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Masterplan to get from Los Angeles to Grangegorman

Charlie Taylor

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Although he has worked on multi-million dollar architectural projects around the world, James Mary O'Connor had never toiled professionally in his hometown until recently when an exciting new development brought him home to Dublin.

Shortly after completing a diploma in architecture at Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) in 1982, he went to the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) to study urban design on a Fulbright scholarship. He had planned to stay two years, but ended up settling down in the City of Angels, where he has built a successful career as principal-in-chief at the award-winning architects and planners, [Moore Ruble Yudell](#).

Many graduates left Ireland in the 1980s because of the lack of opportunities, but O'Connor had other reasons for departing.

"My interest in going abroad was to do with coming from a small island and wanting to know a whole lot more about design elsewhere," he says. "In LA I was brought into a completely different culture.

"It was an exciting place to be because a lot of core ideas around urban design were being explored there. It was really eye-opening."

After finishing at UCLA, O'Connor established his own practice with a friend but after just two years, his former teacher, architect Charles Moore, sought him out to help on a project in Japan.

This led him eventually to join Moore's Santa Monica-based practice, where he has remained for more than 30 years, with special responsibility for many of the firm's Asian projects.

O'Connor has led design teams on large-scale architectural and planning projects throughout the US and the world.

Among them are the 5,000 unit Serendra mixed-use development in the Philippines, the Potatisåkern project in Malmö, Sweden, the Uludag ski resort in Bursa, Turkey, new US embassies in Chad and Finland, and the Gottingen station plan in Germany, which included planning a new town around an existing train station.

More recently, he has led the design effort on the new 21,000sq m (226,000sq ft) main library at Shanghai Technology University in China. The new campus for Shanghai Theatre Academy, which comprises of a mix of academic, library, performing arts training and theatre facilities, is also on the cards.

O'Connor has been recognised throughout his career, receiving many national and international awards. His projects have been finalists in the prestigious [World Architecture Festival](#) in Barcelona and Singapore in each of the past five years.

He has also gained a reputation as a visiting lecturer and for his teaching at UCLA design studios.

O'Connor believes the secret to his success lies in being an architect who really tries to connect with his environment.

"I have never wanted to be the type of architect who just flies in, stays at expensive hotels, has meetings and then jets off again," he says.

"I want to understand a place and get to know it fully. Obviously you can design from a distance but to really understand the nuances of a place you have to be there to really get it and that goes for whether you're in Dublin, Kobe or elsewhere."

Being Irish has also helped. "Coming from Ireland was a bonus, especially early on," he says. "There are so many of us scattered across the world and we have a pretty good reputation. Irish people communicate with others in such an enthusiastic manner and this social engagement really allows clients to connect with ideas."

Despite working in so many different cultures, O'Connor had never worked in Ireland. That all changed when his firm won the Masterplan competition for the Grangegorman development in Dublin in 2007.

The plan covers a site that stretches over 73 acres on the north side of the capital. Once completed, the development will unite the 39 disparate colleges and outposts of DIT on one campus, catering for up to 20,000 staff and students.

For O'Connor, winning the competition to design the site so close to where he grew up is hugely rewarding.

"I'd never built anything here and it seemed like a site that was frozen in time," he says. "I grew up very near to Grangegorman and used to pass through it all the time so I felt like I knew it intimately. In addition, I'd studied at DIT, so the project really appealed to me."

O'Connor hopes that his fellow alumni will offer support to their alma mater as it settles into its new premises in the coming years.

For his part, he's been enjoying his frequent trips back home as he oversees the project, especially as one of his two sons has been based here while studying for an MPhil at Trinity College Dublin.

Ultimately, he says, Ireland doesn't seem as far away from Los Angeles as it once did.

"The country is more connected to the world than it once was and that makes it feel like I'm never really that far from here," he says.

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