and an Olympic-standard diving pool is being built in the town.

"We know where we come from and we know where our core business comes from, but we want to diversify," Mr Tinlin says. "Southend was a real boomtown in 1900-10, and then again in the 1960s. Right now it is on the cusp of another real boom."

One moreover, that it can set a date to: July 27, 2012, day one of the XXX Olympiad. That is 1,136 days from today.

**Revitalisation through the arts
 Urban regeneration Metal**

Jude Kelly is well known in artistic circles: she is chair of the arts, education and culture committee for the 2012 Olympic Games and artistic director of the Southbank Centre in London. She is also the founder of Metal, an international arts organisation that is coming to Southend.

Colette Bailey, Metal's managing director, explains that it aims to bring together artists, architects, business people, public sector officials and others to improve urban regeneration. Ms Bailey, who is overseeing Metal's renovation of the Grade II-listed Chalkwell Hall, says that she and Ms Kelly chose Southend because of the "massive opportunities for cultural-led regeneration in the Thames Gateway. There is an awful lot of change and opportunity: this is the largest regeneration area in Europe."

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Metal will host international artists, hold regular dinners for artists and others to discuss ideas at Chalkwell Hall, work with local schools and organise networking events for local people in the creative industries. "We are interested in how artists' ideas can influence and change civic life. Southend has a massive number of creative individuals, although they haven't always been visible."

The hope is that Metal will encourage creative businesses to set up in the town and attract more visitors, something that it achieved in Liverpool when it opened a centre there.

**New model airport could be gateway to Olympic Games
 Company report: Southend Airport**

A refurbishment plan costing £35 million could transform Southend Airport into a key regional airport in time for the Olympic Games. Eddie Stobart, the haulage company, which bought the airport for £21 million in December, aims to refurbish it by 2012 and make it capable of handling two million passengers a year by 2020.

Alistair Welch, managing director of Stobart Air, says: "We want to make sure we have things in place in time for the Olympics. It will put Southend on the map. You could be in Stratford within an hour of landing and Liverpool Street in an hour ten."

However, there is considerable local opposition to the expansion plan and Stobart faces a number of regulatory and planning hurdles. At present, the airport handles between 30,000 and 50,000 passengers a year, most of whom are on the weekly flight to Jersey. The plan to increase capacity to two million passengers a year would mean being able to handle four flights an hour, 18 hours a day. "We want to be a good regional airport that can support the local market. We want to expand [our services] to the Iberian peninsula for Southenders heading away on holiday," Mr Welch says.

The plan is to extend the runway to enable aircraft to carry more fuel and so take more passengers further. "We will be able to support planes which have a greater range, are quieter and more fuel efficient," he says.

The renovation — which would include a railway station, 130-bedroom luxury hotel and a new passenger terminal — could create 4,900 new jobs. A further 1,000 could be created if plans for a business park on the northern side of the airport go ahead.

The airport will remain a niche freight specialist — including urgent medical and business deliveries — and a hub for aviation maintenance and engineering companies. Several aviation companies are based there, including Ipeco (makers of jet cabin seats), ATC Lasham (jet maintenance engineers) and Air Livery (refurbishment and painters of jets). Mr Welch adds that many of these companies struggle to recruit highly skilled labour and he is in talks with the East of England Development Agency and the borough council about building an aviation skills academy at the airport.

There are also plans to build a new hangar and facilities to accommodate the growing private jet business activity at the airport, he said. He is coy, however, about talking about the volume of private traffic into the airport: "You have to be careful in the current market."

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