

## Launch of Scottish Canals sites, March 27<sup>th</sup> 2014 Lighthouse, Glasgow

I'm delighted to be able to present to you two sites on the Caledonian Canal which have been carefully selected and which pose very different opportunities and challenges to designers.

The Caledonian Canal is Scotland's only ship canal in the sense that is of such a scale as to be able to take large ships- or rather small to medium sized by modern standards. A huge engineering feat at the time and the first example of large scale Govt-funded infrastructure investment, the project also had the socio-economic aim of providing work for Highlanders at a time of mass migration and actually served to provide the first jobs for many men who had only ever known subsistence living. In its building and subsequent operation, it modernised the Highlands and connected its inhabitants to the rest of the world.

The canal works with the unique geology of the Great Glen and adopts the great Loch Ness into its length along with Loch Lochy and the man made Loch Oich.

These days the use of the canal is mainly leisure and it is a huge draw for tourists. Fort Augustus gets 250,000 visitors a year. We are endeavouring to boost popularity of the canal and create a better visitor experience; one that results in longer dwell times and better spend rates. The ambition of the Scenic Routes initiative matches our own in this respect.

The first site for the competition is at Neptune's Staircase, the longest staircase lock flight in the UK and one that raises boats 20m. It's name suggests a scale of mythical proportion and indeed, in the shadow of Ben Nevis the scale and grandeur makes this location unique.

Scottish Canals' ambition for Neptunes Staircase is twofold- to create a first class tourist attraction based on the heritage and engineering of the lock flight and majesty of Ben Nevis and second, as an activity hub where visitors can readily take a canoe or motor boat out on the safe environment of the canal or hire a bike to take them up the tow path and we have just signed up two new operators to help deliver the activity hub vision.

The site for the scenic routes installation has been chosen as the optimal place to view Ben Nevis. When we conducted our market research we learnt that when tourists ask where the best place to view Ben Nevis is, they are sent to Neptunes Staircase. The scenic routes installation will formalise this and celebrate the mountain. Locally sourced interpretation will add to the experience.

The various facets of this project are each very compelling and once all combined will mean this is indeed a first class tourist attraction.

As ever, we need to balance excitement of the opportunity with caution as to the physical constraints.

Neptune's Staircase runs through the village of Banavie and the immediate setting is suburban and designers must respect the residential dwellings behind the site and their view of

Ben Nevis. So we're asking designers to create something impressive that celebrates something big but make it unobtrusive - no mean feat! The winning design will respect the dwellings and a member of the community will be on the judging panel.

Much of the site is canal embankment of made ground and there is therefore a limit on load bearing capacity. The canal is a SAM and whilst the installation will be just off the monument, Historic Scotland will take a keen interest in what is proposed. The setting of the adjacent Telford House, built to house workers over 200 years ago and its setting will also be examined closely when the judges consider the merits of the entries.

In a nutshell designers have the weight of history, majesty of the highest mountain in the UK and some powerful constraints to deal with so good luck!

The second site is at Laggan Locks at the north east end of Loch Lochy. This is where the rugged fjord-like beauty of Loch Lochy gives way to the more gentle and man-made environment of the canal. Laggan is a welcome site for boaters, hikers and bikers and is often an overnight stopping off point on the Great Glen Way. Scottish Canals is responding to this fact by building two camping bothies. What the scenic routes project can add to this site is something that will hopefully attract drivers from the A82 to get out of their cars and experience this transition in the landscape and enjoy the site of boats going through locks, which never ceases to be a pleasant thing to watch.

What better way to celebrate this than to build an inspirational toilet!

In seriousness, the fundamentals of life need to be considered and if we are to encourage people to stop and enjoy the view, then it bodes the question, how much of a prerequisite is it that there are toilets?

Through our own experience at this location, the lock keeper often gets asked if there are toilets and if we are to encourage more people to stop, we know - and this will vary from location to location given how far people have travelled - that at Laggan, we need public access toilets. However, the ambitions of the Scenic Routes project is such that it will not be any ordinary toilet. It will be beautiful and it will integrate a snacks and refreshment offering into the building to improve the visitor experience and provide positive economic impact. A quality cappuccino would be a welcome luxury to a bedraggled canoeist who has just completed Loch Lochy..

The site has these wonderful spits of land that protrude into the loch and we would like to direct visitors to the end of the spit by giving them somewhere to walk to, such as a bench, a small shelter or a sculpture. This will be compatible in design with the toilet and will be where hard core hikers and canoeists can rub shoulders with less intrepid bus tourists - an interesting cultural exchange perhaps?!

As ever, opportunities are matched with constraints and in this case, the main constraint is the Schedule Ancient Monument as all building will take place on the Monument itself. We have consulted with Historic Scotland who have accepted the principle of what we are

trying to do here, including the intrusive excavation necessary to build a septic tank and soakaway. Above the ground, designs must respect their surroundings and the winning design will likely do this in such a way that is contemporary.

The Scenic Routes initiative is about bringing together people and wonderful places. Young architects are being given 4 of Scotland's most iconic places to work on and foremost, this is about integrating people with those sites, with the natural beauty and with the heritage in such a way that enhances their experience.

We are very excited to see the response from young architects to these challenging briefs. We hope to see a variety of different ways of responding to the many opportunities and constraints posed and to see how architects express themselves.

All that is left to be said is best of luck to you all!!

Thank you.