Irish Design:
History, Context and Possibilities
1900 - 2011

INTRODUCTION

Ireland's creative output has often been framed by international successes in literature, music, acting, filmmaking and art production. Yet, these represent only a small and incomplete picture of the breadth of Irish creativity. Irish fashion and textile designers enjoy worldwide recognition; Irish engineers and architects have created some of the world's most iconic buildings; Irish production, costume and animation designers have won the highest accolades in the film industry; Irish software engineers provide engines to some of the world's most successful companies and have secured recent successes in mobile app development; Irish graphic and industrial designers have graduated and trained in some of the world's most well regarded studios. While some of these designers have made their homes elsewhere, Dublin has emerged as home to a vibrant, energetic design community.

In totality Irish design development can be viewed as the establishment of five networks. The first comprises the provision of state infrastructure allied to the nation-building project in the early years of independence. The second consists of an international network of design influence that evolved partly as a consequence of emigration. Additionally, it reflects both an interest in travel and ambition for international professional design training and expertise. Ireland has also witnessed waves of immigration in select areas of design practice. While this history is lesser known, it has had a profound effect on indigenous creativity and can be understood as a third network of influence. The fourth encompasses a network of educational provision that, in the last twenty years, has grown hugely; stimulating and sustaining design development. Finally, the fifth network comprises a web of international connections facilitated by contemporary communicative systems that have enabled Irish designers to connect to global spheres of influence.

Grafton Architects Bocconi University

Atelier David Smith Fire Station Artist Studio

For all the national and international successes, the narrative of Irish design activity can be difficult for international observers to locate, fuelling assumptions that Ireland's most notable creative achievements lie in the literary, film and artistic fields. However, this discrete output needs to be viewed as a consequence of the country's unique trajectory of design activity, which, with the exception of architecture, has had an ad hoc, often informal, evolution by comparison to the experience of other European countries. Ireland's limited industrial history reflects a national economy that, until the mid-20th century, was based on agricultural production; its unusual position within Europe – that of a colonised country surrounded by colonising forces – fostered a political and economic climate of flux and instability. Both these factors had a significant impact on attempts to establish the industrial base necessary for the development and expansion of design. Within this climate much of what could be construed as design activity was typically allied to craft-based production.

This essay and accompanying timeline, make no claim to being comprehensive, and more in-depth analyses are currently emerging with new scholarship. However, this study aims to chart broadly the trajectory of Ireland's design heritage, to capture the breadth of design expertise that currently defines the Irish cultural landscape, and give additional context to the content of the submission document.
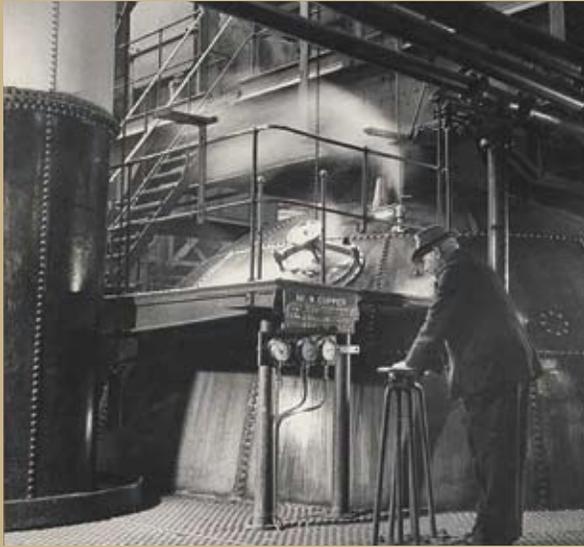
Guinness Established 1979

Aer Lingus Established 1936

THE BEGINNINGS OF IRISH DESIGN DEVELOPMENT

Farming was, until the second half of the 20th century, the main driver of Irish economic activity. What manufacturing did exist prior to the foundation of the state in 1922 largely consisted of local craft-based industries centred on textile, glass and ceramic production. In the previous decades, craft output had taken on a particular significance as the Irish Arts and Crafts Movement demonstrated how local traditions could materialise Irish difference and give concrete form to the aspirations of cultural nationalism. Examples of large-scale manufacturing were limited, and in Dublin brewing, distilling, baking and paper production thrived, in addition to a modest textile industry. Within this industrial landscape, Guinness (1759-) dominated the story of Dublin's industrial production.

The first government of the Free State embarked on an ambitious project of nation building in which design activity – dominated by architecture and engineering - were employed to create a national network of infrastructure and communications. Milestones of the period included the monumental, Siemens-built, Ardnacrusha hydro-electrical station on the Shannon River and the launch of a state radio station. As the political climate stabilised in the 1930's, the emphasis on state infrastructure continued with the establishment of a national airline, Aer Lingus; a new national radio station, RTÉ; and the provision of a network of national hospitals and schools, many of which are still in use today.

The blue print of Dublin city changed dramatically during this time: Dublin Corporation (the forerunner of Dublin City Council) embarked on an ambitious campaign of rebuilding the city's main thoroughfare and alleviating high levels of poor and unsanitary housing. The renaming of streets and state buildings after Irish cultural and political figures was an important, and cost effective, visual gesture of national pride, that recast the cities as symbols of political independence.

Design activity played a crucial role in visualising this new political autonomy. Definitive stamps, coinage and variety of printed ephem-

RTÉ 1961 Opening

era as issued by the state synthesised historical references within contemporary idioms, giving popular expression to the change in political status. A growth in what we would now consider to be 'graphic design' activities saw new advertising companies appearing in Dublin. However, the need or desire to advertise Irish products was limited until the 1950's as protectionist economics policies limited the competition for Irish goods to compete either nationally or internationally.

An emphasis on the economic benefits of tourism had a crucial impact on the trajectory of design practice. This awareness can be traced back to the 1940's with the realisation that the tourism industry could supplant agriculture as the principal indigenous industry. As mass emigration and high unemployment figures defined the 1950's, there was a distinct growth in design activity, allied to tourism development. This was most evident in the area of graphic design where Dutch designers from KLM were imported to work on an ambitious advertising campaign for Aer Lingus. As the decade progressed, these designers worked

for many tourism-related companies including Bord Fáilte and John Hinde, in addition to working for a host of indigenous companies, including Guinness and RTÉ. They were also active in promoting the advertising industry which continued to expand with the establishment of the Institute of Creative Advertising in 1958 (now ICAD). As a flag carrier, and thus, official agent of state, Aer Lingus became hugely significant in how Ireland and Irish design were viewed internationally. It became a locus for the promotion of quality Irish goods as exemplified by the design of crew uniforms, the examples of Irish ceramics, glass and textiles used in its service provision, and its promotion of Irish design in the pages of its in-flight magazine, Cara.

Ireland's success in exporting fashion and textiles can also be traced to this mid-century point. This was, in part, influenced by the growth of US tourism, but also by an evolving interest in celebrity culture and the greater availability of television. After Jacqueline Kennedy was photographed wearing a white Irish linen dress by fash-

Liberty Hall, Customs House and River Liffey, Dublin, Ireland.   Photo : E. Nägele, John Hinde Studios.

John Hinde Liberty Hall postcard

ion designer Sybil Connolly, sales for Connolly's designs increased, while an appearance on CBS's Ed Sullivan show by the Aran jumper-clad Clancy Brothers in 1961 sent the sales for this distinctive garment soaring.

With limited industrial production, direct or indirect state intervention into the stimulation of design activity remained necessary during this period. A number of government reports were published emphasising how greater links between art, industry and tourism were crucial for the country's economic survival and the recommendations of these, including that of educational reform, slowly trickled down into official policy. By the late 1950's, Ireland had reached a turning point. A radical shift in political thinking from insularity to internationalism emerged and paved the way for economic development through greater engagement and trade relations with Europe. This culminated in Ireland's application for, and acceptance to, the EEC in 1961 and 1973 respectively, opening up the possibility for Irish produced and designed goods to access

new markets. The fabric of Dublin city materialised this changing dynamic as an architectural boom in urban planning, office developments and corporate headquarters redefined the landscape. As a new generation of architects returned home after training in the US, they provided modernist paradigms reflective of this more internationally-focused Ireland.

With respect to other design disciplines, specifically graphic design, textiles, ceramics, house-wares and industrial design, the most significant development occurred as a consequence of an invitation to a group of Northern European designers (including Kaj Franck and Åke Huldt) to survey Irish design in 1961. The observations of this group (published as Design in Ireland or The Scandinavian Report) were partly responsible for the establishment of the Kilkenny Design Workshops (KDW), the first government-sponsored design agency in the world, and the singular, most important design initiative in the history of the state. KDW focused on the training, retailing, modernisation and promotion of Irish design, in

Kilkenny Design Workshop Archive Objects, Earthenware

Abram Games Guinness poster

addition, to making sustainable links with extant Irish and European manufacturers and small-craft initiatives. By the mid-1960's textiles and graphics were the main source of design employment in Ireland and KDW had particular successes in these areas. In addition to nurturing the emergent field of industrial design, it also had great success in the export market for Irish craft, particularly in the US.

Growth in design awareness, particularly as allied to export markets, eventually heralded huge developments in design education provision in the 1970's. In Dublin the National College of Art and Design was completely reformed; Dún Laoghaire's College of Art and Design championed Bauhausian principles of education; a network of Regional Technical Colleges appeared across the country; and new courses in graphics, industrial and fashion design emerged. In a similar trajectory to the 1950's, the recession of the 1980's unexpectedly stimulated creativity and ingenuity. The first design degrees materialised in 1981 and as a new generation of formally trained design-

ers graduated, Dublin in particular experienced a significant rise in graduates establishing graphic and industrial design consultancies. Due to an increased emphasis on tax breaks for foreign investment, international animation studios also established headquarters in the city. A new wave of emigration added to the network of the Irish design diaspora. As Irish graduates secured internships in the design centres of New York, Milan, Paris, Berlin and London, they opened up opportunities for subsequent graduates, keen to train with the world's best design talents.

Back in Dublin, astute entrepreneurialism saw the industrialist Tony Ryan establish the low-cost airline Ryanair, revolutionising airline travel across Europe and placing Dublin at the centre of a growing aviation network. The physical fabric of the city also began a radical transformation. By the end of the 1980's, an ambitious project of urban renewal was formulated; twenty years on this Docklands Development Plan has transformed the city's landscape through a mix of office, residential and cultural buildings.

Philip Treacy Chapeau London 3

THE MATURING OF THE IRISH DESIGN PROFESSIONS

The 1990's saw the greatest expansion of design activity in the state, in part fuelled by the economic boom that defined the years between 1995 and 2007. Dublin especially experienced a significant rise in the number of indigenous design companies. Developments in hardware and software provision, coupled with the affordability of new technologies, gave new and established designers greater access to the means of design production. While larger design studios continued to be established, smaller, more independent studios emerged. Without large overheads, many of these enterprises were subsequently able to row with the tide of economic change; to diversify and apply design thinking to a new range of strategic applications.

As the network of Regional Technical Colleges became autonomous as Institutes of Technology (IoTs), they greatly expanded the range of design education. A range of more specialist courses

emerged at undergraduate level, with a notable concentration in areas linked to design for screen-based media and those that fostered transferable skills applicable to a number of design related activities. The synthesis of design and new technologies was captured in Enterprise Ireland's report Opportunities in Design (1999), which reconsidered the core role of design as framed by developments in emergent media (web design, interface design, motion graphics, animation, gaming), and the music, entertainment and tourism sectors. Subsequent examples of how these themes synthesised are numerous and include the commodification of heritage (most notably The Book of Kells, DVD, 2000), the inclusion of interactive elements within exhibitions in the state's galleries and museums, and the alliance of culture, design and technology which has defined Ireland's presence at the World Expos of 2000 in Hanover and 2010 in Shanghai. Irish strengths in innovation, transferable skills and technological development led to the establishment of MIT's Media Lab Europe in
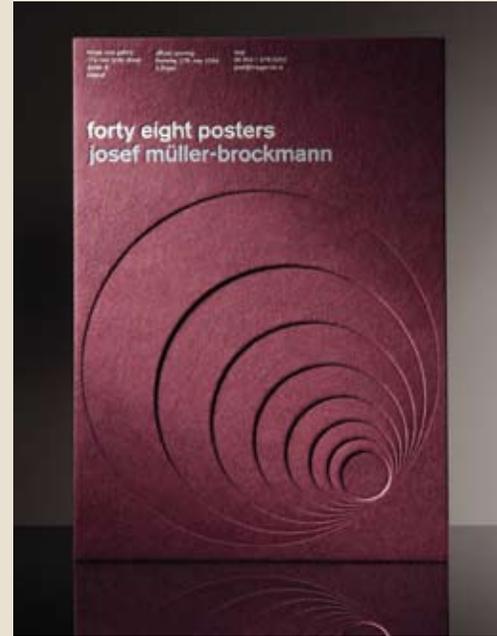
Úna Burke Piece 5


Image Now Muller Brockmann exhibition invitation

Dublin city centre. Although short-lived, its remit of applied research lives on in the National Digital Research Centre. Irish strengths in these fields, coupled with low corporation taxes, have seen transnational companies including Microsoft and Google establish European headquarters in Dublin and grow service provision.

Outside of technology, one of the most significant growth areas for the international recognition of Irish design has been in fields relating to film and animation. Irish designers now work for many of the world's most celebrated directors and producers. Illustration and technology have merged in the new field of concept design, Irish production and costume designers have garnered Emmy and Oscar wins - many for projects originating at Wicklow's Ardmore Studios - while Academy Awards and nominations have been conferred on a number of Irish animators. The last decade has also seen an increase in design advocacy and public discourse. Annual events including Design Week, Open House and OFFSET, coupled with the growth of design-related exhibitions by national museums and private galleries, have endeavoured to engage both the design community and general public. The IoT and the university sectors have pioneered new research into design history and criticism; have, and are currently, hosting public lectures on design issues; and have continued to evolve new design courses at under and post-graduate levels.
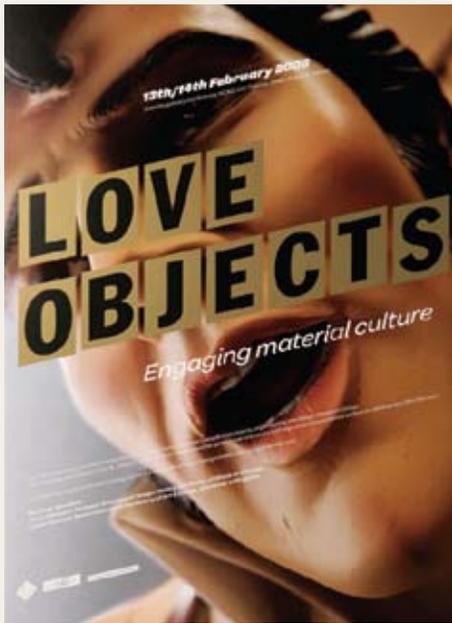
Red&Grey Design NCAD/DRG, Love Objects poster
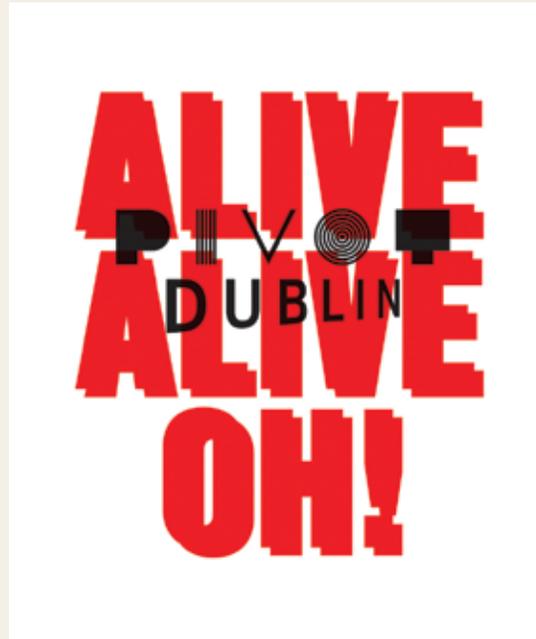
Stone Twins PIVOT Dublin Book Cover

CONCLUSION

Ireland's economic boom has left a rich legacy of infrastructural projects including a network of national motorways and award-winning public housing schemes. In Dublin, the provision of the Luas system of trams, the rebuilding of two national sports stadia, a free bike scheme servicing the city centre, the development of the Docklands, and the future provision of an underground rail network have - and will continue to - encourage greater public engagement with design issues. At grass roots level, a new generation of young designers is active in publishing, music and entertainment promotion, street art and the hosting of design exhibitions and events.

The design successes highlighted here and elsewhere in this bid document are testament to Irish designers' resilience, perseverance, their ability to think laterally and to adapt core problem solving skills to contemporary circumstances. Irish designers have repeatedly shown an aptitude within new and emergent fields that thrive on skills transference and versatility. Indeed, it could be argued that our limited industrial design heritage has allowed practitioners to move with the tide of change and embrace new and emergent areas.

While Ireland's recent economic downturn is an undoubted challenge, change is inevitable, and there is a palpable sense of possibility arising from adversity. Irish designers are actively seeking and making new possibilities. It is this expertise that PIVOT Dublin seeks to grow through its bid for World Design Capital; harnessing creativity and ingenuity to grow design awareness and improve the life of its citizens through strategic design thinking and application. Dublin's status as World Design Capital 2014 would offer a focus to harness such energies and to contribute to economic development and nation rebuilding.

Dr. Linda King
School of Creative Arts, Institute of Art, Design and Technology (IADT), Dún Laoghaire, Dublin.

March 2011