

Architects of Ulster 1920s – 1970s

by Paul Larmour

As the journal of the Royal Society of Ulster Architects, *Perspective* showcases new buildings in Northern Ireland and those executed elsewhere by architects from the region. It prospectively catalogues the development of the Northern Irish profession when considered as a complete body of work. Since 1997, Dr Paul Larmour - former reader in architecture at Queen's University, widely-published and celebrated architectural historian and honorary member of both the RSUA and the RIAI - has been quietly building a series of articles looking at notable Ulster architects over the preceding century; an otherwise undocumented retrospective of architecture in the Northern Irish state. Occurring only occasionally and often nestled in the latter half of the journal, these articles were tonally different; densely packed academic pieces that were as compellingly and passionately written as they were researched.

I always looked forward to these, slicing them out of past issues to collect in a binder when the demands of office space dictated a clear-out. I recognised the academic rigour of Dr Larmour's



Ulster Bank, Shaftesbury Square, Belfast by Tony Houston.

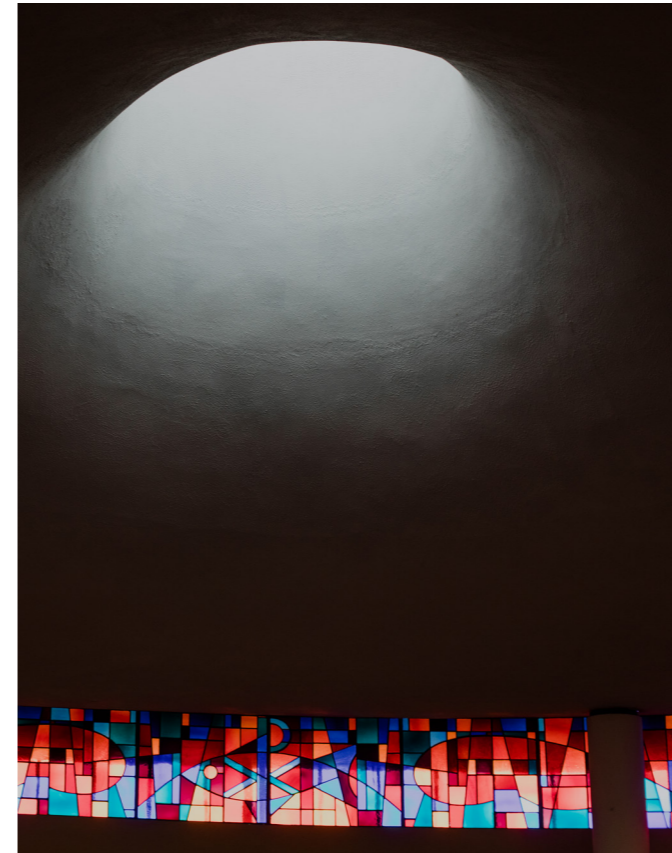


Bus Station, Oxford Street, Belfast, 1959-60 by Ben Cowser.

approach and the value of these articles as a documentation of Northern Irish architecture to be found nowhere else. You can imagine my satisfaction, therefore, to learn that these articles were being revised, expanded, and collected in a single volume; I can now retire the binder and its increasingly ripped and dog-eared contents (although I think I'll hold onto it for old times' sake).

Dr Larmour's *Architects of Ulster: 1920s-1970s* was launched in November 2022 by RSUA director Ciarán Fox at an event in the Methodist College's Chapel of Unity (designed by one of the subjects of the book, Gordon McKnight). It is the first publication to be funded by the late Gordon Wheeler, former chair of the RSUA publications committee, described by Karen Latimer - the current committee chair and editor of *Architects of Ulster* - as "a committed bibliophile, extremely passionate about architecture...who left a very generous legacy to the UAH specifically for publications." The book consists of twenty-one chapters, each one focussing on an individual architect. Largely examining these individuals through their work, relevant biographical details are included to contextualise the practitioners and their practice within Northern Ireland as it developed from a nascent state in the twenties to a troubled province in the seventies.

Those included are architects of the early Northern Irish state, Ingleby Smyth and Thomas Rippingham; prominent church architects, Padraic Gregory, Liam McCormick and Gordon McKnight; champions of Ulster architecture, RH Gibson and Phillip Bell; conservation pioneers, Denis O'D Hanna and Robert McKinstry; avant-garde housing specialists, Henry Lynch Robinson and Noel Cambell; founders and figureheads of one of the biggest local firms, Donald Shanks and Joe Fitzgerald; those who brought national and international attention to the local profession, RS Wilshere, John MacGeagh, Ian Campbell and James Munce; and the designers of oft-misunderstood and



St. Aengus RC Church, Burt, Co Donegal, 1964-1967 by Liam McCormick.

largely uncared for iconic buildings, Ben Cowser, John McBride Neill, Tony Houston and Adair Roche.

While ostensibly a collection of articles focused on isolated individuals, the scope of the work and sweep of architects and buildings covered creates a biography of the Northern Irish profession from the earliest days of the state. While the separate articles occasionally cover similar ground, this serves both the casual reader consulting the book in reference to a specific building or architect, and those wanting to read cover to cover in contextualising and connecting the individuals in one grand narrative. There is a sense of delight in discovering an entire chapter dedicated to a name briefly mentioned in a previous one, or when characters already discussed appear as minor players in someone else's story.

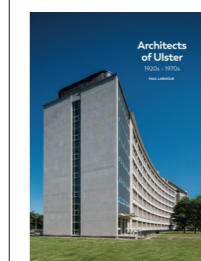
Similarly, and more personally, buildings that have formed important aspects of my life (I attended a Wilshere school,

lived beside a McKnight church, attended school prize-givings in a MacGeagh, and so on) are suddenly connected to this web of architectural history. *That* building was designed by *that* architect who mentored *that* architect who designed *that* building, assisted by *that* architect who went on to design *that* building; my surroundings, both personal and professional, suddenly alive with meaning and part of the wider story of Northern Irish architectural authorship.

The text is unpretentious and to the point, dealing largely with the development of the architects throughout their careers in chronological order. The narrative, however, is brought alive by Dr Larmour's gift of describing buildings in a passionate and incisive way, making stylistic connections that chart the architectural progress of both the individual and the wider profession. This is further enhanced by the illustrative photography, with images taken by the author over the last forty years alongside new photography by Joe Laverty. The design of the book - deftly executed by Chris Sherry and LA McFall - switches between illustrative images embedded in the text and full-page collaged spreads, occasionally interrupted by stunning individual double-page images providing moments to pause and breathe.

I agree with RSUA director Ciarán Fox who, in his address at the book's launch event, articulated the importance of this book in the context of the contested nature of Northern Irish identity. Just as the value of Northern Irish architectural heritage was realised all too late - with listing legislation only reaching this corner of Europe in 1972 - so too is the value of twentieth-century Ulster architecture woefully misunderstood and criminally mismanaged. This is made all the more important when you consider that Northern Ireland is also a creation of the twentieth century. The key to understanding what Northern Irish identity means must reside within an understanding of the built fabric of the place as it was established and developed; architecture is an expression of who we are and who we want to be. *Architects of Ulster* is an important step in reaching this understanding. ○

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Ulster Architectural Heritage Society

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