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ENCLAVE REVIEW

The Second City's Second City

Denis Linehan

Down on Docklands this week even the leaves on the trees are smiling. Long evenings are on their way to midsummer and the tree-green canopy over Centre Park Road frames strollers, joggers, cyclists, mothers with little daughters, sleeping babies in three-wheel all-terrain buggies, intertwined lovers and rushing power-walkers – all moving through the ruins of a past economy. Leading to the Marina and the small harbour at Blackrock, this boulevard of tall verdant hedges hides the old factories, warehouses and yards that once heaved with industry, turning out tractors and cars, tyres, fertilizer and other products whose precise form is lost, but whose presence lingers in the design of the workshops. Glimpses into vacant lots through wire fences reveal a population of dusty lorries and vans that look like they might have been parked for years, together with machines in various shades of steel blue, yellow and mustard, whose obscure uses conjure up images of manufacture and days spent labouring.

Yet, life continues. Among the ruins, the city blooms. The inheritors of the submerged factories seem irrepressible. In the shells of the old buildings dozens

of new businesses trade. They sell second hand cars, coal and timber. Mechanics, printers, dealers in champagne and fine wines, air-conditioning engineers crowd together in the Marina Commercial Park. Located at Fords, sometimes this haphazard industrial estate – whose centre piece is Albert Kahn's dilapidated Fordson Tractor Assembly Hall – has the feel of a crumbling Hollywood movie studio. The people flow by, to catch hurling matches at Páirc Uí Chaoimh, toward the riverbank beyond and or the comforts of the municipal park at the Atlantic Pond. People toss bread at discerning ducks and skirt the water, to gossip, to discuss family matters and love affairs. On benches or sitting on folded jumpers and rugs, books in Spanish, Polish and Czech, Chinese and English are relished. On very sunny days, children roll down the sloping grass. You can hear them giggle. Old men stand transfixed by the spectacle of the bright containers being lifted from ships on the northern riverbank. Small craft, tug boats and skiffs glide by on the Lee. Unleashed dogs skip along the riverbank, taking themselves for a walk. On Sundays, African Pentecostal worshippers - from the Mountain of Fire Ministry - spill out onto the street, children in arms, eyes on Heaven, hearts in Lagos. Nearby, American Football players – overlooked by Victorian gothic villas – hunker in groups, and at the sound of a whistle, slam into one another in Kennedy Park, named in honour of JFK. Meanwhile, the summer concert season is coming up fast. The event takes place under a giant old circus tent set up on land once used by the Ford Motor Company to park and distribute new cars. Lady Gaga has come and gone. Posters for concerts by Deep Purple and Tony Bennett decorate city-centre bars. The two-night show by teen sensation JLS is sold out.

The Docklands is the second city of the Second City. At 166 hectares, this riverside district is extensive enough to swallow Cork's city-centre in one gulp. After WW2 the Docklands thrived as a manufacturing and distribution centre of the type that used to be common in many port-cities on the coasts of Europe. Then during the 1980s, in a decade of urban traumas, the factories closed, shifting east, leaving in their wake a district that shape-shifted into dereliction. Zoned for industry, there are no houses, no church steeples, no shops, no services and almost no-one lives here – except the homeless, sleeping rough in the woodlands not far from where swans hide and make their giant nests.

Since 2000, the Docklands became a place where certain visions of a New Cork congregated. Despite its vibrant social space, and its huge potential as parkland – like Prater in Vienna, or Meža Park in Riga – instead planners and speculators were inspired to imagine a cosmopolitan post-industrial future: a Docklands of Desire. An addictive cocktail of urban boosterism and commercial speculation reconfigured the land for waterfront living, new generation office space, luxury apartments, spa hotels, concert venues and exhibition halls. These visions were bound to the passions of the Celtic Tiger – a period built on the casino capitalism of an entrenched oligarchy, who plied the state for tax breaks, gorged themselves on land and property, dragged down the banking system and like pirates, left the damage to be mopped up by

an angry but shackled citizenry. But this week, down on the Docklands, it's a vision that lies in bits. On YouTube you can find a low-resolution film of the 1 billion euro Atlantic Quarter project. This computer animation begins with a journey into outer space, where the viewer orbits the Earth for five years, returning through the atmosphere to Europe, then Ireland, and finally to Cork, to witness the arrival of two towers designed by Norman Foster surrounded by a new quarter of hotels and exhibition centres, and even more apartments. A close look at the towers shows a waterfall plunging from the rooftops. Like the apparitions of the Virgin Mary that periodically spring up in the Irish countryside, this phantasmagorical vision of a cosmopolitan future is also a symptom of our transient grip on reality as we adapt to the turbulent march of progress. Like the money and the developer, who have disappeared into thin air, it's all very ghostly now.

In the summer of 2008, the Japanese artist Hironari Kubota spent a few days spinning a white Mark 4 Ford Transit van in the Docklands. When I first saw Kubota's performance, I understood the irony of the Ford being converted into Art. But as he pushed the van, and then ran underneath it as it spun, I thought he was a raving lunatic. But now, I think it was the sanest thing I've witnessed and the most articulate philosophy for an

urban plan produced in Cork this century. Kubota was undoubtedly having fun – part circus act, part drama, part history, part sociology, part event – the performance used what was there, if only in memory – and put it joyfully into motion. In some part too, the conditions that permit and encourage the use of Dockland spaces for performance and theatre is key to this cultural rather than commercial regeneration. Instead of becoming another amalgam of identikit corporate architecture the Docklands is instead, in the imagination of the populace at least, a place apart. And if once positioned as a kind of PR sop, cobbled together to soften up the area for development, art on the docklands now has proven to be the zone's only tangible success. Music, sculpture, dance – it all speaks to the art of right living, the art of walking and dreaming, the art of reading and cycling, the art of roaring support for hurlers, runners and swimmers, and the art of rest, the art of slow not fast, the art of free for the city, to breathe, to idle, to rest, to roam, to gaze, to chat, to think, to laugh, to escape, just to be.

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