

INTRODUCTION MONDAY 13TH OCTOBER

The Common Place

Colleagues, welcome to you all to this our annual conference in our 175th year. For those of you who were not able to be here yesterday, Sunday's papers will be available to you on the website. The title of the conference is Architecture Now – Policy and the Common Place, so that we can concentrate on the present and look to the future. Its working title was The Common Place, which, as well as emphasising the ordinary work that we do, illustrated a wish to bring us all together to act for the common good.

As we celebrate excellence, let us also celebrate the commonplace things that we do so well and that form the physical surrounds that define our culture. Architecture is the hallmark of a civil society and that is what we do so well, for the small stuff as well as the big stuff. We will look at what we have been doing to make things better, but first I would like to address the past, so that we might put it behind us and rediscover the common places that we all share and that unify us.

That has been my major ambition of the last few months – to unify us as a profession, and to put the divisions of the past two years behind us. The other items that I presented to Council on the 1st January are being and must be tackled if we are to thrive for the next 175 years. Amongst these are the Governance Review, the Financial Strategy, the BC(A)Rs, the Review of the operation of the Register, support for our members, support for our practices, the role of Architectural Technologists, Procurement and fees. When I started in January, I made it very clear that I wished to represent all shades of opinion within the membership and that I recognised that there were various views, particularly with regard to the BC(A)Rs.

We must stop being factional, we must stop being adversarial, we must stop being strident. We must be careful with the words that we use, be respectful to each other, argue our views but not impose them, but mostly, we must accept that we can do great good if we work in a spirit of co operation rather than a spirit of distrust.

I will let history judge why, with a proportion of elected and appointed members of Council, the BRegForum continued to work outside the Council of the Institute to issue a narrative that was at best partisan and at worst misleading, hurtful, vitriolic, damaging and frankly unprofessional. History might also judge those who saw no conflict in acting on Council and against Council – running with the hare and the hounds.

History will relate how it came to pass that so much division and distrust stemmed from a piece of secondary legislation, which by definition could not change the remit of the primary Act. A piece of legislation that the RIAI fought very hard to improve and continues to so do, under a new Council. It will attempt to explain how close we came to permanently damaging our Institute at a time of great stress. It might explain how a sense of alienation took hold amongst some of our members who could believe that the RIAI would act against their best interests.

Without doubt, fear played an enormous part in what happened. Combine this fear with the damage wrought on our members by the great recession and a picture emerges. That is not to underestimate the real concerns of our members, but we must not be driven by fear. I say again, fear must not drive us – opportunity should.

I know that we shall achieve more by reasoned dialogue than by stridency, by calmly addressing the issues needing to be addressed, rather than by personalising issues. For us to make a better world in which to be an architect or technologist, we must work on the basis of fact, substance, collaboration and reason. We must also treat others with respect. It is in that way that we will actually achieve changes and continue to be credible and relevant to the process of developing our societal position and our architectural culture.

Those of you who attended the AGM in September will have witnessed what was for me the nadir of my presidency. This low point came when some Council members who attended the July Council meeting at which the Annual Accounts 2013 (circulated to Council in March) were presented by the auditors appeared not to have been aware of what was happening. This despite a thirty minute discussion on the accounts and the fact that they were proposed and seconded by two Council members and that there were no dissenting voices. This is deeply worrying on so many levels. I have never hidden my opinion that the dynamics of this Council have made it dysfunctional and the AGM underlined this for me as a stark reality. But reality is what we must deal with and we must now put the past behind us and move forwards through engagement and truth.

I call on all current and future Council members to work collaboratively and in the spirit of good faith, to co-operate with one another, in the Interest of the RIAI and its future as a representative organisation for its members.

Architecture Now

I said yesterday that Irish Architecture has developed a critical mass and that no matter where you look, you will find it difficult to meet the match of the achievements that we celebrate. The future direction of Irish Architecture must surely be as an integral part of the cultural identity of our society.

One way of imbuing that identity is through constant communication to the public and by the celebration of the achievements of architects, through exhibitions, publications, engagement, awards and reviews. Another way is for us all to be ambassadors for architecture in our daily lives.

For example, our stands at the Ideal Homes Exhibitions and the National Ploughing Championships are very well attended and raise the profile of what it is that an architect can do for a client. If we are serious about the overall quality of our places, then we must broaden our base and relevance to as wide an audience as possible. When the architect's role is as embedded in our society as the GP's, we will have transformed both our profession and our places.

Our own society is in a state of constant flux. The changes to the regulatory environment pose their own challenges and we must address the concerns of our members. As things change and our population grows, we must seize the opportunity to enhance the roles of the architect and the technologist.

The Housing Agency report of 2014 forecast a minimum required supply of 79,660 residential units in urban areas to support the population between 2014 and 2018, an average equivalent of 15,932. Nearly half of these are needed in the greater Dublin area. Eurostat has forecast that the population will increase from our current 4.5 million to 5.5 million in 2035 and to 6.5 million in 2060. On these forecasts, we will have an additional million people within 21 years.

For this to happen, we must have three connected drivers that are all working, and working together. These are the infrastructural, the financial and the needs of the end-user. By infrastructural I mean the Planning, Regulatory and Procurement drivers, of which we are a part, along with Government and our social partners. We should all be working in the same direction and this is yet to happen. There is little point in a Planning Authority proposing multiple uses for existing buildings if, for example, the provisions of the Building Regulations do not facilitate this or the development standards laid out in their development plan do not allow for it. As the most intense users of the planning and regulation systems, we have the experience, the knowledge and the responsibility to ensure that our systems deliver the best results possible.

The financial side of the equation is self-explanatory. Without finance nothing can really happen. Since the crash of 2008, and the Great Recession that has followed, our financial system has been and still is broken. This is reflected in the house prices in certain areas, where 'cash buyers' are chasing a shortage of supply. There have been novel approaches to securing finance for projects and the Government Policy in Construction 2020 recognises the difficulties. Without access to sustainable funding, projects simply cannot be resourced. Given the estimated housing needs and the demographic trend, this is a very serious problem.

Finally, the end user has to support the results of the previous two drivers. Society must have agreed to the shared vision. This is not as simple as it sounds. Even if we get all of the infrastructural and financial parameters into alignment, if people do not want, for example, to 'live over the shop', then there is no point doing it. Similarly, if we cannot convince people of the benefits of sustainable densities, then it is nigh on futile to provide them. We need broad brush strokes, based on empiric research, but one of our biggest challenges is to convince the householder, patient, student and all others who use the built environment that their habits must change. Ironically, Kennedy Wilson – an international housing rental business – are the first developers in Dublin to create large, family sized apartments to replace the three-bedroom semi-detached house.

All of these issues are interconnected, but we now have the opportunity to envision and create a built future that is fit for purpose and serves the needs and aspirations of our society. We just have to ensure that all the parts fit. This requires commitment, understanding and a willingness to change. Those are three qualities that we have as architects and technologists.

The Future

The economic indicators are better than they have been for some time, with our sentiment surveys showing a more optimistic outlook. They are not uniformly spread, so we must be aware of the needs of our members who may not yet be seeing an improvement. As we emerge out of the difficult years, as we surely will, we must ensure that we are the leaders, not the followers.

Before we look towards the future, let us look at the fine work that has been carried out this year in support of our members in the Institute. As well as the trojan work of the Standing Committees and workgroups such as the Housing Committee, Sustainability task force, Historic Buildings Committee, Board of Architectural Education and the Universal Design Committee, amongst others, you will have seen the fruits of the works of this year's Council, as part of my own agenda.

For the first time, we have presented to and it has been accepted by a government department that the value of our work can be enumerated and agreed. The European Procurement Directive, when it is transposed into national legislation, can build on this. Also for the first time, we got agreement from a government department that tendering for a project below a calculated cost would result in marks being deducted from the tender. These come close to the core of our survival – the overwhelming need to provide an adequate level of fees for our work. We have set up a Procurement taskforce whose task is imperative.

The work on BC(A)R has been continuing to use much of the resources of the RIAI. The Steering Group co-chaired by Fionnuala Rogerson and Joe Kennedy, with Claire McManus, Paul Kelly, Michael Grace and John Mitchell has been co-ordinating as much information as possible on SI9 as well as the work of the Change Group, which consists of Eoin O Cofaigh, Orla Hegarty, Deirdre Lennon, Michael Grace, Paul Kelly and Michael Collins.

The work of our members on the Contracts Drafting Group continue their work on the RIAI Suite of Contracts, very often in the face of some opposition by other parties. Their work is invaluable to us.

Our communications to the outside world this year have been at a very high level. I am aware that people might want me to concentrate on their particular interests, but I have to judge the situations as I see fit and get the most benefit for all of our members. I have learnt the vagaries of editing! On 'The works' two weeks ago, I went from Newgrange to the Wide Streets' Commissioners in the blink of an eye, missing out a huge tract of our architectural heritage! We have got good coverage and that does not come easy. It is due to the constant work of our staff.

Members' meetings were high on the priority list. I had one last week in Waterford, which was very useful. It coincided with the opening of the Waterford Festival of Architecture, which is a great opportunity, enterprise and flagship for the value of architecture and design. I intend to have more members' meetings during the remainder of the year. Having hoped to have had them earlier, the frequency of Council meetings has made it very challenging to find the time.

The work of the Housing Committee has produced our current Housing Policy. This is a very important document for us, as we have a much more holistic view of the issues than the other interests in housing. I see it as a great opportunity to use some of our existing built fabric, particularly in our Country Towns.

Under the aegis of the Academy of Urbanism and the Urban Forum, we held a joint colloquium in Mallow on the future of the Country Town. The Country town is crucial to our history and is probably the piece of urbanity with which our population most closely identifies.

Our new policy on Architectural Technologists is very important. I have yet to find champions for progressing this policy, but have met recently with Darren Bergin to kick-start it. I think that it will take Council members to provide the motivation. It is fair to say that we do not necessarily know where this policy will lead, but I have made addressing this issue one of my priorities.

I have only picked a few of the areas of action that have taken place, just to give you an idea of the work that is being done by your colleagues. I would need the whole day to outline all of the work that is carried out by the staff and other members on your behalf. Almost all of it is available on the website.

I mentioned earlier some of the priority items on my agenda, such as Corporate Governance, the role of the Institute, the finances of the Institute and the questions related to BC(A)R. One of the other critical items on the agenda is the question of fees and charges. Without adequate remuneration we cannot either resource work correctly or provide ourselves with a satisfactory standard of living. If we do not address this issue now, we will find it difficult in the future.

I set out to address these things and I shall. I want your support to carry out those tasks, particularly:

Governance:

The Governance Review, chaired by the past president, with Fionan de Barra, Eoin O'Morain, Anne Kiernan (all current Council members), Anne Fletcher, Eddie Conroy and Kathryn Meghen has met on a number of occasions and will be reporting to Council by year end. I have committed to carrying out this review and reaffirm my commitment today. This work is very important for our future. The group has been looking at other

organisations and systems, External consultation may have to be undertaken and there will have to be extensive consultation with members. Any changes will have to be presented to General Meetings of the membership. The results of this work could lead to small changes or radical changes – whatever the outcome we must ensure that we make the Institute fit for the future. These are the structures that will form the future Institute and I do not think that they should be rushed.

This group is also looking at the role of the Institute and making comparisons with other registration bodies and other regulatory bodies. Again, this is an agenda item that has a high priority.

In advance of the Governance Review there are two issues that I want to see advanced. The first is a Code of Conduct for Council as it is clear that, for the first time in our history, we require a special code of conduct. The second is the issue of Succession Planning. We need to develop a process to deal with the changes in senior RIAI executive positions and I am letting you know that this process is making progress. The CEO recently pointed out to me that he could be run over by a bus!

Finances:

I want to be very clear about this – the RIAI is not in a financial crisis. We have a very strong balance sheet, with accumulated assets of €4.35 million and cash reserves of €2.6 million, which we built up over the period from 2000 to 2008. We own two buildings unencumbered by debt. Wise management by the executive and previous Councils has put us in this position of strength. Four factors have contributed to the losses in the 2013 accounts and they are the loss of rental income from and payment of Rates for Corrigan House (€150,000 + €50,000), a subvention for members of some €250,000 in reduced or waived annual subscriptions and the book depreciation of €120,000 on the new IT system which was tendered three years ago and won by the lowest bidder.

I am working with the financial team to bring us back to a balanced budget by the end of my term in 2015/2016. If it does not damage our services to members, we will look at models for generating a surplus.

BC(A)R:

My vision for addressing the question of BC(A)Rs is to retain a seat and a voice at the tables of change, so that we can work to re form the system into one that is what we have always been seeking – one with the qualities of fairness, effectiveness and compliance. We have always supported better building and should be seen to be actively engaged in it.

We must have that seat so that we can influence events on behalf of our members, for example to ensure delivery the commitments that we have for a robust statutory register of contractors and for progress on LDI, as well as for further progress for adequate resources for Building Control Authorities so that there can be an effective system of independent inspection by the BCA.

Fees:

I have set up a group chaired by Michelle Fagan to make proposals for Council to address this core issue. I have also asked them to look at guidance for salary levels in the profession. We must be able to value ourselves if we are to survive.

Procurement:

This group is chaired by Deirdre Lennon and is crucial to our younger members, but also crucial to us all. This is closely linked to fees.

On these and other issues, the time has come for us to make up our minds about the kind of corporate culture that we want. Is it a culture of imposed wills or one of collegiate endeavour? We have been consumed by inward looking division and it is time to move on to looking outwards again – to show leadership in furthering the advancement of architecture for the benefit of society. We can either be leaders or followers. The choice is yours.

My vision of our future is one that will make the profession stronger and improve the lot of architects and technologists. It is our future as leaders/

In this year of the 175th Anniversary of the RIAI, we should recall that the main object for which the Institute is established is to undertake and encourage the general advancement of architecture for the benefit of the community and to promote and facilitate the acquirement of the knowledge of the various arts, sciences and skills connected therewith. We must move forward as a united profession, with a clear understanding of what the best way is to effect change for the better. I believe that we are at that point and that we can regard the past as another country. With the backing of the membership, we can look forward to a shared future, where our roles are understood and valued. I want your support to achieve this vision of the future.

I thank all those who give so generously of their time to support our members and appreciate the dedication of all of those who work tirelessly for their colleagues. In particular, the staff of the RIAI have been very supportive of our members in these times of crisis. We are very lucky to have them. This crisis will pass and we will regain our respected position so that we can drive forward our common agenda in the future in the collegiate spirit that has served us so well. We must seize this opportunity and I ask for your support.