

New tall buildings and the character of Dublin

The capital of Ireland is starting, once again, to see a strengthening of its economy and its re-emergence as a gateway to the global economy. Just like the economic boom during the ‘Celtic Tiger’ years Dublin is experiencing huge pressure to build, particularly in the re-use of brownfield land, the promotion of particular tall building proposals and debates about the protection of specific built heritage elements which are at risk from demolition. Schemes which had spluttered to a halt during the recession have commenced on site. In this article I will reflect on the redevelopment of the Boland’s Mill site in Dublin’s Grand Canal Dock; a place of huge significance to the Easter Rising 1916. A currently-underway redevelopment will see the removal of mid twentieth century fabric, the restoration of the original mills and the erection of 3 towers of 13, 14 and 15 storeys. There has been concern about the impact of the tall buildings on the built heritage, and what that may say about the approach to development in the city.

It has been argued that Dublin is a city of quite exceptional character and beauty¹ that can be characterised mainly by its 18th and 19th century attributes, in the central city at least; these include tightly woven streets, using consistent materials, scale and form, which are from the Georgian period in the main, but also take elements from the Victorian period. The predominant part of the fabric of the city from this period has survived mainly as a result of neglect and lack of economic activity during most of the 20th century. The city can be characterised as medium-rise, with buildings that mainly range between four and eight storeys - this is relatively tall, compared to other cities in Ireland and Britain. The city is built along the River Liffey which forms the main backbone of the modern city, fanning out to the north, west and east. The city gently rises from the central area to the west, providing wide panoramas of the city from the west. The skyline, particularly from the west, can be characterised by its generally medium-rise nature, although a number of key historic (and more recent) buildings punctuate it at regular intervals. To the east of the central area lies the Docklands which is experiencing a large amount of development, mainly office and residential, spurred on by a development plan framework, implemented by Dublin Docklands Development Authority and Dublin City Council. The planning of the Docklands area was the city’s first attempt at comprehensive planning on a significant scale for economic growth and, as such, had the

¹ BOR, W. 1967. An environmental policy for Dublin. *Journal of the Town Planning Institute*, 53, 293-296.

political will from the state, business and the local population for implementation. Whilst the framework for development suggested development at between four and eight storeys (reflecting the character of the wider city centre), a number of taller buildings are again coming forward in this area as economic confidence improves.

The North Lotts and Grand Canal Dock Strategic Development Zone (SDZ) in the Docklands contains the historically significant and protected Boland's Mill. Linked to Éamon De Valera's 3rd Battalion of Irish Volunteers use of the Mill complex during the 1916 Rising (strategically located on the main rail and road connections from Dún Laoghaire) the buildings have huge significance to the quest for Irish independence from Britain. In recent years, the SDZ has required a conservation-led scheme for its redevelopment.

The approved development provides for 42 new apartments, 29,000 m.sq. of office space, 1,400 m.sq. retail and restaurant space, 550 m.sq. cultural space. It will provide for 'significant economic activity in the area, facilitate the redevelopment of a disused brownfield site, provide a community/cultural space and associated public space which will provide a valuable asset for both established and new communities, it will deliver a highly permeable and attractive and animated public realm and open up the adjoining water body to a wider public and secure the restoration and hence the future of a number of heritage structures'². NAMA (The National Asset Management Agency) is funding the redevelopment of the site to the tune of €170 million in demolition and enabling works. Established in 2009 as an initiative taken by the Irish state to address the serious crisis in banking, in this instance NAMA reflects strong central government interest in the redevelopment of this important site.

The approved scheme (permission was granted in July 2015, reference DSDZ3796/14) has sought to address the protection of this important heritage asset through the demolition of the concrete mill from the mid twentieth century and the articulation of a conservation narrative with a series of very modern towers which are, in many senses, out of keeping with the rhythm of this part of the Docklands. Whilst the assessment of the application by the City Council viewed the removal of existing fabric as beneficial to the protected structures, the planner's report recommending approval of the scheme makes little comment on the relationship between the new and the old beyond the importance of new 'landmark buildings' being built in this location. This is the last of the redevelopment sites on the inner waterfront of the Grand Canal

² Report of the Deputy Planning Officer, 06 February 2015

Dock and the quality of new architecture is obviously very important. Having said that, it also appears odd that the protected Boland's Mill (a set of landmark buildings by their very nature; both physically and culturally given the link to the Rising) might be drowned out by towers which have little relationship to the existing either in terms of materials, massing or height. There are undoubted public realm benefits to the scheme but it remains surprising that the assessment of the proposed relationship is under-articulated at best. That the report suggests that the 3 towers are 'landmark buildings' is also of concern.

The examination of this approved development proposal indicates that a correct decision was made, in the sense of utilising key sites for high-density development and investing in schemes which might recoup some moneys for the state. However, the built heritage debates in the assessment of the scheme were unsophisticated, and did not reflect the importance of the designations in architectural or cultural terms in the Docklands area. There are undoubted huge benefits to this redevelopment yet it would also appear that this should be the starting point for a more robust inclusive debate about the need for Dublin to utilise creative solutions about the type and form of development that should take place, particularly in relation to its unique character. In a time when there is still no new central government since elections earlier this year, strong direction from the planning department of the City Council about the scope and form of new development across the city is even more important than usual.