




2009-09-01

Loosening the Ties that Bind: Grangegorman Masterplan

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Recommended Citation

Brady, N.:Loosening the Ties that Bind:Grangegorman Masterplan. *Architecture Ireland* No.248, Sep-Oct 2009,pp.26-28.

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School of Architecture

Articles

Dublin Institute of Technology

Year 2009

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Grangegorman Masterplan

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Loosening The Ties That Bind

The Grangegorman Masterplan in Dublin

James Mary O'Connor, Principal, Moore Ruble Yudell in Interview with Noel J. Brady



"You could say that it is the difference between the head and the heart. We believe that the academic idea and the experience of place both need to be addressed in the work"
James Mary O'Connor

Colin St John Wilson extols the much underrated silent twin of modernism, in "The Other Tradition of Modern Architecture: *The Uncompleted Project*" identifying an alternative to the decorated shed of Gropius and Harvard GSD's version of modernism. Charles Moore along with William Turnbull and Don Lyndon established one of the more influential firms adopted a similar alternative view on the west coast of the US. James Mary O'Connor outlines the next stage in the evolution of Charles Moore's vision for a more holistic view of architecture and the development in its own right of Moore Ruble Yudell. The firm uses the term "*Evolving the Humanist Tradition*" to define this approach. I began the interview questioning the meaning of this term.

JMOC Early modernists like Alvar Aalto were very interested in the human aspect of Architecture. We at MRY are looking to give contemporary expression to such concerns. When you look at architectural magazines or on the internet, there appears to be a fascination with what buildings look like. However, there are many architects working today who are pursuing expression in the look of the building and in the way it is experienced. Take for example Alvaro Siza. The plan is often very subtle. When you visit

the building, you realize that it has been turned to acknowledge a view or some other human condition. The building is not simply an object or a machine. We are striving to explore and connect with our users and to create places which nurture community by addressing issues of spatial memory, of how we now live and work and where we want to go.

NJB In spite of the plethora of media promoting architecture, it seems resistant to that broader view, relying on what is easily parsed and easily digested.

JMOC That's right, it is easily sold. There is a fascination today about looking at something. It is not about what it is feels like to be in the place. It is often a formal response to the object. The CCTV building 2002 (OMA/Rem Koolhaas) in Beijing was envisaged as an office building which explored new ways of people working together but in truth it appears to be not very open at all. Robert Venturi still produces buildings and is as interesting to me as when he wrote 'Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture'² yet he is rarely in the media. Architects such as Rem Koolhaas or Daniel Libeskind appear to be our cultural show today.

NJB Are MRY more comfortable with masterplans. Early projects such as Kresge College³, appear to be about more about path and place than mere building.

JMOC It is a narrative, a journey which offers a rich, social experience that helps

build community. We have been very successful at connecting to the project to the place. Take for example our Chun Sen Bi An masterplan project in Chongqing, a mountain city in western China. What has been happening there is that developers have been allowed to scrape the site, dynamite the hills and even the mountains, erasing all traces of human experience and memory. We offered a different path of development to the city - preservation. We discovered an old trail which we envisaged as an ancient path, preserved the existing rock outcrops and gave voice to the memories while creating new communities. The City planners really embraced our approach and this project has become very well known in China. In a loose manner, it echoes our Bo-01 Malmö 1996-2001, Sweden project.

NJB There is a looseness about this which is untypical of many architectural projects. That looseness is evident in the Grangegorman project, a desire not to have one centre but many centres. There is some idea here that the path unites all things.

JMOC I love that sequence at Trinity College when you walk through the gate, even though it is narrow, and there is a path which opens up to a series of quadrangles. People come and pass through these spaces sometimes as a shortcut through the city and other times to experience the place itself. Coming from Phibsboro myself, I always thought the Grangegorman site was a missing link in the urban fabric of the northside of the city.



Growing up there, I have the advantage of a very thorough knowledge of all the streets, alleys and adjacencies travelling from home to DIT - Bolton Street, cutting through The Kings' Inns and Henrietta St.

There are several traditions in campus building. One creates a place that sets itself apart, the University of Virginia for example, where from the lawn you see the Blue Ridge Mountains. When you go there, you experience a connection with nature, a kind of idealised environment. In our Grangegorman Masterplan you can see the Dublin city skyline, including the mountains, from the main library complex windows. Another campus design tradition, such as TCD, forms a series of squares. I would say that the Grangegorman masterplan is a hybrid. It combines a spine, pavilions, multiple centres and the Chinese tradition of the borrowed view.

NJB Spending time with the client getting to know the context appears core to the design process.

JMOC Yes, time spent listening to the client is critical to the process. Ideas come from many sources. Some are discarded once we better understand the context. A strong idea can inform the design but we try to work in an open-minded approach while getting to know the context.

NJB Victor Papanek in "Design for the real world"⁴ spoke about how ideas are cheap

(plentiful) and that it matters more what you do with them. Perhaps as a consequence the character of the projects appears quite varied; the work of many hands. This supports your description of the firm as a family.

JMOC Yes, there are diverse projects coming from our office from the Santa Monica Civic Centre Parking Structure, to the US Courthouse in Fresno to the Horace Mann Elementary School in San Jose. I don't think that we are about some perfect ideology. Our experimentation and openness to change has seen quite an evolution since the work when Charles (Moore) was involved to where we are now.

The work at the University of Virginia and the Peg Yorkin House are different both in their settings and in the nature of the brief. The University of Virginia is a campus with a very historical core, the lawn area was laid out by Thomas Jefferson. Our project extends the Jeffersonian plan in a re-interpretive approach.

Peg Yorkin's house is a contemporary home for a film director and his family. It is flanked by the Pacific ocean to the west and the Pacific Coast Highway to the east. The Yorkin house is on the one side a wall to the highway and on the other it presents a flow of courtyards and rooms that open to the ocean in a relaxed way.

Often in architecture today, a lot of expression is focused on the exterior facade as if to say "I'm looking at you". The potential for

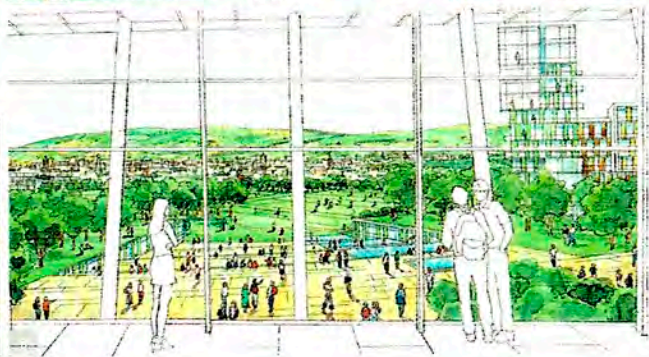
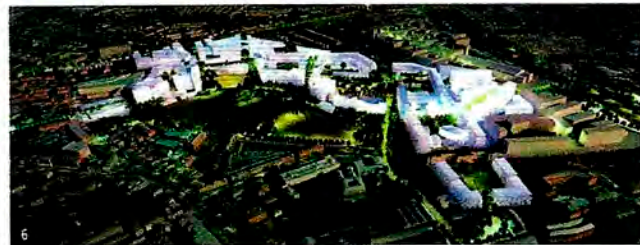
discovery beyond the facade is often missed. Frank Gehry's Walt Disney Concert Hall 2003 in Los Angeles is an example that offers both. It is revolutionary on the outside in its form and materials. Inside is exhilarating and feels like a musical instrument. The ten years it took to design and to develop ideas was an extremely important part of the process.

NJB Did William Mc Donagh's influence at the University of Virginia have any major impact on the work?

JMOC Yes, William Mc Donagh's message of environmental consciousness and sustainability in the built environment impacts our work not only at the University of Virginia but also elsewhere. We are seeking LEEDs high-level rating for this project. Elsewhere, our Santa Monica Civic Centre Parking structure is the first environmentally friendly parking structure in the United States. It is a transportation hub, generates its own electricity, recycles site water and will soon be connected to the new light rail system.

NJB Does it work best when you and the client share the same values?

JMOC Sure. You can have one person on the team who disagrees with you but it cannot be the client. Most of our clients come to us through some connection to our work. In Dublin we have a very good client. The GDA, led by Gerry Murphy's, really believe in the project. Everyone from DIT has participated and embraced the challenge of transforming



the site into a world class campus. It is about education and place making rather than commercial development. John Mitchell from our Dublin partners DMOD has ensured open dialogue and communication between all parties. This has made for a very productive experience.

NJB There are other stakeholders besides DIT.

JMOC The 'Celtic Tiger' boom did not greatly change this area of the north side of Dublin. Here we have an opportunity to reconnect parts of the city to a generous landscape. There has been a series of community workshops throughout the design process. We have taken many ideas from these meetings to better inform the project design, to better serve the surrounding communities - like the DCC community library, the HSE primary care facilities, access to community facilities and shared use of sports' fields. The masterplan maximizes open space for the site and allows for the notion that the university can have many uses. It serves students and locals alike. Like a city, it offers variety and diversity. Local kids growing up will have opportunities to see and maybe engage and be influenced by students - science, applied science, business, engineers...when they walk along "St. Brendan's Way". The campus experience will unfold the whole range of educational opportunity at their feet. The visibility of apprentices working at learning their craft will open up new possibilities for the community both local and citywide.

NJB How did you go about setting the template while maintaining the cohesion?

JMOC I think the looser framework of the open hand at conceptual design phase was an important template in our approach. We valued creating a number of centres which we thought could engage the other buildings. We wanted to leave breathing space around the buildings to create spaces for social engagements - a sort of learning landscape. The Irish climate calls for narrower buildings to ensure interior daylight. The landscape fingers between the buildings lead to the palm of the site - the playing fields. The open hand is a symbol of the goals of education and the invitation to the greater community to use the site and its facilities. Check out Steve Jobs commencement speech at Stanford University a few years back - it is very inspiring. The crossover of ideas and fields of knowledge is exciting. Grangegorman's student body will be diverse. We believe the experience afforded by the masterplan will be open and will result in a collective education.

DIT - Bolton street where I studied Architecture lacked a campus and I did not understand this until I went to UCLA. You were on a campus that you went to and you heard music playing, or heard about an interesting history lecture or jazz, and it was about the whole experience and not the narrow band of what you were doing.

NJB Will the looseness that permeates the masterplan allow this to happen?

JMOC Yes. Permeable space and access brings on creative opportunities in work and learning. The future is the overlap. At Grangegorman there will be amazing opportunities for well designed buildings at many scales. I hope the firms entrusted with the work will spend time and help build a beautiful and lasting campus for the city of Dublin.

NJB With plans expanding in China and in the US the firm appears to be evolving with another generation?

JMOC We are only in the early stages of engaging with environmental architecture for the 21st century. The next ten years will be very interesting - there's a lot to be done to bring the new technology and awareness to architecture. Recent architectural graduates are digitally native while I am a digital immigrant. Immigrants bring different life experiences to bear on the process. I'm still learning.

NJB Is Charles Moore's legacy present in the firm?

JMOC Charles' legacy is certainly apparent in our open approach to the design team. He was forever seeking ways to explore and present other culture, had a witty, sometimes irreverent view of design while deeply committed to producing spaces which were greatly appreciated by their users. Charles was much more interesting than Post modernism. For Charles; Architecture was only one part of the experience.

James Mary O'Connor will speak at the RIAI Conference in Limerick on 2 November.

1. The Grangegorman Masterplan creates a new sustainable higher learning quarter for Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) and the Health Service Executive (HSE)
 2. One of the main goals of the masterplan is the reintegration of the site back into the urban fabric of Dublin
 3. The Broadstone Gate is envisaged as a major entry plaza to the east of the Grangegorman site
 4. The DIT Library anchors one of the central hearts of the Grangegorman urban quarter

5. "Green Fingers / Open Hand" landscape concept
 6. A series of quadrangles and courtyards are linked by both urban and landscaped pathways to form a legible and interconnected campus
 7. The Serpentine Walk creates a curved landscaped pedestrian spine traversing the entire site providing a green alternative to the more urban character of St. Brendan's Way
 8. The DIT Library provides a natural viewing platform for sports fields and daily student life, with the grand backdrop of the Dublin skyline and Mountains beyond