

# SUBURBAN TO SUPERRURAL – IRELAND'S PRESENCE AT THE VENICE ARCHITECTURE BIENNALE

10 September to 19 November 2006

By Sandra Andrea O'Connell

Imagine picture-postcard holiday villages in the West of Ireland that will only be visible when actually occupied and otherwise will vanish into the unspoilt landscape; imagine floating cities, complete with shopping and leisure facilities, that will travel on boats from location to location to appear as required; or imagine an extraordinarily efficient railway infrastructure that will half the commuting time across the country and bring places of living and working closer together – these are some of the thought-provoking ideas that have so far emerged from what could be Ireland's most daring entry yet at the Venice Architecture Biennale. The presentation, entitled *SubUrban to SuperRural*, is being curated by fklarchitects, a young award-winning Dublin-based practice, headed up by Michele Fagan, Paul Kelly and Gary Lysaght.

Back in October 2005, fklarchitects replied to an open call from the Irish Architecture Foundation for ideas on how to represent Ireland at the next Venice Architecture Biennale. Their winning proposal called for comprehensive research into prevailing attitudes of living and working in Ireland and how these imprint on our environment. "It is a particular Irish response to the Biennale theme *cities, architecture and society*", explain the three curators. Whereas most countries deal with the challenges of the 10million plus *Mega City* and the densification of space, fklarchitects propose to tackle the 'romantic' Irish preoccupation with living at the edge (*SubUrban*) or beyond (*SuperRural*) the city's hold. According to fklarchitects, "at the heart of the project is a thorough exploration of our obsession with the land and the motor car". Rather than anticipating radical changes in Ireland's cultural make-up, the practice has called for an investigation on how to create viable and sustainable communities at the edge. "The desire for living in detached or semi-d houses complete with front and back garden will probably remain the same", say fklarchitects. "All that will perhaps change is the wallpaper or the furniture." The curators also believe that any change will come "from the bottom up", driven by individuals and local, rather than national, government.

To arrive at new and innovative ideas, fklarchitects commissioned eight fellow practices: Boyd Cody; Bucholz McEvoy; Henchion Reuter; heneghan.peng; MacGabhann Architects; ODOS; Dominic Stevens and Tom de Paor. Although the practices are all part of a generation – somewhere between the ages of 25 to 45 – they can be characterised more by their diversity rather than their similarity in design philosophy; ranging from Dominic Stevens' fascination with the rural landscape to Tom de Paor's intense urban projects. The task set by the curators is to look ahead at the next 25 years and arrive at some predictions and possible solutions for the next generation. To set the research into context, the reading list for the contributors included David McWilliam's *The Pope's Children* and Frank McDonald's *Chaos at the Crossroads*. The group of nine architectural practices has met regularly since their appointment in February 2006 to develop the official Irish presentation.

For Biennale Commissioner Shane O'Toole, this will be the first Irish group show at the Venice Architecture Biennale. It is also Ireland's fourth presence at this prestigious international event, following on from O'Toole's highly-acclaimed 2004 installation on the transformation of Letterfrack (from haunting institution to innovative educational facility) by O'Donnell + Tuomey Architects; and from two outstanding earlier contributions, commissioned by Raymund Ryan, on Bucholz McEvoy in 2002 and Tom de Paor Architects in 2000. The persistence of Ryan and O'Toole to secure a prominent space for Ireland's exhibit – combined with a fortuitous personal contact at the Salzburg Seminar last



summer between Irish Commissioner Shane O'Toole and Biennale Director, Richard Burdett – has resulted in an unrivalled location for 2006. "Ireland's presentation will be located in a 90m<sup>2</sup> space in the Padiglione Italia at the heart of the Biennale", says O'Toole who secured the venue following a presentation to Burdett with fkl in January of this year.

Shane O'Toole is delighted that Ireland is one of only six countries invited to show in the Padiglione Italia, which is under Burdett's direct control. He regards the appointment of Italian-born architect Richard Burdett – founder of the 9H Gallery and the Architecture Foundation in London, Professor at the London School of Economics and advisor to London's Mayor Ken Livingston – as an inspired choice. Burdett's leadership of the *urban age* programme, a global investigation by city mayors, architects and academics into so-called *mega cities* all over the world, recommended him for the prestigious role of Biennale Director. Burdett's Biennale will be dedicated to the future of the city and Ireland's research-driven project, which tackles extreme suburbanisation, is expected to sit well in the Padiglione Italia alongside research by Rem Koolhaas and OMA; ETH Studio Basle; MOMA, New York; the Berlage Institute Rotterdam; and the London Architecture Foundation. Shane O'Toole was also responsible for securing significant funding for the Irish project from Culture Ireland, which promotes Irish cultural projects abroad under the auspices of the Department of Arts, Tourism and Sport, as well from the Arts Council and the private sector.

A particular challenge for the curators is the international make-up of the Biennale audience. Rather than relying heavily on words, it is planned to have a strong visual presentation that will communicate the idiosyncrasies of the Irish situation. Each practice will present their research and proposals inside a dedicated 'box', using powerpoint presentations and models, while films and challenging statistics – for example, did you know that Ireland has the highest car user rate in the EU? – compiled by fkl will create the wider context. For the curators, the project is more about asking questions than arriving at specific solutions. "We might not yet fully understand the factors that shape our culture and this is a unique opportunity to design not for the present but as part of an open investigation into the future", explain fklarchitects. To their delight, all eight fellow practices responded enthusiastically to the task and signed up to the concept.

Outside of the Architecture Biennale context, it is highly likely and desirable that this innovative research – due to be published in both book form and on a dedicated website – will become an invaluable resource for future generations of architects, planners, Governments and citizens alike.

The 2006 RIAI Annual Conference will visit Venice and the Architecture Biennale from 12 to 15 November. All booking queries to Catherine Bolster, M 087 2227613, E [cbolster@eircom.net](mailto:cbolster@eircom.net)

2006 Venice Architecture Biennale [www.labiennale.org](http://www.labiennale.org)

Biennale Theme: *cities, architecture and society*

Commissioner: Shane O'Toole, Irish Architecture Foundation

Deputy Commissioner: Ciarán Ó Gaora

Curators: fklarchitects

[www.cultureireland.gov.ie/events/eventdetails/venicebiennale\\_06.html](http://www.cultureireland.gov.ie/events/eventdetails/venicebiennale_06.html)

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