

CoisCéim Dance Theatre

A REACTION TO PLACE by Jenny O'Leary

COMMISSIONED BY ARTS COUNCIL IRELAND



BACKGROUND

A REACTION TO PLACE connects award-winning empathetic architect, Jenny O'Leary with the renowned contemporary performance company, CoisCéim Dance Theatre, in a design project that harnesses the rich heritage and embedded kinetic energy of the landmark building at 42 Fairview Strand to develop and present a blueprint for its evolution into an ecological artwork where dance can thrive.

"One in every eight deaths in Europe can be linked to pollution...There is a clear link between the state of the environment and the health of our population. Everyone must understand that by taking care of our planet we are not only saving ecosystems, but also lives". EU's Environment Commissioner Virginijus Sinkevicius, 08 Sep 2020

CoisCéim fundamentally believes that environmental responsibility will become central to public health policy and that operating carbon neutral / climate positive structures will be an essential part of this

agenda. Our desire is to be at the forefront of this necessary shift, and we believe that with her holistic approach, expertise and experience in empathetic architecture, Jenny O'Leary is uniquely placed to harness the rich heritage of 42 Fairview Strand – embedding its kinetic energy and CoisCéim's vision and values into the fabric of the space itself – and envision a sustainable future.

A member of the RIAI, Jenny O'Leary's practice is rooted in **"an architecture that accentuates a connection to place. That considers human society as integral to, and a component of nature, not detached from it. That seeks ways to live in balance with the resources we depend on but that are currently taken for granted. That works to illustrate humanity's relationships and responsibilities to natural resources. Architecture powered by the energy within, a closed loop"**. (Jenny O'Leary)

This ethos is mirrored by CoisCéim's Artistic Director, David Bolger, whose 2018 essay – "Empowerment and Creative Flow" also highlighted the need for balance between past and future: **"Creative flow and maturity conduct and transform an intelligent sense for artistic ambition and expression. Think big. Work that is allowed to reach its full potential....that can be examined, investigated in a flexible space. This flexibility can only exist within strong foundations. Rooted in our past to achieve the future"** (David Bolger)

A REACTION TO PLACE is an experiment – testing a new approach to conceptual design for buildings by abstracting the brief through an artistic exposition to define a vision for refurbishment rather than imposing a traditional client accommodation schedule. Through this commission from Arts Council Ireland, CoisCéim also seeks to reinforce Jenny O'Leary's reputation as a vibrant, exciting new voice in Irish architecture and send a visible signal to the RIAI in relation to gender equality – currently women form only 28% of the membership.

THE ARTWORK | 42 FAIRVIEW STRAND

An exposition of a reaction to THIS place, in time.

In a story about time, Anndri Snaer Magnussun recounts a conversation between his daughter Hulda and his grandmother, around the kitchen table. The year is 2018. Born in 1924, his grandmother is 94 years old, his daughter is ten. Together they imagine Hulda having a similar conversation with her great-granddaughter in the year 2102, perhaps around the same kitchen table. If, in turn, Hulda's great-granddaughter lived to be 94 years old, that year would be 2186. Thus Hulda, Andri's daughter, can personally touch, and is a link between, the years 1924 and 2186, a span of 262 years.¹

In A REACTION TO PLACE, we are imagining this old post office at 42 Fairview Strand as the daughter in this story - the protagonist, relating lifetimes lived and dreaming of a future. We are stepping into a "long now", acknowledging that the present moment emerged from everything that went before, and forms the foundation for the distant future.²

It takes as a starting point, the principle that economic growth and individual consumption have been prioritised over the natural world and collective well-being. Humans have become disconnected, physically and psychically, from the natural world and from each other.

Furthermore, in order to survive and co-evolve with our habitat, now is the time to reveal the living systems and reconnect with the natural and cultural rhythms of our surroundings.



BERNARD SCALÉ MAP C. 1773

42 FAIRVIEW STRAND, A PLACE THAT EMERGED FROM THE SEA

The small corner of Fairview on which this building stands was once submerged where the River Tolka flows into Dublin Bay - the north side of Fairview Strand defining the sea front. In Bernard Scalé's map of 1773, Ballybough Bridge is shown to the west, crossing the Tolka River from Summer Hill. By 1798, Annesley Bridge had been added to provide a more direct route to Howth

¹ Magnason, Andri Snaer *On Time and Water*. See also Emergence Magazine podcast interview with Andri Snaer Magnason

² Eno, Brian. *The Big Here and Long Now*

and Malahide. To build the bridge a causeway/embankment was needed - the reclamation of the land to the west of Annesley Bridge Road began.



OSI FIRST EDITION 6 INCH MAP C. 1842

Half a century later, in the 1840s, buildings have yet to appear. A large "Vitriol Works" or fertiliser factory, named "Chemical Manure Works" on later maps, was located on the south bank of the river, presumably wafting odours across the newly-formed island. It is these works that James Joyce's characters navigate past in *An Encounter in Dubliners*.

Newspapers of the time published notices for free lectures on "Hygienic subjects – Air, Ventilation, Water, Food, Baths, Clothing, Mental and Physical Exercise, Sanitary Engineering and Architecture, Soil, Climate, Preventable Diseases, Vital Statistics and Sanitary Organisation" by esteemed medical practitioners including the Royal College of Surgeons, Dr. E.D. Mapother and Dr. Charles Cameron.³

"Mapother railed against pollution from chemical and gas works, factories, and slaughterhouses, and argued that improved drainage and sanitary measures had eradicated "ague" and further improvements could eradicate cholera."

By the turn of the century the street pattern we see today has been laid down with the Post Office occupying a prominent site at the end of Philipshburgh Avenue (shown overleaf).

A BUILDING FORGED IN FIRE

CoisCéim's new home was constructed in 1889 as a purpose-built Post Office. In 1909, it was extended to the front with a decorative limestone and red brick facade, identical as seen today.

The postal service in Ireland became accessible to the general Irish population with the introduction of the "Penny Postage" in 1840. At that time the post system comprised of

³ Ní Chríodáin, Louise *Dublin in 1886: The most unhealthy of any great towns in Ireland* in *The Irish Times* Dec 21, 2018

“receiving houses” where letters were received and collected for sorting in “sorting houses” and onward redistribution. Prior to the establishment of purpose-built post offices, these were often local shops or inns in a village or town.



OPW records refer to a receiving house in the vicinity of Fairview, sufficient to its needs, hence this Post Office was planned as a sorting house and consisted of one large double-height hall running from front to back, and populated with rows of sorting desks. The Principal Architect was Mr. Robert Cochrane. Patrick Sheridan won the contract with a tender price of £886-4-3, and this version of the building stopped short of the street, in line with the existing entrance porch.⁴

In 1901, drawings were completed for an extension to include a Public Office for receiving letters to the front of the sorting room. In some drawings a “Women’s Retiring Room” was included, for the post mistresses. However, in letters dating to 1904, the General Post Office indicated that due to other provisions in the area a public office was not necessary, but that something must be done to improve the “eyesore” that was street elevation of the building- at that time a flat gable red brick wall.⁵

In 1907 and “owing to the growth of congestion at the Fairview District Post Office” the decision was made to increase the sorting space provided in the building, noting the “erection of a Branch Post Office originally contemplated has now been definitely abandoned”.⁶ The architect (M). H. Allberry was responsible for the extension and Patrick Shorthall awarded the contract, with work commencing in 1909.⁷ Two different tones of brick are visible in the building: Ruabon bricks from the “Red Works” in Wales to the porch and rear, Portmarnock red brick to the extension at the front.

⁴ Crean, M.: The Purpose Built Post Office Buildings of the Office of Public Works in Leinster from 1870 to 1947. Masters in Urban and Building Conservation. University College Dublin, 2007. p.76

⁵ National Archive of Ireland Document OPW/ 15216/10 letter dated 6th February 1904

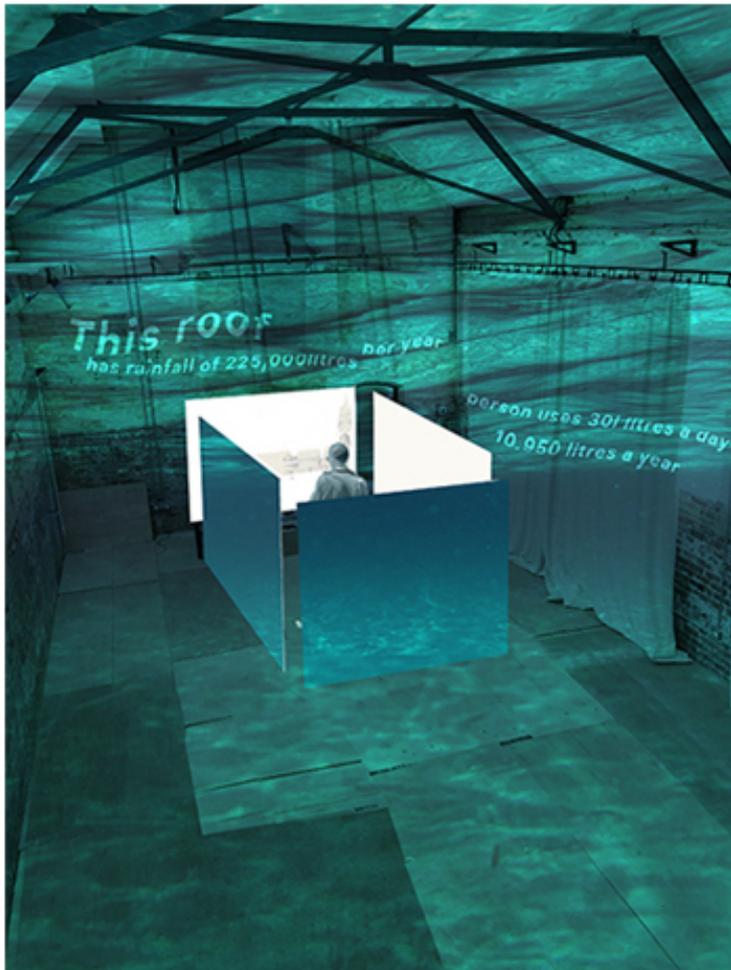
⁶ National Archive of Ireland Document OPW/ 15216/10 letter dated 17th December 1907

⁷ Crean, M.: The Purpose Built Post Office Buildings of the Office of Public Works in Leinster from 1870 to 1947. Masters in Urban and Building Conservation. University College Dublin, 2007.

"...the lofty gable on the street front faced with Portmarnock (Co. Dublin) Brick, contains large central window surmounted by carved keystone and projecting pediment supported on consoles. Stone dressings all Ballyknockan (Co. Wicklow) granite."⁸

Standing in the centre of CoisCéim's studio, you are surrounded by the energy of fires that burned over 8 tonnes of coal at temperatures of 800-1000 degrees Celsius to manufacture over 37,000 bricks. At 7.5 megajoule per brick, the energy housed in the walls of this building is equivalent to boiling a kettle 3 times a day for 117 years, or 10 people running 30 marathons a year for 100 years

A FUTURE WITH A PAST



An exposition of a reaction to this place, in time

**to create a place
... of water
... of soil and earth
... making energy
... saving energy**

Jenny O'Leary's exposition has been designed as a stimulating, interactive experience for the public and builds on CoisCéim's passion for working in collaboration across artforms in site responsive ways and engage new audiences for both architecture and dance as a result of its inclusion in OPEN HOUSE DUBLIN, 2021. Thank You.

⁸ Ibid. p.78 quoting Irish Builder 27.11.1909