

INTBAU Ireland Paper to Seminar Feb 2011

The current state of architecture in Ireland

Modernism dominates, as far as Large Retail Developments, Office Blocks, Public Buildings, Schools, Hospitals, etc are concerned. Private housing continues to be traditional, except for large apartment blocks designed to maximise irregular sites, plot ratio and profits.

The biggest development in Belfast is the Titanic Quarter, mainly Modernist except for any existing buildings which will be preserved.

In Dublin, the docks have seen proliferation of boxes, including a new Conference Centre, which has three blank walls and a glass frontage with a sloping bottle-like front.

Examples of Mod buildings are the extensive hospitals built in Northern Ireland and the new Teachers Training College in Limerick.

(<http://www.mic.ul.ie/president/tour/default.htm>)

There have been a few developments in Traditional Style in Belfast (Queen Anne's Square), Lisburn (Lisburn Square) and Dundalk (The Marshes Shopping Centre). In the case of the latter, I spoke to the Planner for the area to see if an enlightened policy might exist and was disappointed that the Planner had little interest in the appearance of the building.

There are some small signs of improvement in design, eg the new Library in Queens University Belfast.

The position of and attitude to traditional architecture and urban design with the rest of the profession and the public

The profession is mainly Modernist with a minority of young architects who feel disappointed with the current state of things. The public is generally indifferent but can be motivated, as in Bangor NI to defend the seafront from development.

An example of indifference was the recent submission of a paper by INTBAU Ireland to the Belfast Telegraph in praise of Traditional Architecture. The reporter expressed interest but the article was not published.

The principal social, political and economic drivers of architecture and urban design

The principal drivers in NI have been Govt led initiatives for urban redevelopment, school buildings and hospital buildings. Financing has been mainly PFI / PPP with a perceived need for fast track design/construction.

In the Republic the main driver has been property development. Most shopping centres have been Modernist along with most Government sponsored buildings such as new Department Blocks.

There is now a pause due to the economic downturn. However, while the pace has changed the culture has not. One of the Republic's most attractive towns Kilkenny is in danger of

modernism. An opportunity is thus to appeal to tourism as an important sector in the economic revival.

Both the Republic of Ireland (RoI) and Northern Ireland (NI) have published Government policies on architectural design. The RoI text is commendable but all the illustrations are Modernist. The NI text is also commendable but does not include illustrations. Both Mods and TAs use identical language but mean entirely different things.

Changes in the position of architecture, society, politics and economics in the last decade

Since Mod has resulted in the ubiquitous box structure (from commercial to ecclesiastical buildings), removal seldom causes an outcry (except for DOCOMOMO). The recent removal of Churchill House a typical 60s tall office block in Belfast had a large audience for its demolition, mainly for spectacle, not for regret.

The current economic difficulties should be beneficial to TA, since it builds for permanence, quality, and whole life cost.

Most economic recoveries must advance on the basis of a large no. of small businesses rather than a small no. of large businesses. Return to TA is the best way forward economically, as it values heritage and culture and can grow incrementally. Traditionalists have big answers in small projects (street by street - plot by plot).

Projected future developments that would affect the position of traditional architecture and urban design

The current Government policy of applying 0% VAT on new build and 20% VAT on re-use is a policy of destroy and replace, a sure-fire means of killing local character, destroying heritage and replacement by concrete and glass boxes.

INTBAU should now make representation on Government VAT policy. This culture appears to obtain right across Europe so representation at EU level might be appropriate.

The issues that seem to be most significant at the moment and for the future

Selling Traditional Design and Culture is necessary. The general public is concerned with employment. We therefore need to link TA with craft skills, local maintenance and local employment.

We need simple means of persuasion spelling out principles very clearly. There are some excellent books available but they are targeted at the architectural profession which will not change unless a different tune is directed to the piper. Therefore persuasion must be aimed at the public, employers, clients, church authorities, etc.

How traditional architecture and urban design should position themselves to establish their position and their distinction from mainstream architecture and urban design

There are a number of options:

- Try to join with the Modernists and pretend there is little difference in the hope that traditional architects may pick up some scraps.
- Mount campaign in favour of TA with the object of winning the intellectual argument.
- Join with the Mainstream, deliberately carry out 'Modernist-type' designs but include traditional characteristics so that the overall appearance of this design is superior to the blank walls normally associated with Modernism. This would permit a gradual return to true architecture over time.