ARCHITECTURAL
ASSOCIATION OF IRELAND

# building material

Issue fourteen [winter 2005]

Office No.1, 43/44 Temple Bar, Dublin 2.
t: + 353 1 6351428 f: + 353 1 6351429
e: aaiadmin@eircom.net w: www.aai-architecture.ie

Awards Sponsor
Tegral Building Products Ltd

Corporate Partners
Bennett Construction Ltd
Bruce Shaw
Kingscourt Bricks
Ecolodge
Tegral Building Products Ltd
The Irish Architecture Foundation
Dept of Environment

Cultural Partners
Arup Consulting Engineers
Davis Langdon PKS
Enterprise Ireland
The Institute of Engineers of Ireland
The Irish Concrete Society

Patrons
Anthony Reddy Associates Architects
Henry J. Lyons and Partners Architects
Horan Keogan Ryan Architects
McCrossan O'Rourke Architects
Murray O'Laoire Architects
O' Mahony Pike Architects

Friends
A2 Architects
ADT Windows
Box Architecture
Cullen Payne Architects
Donaghy and Dimond Architects
DTA Architects
Shay Cleary Architects
FKL Architects
Gerry Cahill Architects
Grafton Architects
McCullough Mulvin Architects
M+Co Architecture
Paul Keogh Architects
mml architects
O' Donnell + Tuomey Architects
Paul Keogh Architects
Shay Cleary Architects
Taylor Architects

arts council
schomhairle
ealaíon



*Thanks once again to the editorial team and good luck to Brian W.*
*Very special thanks to Anna H for intellectual, emotional and nutritional support.*

*Spine art by M. Ramboz.*

## Contents

# Editorial

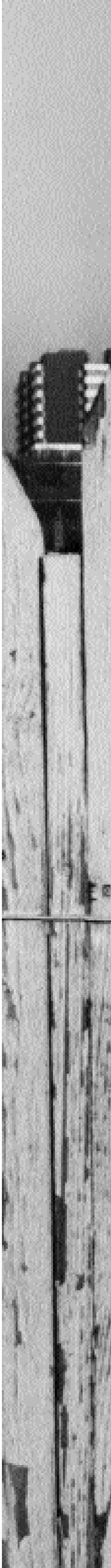
GARY BOYD

This edition of building material investigates the relationship between the economy and urban form and in particular how architecture and architects operate at the extremes of the economic cycle: boom and bust. These are periods where the presence or absence of finance within the built environment is at its most explicit.

In the rapid ebb and flow of economics, slowing-moving architecture is inevitably out of step. Indeed, the enduring qualities architects are trained to admire and promote – form, space, materiality, beauty – those qualities which shelter, accommodate provoke emotion and, which seem to lie within the very meaning of architecture itself, can become irrelevant in the anarchic context of finance. This is especially true in times of slump. Here, it is their very solidity and materiality that makes buildings vulnerable. Finance, immaterial, without quality or form can simply evaporate, slip through time zones and international boundaries to remerge elsewhere in some far off corner of the globe. For buildings rooted to the spot, unable to adapt to recent developments or located in some unprofitable zone, it can mean vacancy, obsolescence, dereliction and demolition, regardless of whether they are sound, beautiful or socially useful. In this world, all that is solid can and does melt into air. In recent times, this has been the experience of cities like Detroit whose wholesale erasure as a centre of automobile production is all the more bewildering in a world which consumes more motor cars than ever before.

It has also been the experience to some degree of many other cities in the last one hundred and fifty years, Dublin included. Sometimes, it is difficult to remember in the boom-town that is contemporary Dublin that until very recently the city had undergone a protracted economic stagnation. It is perhaps even more difficult to acknowledge that it is likely do so again. In what Neil Smith calls the 'see-saw effect of uneven development' global capital seeks and finds the places of most profit, places where it will get a maximum return on its investment. In this world, disinvestment, a dramatic fall in property prices and, at its extreme, the destruction of whole sectors of a city simply paves the way for future building and often means an opportunity for wholesale and immensely profitable redevelopment. For finance, therefore, bust segues seamlessly into boom with each dependent on the other. For slower moving entities like architecture and indeed, society and its communities, this neat turn around can be prefaced with hardship, uncertainty and social instability.

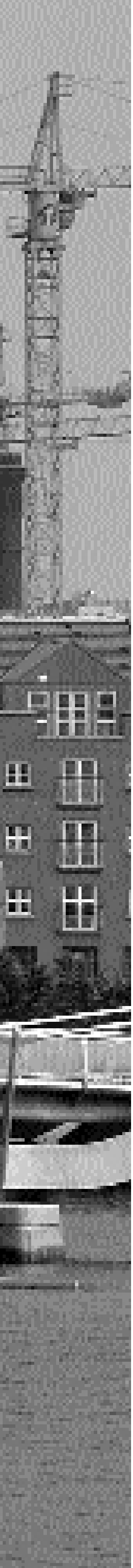
The hidden and intangible flow of finance is as much the site of architecture as physical location, topology and climate. This is something which, if architects want to remain relevant in the shaping of the city, has to be embraced in all its complexities.



# 1

## Boom and Slump on the Clyde and Liffey

JONATHAN CHARLEY



**1**

It is still boom time and the crane operators and scaffolders scurry between historic square and water's edge laying the foundations for glitzy offices and chic apartments in the race to boost the value of real estate. The capitalisation of culture or more precisely of eating, drinking, and caffeine-injected art galleries is a vital component of this process as the city is reborn as a post-modern metropolis serving duck instead of mutton. It isn't difficult to crack the veneer of prosperity that camouflages such urban development. The Liffey still funnels milk bottles, bus tickets, teabags, and surgical debris towards the sea. And, as in all 'regenerated' cities, a quick detour from the prescribed tourist route returns you to the reality of urban poverty.

But despite the fraudulent claims on the future that adorn the hoardings of overpriced flats, the construction boom over the last decade in Ireland is unusual in modern economic history. In most economies the construction sector accounts for anything from nine to thirteen per cent of GNP. Even in rapidly industrialising economies like that of the old Soviet Union it didn't surpass this mark. Statistics of course are as open to ideological manipulation as any other index of progress. However, when a construction industry, fuelled by speculative housing accounts for twenty two percent of GNP, higher than in any other developing economy, we are dealing with a fairly unique situation. But what is the real character of this construction boom? What are its social objectives and who has actually benefited from it? How long will it last or has it already come to an end? Being the public optimists that they are, land developers, speculative house builders and civic booster boys pretend it will continue indefinitely. As champions of neo-liberal economic policy they argue that everyone in society eventually benefits from an economic up turn. Prosperity trickles down they say. They point to the new roads, tunnels and civic improvements built 'not to circulate commodities' but 'to improve the quality of everyone's life'. They celebrate the expanding service sector that includes the tourist and retail industries, and which by the early 1990s was employing over sixty per cent of the Irish workforce, many of them in jobs notorious for low wages and insecurity. But this and other matters are of little concern to the fortune-tellers who, mesmerised by the speed of urban regeneration, see nothing but flashes of gold bullion.

**2**

Charles Mackay's Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Popular Crowds along with J.K.Galbraith's The Great Crash 1929, are a good place to start pondering the historical meaning of a boom. To my knowledge, worthless peat bogs are not being flogged to greedy investors in the same manner that impenetrable swathes of Florida swamp were once sold in the 1920s. Neither is there a gang of unscrupulous merchants beguiling the local population with tales of unlimited silver deposits on the slopes of the Wicklow Mountains. But there is a similar air of unreality, of a dreaming city in which too many people have indulged themselves in what Galbraith might have termed a 'vision of eternal hope and optimism'. There is only one thing you can be absolutely certain of with regards to an economic boom: it will be followed at some point by decline and stagnation. This might occur as a stage-managed slow burn, a grey Wednesday or a murky Thursday. In these scenarios stocks and shares are rescued at the last minute by the intervention of finance capital, or bankrupt firms and devalued property are hoovered up at a snip by capitalists determined to kick start the process of accumulation. But the spectre remains of a full-blown crisis in which the state trembles, capital flees, fingers get burnt, and the working class are left to sweep up the mess.

Inevitably, just as the renaissance cartographers re-imagined maps as a way of consolidating private property, so economists and politicians have endeavoured to model the economy in a vain attempt to control it. Compiling statistics and graphs, they try to understand the historical patterns of productivity and profitability and the relationships between different industries. They ask whether the construction industry mimics the rest of the economy, drives it, or lags behind in its own peculiar world. With concerned frowns they speculate on whether the peaks and troughs that dominate construction history are indicative of minor fluctuations, business cycles, or long waves of depression and expansion. Others doubt whether there is any discernible pattern to economic history at all, whilst the doyens of neo-liberal economic theory reply that if there ever was a 'ragged pattern', it has come to an end. After three centuries, they maintained, capitalism had shown itself to be the most fitting way of organising human society. It had developed into a well-oiled machine that required little more than occasional fine-tuning. For the construction industry this translated into the utopian idea that an unfettered market in building services could somehow satisfy all of our needs and desires with regards to urban development.

In contrast, more critically minded economists have suggested that the specifically capitalist production of the built environment makes the construction industry inherently unstable and unable to resolve many of the pressing construction challenges that all societies face. They argue that the very system itself is characterised by instability as a result of the long-term tendency for the rate of profit to fall. It is this, they suggest, that has historically driven construction firms to subordinate any concept of social need to the primary goal of finding new ways of maintaining profits. In time honoured fashion this is accomplished through takeovers, technological innovation, the forcing down of wages, or by shifting capital elsewhere in the search for cheaper labour power and as yet uncommodified spaces and services. The result is an historical pattern of profound social and spatial inequality that in extreme situations can result in the cessation of construction activity due to war, social revolution or environmental degradation.

**3**

What we do know is that if you plot the trajectory of output and profitability in the British construction industry over the last two hundred years, the result is a line of peaks and troughs that resemble a mountain range. The graph of Ireland's economic history is similar with valleys and ravines indicating decline, the advent of war or social unrest, and periods of relative peace and prosperity marked by gentle slopes and scrambling climbs.

Nobody particularly likes to dwell on the bad times, and if the odds are good, all memories of past penury are forgotten. To a large extent this myopic enthusiasm for the promise of a boom is understandable. There is always money to be made. The great canal and railway explosion of the nineteenth century continued for decades, not least because of the institutionalised corruption of politicians. Similarly the industrial revolution, though interrupted by Napoleonic wars, the Chartists, and the recession of the 1870s, was one of the most protracted booms in the history of building construction. Legendary profits were there to be made in everything from infrastructure and housing to the export of cast-iron buildings. But even this eventually came to an end, as did the post Second World War building boom, which at one point similarly appeared as if it would last forever.

The first things to tumble were the property markets that crashed in the midst of a global recession in the late nineteen seventies, not least because of the over production of office space. Almost simultaneously, the dismantling of the welfare state and the process of de-industrialisation gathered pace. Sometimes decline is a slow process, but it can also be frighteningly rapid. Towns and communities that had been organised around single industries like steel, coal or car production were decimated within a generation. And two decades was all it took for the certainties associated with secure employment, public housing, schools and hospitals to become memories. But despite the demolition, strikes and receiverships of the late nineteen seventies and early eighties the capitalist construction industry didn't panic. It simply moved towards management contracting, laid off workers and embraced the opportunities opened up the by the privatisation of the built environment and public sector.

It rushed with open arms into a new regime of accumulation organised around speculative housing, retail parks and leisure buildings, and began to build them at a rate and in a manner that continues to defy architectural reason and economic wisdom. It is not difficult to imagine what will happen when the market for offices and housing becomes saturated, the circulation of credit spirals out of control and interest rates inevitably rise. We have been there many times before. What appears at one moment as a cast-iron guarantee of increased property values can quickly become a cul-de-sac of repossession and bankruptcy. The fact that over forty per cent of the new housing in Dublin is unlet and unsold should be warning enough that there are cracks in the foundations of this particular boom. The smart investors will have already cleared their desks and won't be taking the cleaning staff with them. Banks will try and off-load the debts, and more than likely it will be the working and middle class who will face 'restructuring' and tax increases to pay the bill.

**4**

Early in 2005, the Bank of Ireland reported that employment in construction had reached an ‘unsustainable level’, and that the role of the construction industry within the economy was ‘above equilibrium’. They hope that even if this situation leads to a slowdown in housing, it will not result in widespread unemployment as sub contractors, casual labourers and small firms are soaked up by the expansion of ‘other’ areas of construction and ‘other’ sectors of the Irish economy. But if it is true that 132,000 workers (62% of the total construction workforce) are employed in the housing sector, it is wishful thinking to imagine how even fifty thousand will suddenly be absorbed into new employment. Housing and construction booms necessarily draw on what was once called the ‘reserve army of labour’. This is the pool of the unemployed and casually employed rounded up by contractors when the order book is full and dispensed with as soon as the market contracts. Such has been the fate of every labourer and wandering craftsman from the speculative housing booms of nineteenth century Paris and Glasgow, to the construction jamboree of the late 1980s in London.

That the contemporary house builder should be primarily motivated by profits rather than an analysis of social need or the desire to address the disparities thrown up by uneven development, should hardly surprise us. It was precisely the increasing dominance of competitive tendering and the contracting system at the turn of the nineteenth century that gave birth to the speculative house builder. This said, it is still extraordinary that about sixty per-cent of the new housing in Ireland is being bought as a second home or holiday flat, purchases that come complete with tax break advantages. The rest is being consumed by what are termed ‘inward migrants’ and first-time buyers. You do not need to be an economist or a sociologist to see that this sort of market discriminates against all but the relatively affluent; you simply have to wander into an estate agent and survey the six figures. It is difficult to see how such an agenda for housing is going to benefit the large mass of working class Ireland. But developers have a solution. ‘Social inclusion’, ‘some for rent’, and ‘affordable flats’ are dangled as imaginary compensation in front of the public as developers continue to trade in wishful slogans and brave new worlds, wilfully ignoring the fashionable shibboleths on uncertainty and chaos. This is to be wholly expected; after all it is the business of estate agents to sell security and nostalgia. Other meaningless expressions like ‘Luxury, Dream, Historic, Sustainable’ and ‘Family’ form part of this specialised vocabulary used by marketing consultants and home builders to disguise the reality of daily social life in a city. Language is as much about mystification as explanation, which is why sun blinds, potted plants, lampshades and trinkets are strategically placed in the facades of empty flats, so as to persuade the would be customer of the intense and vibrant life to be had in waterfront homes. But there is no hiding the profusion of ‘To Let’ and ‘For Sale’ signs that jostle next to the lie, ‘Only a few left’.


**5**

No one knows its precise location, but somewhere there is a factory or covert maternity hospital that is producing hundreds of thousands of identikit professional couples. These are people who think a two hundred and fifty thousand pound 'studio' flat with enough space to challenge Lilliputians is desirable and affordable. Over the next decade a hundred and ten thousand of these individuals are expected to arrive at the Leith docks in Edinburgh, specially ferried in from London, the Baltic or god knows where. About the same number it seems are anticipated in Glasgow as the city migrates westwards along the Clyde.

And so it goes on in Dublin. But who are the homebuyers? And more precisely where are they? If you walk west along Pearse Street facing north, you have a good chance of spotting one of them. There is no point looking to the other side of the street. They are unlikely to be drinking under the gaze of Widow Scallan's hunger strikers or admiring the customised crazy paving of the corporation flats. No, the residents of new Dublin are to be found in protected pockets, socially and spatially dislocated in a panorama composed out of white render, timber cladding, concrete, glass and steel, the international language of the modern speculative flat. These are truly homogenous and unsettling places that lack the social diversity and messy noise that makes urban life urban. It couldn't be otherwise. Whatever it looks like, suburban baronial, faux Georgian, modernist glass palace, soft or heavily fortified, the condominium in is in effect a middle class prison, a self-contained world with managed vistas and closely observed rules of social conduct.

As yet there are no tollgates or border crossings into these zones. A few of the boys in shorts and wet suits jumping off O'Connell bridge have migrated down to the cleaned up dock basins that are great for swimming in, and for the time being no one is bothering them. One can only presume that their right to use a private pond is an example of what is meant by the trickle down effect.

Jonathan Charley is senior lecturer in architecture at the University of Strathclyde, Glasgow.