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Cover Image: Manuel Aires Mateus - House in Barradinha, Alvalade, Portugal.
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This issue of building material is concerned with the perception (or position) of architecture in (contemporary) Irish society.

As architects, our understandings are always changing. We never stop learning architecture. Learning how to make architecture. Learning how to be architects. Learning about architecture.

As architects, we use the medium of architecture to come to new understandings about our surroundings. The "general public" is, likewise, involved in this process of learning, of developing new understandings. This issue of building material is concerned with this subject - the perception (or position) of architecture in (contemporary) Irish society.

It is often felt that an interface is needed between "architecture" and the "general public", that a translation of language and of methods of communication is necessary. A middle ground, a commonality, is sought. These interfaces are often highly successful and generate much-needed and very worthwhile positive energy. But this meeting of architecture and the public need not always be translated or mediated by others; neither need it always begin with the domestic sphere.

This was demonstrated by the recent exhibition for the Carlisle Pier development in Dun Laoghaire. Aside from a discussion here on the various merits of the four short-listed schemes, for me, the most outstanding and exciting part of the exhibition was the reactions of the visitors comprising, for the most part, this "general public."
The proposals were communicated through plan, section, elevation, model. No translation. No mediation. No problem. I found myself watching groups of people moving forward and back among the proposals, really working hard to fully understand each scheme and making relative comparisons. I found myself listening in on conversations about form, about scale, about movement. About relationships of the proposals to the walker, to the town, to the harbour, to the bay. Conversation was serious. Architecture was serious. And these people were at the core of the issues. The opportunity (the challenge?) for real public engagement was presented, and was enthusiastically seized. As a result of such happenings, understanding continues to grow.

In 1948 Jorn Utzon wrote about this growing, this journey towards a real understanding of architecture. In short, he believed that "by being in contact with our surroundings, we find our way into architecture's innermost being." As a nation, we do have a particular (and perhaps peculiar) approach to land, and hence to our built environment. A number of the pieces gathered for this issue of building material attempt to understand the Irish approach to the physicality of our surroundings. Though perhaps at different stages of Utzon's journey towards a deeper understanding of architecture, the Irish public and Irish architects are not exclusive entities. We are learning together.