Inspire me

The leading figures in UK and Irish design get together exclusively for the Plan Conference 2006

Poustinia architect Tom Maher interviewed • Jason O'Shaughnessy on Hadid’s MAXXI • Kid’s bookstore gets creative in Beijing
November 2006

On the cover: Speakers at the Plan Conference 2006, photographed by Alan O’Connor
Right: Will Alsop at the Plan Conference, photographed by Alan O’Connor
Below: Kid’s Republic in Beijing by SKSK architects

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Inspiring the Inspired:

Plan architecture and design conference 2006

Plan Magazine's recent architect's conference brought together the best of British and Irish architecture in Sandyford's IMI.

Richard Conway brings you in-depth coverage from the day.

It's not every day you get Will Alsop, Merritt Buchola, Paul Kelly, Keith Williams, Dick Gleeson and The Irish Times' Environment Editor Frank McDonald under one roof. So when Plan pulled together this checklist of bigwigs to discuss "inspirations", the results were sure to be interesting.

Architects and designers came from all over Ireland to hear discussions on everything from Ireland's suburban sprawl to architectural originality.

Will Alsop, SMC Alsop
Architects of Ireland; you may not know this, but your daily regime doesn't work. Stop your caffeine-fuelled dashes to the office and the 12-hour working days: it's time to have fun.

Stop away from the computer and do a few hours of painting. Or maybe go for a swim, have a slap-up meal and then put your feet up with a nice gin and tonic.

What is this decadence? The agenda of some bohemian lifestyle guru? An intoxicating recovery method following difficult client meetings? Well no actually, it's a day in the life of architect Will Alsop.

"So many architects think that you have to have a bad time otherwise people won't believe you. So they want to behave like lawyers and accountants and doctors - who all pedal doom and gloom. I mean that's what they deal in - we don't - it's supposed to be joyous, and we're supposed to actually discover that joy."

"If people have a good time you end up with a better product: it's not rocket science, it's true."
Al sop says he goes to other architects' offices and finds them "unbelievably tidy. I don't know how they do that. The other day I found, under a desk, somebody's old gym shoes. He's left over a year ago. Where are they still there?"

He says his approach to architecture is tied in with drawing and painting. He often invites his colleagues to "draw from life" and says this has led him to believe that "architects can actually draw-by-looking; use the computer better in being able to manipulate the image."

"I think the combination between drawing and painting, and use of the computer is important. I don't talk about designing buildings or places I talk about discovering, and it's a sort of joint voyage of discovery as to what they might be."

He adds that this "comes from that skill, basic skill of being able to draw; it still horrifies me how many younger architects, through technology, have to say I'm not picking the young - really don't use drawing as a necessity at all. I think that's sad. It might say something about how the schools of architecture actually operate," he adds.

He trains the audience in multimedia presentations he used two clients. Colourful images of a Palermo project, his masterplanners for Middlesbrough and the Toronto waterfront jump off the screen, as TBA says he is under the work of Urban Planners, who he affectionately call "carpet layers". He cites a four-lane highway separating the waterfront.
The downtown area as an example of their many mistakes: it scare people from the streets. And he thinks ending it is the key to success: “Don’t take people what you think they want, but what they actually want.”

“Politics make terrible solutions about what people are. If you take the time to really delve into what people are, they don’t want what the politicians and the planners think up, and I think that’s an amazing mistake.”

Professor Merril Bouchol, uchol McEvoy Architects, asks Bouchol darts into the sea, laptop in hand. He looks like man on a mission.

Greeting the audience with an “I was a sometimes Irish, sometimes scottish, the Pincorn-educated explorer set up his equipment on the stage and straight to the point: how citizens can change society.

Earlier, over refreshments, a Dublin-based architect had told me that he takes the time to really delve into what people want. He says that architects must design with project energy consumption in mind.

He says that the completion of his first Irish project, Fingal County Hall, “brought home the extent of society” that we now need architecture to create a vision from their expectations to that of society needs. He says that architects should be on a mission.

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you don’t hear too much about that anymore,” he says.

He presents plans to develop Dublin’s northern and southern retail cores and adds that the city council’s "central objective is to link the two major shopping areas".

Gleeson says this is necessary because the northern retail core – around Henry Street – is made up of big stores while the southern one – around Grafton Street – consists of smaller shops. There is also an over-reliance on the “spines” of both streets and he believes that planners should encourage development along the “side streets”.

He shows the audience colourful renders of the city council’s plans for various city areas including the North Fringe – along the Malahide Road – the Poolbeg Peninsula and Heuston Gateway.

He presents a moody lit image of Paul Keogh’s Heuston Gate scheme but quickly adds that high-rise buildings could only be built in certain parts of Dublin. He adds that “nothing like the [deBlacam and Meagher designed] Digital Hub” scheme is envisaged.

He cites Bilbao, Barcelona and Malmo as other examples of cities that have regenerated successfully.

Frank McDonald, Environment Editor, The Irish Times

Dressed in a dapper black suit with a polo necked jumper to match, event chairman Frank McDonald is in a bright mood, but is concerned about the continued development of one-off “McMansions” throughout Ireland.

The author of Chaos at the Crossroads, The Construction of Dublin and The Destruction of Dublin sees the proliferation of this housing type as an “epidemic.” He gets more than a few agreeable audience nods when he points out their “sheer vulgarity”.

He says that most of what is built in any architectural era is rubbish but he praises Irish architectural practices, saying that he remembers a time “when the best and the brightest were leaving the country” but that now “an equivalent amount of immigrants are coming in.”

The Plan Inspirations conference was sponsored by Aedas, Eurotech, Corus, Rational and the Clarke Group.