

PLANNING REPORT

Architectural Strategy - Part VIII Planning Report

Athlone Public Realm

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The following report relates to the development by Westmeath County Council of Public Realm Enhancement and Associated Works within an area encompassing c.0.0425ha immediately to the north of Athlone Castle (a National Monument and protected structure – reference Number RPS 070) and within an Architectural Conservation Area (Athlone Town), Athlone, Co. Westmeath. The report outlines the nature and extent of the proposed works and key elements of the project.

The report is prepared in accordance with Part VII of the Planning & Development Regulations 2001 (as amended).

1.0

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The design approach for this public realm enhancement scheme for Athlone is to create a distinct placemaking piece which incorporates both cultural and wayfinding significance, in order to instil a strong sense of place and connection with Athlone's Medieval heritage for visitors and residents alike.

Currently much of the visitor accommodation is located to the East of the town, whereas the Cultural Quarter to the West is not receiving as much visitor footfall. In order to improve the visitor experience and encourage people to visit the Cultural Quarter, a wayfinding piece is required to navigate visitors to the medieval castle experience.

Wayfinding is of particular importance in built up environments in order to provide a safe and clear route for visitors to navigate from place to place. The proposed entrance point of the site is designed to encourage people to orientate themselves towards the castle visitor centre entrance while maintaining a visual connection with the River Shannon.

The objectives outlined below are achieved by following a complementary palette of materials and applying a sensitivity to existing structures which creates a coherent and distinctive character to the area.

Design Objectives :

- Unobstructed view of the Castle from the bridge
- Passive surveillance
- Maintain the view of the River Shannon from the Market Square
- Provide an easily accessible user experience
- Encourage access to castle visitor experience

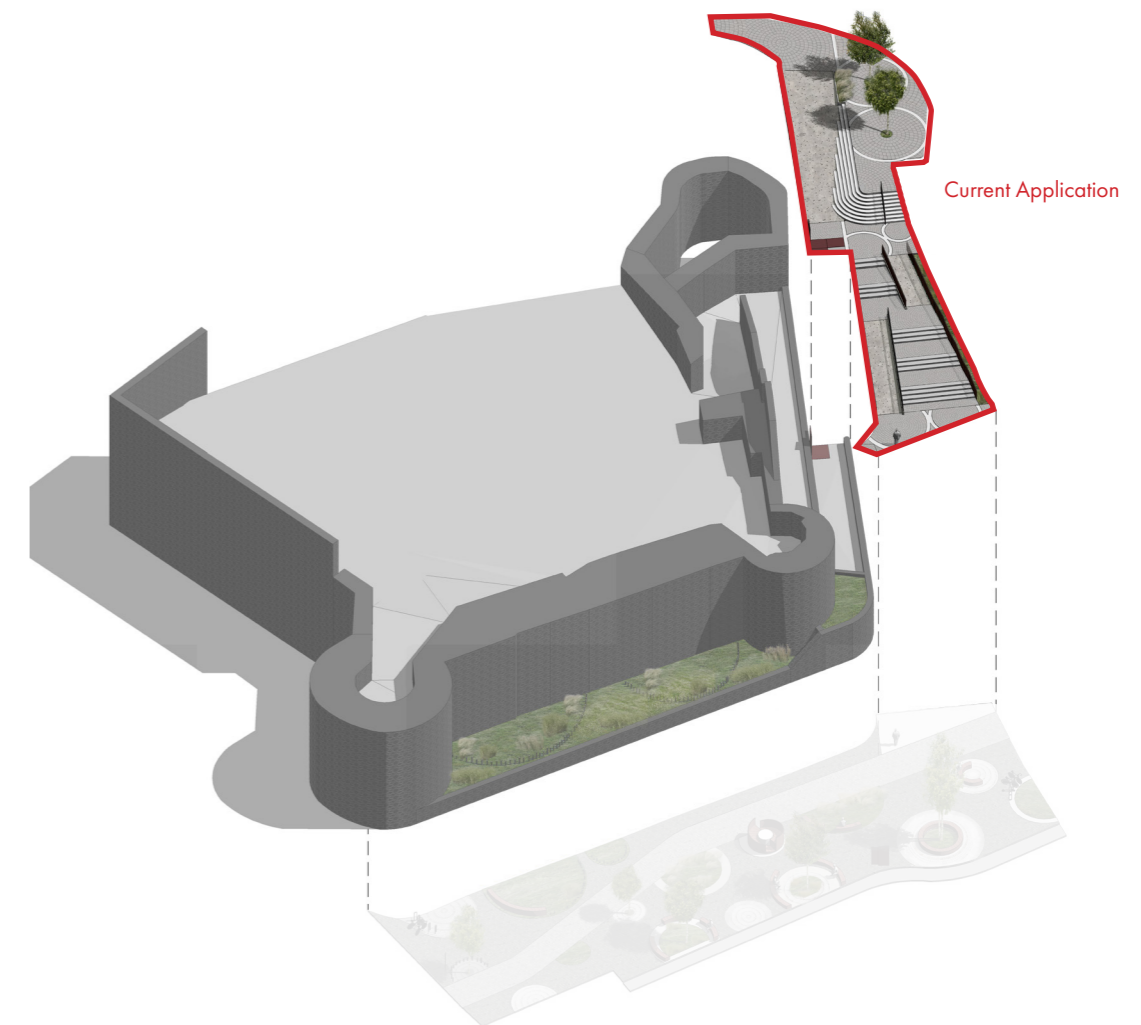


Figure 1.1 : Concept design visual illustrating the site integration with Athlone Castle.

2.0

SITE LOCATION & CHARACTER

2.1 Site Context & Description

2.2 Athlone Public Realm Character & Distinctiveness

2.1 SITE CONTEXT & DESCRIPTION

Athlone has a rich historical culture . There are many areas of important historical significance, namely Athlone castle, an entrance of which is located adjacent to the site of this proposed development.

Brief History

After the arrival of the Anglo-Normans Athlone's strategic importance grew. Athlone Castle, known as Adamson Castle, was built in c.1210 for King John of England. Over the centuries it has been a focus of the Anglo-Norman settlement . It was subsequently taken over by the Free State troops in 1922. A museum was established in 1967 which was then handed over to the Office of Public Works. The central keep is a National Monument today , which should be celebrated by the townspeople and experienced by visitors.

Athlone is also shaped by the geographical location of the town, parallel to the River Shannon whereby settlement in Athlone began mainly on the west bank . The importance of the River Shannon to the early settlement of the town should also be recognised as an significant wayfinding landmark both historically and to the present day.

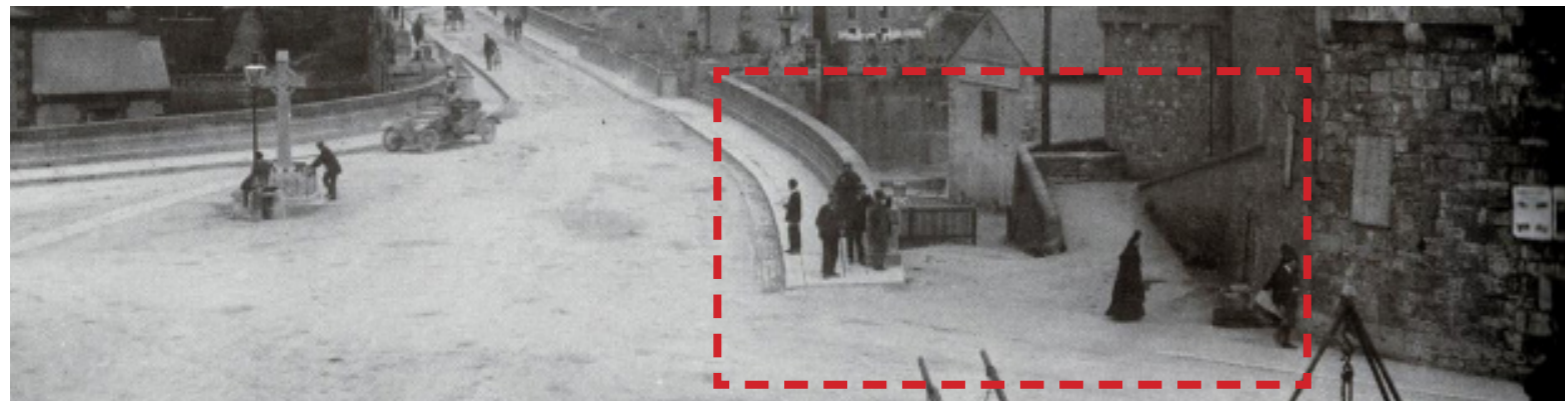


Figure 2.1 : Historical image of the castle entrance from the late 1800s or early 1900s , copyright the National Library of Ireland



Figure 2.2 : Present day comparison of the image above

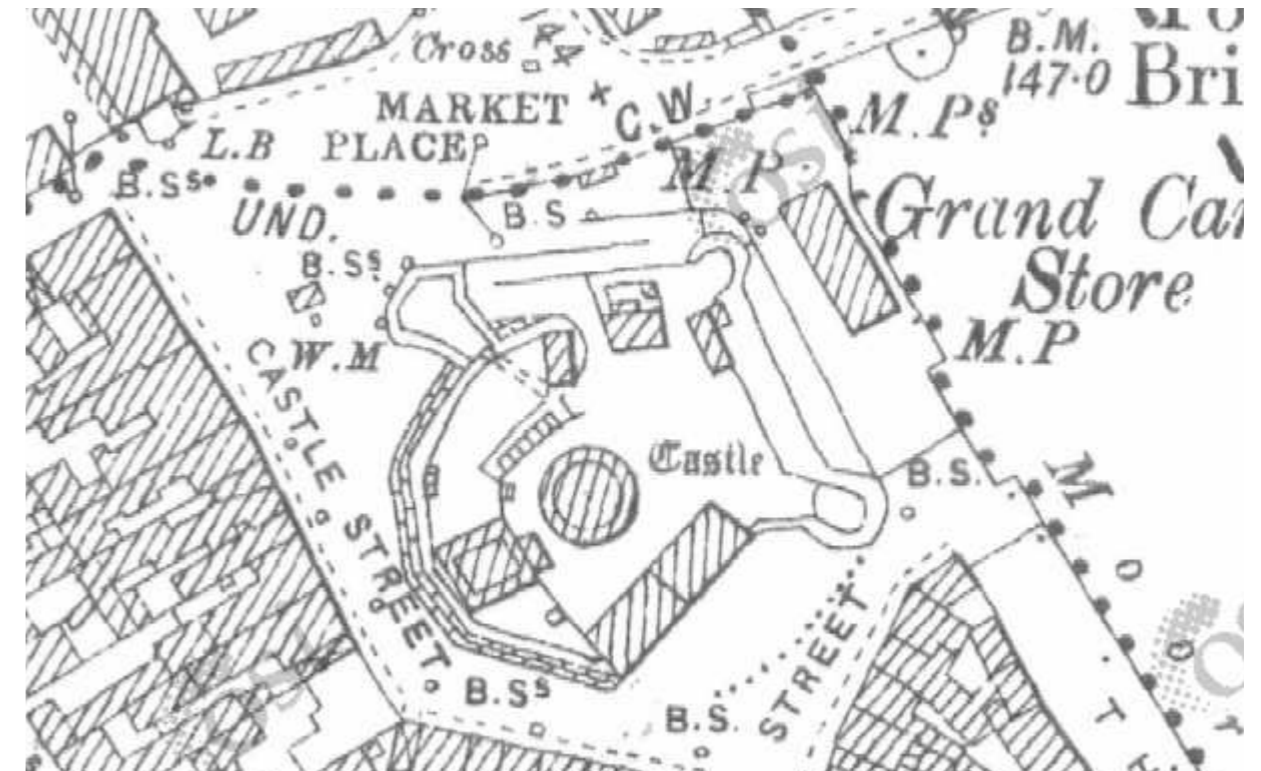


Figure 2.3 : Historic (1888-1913) 25 Inch map extract- Historic Environment Viewer



Figure 2.4 : Present day OSI data with site location indicated

2.2 ATHLONE PUBLIC REALM CHARACTER & DISTINCTIVENESS

Context: Existing and Proposed Athlone Public Realm



Figure 2.5-.2.10 : Clockwise , examples of both existing and proposed public realm character and materiality

3.0

SITE CONSIDERATIONS

- 3.1 Existing Site
- 3.2 Redline Boundary
- 3.3 Background Audit

3.1 EXISTING SITE

Existing Topography

Section A-A

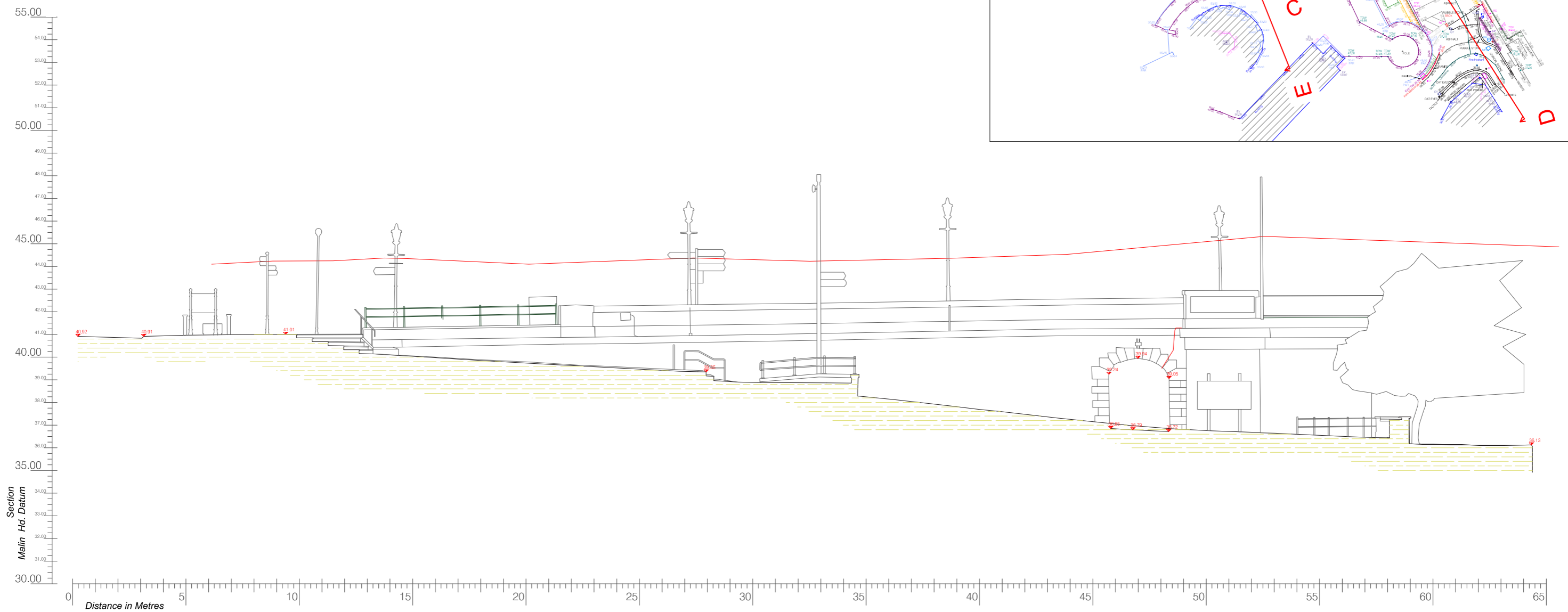


Figure 3.1 : Topographical survey completed by Murphy's Surveys

3.2 REDLINE BOUNDARY



Figure 3.2 : Site redline location- background based on OSI data

3.3 BACKGROUND AUDIT

Tourism and Cultural Quarter

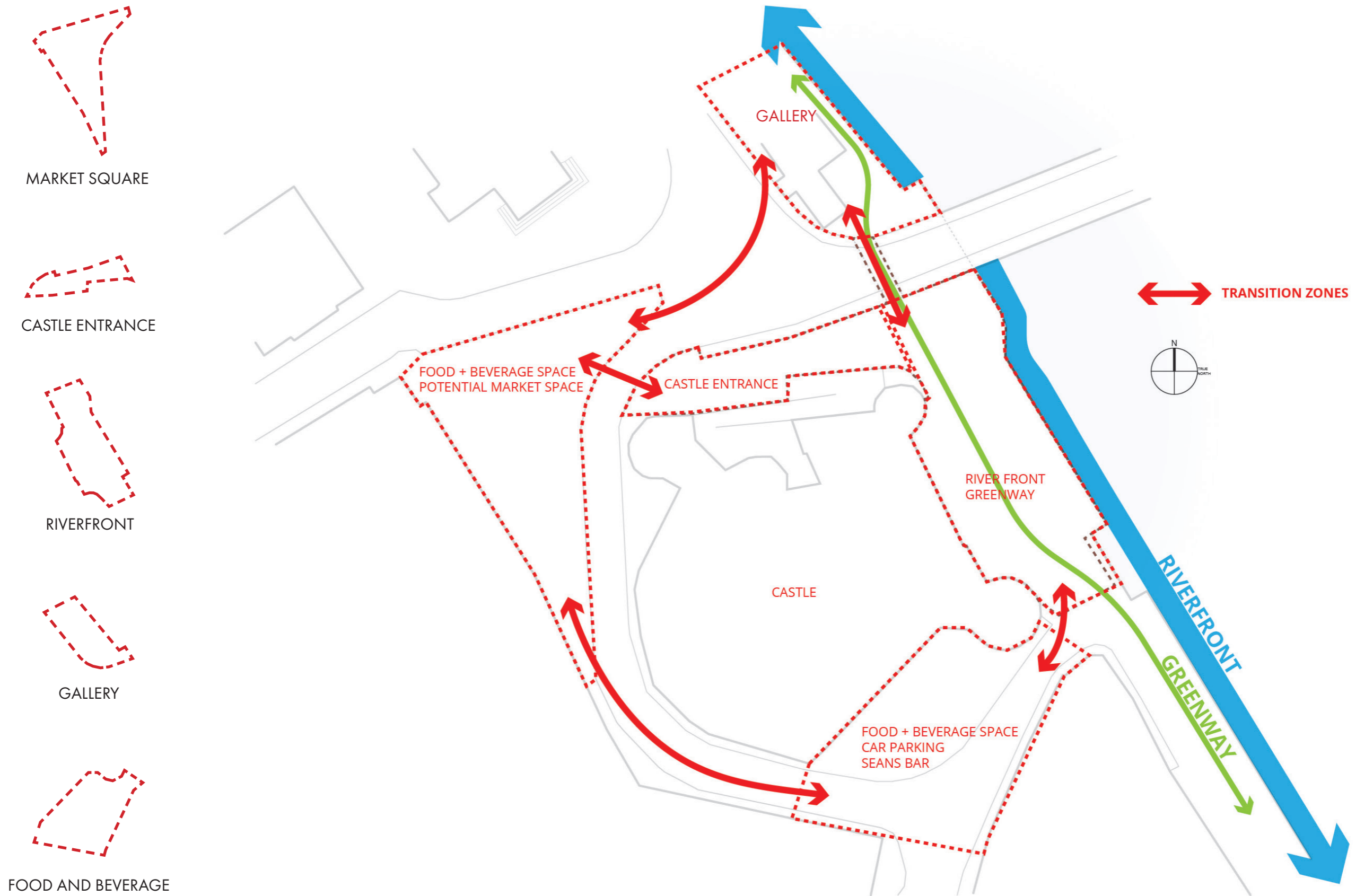


Figure 3.3 : Site Context considerations and integration

4.0

PLANNING POLICY DOCUMENTS, GUIDELINES & LEGISLATION

- 4.1 National Policy & Guidelines
- 4.2 Regional Assembly, Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy
- 4.3 Athlone Town Development Plan 2014-2020

4.1 NATIONAL POLICY & GUIDELINES

2.1.1.1 Project Ireland 2040 National Planning Framework and National Development Plan 2018-2027

Project Ireland 2040 is the Irish Government’s overarching policy initiative for the long-term planning of the State. It is informed by the Programme for a Partnership Government 2016, which recognises that economic and social progress go hand in hand and is made up of the “National Planning Framework to 2040” and the “National Development Plan 2018-2027”.

The **National Planning Framework to 2040** is the Government’s high-level strategic plan for shaping the future growth and development of the country out to the year 2040. It seeks to achieve ten **National Strategic Outcomes** (NSOs).

The proposed public realm enhancement works (the development) demonstrates compatibility to the following NSOs:

- **2.1.1.1.1 NSO1 Compact Growth**
- **2.1.1.1.2 NSO7 Amenity and Heritage**

4.2 REGIONAL ASSEMBLY, REGIONAL SPATIAL AND ECONOMIC STRATEGY (RSES)

This section refers to the **Eastern & Midland Regional Assembly Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES), 2019 to 2031**.

The development is fully consistent with the RSES that stipulates as follows:

Key priorities are to promote the continued sustainable and compact growth of Athlone as a regional driver, with a target population of 30,000 up to 2031, providing for an enhanced public realm and regeneration in the town centre along with significant employment growth linked to the further development of Athlone Institute of Technology (AIT) and building on the town’s existing strong economic base and enterprise clusters.

4.3 ATHLONE TOWN DEVELOPMENT PLAN 2014-2020

In the Athlone Town Development Plan, Westmeath County Council set out its policy for the

Athlone Town Centre Public Realm Enhancement stating:

- The strategic aim for Athlone is to focus development on “continuing to respect the primacy of the town centre, including prioritising the improvement and enhancement of the public realm”
- The policy “to promote the enhancement of the public realm [...], through the continued maintenance and provision of trees in the urban environment”.

5.0

PROPOSED SCHEME

- 5.1 Development Description
- 5.2 Architectural Design Statement
- 5.3 Concept Design Progression
- 5.4 Design Approach
- 5.5 Wayfinding
- 5.6 Materials & Finishes
- 5.7 Conclusion

5.1 DEVELOPMENT DESCRIPTION

PART XI OF THE PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT ACT, 2000 (as amended)
PART 8 OF THE PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT REGULATIONS, 2001 (as amended)

Pursuant to the requirements of the above, notice is hereby given that Westmeath County Council proposes to undertake the following works:

Public Realm Enhancement and Associated Works within an area encompassing c.0.0425ha immediately to the north of Athlone Castle (a National Monument and protected structure – reference Number RPS 070) and within an Architectural Conservation Area (Athlone Town), Athlone, Co. Westmeath.

The proposed development will consist of works at the northwest and proximate to the main entrance to Athlone Castle and include the following:

1. Removal of existing ramps, steps, railings, and relocation of public lighting
2. Public Realm enhancement to include hard and soft landscaping, footpaths, ramps, steps and public lighting;
3. Signage
4. Accommodation works (including utility provision, drainage and services);
5. Other associated works

The site is bounded by Athlone Castle to the South, Athlone Town bridge, also known as Shannon Road Bridge (a regional Monument and protected structure - Reference Number RPS 004) to the North, The Shannon quays to the East and Market Place to the West.

The Proposed scheme has undergone Appropriate Assessment Screening under the Habitats Directive (92/43/EEC) and screening for Environmental Impact Assessment under the EIA Directive 2014/52/EU.

5.2 ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN STATEMENT

The applicant wishes to provide a wayfinding and placemaking intervention, while applying a sensitivity to the surrounding cultural heritage of the site. The scheme will provide a high quality environment with sophisticated landscaped external spaces carefully designed to integrate into the existing context. As part of the Athlone Castle Environs Public Realm Enhancement, this project aims to remedy the disconnect between the East and West sides of the town by encouraging and enticing visitors to cross the town bridge and explore all that Athlone's Cultural Quarter has to offer.

The site is bounded by Castle Street and the town bridge, a key focus point within the Cultural Quarter. The site extends towards the river but excludes the existing arched underpass of the bridge. Wayfinding elements, such as the intervention indicated in Figure 4.1 to the right, were introduced in order to encourage tourists to visit Athlone Castle Visitor Centre, while also appreciating the view of the River Shannon as the river plays a significant role in the historical development of Athlone as a Town.

Prior to beginning the process, appropriate site analysis and public consultation was undertaken, along with the relevant surveys and assessments.

The design was developed through an iterative process of looking at multiple layout options for the site. Various options were analysed based on a number of criteria including connecting the East and the West sides of the town, enticing visitors to cross the town bridge, creating a decompressed zone in the public realm and provide flow to key attractions within the Cultural Quarter. This was then further developed with renderings, hand sketches and drawings to bring to life the vitality into the scheme. The final scheme fits well into the site and is borne out of the local context, architectural heritage and language of the area.

In order to provide an attractive public realm space, all paving material will be of high quality and suitable to withstand the expected pedestrian footfall. Circular paving designs have been incorporated to align with other public realm projects in Athlone.



Figure 4.1 : Concept Development visual at the entrance of the site, directing one to appreciate the view of the River Shannon.



Figure 4.2 : Concept Development visual to the base of the development looking back up towards the Market Square

5.3 CONCEPT DESIGN PROGRESSION



schematic proposal 1



schematic proposal 2



schematic proposal 3



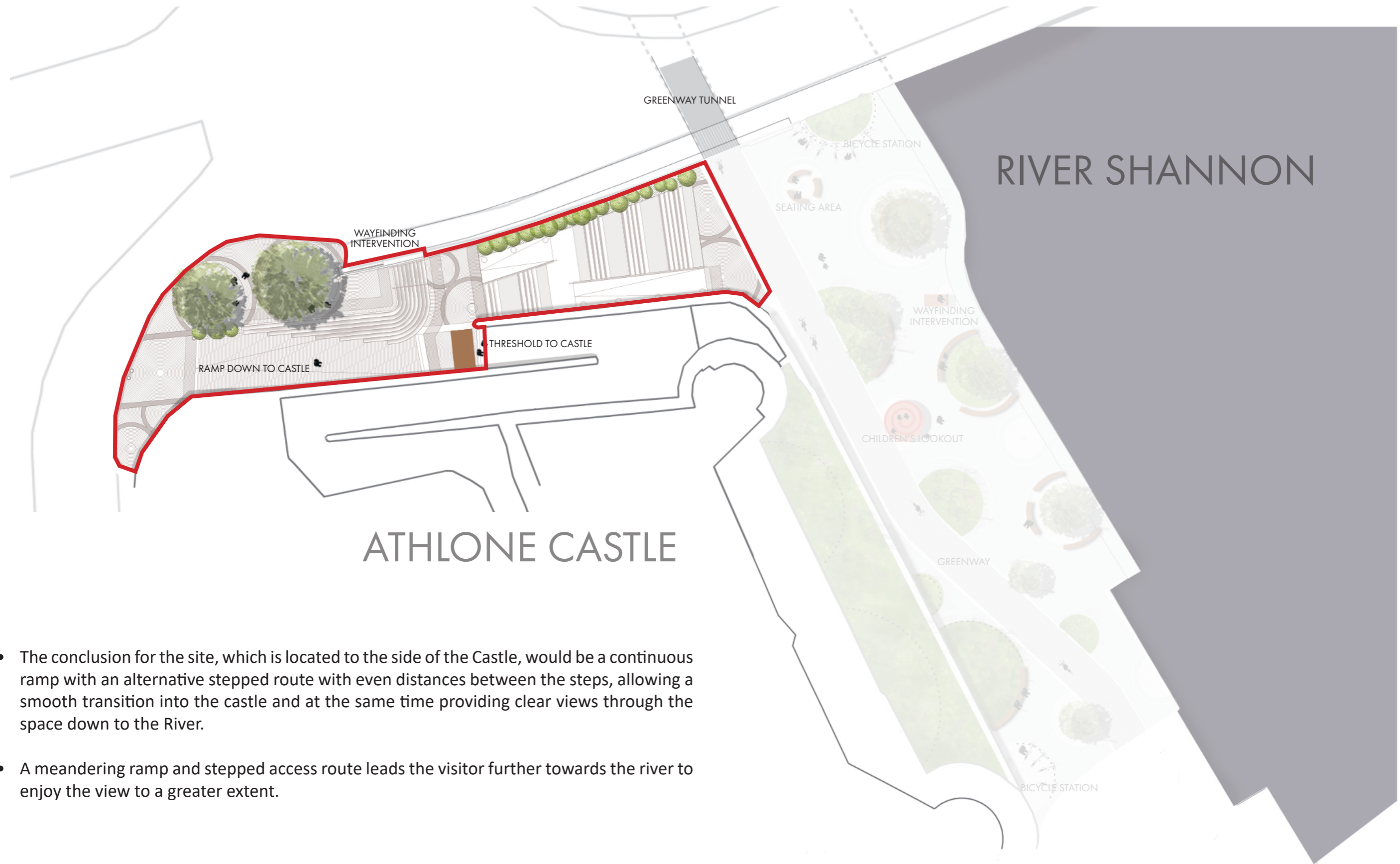
schematic proposal 4



Figure 4.3 : Illustration of concept progression and reference images

5.4 DESIGN APPROACH

Design Proposal



- The conclusion for the site, which is located to the side of the Castle, would be a continuous ramp with an alternative stepped route with even distances between the steps, allowing a smooth transition into the castle and at the same time providing clear views through the space down to the River.
- A meandering ramp and stepped access route leads the visitor further towards the river to enjoy the view to a greater extent.

Figure 4.4 : Zone A final conceptual diagram illustrating the meandering slow ramp with wayfinding interventions and focused views across the river

5.4 DESIGN APPROACH

Concept development visual



Figure 4.5 : Concept design visual indicating the view from the Market Square towards the entrance to the Castle with a clear site line River Shannon .

5.5 WAYFINDING

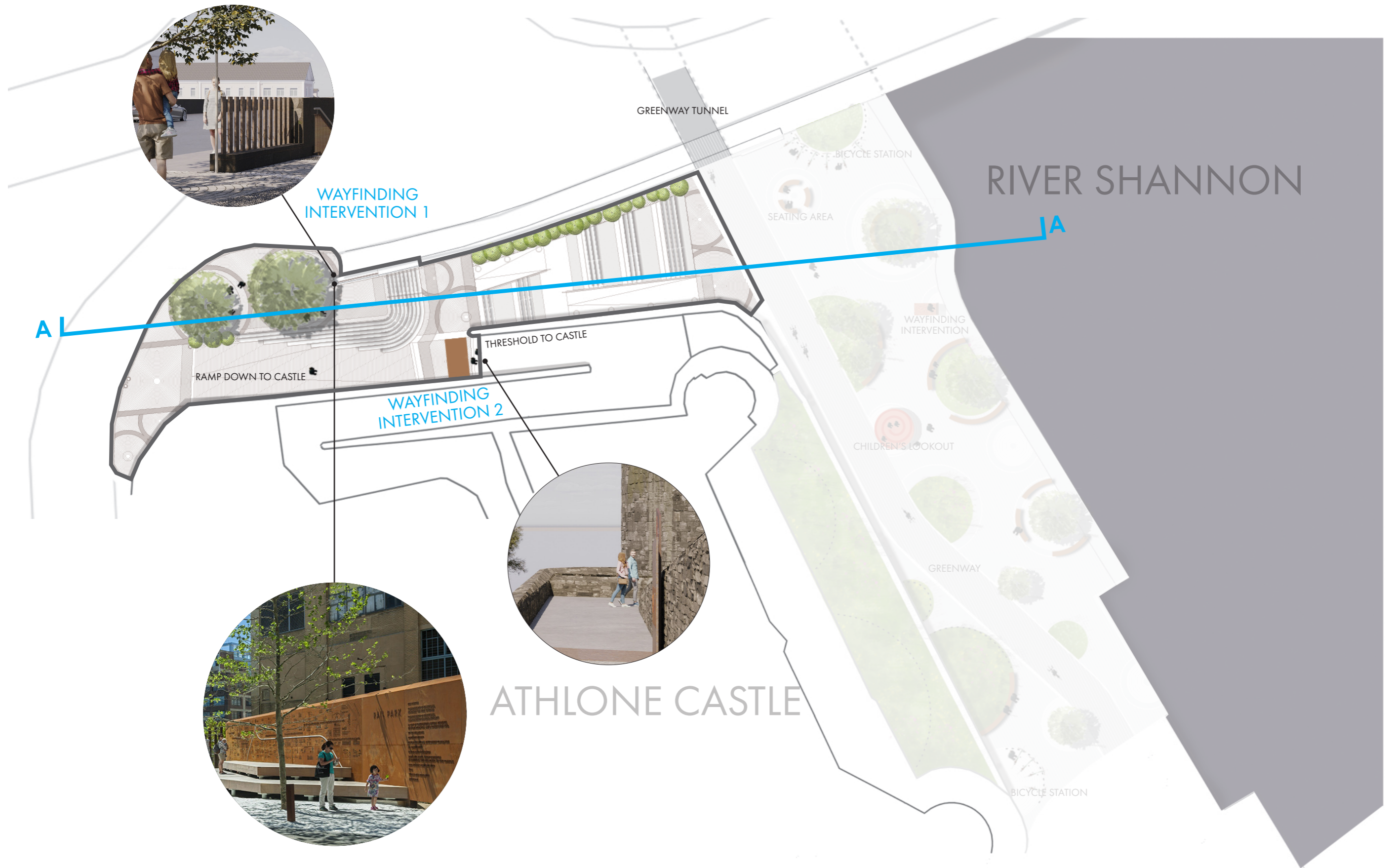
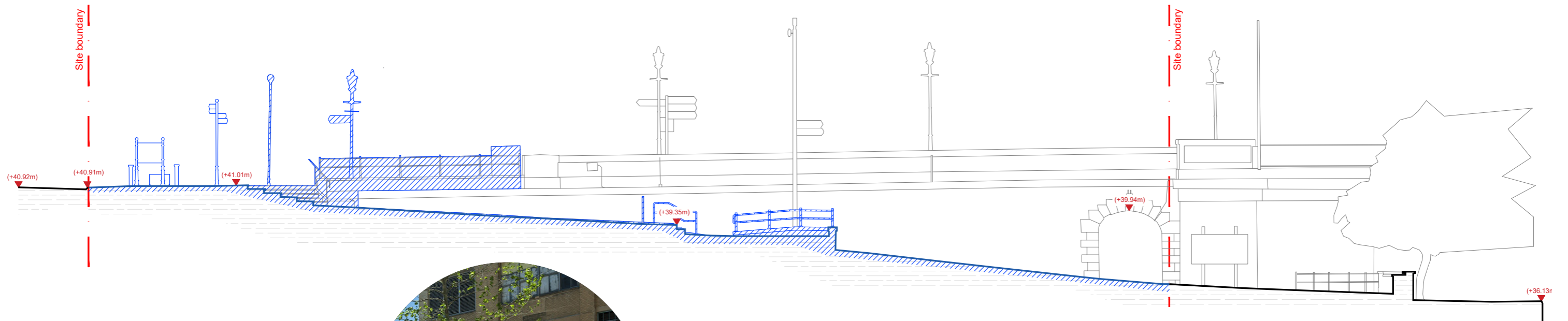


Figure 4.6 : Diagram illustrating the wayfinding integration pieces to encourage the public to visually connect with the river and the greenway as well as indicate

5.5 WAYFINDING

Section A-A

A-A before



A-A After

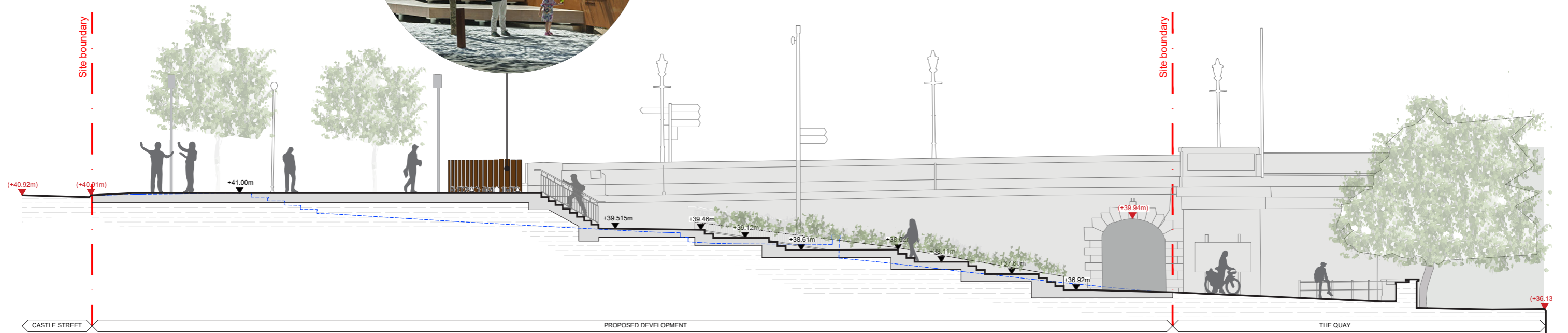


Figure 4.7 : Diagram attic section indicating the wayfinding integration to the scheme

5.6 MATERIALS & FINISHES

Precedent Exemplars

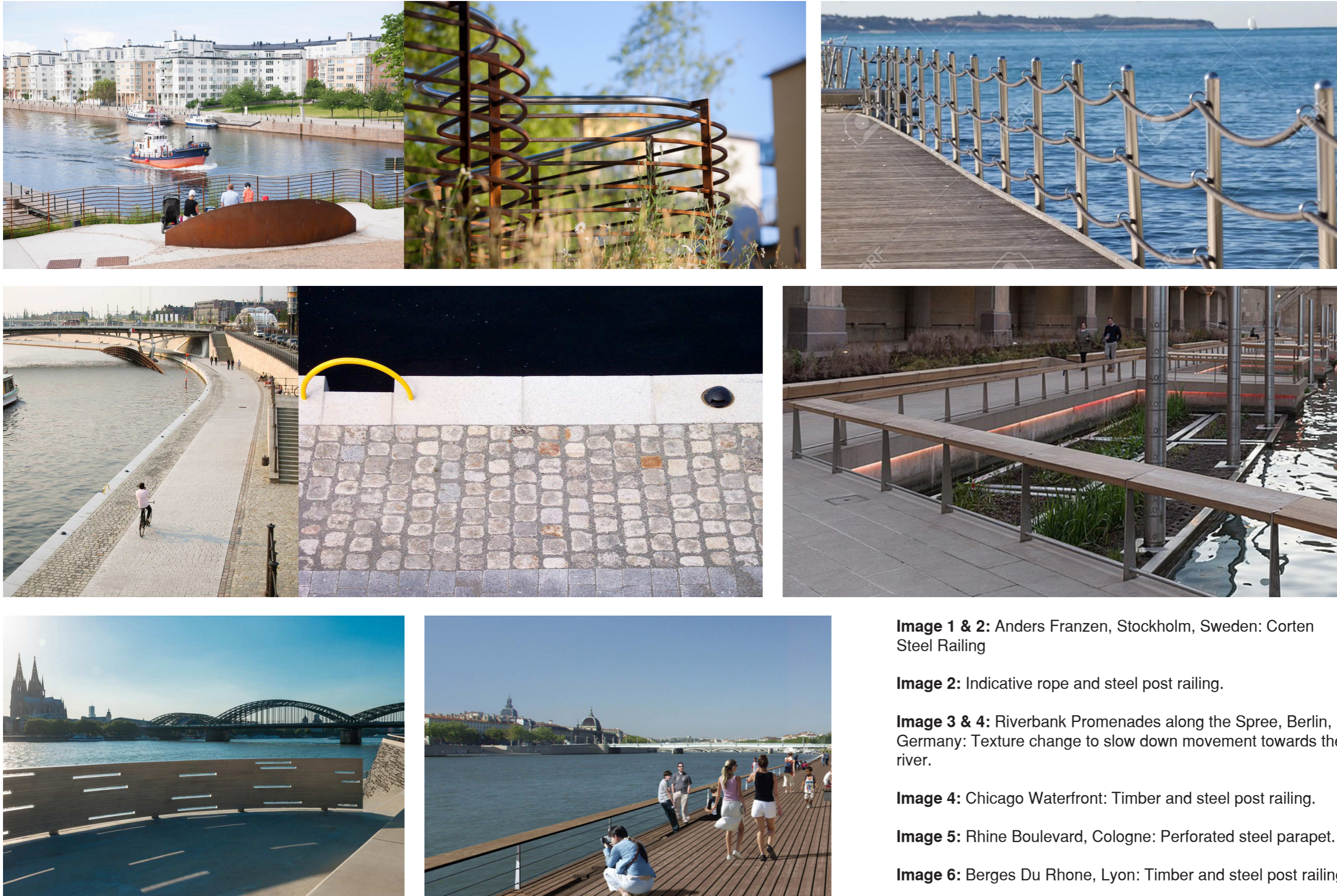


Figure 4.8-4.15 : Precedent images of exemplar schemes and materiality

Image 1 & 2: Anders Franzen, Stockholm, Sweden: Corten Steel Railing

Image 2: Indicative rope and steel post railing.

Image 3 & 4: Riverbank Promenades along the Spree, Berlin, Germany: Texture change to slow down movement towards the river.

Image 4: Chicago Waterfront: Timber and steel post railing.

Image 5: Rhine Boulevard, Cologne: Perforated steel parapet.

Image 6: Berges Du Rhone, Lyon: Timber and steel post railing.

5.7 CONCLUSION



Figure 4.16 : Concept development visual

It is our belief that the scheme has been designed to provide a vibrant public realm space for both residents and visitors of Athlone. The scheme has been laid out to create a calm and inviting atmosphere which promotes a sense of place and recognition of Athlone's rich historical culture. This scheme has also been designed to have a positive impact for the wider wayfinding navigation of Athlone, as the base of the bridge adjacent to the site acts as a gateway to the Cultural Quarter.



Figure 4.17 : Concept development visual

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