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PIVOT Dublin

A discussion on the bid for Dublin to become World Design Capital

Barry Sheehan discusses PIVOT Dublin and it's legacy with Dublin City Architect, Ali Grehan.



Ali Grehan

Q. Can you tell me a few things about your background, prior to your job as Dublin City Architect?

Up until 1995 I worked in conventional architectural practice. I preferred working for smaller practices with a very strong social agenda than for large, commercial practices. In 1995 I got the chance to take a few months' work on the LUAS project, co-ordinating the Environmental Impact Statement, something I knew nothing about. The EIS was being done by consultants and my input was to last only for a few months and then I could return to more conventional architectural practice.

The Environmental Impact Statement project turned into a much bigger undertaking, probably because I came to it with a fresher perspective and I could see what had been produced was not very good. Sometimes ignorance is a wonderful thing, because you say things that maybe somebody who is more experienced feels they can't say. There was a small architectural team in LUAS and our leader, agent provocateur In-Chief was Alan Me who is a very interesting Architect. Cormac Allen was also there and was hugely influential in the project. During this period I worked for some really interesting people including Irish Rail engineers, Pat O'Donoghue, a fascinating guy and Michael Sheedy.

We effectively designed the first LUAS system for Dublin. It was all ground-breaking stuff; everything was new. New statutory processes, new thinking around what happens when you CPO and demolish properties in the city centre. What emerged is a huge credit to Alan Mee in particular. It was a very interesting and quite radical proposal and certainly the Environmental Impact Statement, turned into, almost, a masterplan. It was hailed as the most comprehensive Environmental Impact Statement ever to be carried out for the State.

The entire process was very thorough which I believe led to its success. I stayed in the LUAS until the first lines went on site.

I then moved to Ballymun Regeneration in 1999 where I worked on the regeneration program under Mick McDonagh the Chief architect, another fascinating project. This was a particularly rewarding experience because of the inter-disciplinary working, the motivated team, the focus. There was a clarity of purpose to the project because a really substantial and robust master plan had been completed by MacCormac, Jamieson Pritchard working with O'Mahony Pike, and a team from Ballymun Regeneration. So, we had this wonderful master plan document that had to be implemented. There was such a diversity of work and a range of projects.

I very happily worked there until 2004 when I got a job in Fingal County Council. I thought it was an important opportunity to experience life in a more conventional local authority. I went to Fingal for two years. Fingal was great, David O'Connor had moved from being County Architect to Directorate of Services for Planning and Development, which was an unusual move. Marguerite Murphy was the County Architect at the time. I stayed there for two years before the opportunity came up to apply for Chief Architect in Ballymun Regeneration and I had to take it. I joined Dublin City Council as City Architect in 2008.

Q. You took over as Dublin City Architect. How long after that did the Pivot Dublin project come about?

Very shortly after that. I started at the beginning of 2008 as City Architect and the Pivot Dublin project started in 2009, although it wasn't initially called Pivot Dublin. I articulated the possibility that we might make a bid for this new designation called World

Design Capital in 2009 in a Pecha Kucha talk. I remember that evening in the Sugar Club, it was August/September 2009 and I was asked to give one of the talks for six minutes. And the great thing about a challenge like that is that you have to think, what am I going to say for six minutes? Earlier on in July, Dublin City Council had received a media, press release about this World Design Capital designation. In July 2009, Helsinki and Eindhoven had been shortlisted for the 2012 designation which is what the press release was about. It spoke about the purpose of World Design Capital and the strap line seemed to be, 'Awarded to cities that use design as a tool for social, cultural and economic progress'. I was still relatively fresh from Ballymun Regeneration. When I saw that description, I thought, that's what we do. At the time we were applying design in Ballymun and we also apply design in local authorities towards a very broad holistic aim including urban development, social issues, cultural, economic, environmental, physical, the whole remit. So again, in my slight ignorance I thought that's what we do, we could pitch for this.

So, tasked with having to make a six-minute PechKucha statement, I started by covering everything but quickly realised the presentation was a mess so I was advised to just talk about one thing rather than twenty things. And so I thought about World Design Capital, and whether Dublin should make a bid, and whether it would be of value? And if you remember that in 2009 we were pretty hammered from the recession, the crash.

One thing that was high on my agenda was the number of Architects who'd been let go. The architectural profession was pretty decimated as a result of the crash for lots of reasons. It seemed very regrettable, especially since lots of young Architects around that time were starting to propose ideas as to how we should deal with the crash. Yet it seemed that at the very time when we needed creativity and invention and new thinking, that's when we were throwing all those people out of the lifeboat and instead we were resorting to old, conventional thinking.

Design is about change and about really trying to see problems afresh and coming up with useful solutions, better solutions. We needed designers and we needed to design. But in 2009 we didn't seem to have time for design anymore.

The position in that Pecha Kucha talk was that it might be useful to make a bid. Having put together the presentation I was able to take it to the senior management team in Dublin City Council and say, "Do you think it might be worth looking at?" and kudos to the senior management team, they had no problem with us pursuing this and exploring it a little bit. Even to the extent of, of agreeing to assign a budget to making a bid. But we were moving cautiously and slowly as nobody had decided to make a bid yet, we just said, "Should we think a bit more about making a bid?" So, we had a number of conversations with people, and you were one.

I remember, somebody said, "You have to talk to Barry Sheehan". "Who's Barry Sheehan?" I remember that whole conversation and I thought you were mad.

Q. I can't imagine your opinion has changed

We had 23 conversations with people across different areas of design because the idea to make a bid was broadening. My initial reaction as an Architect had been, this is about architectural issues, this is about the built environment. The conversations were a terrific learning curve, for me certainly, my whole vision was expanded to take in a whole world of design.

After talking to the 23 people, there seemed to be a lot of positive interest. Jonathan Legge was a very important person to talk to, Ré Dubhthaigh was another important person. One thing Jonathan said, which really stuck, certainly in my mind, was this idea that, "One push can make us strong." So, the reaction we were getting from people was that there's a lot of interesting stuff happening in design in Ireland and in Dublin. But it's not really connected and we're not really talking about it and certainly very few people seem to know about it. So, that was Jonathan's suggestion that, one push could make us strong, and maybe a World Design Capital bid could be that push. That was very encouraging.

Following this, we had a workshop in spring of 2010. We invited about 80 people from all different design disciplines to the Wood Quay Venue in Dublin City Council. The workshop was led by Toby Scott and Aibhlin McCrann. We used the workshop to sense people's hopes and fears around making a bid. So, we're still talking to the design community, still very much within the community, but a

very important community. And the striking comment made at that particular workshop, by a couple of people was “We’ve never been in the same room together”. This was staggering as you’re talking about people, many from the same generation, all working in fields of design, all noteworthy in their fields yet they’ve never worked together or workshopped in a room before.

That proved to be a kind of indication that maybe something needed to be done. . As a result of that workshop came a feasibility study into the benefits of making a bid, and we identified three main objectives in making the bid.

One objective would be that it could be a push or a common platform to get people working together to do something outside of their immediate area of interest which was just a common purpose, a common platform to get people together.

Secondly, making a bid document raised quite an extensive set of questions about everything to do with design in the city. We would probably end up putting together a pretty compelling picture about design, for good or bad, but at least we’d have a catalogue. It inventorized design in Dublin, and that’s a useful piece of work.

Thirdly, and the most useful piece of work, would be an opportunity to start proposing important ideas for addressing the crisis we were in, the economic and social crisis, not the design crisis, the societal crisis that Ireland faced because of the crash.

So, does design have any answers?

Q. 2014 passed and ID 2015 came along. It came on the back of Pivot Dublin and other things that were happening. How do you think Pivot Dublin contributed to ID 2015?
It certainly must’ve helped make the case for ID 2015 because everything that happens, is built on something else. We stand on the shoulders of others, is essentially true.

We were constantly reminded when doing Pivot Dublin of the Kilkenny Design report, 50 years earlier which had been a very important piece of work. Pivot Dublin was I would say very important, a critical step in pushing the agenda that enabled ID 2015. When we didn’t get the bid in 2011, we did continue the project as Pivot Dublin.

That was really important and the reason we continued was as much because there was every reason to continue and there was no good reason to stop. We secured again a small budget from Dublin City Council. There were still a number of legacy projects from the bid process, initiatives that were under way anyway that we continued with, if you remember the exhibition in Helsinki for Helsinki World Design Capital 2012, that was important.

In 2012 we did kind of struggle to try and identify what the purpose of Pivot Dublin was. You can’t just spend time working on something with no end to it, it just becomes a vanity project. But nobody was asking us to stop. People were saying, “Of course you’re going to continue.” So, how are we going to continue, why are we going to continue? But we did continue and out of it a number of interesting things happened which have been very important and have been the inspiration for some very important design programs.

One of these things was Make Shape Change. The Shape, the Shape film that was a little piece of residue, the idea came from the bid work. If you recall, we talked about making a kid bid; a document that communicated the bid to children. We didn’t end up doing a document but instead we ended up making a short animation with Johnny Kelly. As it turned out and because the work was so beautiful, Scott Burnett who was part of the Shape team, went on to put together a small website, called Make Shape Change, which describes different areas of working in design. www.makeshapechange.com.

So now you have a beautiful film and a wonderful little website, so where do you take that? The next step was to talk to a group called Junior Achievement Ireland who goes around to schools and is an international organisation. They run short educational programs in schools about the world at work. They focus on disadvantaged schools in the most wonderful way possible. I’ve watched Junior Achievement at work, they’re not remotely patronizing, they are incredibly subtle and thoughtful about how they do this. Essentially they’re saying, “Well, we need to reach out to lots of kids and tell them that there are lots of areas of work that might never have heard of”.

Junior Achievement had never run a program about working in design. So, when we presented them with a little film and the

website they said, "Wow, this could be a really great part of a module around design". They put their own piece of work around that, which was the actual course that would then go into the school.

The program works with volunteers, so if they're trying to explain to kids how you work in banking, they get bankers to go into the school. If they're talking to kids about the different fields of design that they could work in, they get volunteer designers. We piloted a program with Junior Achievement in 2015 and we've been extending the programs throughout 2016 and next year the plan is to go into 50 schools.

Q. Throughout Ireland?

No, throughout Dublin. An obvious next step is to get other local authorities to sponsor the Junior Achievement to run programs in their area.

It is a charity and there are overheads in running the program. It's a small team and everybody who volunteers seems to get a great kick out of it. Not only do they get a bit of training but they learn how to interact with a classroom of 12 year olds, 11 year olds, 13 year olds, a very demanding audience. They also get some training for their own communication skills, and their own management skills. In terms of their own time, it's just a morning of their time, that's all and they will also get some kind of certification or CPD knowledge out of it. Junior Achievement has taken it over so we don't have to worry about it anymore; they run the program and we just sponsor them to run the program.

Q. So, you can use Pivot Dublin project to launch a variety of initiatives. You have another one planned with the American Institute of Architects?

Yes. The American Institute of Architects initiative came out of Hidden Rooms which was a very important event. Again, it was about design bringing different people together, non-designers particularly, policy makers, members of the public, users, all of that. You can look at www.pivotdublin.com if you want to have a bit of background.

The purpose of the Hidden Rooms event was to focus on 16 critical city issues under the thematic structure of social, cultural, economic and environmental matters. Every single Hidden Room group, consists of 20 people in a

remarkable room around the city. There were 16 groups, over the course of the day to hear from an inspirational international speaker, to address an issue and to workshop their way towards a solution to the issue, which could be piloted in 2015. Not every room ended up with a pilot project that has been delivered, but many did actually result in something.

The College Green pedestrian plaza was greatly helped along by that Hidden Room day. The Design for Growth, designers working with SMEs emerged from that day. The American Institute of Architect program emerged from that day. So, we're calling the program, Framework. It is based on a very successful program that the American Institute of Architects have been running for the last 50 years in the States. It's about working with communities to help them regenerate their neighbourhood. Yes, of course it's something that groups have done before, there's a lot of great architecture groups working with communities on master planning and regeneration but what's remarkable about the AIA program is the systematic approach which they apply to every community they work with.

Step one is being invited in by the community. The community have to demonstrate that they are motivated. The AIA will not work with a community that seems to be a bit lost and doesn't know where to start. They insist the community get their act together, that's a very important step.

The second step is preparing for a design charrette but those preparations are again very well mapped out by the AIA and essential to the success of the program. Essentially what the AIA are looking for the community to do, is to come together and to take responsibility for this. If the community take responsibility for coming together and organising the workshop, it's more likely they'll take responsibility for implementing the workshop recommendations. However, if it's a case of a really great team coming in to an area, understanding the area, doing a master plan, handing it over to the community, the community haven't had an awful lot of time to involve themselves and influence this, they don't know where to take it. So, by the time the AIA workshop happens you've already actually achieved an awful lot. The workshop happens over three or four days, it's a kind of multi-faceted affair, involves public presentations to hundreds of

people and involves intense work as a design team. It involves meeting all the stakeholders, understanding the issues and ultimately bringing a very objective perspective. The design assistance team come in to work with the community; they are objective, they're not paid, they're voluntary, they're new to the area and they aren't there to make any work for themselves later on. In fact they have to commit to not get commissions out of it.

They can broker, you know, competing agendas. At the end of the four days a report will be produced, quite a detailed report, an illustrated report, a plan will be produced that sets out steps that the community can take in easy steps, longer term goals.

The fourth stage is implementation and it's the Community who have to put together an implementation group. When we say 'community', it's not just the Residents Association, it's any group who have an interest in an area. It could be public transport providers, it could be the local authority, it could be health services, it could be the local GP, it could be the owners of the shops and the residents etc. They all come together and then they form an implementation group to implement the recommendations.

Q. There seems to be a confidence in Irish design and in Irish designers in the last number of years. Irish Designers are winning many awards worldwide, and there have been significant design promotion and activities. Pivot Dublin is continuing on, but do you think there is a State need to create another agency or will we just roll along? We've demonstrated incredible success in the designed object. Yes, we have more and more designers who have an international reputation, who are highly sought after. You go into shops around town you see great stuff. And Irish designers are working abroad.

There is no problem there. The Irish designer as a product designer is strong and I include visual communications in that. Irish design as an essential tool for how we develop the country is still not at the races. We're not there yet. If you look at all the important decisions that are made, National Development Strategies, you'd be very hard pressed to find any reference to design. Certainly a design led approach is not applied to the making of

that plan. No way. Because design is, I've said this before, I think it's politically inconvenient, there's no question about it, politically extremely inconvenient. If you're going to adopt a design led approach you've got to be open at the outset to the outcomes. It's a hard enough ask for any organisation to be completely open about the outcomes, it's a very brave thing to do.

Something like the new National Spatial Strategy is critical. Who's preparing it, how have they gone about preparing it? It's an important piece of work, it's vital for the development of the country. Where are we going to locate our main investment and why? What are we going to develop and why? Who's going to win and who's going to lose? Why? Huge things are at stake here, is a design led approach being applied to that? An awful lot of work goes into design; any designer knows that. It's all invisible, it's like the, the iceberg. It's 99% preparation and 1% outcome. Well that outcome sticks if it's well done. If the 99% is well executed, that 1% sticks and it's good and it's lasting. But we cannot seem to learn that lesson. Design demands preparation. Design is the most efficient thing you can do, it's the most practical thing you can do. So, that's why it really infuriates me when people say that design is a frill.

It's the most practical thing to do. It's about project management, it's about planning, it's about being level headed, it's all of those things, there's nothing froufrou about it. We have an awful long way to go but we need to. And if you think about things like climate change, my God, we're running out of time. We have to apply a design led approach to address climate change. But that means joined up thinking, and everybody says we need joined up thinking in this country and we don't have enough of it. So, I would say that's the great challenge for designers and design in Ireland, to start applying a design led approach.

If you want an example from countries where we say, "Oh, they're good at design", then say, Holland. The Dutch are very good designers and they're very practical and level headed people. One of the reasons they seem to be good designers is because they are so conscious of the scarcity of their resources.

They don't have much land, they're always trying to hold back the sea, there's a lot of people living in a small area.

They've got to find ways of collaboration, whole communities, towns have to come together to stop the flood, make difficult decisions, so they're well used to it. One of the most impressive things I heard, when I was in Amsterdam, was, from somebody who works with their equivalent of the Architects Association. He was explaining how they developed their master plan for developing an area north of the station, a new area. Amsterdam is a very precious city in a sense, it's very beautiful, and everything within the canal ring is preserved. So, clearly conservation

is a huge issue, so what did they do? They asked the conservationist to prepare the plan.

They were asked at the beginning, instead of suddenly being presented with a plan that they were to react to, they had a chance to influence the plan. They did accept that there needed to be high density, high rise, they didn't have a problem with it. But they manage to mould it in a way that they were okay with. So it was win-win. That to me is design thinking, in saying right, who's going to have a big problem with this, well maybe we better ask them first, instead of waiting till the end, try and keep them out of the process and then we'll just give them something that they can't fight.

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