



Irish Examiner

THE TRUE TONE OF THE CRITIC'S WORK

Des O'Sullivan
reviews
architectural
critic, Shane
O'Toole's new
collection of
writing from
1999-2016

A delicious ambiguity is contained in the title of Shane O'Toole's *One Hundred and One Hosannas for Architecture*. In terms of the architecture of Ireland, is it a hymn of praise or a plea for salvation?

Here are 101 essays on everything from the Glucksmann and Crawford galleries in Cork to Calatrava's Irish bridges, the Bocconi university in Milan for which Grafton Architects won the World Building of the Year Award in 2008; Christ the King in Cork (with a gleaming newly-cleaned facade), Liam McCormick's church at Burt in County Donegal; Eileen Gray's E 1027; the Ha'penny Bridge; a house at Bohermore and social housing at the Timberyard in Dublin. St Angela's College in Cork is included and the University Church in Dublin too, as the first Byzantine basilica to be built, north of the Alps.

Shane O'Toole is known and admired as an architect, writer and critic, although he no longer practices as an architect. In the 101 essays gathered here — all previously published — he presents a generally positive point of view of the developments from 1999 to 2007, whilst bemoaning the demolition of some fine structures. Anything that focuses Irish minds on

architecture is always welcome. It seems to me that this is a country where the aesthetic is trumped every time by the regulations. The negative results of this unimaginative and bureaucratic approach are everywhere to be seen.

This publication, newly arrived in our bookshops, is a timely and welcome intervention. *One Hundred and One Hosannas for Architecture, A Chronicle of Millennial Culture in Ireland*, (€22.99) is published by Gandon Editions.

The ambiguous title can be read in another way as a sort of primer: Architecture 101. O'Toole guides us to buildings which are exceptional. By highlighting what has been done he shows us what can be done, what should be done, and what is often not done.

The essays begin, fittingly enough, with James Gandon, the architect who shaped Dublin with buildings like the Custom House, the Four Courts, O'Connell Bridge, and as a consultant to the avant garde, Wide Street Commissioners.

Michael Scott's Busarus, though controversial at home, was seen as Dublin's first contemporary office block before London had even started to build one. It attracted more international attention and acclaim than any other Irish building. Difficult to imagine now how revolutionary it must have seemed when it opened in 1953. Briefly in the vanguard, once again Ireland moved on at a snail's pace to be overtaken, once again, by everyone else.

In a glance at the Venice Architecture Biennale O'Toole remarks: "Irish architecture has always struggled to be heard on the international stage.

"Yet since Scott Tallon Walker won the RIBA Royal Gold Medal in 1975 each generation has thrown up at

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least one outstanding talent". In this piece he refers to the architecture of de Blacam and Meagher, O'Donnell and Tuomey and Tom de Paor.

It was news to me, until I read it in this book, that the University Church at St Stephen's Green in Dublin, built on the initiative of Cardinal Newman and completed in 1856 was, with the exception of the Allerheiligen Hofkapelle of 1837 in Munich, the first basilica built north of the Alps and the earliest example of a revived Byzantine style in Northern Europe.

The reader will be surprised by some of the material in this book, built like a missal complete with useful cloth bookmarks on the binding. It is a something to be dipped in to again and again. No one should be surprised to learn that we might have had a design centre by Mies van der Rohe, had the proposal not been put on hold before it even began.

O'Toole quotes another superstar architect, Daniel Libeskind, whose Eighteen Turns Pavilion designed as the Serpentine Gallery

summer pavilion in London in 2001, graced the lawn at Fota for a few months in 2005 during Cork's reign as Capital of Culture. At a packed lecture in Cork Opera House Libeskind said: "Architecture is much closer to the profession of storytelling than to plumbing. It's a communicative art: every building tells a story".

We Irish are both storytellers and builders. We need to consider our built environment more. Writing in 2002 of an architect's experimental home in Co Leitrim O'Toole asks: "Why, when Ireland builds more one-off houses than anyone else in Europe, do they all look so alike?"

The question is as apropos today as it was then, even if we are no longer building so many houses, one-off or otherwise. Why does Irish imagination and

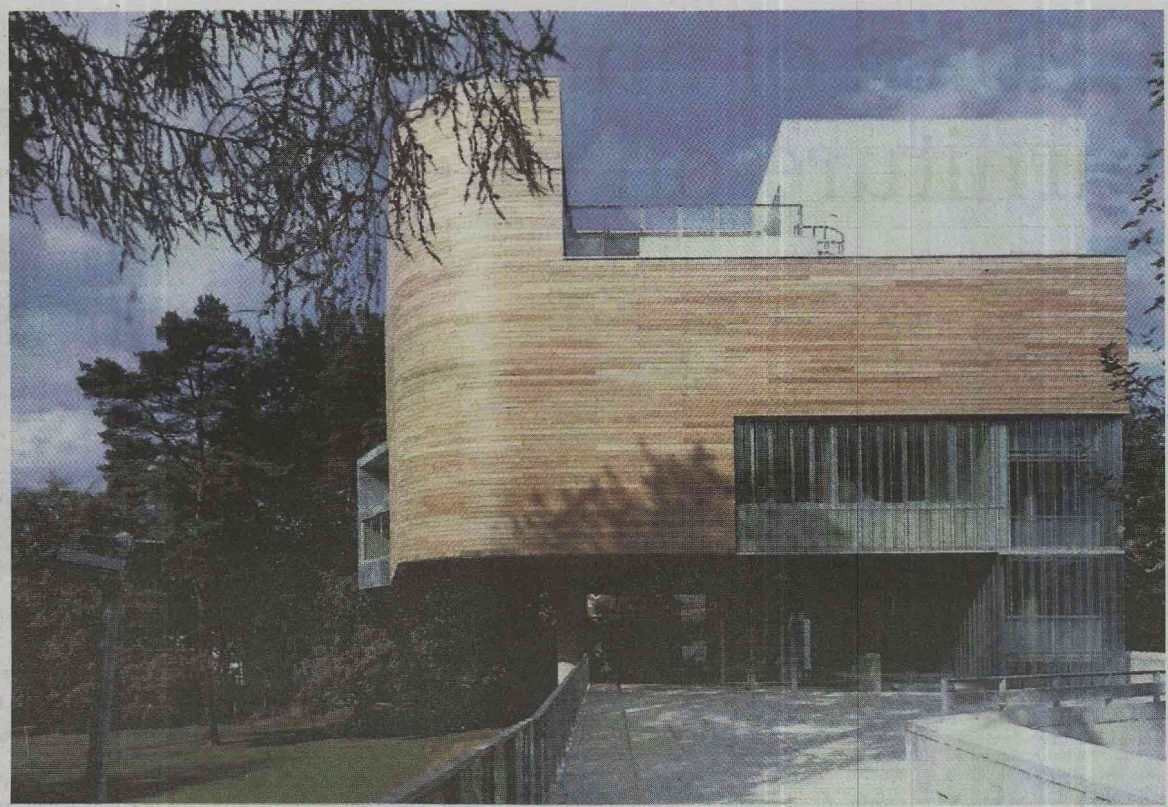
creativity, widely celebrated around the world, not extend more into our buildings?

Do we need to establish an inquiry to come up with yet another report to moulder forgotten on some shelf. Perhaps it could be called, without any ambiguity whatsoever, The Impediments to Imaginative and Decent Construction in Ireland?

■ Shane O'Toole is an award-winning architectural critic, a graduate in architecture from UCD and an honorary fellow of the RIAI. He is a renowned writer on design and construction matters and was short-listed twice for CICA, The International Committee of Architectural Critics' Book and Journal Awards for contributions to Architecture Ireland and the RIAI Annual Review.



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The award-winning Lewis Glucksman Gallery at University College Cork, designed by O' Donnell + Tuomey.

Picture: Maxwells Dublin



BELOW: Christ the King Church,
Turner's Cross, Cork.
Below left: Architect Michael
Scott at Busarus, built between
1945 -1953.