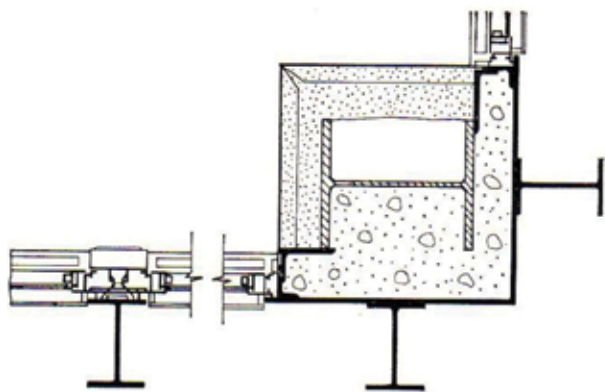


That moment between the complexities of the past and an unknown future

An interview with Níall McLaughlin MRIAI on his first five years in practice

EA Eimear Arthur
NM Níall McLaughlin



860-880 Lake Shore Drive, Chicago, 1951

NM

There were quite strong movements in the School of Architecture in UCD at the time I was doing my thesis; there was competition amongst students to get allocated to certain charismatic teachers and to go with their 'programme'. I didn't want to do that.

I'd been taught quite intensively by Robin Walker in fourth year. He had a way of focusing on certain students and tutoring them intensively. I was rather obsessive about pencil drawing, and I think he liked that precision. He'd come to my desk with his big cigar, and he'd smoke and design buildings in his head while I drew them. I suppose that initiated for me a lifelong discourse between the apparent absolutes of the system that Mies laid down, and the fact that, for me, somehow it wasn't enough. Robin once gave us a forty-five-minute lecture about the corner detail at Lakeshore Drive: a steel I-section wrapped in fire-proofing, then wrapped in steel, then glazed with this kind of 'curtain' of I-sections. That was a huge problem for him in the way that he thought about architecture; the desire for the whole system to be completely transparent and logical, and that wasn't.

Then, in the summer after fourth year, I almost accidentally spent a lot of time looking at Brunelleschi. In particular, I spent a week in the Ospedale degli Innocenti in Florence. This represented another term in the equation; outside that incredibly exacting Miesian discourse where all the rules are so consistent, except when they're not – and then there's no answer at all. My attraction to both approaches left me feeling a bit stuck. I didn't want a tutor in fifth year who would lead me off in their direction. I picked a tutor called David McHugh,

by Eimear Arthur MRIAI

who was very good at sitting down with you and turning out whatever your problems were that day. He didn't come with any strong agenda; he was a thoughtful person who you could reflect with.

I designed a scheme in Chapelizod: a cadet training school for the army. It's funny that I've ended up doing Oxford colleges because I look at my thesis and it had a dining hall and a chapel and an entrance; it had grounds and parkland and a quadrangle. Although it wasn't an Oxford college, it really was.

I'm not someone who is consistently vocational; always relentlessly pursuing ambitious goals. I tend to have phases of it, and that was one of those phases. I was in this project. I produced this huge, forty- or fifty-drawing presentation, all hand-drawn. There was something obsessional about it, but my whole time in UCD wasn't like that. I had years where I was doing other things, like reading or partying. I wasn't always the focused, diligent, ambitious student. That's kind of been true most of my life. I tend to have moments of 'switch on' or 'switch off'.

EA

And how was your thesis received?

NM

I don't remember much about that. I remember I had been up for four or five nights. I remember my girlfriend Eileen helping me pin up. When I stood up, I was so shattered that I couldn't speak. At my final crit! Chris Cross was there. He said something quite interesting, he said: 'I can see that you're going to be successful, not necessarily because I know whether you're talented or not, but because anyone who is capable of putting that much dedication into a task will have success.' It wasn't a

(previous page) 1. Corner detail, 860-880 Lake Shore Drive, Chicago, by Mies van der Rohe (1951)

full compliment, but I found it quite telling. I remember Cathal O'Neill was very positive about the drawings. He said to me after my crit: 'Níall, whatever choices you make next; stay away from money. Stay away from money and stay close to architecture.'

That's my memory of my thesis. I don't know what I could take forward from it, except that it was the first time that I felt this extraordinary surge of confidence; that I knew what to do and that my idea of what to do was good enough.

I wasn't part of one of the movements in the school, you know, groups of six students around this or that charismatic teacher. I wasn't really on the radar until my work popped up at the end. It's probably been in my nature all my life that – although I'm a sociable person – I quite like standing outside situations and not feeling as though I'm part of a set or a 'scene'. Not minding the crowd but feeling that I'm happiest just a few feet apart; being 'there' but not being in it. It is slightly in my nature to both suffer and relish that 'apartness'. That's probably been consistent in my teaching and in my practice in various ways.

EA

What year was that?

NM

I matriculated in '79 and I went straight through; I finished in '84. I didn't take a year out.

EA

What were your ambitions, then, when you were leaving? What did you want to do?

NM

I was probably a bit lost. I'd gone straight from school to university, learning an amazing new subject, and I went five years straight through without a year out. I was immersed. The school at UCD at that time was very self-sufficient; it had its own ways and seemed like a kind of paradise. And so, finishing and leaving it, I'd love to say that I left with a strong sense of direction, but I didn't know what I would do next.

One of the fifth-year tutors, John O'Neill, asked me to work for him. I was there for about six months. It was just me and him in a basement; he was a really nice guy. I detailed a little retreat and community centre down in Kilkenny from top to bottom. I sat every day doing working drawings, you know: A1 sheet, 1:20 section, pull off the details.

EA

That's a great education in detailing, straight out of college?

NM

I'd failed technology in second year and had to repeat it that summer. I was in one of the big empty studios in Earlsfort Terrace, by myself, for six weeks, producing a working drawing every one or two days. From being bad at something, and not very interested in it, I had this sort of Damascene summer in the studio where I fell in love with construction detailing. I loved making the drawings, I loved building the building in my mind.

Shane de Blacam had an amazing respect for working drawings. He had this sense that they were a kind of philosophical proposition. He spoke as if the authority of the architect was communicated through working drawings. He didn't say this, but it always struck me – when I've used Ordnance Survey maps, if you get lost using one, the problem is you. They are such models of accuracy and clarity, it must be you. I had this dream of a working drawing like that; one that someone would look at and go 'well, I know the architect knows what they're doing, so I'd better go and think about this'.

In those days, there were a lot of people teaching in UCD to whom detailing really mattered. We had a technology studio every week; we'd do working drawings of complex bits of construction. So it wasn't a problem for me to go into John's office and make working drawings. And the whole time I was producing them, I knew that, if I drew a steel I-section, in a few months' time someone would be lifting it and putting it in place. It was a magical feeling.

Apart from that, the rest of that summer, I'd love to say I was plotting the rest of my life, but really we were going to festivals and concerts and partying. We were just getting over a very long fifth year.

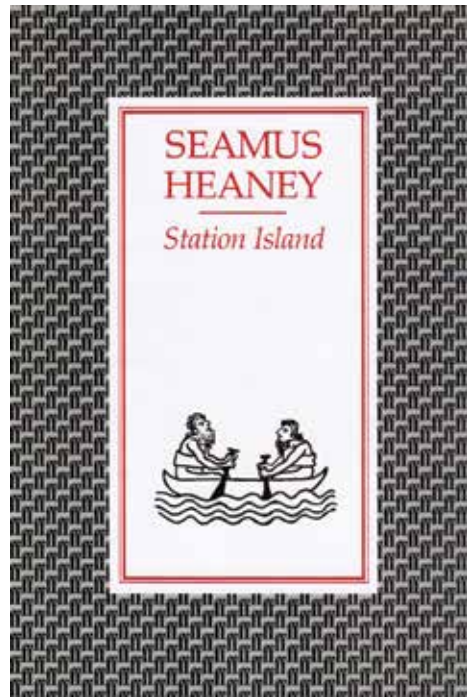
EA

So you were there for about six months?

NM

Yes, then I got the knock. It was Scott Tallon Walker; I was being recalled! Mies comes knocking on your door and says 'where have you been for the past six months?' It was a bit like that.

I went in to be interviewed by Ronnie Tallon. He said to me, 'I give a young boy like you a job, I expect you to stay for the rest of your life. If you leave here, don't darken my doorway again.'



There was a sense that you'd come to join the whole thing; the world that came out of the deep consistency of the Miesian programme. In fact, even though I did leave, he was always very kind to me afterwards, and never mentioned his threat. But there was that sense that you were with the programme, or you weren't, and the programme was profound.

I came in at the tail end of what was a fantastic scene there. There was something about that office; the way everyone dressed and conducted themselves, in high white Georgian rooms with amazing modern art on the wall. Ronnie used to, I think, collect paintings for various institutions, and he was involved in setting up exhibitions in Dublin, so he was very central to that kind of world. He had fantastic paintings on the wall, which he always said were the 'pension fund'. It was amazing.

I was in the kitchen one day and found a cast of Joyce's Death Mask. You know, just there it was. For a young person, it was amazing; this wonderfully connected cultural world that had held Michael Scott, Dorothea Walker, Robin Walker, and Ronnie Tallon, and was now under the aegis of Ronnie. People there had their own differences and disagreements, but they spread out into this amazing kind of hinterland. There's a poem Seamus Heaney wrote called 'An Architect' which I'm sure is about Robin; I'd be very surprised if it wasn't. Heaney has that ability to nail someone.

That world had a seriousness and a very strong vocational sense. I was about twenty-two, and my memory is that the team was small – about fifteen to twenty people – and that they were

much older than me. They'd built all the great buildings. There was the guy there who had built Bank of Ireland, Baggot Street; there was the guy who'd done the Carroll's factory. On a Friday evening, they would rock back at around 5.15 and light their pipes. Someone would say: 'when Robin designed the bond of the blockwork on the PMPA building, what do you think he was doing?' And then there would be a great discussion about it. Again, within that world, you had a completely consistent set of terms, and the sense that everything is a product of arguing from the premises and examples that existed. I suspect, as a practice, they were probably changing at that time, but I was there in the afterglow.

I was put on a small team with Michael Tallon and Ronnie to do a huge competition for a hospital in Tallaght, which we eventually didn't win. I think I spent about five months working on it. Our submission was enormous. Every day we were just working through different wings, different bits of it. We were working extremely long hours. As I remember it, we seemed to be in until two in the morning all the time. Then Ronnie would give me a lift home in his car and we'd talk about football or something.

By the end of the Tallaght Hospital competition, I was exhausted. I had done my thesis, worked unbelievably hard, gone straight into work, and then done that competition. We'd been working every hour that God gave. By the summer, I was completely burnt out. And the things that had held me in Dublin weren't really there anymore. I remember being on Grafton Street, looking at people going by and thinking: 'this could be the rest of your life'. I didn't really mind that idea, but I thought 'no, that's not what I'm going to do'.

People were going to New York, and people were going to work for such-and-such. I didn't have that compulsion at all. I was just exhausted. So I decided, with a friend of mine, to cycle to Marrakesh. It was hilarious. I think the first leg was to cycle from London to Dover, but our bikes were so bad that we didn't make it out of the London suburbs. We ended up camping that night in Blackheath or something totally embarrassing. We got our bikes nicked in the South of France and ended up working in a bar there for quite some time; and sleeping in the woods. Once a week I'd have a phone call to my parents: 'no, I'm not coming home!'

Seamus Heaney's *Station Island* had come out around that time. I brought the book with me. I still have the copy; you take it off the shelf and it falls apart in your hand, it's so worn. The central text is a pilgrimage that Heaney goes on where he's encountering ghosts from his past; reckoning with various parts of his own history and biography. He's in an in-between space where it's possible to hold all these things from the

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past together; they're seen as kind of dream sequences. He's trying to work out for himself what he needs to be. For someone at the stage of life I was at, it was a key text. The idea of that uncertain predicament, that moment between the complexities of the past and an unknown future. There's a brilliant end to it, where he meets the ghost of Joyce, who tells him 'you lose more of yourself than you redeem; doing the decent thing'.

For me, that was the dilemma about different versions of life that you might live. There was a moment, at the end of a year out of college, where there was a version of my life that was laid out on tracks and I could see it all the way through. Then there was one that was almost entirely uncertain. Being at large, being out there, and not making decisions; letting things pass without insisting that you had to know what to do next, was a very important characteristic of that time.

EA
So you're in the South of France?

NM
It sounds like some crap novel – 'Finding Myself'.

EA
You're there, kind of simmering ... and then what happens?

NM
Nothing! My great lesson in life, is that, when you take time out to make a big decision, or have that big moment (pack all your bags and you lose all your associations), and then you do it ... Well, then you get the bus back, and it's raining, and it's a Tuesday morning and you go: 'isn't something meant to happen now?' And it never does. That's not how change occurs. I came back to London in mid-to late- November without a job. I'd lost about two stone and had my battered Heaney book under my arm and a couple of mates. There

was no sense of what I would do next.

I did some contract work, and then Neil Scott contacted me to come work at Scott Tallon Walker in London; the line was wound back in again. I was there for about a year and a half, in a nice and happy office on Cromwell Place with lots of UCD graduates. Neil Scott was an extraordinarily sympathetic character, and a wonderful employer.

At that time, we worked hard, but it was very much about just being in London. It was the very beginning of the rave scene; I remember that time for the music more than anything else. We were going up to King's Cross for raves in these huge abandoned warehouses. There was one space that was flooded and had huge bonfires and this amazing dance music. All sorts of people were there. They were strange, magical, spectral events in an incredible, derelict, industrial landscape. You simply couldn't have them now; it would all be shut down. It was completely unruly. And getting the night bus with Charlie Dolan to dance all night to Soul-to-Soul at The Fridge in Brixton. It was, I think, one of the nicest moments in London culture. White t-shirts, black jeans, and Doc Martens; an amazing music scene. It was a great time, in that world.

Even then, I don't think I was hanging out with architects in London. You know those dramas where there's like nine people sharing a house? We shared a house and it was like that. The people were from completely different backgrounds, and you lived in their world. It was an amazing introduction to London, and to England, and it was nothing to do with architecture.

In general, for five years, I was – to use a technical term – just fecking about. I was in my twenties and I was just working myself out in a generally interesting and conducive atmosphere. I wasn't very focused on what I would do next. I know that you're meant to say that everything was leading to some sort of architectural apotheosis; but that's not how it was.



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(this page) 3. The Fridge, Brixton, London

I worked in London, and then I did a walking journey through Morocco and Greece that lasted for months. It was part of the same thing of ‘oh, if I roll the dice again, maybe it’ll land somewhere more interesting’. I was becoming a bit more interested in architecture, and in the idea that I might have my own architecture again. It was like I had come out of a fog, and had much more of a sense of the kind of things that I liked; that I associated myself with.



My mum’s American, and there was always this vague sense that I would go and live in America. So after that walking trip, I was applying for a Green Card. I came across to London, after lining the American thing up, to do some contract work for a couple of weeks, and I met Tom Gray, who wanted to share a flat on Portobello Road. I moved into that flat to stay a couple of months, and I think I stayed for twenty-five years. Through that flat, and Portobello Road, I met people who are still the best friends in my life. It was incredible around Notting Hill at that time; there were poets, photographers, filmmakers. It’s what you come to a new city for. All the things I’d hoped London would be really gelled around that.

Then I decided I’d set up my own practice. One of the people I’d met around Portobello Road wanted his flat converted, and Chris Cross, who had been at my final crit at UCD, contacted me in 1989 to ask if I’d teach at Oxford Brookes and at the Bartlett.

If you look at most schools – like the Bartlett, or London Met, or to some extent, UCD – they are built around a particular ethos, and everybody falls into line, a bit. But at Oxford Brookes, Chris had cultivated a school of completely different worlds, all ‘at’ each other. Peter Barber had a unit, and Alex de Rijke, Murray Fraser, CJ Lim, and FAT. It was great fun. They’d ask you to their crits, then ambush you: ‘what do you think of that? And that!’ There was a sense of debate, and dialogue. That was really enjoyable, and kind of set me up, in a way. I was very lucky; it was quite a lean time. I was teaching three days a week, and I had one little project for a house extension. Luckily, my girlfriend then, Mary, her father was Robert Myers of Price & Myers; and he would give me little jobs to do, measured surveys and the like. Around 1989, everything started to happen, to fall into line.

EA
 So you end the first five years on the cusp of everything that happened afterwards?

NM
 Everything that happened afterwards is cued up at that point, at the end of 1989. I’ve got my own little practice; I’ve got my first set of clients – who later brought me more clients; I’ve got the teaching. And I’ve found my best friends.

Also, the thing about going to teach at the Bartlett was that I was at a school where the ‘norms’ of my own architectural education were nothing. I had to completely re-educate myself to teach there. You might say there is a dialogue in my work between what you can see as coming from my UCD education – the dream of Mies and Kahn and an underlying, comprehensive order – and then this other thing, much more mercurial and to do with processes and open-endedness; that comes out of my sort of ‘re-education’ in the Bartlett.

EA
Back to Heaney’s idea of that space between, and the ability to communicate with both?

NM
 Yes, exactly.