

1 – The Albert Clock (1868) by W.J. Barre, with the head office of the Northern Bank (1852) on the left, and the Custom House (1857) behind, both by Charles Lanyon (photo: author's collection)

## Victorian and Edwardian Belfast: preserving the architectural legacy of the inner city

## C.E.B. BRETT

HIRTY YEARS AGO, BELFAST WAS A PREDOMINANTLY VICTORIAN AND Edwardian city with a very strong character of its own. During the nineteenth century, it had grown from a small Georgian market town to a great industrial city, manufacturing, first, cotton, then linen, then engineering and shipbuilding. This brought an influx of workers from the countryside, especially after the Famine. Protestant workers settled largely in East Belfast and worked in the shipyard; Roman Catholic workers settled largely in West Belfast and worked in the linen mills. (That is, of course, an over-simplification, but one with a grain of truth.) In 1800 the population stood at around 20,000; in 1831, 50,000; in 1861, 120,000; in 1891, when for the first time it outstripped Dublin, 250,000; by 1901, it had reached 350,000. It reached a peak of nearly 450,000 in 1951. Since then, the population of Belfast within the city boundary has declined sharply, possibly now to below 300,000, though the population of the urban area as a whole appears somewhat to have increased, depending where the boundary is drawn. It is not only the population which has declined; so has the industrial base and so has the visual character of the city, especially the inner city.

The heart of the Victorian city lay close to the quays and harbour of the (dredged) River Lagan. The Custom House and the Harbour Office, warehouses and banks, the memorial to Prince Albert (Plate 1), the old parish church and St George's church, all tended to cluster fairly close to the waterfront. But in the second half of the nineteenth century, the town's centre of gravity began to shift southward. And, at the turn of the century, it was to acquire a series of monumental buildings, designed, I believe, whether consciously or unconsciously, to demonstrate and emphasise not only the new self-importance of Belfast, but also its independence from Dublin: the Presbyterian Assemblies Building, with its spire modelled on that of St Giles' cathedral in Edinburgh, completed in 1905; St Ann's Church of Ireland cathedral, still lacking its spire almost a century later, started a few years earlier; the technical college, modelled on the War Office in London,

completed in 1907; and, grandest of all, the fine new City Hall, completed in 1905 (Plate 2). It has occurred to me to compare this group of buildings with their near-contemporaries in Budapest – the Parliament House, completed in 1904; the Basilica of St Stephen, completed in 1905; the National Gallery, and the reconstructed Matthiaskirche, both completed in 1896; the Fisherman's Bastion, completed in 1902 – all designed to emphasise the independence of Budapest from Vienna.

The Georgian buildings of Belfast were, for the most part, built of locally made brick, since there was no good indigenous building stone close at hand. In the first half of the nineteenth century, as in England, rough brickwork or random rubblestone was often coated in stucco, and painted to resemble stone, but in the years of prosperity, during the second half of the century, imported stone was usually used for buildings of social significance. The standard of craftsmanship in Victorian and Edwardian Belfast was exceptionally high. Sculpture, woodcarving, ornament of every kind was lavishly applied to new buildings. This tradition, unhappily, came to an abrupt end during the 1914-18 war, when many tradesmen were killed at the Somme or elsewhere on the western front. It is only now beginning to revive.

The inter-war years saw little change in the architectural fabric of Belfast, apart from the devolved parliament housed on the outskirts of the city at Stormont, opened in 1933, and the Royal Courts of Justice not far from the Lagan, opened in 1934. A number of holes were punched in its fabric by the two major German bombing raids of 1941, when more civilians were killed in a single night than in any other British city, except London. But in essence, the city I explored with a notebook between 1960 and 1965 was as it had been in 1914: a respectable handful of eighteenth-century, or later, Georgian buildings, and a street pattern largely laid out at that period; a great wealth of handsome and often ornate churches and public and commercial buildings in the inner city; a ring of mill and factory buildings, with their tall, smoking chimneys, interspersed with close-packed streets of workers' houses; and an outer ring of suburbs, churches, and merchants' mansions on the higher ground encircling the central saucer of Belfast.

The layout of the city and its street pattern are not unimportant. The original, small, seventeenth-century settlement at a strategically significant river crossing was a very close-knit group of a few main streets, with numerous courtyards and alleyways linking one with another within a polygon of ramparts, long since swept away (though the security fences and barriers of the 1970s were to follow almost precisely the same lines). Outside these ramparts, the flat ground within its ring of hills was laid out in the late-eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries – almost like the New Town of Edinburgh or an American town – in a rational series of interlocking grids, adapted, however, to pre-existing roads and streams. It was only later that building crept up the slopes of the Antrim plateau to the north, of the Malone ridge



2 – Belfast City Hall by Sir Brumwell Thomas, completed in 1905, whose dome superseded the Albert Clock as marking the centre of Belfast (photo: Marcus Patton)

3 – Sir Charles Lanyon's Tudoresque masterpiece, the School for the Deaf and Dumb (1843), disgracefully demolished by the Queen's University in 1963 (photo: author's collection)



to the south, and of the Castlereagh and Holywood hills to the east. But generally, apart from the road leading up to the plateau through the Carnmoney Gap, building has never risen above the 150 metre contour line, above which water supplies have to be pumped, at serious extra cost, into new dwellings. In visual terms, this has had the delightful consequence that, until very recently, every part of the inner city enjoyed views of the surrounding hills, along the broad north-south axes of the main thoroughfares, or up Royal Avenue to the Cave Hill. The Georgian office of my own family firm stood close to the City Hall in Chichester Street. Every time I stepped out of its front door, I used to pause on the top step to enjoy the vistas of, on the one hand, the Castlereagh Hills, and, on the other hand, the low, symmetrical façade of Sir John Soane's Academical Institution of 1814, backed by the much higher slopes of Divis mountain. There were similar views up and down each of the parallel main streets of the inner city. Most unhappily, in the seventies the planners permitted the new multi-storey Europa Hotel to be sited so as to block off the vista of the hills up Hamilton Street and Franklin Street. Instead of learning the lesson when they saw what they had done, they have more recently allowed the BT Tower, beside the Waterfront Hall, to block off the view of the Castlereagh hills from the centre looking down Howard Street, Donegall Square South and May Street. This is a shame, and a misfortune not to be repeated.

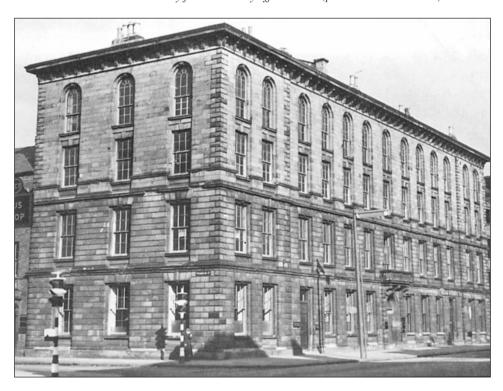
In other respects too, in the years since 1960, the city has changed almost out of recognition. In the mid-sixties, Northern Ireland entirely lacked apparatus for the listing and preservation of Georgian and later buildings. Public opinion was startled and dismayed when, of all people, the Queen's University authorities demolished two particularly fine and well-loved Victorian buildings – the School for the Deaf and Dumb of 1843, by the important local architect, Sir Charles Lanyon (Plate 3), and the Hall of Residence of 1859, known as Queen's Elms, by Thomas Jackson, facing Lanyon's original university building. In each case, the replacement was an uncongenial slab of concrete in the contemporary international manner. Public outrage led to the formation, for the first time, of an active group of conservationists – the Ulster Architectural Heritage Society – of which I was one of the founders in 1967. And that, in turn, led to the passing of basic legislation for the listing and protection of the built heritage in 1973. Unfortunately, bringing in legislation is one thing, applying and enforcing it quite another.

There have been, I think, five principal causes for the very sharp decline since the sixties in the visual character of Belfast. The first has been the greed of the property developers, and their resolute refusal to take into account aesthetic considerations, coupled with the failure both of architects and planners to stand up and be counted in favour of quality rather than crude profit The second has been the inexorable process of inner-city decay. The third has been the equally inexorable growth

in the demand for space by cars, lorries, and ever-more enormous container lorries. The fourth – now it is much to be hoped drawing to a close – is the Troubles, the long-drawn-out cycle of rioting, arson, shooting and semtex. The fifth has been the poor performance of the city's planners. How far this has been the cause and how far the consequence of the very low esteem in which planners are held in Northern Ireland by politicians and public alike is a matter of opinion.

The first cause means that the inner city has been irregularly sprinkled with inappropriate buildings, often high-rise, and far too often out of scale and sympathy with their neighbours. An early example was the loss of a very fine neo-classical warehouse block in Bedford Street (Plate 4), despite loud cries of protest, to make way for the twenty-three-storey Windsor House, far too close to the City Hall and the heart of the city, both of which it overshadows. Other depressing examples of inner-city high-rise office blocks are Fanum House and Bedford House, neither of which has worn well. And the record of the public sector has been no more creditable: Churchill House was built on the site of a charming old warehouse called Banquet Buildings; River House crudely overshadows the delightful National Bank

4 – Lanyon's warehouse in Bedford Street (c.1855), demolished to make way for a 23-storey office block (photo: author's collection)



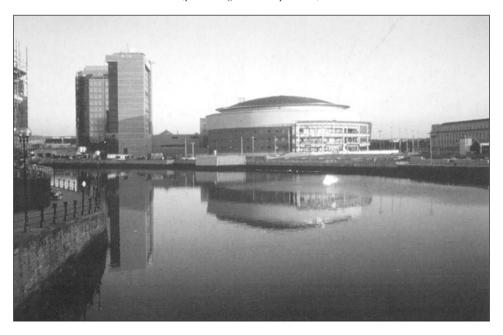


5 – River House overshadows the excellent National Bank next door (photo: Marcus Patton)

next door (Plate 5); Telephone House, the post office slab fronting Donegall Quay; the Department of Commerce in Chichester Street. I do not know of anybody who now likes or admires any of these dreary intruders into what used to be a tightly knit streetscape. There still exists, I believe, planning permission for an enormous office block on the very central and important Ewarts' site. Mercifully, it has not yet been built, and it is much to be hoped that it never will be. But now, a whole new generation of high-rise buildings is going up, many of them in the Laganside area, the most conspicuous being the new Hilton Hotel and British Telecom buildings. Neither of them is a building with the slightest pretension to architectural merit or charm, and both completely overshadow not only the only recent public building of any merit in the inner city, the new Waterfront Hall, but also the Royal Courts of Justice, Saint George's Markets, and the not-long-rebuilt low-rise Markets area of social housing (Plate 6).

I do not assert that high-rise buildings are always and everywhere wrong. They are fine for Manhattan; they are wrong for an inner city packed with good examples of Victorian and Edwardian street architecture. We should have learned our lesson from Paris: once the Tour Montparnasse had gone up, the authorities realised what a ghastly mistake had been made, and resolved not to repeat it, so that, thenceforward, high-rise buildings were exiled over the horizon to the new quarter

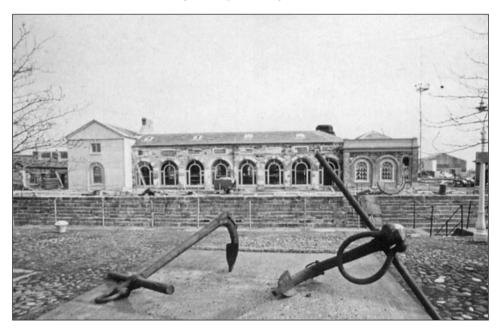
6 – The Waterfront Hall overshadowed by the Hilton Hotel (photo: Laganside Corporation)



at La Defense or to the outer suburbs. Belfast might quite easily have done the same. High-rise buildings would have done no great harm amongst the cranes, gantries, power-station chimneys and grain silos of the harbour. Unfortunately, apart from old buildings restored and the Waterfront Hall, many of the new buildings now going up in the Laganside area combine clumsy massing with inappropriate materials and shoddy detailing. They are designed to maximise let-able floor space and nothing else. I think this is acknowledged, and regretted, by Laganside itself. It deserves great credit for the quality of its water management, its weir, its engineering works, and its riverside walkways; also, for the restoration of its own attractive dockside headquarters (Plate 7). But in general, though it has succeeded admirably in stimulating investment and development, it has not succeeded in stimulating high-quality design or architecture.

The second cause, inner-city decay, is not unique to Belfast, but Belfast is by no means exempt from it. There are many seedy and run-down sections of the inner city, but in this regard, I think a serious effort to cope is being, and has been, made. The long-serving Minister for the Environment, Richard Needham, gave high priority – correctly, in my view – to the regeneration of the inner city in order to provide and enhance a neutral working environment for people both from the Protestant and the Roman Catholic residential areas. His success story was the building of the very

7 – Headquarters of the Laganside Corporation after restoration (photo: Laganside Corporation)



large Castle Court shopping centre at the very heart of the city. I was against it, because it involved the demolition of the excellent High Victorian Head Post Office of 1886. I do not at all care for the hi-tech glass-and-steel style in which its replacement has been built, but at least its great bulk lies on its back instead of sticking high up in the air, and it has certainly proved successful in bringing people, particularly those from West Belfast, back into the inner city. On this theme, my only reservation is that it may prove over-ambitious, with not unlimited resources, to seek to regenerate West Belfast, the Northside district, the Laganside scheduled area, and the city centre all at the same time. But if it can be achieved, so much the better.

As in other western cities, the pressures of ever-increasing road traffic and the demands for parking have much influenced the face of the inner city. The fourlane Westlink, which cut a drastic swathe through the city, destroying many good buildings on its way, was effective when it was built, but lacks separation of levels at several busy crossroads, and is by now inadequate to meet the traffic demand. It is going to take a great deal of money and much traffic disruption during the works to remedy this. The new Lagan road and rail bridges, on the other hand, have been very successful. Like the Lagan weir and its associated works, they are visually intrusive, but the engineering design is of a high standard, and must be accounted a success. But the biggest change has been the closure to most through traffic - originally for security reasons – of the former main axis through the centre of the city of Donegall Place and Royal Avenue. The result does not amount to full pedestrianisation, but it has greatly eased the conflict between those on foot and those in vehicles, so marked in many other cities. The comparative success of traffic management in Belfast, at any rate in comparison with Dublin, has been achieved only at a high cost in townscape terms. There are unacceptably large areas of 'space left over', some colonised by travelling people with their caravans, others simply given over to random parking, others again mere weed-infested vacant lots. And, where in the past main thoroughfares were invariably endowed with satisfying, dignified and coherent frontages, the new roads, such as the Dunbar Link, having been cut at an angle to the pre-existing street pattern, completely lack an appropriate sense of enclosure.

The fourth cause of the deterioration in Belfast's visual character has, of course, been the thirty-year campaign of violence. Riots, petrol-bombs, fire-bombs and high explosive car-bombs (not to mention the ensuing dereliction and vandalism) have done much damage. Even now there are to seen, scattered about the city, the carcasses of burned-out buildings, roofless buildings, blocked-up buildings and cleared bomb-sites. At some periods the campaign was aimed at 'economic targets'; at others, at publicly owned and official buildings; at others again, bombs were placed indiscriminately where they could inflict the greatest possible amount of

damage over as wide an area as possible. And for every building actually destroyed, many others have suffered severe damage to slates, roof-timbers, chimneys, window-sashes, and so forth. The code of compensation for malicious injury to property, though not over-generous, has on the whole attained its object, and much of the major damage has been made good, but many historic details have been lost for ever. And the fabric of the inner city has suffered a lasting injury.

My fifth cause is the most awkward and controversial: the extent to which the planners and architects can be held responsible for the deterioration in the visual quality of Belfast. There are a few, but in my opinion only a very few, good recent buildings in Belfast. Does it follow that there are only a very few good architects? It may be so, but many architects will argue, forcefully, that they have no alternative – they must provide the developer client with what he asks for, and if what he wants is a shoddy box with a shiny tin roof, then that is what the architect must supply. I do not entirely accept that argument, but there is a sufficient element of truth in it to shift at least some of the responsibility back onto the clients. There is no doubt that some speculators and developers are, quite openly and unashamedly, complete philistines, in the business only for the profits. I suppose there have always been capitalists like that. But what is much more baffling is that large, wealthy, important corporations seem no longer to have any interest in quality of architectural design. I find it extraordinary that British Telecom, which has an outstandingly good track record for its support for the arts, should be responsible for a new office block which is as inappropriate to the site as it is mediocre. The same goes for the Hilton Hotel next door, with its silly looking lop-sided hat. The same goes for the former Trustee Savings Bank, now First Trust, which acquired as its new headquarters a ready-made speculative venture quite devoid of aesthetic merit. The same goes for the Ulster Bank. For a hundred years, it provided Belfast, and Ireland, with many very fine bank buildings; now it has acquired yet another ready-made speculative venture: an appalling six-storey intrusion into the city's central square with the classical façade of the (listed) 1851 Methodist Church glued onto its front in the forlorn hope of pacifying the conservation lobby – a ludicrous example of façadism at its most spurious (Plate 8).

So then, what of the planners? Have they no responsibility for all these disasters? Of course they have. They should and, I believe, could have taken a much stronger line in restricting heights of buildings in the inner city, in encouraging better detailing, massing, materials, and, above all, in enforcing rather than compromising the rules applicable to listed historic buildings and conservation areas. (There are two declared Conservation Areas in the city centre, but they have proved, in practice, to be quite ineffectual, perhaps because there has never been a single Conservation Officer, qualified or unqualified, in Northern Ireland, and planners



8 – New speculative headquarters of the Ulster Bank, incorporating only the façade of Isaac Farrell's Methodist church of 1850 (photo: Marcus Patton)

lack expertise in architectural history.) The planners seek to excuse themselves by pleading that the quality of the architecture is not within their remit. They also plead, with some justification, shortages of staff and resources. But the sad truth is that in Belfast they have lost almost all their credibility. The Irish are not a disciplined race, like the Scots, the English or the Germans, and they resent bitterly any interference in their liberty to do as they please with their own property. Moreover, a majority, perhaps a large majority, both of public and of politicians, would probably take the view that jobs, prosperity and economic regeneration should take a higher priority than aesthetic or environmental considerations.

The current failures of planning control in inner Belfast will not be rectified without considerable changes in the planning service and its leadership, without the increased resources recommended by a recent Parliamentary Committee, and without a greatly increased determination to attain a better balance between environmental and economic considerations, between quality and profitability. Let us hope the new Assembly and its ministers are prepared to put political prejudices aside and to address these matters.

I now turn from the negative to the positive. For there has also been a positive side to the development of Belfast over the past thirty-five years.

First and foremost has been the enormous improvement in the quality and, to a lesser extent, quantity of social housing. In 1971, when the Northern Ireland Housing Executive was set up, the public housing stock of Belfast was certainly the worst in the British Isles, and possibly amongst the worst in western Europe, due to long years of neglect or, worse still, misguided replacement by unacceptable flats. Today, to quote a recent book by Richard Needham, former Minister, 'Northern Ireland has some of the best public housing in Europe.' I had some hand in this transformation, for I served on the Board of the Executive from its inception in 1971 until 1984, for the last five years as its Chairman. During that span of time, the Executive built over 50,000 new houses throughout Northern Ireland, most of them excellent two-storey or three-storey houses rather than flats, built to high standards of space and layout. It gives me great pleasure that, quite contrary to my expectations, the wheel of fashion has failed, in this instance, to revolve. New houses are still being built by the Executive to almost exactly the same specifications, because they have continued to be exceedingly popular with users of both communities – in effect, just what their tenants wanted. Many of them have now been sold to their sitting tenants, and the initiative for new-build housing has passed to the housing asso-

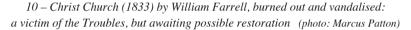
9 – Terrace in College Square North, restored in 1999 by Hearth Housing Association, next to the Old Museum of 1831 (photo: Marcus Patton)

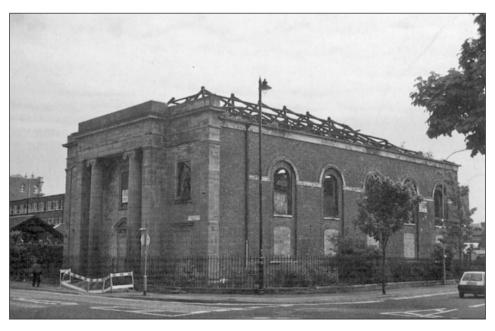


ciations and to private developers. It also gives me great pleasure to record that both have taken note of the example set by the Executive, and that the standards of space and design in the private sector have been rising steadily to meet the wishes and aspirations evinced by public-sector tenants. The fact that the two communities largely prefer to live apart, in territories divided in many places by so-called 'peace lines', is very much to be regretted. The divisions will not begin to disappear until trust and confidence can be restored, but at least, bad housing is no longer a serious cause of unrest and violence.

Of course, most (though not all) of the public-sector estates are on the periphery of the inner city, but it has been satisfactory to see a return of housing demand in and near the city centre. This fairly recent development is perhaps still fragile: it is unlikely that it could survive any resurgence of conflict, but it is an encouraging symptom of returning confidence. There have been some interesting new projects, mostly of flats or 'town houses', and some enterprising refurbishments. Some of the most exotic post-modernist projects have been waterside blocks within the Laganside Corporation's area.

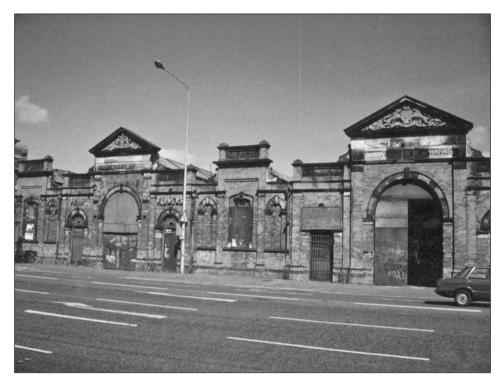
The restoration of a number of terraced and other dwelling houses of historic interest has been successfully undertaken by the HEARTH housing association and its associated revolving fund, of both of which I am chairman. These include terraces





of late Georgian houses in the Joy Street / Hamilton Street area, very much in the inner city, and a not-dissimilar terrace forming a significant group with St Patrick's Roman Catholic church of 1877 next door, and St Patrick's schools of 1828 next door again, which was very recently well restored by the newly created Belfast Building Preservation Trust as its first venture. It would be highly desirable if more such groups of buildings could be similarly restored in a co-ordinated way, for there is a tendency to look at buildings individually rather than in their context, a shortcoming not unknown even amongst planners. HEARTH's most recent very ambitious scheme, supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund, involved the restoration for social housing of three very large bomb-damaged stucco terrace houses, and the construction of a replica of one completely destroyed, very much in context with the Old Museum building of 1831 next door (the first museum to be built by public subscription in Ireland, now an arts centre) (Plate 9). Unfortunately, on the opposite side of this once-important street stands the roofless ruin of the very fine classical Christ Church of 1833 by William Farrell. It is greatly to be hoped that a suitable new use for it can be found before the building deteriorates further (Plate 10).

Over the past thirty years, a number of restoration schemes for important buildings have been carried out in different parts of the city. Amongst the most important early examples were the conversion by the university of Elmwood Presbyterian church of 1862 into a concert hall, which thereby made amends for earlier misdeeds; the very thorough restoration of Frank Matcham's greatly loved Grand Opera House of 1895 by the Arts Council of Northern Ireland; the splendidly florid and ornate Crown Liquor Saloon, of about 1885, by the National Trust; and the imposing Custom House of 1857, described as 'Belfast's finest public building and the peak of Sir Charles Lanyon's achievement', by the Customs and Excise service. The process is an ongoing one, and has received a considerable boost during the past three years from the availability of National Lottery funding to provide part (but never all) of the capital cost of substantial projects. An interesting example is at St George's Markets of 1890, designed by the then City Surveyor, J.C. Bretland. Extensive work is nearing completion with lottery aid, carried out by the Belfast City Council (Plate 11). A very lively market has survived successfully in this most attractive low-rise series of market halls, surrounded by brick walls punctuated by arches, pediments and knops. But, unfortunately, this building, like the neighbouring High Court building and the two-storey residential district of the Markets next door, is completely overshadowed by the multi-storey Hilton Hotel and British Telecom headquarters just across the road. Two other schemes, which it is hoped to start soon, are for the restoration and stabilisation of the Albert Memorial clock, which used to be regarded as the centre of the city, and for the conversion to offices of the highly ornate late Victorian gasworks buildings.



11 – St George's Market before restoration (photo: Marcus Patton)

12. – Offices of Hamilton Shipping (1998), close to the docks (photo: Laganside Corporation)



There have also been some very creditable recent private ventures into conservation, usually with the assistance of Historic Buildings grants. One is the conversion into a restaurant of an attractive quayside ships' chandlers of 1855, Tedford's; another, the restoration as a hotel of a pair of important seed warehouses of 1868, very close to the Albert Clock. They had lain vacant for over twenty years, to the near-despair of conservationists, for they exemplify at its very best the rich ornamentation of which the local stone-masons – in this case, Thomas Fitzpatrick – were capable. Insofar as these buildings typify the best and most characteristic of the architectural legacy of Victorian Belfast, their retention and restoration is exceedingly welcome, but once again, these are buildings which have been singled out for restoration on an individual basis rather than as part of a coherent group, and which suffer considerably from inappropriate and out-of-scale neighbours.

As to contemporary architecture, there is little to please my eye in the inner city with the exception of the Waterfront Hall by Victor Robinson, opened in 1998. The interior is extremely fine, a most successful handling of spaces, of masses, of textures and of colours. The front part of the exterior, in a clever combination of glass and stone, is also very fine, though I personally feel that the non-functional red-brick river frontage rather lets down the rest of the design, and I do not care for the fussy (and, again, non-functional) fins at the base of the dome. It is a great pity, as I have already remarked, that a contemporary building of so much architectural merit should be so brutally overshadowed by its unneighbourly neighbours. One other recent, modest, three-storey white office building which I like very much is to be found at Prince's Dock – the offices of Stena Line, as sleek and elegant as a modern ferry, and not unlike one (Plate 12).

There are many excellent ingredients, but the overall result is pretty indigestible. It is not easy to see how this state of affairs is to be improved, but it is possible that new opportunities will open up if and when the new Assembly and ministers take up their duties. One obvious step would be to give effect to the various changes recommended by the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee's Report on the Planning System of two years ago, which exposed many deficiencies. Another possibility, in the new spirit of cross-border co-operation, would be to look southward towards Dublin. Since 1973, it must be said that the legislation and structures for the conservation of the built environment in Northern Ireland have been far in advance of those in the South. It looks as if the balance is about to turn the other way, if the two Bills at the time of writing before the Irish parliament are passed. One lays down a completely new code for statutory listing and enforcement – with fines of up to a million pounds for those who accidentally-on-purpose nudge down historic buildings. The other refines planning procedures, and requires the appointment of

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architects and conservation officers. Is this not a field where it might prove advantageous to both parties to seek a closer rapprochement between the laws and structures for conservation in the two parts of Ireland?

## **ENDNOTES**

This essay is an updated version of a paper delivered on 4 February 1999 at a symposium on 'Urban Space and the Management of Cultural Diversity' in Berlin, sponsored by the Anglo-German Foundation.

Richard Needham, Battling for Peace (Belfast 1998) 135.