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Dear Kieran Walsh

Re: Request for Opinion Piece on the North Quays (In Three Parts)
Subtitle; Let’s Not Write An Obituary for the North Quays Yet!

Your editorial on the North Quays, dated 30 September 2014, is a welcome initiative by the local press to encourage public engagement with planning and the prospect of our city.

Because cities seesaw between destroying their centers and longing for their revitalization, small steps can tip the balance. Public engagement is the essential lever. So before we write any obituary for the North Quays, let’s weight up the options.

Judging by the bookshelves alone, city centers are on the rise again; note the titles of recent publications by leading economist Edward Glazer, ‘Triumph of the City: How Our Greatest Invention Makes Us Richer, Smarter, Greener, Healthier, and Happier’ or Leo Hollis ‘Cities Are Good for You’. If this pro-center impulse was fully embraced, it could have far-reaching effects for Waterford prospects, politically and economically.
The turnaround of an urban site as strategic as the North Quays will need the slow simmer of a revitalizing city-centre strategy for up to 30 to 40 years. This has been key to the successful turnaround of cities from Bristol to Boston, Copenhagen to Curitiba. It justifies why cities are somewhat stubborn in resisting quick fixes! But this is not to rule out short-term start-ups as steps towards such longer-term revitalization.

As a Ferrybank resident, I want to encourage immediate action. But as an urban academic, I write to temper enthusiasm with some circumspection. This response is therefore in three parts; the first is a scan of urban trends and international case studies, the second part is a view of how temporary uses could bring about immediate change, the third and final part is a close up view of exciting local initiatives.

PART 1; AN INTERNATIONAL OVERVIEW OF RETROFITTING

St Herblain in Nantes

You offered, as an example, the regeneration of St Herblain in Nantes, which, quite apart from its street festival company Royal de Luxe, is true in two key respects.

Firstly, the retrofitting of the center of Nantes was in direct response to sprawling growth patterns and a vacated industrial heart in its city center that arose from the closure of their shipyards in 1987.

Secondly, like our North Quays, the rejuvenation of St Herblain dealt with a similar array -or disarray- of ownership patterns, railway rights-of-way, residual port activities, and abandoned industrial hangers.

But unlike any immediate prospects for Waterford, St Herblain benefitted from European REVIT Programme that facilitated brownfield regeneration and triggered transnational cooperation between six partners. Until we tap into similar investment, where else might we turn for inspiration? There is still reason to be hopeful for the short and long term. Here is why.

1.1. Big Changes Start with Little Steps; the Case of Copenhagen, Denmark

Take Copenhagen for instance; it sustained a policy of stealth that has made it the envy of cities round the world for its place-making charm. For over 50 years, year-on-year since 1961, the City of Copenhagen removed just a few parking spaces, the loss of which according to its architect Jan Gehl was that “nobody noticed”. Gehl, who received lifelong membership of the Irish Planning institute (IPI) in Dublin last month, confirmed that car spaces reclaimed slowly, yet persistently, were turned into prime public spaces or improved cycle facilities.

It was because the policy persisted for over 40 years, the evidence of well-laid plans became tangible later on and luckily for urbanist, their strategy of many small steps is so popular it is irreversible. Their outcome is desired by cities worldwide but in terms of process, perhaps not always delivered with the sustained patience of the Danes!

We seem to have followed a more ad–hoc course.
1.2. De-Centralization versus City Center Revitalization

In the wake of our own politically driven, yet fractured de-centralizations plans, inevitably politics and delivery have to coincide. Just as much as the dynamic of devolution or re-centralization shape politics, they shape our built environment. We have witnessed a pattern of Irish town and cities decentralizing. From Castlecomer to Claremorris, our town centers have been eviscerated as our edges expanded even bloated, with impunity.

So the challenge for Waterford will be to make small plans towards a larger people-centered turnaround. Without such a long-term plan, cities regularly fall prey to ‘hit and run developers’. And we have seen of few of these on our NAMA supporting pay-slips!

But the sudden arrest of the economy and the recent consolidation of Local Authorities put in check this expansionist trend. We have to do more for less. This all bodes well for city centers and city life. Ten acres were doing the work of one when we went on our development spree, sprawling as we did into what we thought was ‘Happy Acres’- rezone-able land forever possible over the next hill.

Disaffection and disillusion ensued so what now for our atonement?

1.3. Meeting of Minds delivers resurgence at Faneuil Hall in 1970s Boston, USA

It was from a similar awakening after the oil crisis in the 1970s, that the value of reuse and retrofitting the city center was born. The fanfare of the opening of a refurbished Faneuil Hall market place in Boston, in the summer of 1976, came in defiance of a parallel decentralization trend.

Faced with such negative attitudes, it took the meeting of minds of a few pro-city, risk-takers to turn-around Boston’s city center’s outlook when they came together to focus on the refurbishment of a few significant derelict buildings.

A pro-city mayor of Boston, Kevin White, a sympathetic developer, Jon Rouse, and a designer, Ben Thompson, came together to envisage and make possible a turn-around for their City. Political will, planning intelligence and design flair won out and the refurbished marketplace of Faneuil Hall became a model swiftly emulated across the world.

One of Faneuil Hall’s recipes for success was expedient and practical; to disguise un-let shop fronts for the opening, they commissioned sales-carts for start-up businesses. This had the advantage of not only attracting creative, local individual by their low-rent and easy out clauses but added to the uniqueness of the market’s festival-like atmosphere. It is a model of market and refurbishment still imitated today.

Some 20 years later, Deans Clough in Halifax validated the Faneuil Hall revitalization approach in the revitalization of a vast post-industrial site.

1.4. Responsive design put heritage first; Deans Clough, Halifax, Yorkshire, UK

Situated in Yorkshire’s agricultural heartland, Halifax was once a woolen metropolis boasting the world’s largest carpet factory, Crossley’s Carpets, until it closed in 1983. Given its presence and a 20-acre centrally located site, the prospect of the abandoned site was critical to the prosperity, as much as the image of the city, of Halifax.
With derelict mill buildings stretching over a half a mile long, or over a million square feet of empty space, it was a revitalization task as intractable as the current North Quays. In the case of Halifax, the sheer size of rentable area on any single floor (floor plates) was turned to advantage.

Lancashire born investor, Ernest Hall rose to the challenge by converting the buildings slowly with a clever incremental business plan. Hall sunk his money into the restoration of the historic fabric of the Mills and was knighted for its success. Based on a low-investment model, not unlike Boston’s start-up shopping carts, Hall offered a new concept of low-risk serviced workspace, with on-site business supports and short leases from 10 sq. m spaces upwards to whole buildings.

Sir Ernest Hall was no shrinking violet; the title of his autobiography gives a flavour of his tenacity ‘How to Be A Failure and Succeed’. His resolve means Deans Clough is a landmark today, a thriving center of creativity for 140 businesses, as well as a successful arts, design, education and food complex, and a model of refurbishment coveted by many other cities. It is a heartening story of a turnaround in the face of adversity.

The business model of Deans Clough, suited to their range of floor-plates, is a model not unlike that of the Fumbally Exchange (FEx), which has recently opened in Waterford’s Viking Triangle and which offers incubators units and a network of support for start-ups and similarly attracts creative individuals who share co-working spaces.

Conclusion

To conclude this overview of urban trends and retrofits, it would seem that coordinated steps towards a long-term vision, twinned with the reuse of industrial heritage, repeatedly pays dividends and usually far greater that the heavy hand of the demolition ball!

Such steps have already begun for the revitalization of Waterford city center as the successful renovation of the Viking Triangle led by Michael Walsh and the Council has publicized. The next phase, as Kevin O’Sullivan, Irish Times editor wished for is to move beyond this corner. As an immediate stepping-stone, the potential of the North Quays is a resource waiting patiently to be tapped but only if approached creatively and with carefully made plans for the short and longer term.

Part 2 will take a closer look at Ferrybank and its quayside to speculate how we could deliver the start of its regeneration.

PART 2; MEANETIME USES AND LANDSCAPE CAN RESTORE CONFIDENCE

The Barcelona Ramblas-style landscaped central promenade along the Waterford Quays is helping to bridge a gap between the recently renovated Viking Triangle and the historic Quays. Given the predominant tourist target of the Triangle, the next phase should ideally focus on improving the everyday life of locals.

Mindful of the growing desire to see changes sooner rather than later, might we dare to consider some incremental, temporary uses for the North Quays as part of a grander plan?
Deputy Mayor, Jason Murphy described the North Quays as “a relic”. But if we think of relics as objects not just surviving from a former time but also full of meaning, this could be the North Quays saving quality. Looked at creatively, as so many other cities have, the potential of industrial heritage to offer temporary uses offers a unique potential for investment.

The large rentable area on any single floor (or floor plate in estates agent speak) that we have on the North Quays are similar to those used to advantage in the turnaround of Deans Clough, Halifax. According to architect, Conor McCabe of Henry J Lyons Architects “FDI (Foreign Direct Investment) companies need larger floor plate structures than currently on offer”. Speaking at a joint seminar on ‘Cultivating A Workplace’ held by WIT Department of Architecture and Waterford Chamber this summer, he detailed how existing buildings like the North Quays, appeal to technology users in particular as “they are well located and have the potential to be something other than a generic corporate office building.” This could be Waterford selling point if the existing warehouses on the North quays are kept and retrofitted.

From Duisburg to Rotterdam, from Pittsburg to Seattle, examples of refurbished post-industrial quayside abound. But luckily for our more strapped, City-coffers, we can also look to a growing example of parsimony in practice today. In our worldwide recession, ‘pop-ups’, ‘meanwhile uses’, and ‘temporary spaces’ are the currency of turning places round in all but the oil-rich economies. Here are some heartening examples.

2.1. Healthy City; Take Me To The Water

For Ferrybank residents, the most immediate benefit of any short-term redevelopment of the North Quays would be to allow more humane access to the River and the Quays.

The walkability along Dock Road, from Fountain Street’s parade of shops along the dual-carriage flyover is poor by any standards. Building upon Copenhagen’s, Manchester or Bristol’s model of success, a more humane walkway, or boardwalk, along the riverfront should be the first focus.

Demolition, for the sake of being seen to do something, should be resolutely avoided and instead this cash should be used for a strategy of locally responsive landscape. Existing structures have repeatedly proven to be the catalyst for innovative reuse and economic growth. Instead the space around and between the structures could be landscaped.

Downstream, Neptune Shipyards once had strong links to the industrial heartland of the Ruhr Valley, a place that illustrates the benefits of avoiding demolition and embracing ecological redesign with a vengeance. By clever landscaping of its abandoned industrial heritage, for new recreational and green industries, since 1989 Project Ruhr- formally Emscher Park- has transformed its image and created a new tourist industry as well.

The timing is ripe to rekindle these links.

2.2. Could a once Landscaped Ferrybank be revived by a GIY (Grow Your Own) Festival?

Recalling Project Ruhr and our own long history of a landscaped hinterland for Ferryback, could we reconsider the value of landscaping as the Germans did? Could we have a local Garden Festival as part of our annual ‘Harvest Festival’ or even offer a permanent home for
‘Bloom’ on our North Quays? This would not only build upon the historical image of a landscaped north side to the city but even tap into the local skills.

For instance, might local entrepreneur, Michael Kelly and his ‘Grow Your Own - Together We Grow’ (GIY), welcome some seed funding for his ‘Get Ireland Growing Fund’ and be encouraged to bring about a slow transformation on par with Project Ruhr, given time?

And in any case, would it not be so much more powerful to grow rather than destroy our Ferrybank history and heritage?

This summer, attracting almost no commentary, the Council requested the demolition of many of the industrial structures on the North Quays through e-tenders, (E-tenders 04/03/14, Waterford City Council- ID 82513) saving after the fact, in response to pleas by An Taisce, DoCoMoMo Ireland (Documentation and Conservation of the Modern Movement) and the President of the RIAI (Royal Institute of Architects of Ireland) a very special Hennebique structure, the R&H Hall, identified by the National Inventory of Architectural Heritage.

A similar Hennebique structure in the UK was subject of an International Architectural Design competition and resulted in ‘Explore Bristol’, a very successful science center completed by Wilkinson Eyre Architects in 2000.

The threat of demolition of the remaining standing structures, even if unprotected, could coalesce opinion on the future of the North Quays if debated more publicly. This was the case for Boston’s Faneuil Hall and is still worth consideration in light of the RIAI President, Robin Mandal claim “that the reuse of structures is one of the most effective forms of sustainable development that we have”.

It is from ideas like this and creative alternatives responses that revitalization begins. So let the debate begin as to what alternative could be found.

2.3. Rejuvenation of Quayside Heritage and a pedestrian bridge

Wilkinson Eyre Architects were also the designers of a pedestrian bridge that would be an exemplar for Waterford. Built to connect Newcastle with its opposite post-industrial quays of Gateshead on North of England’s Tyneside, it is a fine example and of a similar scale to our Quays. Can you imagine the benefits to Ferrybank and beyond, if the Quays had a pedestrian bridge from the refurbished Viking Triangle? Its growing success could radiate and its appeal be enjoyed by more locals. And by foot!

This is what Newcastle with Gateshead delivered for their divided city when both sides were hard hit by de-industrialization. The Tyneside quayside is a mirror of ours. Their pedestrian bridge connected a commercial north quayside, Newcastle, with its industrial south, of Gateshead. When its ‘Blinking Eye Bridge’, named so because of its clever opening mechanism that rotates like an eyelid, won the prestigious Stirling Prize in 2002, Tyneside’s regeneration was put on the International map. It was one of a series of design initiatives that revitalized and benefitted both quaysides.

Another strategy was their reuse of its industrial heritage as cultural and educational projects. One defunct Flour Mill, which became the Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art as part of a cultural regeneration strategy. Close by in the new SAGE Concert venue, they rehoused their music school in a state of the arts facility of regional appeal. The lasting
legacy of Tyneside, has been that it used public art as a participatory tool in urban renewal and improved local identity not only by involving locals in its direction but by making the place more emotionally connected for a broad spectrum of the population.

Tyneside is an example of the benefit of working with existing structures, educational institutions and with local initiatives to improve the lot of locals while attracting further creative people into their city.

Conclusion

Copenhagen, The Ruhr Valley and Tyneside are all examples of how temporary ‘meanwhile’ uses can restore confidence in a place. A re-inhabited North Quays, even temporarily, would provide a new elevation to the center and benefit the city both visually and economically. Something at the scale of the Tall Ships Festival or the memorable artworks of Gottfried Helnwein, whose haunting images animated the Quays, provided a level of vibrancy that could well be re-echoed until a longer-term solution is premeditated or evaluated.

Part 3 will expand further on how we can tap into local initiative to create our own version.

Part 3 LOCAL INITIATIVES

Following some examples of international revitalization projects, this third and final part will turn attention to how local initiatives might be tapped into to transform, not just the visual impression of the Quays, but restore the principle of co-ordination to benefit the economy of the city as a whole.

For example, building upon our local creativity, the suggestion of Deputy Mayor, Jason Murphy that our street carnival company, Spraoi, could have a more public home on the Quays could be an easy, early win.

3.1. Ludic City, Cities love Fantasy and fun, the example of Luton Carnival, UK.

The recent ‘Giant Grandmother’ that caused such a stir in Limerick last month was imported from the incredibly successful and world-renowned street theatre company Royal De Luxe, from Nantes. The ‘Giant Grandmother’ generated thirty million Euro for the Limerick economy. It begs the question as to how we could develop our homegrown equivalent?

North of London, in Luton’s city center, the University of Bedfordshire teamed up with Luton Borough Council and together invested in a home for street entertainment. After Notting Hill Gate festival, The Luton Carnival is the second largest in the UK. They built an award winning building as a creative space to unite, educate and support Carnival arts. The center includes a third-level course in street festivals. Its open workshop is right in the city center and on occasions the streets of the city come to life with its Carnival.

It is based on a model not too dissimilar to our Spraoi August festival but where Luton celebrates through design, Spraoi workshop is hidden in an industrial estate; where they invested, we have yet to make the connection of business to creative industries and to third level education. Even if only for the short-term, the North Quays could be a great crucible, home or stage for the annual spectacular public events of Spraoi not unlike the energy of the open display of sculpture of artist Anish Kapoor's studio in south London.
3.2. PPP of the Metropolitan Revolution; Personalities, Politics and Popularity

So what can we learn from this scan of urban lessons for current affairs? "Nil neart go cur le cheile"; there is no strength without unity. It takes a great deal of patience to stay with a creative plan. It succeeds by a triangulation of personalities, politics and popularity. (A renewed PPP!) But easy wins come by working together and capitalizing on creative local industries.

This is a theme that was picked up recently by the Brooking Institute, a think-tank for cities based in New York. The spirit of their book title of 2013, The Metropolitan Revolution, How Cities and Metros are fixing our Broken Policies and Fragile Economy, asserts that cities, their politicians and locals are key. Partly in reaction to the Great Recession, the stasis of government and administrators has meant that metros and cities have, in effect, been doing things for themselves. According to its authors, urban researchers, Bruce Katz and Jennifer Bradley, the result is an inversion of power from nation states to cities.

Most critically for Waterford, they note how many city initiatives operate as collaborative communities of pioneers attune to locally responsive leads and needs. Ultimately, it concludes, if you hold back on the growth of a city, such as Waterford, you hamper the growth of a nation.1

3.3. Local Energy; Waterford’s Architecture Festival.

Longer-term, it is the work of educational institutions working with local creative resources like Garter Lane, G.I.Y., Spraoi, Fumbally Exchange, IDA and Waterford Chamber from which new idea and initiatives will spring.

This is what Hall did for Halifax in the 1990s, and Rouse for Boston in the 1970s. They restored the principle of co-ordination – rather than faction. It is a critical characteristic of urban renaissance projects in any era. Both were willing to personally invest their own fortunes for the benefit of a particular place that they loved. As a result, they brought tenacity to bridge or bend political, local and business wills, which became the gel that made their projects a success not only for their investment but also for the life of the cities they loved. This local intelligence will be central to the city’s revitalization but only when matched with intelligence.

Cities, worldwide, are teaming up with educational institutions to nurture coordination. Since twenty years, an ‘Urban Lab’ set up by the architect Renzo Piano in Genoa has transformed its heavy industry city into a modern metropolis whereas, most recently, the clustering of education and health sectors in Detroit’s Midtown is leading a resurgence in its fortunes.

Since WIT’s Department of Architecture temporary relocation to the Granary and Garter Lane buildings a few years ago, it too leads by example. By its city-center relocation, it has tapped into new synergies. Greater choice of accommodation has meant students can get more space for less money and with less commuting time they can donate their surplus energy to engaging with the city center while staff can avail of serendipitous encounters with the local creative community. Only last month witnessed renewed life in Hanover

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1 San Paulo houses 10% of Brazil’s population but generates 20% of its GDP, states ‘The Metropolitan Revolution’. According to Dublin Chamber of Commerce, the Greater Region of Dublin while being home to 39% of the Nation’s population generates 48% of our GDP.
Street, when the annual Festival of Architecture spilled over from the Granary onto the streets of our city center in the form of street performances, treasure hunts and guided tours.

Conclusion

To conclude, the timing is ripe. Buoyed up by these international success stories, of long and short-term strategies, the desire for change should be embraced creatively by tapping into more local initiatives. The clustering of educational, health and innovative industries is vital.

It is within our reach and as the New York Times pertinently stated in 1964 ‘We are all a captive audience of our physical environment, and need every means possible to shape it to better ends.’ With the alignment of locals with creative education, eager politician and a supportive business population, this is as good a time as any to improve our city’s shape for the future.

But change can begin straight away, by following Copenhagen’s policy of stealth; slowly remove parking spaces on one quayside and return the waterfront to walkers on its opposite quay. Then join the dots between for a healthier city.

It is therefore a welcome invitation that ‘The Munster Express’, shares this impulse towards improvement and is using its capacity to broaden the audience and educate the consumer on a local site of such significance.

Miriam Fitzpatrick