THE TIMES THEY ARE A CHANGING...

The official opening of the eagerly anticipated Coláiste na hOllscoile in Derry's Great James Street was a spectacular, zeenamzatza affair. Stillsmials graced the ground floor of its dramatic central space, immediately changing its scale, and the angular redlight came into its own in a way organized by the architects or structural engineers. Gymnasiums suspended on twisted sheets hung from its steel structure unravelled themselves through three stores onto the terrazzo floor below in sync to the rhythm of Derry sonatas. Gaston McCrystal, these embolden on a voyage of discovery caught McCrystal's applause notes scaling skyscrapers as they emerged onto gantries and balconies.

Politicians, funders, staff, builders, architects, and client representatives mingled with others for whom Coláiste will be a welcoming place for all to eat, dance, sing and chat in Irish. The celebration, a mix of traditional and contemporary Irish cultural expressions - organized by vicarides Eileen O'Doherty and her lone husband Kevin (Doh new, sadly too ill to attend on the night) - was the culmination of a long, and no doubt at times, tortuous process that has resulted in a unique building, easily the most innovative built in the city for many decades.

The site, previously the premises of McMichael's Bakery, is just inside the Clarendon Street Conservation Area. It has one 15m public street Starage roughly equivalent in width to 2-3 Rui towncroes.

Very little remains of the original Georgian and Victorian terrace that ran between Lower Road and Little James Street. Mostly rebuilt over the last twenty to thirty years, a former Georgian Lodge stands as a historic boundary to the upper section of the street, now a modern collection of unmentionable retail development. With all this reconstruction activity it is amazing how the other sides of the street managed to survive largely unscathed.

From the late 1960s until the early '70s inner city Derry was caught up in the unrest caused by the Troubles. The term 'business as usual' shows an impervious to achieve the heavy riot and destruction of residential and commercial properties. The occurrence of the political, social and economic stability as well as the city's quiet economy cannot be overstated and impacted negatively on its development culture for decades.

Forty years on, with the advent of peace, the time and head space needed to initiate a more considered renewal of the most damaged parts of this unique, and once vibrant, historic city have just become available. It is within this disengaging context that Coláiste na hOllscoile has emerged like a phoenix from the ashes.

This fascinating building resists the norm. Visitors heading through the new Park from Marlborough Street can just about pick out its triangular roof light above the chimney pots of Sydneys Terence. The next sighting from the centre of...
Princes Street and Sydney Terrace reveals what appears to be a very plain, grey, narrow-fronted tenement house façade sandwiched between its neighbours. Their parapet lines step uphill to align with the adjoining neighbours’ eaves. These respect and maintain a distinctive character pattern, evident in so many of the city’s historic tenements. Vibrant yellow frames - inspired by the paint of the builders’ scaffolding posts - the only thing that might provide a dash of style.

Wandering on down the street the eye’s view is arrested by the kaleidoscopic stepped streetwall opposite, released in the first floor window. The two simple concrete facades take their place in the unfolding rhythmic mass as layer after layer of projecting piers and forehead reveal themselves beyond.

A look up till this street reveals the otherwise hidden side of what turn out to be vertical photos like a cast concrete concrete. A giant purple-like colour on one section of the Culturlann’s concrete façade echoes the painted plaster base across the street and provides a contrasting backdrop to the hand-painted signage – a clever replication of this common element in traditional street fronts.

The most dramatic view is from Queen Street. Popped up by its Georgian redbrick and flanked by No 1 Queen Street only half of Culturlann’s side facade is revealed. All three storeys crowned by the symmetrical yellow framed roof light continue to present a unity composition that adds a great visual energy and dynamism to the surrounding streets and street context. Completely of its time Culturlann has an architectural quality, integrity and inventiveness that holds its own position. Thanks to the skill with which its size, scale, massing and colour have been handled it respects and integrates extremely well into the streetscape.
The architects traced the origins of their concept back to their work at the Irish Film Institute in Temple Bar where measured surveys revealed an irregularly shaped interior courtyard whose roots and crannies offered all kinds of possibilities for achieving subtle and successful circulation.

Interested in the spatial qualities of a raised Irish tower house the architects pulled and hauled at the extremities of the vertical forest. Reeled to flood the internalized ground floor space with natural light. The terraces shade the first line of a stepped walk that three people through subconsciously - enabled by the architects to a hill in a parallel reaction. Steel stairs and balconies, in the practice’s trademark red oxide, are stacked into and between the concert’s sharp angles and chambers. Sometimes visible, sometimes concealed these wide explorations causing people to climb higher and higher until eventually the full spatial climax is reached.

The deconstructivist concrete forms, predilected materials and earth palettes of the interior are expressed in the building’s externalities - the kitted facade. This allowed the architects to reference - on a wide frontage - the essence of the vertical proportions established by the facades of the historic town houses, without responding to a pedastyle. In addition their innovation gives the facade a unique presence and character all its own. The glas horizontal crimped timber boards used to make the shuttering boards refer to the dimensions of traditional brick coursing visible across the streeet and introduce a human scale and pleasing textural quality.

Beloved of many architects exposed concrete is often associated with 1970s brutalism in the mind of the wider public. This can conjure up negative associations. But concrete and sandstone render are being rediscovered. Both contain sand and grey Portland cement. Unpainted sandstone render is common on front facades, yard return and gables throughout historic Derry. The use of this monochromatic grey concrete derived from Portland cement is entirely in keeping with this established character pattern.

There is no denying that exposed concrete in a wet climate can become unattractive. John Tomney explains that an addition has therefore been incorporated to make the concrete impervious. He is confident this will avoid the decay in water stains and algae that have, in the past, blighted exposed concrete.

Poorly built buildings can undermine the best architectural concepts and details. Derry contractor JMH have stepped up to the plate and hand crafted what has to be among the finest timber framed concrete on this island. Rising to the challenge of attaining the concrete quality sought was a matter of personal interest for the late Brendan Muldoon whose ordinary death –

Mary Kerrigan

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