

BELFAST'S UPWARD SPIRAL

• 72



It was the mid 80's and I was standing in a second-hand bookshop in Glasgow looking through a volume on modern architecture. It was the kind of book that had long been discarded as a coffee table slab, due to the unfashionable nature of modern architecture. I saw a photograph of a building. Looking like a three-dimensional Jacob's Ladder

made from concrete, it lifted towards the sky, behind tall trees. I read the description to find out where it was - Extension to the Ulster Museum, Botanic Gardens, Belfast.

Later, on a visit to Northern Ireland, I made my way to Belfast. At the entrance to the Botanic Gardens I passed a statue of the scientist Kelvin.

Through the trees, a silver elephant skin of carefully shuttered concrete was illuminated in the afternoon sun. The two structures – the original neoclassical building and the extension, were radically different, yet woven together in an almost geological way. I felt like a palaeontologist discovering the remains of a lost dinosaur. As I ▶

▶ stood looking at the building I was aware of people looking at me, as they passed, wondering what there was to look at. Was it all a well-kept architectural secret?

The large rectangular concrete forms of the extension pushed restlessly out from the walls like a stack of froebel blocks, weightless and at the same time monolithic. On entering I was told to take the lift to the top and walk down. The soft curvaceous forms of New York's Guggenheim spiral was replaced here with a more mysterious, Casbah like, intensity of light and space. Above me, the superstructures that enclosed the spaces of the museum, were held against the forces of gravity with the precariousness of a frozen waterfall.

Emerging from the lift I was at the height of the treetops glimpsing over the city and the distant hills. Things looked different from here. The Belfast I had known only from TV and radio news was transformed by this building. The balconies, terraces and big windows, asked me to look and think again on the city I could see before me. The lift that had taken me to the top had dramatised, like some decompression chamber, the contrast between the low entry space and the very large gallery volumes I was standing in. The terraces that pushed out from the spiral were all locked. There was no way out on 'deck'.

I walked down through the spiral that day, through art, history, science and nature. Stopping for coffee in what

73 •



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Courtesy: The Office of Francis Pym

was then the original restaurant, I looked out to the views below of the old graveyard and the Botanic Gardens. A large terrace from the café - formed by a projecting slab of storage rooms, extended the space outdoors and would have given the feeling of being amidst the trees, but it too was closed. Somehow amidst an unintentional process of neglect, the overall power of the spiral was still vivid. With time running out, I made my way back down to 'terra firma'. There was just not enough time. Perhaps there never would be. ▶



► Coming back to Belfast now almost 18 years since I first saw the museum, I made my way back to the spiral. It marked out for me a kind of decoding of events. History had unravelled, but the museum like a landscape was fixed in a different time and space. The power of the spiral guaranteeing it a place in the shape of things.

The story behind the design and building of the extension has taken on an almost mythic status. The young and unknown architect Francis Pym produced a design for the competition in 1964, which was picked as outright winner. Nothing is known of his earlier work other than a gazebo. The unusual and brilliant design solved the integration with the old building in an unexpected masterstroke. In 1968 as soon as the building starts to take shape from the

ground - like the saga of the Sydney Opera house, the architect resigned and never returned to see the completed building. Later it seems he changed profession and turned to religion (Perhaps the museum is more transformative than I imagine). An assistant completed the project for the Northern Ireland Ministry of Finance. The drawings - large charcoal

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In 1972 the building opens. The slowness of architecture is overtaken by events. The long period of gestation and completion delivers the building into a time of Northern Ireland’s worst period of conflict. Soon the architect and the building are forgotten as other events take hold.

When I saw pictures of Zaha Hadid’s project for the New Contemporary Arts Centre in Cincinnati with its dramatic projecting concrete volumes I thought of the museum. I wondered how the extension must have appeared when the shutters and formwork were removed.

The years that have passed have not always been kind. Due to the pressures of restricted space, the need for ever more sophisticated environmental controls or simply in a counter effort to overturn some of the extensions own inherent complexities, many adjustments and additions have been carried out that have diluted its character. The obligation to re-tell history with a vast quantity of objects and material has filled the ‘boat’ almost to sinking. Even the purchase of adjacent buildings to remove pressure on the extension cannot hold back the demands of occupancy that have swelled way beyond the original brief. A game of spatial fire-fighting with the ever-expanding demands of a modern museum is played out with minimum budgets. ►

► Like a city in microcosm, architectural territories have been claimed or lost. The sculptural entrance ramp and terrace have been turned into a car park. The courtyard to the old building roofed over. A shop and cloakroom are uncomfortably placed. The boundary to the botanic gardens destroyed with cheap fencing. The entrance sequence to one side blocked in and painted. The terraces are still out of bounds and the upper sculpture court looks like a collection of leftover remnants from a suburban garden.

The architect’s original intention of walking upwards in the spiral has become diluted. We were meant to begin locally in the history of Belfast, on the ground floor -the extension of the surface of the city, and then lift upwards through history, science and nature to finish in the large spaces for modern art. We were meant to walk out onto the terraces and sculpture court. To look out over the city and gardens and consider the ideas, images and objects that we have just seen. Consider maybe, how they might connect us to other cultures and ideas beyond these shores.

The platforms of the spiral are like geological shifts of space. They are cultural ‘tectonic plates’, pulling and drifting apart to take us up over the city. As the building folds, interlocks and spirals, it plays with our own personal journey for knowledge. It is an icon to a period when architecture addressed at the very centre of its responsibility, the optimism of modern life, culture and public space. To the people who know and love it, it has remained a well-kept secret.

Now is the time to take stock. To look at the potential of the museum’s spaces, rooftop views, of adjacent sites for new staff accommodation and parking. Take a fresh look at new materials and methods used in modern exhibition design. To restore, clean and upgrade the shell. Perhaps introduce some new buildings into the Botanic Gardens to intensify the experience of the area as a major Cultural/Museum Park.

The museum extension deserves new investment. Buildings like this can now be reconsidered for their quality and importance to our contemporary culture. The ‘snow blindness’ to our recent past has filled us only with preconceptions that have devalued and stopped us reclaiming an important part of our architectural history. The work of various modern architects, such as Denys Lasdun have come through the same cycle of complacent neglect to re-emerge to be respected, published, and restored in the way they deserve.

The extension to the Ulster Museum is a building of major architectural importance. It awaits a wider

discovery in a world of International tourism, bringing new expectations. The energy and confidence that is taking shape in Belfast to develop and implement a policy on architecture and to open a new centre for architecture and the built environment (PLACE) has focused a passion and energy for change. Part of this process is valuing and safeguarding our contemporary culture. The spiral stands beside the gaze of Kelvin, testament to the importance of discovery in our modern world. ●

Paul Clarke

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