The Place of History In Contemporary Architecture

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The Place of History in Contemporary Architecture:
Shanachie House and Garden, Dublin, Ireland
(a place for storytelling)

by Elizabeth Welch Maheras

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is an approach to the problem of how to treat the historical fabric of the city when creating new architecture.

The project is located on the South bank of the River Liffey in the city of Dublin. It is where part of the foundations of the medieval town are buried beneath the contemporary fabric. The project is the redefinition in modern terms of the medieval tower on the site where the twelfth-century Isolde's Tower (later named Newman's Tower) is buried.

Ireland has a rich history of storytelling and literature. This combined with the fact that the medieval tower was named after the Celtic legendary figure Isolde was the impetus for creating a literary place—the tower (the storyteller's house), a library and publishing house, and a public garden.

An important inspiration for the project was Ireland's most famous storyteller, James Joyce. His Dubliners and Ulysses were a significant influence on the storytellers house.

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Introduction

When building new architecture within the historical fabric of the city, it is imperative that architects treat the existing city in a way that gives history's architectural remains a life in the present. Preservation and the copying of architectural forms of the past leaves us with lifeless relics and reduces architecture to a manifestation of style. The treatment of the historical fabric of the city in a way that respects the present as well as the past is in keeping with the very essence of the city with its organic continuity.
The Story of Dublin

The particular site in the city of Dublin was chosen because it has many layers of history. It is where the city began. In the mid-ninth century, there were two settlements on either side of a ford and a pool (Map 1). On one side was the Gaelic Áth Cliath, a farming and fishing community where there may have been a fortress. On the other side was an ecclesiastical settlement called Dubhlinn, meaning black pool.1

In 837 the Vikings landed in Áth Cliath and built a longphort, or fortified place, to land their ships. It was their military camp and a settlement for trade between Northern Europe and the Mediterranean (Map 2).2

In 1170 the Normans invaded Dublin where they built upon and expanded the already existing Viking walls to form their medieval town (Map 3, note Isolde's Tower).3
John Speed's map of 1610 (Map 4) shows the development of the Anglo-Norman town. The site of the thesis project is at number 6. Isolde's tower was renamed for Newman, who leased the tower, refurbished, and enlarged it. One can see from Speed's map that Isolde's tower had a prominent position historically. It was the most important tower for the protection of the town, enabling the best viewpoint down the Liffey. It also was a landmark for those on ship approaching the city.

By the sixteenth century, the ford and the black pool that were important to Dublin's origins had been subsumed by the city growing beyond its walls (Map 5). Isolde's Tower is approximately at number 5, "playhouse".

Today, archaeological assessment concludes that the city street above Isolde's Tower, Exchange Street, mirrors the Tower's adjacent walls.
The project excavates and exposes the foundation of Isolde's Tower. What was historically water now becomes a public garden. The semi-circular pool surrounding Isolde's Tower recalls the historical condition of the tower and reflects the tower. The new tower is placed on the corner of the site which recalls the relationship that Isolde's Tower had with the Liffey (map 4).

Retaining walls around the site create an interior and form the circulation around its periphery. One is always moving between walls, even when ascending the walls of the new tower. The library and publishing house is located on the side of the garden and is formed by two walls—the wall on the garden-side and the wall on the city-side attached to existing buildings.

The project is created by a series of site-lines that set up relationships between the architectural elements. The center-line of Isolde's tower goes through the center-line of the new tower forming a relationship between old and new towers. The center-line also passes through the place on the garden level for the storyteller at the base of the new tower forming a connection between storyteller and Isolde's Tower.
The tower creates a relationship with the larger city by forming framed views to specific elements both near and far. It enables a view from the interior to the exterior. This is achieved by a series of windows that are "punched-out" from the surface of the tower. The punched-out surfaces have an opening which creates a frame. The protruding windows create intimate niches for sitting and reading or writing, or for pausing and viewing as one ascends the tower. As one reaches the top the windows becomes more open and the view more directional and general.
In the garden, a ramp leads up to street level where one can go behind the tower and either enter it or continue along the periphery to the library. Upon entrance to the tower, there is a balcony to pause and look out onto the garden. Ascending the stairs, the framed openings that reference the city outside begin.

At street level, a long ramp leads between two walls—the concrete retaining wall of the street and the glass wall of the garden. The glass wall creates a site-line that leads to a central spot at the base of the tower at the garden level. This spot is where the storyteller is.

In the garden, a ramp leads down to the base of the new tower, a pub below the garden. This could be a more intimate surrounding for the storyteller.
Ascending to 10.5 meters there is a bridge to the left that leads to a long glass window, or oculus, that sees the sunset. On the other end of the bridge, light is let in from the North and from above.

At this level is the publishing house. The garden-side wall of the publishing house stops at eye-level, framing the horizontal panorama of the North side of the Liffey.

10.5 meters

Ascending to 7 meters a wide horizontal window frames the Liffey Bridge beyond. This window is at eye-level when sitting on a chair.

7 meters

Ascending to 4.5 meters, the tower frames Parliament Street located on the East side of the tower. It also frames the Ormond Hotel across the river. The Ormond hotel is mentioned numerous times in James Joyce’s Ulysses.

At this level, the wall of the library has an opening that frames the Ormond Hotel and an opening that frames the new tower.

4.5 meters
Reaching the top of the tower there is a room of mostly glass similar to the oculus. It provides a view down the Liffey that recalls the original condition of Isola’s Tower as it is shown in John Speed’s map.

Left of the stairs, there is a threshold. Passing through it, there is a view of the other side of the city, the interior.

21.5 meters

Ascending to 18.5 meters, there is an opening that directs the view beyond to the Southeastern part of the city.

18.5 meters
Photo 1: Southeastern Dublin (tower view at 18.5 meters)

Photo 2: Liffey Bridge (tower view at 7 meters)

Photo 3: Ormond Hotel (tower view at 4.5 meters)
Section looking North
Images of Ireland

Photo 4: Tower House

Photo 5: Round Tower

Photo 6: James Joyce's Tower
Conclusion

This project reinvents the historical Isolde's tower, creating a place that continues the tradition of storytelling. Isolde's tower was historically located at the peripheral walls that defined an interior town. The tower provided the insider a view to the exterior. It was also a landmark for the outsider approaching the town. Dublin today does not have such clear distinctions between outside and inside, and it is made up of many landmarks. The tower is now in the middle of a borderless city, providing either a panoramic or a framed view of specific landmarks. It is a tower that is about Dublin today, but remembers its past and marks where the city began.
The Project: Preliminary Stages

First the tower was designed in abstract without reference to the particular site. Light and view was important.

Then the tower was placed on the site, and developed with the site in mind.
Footnotes


2 Ibid, p. 65.

3 Ibid, p. 183.


6 Margaret Gowen, "Archaeological Assessment of the Proposed Foundation Design for Essay Quay/Exchange Street Lower and 3, Essay Gate / 14a-16 Exchange Street Lower" for submission to the Planning Authority on Behalf of Temple Bar Properties Ltd. July 17, 1995, p. 3.
Illustration Credits


Map 2: Ibid. p. 66 “Map of Scandanavian Dublin”


Map 4: Ibid. p. 64.

Map 5: Ibid. p. 78.

Map 6: Taken from a report by Gilroy McMahon Architects, Dublin. “Proposed Viking Center and Museum for the Foundation of Dublin Temple Bar” for “Archoelogical Context”.

Photo 1: Terence Sheehy. Images of Ireland. “Merrion Square and Leinster Lawn”


Photo 5: Kathleen Jo Ryan and Bernard Share, ed. Irish Traditions. p. 27, “The Round Tower at Kilmacduagh, County Galway”.

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