

# Building sight

Fifteen years ago, a collection of young architects won the competition to rebuild Temple Bar. Since then, Group 91's practices have gone on to design everything from libraries to skyscrapers. An exhibition in Belfast revisits their work as the North begins a new phase of development. **Frank McDonald** assesses their legacy

As Mulvin notes, Dublin was a "blitzed city" at the time, and the members of Group 91 were "very concerned not to knock down buildings unless they really needed to be knocked". So new public spaces, such as Temple Bar Square, Meeting House Square and Curved Street, were earmarked for sites that were already vacant.

"Alan Parker's film *The Commitments* had just opened when we won the competition, and we found its theme amusing - 'You get the big gig, then you fall apart,'" Tynan recalls. "And, yes, of course we had rows and negotiations [about who designed which building]. We were eight hungry practices, but we all got what we wanted."

In the divvy-up, O'Donnell and Tuomey designed the Gallery of Photography, Paul Keogh took on the Gaiety School of Acting and Meeting House Square, Grafton did Temple Bar Square, McCullough Mulvin did Temple Bar Music Centre, Derek Tynan did the Printworks, Shane O'Toole and Michael Kelly did the Ark and Shay Cleary Arthouse (now FilmBase).

Only McGarry and Ní Éanaigh were left high and dry, after their "Wibbly Wobbly" footbridge, which was intended to link Jervis Street with Meeting House Square, was refused planning permission in the face of entrenched bureaucratic opposition from Dublin Corporation.

Millennium Bridge, by Howley Harrington, was eventually built instead, but because it is aligned with Eustace Street it has turned Meeting House Square into an urban backwater that's hardly used except for the weekly food market and outdoor movies on summer nights. Still, when acrobats performed there last month it recalled a colourful 1991 image by Rachael Chidlow of how the square could be.

Everyone from Group 91 is saddened that the square has to be gated at night to prevent it being trashed. As for Temple Bar becoming the "temple of bars", Mulvin says the architects "never thought of it as being anything like that"; what happened to the area shows that control over how buildings are used is "absolutely critical".

Idealistic visions of new public spaces have also been compromised by commercial considerations. Nearly half of the ground plane of Temple Bar Square has been privatised by enclosed outdoor seating for some of its restaurants and coffee bars. Trastevere has no less than 16 external tables, leaving only a narrow passage-

way for pedestrians.

One good thing about Temple Bar was its "rippling effect", as Farrell says. It led to framework plans being adopted for other parts of the inner city, spreading the urban-regeneration agenda far and wide. The Liffey Boardwalk was another spin-off, while the new footbridges over the river "have changed people's whole perception of the city".

What the audience of youngish Belfast architects at the discussion forum wants to know is whether they can learn lessons from the Dublin experience and "raise the bar" for architecture in the northern capital.

Sure, Belfast has seen frenetic redevelopment in recent years on foot of the peace process, but where's the interesting architecture? John Reid of Robinson McIlwaine, who created the Switch Room Galleries on what's left of Great Patrick Street, where the Group 91 exhibition is being held, says Belfast would be "changed dramatically" over the next 10 years by major regeneration schemes such as the Cathedral Quarter: "We are where Dublin was 10 years ago," he says.

The impressive white spaces of the Switch Room used to house Northern Ireland Electricity Service's control centre, and the ambition of its sponsors and curator, Marianne O'Kane, is that the new gallery will generate sparks to promote an architectural culture in Belfast and some (sorely needed) public debate on where the city is going.

Reid asks about the scale of the influence Group 91 had on the development of an architectural culture in Ireland. "Tiny," says Shelley McNamara. "There are whole new towns being built in Ireland now that are entirely developer-led," she says. Group 91's ideas have been "perverted by the development community", adds O'Toole.

The baton has now been passed to a younger generation, such as Boyd Cody, Bucholz McEvoy, FKL, Heneghan Peng and Tom de Paor, all of whom are contributing to the ambitious Irish entry for this year's Venice Biennale, which opens on September 10th. Their chosen theme, appropriately, is "SubUrban to SuperRural". ♦

Group 91: 15 Years On continues at the Switch Room Galleries, Belfast, until September 11th

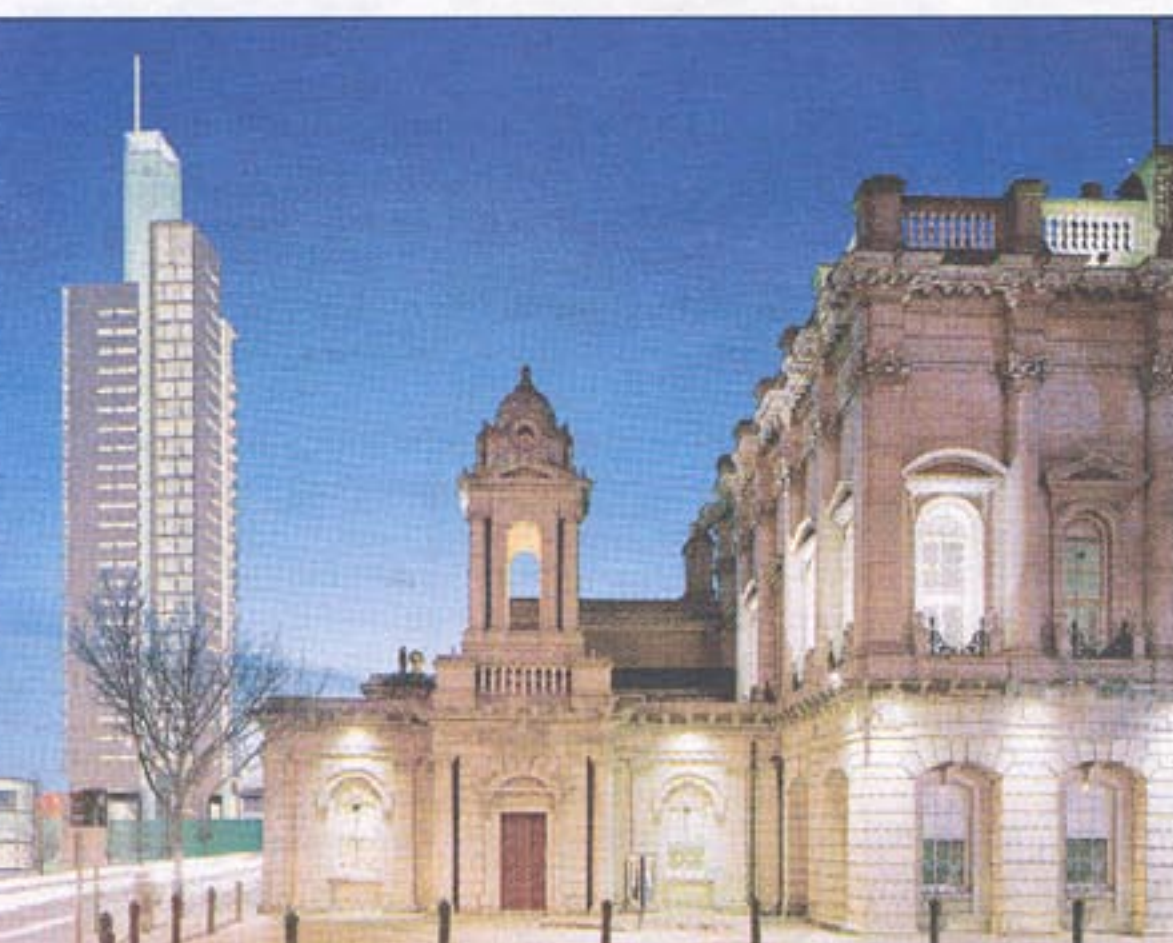
Below left, left to right: Group 91 members Paul Keogh, Michael McGarry, Rachael Chidlow, Derek Tynan, Sheila O'Donnell, Siobhán Ní Éanaigh, Shelley McNamara, Yvonne Farrell, Niall McCullough, Shay Cleary, Valerie Mulvin, Shane O'Toole and John Tuomey in 1991. Photograph courtesy Paul Keogh

Left: John Reid, Derek Tynan, Siobhán Ní Éanaigh, Shay Cleary, Yvonne Farrell, Shelley McNamara, Michael McGarry, Rachael Chidlow, Paul Keogh, Valerie Mulvin, Shane O'Toole and Marianne O'Kane last month. Photograph courtesy Paul Keogh

Far left: Heuston Gate

Below: Dublin Zoo's postmodern milking parlour

Bottom: Letterfrack Furniture College, in Co Galway



**B**ack in the bleak, hopeless days of the late 1980s, 13 relatively young architects came together to form Group 91. They had lots of ideas but very little work. Famously, one of them, Paul Keogh, had got a special mention in the 1988 Architectural Association of Ireland awards for a postmodern Jersey-cow milking parlour at Dublin Zoo. Now his firm, Paul Keogh Architects, is much better known as the designer of an elegant 32-storey residential tower planned for a site sandwiched between Heuston Station and Royal Hospital Kilmainham, in Dublin. Times have changed indeed, and the surviving architectural practices of Group 91 are swamped with work.

Sheila O'Donnell and John Tuomey have won numerous awards and international prize nominations, for projects such as the Furniture College in Letterfrack, Co Galway; Ranelagh Multi-denominational School; and the Lewis Glucksman Gallery, at University College Cork. Now they're doing a new Photographers' Gallery in London and a John Lewis department store in Sheffield.

Grafton Architects, headed by Yvonne Farrell and Shelley McNamara, have been busy, too, with several schools to their credit, as well as the sharply angular department of mechanical and electrical engineering building at Trinity College, Dublin, Dunshaughlin civic offices, in Co Meath, and a huge new building for Luigi Bocconi University, in Milan.

The output of Niall McCullough and Valerie Mulvin over the past 15 years has included the Model Arts and Niland Gallery, in Sligo; Dungloe district offices, in Co Donegal; the Source Arts Centre, in Thurles, Co Tipperary; Waterford City Library; the virus reference laboratory at University College Dublin; and, in collaboration with KMD Architecture, the Ussher Library, at Trinity College Dublin.

Shay Cleary has also been busy since the Temple Bar Architectural Framework Plan provided the springboard to catapult Group 91's architects onto the public stage. His projects have included the Irish Museum of Modern Art, Project arts centre (a late Temple Bar addition), Curved Street and the renovation and extension of Cork County Hall.

Michael McGarry and Siobhán Ní Éanaigh will always be associated with the highly successful Liffey Boardwalk, on Dublin's north quays, and the giant lamp standards in Smithfield; Derek Tynan Architects has forged new types of housing, such as the controversial Victoria Mills student accommodation, in Cork; and Shane

O'Toole has become a leading architecture critic.

Group 91 got together originally to propose a project called Making a Modern Street. The site, off Meath Street, in the Liberties, had been provided free of charge by Dublin Corporation (as it then was), and the idea was to line its frontage with a row of individually designed residential buildings that would be a showpiece of inner-city living.

They wanted to bring an architectural agenda to Dublin's year as European City of Culture, as Keogh recalls at a discussion forum in Belfast to mark the opening of an exhibition, *Group 91: 15 Years On*. But Dublin's confidence at the time was at such a low ebb that not a single developer would take on the project.

Ní Éanaigh says that it was important for architects to be brave in putting forward new ideas and that it wasn't enough for people to respond by saying "You can't do it here". Being provocative, even subversive, was "part of our tool kit". Cleary agrees: "If you ask everyone what they like, you'll just end up with porridge."

The breakthrough came with Temple Bar. For years the area had been threatened with demolition for a new transportation centre. "But Charlie Haughey then decided that Temple Bar was going to be his popular legacy to the city, and three of us were invited to come into the Cabinet room and suggest what could be done with it," says O'Toole.

This gave Group 91 the inside track in preparing for a competition to provide an architectural-framework plan for Temple Bar. But, in fairness, the architects involved had been to the fore in putting forward ideas about rebuilding and repopulating the inner city, to counter the dominant road engineers who just wanted to carve it up.

Even among architects, the problem in Dublin was that the older generation had "sat on top of the profession and squashed it, gathering up every project that came on the scene", O'Toole recalls. "We would have met the same fate if we hadn't won the Temple Bar competition, so it was a guerrilla war that had to be conducted."

Group 91's plan for Temple Bar was streets ahead, so there was little surprise that it won the day. "All of us believed in architecture; we hadn't become cynical," says Farrell. "We believed architecture could make an incredibly powerful, even poetic contribution. But you also need to be clever enough to manipulate other forces."

