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Workshop 04 Resource Networks in Existing Buildings

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THE MODERNISATION OF OLD BUILDINGS AND THE PRESERVATION OF HISTORIC MONUMENTS – THE IRISH EXPERIENCE

The world was at war, when in 1916, a rebellion against the Union with Great Britain broke out in Dublin, as Ireland made its bid for freedom and independence. This event led eventually to the formation of the Irish State in 1922, but with the country damaged and impoverished. The urgent need to create unity, reconstruction and vision for the future, was instrumental in seeing available accommodation provided for Government and Parliament.

Two hundred years earlier, throughout the 18th century Ireland had its own Parliament, separate from London, and housed in a purposefully designed building. That Neo-Palladian "Parliament House" consisted of a bicameral legislature, the Upper and Lower Houses placed in an informal relationship to one another, with a corridor surrounding the Lower House on three sides, ante rooms protecting both chambers, committee – rooms clustering the periphery, and a grand colonnaded atrium by way of screen and frontispiece. The success of the American and French Revolutions had inspired an early revolution in Ireland in 1798 which failed, and the Act of Union with Britain which followed in 1801 ended the then Irish Parliament. The redundant building, still regarded architecturally as one of the most important buildings in Dublin, was sold to the Bank of Ireland in 1803 and remains its headquarters to this date.

A brief break away parliament formed in 1919 met on a few occasions in the Round Room of the Mansion House (Lord Mayor's premises), but it was the availability of the lecture theatre at the Royal Dublin Society's building – known as Leinster House

— that the new Irish Government saw fit in 1922 to rent, to provide for parliamentary meetings, on a temporary basis. Concurrently, the Government took possession of the newly completed complex of the Local Government Board of British Administration and the Royal College of Science and State Offices. It founded its Ministerial Offices, Cabinet Room, and the senior Department of the Taoiseach (Prime Minister) and of Finance, within the complex, sharing space for many years with the Faculty of Engineering from the University. That complex eventually became known as Government Buildings.

Both Leinster House and Government Buildings occupy sites on a city block of 8.2 hectares, 1 km. south of the city centre.

Leinster House had been a large private house built in 1745 in a then unfashionable part of the city. It was acquired by the Royal Dublin Society in 1850 as their headquarters from which to promote and develop interests in farming, husbandry, and arts and crafts. The Society organised architectural competitions throughout the remaining decades of the nineteenth century to build new cultural institutions at its grounds around Leinster House. Beginning in 1859 they built a Natural History Museum, a National Art Gallery, a National Library and a National Museum, having earlier been stimulated by the success of the 1853 Dublin Exhibition, also in the grounds, and visited by over 1 million people in 6 months.

The 19th century cultural buildings flanking Leinster House, within the city block, were prior to the time of their construction, surrounded by 18th century terraced family houses and parks. These were part of the elegant Georgian architectural development of Dublin that now saw this once unfashionable part of the city, become sought after.

It was therefore into this Cultural enclave that the new Establishment and Legislature found their first home in 1922. Constrained public finances, determined in 1924, that Parliament would remain in Leinster House, and that decision

commenced a programme of consolidation of accommodation within the city block through further investments and acquisitions of adjoining properties by successive governments. One of the first actions taken was to complete the final section of the recently constructed National Library as a symbolic gesture towards learning and the future. Leinster House was also modified to better suit the initial requirements. The complex of buildings which commenced life as a private home with wonderful spaces, decorative plaster ceilings, ornamental fireplaces, and other domestic scale details, settled comfortably over the following decades into a successful Parliamentary accommodation, by careful conservation works and by sensitive additions and alterations, as resources allowed. Throughout the 1950's, 60's and 70's the State-owned buildings within the block were maintained and enhanced where possible. A major new commercial office block was built tangential to the Leinster House precinct in 1972, and acquired by Government to house the then important Department of Agriculture. It was however the successful adaptation and conversion of older buildings throughout the 1980's, that helped to underline the potential of using old buildings for new, modern purposes.

The accession to the European Economic Community in 1973 placed an additional burden on the Government of providing suitable accommodation for Ireland's hosting of the European Presidency which provoked a debate over new-build conference facilities versus adaptation and extension. The final outcome was the modernisation and extension of structures at Dublin Castle in 1986.

In 1981 the development of the National Concert Hall in the Aula Maxima of the 19th century Catholic University showed that when finances are scarce, solutions can be found to successfully exploit existing resources which can be justified in terms of sustainable urban planning. Likewise, with the founding of the Museum of Modern Art at the restored 17th century Royal Hospital in 1983, the preservation of a historical building and its continued occupation and use for appropriate new purposes is seen as justified at a number of levels, not least, in maintaining the urban fabric of the surrounding city.

The 1990's have seen considerable additional investments made to all the State owned buildings on the block. Upgrading, extensions, alterations, restorations and conservation have all been employed to further consolidate and reinforce the success which the State and Cultural Institutions have together enjoyed, sharing not only the same urban site, but also common facilities. This physical closeness, has served at both the practical and philosophical levels to ensure that there is no great remove between Public Representatives, State Officials, and the custodians of heritage and Culture.

The Irish Government's Policy of Architecture 1999 commits the State to encourage high standards of architecture and to give society good example by leading when it acts as its own developer. The Government has taken significant steps towards strengthening the protection of our architectural heritage through the recent introduction of a comprehensive and systematic legislative mechanism for its protection as part of the planning code.

Encouragement and facilitation by Government at Local Government level has also assisted in the successful regeneration of run down areas in the city centre – most notably at Temple Bar, south of the River Liffey, the HARPA area to the North, and the more recently 2002 launched O'Connell Street rejuvenation plan.

In this regard it is also important to note the Resolution of the European Council of the 12th February 2001, on "Architectural quality in urban and rural environments" which expressed its attachment to

- a) the common characteristics shared by European towns and cities, such as the importance of historical continuity, the quality of public areas, the social mix and the richness of urban diversity.
- b) the fact that good quality architecture, by improving the living context and the relationship between citizens and their environment, whether rural or urban, can contribute effectively towards social cohesion and job creation, the promotion of cultural tourism and regional economic development.

Great Irish literary figures have also in the past had associations with parts of the block :--

James Joyce made reference to the Museum and Library buildings through his character Leopold Bloom in Ulysses.

Oscar Wilde lived with in meters of the National Art Gallery, and George Bernard Shaw was so indebted to the delights of the National Art Gallery that he bequeathed half his estate to it upon his death.

The Irish poet William Butler Yeats, writing of the events of the Easter Rising in 1916 and the subsequent difficult years before the establishment of the Free State penned the line to his poem commemorative of the event - - - "All changed, changed utterly: a terrible beauty is born". The inference was fear of the unknown, the future – yet hope too that the outcome would be beneficial. Now, after eighty years of successful self-government it is possible to confirm the maturity of architectural responsibility and commitment to quality architecture at Government level.

Present, and planned future developments within the block are optimistically viewed as stamps of approval for the course of actions taken in 1922.

In this regard, the example set at the very centre, by the on-site commitment to "Resource Architecture" and by the attendant levels of architectural excellence, is worthy of note beyond the shores of Ireland.