

# Interleaving Lives

## A Conversation with Karen Latimer

*"I have always had parallel lives if you like, and a lot of people in one bubble don't know about the other bubble. What's interesting is how these parallel lives slowly interleave."*



Karen was a Lay Judge at the RSUA Awards in 2014.

I was sitting in the corner of the bustling café of Queen's University's McClay Library with Karen Latimer. We had both mistakenly thought, given the May Day Bank Holiday, that the library would be a quiet place to sit down with the dictaphone, forgetting the impending exams and the need for students to remain fully caffeinated for the coming month. Regardless, it made for a lively and entirely appropriate backdrop for our conversation (even if it did make the transcription process a bit of a challenge).

I was aware of Karen through her work with the Ulster Architectural Heritage Society, knowing she had edited several UAHS publications and having seen her introduce numerous guest speakers at events, with a vague awareness that she was once the architecture subject librarian for Queen's architecture faculty. Living in my conservation bubble, I was entirely unaware of Karen's additional role – betrayed by the bibliophilic metaphor of these parallel pursuits 'interleaving' – as an internationally renowned expert in library design.

Karen originally comes from the north of Scotland and graduated with an MA from the University of Edinburgh in 1971 followed by a postgrad library qualification. This led to her first job working in the photographic library of the Courtauld Institute of Art in London before getting a position at Durham University.

*"I met my husband when I was working in Durham and he had just been appointed to a lectureship at Queen's; that's what brought me to Northern Ireland. I had studied history*

*of art and architecture, so the question was, 'what can I do now?' For me, it was either libraries or museums. I picked libraries and ended up getting the job as Queen's architecture and planning librarian. I had just been appointed when my husband got a position at Rice University in Houston, Texas so I wrote to everybody I could think of in Houston with my CV. By a stroke of luck, the University of Houston was just about to build a new library and needed somebody to work between the architects and the library staff. I got offered the job as I had just completed a dissertation on designing library buildings."*

In this position, Karen acted as an intermediary between the University of Houston as the client and the architect for the project, Kenneth Bentsen and Associates, coming back to Northern Ireland on completion of the project in 1975. Despite accepting the Houston job shortly after being appointed to Queen's, Karen was fortunate enough to be able to return to the architecture and planning library role on her return.

*"The university librarian at Queen's at the time was a man called Henry Heaney, and I owe a lot to him. I asked him for unpaid leave of absence to go off to America and he agreed for which I am eternally grateful. My job at Queen's was to connect the students with the right information and support them in their studies; that's fun to do. It was the best job in the library for me because architecture is a subject I am deeply interested in; you're never supposed to say as a librarian that you enjoy reading but it was a real treat for me to get to select the architecture and planning books. You're looking constantly at what the latest trends are and what is being published in the field to make sure you've got the resources that the students really need."*

While the foundations were being laid for Karen's distinguished career in library management and design, similar foundations were also being established for another life as a committed architectural conservationist. It wasn't long after Karen's return to Northern Ireland in 1975 that she encountered a number of key figures in this field.

*"There were several people who got me involved in architecture generally in Northern Ireland. Alistair Rowan was my tutor at the University of Edinburgh, and Hugh Dixon was a fellow student at Edinburgh, so when I came to live here he was one of the few people I knew. I met Brian Boyd and*



Karen advising students in the Architecture and Planning reading room; photo taken from 'Celebrating Our Past - Shaping the Future: 50 Years of Planning Education at Queens University Belfast'.

*Charlie Brett at a Concrete Society lecture and got involved in the Ulster Architectural Heritage Society. I joined the UAHS pretty much as soon as I arrived; it built on an interest I already had so it made perfect sense to get involved in that world when arriving somewhere new. Some people join a church, some people join a football club and I suppose the UAHS was my equivalent. It's been a huge part of my life ever since."*

The Ulster Architectural Heritage Society was founded in 1967 "to promote the historic environment, its protection, conservation and heritage-led regeneration for people and communities."<sup>1</sup> Thanks to the Society, listing legislation was introduced to Northern Ireland in 1972, and the early work of the UAHS involved the compilation of lists which would play a key part in the identification of heritage buildings for statutory protection across the province. As Karen's involvement in the UAHS deepened, the Society was in the midst of successful campaigns for establishing the Historic Buildings Council in 1974 and, in 1975, the establishment of conservation areas in Northern Ireland.

*"One of the first things that got me involved in the UAHS was Charlie walking me through Belfast and saying 'Look up! Look up!' He then recruited me to HEARTH very early on; it must have been right at the beginning because I was actually on Marcus (Patton)'s interview panel."*

The Historic Environmental and Architectural Renovation Trust for Housing – or HEARTH – was established as a joint venture between the National Trust and the UAHS. Initially set up to save smaller buildings of historic interest rather than the large public buildings which were the focus of the UAHS and the country houses of the National Trust, HEARTH had set up a Housing Association wing in 1978 to focus on the rehabilitation of historic buildings as social housing. In an as-yet-unpublished article, Karen cites discussions that took place at the time which clearly sets out the need for such an organisation. "There can be no doubt of the need to provide more, and better, housing in Northern Ireland; there can be no doubt that the rehabilitation and renovation of existing dwellings can make an important contribution to the overall problem...not only as a new initiative in the neglected field of conservation but also as an urgent and practical contribution to the desperate social problems which face the divided community in Northern Ireland in 1972."<sup>2</sup>

*"HEARTH encapsulates a philosophy I really believe in; restoring small at-risk buildings for the public good and putting them to the best use possible which is housing. It pleases me that buildings like College Square North and the terraces on Joy Street and Hamilton Street are social housing. I do not take any credit for that; it really was down to Marcus and my predecessors chairing the committee."*

Charles Brett was chairman of HEARTH from its inception in 1972, with Karen on the committee from 1978 and in the



Karen (far left) and Julia Barrett (far right) at the launch of PADDI, c.2000.



Proposed new Central Library, Limerick, designed by Henry J Lyons, for which Karen provided consultancy advice. ©HJ Lyons

role of vice-chair from the mid-nineties. When Brett stepped down in 2001, Karen took over as Chair, feeling the weight of responsibility in assuming the role of such a considerable figure.

*“I can’t speak highly enough of Charlie; it was his vision and drive that got HEARTH off the ground, so following him was quite a challenge. I always say to people that the greatest thing I did was to be the person who followed Charlie, anybody else could follow me! It was a privilege to be chair of HEARTH with Marcus as director and a terrific committee. I have stood in buildings with Marcus where your heart would have sunk, but he is the eternal optimist. In his quiet way – even when it wasn’t fashionable – he would just say, ‘It’s saveable.’ I’ve been involved with HEARTH as long as I have lived in Northern Ireland, but I don’t want to say too much about it; HEARTH is much more Marcus’ story.”*<sup>3</sup>

When Karen joined Queen’s as Architecture and Planning Librarian in 1975, architectural education and scholarship on the island of Ireland were in their infancy. The School of Architecture at Queen’s was only 10 years old, and there was a dearth of available information on local architecture. As a result, in the early 1990s, Karen struck up a close working relationship with Julia Barrett, her counterpart at University College Dublin, establishing a strong relationship between the two institutions.

*“Students who were doing projects locally would come to us as subject librarians, and they didn’t just want to know what had been designed around the world but also what*

*was happening nearby. There was very little information on Irish architecture in the major journals; I did a search once on Lanyon, probably the most well-known Ulster architect, and I think there were half a dozen references in the RIBA database. In those days the only two architecture schools on the island of Ireland were Queen’s and UCD. We started off exchanging information and kept paper files for a while; just old-fashioned catalogue cards with references to articles and other sources.”*

Initially creating this bibliographic database for purely practical reasons – to put the information they and their students required within easy reach – both Karen and Julia recognised the value and uniqueness of what they were creating and sought a way to make this available to others.

*“The two big players in architectural information were the Avery Library, the architecture library in New York, and the RIBA in London; they each have architectural periodical indexes. We tried to see if we could join with them and feed our data into their databases, but they weren’t really that interested, so we decided we’d just go it alone.”*

What they went on to establish was the Planning and Architecture Design Database Ireland (PADDI) a publicly available and fully searchable online bibliographic database including references to journals, books, and parts of books launched in the early 2000s.<sup>4</sup>

*“We got research funding, so we were able to employ people to work on it. That’s hard enough to do, but the even more difficult thing is to embed it. Very often with these projects you set them up, run them and then you leave, and they die. We’re both retired now, Julia and I, but it’s good that PADDI still exists and continues through the work of our successors at Queen’s and UCD.”*

The scale, scope and impact that PADDI has had on local architectural scholarship cannot be overstated. Personally speaking, I find the PADDI database invaluable. Type in a keyword and you are presented with an extensive list of sources, including links directly to the Queen’s and UCD catalogues; like an automated subject librarian on your desktop. It speaks to the generosity of both Karen and Julia – as well as their respective institutions – that this was made and remains publicly available; revealing a genuine passion for the



UAHS Chairman David Johnston, Karen Latimer, Paul Larmour and Chris Sherry at the launch of the book ‘Architects of Ulster 1920s-1970s’ by Paul Larmour in November 2022.

subject and an understanding that promoting and enhancing local understanding can only serve to benefit the local built environment as a whole.

In a similar vein, Karen’s attendance at the annual conference of the Art Libraries Society (ARLIS) created networking opportunities that developed into a long-standing organisation that remains in operation today.

*“You used to find that gathered around the bar of an evening after conferences would be a small caucus of architecture librarians, and we kept saying we should establish a body for architecture librarians, so we set up this thing called ARCLIB.”*<sup>5</sup>

What would become known as ARCLIB began as informal discussions in 1987, and gradually developed into a more formal structure. An initial meeting was held in Oxford in April 1988 attended by librarians from seventeen schools of architecture, and following this, members of the fledgling group were invited to attend an annual seminar of French Architecture School Librarians, bringing an increased awareness of alternative methodologies of librarianship and the connection between institutions. This encouraged the as-yet ‘informal organisers’ to become more focused. An inaugural meeting in 1990 saw the group officially adopt the ARCLIB name and elect a board, and the group held their first international conference in Edinburgh in September 1994.

*“It is a great networking organisation; it runs a conference where people can get together and help each other out with advice. Like PADDI it’s still going today, it’s particularly pleasing when you set something up and it has a life independent of you.”*

As well as founding this national body for architecture librarians, Karen also held the prestigious position of Chair of IFLA’s (International Federation of Library Associations) Library Buildings Standing Committee – with her initial involvement in the renowned international professional body being triggered by the introduction of fee-based services to Queen’s Library in 1991, a unique service which Karen played a key part in implementing.<sup>6</sup>

*“It really started on the back of architects using the architecture library at Queen’s, because they graduate, go into practice and suddenly they don’t have access to the kind of information they need for a small practice; you can’t subscribe to all the journals. So we set up the associate membership scheme initially for architects but now scaled up so that people outside the university can pay a small sum and become a member. I was asked by the then librarian of the RIBA to talk to the IFLA conference in Beijing about selling information services to architects; this was in 1996.”*



Karen talking at the launch of the book ‘Architects of Ulster 1920s-1970s’ by Paul Larmour.



Paul Harron, Karen Latimer, Trevor Leaker, Lynn and Paul Larmour at the Ulster Tatler Christmas drinks December 2022.

*Aileen Hull – the president of the RSUA at the time – could see the value in promoting something happening in Northern Ireland that was different and interesting, and she got me funding to attend. As a result of that talk, I was recruited to the Library Building and Equipment section of IFLA and later became its Secretary and eventually Chair.”*

In 2001, after 26 years as subject librarian and seeing several generations of young architects move through the Faculty, Karen made the difficult decision to move on.

*“Librarianship is just like any profession; the further up you go the less time you spend on the hands-on aspect. I just thought the time had come to do something a bit more challenging for me I went on to run the Medical and AFBI Libraries. The architectural library job, however, was just ideal for me working with all the architecture students, many of whom are now leading major firms. It was a very stimulating and fun environment to be in and I loved working with the students; they were really creative and interesting. Architects are passionate about their subject; they have to be. It was a great wrench deciding to leave.”*

Following this move into library management, Karen returned to her role in library design, becoming involved with Designing Libraries UK. <sup>7</sup> Originally this project was run by the University of Aberystwyth funded by the Museums, Libraries and

Archives Council and managed by the Chartered Institute of Library & Information Professionals. It is now a Community Interest Company.

*“It’s an online database that provides information to architects and librarians; anybody working on designing a library. It started off life as a database of all the new libraries that had been designed in England but then expanded to cover all of the UK; we’re revamping it at the moment. The idea is that if you are designing a new library, you can have a look and see what’s happening and connect to people who can help. Again, it’s that link between architecture and libraries, which fascinates me.”*

Designing Libraries UK has grown beyond the initial database of libraries to include design guidelines, an online reference library related to design and planning issues, a bibliography of academic articles relating to innovative design trends, insights and new stories to provide practical advice and inspiration for anyone involved in library design. In 2022 the structure of Designing Libraries was refreshed, with Karen in the role of Chief Advisor.

Yet another ‘interleaving’ of Karen’s parallel lives is her involvement in the publications committee of the UAHS. The early UAHS publications – while remaining of considerable value as reference sources – were rudimentary booklets, entirely black and white and sparsely illustrated. Starting with Paul Larmour’s ‘Architectural Heritage of Malone and Stranmillis,’ published in 1991, UAHS publications have gradually become more lavish, developing into the full-colour prestige publications exemplified by the most recent book, ‘Architects of Ulster: 1920s to 1970s,’ again by Dr Paul Larmour. <sup>8</sup> This shift occurred under Karen’s tenure in the publications committee.

*“My professional career is about access to information; that’s what libraries are about. Charles Brett always tells the story that when he arrived in Northern Ireland there were no books about Northern Irish architecture, so that’s why he produced the ‘Building of Belfast’ (in 1967), and to some extent when I arrived in Northern Ireland (in 1974) there still wasn’t much available, either about current architecture or historically.<sup>9</sup> And it seems to me that’s very important, that publications are about recording; if you don’t record something it has no visibility.”<sup>10</sup>*

This approach to the UAHS publications as a means of recording, filling knowledge gaps and sharing this information as widely as possible underpins much of Karen’s career; from her position as subject librarian to the establishment of PADDI and ARCLIB, and on to her roles with Designing Libraries UK and IFLA. This certainly speaks to the librarian aspect of her ‘parallel lives.’ However, this is heavily influenced by her role as a conservationist, and looking at the spread of Karen’s interests, experiences and considerable achievements, the idea of these two aspects being parallel is exposed as being a total misnomer; the crossovers and concurrences of the two worlds remain present throughout.

*“Although most of the work I have done is in conservation, I have always been interested in good architecture of all periods. Conservationists often get pigeonholed as having a fixation on historic buildings to the exclusion of all else. This is not the case at all; you are interested in your environment, the whole sense of identity, how buildings shape places, and good design regardless of period.”*

Karen has published widely in the fields of librarianship, architecture and design and conservation. Her expertise in library design has also led to Karen acting as a lay member of judging panels for the RIBA and RSUA, as well as sitting on the panels for a number of international library building design competitions and awards including the prestigious



Sean Sloan, Karen Latimer, Arthur Sloan and Donal McRandal at the RSUA Design Awards 2023 at Stormont in May.

Australian Library Design Awards. Additionally, Karen has been recognised for her contribution to the fields of interest to which she has devoted her life, becoming an Honorary Member of the RSUA in 2000, being awarded an OBE for her contribution to architectural heritage in 2007, attaining Fellowship of CILIP in 2009 and, at the 2018 IFLA conference held in Kuala Lumpur, receiving a distinguished Scroll of Appreciation in recognition of her international work in the field of library design.

Towards the end of our conversation, I asked Karen to reflect on her time in Northern Ireland.

*“It’s definitely a better place to live in than it was in the seventies and eighties. I am very optimistic in terms of Irish architecture, I think – North and South – there is a lot more focus on good architecture. I feel that people are more aware of the importance of good architecture in modern buildings and the importance of retaining the old. Take the Bank Buildings, for example, a few years ago I feel that would have gone, and I think that was an indication of an awareness of the value of place and the sense of place which is encouraging. Having said that there are still a lot of poor-quality buildings around, and there’s still an awful lot of dereliction where people aren’t being imaginative enough about regeneration and reuse; it’s a real challenge but I think the answer is to go back to inner city housing. During the Troubles, people left the city for the safety of the suburbs. I think there is an appetite now for people to come back and live in the city centre. That’s what is needed.”*

#### Dr Andrew Molloy

- 1 UAHS website. <https://www.ulsterarchitecturalheritage.org.uk/about/what-we-do/>.
- 2 Latimer, Karen. ‘Working with Hearth Housing Association and Revolving Fund.’ Unpublished draft provided to author.
- 3 Molloy, Andrew. ‘A Pronounced Character: Sir Charles Edward Bainbridge Brett (1928-2005)’. *Perspective* 31, no. 2 (April 2022): 80–84.
- 4 PADDI – Planning Architecture Design Database Ireland. <https://paddi.net/>.
- 5 ARCLIB – Architecture Librarians’ Group. <https://www.arclib.info/>.
- 6 Latimer, Karen. ‘Free To Fee: The Current Account From An Academic Library’. Beijing, 1996. <https://archive.ifla.org/1V/ifla62/62-latk.htm>.
- 7 Designing Libraries UK – <https://designinglibraries.org.uk/>.
- 8 Larmour, Dr Paul. *Architects of Ulster 1920-1970s*. Edited by Karen Latimer. Ulster Architectural Heritage Society, 2022.
- 9 Brett, Charles E.B. *Buildings of Belfast 1700-1914*. 1st Edition. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1967.
- 10 UAHS publications. <https://www.ulsterarchitecturalheritage.org.uk/publications/>.