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## Apocalypse now, if we are not careful

A year of significant achievements could be overshadowed by a hardening of Ireland's arteries, writes Shane O'Toole

One evening in late November, thousands of Dublin commuters were given an apocalyptic premonition when a water main south of the city in Bray burst and threw the N11 and M50 motorways into chaos. Two of the city's main arteries were clogged by water from a burst pipe and the traffic nightmare gave us a glimpse of the fragility of the infrastructure on which we depend. The unchecked and effectively unplanned expansion of our cities is eroding the quality of life and there's no sign of an improvement.

Architecture has never been so appreciated in Ireland, but planning remains our Achilles heel. It is depressing to have to admit we are likely to continue choosing leaders who tell us what we want to hear even though we suspect the road leads to ruin.

The significant achievements in Irish architecture in 2006 all took place against this gloomy backdrop.

The death of Arthur Gibney and Sam Stephenson, two giants who shaped the face of Ireland a generation ago, and of Jane Jacobs, the American godmother of the community planning movement, unavoidably brought to mind the conservation wars of the 1960s and 1970s. We are not out of those woods yet. There is a particular irony, however, to the fact that many of the buildings currently most at risk were built during those fractious times. The gravest risk is to the Ulster Museum, where a proposed entrance pavilion and cafeteria extension threaten one of Belfast's most iconic public buildings and one of the glories of mid-century modernism in Ireland.

Francis Pym's cubist sculptural tour de force is internationally renowned for its daring and prescient splicing together of old and new and for what architectural historian David Evans calls the "almost barbaric power of its great cubic projections and cantilevers brooding over the conifers of the botanic gardens like a mastodon". Its loss or disfigurement would be a tragedy. The Ulster Architectural Heritage Society has objected to the museum's plans.

In October the owners of Liberty Hall announced their intention to demolish Dublin's tallest building and redevelop the site. The timing was curious, just 48 hours before the Irish Architecture Foundation's inaugural Open House Dublin, when an unprecedented 10,000 people took time over the weekend to view the inside of 100 unusual buildings normally closed to the public.

Hundreds turned up to see the iconic tower, meet Desmond Rea O'Kelly, the architect and engineer whose design dates from 1958, and experience the sights of the capital from the rooftop viewing deck that had been closed to the public since security was tightened when the Troubles began in Northern Ireland.

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While most visitors were prompted by the novelty of the occasion, many left with a renewed sense of the slender tower's worth, particularly in light of the minister for the environment's approval in June of amendments to planning schemes in the docklands area that will permit the construction of two towers — the U2 tower and the Watchtower at Point Village — each of which will be more than twice the height, and width, of Liberty Hall.

Perhaps renovation is the answer. Docomomo, the international organisation dedicated to the conservation of modern-movement buildings, had objected in 2001 to Shay Cleary's controversial remodelling of Cork county hall — still Ireland's tallest building, designed by Patrick McSweeney in 1968 — but Cleary was vindicated this year following the completion of his well-received makeover.

If the light elegance of Cork county hall was a pleasant surprise, the biggest architectural disappointment for many years was the dull, clumsy, bloated office block and plaza beside Dublin's city hall.

So much had been expected of David Mackay, the architect whose pioneering work in transforming Barcelona's public spaces during the 1980s earned MBM Arquitectes a worldwide reputation. Built under the supervision of Dublin's city architect the overblown structure, which looks like Robocop advancing behind a riot shield, is dishearteningly slick and aggressive without a hint of civic grace.

Two new arts buildings — Solstice in Navan by Grafton Architects and Source in Thurles by McCullough Mulvin — showed how to make successful public buildings that transform their settings for the better, while the most intriguing new work of the year was de Blacam and Meagher's extension to Cork Institute of Technology's campus. Using a mountain of brick, Shane de Blacam has produced a challenging pile of enormous scale — one that is sublime and timeless in parts yet also obsessive, idiosyncratic and wilful.

The newcomer of the year was Jason O'Shaughnessy of Architecture 53Seven, whose series of dramatic works in and around Portlaoise turned many heads.

Boyd Cody also featured in the world's leading awards scheme for emerging architects, run by the Architectural Review in London. O'Donnell and Tuomey won big commissions in Sheffield and London and is the subject of a new book by Princeton Architectural Press, a New York publisher. Heneghan Peng's long-awaited first building, Aras Chill Dara, in Naas, won awards at home and abroad.

The building, though, that everybody is holding their breath waiting for is Grafton Architects' dramatic Bocconi University extension in Milan. Now taking shape, it will not be completed until 2008. Meanwhile, Grafton's Shelley McNamara became the first architect to be elected to Aosdana, Ireland's academy of elite artists.

Public clients have been key drivers in improving standards of architecture in the republic in recent years, largely by emphasising quality when assessing value for money spent, hence trepidation at the imposition by the Department of Finance of new conditions for public projects from tomorrow..

The new rules encourage lower design fees based on reduced design input, so it is hard to imagine how the standard of our publicly funded buildings can be maintained. Less design input can only promote standardised solutions.

While a traditional architectural design competition for the Abbey

Theatre is in the pipeline next year, the building will be procured through PPP (public-private partnership), a development mechanism that displaces the capital cost of a project to the next generation.

PPP also curtails the normal relationship between client and architect during the detailed design development phase, placing enormous strain on the delivery of quality, particularly in complex projects.

Few building types are as complex as theatres. Many international experts maintain it is not possible to deliver a world-class performance venue by PPP. There is real cause for anxiety: the last thing the Abbey needs is another duff home.

The outstanding achievement in Irish architecture in 2006 was the award in Madrid last June by Spain's Queen Sofia of the European Union Prize for Cultural Heritage, as Ciaran O'Connor and Gerard Harvey were singled out from 214 nominees for their restoration of the Great Palm House complex at the National Botanic Gardens in Dublin. There could have been no more heavily garlanded celebration of the Office of Public Works' 175th anniversary.

In winning, the OPW architects — who developed new restoration techniques to save the last surviving prefabricated 19th-century palm house in western Europe, using cast iron columns infilled with Burmese teak panels and supporting curved wrought-iron glazing bars — completed a unique double in the 38 years of the Europa Nostra awards. The last time Ireland won this prize was in 1996 when the same team restored the famous Turner Curvilinear Range, also at the botanic gardens.

The year's most important architectural event was Ricky Burdett's Venice Biennale devoted to Cities: architecture and society. The biennale was a global wake-up call and a reminder that societies need to be self aware. This is precisely what we are not, although FKL architects — who curated SubUrban to SuperRural, Ireland's successful entry to the biennale — took important steps towards setting an agenda that would, if heeded, transform the development of Ireland for the better over the next generation, when the population is expected to increase by up to 1.6m people.

More than 1,000 Irish planners, designers and policymakers visited Venice to learn from the biennale. FKL's exhibition will tour Limerick, Cork, Dublin and Belfast in the coming year. The questions it poses are simple. Where are we going to live? How are we going to get around? The choices are not simple, however, and the answers cannot emerge from our current fragmented planning system. So who is going to create a planning framework that will permit us to join the dots before it is too late?

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