

NEW IRISH ARCHITECTURE 19

AAI AWARDS 2004

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CIGAR BOX, North Great George's Street, Dublin

DENIS BYRNE ARCHITECTS



The L-shaped site occupies part of a 'corner' in the conservation areas of the north-inner-city Georgian grid, between a Victorian warehouse and a pastiche Georgian apartment development. The building strategy chosen emphasises the border nature of the site, and aims to differentiate between the buildings on the corner and the Georgian terraces. This is achieved by inserting on the site a new space analogous to a lane or side street. The new building 'bookends' the existing buildings that reach back from the Parnell Street corner.

The building, thus separated from the Georgian discipline, was free to look to the adjoining warehouse building, and elsewhere, for clues as to how to build. Clues provided were the size and proportion of door and window openings, floor-to-floor heights, and general 'feel'. The building was intended to be unpretentious and direct, qualities associated with warehouse buildings. The materials used are traditional – brick, stone, timber, glass and metal – all used in a straightforward way.

The main entrance and staircase (with dumb waiter) are found in the new space between the buildings. This space is covered by a glass roof above timber-slatted underlining, but is otherwise open to the elements. The red-stained timber lining continues down against the existing gable wall to enclose the staircase. This entrance space is intensely and celebratory urban in experience. As one ascends the staircase, views of





Georgian Dublin appear and alternate with the Rotunda's spire. In the afternoon, sunlight pours through here.

The large apartments, one per floor, are shaped to maximise available light on a tight site. Each one is entered from the access deck through a private west-facing balcony. The apartments contain an oak-lined entrance lobby (the 'cigar-box'), but are otherwise open loft-type spaces, with painted concrete block walls and concrete ceilings. Oak floors and oak wall-linings soften this sparse robustness. Bedroom and kitchen balconies and large external double doors in the main living space enrich the restrained interiors. The open spaces allow flexibility of bedroom sizes and numbers. The two offices, front and back, each occupy a part of the ground and basement floors, and are both lit by the central light-well and front and round-the-corner rear windows. Finishes here continue the warehouse feel.

This simple building with its covered side space has two ambitions – to extend the vocabulary of the city, and to provide a good example of contemporary architecture in a historic context.

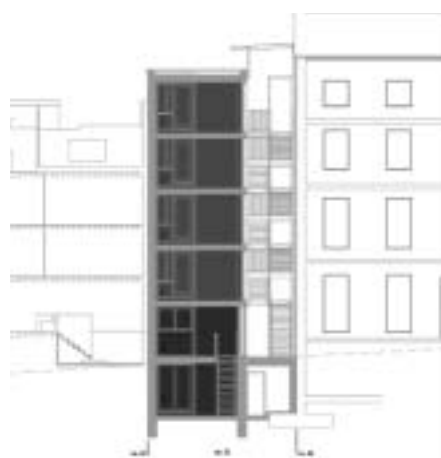
Location – 26 North Great George's Street, Dublin 1.

Area – 565m². Stage – completed Autumn 2003.

bottom
Plans (basement, ground floor, 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th)

opposite
Elevation to North Great George's Street
Section through terrace
Cross-section through staircase













ASSESSORS' COMMENTS

ROBBRECHT – I like this project. It is an intelligent use of a restricted piece of land in its Georgian Dublin context. And an interesting typology has been given to the apartments themselves.

O'NEILL – I like the way it slips behind the buildings, the way it deals with where it is. It's in a very specific place without resorting to pastiche. This is a very powerful street coming down to it, very powerful Georgian architecture, and then it has the warehouse building on the other side of it. I just think it's a very, very strong project externally.

CONROY – I think the slot achieves an incredible amount. On the one hand, it mediates between the Victorian and the Georgian blocks. And then the steel stairways become interesting places. So the slot becomes a kind of presence rather than an absence. I think it's characterful, with the timber travelling up the stair sides and turning over the top. And then this idea of the timber box, the 'cigar box', that travels up through it...

BETSKY – What do you mean by 'travels up through it'? There's just a bathroom box clad in wood on every floor.

CONROY – Yes, but you can see it right up through the building, particularly at night when it's lit. The site looks tight on the plans, but as the building steps up, the floor plans get smaller to allow light to travel down. It's very careful about the exact distances between things. It's an almost impossible site, but it has made just the right gestures to deal with a Georgian condition, a Victorian condition, and offer light-filled, good-quality apartments.

FINUCANE – I agree with you about its light-filled quality, but I really don't like the façade in this Georgian street. I really do like the light-filled interiors, and I like the way the plan works on a very tight site. But I really don't like that façade.

BETSKY – I just see a building that seems an arbitrary height, higher than the building next to it, with no gesture made to accept that, and that tries to make a relationship with its neighbour by abstracting it, but because it is set forward and then stuck on to it, it doesn't have the presence that can allow it to answer back. So, it seems to me that it's neither fish nor fowl. And then I look at the spaces that are made, and I see kind of L-form spaces which don't seem to have a centre or focus or any kind of presence, where you have to sort of slide by the sideboard or the table there. I don't quite understand how these spaces are actually used.

FINUCANE – I really like the interior spaces. I would live there with all that. I just wonder about the façade.

BETSKY – But the fire escape is just a fire escape. It's not a place to hang out. It's a fire escape. This isn't *West Side Story*.

CONROY – A staircase like this is an unusual gesture here [in Dublin], where it isn't that common. But I think that there's a lot more made out of it, in design terms, than what might have been.

O'NEILL – Yes. I like the activity on the side. The hoist and vertical circulation are successful on the street. When you come to the end of the street they deal with the



transition from existing buildings to contemporary. But I'm not convinced about the inside spaces.

O'NEILL – Those images of the kitchen and living area are kind of clumsy and chunky. And I don't think there's anything special about the fenestration there.

BETSKY – Think what that interior would have been like if it had gotten the minimal treatment of some of those expensive house additions we saw earlier. It would have been so much more successful.

ROBBRECHT – I like the plan and I like the façade, I really do. It has this kind of autonomy, holding its place there in the street. The staircase might be indulgent – but there's no elevator, no? The project uses a very tiny place in a very rich way, the way the apartments are just put in-between these two walls. The windows there relate to this Georgian house, on the one hand, but on the other hand it's quite an autonomous thing. If you look further along the street elevation, you see that it [the parapet height] jumps up again, so it works.

CONROY – I think it's very careful about stepping back for light. The stairs, as well, is a kind of an adventure in Dublin. It's not typical, but very urban.

ROBBRECHT – Yes. That's probably very much inspired by that scheme in Basel, with the wavy metal façade.

BETSKY – And what does it look like at the rear? We never get to see it. Considerably more massive, I would suspect.

ROBBRECHT – I like this project. I think it is a very good urban intervention.

DENIS BYRNE – graduated from University College Dublin in 1982 and moved to London to live and work. There he formed a partnership with Brian Beardsmore and Simon Yauner before returning to Dublin in 1991. After working with the National Building Agency and Richard Hurley, amongst others, he formed Denis Byrne Architects in 2000. The winner of previous AAI and RIAI awards, he was studio tutor at DIT from 1993 to 2003, where he is currently a visiting critic.



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