Black to White: Small Projects, Big Impact

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In 1994 the interior improvements and exterior façade treatment of Black’s Pharmacy in Monaghan won for De Blacam & Meagher an ‘Regional Award’ (the RIAI’s annual Irish Architecture Awards former title). The same practice is the focus of the Irish Pavilion at this year’s Venice Architectural Biennale. In the intervening years, they have completed a number of significant commissions, which have in turn influenced a new generation of Irish architects to pursue architecture in spite of the challenges of practice. Their mews house in Heytesbury Lane (Regional Award 1998) was followed by the Wooden Building (RA 2001), interventions to Maynooth Keep (RA 2002) and the monumental Cork Institute of Technology (Irish Architecture Award 2007). The developments mirrored the bubble of the economy. While there is no denying the necessity of housing, heritage and schools, one can certainly question the level of exuberance that finds us on the other side of the bulge.

The RIAI awards have been an interesting metric against which practice, wealth, ambition and mere activity could be measured. With more than 50% of the Irish building stock built in the last 20 years, architects have contributed to this significant statistic by adding new and significant landmarks as well as preserving our older structures. What is interesting is the development of younger and smaller practices during this period of unprecedented exploration. Unlike previous economic expansions, the numbers of architects, newer practices and an active migrant workforce made for a dynamic working environment. For the first time in over a decade, young graduates could remain in Ireland filling the gap left by those who had emigrated in the 1980s. The environment also encouraged ever-younger practices to get started, leading to a rapid increase in levels of innovation, in particular in private residences.

Caught between the twin traps of growing families and increased purchasing costs – as couples who could not afford the increase in stamp duty let alone the ever-increasing house prices worked with what they had – architects were commissioned to excavate additional space by whatever legal means that transcended the limits of site, tectonics, planning and cost. These challenges were grist to the mill, forcing clients to accept non-standard thinking and new vistas. With television programmes underwriting this new home improvement agenda it became easier to accept new ideas outside of tradition. Gradually the default no longer applied.

Outside of individual houses, innovation was less obvious (often for good reason). While sized project is used to measure a firm’s capacity, it is not necessarily the most accurate metric to judge design skill. The home, and in particular the interior, features heavily in the work of Irish Architects. For years individual architects and small practices have mined a living from the repair, refurbishment, extension, conversion and enlargement of the Georgian and Victorian residential landscape of Dublin.

In recent years, houses of a younger vintage were included as part of ‘lifestyle makeovers’. The small-scale project,
The Plastic House by Architecture Republic is the lantern that illuminates one potential future. It is probably as far as possible from Black’s Pharmacy. The black polished Irish Limestone of the pharmacy’s façade, which identified with place and certain tectonic gravitas is set against the Plastic House, which challenges the notion of house itself, becoming for a time a temporary art gallery. The very material challenges the fabric of the living and the regulations designed to protect people from the unknown and untested. A brave attempt to explore new materials, which have the possibility of altering the very fabric of living.

McGarry N Eanaigh have utilised this early experience in developing strategies to deal with important human and social agendas. They have successfully navigated the space between the small-scale house and larger public works as have others like McCullough Mulvin and Grafton Architects. Many of these practices have established an International Reputation on the back of intimate works and competitions. This hard won experience has made it easier for every new graduate, with many setting their target on convincing the new O’Donnell + Tuomey. In order to develop, architects must build using the smallest of works to make an enquiry into the nature of space and tectonics. In the Parson’s Podium Infill Competition, FKL Architects (Maxim Laroussi, Javier Buron & Jean-Baptiste Astruc) illustrate the international character of this new development. Whether from America (Kenkabi), Morocco via France (Lauroz) or Italy, it is a valuable opportunity to open up the architectural discussion to new creative and inventive works. Now is the time for bold decisions, not reliant on the passive acceptance of tradition. We require more design intelligence at all levels of our society. One way to encourage this is to provide more access and opportunity for everyone to play a role.

In recent years, new practices have emerged with a distinctly different flavour. The boom saw the immigration of young architects from all over the world. Some were journeymen (and women) architects collecting experience as they came and went or others sat down deeper roots. Practices such as Ryan Keenan (Winner of the Radical City, Council Henrietta Street Infill Competition) and Architecture Republic (Maxen Larouzzi, Javier Buron & Jean Baptiste Astruc) illustrate the international character of this new development. Whether from America (Kenkabi) or Morocco via France (Laurozzi), it is a valuable opportunity to open up the architectural discussion to new creative and inventive works. Now is the time for bold decisions, not reliant on the passive acceptance of tradition. We require more design intelligence at all levels of our society. One way to encourage this is to provide more access and opportunity for everyone to play a role.