

Phoenix Rising

Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane
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What is Phoenix Rising?

Phoenix Rising is an exhibition that will reflect on urban experience and civic ideals through contemporary art. It references Dublin's 1914 Civic Exhibition which was inspired by the work of Scottish biologist, sociologist and planner Patrick Geddes and which attempted to re-imagine Dublin as "the phoenix of cities" during a period of economic, social and political strife. The 1914 Civic Exhibition was held in the former Linen Hall and featured diverse exhibits and entertainments and a related summer school. This exhibition in 2014 will present contemporary artists' responses to the urban environment using different strategies to understand and represent the city.

Phoenix Rising takes place following another time of economic crisis and reflects a recent re-emergence of the term 'civic' in public debate. A related programme of film screenings, workshops, talks and discussions will further explore themes such as: historical and contem-

porary conceptions of the civic, the legacy of Geddes in Dublin, the role of art in public life, the civic role of art institutions, future and imagined cities, housing and urban ecology.

This newsletter will present research generated in the lead-up to and during the exhibition. It will feature diverse contributions including material generated in workshops and other events at the gallery and interviews with artists involved such as Stephen Brandes, Mark Clare, Cliona Harmey, Stéphanie Nava, Vagabond Reviews and Mary-Ruth Walsh. Printed copies will be available in the exhibition space and it will have an online presence at civicimagination.wordpress.com or the exhibition pages on the gallery website www.hughlane.ie. This first issue provides a background to the Civic Exhibition and the work of Geddes in Dublin.

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What was the Civic Exhibition?

Logan Sisley, Exhibitions Curator

July 2014 marked the centenary of the opening of The Civic Exhibition, which was held in Dublin's former Linen Hall and in the grounds of the King's Inns from 15 July to 31 August 1914. Described by the *Irish Times* prior to its opening as "one of the most important enterprises in modern Irish history" it was a significant undertaking with ambitious goals, but was overshadowed by other events.

The Exhibition developed out of the showing in Dublin of Patrick Geddes's Cities and Town Planning Exhibition. This had been presented within the Uí Breasail Health and Industrial Exhibition, organised by the Women's National Health Association of Ireland, at the Royal Dublin Society in 1911. Geddes organised his Cities exhibition around the principle of an Index Museum - an *encyclopaedia graphica* - in which knowledge of the world was structured using objects, images and diagrams rather than text. Geddes's exhibition in Dublin and later in Belfast acted as a catalyst for the development of the town planning movement in Ireland. At a public meeting of the Housing and Town Planning Association (formed in 1911) The Vicereine Lady Aberdeen described the object of the movement as "to improve towns, so that their inhabitants might be able to live and work and play under conditions which make for mental, moral and spiritual development." The Women's National Health Association also remained active in the field.

The Civics Institute was formed in Ireland in March 1914. As the principal organiser of the Civic Exhibition it organised a series of lectures in the lead-up to the event. These included the American planner John Nolen on "The Civic Awakening", and Gordon Selfridge from the London department store on "The Romance of Commerce". The English garden cities proponent Raymond Unwin gave a lecture on planning and housing, and argued that "The idea of a city as a unit of life and culture was emerging after a period of unconsciousness, during which the civic unit had been obscured by the nation and national politics."



The years leading up to 1914 were pivotal in the course of Irish and European history, with the rise of the labour and women's suffrage movements and the ongoing debate over Ireland's relationship to the United Kingdom. The Third Home Rule Bill was finally given royal assent in September 1914, shortly after the close of the Civic Exhibition, by which time Europe was at war. In Dublin there was further social division during the Strike and Lockout of 1913-14. In September 1913 tene-



ment houses in Church Street collapsed killing seven people, heightening tension in the city and highlighting the urgency of the housing problem in Dublin. John Nolen, special advisor to the Civic Exhibition, linked the 1913 Lock-out to the development of the town planning movement in Ireland. The *Cambridge Tribune* reported his view that: "After Larkin had stirred things up, even the most complacent were shocked and willing to admit that things could not go on as they were... It was realized that Dublin must move as a community. It was

also realized that it must move on a premise of enlightened public opinion... Hence the exhibition as a practical educator; hence the city plan as a long look ahead."

In this context preparations proceeded for the Civic Exhibition. The chair of the Executive Committee was Lady Aberdeen, and the architect George O'Connor was director. Patrick Geddes was responsible for the Town Planning displays. O'Connor oversaw the refurbishment of the former Linen Hall, off King Street in the north inner city, for the exhibition. The Linen Hall first opened for trade in November 1728 but the Dublin industry went into decline following the opening of the Belfast Linen Hall. During the 1870s the Linen Hall was used as a temporary barracks by the British Army and was taken over by the Board of Works in 1878. It was hoped that the site would become a permanent centre of urban study and exhibition along the lines of Geddes's Outlook Tower in Edinburgh. However at the close of the Exhibition the Linen Hall was requisitioned by the War Department and it was destroyed by fire during the 1916 Rising.

This adaptation of an existing building contrasts with the large scale temporary constructions of the great international exhibitions of the 19th and 20th century, and such as those built for Dublin's Herbert Park exhibition of 1907. The refurbishment of the former Linen Hall was consistent with Geddes's idea of 'conservative surgery', in which he advocated the retention and repair of existing structures in tandem with new construction. In line with this approach he advocated survey before plan or diagnosis before treatment. Geddes's background in the natural sciences is evident in his use of analogies with the body and there is a frequent use of medical terminology to refer to the ailing city at this time. The *Freeman's Journal* reported quoted John Nolen: "Her Excellency said that this poor old city of Dublin had been in the hands of a great many physicians of late. A great many consultants had been called in, and prescriptions of various kinds were given..." He cautioned that "the civic patient was apt to be obstreperous, and not inclined to take the medicine prescribed."



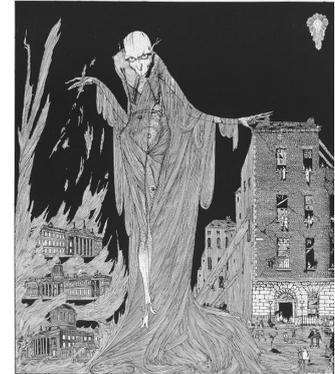
A poster competition was held, which was won by Lilian Davidson. Her design (left) featured a town crier in a cobbled street surmounted by a phoenix rising from flames. The Civics Institute logo also featured the phoenix with the word ‘Resurgam’ – Latin for I shall rise again, and an advertisement for

the Dublin Woollen Mills in the exhibition catalogue called Dublin “the Phoenix of Cities”. The catalogue stressed that the chief aim was “to increase amongst all classes the sense of civic responsibility, and to unite them in a fixed resolution to wipe out the shame of our towns and cities by making them towns and cities of homes, not of tenements.”

The exhibition itself comprised school garden displays, municipal and commercial exhibits, child welfare displays, butter making competitions, dance competitions, arts and crafts displays, archaeological and historical exhibitions, a cinema, concert hall and an American soda fountain. The founder of this gallery, Hugh Lane, decorated a room adjacent to the child welfare display which he called *Futurism in Dublin*. It contained a sculpture of a mother and child and was painted in scarlet, yellow and brown and was intended to “suggest a spirited idea of Perfect Health”. A Summer School was held under the Directorship of Patrick Geddes with topics ranging from Civic and Regional Surveys and their methods and applications to ideal cities, botany, citizenship and economics. The programme was adapted to include sessions addressing food supply during wartime.

The national and international political situation did work against the organisers in realising their ambition and the onset of war resulted in a decline in attendance. Nevertheless over 110,000 visited the exhibition by the end of August. One of the exhibition’s more tangible legacies was a related competition for the best new city plan for Dublin, for which Lord Aberdeen offered a £500 prize. Due to

the outbreak of war the adjudicators, Geddes, Nolen and Dublin City Architect C.J. McCarthy were unable to meet so a winner was not announced until 1916. Patrick Abercrombie and Sydney and Arthur Kelly from Liverpool took first prize. The winning scheme, often known as the Abercrombie Plan, was not published until 1922. As its frontispiece it featured *The Last Hour of the Night* by Harry Clarke (right). The work shows a menacing figure in a war-damaged Dublin with many landmark buildings in flames. This contrasts with the earlier images of Dublin as a phoenix arising from the flames.



While many in Ireland did embrace Geddes’s ideas, his dictum of theory before plan and his talk of material, cultural and spiritual renewal may not have been sufficiently pragmatic for some given the scale of Dublin’s housing problems. His message of civic unity also became untenable in an increasingly polarised political environment. Criticisms have been made that the Civic Exhibition lacked focus – in part due to the different agendas among the organisers – and there is also a degree of paternalism evident. Despite the contradictions, the 1914 exhibition does provide a useful framework through which to look at the city today and to reconsider what the term civic might mean in 2014.



**Phoenix Rising:
Art and Civic Imagination**

**Éirigh an Fhéinics: Ealaín
agus Samhlaíocht Cathartha**

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**Baile Átha Cliath
Dublin City**

Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane
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www.hughlane.ie