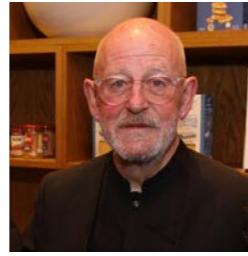


# Fourth Dimension and the Space Between

## A Conversation with Peter Hutchinson



As part of a series Dr Andrew Molloy chats to leading figures in Northern Irish architecture about their careers and influences. In this issue he talks to multi award-winning Landscape Architect Peter Hutchinson.



**“While I’m known for a number of landscape design schemes, I don’t think my career has been defined by them. I have such a wide range of projects.”**

I was sitting in a coffee shop at the lower end of Dungannon’s Market Square with renowned landscape architect Peter Hutchinson. Out of the window, the Square rose dramatically towards Ranfurly House, beyond which lies a beautifully landscaped and historically vital park. It was the second and final site visit of the day looking at two of the projects Peter was alluding to; the RUC Geroge Cross Memorial Garden and Dungannon’s Hill of the O’Neill. Over the course of a number of conversations, it was clear that Peter was proud of them and – as I had not experienced them in person – I decided I needed to see them. Peter was kind enough to offer me the day to act as a guide.

**“I have been involved in some four hundred projects over the course of my career, and neither the RUC Garden nor Hill of the O’Neill could have happened without each and every one of them; I just wouldn’t have been able to design them without those experiences.”**

Weeks before this Dungannon denouement (to which we shall return) we were sat at Peter’s dining table in his unusually linear first-floor apartment in south Belfast. I started the conversation with my usual broad opening question of beginnings.

**“I studied geography and economic history at Queen’s, and then I worked in the ‘Realisation and Implementation’ section of Belfast City Planning Department as a town planning assistant; this would have been 1969. I then went back to study Town Planning before returning to the Belfast Planning Office Design Section. I worked with John McCammon, Harry Orr, Mike Murray and Alwyn Riddell and it was a crazy office. At the time design was an open book of contemporary modern redevelopment, so there were some wacky plans.”**

In the Belfast Planning Department, amongst other projects, Peter worked on the pedestrianisation concept plan for Ann Street, Arthur Street and Corn Market in Belfast, the first one in Ireland. These were heady days to be involved in the Planning profession, which was very much an emerging discipline in Northern Ireland at the time. The initiation point locally was the publication of the Matthew Plan in 1962, rising through Travers Morgan’s motorway plans and BDP’s Belfast Urban Area Plan in 1967, cresting with the establishment of the Craigavon Development Commission in 1966.

**“I moved to the Craigavon Development Commission as a landscape architectural assistant in 1972. The beauty of the Commission was that we had a landscape section, a plant nursery, and a workforce; you could develop a design in the morning, go down and pick plants from the nursery and have it built in the afternoon. The principle was that it was multi-**

**disciplinary and all-inclusive, with architects, engineers, planners, landscape architects, and model makers. It was exciting times and we had buckets of dough, but it dissipated in the early seventies and was absorbed into the Department of the Environment.”**

Through the crucible of the late sixties, Peter had found his calling and left Northern Ireland to study for a post-graduate degree in Landscape Architecture at Edinburgh University before spending a year working with Eikos Environmental Design based in Vancouver working on a series of pedestrian precincts, residential developments and public spaces. In 1976 – now as a chartered member of the Institute of Landscape Architects – he brought this thinking back to Northern Ireland, just as landscape architecture was entering a new phase in the Province.

**“There were three landscape offices; Belfast, Derry and Craigavon. Belfast obviously looked after the city and County Antrim, Derry looked after Londonderry, Fermanagh and Tyrone, and Craigavon looked after Armagh and Down, under the Department of the Environment Planning Department. We got a relatively free reign. We were doing anything from area plans right through to detailed design.”**

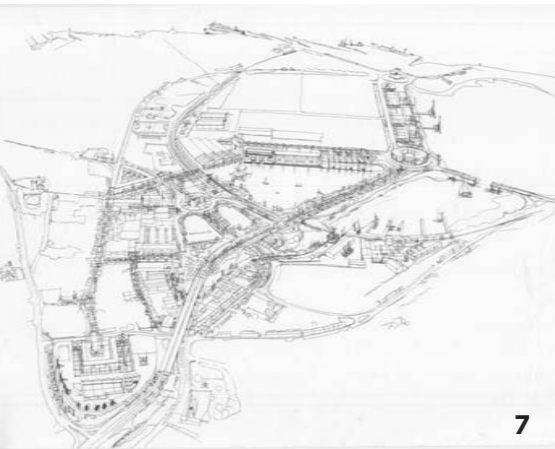
In his position as Deputy Principal under the then DOE Planning Service, Peter was involved in another pedestrianisation scheme ten years after his work on Ann Street, this time

for Lisburn’s Bow Street, the first one in Northern Ireland outside Belfast.

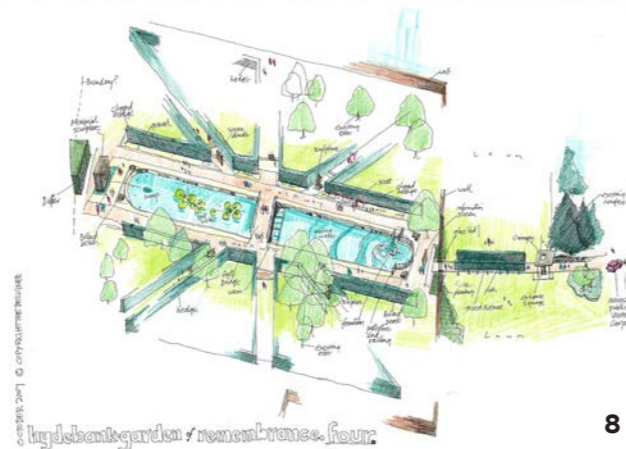
**“This was 1981 or ’82. There had been a lot of bombing, a lot of decimation of town centres. Bow Street had gaps and spaces; businesses had closed. It was in a sorry state. There was a whole host of security concerns. The idea was to establish areas with planters to create safety zones. It took account of pedestrians, seating areas, safety and security. It became the most successful shopping street outside Belfast. It was really successful, really lively.”**

The above account of Peter’s description of the Bow Street scheme falls somewhat short compared with my own experience in the room. As he began discussing the project he reached for a blank page and a pen, making a series of expressive marks as he explained the layout and topography of the site and the implications behind the primary design decisions. Peter’s travelogues – often featured within these pages – are highly visual, and any articles about his designs are always accompanied by beautifully expressive sketches. Peter’s thought process is highly visual.

**“It’s the way I think; I live on drawings. I think better in pictures. It is looking, seeing, and observing. A computer doesn’t give you that contact... [TAPS PEN ON SURFACE OF PAGE] ...between the tip of the pencil and a piece of paper.**

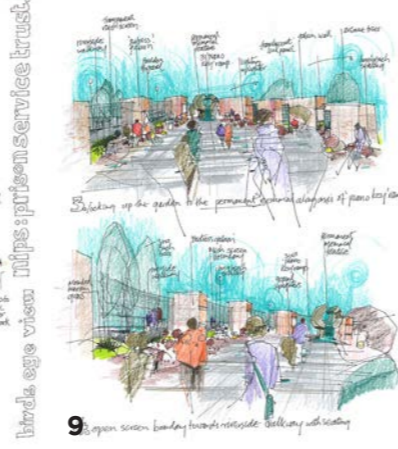


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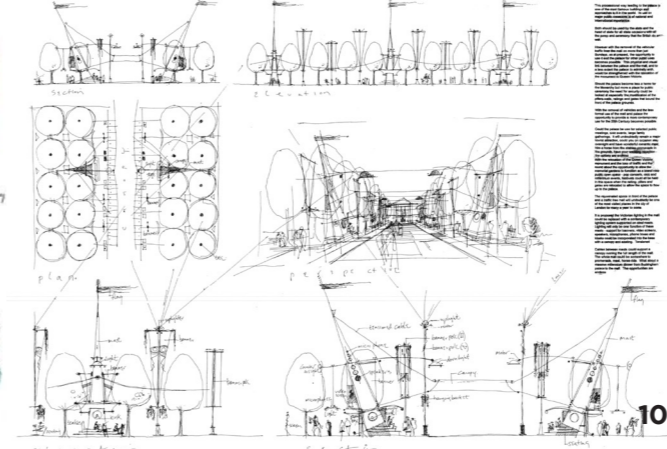
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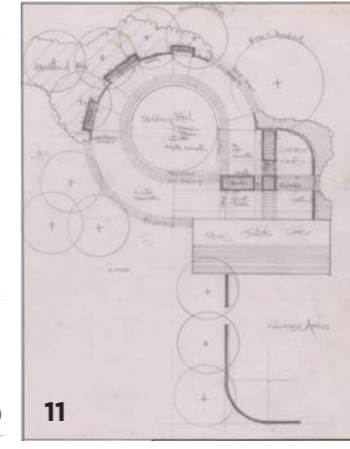


birds eye view nips: prison service trust

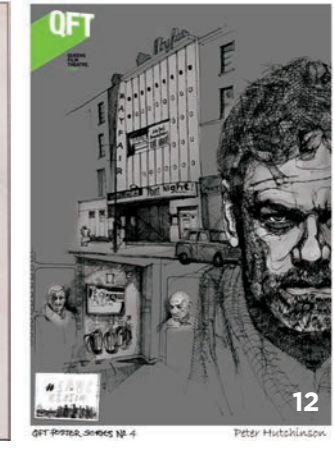
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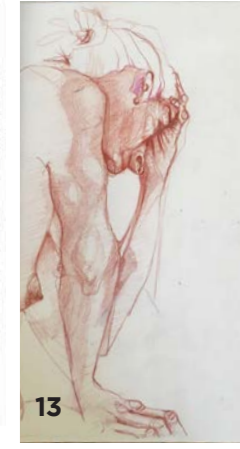
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**Whether it's travelogues or teaching, I'm telling stories; it's a journey from start to finish. I have a visual library in my mind; I can draw a fence... [DRAWING AS HE SPEAKS] ...and I can click through my brain; is it a picket fence, is it a post and wire fence, is it a vertical boarded timber fence? And then I can ask, how is that constructed? ... [THE PEN HAS NOT STOPPED MOVING] ...I've got all those little pictures - a visual library - in my head, millions of them."**

Pulling out a fresh page, Peter began explaining how he uses drawing and sketching in the design process while the pen danced across the page in front of him.

**"I still go through the old-fashioned process of 'survey, analysis, design.' You have the base information and synthesise that into a drawing. The most difficult thing is getting the initial sketch design right. I start off with small sketches; it might only be a thumbnail. Then I take that bit there... [HIGHLIGHTING SMALL AREA ON SKETCH IN FRONT OF HIM] ...and then I make that into an A4, but I might then take that bit there... [SELECTING SMALLER AREA AGAIN] ...and make that into an A3. It's the way you would on a computer, enlarging it on your screen, but you always have the same amount of detail at any scale. With a drawing, you cannot cheat. You go from that initial thought into construction details, junctions and corners."**

Returning to the account of his career, Peter established his own practice in the early 1980s, a time that marked a significant shift in many of the built environment professions away from the public sector. The heightening intensity of the Troubles in the early seventies led to a number of acts of Parliament, initially proroguing the Northern Ireland Assembly before dissolving it entirely. The political shake-up resulted in a dramatic reduction of the powers of the local councils. As described above, the planning wave had crested with the work of the Commission, before it all came crashing down and receding over the course of the 1970s as budgets dwindled and society fractured.

**"The early eighties was when the shift happened from the public sector to the opening up of private offices. There was no training locally, so you either went to Edinburgh - where I went - or Leeds, Manchester or even the USA. But the Housing Executive and the DoE landscape offices were seedbeds for landscape architects. Seven or eight new landscape architecture offices opened, and I started my practice in 1983."**

At the time, one of the largest employers of landscape architects outside the civil service was Ferguson McIlveen (later to be absorbed by the Scott Wilson group, and then by AECOM), who established itself as an engineering firm in the early twenties before diversifying into a multi-disciplinary practice

in the 1960s when Robert Carson joined adding landscape architecture, with WD & RT Taggart being a close competitor, and very few others. Therefore, there was a virtually empty marketplace for private practitioners in Northern Ireland at the time that lent itself well to small practices.

**"Commissions came from different government bodies; whether you were in favour with a particular department, you might have got a park or you might have got an industrial estate; government offices turned the tap on and off. But there were developers and private work as well, and because I was self-employed and didn't know when the next job was coming, I would have taken on anything. Your ear was always open."**

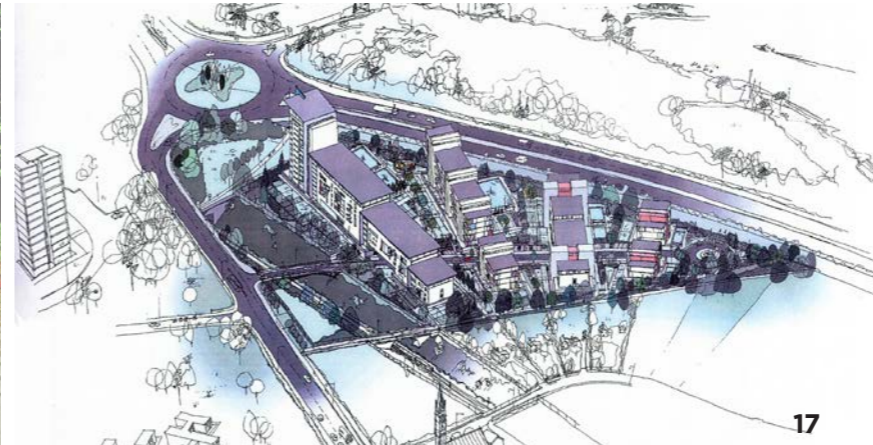
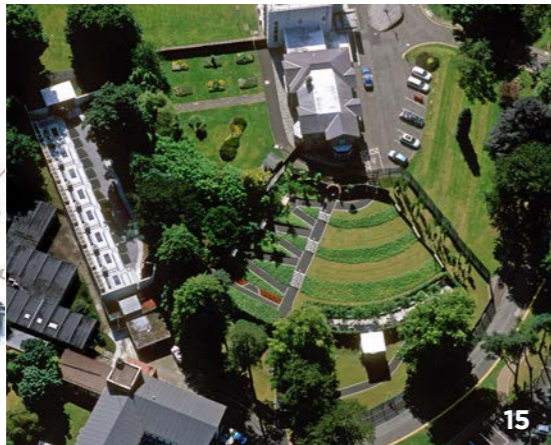
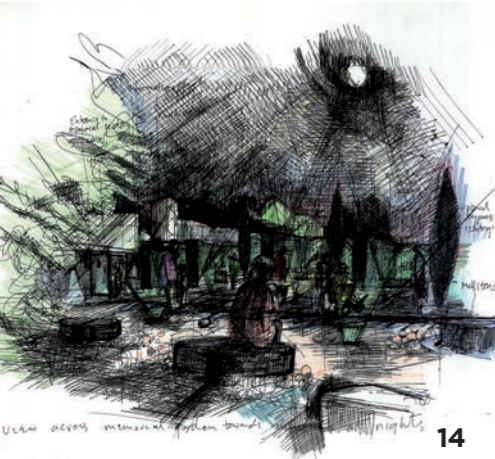
Asking about his approach to landscape design and what shapes his approach to design, Peter references two seminal books; Elizabeth Beazley's 'Design and Detail of Space Between Buildings'<sup>1</sup> and Gordon Cullen's 'The Concise Townscape.'<sup>2</sup> Discussing the impact these publications have had on his practice, Peter once again turned his attention to the pen and paper on the table between us.

**"I think you could describe landscape architecture as the design of the space between buildings. The buildings could be urban... [DRAWING DENSELY PACKED SHAPES] ...and you're designing the junctions and connections... [SKETCHES**

**OUT TREELINED STREETScape] ...but the buildings could be... [DRAWING TALL DISPERSED BLOCKS] ...and you've roads, hills, vegetation, and lakes... [SKETCHES OUT OPEN LANDSCAPE, REMINISCENT OF CORBUSIER'S PLAN VOISIN] ... Either way, the buildings just happen to be part of the landscape. Architects try to get the landscape to fit their buildings, whereas I would tend to make the building fit the landscape. It's in how architects are taught. There's very little focus on relating buildings and landscape in architectural teaching and practice. If it is an afterthought there tends to be a disconnection between the building and the landscape.**

**"The other thing that landscape architects consider is the fourth dimension of time. You have to deal with the diurnal, seasonal changes and annual changes of weather and climate, but also the fact that plants actually grow; the acorn eventually becomes an oak. There is a transience; it evolves."**

This concept of the fourth dimension of time loomed large on the day of our site visits, which took place on a pleasantly sunny day in an otherwise dismal Northern Irish August. The two projects were celebrating notable anniversaries: ten years in the case of the Hill of the O'Neill and twenty years in the case of the George Cross RUC Garden.



The idea of the George Cross RUC Garden arose from the reorganisation of policing in Northern Ireland following the publication of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 and the Patten Report in 1999 which caused the RUC to be superseded by the PSNI. Prior to the official dissolution of the RUC in 2000, the Constabulary was awarded the George Cross for Bravery, the second of three times the medal had been awarded collectively (awarded in 1942 to the Island of Malta following the Siege of Malta, and subsequently in 2021 to the NHS following the coronavirus pandemic). The dissolution of the RUC was a controversial move at the time, and the creation of a memorial garden, along with a tranche of funding, was offered to reassure retired officers that their service would not be forgotten and nor would the sacrifices of their fallen comrades. In 1999 Peter won the competition for the design of the garden.<sup>3</sup>

***“All I was given was a non-specific brief, the most awkward site rife with security issues and only one point of access, and a fixed budget; I think it was three-quarters of a million. For what they wanted that was tight, to say the least. I was taken into a room with all the senior police constables, and they showed me a model; it had a picket fence, some plastic flowers, and two police officers – one male, one female – on a plinth. And they said ‘We’re thinking of this...’”***

Feeling that the complex and contentious history of the RUC deserved more than the traditional form of memorial, Peter undertook research into different kinds of memorials, citing the Vietnam Veteran’s Memorial in Washington DC, the Omaha Beach Memorial in Saint-Laurent-sur-Mer, France and Sir Geoffrey Jellicoe’s Kennedy Memorial in Surrey.

***“I had great fun looking at all these memorials and picking out elements. They were tending to go for more abstract, cerebral, and emotional responses. From that I started to produce concept drawings. The objective was to keep as much of the features of the existing site as possible and work with them. My concept was a journey.”***

I won’t go into too much detail on the layout of the garden – I would encourage you to delve into past editions of Perspective or, even better, book a visit there yourself – but there are three distinct phases within the garden; the slowly curved history trail which is all about sequential facts, a steeply sloped public garden providing a moment to catch your breath, and the deeply reflective memorial garden which is all about the emotion and the intangible. The materiality and colour palette throughout is subtle and evocative.

***“The concept started off with trees and hedges, it was this soft and vegetated landscape. The design didn’t change but throughout the design process and during construction I played around with materiality. It went very much more stainless steel, granite, and concrete; rigid mesh boxes and poured concrete to reflect the sangars. I kept changing it as I went along, I kept adding harder and more brutalist materials. The client was very tolerant. The colours were black, dark green and red; the leather boots, the uniform and the red insignia.”***

Once you get beyond the initial impression of the garden created by the material and colour palette, you notice the details; the cut curved paving, the subtle peaked cap motif on the benches, signage and even the bins; and the distinct deco style detailing, perhaps a reference to the decade of the founding of the RUC; and indeed, the Northern Irish state. Every inch has been thought through with every item bespoke, a true labour of love for its designer.<sup>4</sup>

***“When you’re doing a job like this, this is personal. I put my heart and soul into it and when it finished at the end of 2003, I was so involved I was actually bereft; I felt lost.”***

Our follow-up visit was to a project with an equally rich context, albeit for different reasons. The Hill of the O’Neill is the site of a

number of fortifications initially owned by the O’Neill dynasty, the high kings of Ireland in the 13th and 14th centuries, then by Sir Arthur Chichester following the Elizabethan conquest of Ireland and the flight of the earls, and most recently by the army up until 2007. The site is a scheduled ancient monument and has been subject to numerous archaeological digs, including coming to the attention of Tony Robinson and the Time Team crew following the withdrawal of the army.

Consarc won the RSUA design competition for the redevelopment of Ranfurly House and Castlehill (later rebranded as the Hill of the O’Neill), with Peter as the landscape architect for the now vacant former army barracks.<sup>5</sup> In a reference to one of our earlier conversations, Peter explained that the landscaping was, unfortunately, an ‘afterthought’ to the architectural commission. Despite this, Peter once again put his heart and soul into the scheme. Based again on a journey, the design plays with notions of enclosure and fortification and their opposition in openness and views.

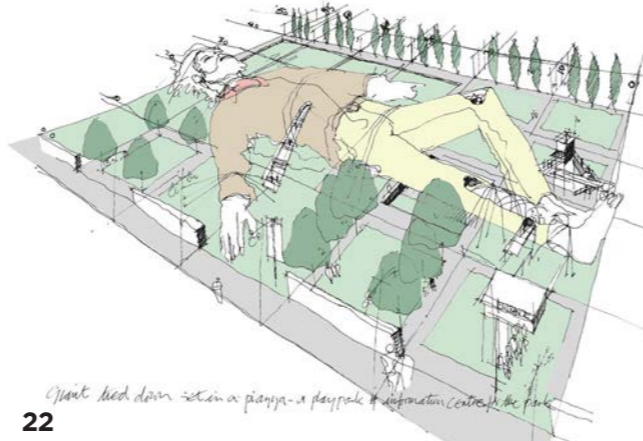
***“Unfortunately, it wasn’t a landscape commission, it was an architectural commission with a landscape element. It was an awkward site that had some of the army fortifications still there. Unfortunately, some of them were taken away. I kept as much of the army remains as I could, because I felt that was important, and people couldn’t understand it. We’re not***



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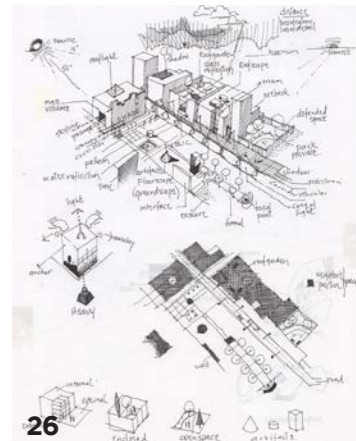
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**very good at keeping our recent past, washing away anything to do with the Troubles.”**

A slowly rising path deals deftly with the steep topography while referencing defensive ramparts, with bastions allowing visitors to step out and take advantage of sweeping views. The site rises to an elevated public square, sections of which are supported on the brutalist remains of army fortifications. Additionally, the iconic twin towers of the ruined Knox Hannyngton House forming a magnificent proscenium arch to what must be the most dramatic stage in the entire country. Beyond this, dramatically steep banks are formed into stepped terraces broken up by wildflower planting, with grand zig-zagging ramps – oversized versions of that from the RUC Garden – that are about both moving through the landscape and experiencing it.<sup>6</sup>

Returning to that moment in the coffee shop, Peter realises that the RUC Garden and the Hill of the O'Neill are two of his most recognisable and noteworthy projects, but they do not stand alone. They are deeply personal realisations dependent on his considerable experience. Looking at Peter's CV and portfolio of projects the number and range of projects are staggering. Commercial medical and industrial landscaping, housing, out-of-town shopping centres (despite Peter's aversion to them), industrial landscaping, civic plazas and pedestrian precincts, private gardens, motorway by-passes, burial grounds and – wherever possible – bespoke street furniture. We only briefly touched upon his work as an illustrator artist and product

designer, for which he has won numerous awards and been featured in a wide array of publications and exhibitions.

Throughout our conversations, Peter referred frequently to the idea of the fourth dimension of time and the 'space between.' His attitude towards his two iconic projects begins to outline these two concepts as an approach to a career. Not only does the landscape exist through time and space, but the same also applies to the designer; they are not static, and each experience enriches their thought process.

The iconic projects do not exist in isolation but within a topography of smaller projects; their contribution to the more noteworthy schemes as vital as they are so often unnoticed. ○

**Dr Andrew Molloy**

- 1 Elisabeth Beazley, *Design and Detail of the Space between Buildings*. The London Architectural Press, 1960.
- 2 Gordon Cullen, *The Concise Townscape*. Routledge, 1961.
- 3 Peter Hutchinson, 'RUC George Cross Foundation Garden' in *RSUA Perspective*, May / June 2002.
- 4 Andrew Haley, 'Turning a Concept Into Reality' in *RSUA Perspective*, November / December 2003.
- 5 Andrew Bunbury, 'Castlehill and Ranfurly House' in *RSUA Perspective*, July / August 2011.
- 6 Andrew Bunbury, 'Hill of the O'Neill: Castlehill' in *RSUA Perspective*, September / October 2013.

**Exhibition of 'Heart of the Matter' sketches from article in Perspective (January/February 2023). Displayed in Belfast City Hospital Tower Block (September and October 2023). Afterwards in Connswater Shopping centre then travelling to other city hospital units - Royal Victoria, Mater and Ulster Hospitals. Exhibition is free and funded by Arts Care - their objective is to provide quality arts engagement that supports health and wellbeing.**

**PROJECT MILESTONES, ILLUSTRATIONS AND SKETCHES**

- 1 Bow Street Pedestrian Precinct, Lisburn NI, 1981. Photo of model, birds eye view.
- 2 Bow Street Pedestrian Precinct, Lisburn NI, 1981. Bespoke square modular concrete planters.
- 3 Bow Street Lisburn Pedestrian Precinct, Lisburn NI, 1981. Street photo from Antrim Street.
- 4 Cedar Court elderly frail/dementia unit, Downpatrick NI, 2013. Bespoke pergola/planter/guardrail.
- 5 Pen & ink sketch of the Turning Torsos by Spanish architect Calatrava, Malmo, Sweden, 2003. Under Construction.
- 6 The Diamond, Enniskillen NI Civic Square/Precinct, 1993. Bespoke prefabricated bandstand.
- 7 Harbour Gateway, concept proposal, Larne NI, 2004. Aerial sketch view of scheme.
- 8 Northern Ireland Prisoners Officers Memorial Garden, East Belfast NI, 2006. Concept birds eye view.
- 9 Bomb Memorial Competition, Omagh NI, 2006. Internal sketches of Remembrance Garden.
- 10 Royal Mall concept design, London UK, 1999. Competition entry, multifunctional light units.
- 11 Waterside House, Oxford Island, Craigavon NI, 1979. Overall layout plan - pool/bespoke seating/planter.
- 12 QFT 50th Anniversary Poster, 2016. Kenneth Brannagh and Mayfair Cinema (series of 16).
- 13 Crescent Arts Centre, Bill Gates' life drawing class, 2011. A3 female nude sketch (brown pencil/cartridge paper).
- 14 Royal Ulster Constabulary George Cross Garden, East Belfast NI, 2001. Garden mood concept sketch.
- 15 Royal Ulster Constabulary George Cross Garden, East Belfast NI, 2003. Aerial photo overview on completion.
- 16 Royal Ulster Constabulary George Cross Garden, East Belfast NI, 2003. View up garden of peace.
- 16 M5 Foreshore Residential Complex, Newtownabbey NI, 2006. Overall concept aerial visual.
- 18 Lenadoon Peace Wall interface, West Belfast NI, 1987. Wall/railing, planting and arch entrance.
- 19 Pedestrian Precinct, Anne Street/Arthur Street/Corn Market, Belfast NI, 1972. Public order leaflet.
- 20 Hill of the O'Neill, Dungannon NI, 2013. Main entrance bespoke signage panel on galvanised steel frame.
- 21 Hill of the O'Neill, Dungannon NI, 2013. Bespoke giant's seat in faced stone, gabon and stainless steel bench.
- 22 Giant's park, Dargan Estate Fortwilliam NI, 2005. Sketch of Giant (Gulliver) - Lottery Fund competition.
- 23 Private residence garden, Malone, South Belfast NI, 1990. Detail of planting and sculpture.
- 24 Council offices competition, Navan/Meath Councils ROI, 2006. Birds-eye view offices and park.
- 25 Laneways Improvement Scheme, Enniskillen NI, 1997. Fabrication of modular bespoke metal arch.
- 26 School of Architecture teaching, QUB Belfast NI, 2000-07. Sheet from landscape module course.