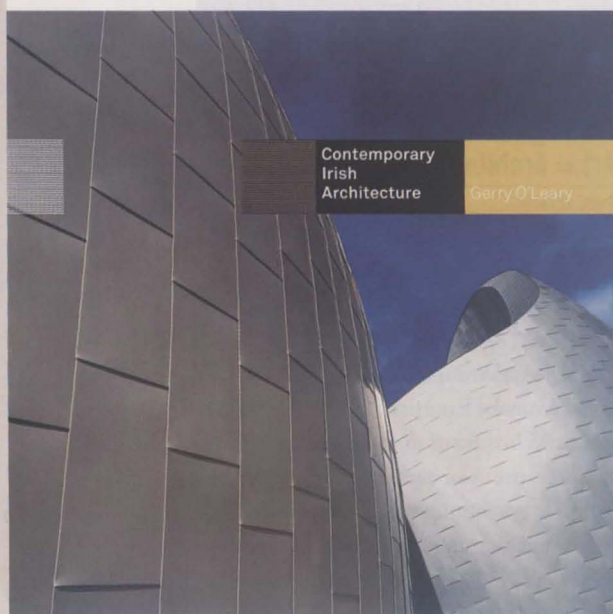


BOOKS



Contemporary Irish Architecture

Gerry O'Leary, Dublin, 2007

pp 256 ill. 345 col. h/b

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Anna Ryan

Contemporary Irish Architecture is a self-published book by photographer Gerry O'Leary with a foreword by Emma Cullinan. At first glance, it appears a straightforward photographic catalogue of various buildings constructed in our country over the past fifteen years. Upon closer study, however, different readings appear. For this reviewer, the title of the book then becomes ambiguous, possibly even misleading, and in many ways conceals the positive contribution this book makes to a consideration of the cultures of contemporary Ireland.

The book gathers a selection of 124 projects that O'Leary has been commissioned to photograph. Each project is given a two-page spread, comprising one full-page photograph, along with two or three smaller photographs and a short description of the project by the architect. As O'Leary writes, his selection process for these photographs is "governed by arresting imagery". Though, to this reader,

the projects presented are of varying architectural merit, what the book in its entirety communicates is O'Leary's careful visual sensibilities and enjoyment of his passion. It is surely this aspect that earned it the top book award at the 2008 Orvieto Fotografia Awards.

The most successful and architectural photographs of this book are, to my mind, those that become almost separate from the 'concrete-ness' of the subject (the building), dematerialising it into studies of colour, composition, abstraction and spatial enclosure. To give one example, I am, to use O'Leary's term, visually "arrested" by the photographs of the OPW's State Laboratories in Celbridge that seem to intentionally divest the built project of its three-dimensional presence, highlighting the building's relationship with the ground in order to transform the photographs into still dramas that echo elevational drawings; similarly I enjoyed the many striking stair-detail photographs that emphasise experiences of flow, materiality, and connectivity.

But to consider this book purely at its face value, as a compilation of visually appealing photography, is perhaps limiting its scope. It has more to offer. Given that much of the work photographed here falls into a commercial category of building development, the book reveals much about contemporary life in Ireland. Through the clarity of the visual image, it presents the kinds of environs in which we, the Irish people, enjoy passing our leisure time today – from hairdressing salons to hotels, shopping centres to surround-sound cinemas. The vulnerability of architecture is suggested: the manifold spatial and material potentials of architecture somewhat controlled by motivations of branding and marketing.

I thus believe that this book will interest more than the intended photographic audience. It is a social document. By gathering and recognising what we have built

for ourselves (our monuments to our selves) during an intense period of favourable economics, O'Leary's book stands as a vividly-visual record of the recent dramatic increase in Irish consumer-culture, a record of the transformation of our Irish life and psyche. This, perhaps, is an unintentional or alternative reading of the book, yet, for me, it is what marks O'Leary's publication as a useful contribution towards deepening our understanding of the drivers of contemporary Irish society.

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Irish Walled Towns

John Givens

The Liffey Press, Dublin, 2007

pp 280 ill. 245 col. & b/w h/b

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Michael Potterton

For hundreds of years, vast sums of money were invested in the construction and maintenance of the walls that enclosed many of Ireland's towns. As the apparent need for these defences gradually disappeared, however, money was no longer spent on them and they faded from public consciousness. In some places they were dismantled as a source of building stone, but elsewhere time and the elements were left to take their toll. Neglect and vandalism are two of the most formidable enemies of cultural, archaeological and architectural heritage, but in recent times they found an unwitting ally in the form of the local developer. New buildings were erected close to town walls without any regard for their scale or context; below-ground remains were wiped away without any archaeological supervision; and in some instances complete sections of walls were entirely demolished. Much of this was due to a lack of awareness.