



1 – Skidmore Owings & Merrill's proposal for George's Quay, Dublin, opposite Gandon's Custom House and on the peripheral boundary of Trinity College

A greedy Celtic tiger

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FROM A CONSERVATION POINT OF VIEW, THE CELTIC TIGER IS A TWO-FACED ANIMAL. Prosperity means that there is a lot more money around and more restoration work being carried out by public and private bodies, as well as by individuals. In the private sector, firms are sponsoring restoration projects, and many period houses in varying stages of neglect are being purchased and, in many cases, lovingly restored by the owners. The restoration and refurbishment carried out on Dublin's eighteenth-century City Hall by Dublin Corporation is a case in point. This major building has, for many years, languished in shabbiness and with inappropriate interventions, but now its inherent qualities and interior splendour are once again revealed.

This type of restoration would have been inconceivable not so very long ago. Compared with ten years ago, the conservation scene has changed radically in Ireland, with a heightened awareness of the need to care for the built heritage and environment. This new and welcome attitude is evident from government and local authority level through to house owners and the general public. The government has put legislation and funding in place which will greatly strengthen the protection of the heritage. This includes a new survey to extend listing and laws extending protection to curtilage buildings.

But there is a less benevolent side to the rampant creature. Land values have soared so every piece of land becomes an object of desire (greed?), and the historic building on or adjacent to this land is viewed as being of little or no importance when factored into the profit margins of the developers. Planning applications are being made every day to demolish good, solid Georgian, Victorian and Edwardian houses (which have slipped through the net of the Protected Buildings listing) standing in their own grounds in order to cover the site with apartment blocks to the highest possible density. Rarely is the opportunity used to make the existing house the centrepiece of the new development; profit motives override all other considerations.

The dearth of experienced architects, joiners, stonecutters, users of lime-based mortars, etc, has been exacerbated by the fast pace generated by the economic boom and the current hugely increased interest in restoration. Realising the shortage some years ago, the Irish Georgian Society, compiled *Traditional Building and Conservation Skills – Register of Practitioners, 1998*. The updated edition (2000) has just been published with a 50% increase in the number of entries.

Much work is being done by various government and educational bodies to put training structures for traditional skills in place, and a whole new area of employment has been opened up. Each year the Irish Georgian Society runs a two-day exhibition of traditional building skills, and in excess of 5,000 people pour through over the weekend, seeking information and seeing that these skills are alive and well and in need of trainees.

The infill of back gardens of protected structures is another area where many a battle is fought between developers and conservation. Recently enacted legislation will help to modify this particular threat. In rural areas there is unbridled building as well, with apparently little or no checks or consideration for historic streetscapes, landscapes or coastal amenities. A little town in Co Leitrim has just had half a mile of its precious tiny stretch of shoreline covered with houses, and with more to come. This type of random development, which is not governed by an overall policy, is destroying the countryside.

On a larger scale, the escalation of demand for high-rise office/residential blocks has caused some major planning confrontations. Dublin is essentially a low-rise city, and this is a fundamental element defining its character (and attraction to tourists). Its non-threatening, low-rise ambience is one of its greatest assets, together with its important eighteenth-century civic buildings, Trinity College, and its Georgian core encircled by a Victorian band of mainly residential-type architecture. So when, in 1999, planning permission for a group of buildings, the highest to be 73 metres, was applied for in the city centre, the battle was on. The buildings themselves, designed by Skidmore Owings & Merrill, were innovative and well regarded from an architectural point of view (Plate 1). It was the location – on George’s Quay, opposite Gandon’s Custom House and on the peripheral boundary of Trinity College – that was worrying conservationists. The scheme was eventually refused on appeal, as was the subsequent 500,000 square metre mini-Manhattan up to 90 metres high proposed for further down the Liffey at Spencer Dock (Plate 2).

These ‘battles’ to protect Dublin’s historic core indicate the problems (from a conservation point of view) of an expanding city which requires more offices and more housing. Other cities outside Ireland have, of course, had similar problems, but the height, bulk and sheer size of these proposals was a first for Dublin – the outcome of increased prosperity. A city must evolve, but the pace of developing



2 – Part of Roche Dinkeloo’s proposals for Spencer Dock, Dublin, a mini-Manhattan on the Liffey, with office blocks up to 90 metres high

Dublin has caught everyone unprepared.

It is not only urban areas. Another huge area of concern, which is the result of prosperity on an unprecedented scale, is the upgrading of roads and the building of bypasses all over the country. With European money to be spent, usually to a deadline, there have been ill-conceived options proposed for many of these roads. In producing viable options (from its point of view), the road design office in Waterford proposed to demolish the gatelodge at eighteenth-century Whitfield Court and go through a protected habitat of bogland and parkland. Another option would slice through the shelter belts of the park and outstanding gardens at the major estate of Mount Congreve. This renowned collection of flowers, shrubs and trees would be severely damaged by the loss of its shelter belts.

The proposed Mitchelstown bypass and Mitchelstown Traffic Management Programme would have many damaging implications for the unique eighteenth-century set piece of Kingston College in Mitchelstown, Co Cork. This major square, of national importance, has just been granted millions for restoration in State and EU funding. One of the proposed routes for the Navan town bypass goes right through the parkland and driveways of Ardbraccan House – a historic eighteenth-century house of national importance, being carefully restored at great expense by the current owners. St Ultan's Well and the Sacred Oaks are among the wealth of ancient historic sites in this parkland; these would be lost if this route were to be implemented.

Some of these options appear to have been dropped after lengthy objections. The Irish Georgian Society has asked again and again for road design offices to have a proper conservation input. Only when a route is chosen is consideration given to an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). One is tempted to the cynical conclusion that large estates are chosen for some road options so that only one owner needs to be dealt with instead of numerous small property owners.

A spin-off of this infrastructural work is the need for the materials to construct roads, resulting in historic houses and landscapes being damaged by permission to operate quarries. Kilree House, Bennettsbridge, Co Kilkenny is an example. A nearby quarry has been operating for some time although it fails to comply with the conditions of permission. Now further permission has been granted for, among other things, a fourfold increase in production, an asphalt plant and a 35 metre-high smoke stack. All this at the heart of an area whose scenic and tourist activity has led to the village of Bennettsbridge being included in an EU-sponsored pilot programme on identification of potential scenic parks.

Conservationists are well aware that everything cannot be saved. The country and its cities must expand and evolve. More housing is needed, more office accommodation is needed, and more roads are needed. Everywhere is bursting at the

seams, but ad hoc, random development, a lot of it to mediocre standards, is not the way to deal with the situation. Unless a halt is called to ill-prepared planning schemes, our heritage will be irrevocably damaged.

Huge low-density suburbs are being rolled out, yet there are thousands of empty homes above shops. Ireland is not alone in having the problems which this situation creates, such as lack of life in the streets outside of working hours, deterioration of the building fabric, and vandalism. A scheme was launched some years ago to encourage people to live over shops, but it was not a success; living in the city did not prove to be an attractive option. A similar scheme is now being launched in five cities in Ireland by the Department of the Environment and Local Government. So much has the scene changed that there are high expectations of success, but it is in a worrying overall context. Poverty and neglect over many years has saved much of our heritage; prosperity in a few short years looks likely to decimate it. This is in spite of vastly improved legislation, the establishment on a statutory basis of the Heritage Council, and a genuine general wish to look after our heritage for the next generation. All parties involved in these exciting times, including conservationists, should stand back, take stock, co-operate, and work out overall policies and strategies.

Irish people bemoan the many historic buildings lost or damaged in the 'sixties by ill-conceived development, and wonder how such wholesale destruction could have happened. If we are not careful, future generations will look aghast at current development and ask in wonder and horror: 'What were they thinking of at the turn of the century?'



ENDNOTES

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ILLUSTRATIONS

Illustrations taken from Frank McDonald's *The Construction of Dublin* (Gandon Editions, Kinsale, 2000)