New Ireland

From Cork to Cairo, Irish architecture is taking on the world
Dublin wants the economic benefits of its revitalised waterfront to flow further afield, and it is hoping to encourage more high-quality development by easing height controls for new buildings. By Eleanor Young

Social climbers

Docklands developments around the UK have a familiar mix of overstated landmarks, blocky commercial developments and flats, leavened by the industrial legacy of warehousing. Dublin Docklands has all that. It feels like a high street pick'n'mix of the big boys of international architecture, with Partners’ plans for the 120m U2 Tower, the Grand Canal Theatre by studio Ljubski due to finish next year, and the global barmate Santiago Calatrava and Kevin Roche competing for attention, next to each other with Samuel Beckett Bridge and the National Convention Centre respectively.

Dublin’s dockside regeneration has an added ingredient, however, in a social programme that is producing interesting projects from Irish architects, commissioned directly by the Docklands Development Authority. On the drawing board are schools by Dublin practices McCullough Mulvin and Sean Harrington. The Sean O’Casey Community Centre by O’Dowd-Dunne-Turner shows where the ambition of tying together physical and social regeneration is succeeding. The project — well built, generous, with a delicate corten steel front — is interspersed with courtyards of silver birches — opens late this year. Its concrete tower, rising above the two-storey 1950s terrace of the East Wall area, has symbolic power — linking the outlying district to the increasingly high rise developments of central Docklands.

The regeneration of the city’s maritime heartland inevitably started with the sea close to the city centre, where construction of the International Financial Services Centre (IFSC) got underway in 1998. Development followed along the broad but accessible waters of the River Liffey, and now the tendrils are moving outwards, with a linear park which will link...
The desire to make Docklands into a liveable and attractive extension of Dublin created a conflict between different uses and needs and developers’ returns versus quality design. Special planning powers allow swift approval for schemes which comply with detailed master-plan requirements and development is also encouraged by corporation tax incentives, initially introduced for the IFSC.

London Docklands Development Corporation was the model for Dublin Docklands Development Authority, which was established in 1997, but the Ten Years on was set ambitious social regeneration targets. It is an on 20% affordable housing when that was still radical policy for Ireland. As reports emerged on population churn and the attendant problems, the strategy changed to an emphasis on family homes and social provision to encourage a more stable community. The latest masterplan for the 50ha Docklands was drawn up by Irish practice Murray O’Laoire and is out for consultation. Creating places for families was one priority; the other was finding a new consensus on height. Deirdre O’Laoire, who has worked on Docklands from the earliest redevelopment plans in the 1980s to the latest masterplan, says: “There has always been a very conservative view on height. And there still is today. The 25m height is dominant, sliced at reflecting the Georgian city.”

The issues of height and family provision have come together in a local masterplan for the North Lotts area, drawn up with West B. But first let’s meet John McLaughlin, director of architecture for Dublin Docklands Development Authority. He grew up in Dublin but spent 12 years working with the French architect Gaston and, in London, Libeskind’s David and Pringle Richards Shutter. When he arrived at the docklands authority in 2004, one of his first moves was to order the redesign of Grand Canal Square. Our went the dull granite facades and in came red poles and deep angled planters designed by Martha Schwartz. It signalled a significant change: public spaces were going to have to work harder, not just to convince developers and prospective tenants that this was a safe place to invest but to make Docklands a remakable part of the city. “I wanted to make it more architectural,” says McLaughlin. The next year will see the opening of two international projects on the square – Libeskind’s Grand Canal Theatre and a hotel with striking chequerboard facade by the Portuguese practice Aires Mateus. That was just the beginning for McLaughlin. The authority has helped private developers to invest £2.5bn over the past five years. It has handled land remodelling, parcelled up plots and, perhaps most importantly, offered a strong planning framework. Developers comply with that framework, now having a planning certainty that is otherwise impossible under the normal Irish system. McLaughlin has overseen Murray O’Laoire’s masterplan and intends to reconfigure the large Poolbeg Peninsula, site of city infrastructure such as utilities and sanitation as well as rich ecosystems. Now, in North Lotts, he is experimenting with a new strategy on height and open space.

The idea is to allow more flexible allocation of height in return for design quality and public space. This should give the area a different character. As well as being a priority for McLaughlin, public space is embedded in the Dublin Docklands Development Authority’s remit of social regeneration. Two linear parks, the first along the newly restored Royal Canal, the second growing up into the community of East Wall, should help the economic benefits of regeneration to spread further across the Docklands. A new canal – technically a water feature, admits McLaughlin – will create valuable waterfront and an area with its own island identity.

So how will McLaughlin’s work in Dublin be seen in ten years? The southern side of Docklands has the city’s highest density of homes so far: a disused tower by Shaxy Cleary Architects on Grand Canal Quay, Alto Vetro. The 20-storey project shows the impact height can have. It fills the site of a small detached house, just 170m, so the space is tight. There is something of a ship’s quarters about the two floors shoehorned on to every floor, each with views over Docklands and the Dublin Mountains beyond the city – perfect corporate lens. The corrugated curtain wall is punctured by apparently random balconies. It would be great if the North Lotts development could sustain this quality of building. Shaxy Cleary is also nearing completion on...
North Quay development

The plan shows ideas for creating a new island north of the River Liffey and a linear park connecting the area of East Wall to the river. Less visible is the change in regime on height which could give it a more varied character.

Grand Canal Square

Designed by Murna Schwartz, the square's red poles and planters take their cue from Studio Libeskind's forthcoming neighbouring theatre. It has already played host to music and theatre events.

A quite different kind of building. The two-storey Liffey Trust enterprise centre, which will assist new businesses, is financed by apartments in two six-storey office blocks. The building will include a performing arts school. There is a concerted effort to boost Docklands' cultural attractions, including renovation of the Point, the former music venue, due to be reopened in 2009.

The Abbey Theatre is also moving from the city centre and has embarked on a design competition for its new home. The judges lined up a strong entry, including Edward Jones and Michael Hopkins, the street Fiona Shaw and, of course, McLoughlin. This is unusually upfront participation for McLoughlin, whose role is more often about persuading, encouraging and cajoling. Having worked as an architect, he misses the detail of joining one material to another, but his work offers other rewards. 'It's like teaching,' he says. 'I am shepherding others.'

Docklands' success has come from permitting developers an easy ride, parceling up land and handing out permission. But McLoughlin has ambitions for quality design that extends beyond landmark buildings. We have got too much certainty to the developers. We will limit the quantum of development to good architecture,' he says. 'The better the design, the more you can market out of it, in his message.

Sean O'Laoire is looking forward to many of the buildings not yet out of the ground. 'It will be more dynamic architecture. Developers are increasingly recognising the value of quality and innovation. There is a demand for developers to demonstrate architecture that will comply not just with the letter of the law but also the spirit of the law.'

Hopefully this will happen in spite of the ugly economic conditions, so that the Docklands can continue the richness of tradition in Dublin rather than churning out an identikit waterside.

As the tallest residential building in Dublin, Shay Cleary's tower connects with views of the hills beyond the city. Its crisp detailing, with sharp little balconies jutting out of the flats, makes it an attractive new landmark for Docklands.

More Notes

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