

Inland Waterways News

Tullamore Harbour plan

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In Maastricht last summer, we spent three nights in 't Bassin <www.bassin.nl>, a revitalised canal basin. It was surrounded by fairly high buildings, but they were set back from the water, with just one lower layer of cafés and shops, with tables and chairs outside. There was constant activity during the day and, at night, quiet jazz entertained the visitors without disturbing those who wanted to sleep. Anybody could walk into the area at any time, but we heard of no vandalism: the activity and the harbour staff deterred evildoers.



't Bassin in Maastricht



South side of Grand Canal Dock, Dublin

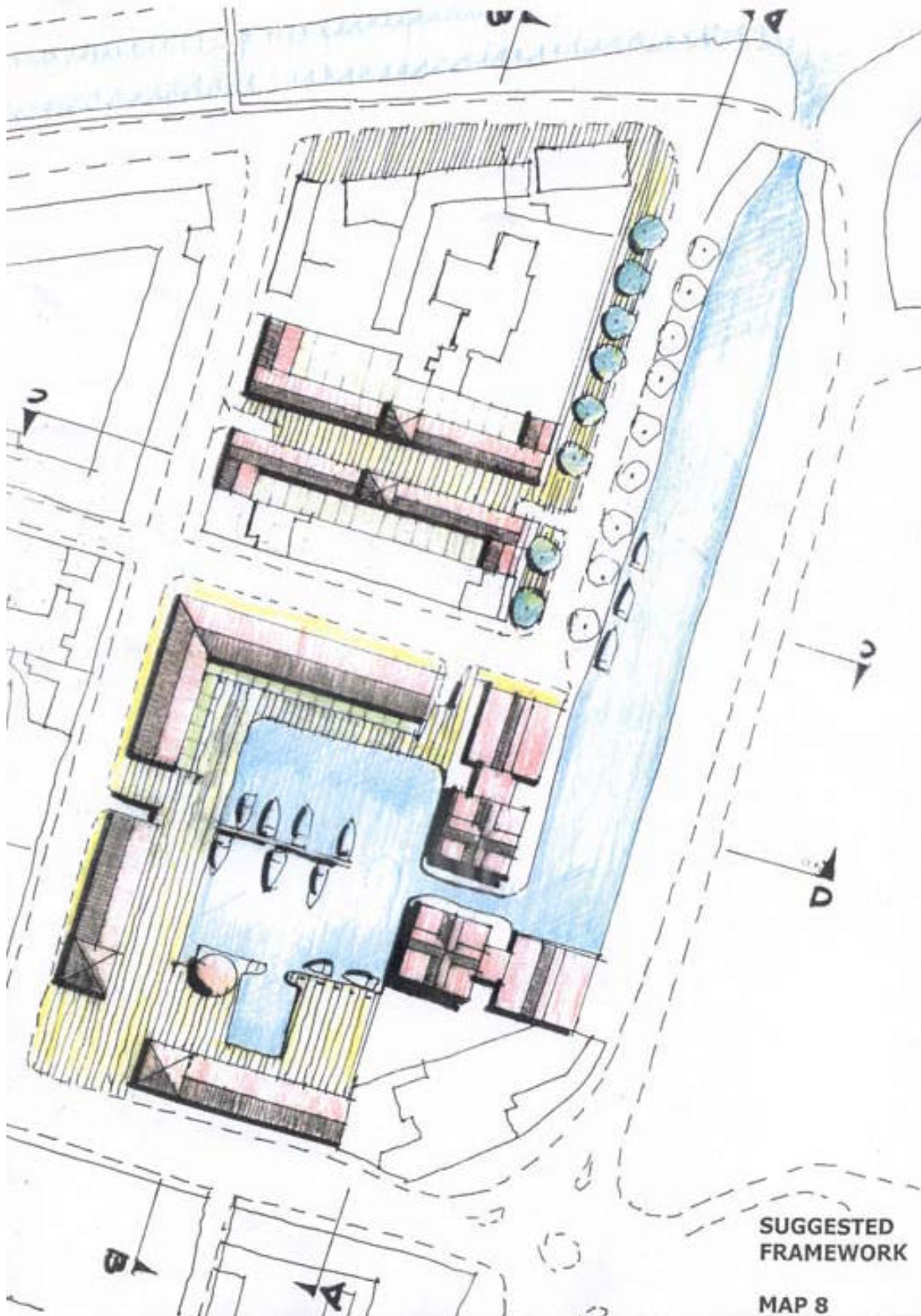
A couple of months later, I took a photo of the south side of the Grand Canal Dock in Dublin. Fortified flats, largely deserted during the day, keep the sun off the water while looking extremely forbidding from the land. There is no incentive to linger.

Tullamore's Local Area Plan

Tullamore Town Council now has a chance to choose which sort of future it wants for the area around its Grand Canal Harbour. It has published a Local Area Plan (which will last for six years) for the 6.3 hectares between O'Carroll Street (E), Harbour Street (S), Chapel Street (W) and Convent Road (N): <<http://www.offaly.ie/yourcouncil/tullamoreudc/news.asp>>.

The Council invited observations and submissions on the proposal by 3 March 2003, and Offaly Branch is working on its submission. Unfortunately 3 March is after ***Inland Waterways News*** goes to press but before it gets distributed, so this is a personal review of the plan rather than a report on the IWAI position.

The plan shows the wide range of factors that planners have to consider: the regional context; historical evolution; existing land uses; building condition; outstanding commitments; movement, access and parking; ownership and intentions; architectural conservation; visual issues; services; the Tullamore UDC Development Plan of 1998; national guidelines; the ***Planning and Development Act 2000***.



The study area (map by kind permission of Tullamore Town Council)

Objectives

That 1998 plan envisaged a major boating centre in Tullamore and an eastern bypass "which may assist in the provision of a more appropriate location for Waterways activities." In other words, the planners would like Waterways Ireland to relocate its canals depot outside the town.

There is no indication of WI's views or of who might own or manage the harbour in future.

The current plan's first objective is to revitalise the Grand Canal Harbour as a publicly accessible local amenity feature and tourist destination, particularly for cruising, and integrate it physically and visually with the town:

Subject to further examination [...] secure moorings will be provided within the Harbour off a pontoon accessible to boat owners only. The area to the east of the dry-dock (which should be uncovered and reinstated) may be devoted to boat servicing uses, such as diesel, pump out, water etc and off street car parking in association with these uses might be provided.

However, there are four other objectives: providing an attractive new residential environment for families, improving vehicular and pedestrian access, enhancing the visual amenity and providing a civic and urban design character.

Buildings or people?

The problem with the plan is that it takes little account of what people — whether residents or boat-users — might like to do or how they might behave. The plan seems to be engineering- or architecture-led, omitting consideration of human behaviour and of management of the facility.

If you surround a harbour with offices, there will be people around during the day but not at night. If you build housing, there will be people at night but not during the day. But a "publicly accessible local amenity feature and tourist destination" is not a sterile body of water surrounded by silent buildings: it is a lively place where people act and interact.

Life and activity and people make a basin attractive; they also provide the security that is essential to boaters. Yet the plan, which says that the "predominant new land use should be residential," gives little attention to the sorts of activities that might take place, either on or off the water.

Focus on activity

The planners should focus on activity, day and night, not on buildings. Five complementary types of boating activity could keep boats in the basin all year round:

- overnight stops by both private and hire boats — with a possible increase in traffic once the Irish Ring (Royal, Shannon, Grand) is completed
- secure moorings and car-parking for a week or two for boaters doing Lowtown to Shannon Harbour at leisure over a couple of weekends
- secure moorings as a base for local boat-owners (not just cruiser-owners)
- fully serviced residential moorings for live-aboards
- working on boats in dry docks, on the water or on hard standing. That includes the low-level boat servicing activities envisaged in the plan but — subject to controls on noise and pollution — could go further.

Activity around the basin could include waterside cafés, shops, restaurants, craft workshops and boat-related businesses including some light industrial uses (eg boat repair). Businesses on the ground floor, housing above: the plan does envisage "live work" units containing offices, but why confine it to offices?

You can run up blocks of flats pretty well anywhere, but you could end up with the aridity that threatens Dublin's Grand Canal Dock. The view over water might increase the value of the flats,

but at the expense of the canal. What the basin needs is life, and neither a purely residential nor a purely commercial development will provide that. The current plan suggests that the potential of the water body, and the needs of boat-users, have not been fully explored. Focusing on the basin, and on activities thereabouts, should enable Tullamore to seize its unique opportunity to build something worth having.

