



New enlightenment for Charlemont House

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The urban *palazzo* or aristocratic town house is the kernel of many a European art museum. With connotations of hierarchy and formality, these focal points in the scenography of the city must typically mutate, be extended and revamped if the institutions they shelter are to grow, adapt to new art practices and service the public in contemporary ways.

Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane occupies the splendid town house designed by Sir William Chambers for the Earl of Charlemont in the mid-eighteenth century. It commands the north-west side of what is now Parnell Square with its tall, five-bay central block bracketed by curving screen walls. It is also on a slight rise such that the front façade presides as an elegant mask, on view to citizens and passers-by. Conversely, upper rooms offer a surprising prospect of the city's monuments and rooftops (fig. 1).

Facing the Garden of Remembrance, a memorial to those who died for Irish freedom, Charlemont House captures sunlight and warmth. Embraced by the screen walls, the forecourt is a small stone oasis. From this genial void in the city visitors enter into a hall with fine mantelpieces to left and right. Until recently they then either ascended, via a staircase with an elegant bowed landing, to four well-proportioned rooms on the *piano nobile* or proceeded through half a dozen top-lit galleries built in the 1930s and organized symmetrically on an axis with the front door of the mansion.

Today visitors can explore further to the rear of these enfilade galleries. A new set of spaces directs attention to an extraordinary artefact caught, not unlike a ship in a bottle, in these far reaches of the museum. This is the London studio of the painter Francis Bacon, meticulously conserved and relocated to the city of his birth. Visitors encircle this unusual shrine to art before accessing the former library pavilion of the eighteenth-century house (now containing several unfinished Bacon canvases) and returning to the orthogonal layout of the museum.

North-east of Charlemont House a second intervention occupies the long lots behind two neighbouring town houses on Parnell Square; until recently these yards contained a popular dance hall. At ground level the new spaces are reached from both the eighteenth-century hallway and the enfilade galleries behind; upstairs a bridge-like connection links at a diagonal back to the *piano nobile* of the mansion. Visitors immediately feel the presence of light: natural light illuminating clean, unfussy spaces hospitable to contemporary art works. This is a functionalist and abstract architecture that nevertheless retains the domestic scale of the original house.

These are the recent additions to an institution associated in the minds of Dubliners with the magnificent bequest of Sir Hugh Lane. As well as strictly architectural concerns, the enlarged museum also pays homage to three great artists born in Dublin: Bacon, to the rear; Harry Clarke, in a crepuscular and chapel-like room off the original entrance hall; and now Sean Scully,

View over Parnell Square from
Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane



in a dedicated space that provides a special finale to the new galleries. Although difficult to ascertain in this era of 'starchitects' and 'iconic buildings', the art museum should, of course, be primarily about art.

To host the Bacon bequest – the studio itself plus today's necessary interpretative material, the London practice David Chipperfield Architects reworked what had previously been, in essence, residual space to the rear of the existing, axial galleries. This entailed some feats of discreet planning as the available space is sliced on its outer boundary by Bethesda Place, a sharply angled service lane. Visitors first enter a cubic, internalized room with audio-visual presentations (the famous *South Bank Show* interview with Melvyn Bragg) and a generous bench.

They glimpse Bacon's studio in the room beyond and proceed to circumnavigate this spatial relic, peering into its messy interior through several window openings (fig. 2). It's a set piece: the house within a house, the old discovered within the new. The contents include a large circular mirror, a memento perhaps of Bacon's early experiments in interior design. Perimeter

Fig. 1
View over Parnell Square from
Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane

Fig. 2
Francis Bacon's Studio,
Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane

Fig. 3
Sean Scully gallery, Dublin City
Gallery The Hugh Lane

floor levels adjust slightly. As with other Chipperfield interiors, a Minimalist ethos is effected by the careful selection of materials (polished black stone) and unobtrusive detailing (the architect started his career with an exquisite boutique for Issey Miyake on London's Sloane Street and has gone on to build museums in Britain, Germany and the USA).

Visitors now turn south-east into a narrow striation of space between the older galleries and a second lane, North Frederick Lane, which cranks about to meet Bethesda Place in the northern extremity of the site. Disconnected from the outside world, visitors follow this new enfilade into the library of Charlemont House, formerly a discrete pavilion in the grounds yet now also 'a house within a house'. They exit this small gallery, dedicated to Bacon's last canvas and several other unfinished works, to proceed into a long chamber that allows release, right, into the pre-intervention galleries and, left, into the light-filled addition recently completed by Gilroy McMahon Architects.

Des McMahon directs one of Dublin's best-known architectural firms, responsible for the dramatic and highly successful redevelopment of Croke Park, the glamorous Styne House office building on Hatch Street, social housing on North Frederick Lane (check by jowl with the gallery) and the conversion of two wings of the military and stern Collins Barracks into new premises for the National Museum of Ireland. The work of the practice is unmistakably Modernist, yet it is not strident or dogmatic. It seems, in particular, to be inspired by the social democratic Modernism of Scandinavia.

Contrary to that ethos, current museum architecture is sometimes subsumed by PR and fashion. Museums have always been associated with image and prestige (hence, in part, the patronage of kings and prelates). Since the extraordinary success of the Frank Gehry-designed Bilbao Guggenheim – a swirling, sculptural building credited with reversing the economic decline of its Basque host city – many museums, and the cities and boards that fund such institutions, have banked their futures on dramatic 'signature' structures by such architects as Gehry, Zaha Hadid, Santiago Calatrava and Daniel Libeskind.

In Berlin, Libeskind's Jewish Museum skews and zigzags away from what was once a Prussian Baroque courthouse; its exterior is a complex metal shard, its interior a sublime if unsettling canyon of concrete and shadows. The same architect's extension to the Denver Art Museum pulls away from an original building by Gio Ponti (1971) with similarly dramatic geometries. However, unlike Berlin, where the architecture is a memorial to that city's eradicated Jewish population, the Denver building must accommodate both the museum's collection and temporary exhibitions.

The specificity of the *palazzo* or of the grander town house allows for a particular experience of art, an almost domestic experience. Curiously, perhaps, the New York Museum of Modern

Art (MoMA) offered this intimate scale up until its reconfiguration in the early 1980s and major redevelopment after 2002. This intimacy between the viewer and the work of art should be maintained if at all possible, and is especially pertinent with art works – including many Impressionist and Post-Impressionist paintings – intended to be viewed in salon settings or in the ease of private homes.

Concerned with scale and context, certain seminal redesigns are strictly internal, almost invisible to the external world. In the mid-twentieth century Venice's Querini Stampalia was the site of discreet yet brilliant interventions by the master designer Carlo Scarpa. Later, in Paris's Marais district, Roland Simounet uncluttered the Hôtel Salé to address the modern needs of the Musée Picasso. And in London, Norman Foster glazed over a peripheral yard at the Royal Academy, inserting a high-tech elevator to whisk visitors to new rooftop galleries.

The work of Gilroy McMahan Architects operates between these extrovert and introvert extremes. Dublin City Gallery is kin to other museums that have been extended using today's aesthetics yet take clues from their host institutions, projects such as Frankfurt's Museum of Applied Arts (where Richard Meier added a trio of new structures, each replicating the mass of a pre-existing, bourgeois villa), Manchester City Gallery (where Michael Hopkins added two new blocks in scale with the bravura, early Victorian Athenaeum and Gallery) and Copenhagen's Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek (where Henning Larsen snugly inserted a temple-like pavilion into a Neoclassical courtyard).

Des McMahan's sensibility shares much with recent Nordic architecture. Priority is given to natural light – precious northern daylight – so desirable for the appreciation of art. There's a respect for the inherent qualities of materials: in the case of Dublin City Gallery oak, render, steel, glass. There's a pragmatic approach to dealing with old buildings – no pastiche, yet an alertness to scale and volume and the narrative of place. And there's concern for neither pomp nor abstract theory but for the way a building is experienced by the public, the way spaces are revealed one after another, and the paramount importance of art works in direct communication with the viewer.

Upon entering Dublin City Gallery, the visitor now proceeds straight ahead or ascends upstairs, as before, or turns – the new and third option – to pierce the flank of the house into the twenty-first-century wing. This aperture, on axis with the grand staircase (almost a quarter of a millennium old), leads initially into a foyer with one set of stairs descending into a light-well and a second climbing to a glass screen that faces Parnell Square. Both ends of this intermediate foyer are skinned in glass. From outside it is visible, rising behind the curving screen wall, a delicate insertion between the eighteenth-century façades and recessed relative to Charlemont House.

McMahan's conceptual sketches focus on circulation. He saw the possibility to create a loop from the axial *démarche* down the centre of the pre-existing galleries round through the new building and back, via the new glazed foyer, into the eighteenth-century hallway (where an information desk acts as a kind of hub). Vertically, the stairs and lift in the new foyer provide access to a rather splendid mirrored café in the basement of the extension, to galleries on the first floor, similar in layout to those at ground level, and to an education room on the roof that links via an almost secretive door back into the top of the old house, where gallery personnel have their private workspaces.

Strangely the two houses whose rear lots the extension occupies were not part of the architect's remit. Thus sensitive interventions, *à la* Scarpa or Simounet, into old and characterful buildings were not central to the architect's brief. The new building is independent except for an aperture in the pre-existing gallery wall (close to the library pavilion now used to house the Bacon paintings) and the bridge-like link, via the interstitial foyer, into the hall of Charlemont House.

Why 'bridge-like'? The interstitial foyer is filled with light, admitted from east and west, and from small windows into a courtyard to the rear of the row of houses; its floor plates are also eaten into by small voids to accommodate both staircases. The new orthogonal galleries are linked to the foyer by a splayed element that faces the Georgian rear elevations. It's a hinge piece, with a large window at basement level allowing visual connection between café and garden, a thin

void in the ceiling above opening up to a generous bookshop at ground level, a skylight in the upper gallery and another picture window in the rooftop education room.

McMahan has split the extension down its centre and placed an open staircase of white-painted steel, oak threads and glass balustrades into this canyon – it is washed in daylight from the glazed roof and end-windows that face the courtyard and houses. There are three galleries, at both ground- and first-floor levels, along the long boundary wall to the north-east. There is one gallery on each level next to the pre-existing galleries (the lower with a doorway for circulation according to McMahan's diagram, the upper doubling as a lecture room). And then there is the unique, high-ceilinged gallery dedicated to the paintings of Sean Scully.

Scully's canvases often consist of chequerboard rectangles, striped vertically and horizontally, and built up through the application of many layers of vividly pigmented paint. They're constructions and, Scully himself has pointed out, in a lecture at the Hugh Lane in 1994, 'a connection of course with architecture'. How best, then, to house the artist's generous gift of seven works to the city and the Gallery?

Des McMahan travelled to New York to observe Scully in his studio. The resultant gallery dedicated to this subtly geometric art (fig. 3) is on the ground floor of the extension and accessed, simply, through a vertical void by its north-east corner. No fancy jambs or lintels to distract the eye. The floor and one elongated bench are oak. The walls, as elsewhere, are white, on occasion hovering above the floor to accommodate services. Overhead, the ceiling, also white, is cut into by a three-sided linear void that is parallel to, but does not touch, three of the four walls. Inside this trough a skylight filters the admission of natural light. Together, artist and architect determined not to punch an opening from the upper floor to overlook this serene space – their priority is the viewer's direct experience of the art.

Daylight is admitted throughout the new structure. If light in the Bacon studio and its attendant galleries is, for archaeological reasons and audio-visual needs, necessarily artificial and highly controlled, light is welcomed into the galleries designed by McMahan and his team. There is a second skylight, running the length of the longest room upstairs. The staircase itself is an airy, glazed chamber. And the small courtyard, harbouring plants, water and sandstone, serves to refresh (a favourite McMahan word) the senses further as visitors navigate their way through the institution.

Setting up a loop of circulation throughout the extended museum, McMahan's extension has itself an inner loop about the glazed internal staircase. Among the pleasures of using the new galleries are the glimpses set up through the various openings (doorways without doors) leading from one space to the next. These openings are often asymmetrical vis-à-vis each other so that the visitor sees something of what is ahead, but not everything is immediately revealed. It's an understated kind of tease.

This sense of gradual revelation is also at play with various glimpses out: into the small courtyard, patches of sky and a strip of city centre (Liberty Hall, Rotunda Hospital, Millennium Spire) that may, in part, register how Parnell Square is not only on a rise but at an angle to O'Connell Street. Out there are the people the museum is intended to serve, and out there new art is being created that will, one day, find its way into the galleries of Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane. Used also as a vertical vitrine for information, the glazed insertion is the one twenty-first-century note visible to the passer-by. Thus Charlemont House signals its evolving role in the fabric of the city.