

# Architecture that reshaped the city



Government buildings, left, was formerly the college of Science. Merville House on the Belfield Campus, above and a fountain in the Iveagh Gardens, right



From Government Buildings on Merrion Square to Earlsfort Terrace itself, UCD's architectural presence has always been felt in Dublin, writes Emma Cullinan

Behind the neo-Classical façade of the National Concert Hall building in Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin, stands a mix of structures from earlier times that are as varied as the history of the site itself and of University College Dublin.

This area of Dublin was home to many grandees; Lord this and Earl that, whose names are remembered in neighbouring streets. The origin of the name Iveagh Gardens, for instance, needs little introduction – this extensive urban park was once a Guinness-family garden.

But they weren't the first to own what was formerly known as Leeson Fields. As Professor Donal McCartney explains in his contribution to the forthcoming publication *Farewell to the Terrace*, the history of this site dates back to Clonmell House on Harcourt Street built for John Scott.

This building became a school run by Dr Quinn who invited John Henry Newman to lodge there during his visits to Dublin where he lectured on the need for a university. The Catholic University opened in three buildings on St Stephen's Green, one of which was Newman's own house at 6 Harcourt Street.

Scott, who had become the Earl of Clonmell acquired Leeson's Fields from the Leeson family and some farmland, to create a garden. This was opened to the public in 1817 and Benjamin Lee Guinness then bought them in

1862, hence the name Iveagh Gardens. It was here that the Great Dublin International Exhibition was held in 1865, part of a wide interest in such visitor attractions that included the Crystal Palace in London in 1851. The London firm of Ordish and Le Feuvre who worked on the English exhibition building also worked on the iron and steel part of the new exhibition building in Dublin.

Dublin-based architect Arthur Gresham Jones won a competition to design the exhibition building on the Earlsfort Terrace/Iveagh Gardens site.

Dr Caroline Casey, in her contribution to the *Farewell to the Terrace* publication, describes it: "Jones' exhibition building had a masonry core containing two concert halls, lecture and reading rooms, dining and exhibition

rooms together with extensive kitchen and service areas in the basement. The façade to Earlsfort Terrace was extensive with a two-storey portico of Doric and Corinthian columns at the centre of the masonry block. The glass 'transept' or Winter Garden was a grand vaulted and galleried structure across the rear."

It is the concert halls in this building that survive today, one

becoming the National Concert Hall in 1981, while the Winter Garden was dismantled.

The university grew through various locations and names until an act of 1908 led to the formation of University College Dublin. In 1912 an architectural competition was held – overseen by Henry Hare of the RIBA (Royal Institute of British Architects) to find a designer for the new university

building. One stipulation, writes Casey, is that the architect be Irish, not something that architects today enjoy. Indeed, no wholly Irish practice is on the shortlist for the new UCD Gateway building.

The winner in 1912 was Rudolph Maximilian Butler of Doolin and Butler Architects, with a classical design. This was perhaps partly in a reaction to an official document, quoted by Casey, that the new university could match nearby Trinity, who had commissioned an impressive line-up of architects over the previous centuries.

"Were there any marked difference between the dignity of the buildings of Trinity College and those of the new College, it would serve to prevent the Roman Catholics of Ireland being convinced that the principle of equality upon which ... they have throughout insisted had not been admitted and acted upon."

Certainly in scale, writes Casey, the new building's facade was a match for Trinity, at 520 ft wide "the Earlsfort Terrace far exceeds the west front of Trinity College ... the design consciously refers to the riverfront of James Gandon's Custom House, in which four pavilions with pairs of giant columns are employed to articulate the centre and ends of the long facade."

Butler's design, executed by the Crampton building firm, is often considered rather severe,

being without much ornament and faced in limestone which, like the architect, was Irish (at a time when people were getting jittery about the use of English Portland stone).

It was Butler's aim to have a building free of ornament. He was well versed in international movements in architecture and was no doubt aware of Austrian architect Adolf Loos' essay on 'ornament and crime' written in 1908 and translated into English around the time the Earlsfort Terrace building was being constructed. Part of Loos' reasoning was that ornamentation would date a building.

Just a few years previously Peter Behrens had created the AEG Turbine factory whose glass and steel top and heavy, solid masonry corners spoke of the industrial age, and Modernism.

Butler envisaged a quadrat with various university departments on all four sides. But in the end only the north and east sides were completed. As McCartney writes: "UCD in Earlsfort Terrace was the last major project of the British administration in Dublin; and like the country itself it was left truncated as the British withdrew."

Yet, despite its ornament-free facade and tough-looking limestone, on winter's evenings when the lights are on within, the building provides a wonderful sense of occasion to concert goers.

## PERIOD RESTORATION ON-CAMPUS



The UCD campus at Belfield has an impressive collection of period houses, all from former estates on the campus land, and the university is gradually restoring these.

The conservation programme, which is being largely funded through private donations, began with one of the University's buildings in Dublin city centre, Newman House.

### NEWMAN HOUSE

Situated on St Stephens' Green, this actually comprises two buildings, dating from the 18th century.

Number 85 was designed by Richard Castle in a pared Palladian style, while number 86, built 25 years later in 1765, is more Rococo.

Both have special plasterwork, the first by the Lafranchini brothers and the second by stucco master Robert West. The restoration work was carried out by Sheehan & Barry Architects.

### UNIVERSITY LODGE

The firm also worked on the restoration of University Lodge, the residence of UCD presidents, which has a Greek facade that was added to a plainer – probably Georgian building – in 1840.

### BELFIELD HOUSE

This house, dating from 1801, was restored in a project carried out by architects Fitzgerald Kavanagh and Partners.

### LIGOURI HOUSE

Fitzgerald Kavanagh also oversaw the restoration of this Palladian-style building dating from the early 1800s.

### MERVILLE HOUSE

Merville, above and left, which was built around 1750, was restored by architects Kavanagh Tuite, who restructured the ground floor and brought in specialists to restore the plasterwork.