

Pursuing the Diagonal

A Conversation with Frank McCloskey

As part of an occasional series Dr Andrew Molloy chats to leading figures in Northern Irish architecture about their careers and influences. In this issue he talks to architect and former RSUA Director Frank McCloskey.



Frank McCloskey with then-president of the RSUA, Alan Jones, 2012 who subsequently became president of the RIBA.

It was dark when I drove into what seemed like a country lane off the Malone Road, so I couldn't immediately appreciate the quirky elegance of the gate lodge as I approached it. Welcomed at the door, I took a seat in the living room, and it was only when my host left to prepare a pot of tea that my eye started to pick out details of the room. Diagonally planked waxed timber ceiling and matching sliding timber doors furnished with

idiosyncratic yellow HEWI handles, the sliding mechanisms concealed by discrete timber hoods; an asymmetric painted brick fireplace with unpainted chamfered brick hearth and mantle; furniture that was stylish and mannerly yet practical and comfortable. It was a room designed, furnished, and used by someone with an impressive eye for design.

I wasn't surprised when, on his return from the kitchen, my host confirmed that he was responsible for the renovation and extension of the gate lodge some thirty years before, and so began an enlightening couple of hours getting to know Frank McCloskey. As with my previous conversations, I began with the open-ended question of how Frank got into architecture. "That's an easy question," Frank laughed.

"There was nothing about wanting to be an architect as a wee fella or anything like that. I went to a college in Armagh and the only three subjects I was good at were maths, art, and English literature; I had to work very hard at everything else. My teacher said, 'With subjects like that, McCloskey, you'd better do architecture,' so I applied for architecture at Queens and never looked back. I loved architecture - I loved the course - I was never a high achiever or anything like that. It wasn't that long after my seventeenth birthday when I started university, so I was very young. During most of my time in the department of architecture, I wanted to work for Ian Campbell."

Ian Campbell, who sadly died at the age of 94 in 2020, was a giant of modern architecture in Ulster, introducing Corbusian austerity to the streets of Belfast with Fanum House, and Scandinavian elegance to the foot of the Mourne with the Tollymore Teahouse; to pick out just two examples in an

astounding career. He was a regional architect with national standing, as exemplified by his obituary - written by Frank for the RSUA yearbook - being published in the RIBA Journal in September 2020¹.

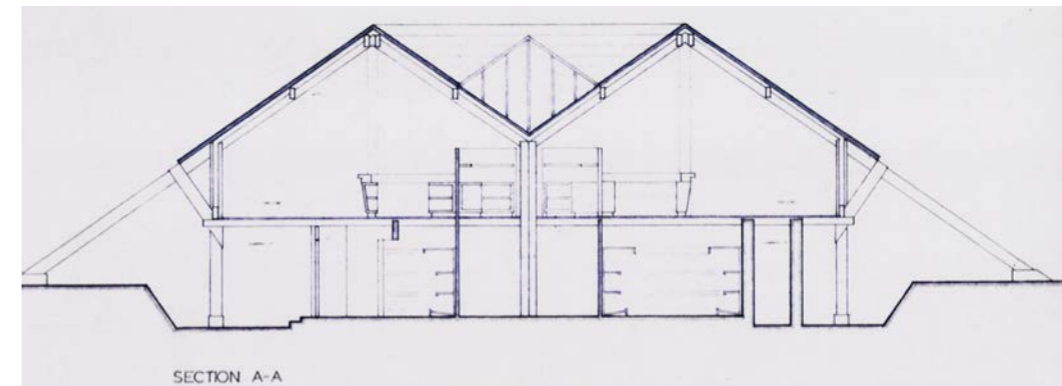
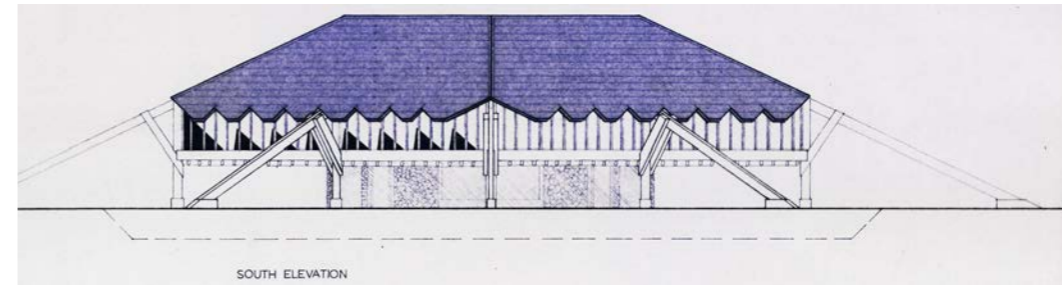
"Ian Campbell was very much the popular notion of what an architect could be - the clothes, the cars, the house, the lifestyle - as well as that his buildings were terrific. I wasn't a star at university, so I thought there was no way Ian Campbell was going to employ me, but I had two strokes of good luck."

In my final year in university, I was doing my master's thesis on an engineered pre-cast housing system. The Concrete Society advertised a UK-wide travelling bursary to Finland and my tutor Harold Sidwell suggested I enter. I was called to an interview in London - I don't think I'd ever been to London before - and went into the headquarters of the Concrete Society. They offered me tea and biscuits and, of course, I bit into one and they started asking me all these difficult questions. I thought I had made a total hames of the interview; forget about it, a disaster! Two weeks later I got a letter saying that I'd won it. That was my first stroke of luck."

The young Frank McCloskey documented this trip in the RSUA's 1975 Yearbook and directory where he declares that it was "one of those rare experiences when the bits and pieces of a subject studied for years revolve and knit with kaleidoscopic effect to form a true picture."² The opening paragraph is an effusive account of Alvar Aalto's Finlandia Concert Hall, Helsinki.



The living room of Holyrood Cottage, the refurbishment and extension of which was a labour of love and work-in-progress for several decades of Frank McCloskey's life. Photograph by Brendan Murphy.



Original design drawings for the Teahouse, Tollymore, dated 1977. Winner of an RIBA award in 1980. Ian Campbell was the partner in charge with Frank McCloskey as his assistant.

"Alvar Aalto was one of Ian Campbell's big influences, so my second stroke of luck was at the end of my sixth year. Ian was advertising for staff in the Belfast Telegraph and I got shortlisted. Again, the interview didn't go very well - I get so stressed! - but he asked me back for a second interview and I got the job. I got on with Ian Campbell from the day and hour that I met him; we had this tremendous connection. He treated me like an apprentice and easily taught me more than I learned in six years of university. He made sure I got a lot of site work, experience with contracts, and all the rest of it; ensuring I would be ready for my professional practice exams at the end of the year. I got a great grounding with Ian. The first job he gave me was the Scout Shop in Belfast, but I worked mostly on schools. I did the extension to Dunmurry Primary, and I had a lot of work in Carrickfergus Grammar. He was a multi-award-winning architect, but the only one of his award-winning buildings that I worked on was the Tea House in Tollymore, which won a national RIBA award in 1980."

The thing is, everything that came out of Ian Campbell's office was essentially an Ian Campbell design, with the exception of Dunmurry Primary School. He seemed to like what I did with that, and my scheme went ahead. He was a very hard taskmaster and demanded perfection from everybody including contractors, but he was very decent. My time with Ian was just wonderful, it was a fantastic beginning for me."

Despite Frank's obvious admiration and genuine friendship with his employer - as well as the enormous influence he had on him professionally - it was apparent that the fledgling architect was never going to get rich at Ian Campbell and Partners, and after six years he was eventually coaxed away from the office.

"I left Ian for evil money. I was poached by another architect who doubled my salary and gave me a company car...and I hated it



Frank McCloskey as pictured in the Ulster Architect, on the judging panel for UA Building of the year, October 1986.



Frank McCloskey as pictured in the NIHE publication 'House, Home & Design, 1988.

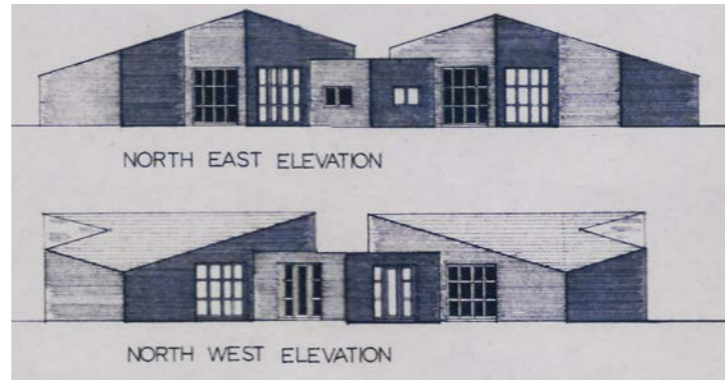
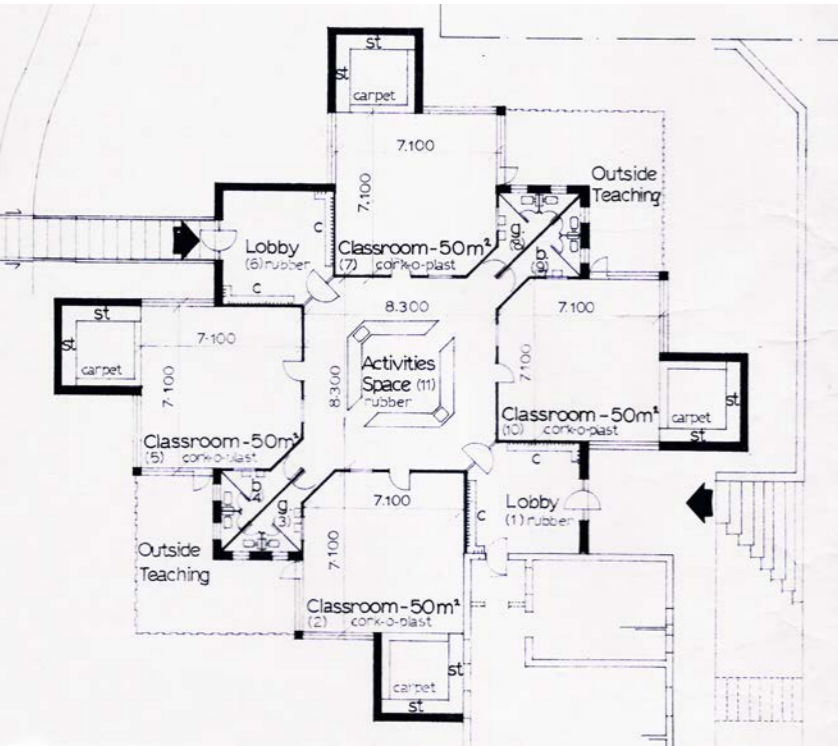


Tollymore Teahouse. Photo by Robert J Anderson.

from the first week. I was stuck in this top room and rarely talked to any of the rest of the staff. The principal wanted the staff to address him formally but asked me to be on first-name terms with him, something that alienated me from the others. I did three schools in two years: one in Omagh and one in Caledon, and a refurbishment of a grammar school in Armagh."

Anyhow, I was very unhappy there and I applied for a job in the Housing Executive."

Frank joined the Northern Ireland Housing Executive in 1981; a heady time for the organisation which had been established some ten years before in the wake of the civil rights movement and was forged in the same crucible that triggered the worst years of the 'Troubles.' The Executive was under the chairmanship of Charles Brett at the time and was brimming with confidence, experimentation, and aspiration; an atmosphere Frank McCloskey appears to have thrived in.



Design drawings for Dunmurry Primary school, dated 1978. Designed by Frank McCloskey when working at Ian Campbell and partners.

"I applied for the job – and it was really just to get out of this office – but I was interested in large-scale housing. I always thought it was one of the more difficult jobs for an architect to get right. I was interested in this concept of 'defensible space,' which was one of these new ideas at the time where a place unconsciously gives the impression of being private, and that you can't go into it because you don't belong there.

The first job I did was Gortnamona in west Belfast. Ian Campbell always said, 'If you can't get a thing to work on the square, try the diagonal,' so I did this entire housing estate based on diagonal lines."

This simple idea, deriving from Franks's love of maths, geometry and the clear influence of Ian Campbell, has permeated many of his designs; plans and sections replete with diagonals.

Discussing the Gortnamona Estate in a 1988 Housing Executive publication celebrating the best examples of housing in Northern Ireland, Frank writes that, with Gortnamona, "the aim was to achieve a visual link between town and country. Houses are arranged around quiet courtyards in an urban manner but the use of simple forms and colours against the backdrop of green hills captures something of the country village. Fundamental consideration was given to the creation of defensible space."³ The estate, described in Concrete Quarterly as being "of simple expression and relative calm," is indicative of the sensitive experimentation of the late seventies and early eighties, a far cry from the brutality of the streets-in-the-sky experimentation of the previous decade.⁴ As a result, it was widely lauded and published, bizarrely including a segment in She magazine.⁵

"The people who moved into the Gortnamona estate moved from really sub-standard houses. At the opening of the estate, Charlie Brett announced to all the tenants– and there were

a lot of them – that I was the architect, and they gave me a round of applause. Of all the good things throughout my career, that was the nicest thing that ever happened to me."

Despite – or perhaps because of – this success, in 1983 Frank was promoted to acting head of Research and Development within the Executive after just six months with the organisation.

"The position was temporarily vacated, and I began in an acting capacity. When the job came up permanently, I applied for it. I was very young at the time, only 33 when I was head of R&D, and I inherited a bunch of 'old hands.' It was a very difficult situation because they were all mature men and this young fella came in full of new ideas. I had a eureka moment which was interesting; one of the older guys that worked for me – a dyed-in-the-wool, local-authority-housing architectural technician – said 'Remember this is only local authority housing, this is only social housing you're involved in.' I remember thinking that was just ridiculous; why should social housing not be of a high standard?"

Rather than cowing the young architect into falling in with the established way of doing things, this interaction seemingly galvanised him in his idealism. He set about establishing new standard details and specifications as well as a new set of standard house types based on Parker Morris principles; which established – among other things – dimensions of vital pieces of domestic furniture and the anthropometric data to ensure space was adequate for their use. The Executive used the standard house types as a framework for new estates, but in a way that encouraged contextual design; permitting consultants to change external materials, alter window shapes and add detailing.

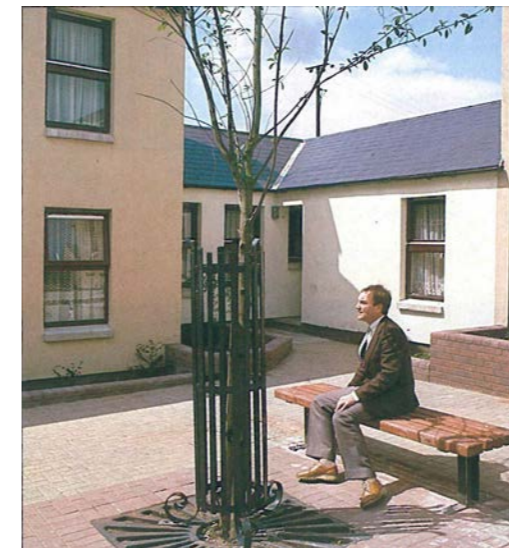
"During the late eighties and early nineties, the Executive won twelve major national design awards, and a very large number are RIBA awards."

These schemes, while designed by a range of other consultants and in-house architects, were based on Frank's standard housing types. At the same time as revolutionising living standards, under Frank's stewardship of the R&D department the Executive also began to apply new energy standards to their houses.

"They gave me a very big budget to change the energy efficiency of the standard house types. I changed the cavity to 100mm and introduced floor insulation, both before they were required by Building Control. Then I worked on the cold-bridging details. We adopted double glazing, which made a lot more sense than single. The tenants still wanted their open fires, so we gave them room heaters which heated all the radiators. The Building Research Establishment wrote a best-practice document based on the Executive's energy-efficiency standards.

The Executive worked on an annual budget and there were often large amounts of money left over at the end of each financial year. More often than not I got a call from head office wanting to quickly spend some money. What I did, mainly, was fill cavities; I filled the wall cavities of one hundred thousand houses. I was mad for insulation! At a dinner one of our consultant architects got very drunk and, sort of, attacked me. He said, 'There's Frank McCloskey, he's going to insulate the world!' It was very heady times, and it was one absolutely fantastic job."

The exciting times in the R&D department were not to last, however, and in 1994 Frank was promoted to Acting Assistant Director of Client Services, a role that Frank less than enjoyed.



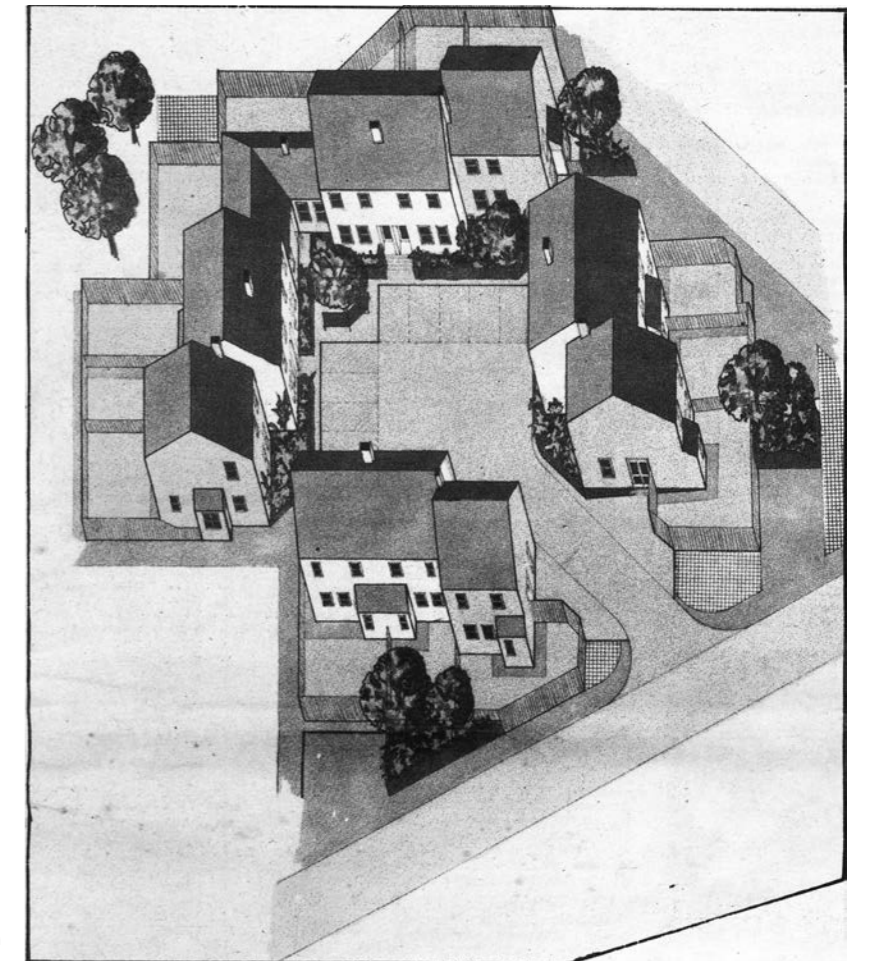
Frank McCloskey admiring the completed Gortnamona estate c.1983, taken from Concrete Quarterly, July-September 1983.

Overworked, stressed, and going through difficult personal circumstances created an untenable situation that came to a dramatic conclusion.

"It ended up I had a stroke at the age of 45. The stroke affected my voice; I could say some words but couldn't string a sentence together. It was very depressing. A speech therapist came to see me in the hospital – didn't know me from Adam – and she said that there was a word which, when you could say it, was an indication that you were on your way to recovery. The word was 'Architecture,' which I thought was a hugely good omen.

Sid McDowell, the chairman of the Executive at the time, was the personification of decency. He tried to persuade me to come back to the Executive, but I had made up my mind. I wanted out. I resigned from the Executive and spent 10 months recovering."

The seeds of Frank's next role had been planted early in his architectural career. Prior to the RSUA finding their home in Mount Charles they were based at 51 Malone Road, renting an office from Ian Campbell whose architectural practice was based in the same building. As such, Frank had strong ties to the organisation from very early in his career, acting in a wide range of voluntary roles from 1975 up until a more formal appointment in June 1996. During this time Frank became close friends with Frances McMorris, the then-secretary of the RSUA. On her retirement in the mid-1980s, Frances asked Frank to design a



Isometric drawing showing typical Gortnamona courtyard, reproduced in Project, October 1981.



Presentation drawings for the McMorris House, dated 1986.

house for her, a story Frank relates with pride and sadness.

“Before Ian went into private practice, he was a partner and associate with JVT Scott and Frances was the secretary there, so they knew each other for a long time. When he heard I was doing her house he was quite annoyed. He phoned me up and said, ‘I want to design Frances’ house.’ I said to him that I had the job done and he said, ‘I’m doing the working drawings, no questions!’ I was really proud of it; it was one of the nicest things I thought I had done. She moved into the house and died of cancer a year later; she only got a year to live in that house. She was a dear friend.”

Unarguably Frank’s most influential role during this period was that of the Convenor of the Editorial Committee which, in 1992 founded the journal of the RSUA.

“Peter Scott, John Baird, and I were the three founder members of Perspective magazine. The first publisher was called Adleader publications. They phoned me one day when the first magazine was almost ready to go, and they asked what we wanted to call it; nobody had given it a name. I was standing looking at my wall calendar and the month was represented by a Frank Lloyd Wright perspective, and I thought, we’ll call it Perspective.”

As with any formal publication, Perspective was registered with the British Library and received an ISBN number. Frank explains that the rules at the time dictated that, should you wish to register a publication with a similar title, it must differ by at least four characters. In 1995 it was brought to Frank’s attention that the then-Prince Charles had published a journal under the editorship of Dan Cruickshank titled ‘Perspectives.’

“I wrote a cross letter to Prince Charles that was roundly ignored. I wrote twice more, and Dan Cruickshank phoned me to ask me what exactly I wanted. I was perfectly nice about it, suggesting that Prince Charles could maybe write a forward

for our magazine or something, but he treated me abominably. I went public and it reached the front page of the Sunday Observer. Then, Nigel Dempster in the Daily Mail ostensibly did an ‘interview’ with me having never contacted or spoken to me. He made me out to be some sort of Northern Irish culchie, it was terrible! But Prince Charles’s magazine lasted twelve months and then went down the tubes, and here’s ours still on the go.”

In 2000 Ulster Journals took over the publishing of Perspective. While acknowledging that the magazine has gone from strength to strength in the last two decades, Frank feels that the original intention of the magazine has been slightly lost.

“It was brought out initially as a magazine to get the public interested in architecture, now it’s morphed into a professional journal. It’s now generally read only by architects, or maybe government clients. It’s my one gripe. Now, Living Design was my baby entirely; I’m really quite proud of it and I’m glad that it is still focussed on public readership.”

After 10 months of recuperation following his stroke, Frank’s long and storied history with the RSUA lead to him applying for the position of Director of Member Services in 1996, a role that morphed into Director of the RSUA in 2001. This was a multi-faceted job with responsibilities for liaising with central and local government on issues relating to architecture and practice, management of continuing professional development, liaising with schools of architecture, providing advice on procurement to the public and private sectors, promoting architecture through publications and the RSUA awards, and managing the RSUA’s staff and premises. It also came with the responsibility for managing design competitions, and during his tenure Frank oversaw over twenty RSUA competitions including the Grand Opera House (Belfast), the Playhouse (L’Derry), the Braid Arts Centre (Ballymena), the Alley Theatre (Strabane), and the Burnavon Arts, Cultural Centre (Cookstown), and - perhaps most notably - the Lyric Theatre (Belfast); a project Frank is particularly proud to have been involved with.



Presentation drawings for the McMorris House, dated 1986.

“I wrote the brief for all those buildings, formed the judging panels, and would have very occasionally sat on the panels. The competitions were based on the European design contest rules; all of them advertised in Europe and procured on the basis of the Public Contracts Regulations, which implemented the European Directive on procurement in the UK. None of those competitions were awarded on the basis of fees, they were awarded based on design. I have to say, it was some work!”

In 2010, Frank was invited onto the Irish Georgian Society’s judging panel for the Conservation Award. Initially appointed due to his position with the RSUA, Frank was retained on the panel until 2019, four years after his retirement. Frank’s esteemed fellow panel members included Eddie McParland, architectural historian from Trinity College and director of the Irish Landmark Trust; David Griffin, Director of the Irish Architectural Archive; Frank McDonald, environmental editor of the Irish Times; and Marion Cashman, Conservation Architect and board member of the Irish Georgian Society.

“I was not a Conservation Architect, so I always concentrated on the modern interventions and thought that if the architects got the modern intervention right this tended to reflect the quality of the overall scheme. It was such a pleasure to be in the company of this knowledgeable and entertaining group for so many years.”

Towards the end of his tenure in the RSUA, Frank championed health and safety in construction, setting up the Construction Professional Health and Safety Card that pre-empted the Construction Design and Management Regulations 2015. When Frank retired as Director of the RSUA in 2015, the RIBA approached him, initially to establish the Health and Safety Card throughout the UK and subsequently to advise on safety focussed CPD. In the wake of Grenfell, Frank now provides assessments on manufacturer’s CPD sessions relating to fire, cladding, and compartmentation, ensuring RIBA CPD complies with the relevant British Standards and Building Regulations.

As we reached the end of our conversation, Frank raised a rather peculiar design competition, one that was only partially realised but that seems to sum up his approach to matters both professional and personal.

“Thanksgiving Square was to be a garden, a building, and a beacon. The Laganside Corporation gave the site to a local charity modelled on the American Thanksgiving Square charity. A firm from Scotland won the competition in conjunction with the sculptor Andy Scott, but in the heels of the hunt all they could afford was the sculpture, which nevertheless was to become a symbol for the city. Thanksgiving Square is all about appreciating what you have rather than whinging about what you haven’t. That would be my ethos. Having not been a star at school or university, I have had three fantastic jobs. I’m very thankful for everything I got. I consider myself a very ordinary man who has had a bit of good luck.

I was lucky to win that travelling bursary and in turn, I was lucky to work for Ian Campbell. I think I achieved an awful lot in the Housing Executive, and I think I achieved quite a bit in the RSUA; all from a start where I was only good at three subjects at school.”

“I’ve had a lucky old life and it’s not over yet.”

Dr Andrew Molloy

- 1 McCloskey, Frank. ‘Ian Campbell, 1925-2020, Known for Beautifully Crafted, Geometric Designs’, 11 September 2020. <https://www.ribaj.com/culture/obituary-ian-campbell-1925-2020>.
- 2 McCloskey, Frank. ‘Good-mannered Architecture’. RSUA Yearbook and Directory 46 (1975): 28–33.
- 3 House, Home & Design. Northern Ireland: Architectural Publications Ltd. 1988. Pg.30.
- 4 ‘A Quiet Corner of Belfast: Housing at Monagh Road, west Belfast, Northern Ireland’. Concrete Quarterly 138 (September 1983): 24–26.
- 5 She. ‘Estatey Homes’, April 1984.