

Concrete design ideas

OVER half of the world's population lives in cities. A century ago, it was less than 10%. The 21st century promises to be the first truly urban age. Over 75% of the world's population will live in urban areas within the next 25 years, many in mega-cities with 10m or more inhabitants.

Against this background, the themes of the next Venice Architecture Biennale — which runs from September 10 to November 26 — are cities, people, society, and architecture.

Ireland will be represented by FKL architects, an award-winning, Dublin-based practice established in 1998 by Michelle Fagan, Paul Kelly and Gary Lysaght. Their concept, of improving the suburbs of Ireland, is as timely as the overall themes of the biennale. Ireland has been invited to set up in the prestigious location of the Italian Pavilion, at the Giardini in Venice.

Meantime, FKL have asked nine other young architectural practices to develop concepts for urban im-

THROWING SHAPES



Des O'Sullivan

provement in Ireland. This is being worked on and the results will form the Irish entry.

One-third of the houses in Ireland have been constructed in the last 10 years. This development is market-led. In the headlong rush to make money quickly, concepts like suburban sustainability, infrastructure, design, layout and community fall far behind.

By encouraging young Irish architectural practices — the ones that will be at the helm of architecture in this country in the decades to come — to focus on the problems of unfettered urban sprawl,

this biennale is giving Ireland a wake up call it badly needs.

The director of the Venice biennale is Richard Burdett, centennial professor in architecture and urbanism at the London School of Economics and a fluent Italian speaker. He is an advisor on architecture to the mayor of London and a member of the Greater London Authority's architecture and urbanism unit. Mr Burdett serves as a member of the City of Barcelona's quality committee and he is advisor on architecture to the BBC.

The focus of the Venice biennale has been the object. Mr Burdett says this should shift to the relationship between the object and society. So, this biennale will look not just on the physical aspect of cities, but on the relationship between the form of cities and their social dynamics. This is something Mr Burdett says is not talked about enough. He would like people to think about the soul of a city, as much as the design of it.

The main exhibition will be an account of 18 large cities, with ex-

amples like London, New York, Shanghai, Mexico City, Berlin and Johannesburg. There will also be examples from the rapidly developing regions of Asia, Africa and South America.

Covering an area of more than 6,000 square metres, the biennale will be the largest single exhibition on cities in the world. The architecture biennale is always a crowd puller and this one will be visited by over 100,000 people from around the globe. It will be designed to communicate with a wide and diverse public, and promises to offer an international perspective on the relationship between architecture, society and sustainability.

The key issues facing mega-cities, from migration to growth to mobility and sustainable development, are apropos in our rapidly growing cities.

This biennale will attempt to propose a manifesto for cities of the 21st century, focussing on their potential to contribute to a more sustainable, democratic and equitable world.