

THE ART OF THE MATTER



The Transforming Power of Art and Architecture.
Tuesday 26 September 2006. Belfast Waterfront Hall.

Alchemy has always been considered a dangerous pursuit: the wish to convert base matter into riches, a difficult endeavour that involves fire and the unification of opposites. The Swedish playwright August Strindberg believed himself to be gifted with the powers. But so deluded was he that the flames of his experiments almost consumed him (and his unfortunate neighbours) and left him with only ash.

Though an emblazoned image of sparkling fire was chosen as the promotional logo, uncontrolled alchemical pyrotechnics was far from the thoughts of those gathered at Belfast's Waterfront Hall on the 26th September for the 'Urban Alchemy -The Transforming Power of Art and Architecture' conference. In the studio black box, everyone was there to participate in another form of 'secret magic': the collective aspiration to transform Belfast and Northern Ireland with a shared vision for Art and Architecture.

As technicians scampered across the stage to check 'all systems were go' with the complex conference gadgetry, the day opened with a short film describing the architecture and civic qualities of Belfast. This looped round several times -as if to reinforce the point- before the conference got underway with a series of speeches. Pat McCarthy (Lord Mayor), Rosemary Kelly (Arts Council of Northern Ireland), Trevor Leaker (RSUA) and Paul Sweeney (Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure), welcomed everyone on behalf of the main promoters and sponsors, and thanked those involved for their energy and enthusiasm in making the day possible.

Chair for the conference was Frank McDonald of the Irish Times, whose job it was to weave and link the events together and to hold fort at time managing the various speakers.

Probing subtlety as he progressed throughout the day for audience reactions and questions, pitching in a few of his own thoughts on issues such as the anti-urban stance of the location of the new Lyric Theatre, while somehow managing to continually tap away at the keys of his laptop. Well known for his books on the urban development (and destruction) of Dublin and rural Ireland, he should have been a key speaker in his own right.

Sunand Prasad was the first to take the floor. Impressed by the Belfast's surrounding 'bowl' of hills and questioning our all too 'scientific' approach to urban design, he favoured instead a sense of the ineffable and the intuitive in architecture. He showed some well-known urban spaces and squares such as Park Güell by Gaudi, before discussing a number of his own projects for medical centres in Belfast. He praised the procurement method adopted by the Health Estates as successfully promoting quality over that of the typical cost driven 'Design and Build' contract. But the relationship between architecture and art in his own projects was very much a traditional one: set pieces within a building. While his modern 'cathedrals of health' glowed with stained glass and sculpture, the engagement with the artist was essentially as a commissioned artisan.

After a welcome coffee break, Maggie Bolt (director of Project-Public Art South West) and Eleanor Wheeler (Belfast City Council Artists in Residence) described a number of initiatives and projects that showed how artists could contribute when drawn into a wider conversation and process. Though modest in scale, many of the projects shown by Bolt revealed a richer social engagement and a refreshing lateral approach to such simple issues as street lighting and numbering. 'Rethinking ▶



Above / RIBA President Elect Sunand Prasad, RSUA President Trevor Leaker, Frank McDonald from the Irish Times and Arts Council representative Paul Harron. (Photo by Harrison Photography)

▶the ordinary' -as one of the artists described it- was a vital strategy in working with small budgets and bureaucratic structures. Eleanor Wheeler outlined the nature of participation and community interface in Belfast, where the art works created a shared ownership of both the making process and of the physical space they were to be located in.

By far the most inspired presentation of the day was that given by Angus Farquhar (the creative director of NVA). He managed to cut across detached professionalism and the jargon of 'art-speak' with his passionate and personal plea to create something of real social value -in contrast to (as he described) "...the huge wasted resources deployed in Iraq." Discussing issues of place, multiculturalism and the notion of 'common ground', his simple 'go out and do it' philosophy was illustrated by the remarkable 'The Hidden Gardens' in Glasgow's South-Side. Created through a vivid layering of



interpretations, ideas and cultures, it provides a shared legacy and emblem for peace in the form of an event space and public garden. It has drawn a divergent community of people together through such events as festivals of light celebrating and sharing their own different religious customs and cultures. A long consultation process that broke 'the rules', it is typical of Farquhar's energy and NVA's ability to regain and uncover the neglected, forgotten or lost territories of our cities.

Lunch was served across the road in the superb St George's Market, where during the 'bangers and mash', two delicately poised and elegant performers swung from the roof in swathes of red cloth amidst the clamour of conversation and sounds of munching delegates.

The conference then broke into four parallel workshops, which explored different themes and debates. John Tuomey, Barry

Pritchard, Rita Harkin, Megan Johnston and Will Chamberlain were among some of those participating. Inevitably there was just not enough time, and soon everyone had to reassemble back at the Waterfront's Studio theatre for a panel rerun of what had just been discussed. At times seemingly improvised, and rushed the workshops did however open up a welcome diversity within the overall conference.

The final 'keynote' speaker of the day was Michael Hopkins assisted by David Selby. He gave the kind of presentation I suspect he would give to any potential client boardroom, and in so doing seemed to completely miss the point of this event. After his photo tour of the 'oeuvre', a masterplan for a large part of Belfast was flashed briefly before our eyes by David Selby. But before anyone could raise a question, both were heading off to the airport. At least one member of the audience who had been 'arch-starved' by the 'boxes' of contemporary architecture, was satisfied by glimpsing some curved spans in stone and brick in the Hopkins's photo-gallery. But as for art or artists, they were sidelined as we were subjected to an architectural monologue. This was an unfortunate end, and a major missed opportunity.

During the day Bilbao, Glasgow, Gateshead and Barcelona were perhaps mentioned all too often, as if to seek safe reassurance in what has been done already by others. Missing also was any aspiration that art and artists can engage the city on a strategic urban level. Is the fate of our cities to lie only in the hands of developers, planners and architects? And what other possibilities are there for art in the city beyond the limited safe domain of the public art object?

Criticisms aside, that such an event had taken place was a major achievement. Many of the issues, ideas and projects shown throughout the day clearly engaged the delegates. Like the inspired belief in creating the Waterfront Hall -an important cultural outpost amidst past difficult days- a precedent and a critical mass of interest has been established by this conference.

As Frank McDonald concluded a busy and successful day, and quietly exited stage left; the delegates headed for a drinks reception, tours and the start of the evening events; I recalled a voice in the short film that opened the conference (who was talking about architecture in Belfast): "...we should have more of it". ●

Paul Clarke