



Funding culture

The green light given this week for several cultural projects marks a significant development for the arts and a great achievement for Minister John O'Donoghue. He has done well to secure Government approval for such a considerable package of investment in national cultural renewal.

The National Concert Hall had put forward a convincing argument for a major - and overdue - redevelopment of its facilities. Its case was urgent: the site adjacent to the NCH at Earlsfort Terrace in Dublin will be vacated by UCD, its current occupier, and owner, sometime in the next year. This is a once-off opportunity to provide Dublin and the country with a state-of-the-art performance centre. The process of acquiring the site - a task for the Minister's department and the OPW - is only the first step, but a vital one, in what could be a lengthy procedure if the completion of funding follows the "2006-2010" time-frame set down by the Minister for Finance.

The other national cultural institution to receive positive news about its future was the Abbey Theatre which, following the recent clearance of its financial deficit, was given confirmation of the site of its new theatre. However, as in the case of the Concert Hall, the option of a public/private partnership is to be examined.

While the announcement that both projects are to proceed is good news indeed - the Abbey after a long and at times unseemly saga - the suitability of a PPP arrangement has yet to be tested. The co-habitation of artistic and commercial interests may not be the easiest concept to make workable - particularly in the case of a hallowed institution like the National Theatre, even though it is currently undergoing its own reinvention.

The provision of funding for Wexford's Theatre Royal and €4 million towards the cost of upgrading the stage area of the Gaiety Theatre - one of Dublin's great treasures - is most welcome. The enhancement that this Exchequer support will facilitate is badly needed; the results when the work is done will provide an imaginative solution to the city's lack of any proper opera venue.

The Minister is right to refer to both the Abbey and Concert Hall as "flagship projects". Both of them will present the opportunity for landmarks of the imagination in architectural terms and the passing of what Mr O'Donoghue calls "signature" buildings to future generations. The creation of such a cultural legacy has, so far, been one of the great deficits of the recent era of prosperity and the building boom in the capital.