



*The facades of Nos 3 and 4 Harcourt Street, Dublin, built by Michael Stapleton (1786-88)  
(photo the author)*

# Decoration and property speculation: newspaper advertisements from Michael Stapleton and Charles Thorp

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CONOR LUCEY

IN COMMON WITH NUMEROUS CRAFTSMEN ACTIVE IN LATE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY Dublin, the celebrated stuccodore Michael Stapleton became involved with house-building and speculative development. Beginning at Camden Street in 1778, Stapleton was in sufficient business by the mid-1780s to describe himself as ‘Master Builder’ on leases and other transactions. By the time of his death in 1801, Stapleton’s will, dated 4th August of that year, recorded his trade simply as ‘Builder’, and outlined a substantial property portfolio, including houses in some of the city’s most fashionable residential districts. A newly discovered advertisement in *The Hibernian Journal*, dated 7th July 1788, emphasises the significance of this aspect of his burgeoning practice:

TO BE LET,

FOR a long Term of Years, in HARCOURT-STREET, near END to STEPHEN’S GREEN, TWO HOUSES, completely finished in a neat elegant Stile, (Stable and Coach-House to one House only) commanding a most pleasing View of Lord Earlsfort’s beautiful Improvements, and Wicklow Mountains, &c. and esteemed the best Situation for Air in Dublin.

Application to be made at said House, or to Michael Stapleton, No. 80, Marlborough-street.

The houses in question are the present numbers 3 and 4 Harcourt Street (Plate 1), and were built on ground leased to Stapleton in 1786 by the surgeon and developer Gustavus Hume.<sup>1</sup> On 4th August 1788, Stapleton let one house to Thomas Usher Esq.,<sup>2</sup> and thereafter the wording of the advertisement was amended.<sup>3</sup> The remaining house, which included the stable and coach house, was let to Lady Maria Steele in January 1790.<sup>4</sup> Designs in the Stapleton collection of drawings, held at the National

Library of Ireland, correspond to the two houses in question, including an elevation in ink and watercolour of a pair of houses that is virtually identical to those built.<sup>5</sup>

By 1788 very few houses had been completed on Harcourt Street (the reference to ‘Lord Earlsfort’s improvements’ describes the half-acre lawn that lay on the opposite side of the street from Clonmell House (17 Harcourt Street), the residence of John Scott, Baron Earlsfort), and emphasising that the buildings were ‘near end to Stephen’s Green’ may have assisted the potential lessee to locate them within Dublin’s ever-expanding streetscape.<sup>6</sup>

Something of a contrast is provided by an advertisement placed by the equally renowned stuccodore Charles Thorp<sup>7</sup> in the *Freeman’s Journal*, dated 1st March 1781, announcing the availability of a leasehold interest in two houses built by him at Gloucester Street (now Seán MacDermott Street):

#### TWO ELEGANT HOUSES,

TO be let, in the East end of Gloucester-street, by CHARLES THARP, No.10, North Cumberland-street, Stucco-plaisterer and painter — Every branch in these buildings are executed in modern taste, and in the most masterly manner; the walls, cielings, &c. ornamented, the painting and staining entirely new, and cannot be excelled in this kingdom. No expence has been spared in finishing them to the highest perfection. As the builder has had the honour of compleating the most capital buildings, in this kingdom, he flatters himself that on inspection, these houses (for convenience and taste) will be found to answer every expectation of the judicious and refined artist.

In 1800 Charles Thorp was deemed to be one of the leading builder/developers in Dublin, described as being in ‘very extensive’ business and employing up to thirty labourers.<sup>8</sup> Thorp built a number of houses at Gloucester Street throughout the 1780s, and on 10th May 1781 leased one ‘new dwelling house’ to Sarah Cooley, Widow – almost certainly one of the houses referred to in his advertisement.<sup>9</sup> By 1900 Gloucester Street was ‘solidly tenemented’, and following extensive redevelopment during the 1980s, no traces of its late eighteenth-century terraces survive.<sup>10</sup>

Compared with Stapleton’s somewhat gaunt appraisal of the houses on Harcourt Street as being ‘finished in a neat elegant Stile’, Thorp’s advertisement emphasises the fact that his ‘elegant houses’ have been ‘executed in modern taste’. This particular terminology was often used in late eighteenth-century architectural literature to describe what we now refer to as the neoclassical style, an example being William Pain’s *The Builder’s Golden Rule* (London 1781), which contained ‘the greatest variety of ornamental and useful designs ... in the most prevailing modern Taste’. Thorp also takes the opportunity to inform the potential lessee that, as a ‘judicious and refined artist’, he had been responsible for ‘compleating the most

capital buildings', a reference to his stuccowork at the Blue Coat School (now the Law Society of Ireland) and at the Royal Exchange (now City Hall), for which he had been described as 'a proper person to execute the stucco work &c. of that magnificent Building, in Preference of several others'.<sup>11</sup> The extended wording of Thorp's advertisement may also indicate a greater awareness of the marketing opportunities afforded by such notices.<sup>12</sup>

Of particular interest is the fact that Thorp's advertisement makes clear that the houses in Gloucester Street had 'the walls, cielings, &c. ornamented' before being presented for sale.<sup>13</sup> The practice of decorating houses as a concomitant part of a speculative venture in late eighteenth-century Dublin is clearly indicated by houses built in pairs,<sup>14</sup> and by reference to the measurement papers of the Dublin quantity surveyor Bryan Bolger, covering the period *c.*1787 to 1818.<sup>15</sup> It is further confirmed by referring to photographs of the interiors at 43-45 Mountjoy Square (all now demolished), built by Michael Stapleton from 1789. In these houses, prominent elements of the stuccowork were identical in composition and detail, indicating that they formed part of the original building and decorating programme.<sup>16</sup> In an international context, it is worth noting that No. 5 Royal Crescent in Bath, England, built by the plasterer Charles Coles in the early 1770s, is one of the few houses in that celebrated development to feature ornamental stucco ceilings.<sup>17</sup>

These advertisements highlight the commercial interests of craftsmen associated with the building industry in Dublin at the time. Given that property notices in eighteenth-century newspapers often make reference to houses 'richly finished with Stucco Ornaments',<sup>18</sup> indicating the value of an enriched interior as a commodity, it is perhaps only to be expected that stuccodores should decorate their self-built townhouses in order to solicit the maximum potential revenue.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## ENDNOTES

The following abbreviations are used:

NA National Archives, Dublin  
 RD Registry of Deeds, Dublin  
 RIA Royal Irish Academy

- <sup>1</sup> RD, 418/263/273407. The houses have been almost entirely rebuilt and now form part of the St Stephen's Green Hotel.
- <sup>2</sup> RD, 441/440/284857.
- <sup>3</sup> From 6th August 1788, the advertisement is identical save for the fact that it is for 'a house'. This revised notice ran continuously until mid-October of that year.
- <sup>4</sup> RD, 419/33/273026.
- <sup>5</sup> For further information on Michael Stapleton's house-building practice see C. Lucey, *The Stapleton Collection: designs for the Irish neoclassical interior* (Tralee 2007) 77-86. For drawings specifically related to Nos 3 and 4 Harcourt Street, see pls 14, 52, 80, 100, 139.
- <sup>6</sup> An advertisement in *The Dublin Evening Post*, dated 31st October 1795, announces a six-month lease on 'a new and fashionable House' in 'Holles Street, near Merrion-square'.
- <sup>7</sup> The stuccodore Charles Thorp is listed in *The Dublin Directory* as Tharp to 1789.
- <sup>8</sup> RIA, Haliday Ms4.B.31, 'Report on the Trades and Manufacturers of Dublin', c.1834. This manuscript document was compiled by the renowned antiquary Charles Haliday from papers 'presented by representatives of the Tradesmen of Dublin to Mr O'Connell as Materials for Argument to Repeal the Union between Great Britain & Ireland'. The information, compiled in 1834 by practising representatives from numerous Dublin trades, identified the most prominent employers in the city in 1800 in an attempt to outline the alarming degree to which they believed trade had declined in the years following the Act of Union. The description of Thorp's practice outlined in this document further records that he 'realized a good property which he sunk in building houses in Dublin — he died wealthy about 1824 & was succeeded by his nephew Charles Thorpe.' I am grateful to Anna Moran for bringing this document to my attention.
- <sup>9</sup> RD, 339/135/227821. Another of Thorp's houses on this street was let to the English cabinet-maker Peter Eglesso in 1783: RD, 355/504/242069.
- <sup>10</sup> C. Casey, *Dublin, Buildings of Ireland Series III* (New Haven and London 2005) 120.
- <sup>11</sup> *The Hibernian Journal*, 19th June 1776.
- <sup>12</sup> *The Dublin Daily Advertiser* for 7th October 1736 announced that 'Advertisements that require no particular Place or Character and are of moderate Length, are taken in at Two Shillings each', adding that 'advertisements may be inserted at a cheap Rate, [which] has been much wanting in this City'. Cited in R. Munter, *The History of the Irish Newspaper 1685-1760*

- (Cambridge 1967) 61-63. Munter further observed that advertising costs 'were seldom listed'.
- <sup>13</sup> An advertisement in *The Dublin Evening Post*, dated 2nd January 1790, for an 'elegant new house' in 'the best part of Dominick Street', notes that the rooms are 'finished in the best stile, with ornamented ceilings, &c'.
- <sup>14</sup> There are numerous examples of identical decorative schemes in late eighteenth-century Dublin houses built in pairs, including the front and rear drawing room ceilings at Nos 64 and 65 Merrion Square, built by Hall Lamb Esq., and leased in 1793 and 1792 respectively: RD, 447/477/290677 and 477/240/302068.
- <sup>15</sup> On 21st October 1793, Bolger measured the 'Plasterers work done for John Claudius Beresford Esqr. at his New Buildings in Beresford Place', executed by the undocumented James Higgins: NA, Bryan Bolger measurement papers, bundle 'B'. At this date the work included a 'Stucco flower' on the ceilings of the entrance halls of two houses, as well as ornamented cornices and friezes in their respective drawing rooms and parlours. The houses in question are the present Nos 3 and 4 Beresford Place.
- <sup>16</sup> The evidence of what may be termed 'speculative decoration' in Dublin houses contradicts the widely held view that the extent of decorative plasterwork was typically the concern of the lessee. Maurice Craig's observation that 'of two virtually identical houses one will be decorated and the other not, according to the circumstances of their original construction or disposal', represents an intermediate position. M. Craig, *The Architecture of Ireland* (London and Dublin 1982) 242.
- <sup>17</sup> The thirty separate lots comprising Royal Crescent were built by individual tradesmen behind a unified palace front designed by the architect John Wood the Younger in 1767-75. See M. Forsyth, *Bath, Pevsner Architectural Guides* (New Haven and London 2003) 146-50, and J. Ayres, *Building the Georgian City* (New Haven and London 1998) fig. 36.
- <sup>18</sup> *The Dublin Journal*, 21st August 1762. I am grateful to Sarah Drumm for this reference.
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