

## 1. O'Connell Street: A Potted History

O'Connell Street and the North Ward in which it is situated are relatively late in date, having been reclaimed from tidal flats from the 17<sup>th</sup> Century onwards. In the following centuries city development moved eastwards downriver, where a formal Georgian city emerged, incorporating key public buildings, residential squares and imposing streetscapes. The Georgian period also witnessed the Wide Streets Commissioners develop the powerful civic and commercial streets in the city centre, including Dame Street, Westmoreland Street and Parliament Street. In terms of layout, O'Connell Street is also part of this heritage.

The upper end of O'Connell Street was first laid out and developed towards the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. Because the new street was built on land owned by Henry Moore, 3<sup>d</sup> Earl of Drogheda, it received the name Drogheda Street. The Earl of Drogheda's name survives today in Henry Street, Moore Street and North Earl Street, all of which were called after him. In the late 1740s, Luke Gardiner demolished Drogheda Street and rebuilt what is now Upper O'Connell Street, making it 160 feet wide and containing a planted mall 48 feet wide, forming an elongated residential square that was called Sackville Mall. In 1784, Sackville Street (now Lower O'Connell Street) was formed by extending Sackville Mall to the River Liffey. Carlisle Bridge, later to become O'Connell Bridge, was built in 1790.

While the residential Georgian areas north of the River Liffey were initially successful, the 1801 Act of Union, which spelt economic decline for the city as a whole, was particularly severe in terms of its impact on the north side. The quality residential areas began to decline, and the key administration and social life of the city consolidated on the south side of the river. The erection of Nelson's Pillar in 1808 and the completion of the General Post Office in 1818 gave two famous landmarks to the street.

Nelson's Pillar was erected, in 1808, to commemorate the Battle of Trafalgar. The Doric column was designed by the architect Francis Johnston (1760-1829), the architect of the Board of Works, and the statue, in Portland stone, of Admiral Nelson, was by the Cork sculptor Thomas Kirk RHA (1781-1845). The original entrance was underground, but in 1894, a porch designed by G. P. Baxter was added to allow direct access from the street. At 2am on March 8, 1966, an explosion destroyed the upper half of the pillar, throwing the statue of Nelson into the street. Two days later, Army Engineers blew up the rest of the pillar. The rubble from the monument was taken to the East Wall dump, and the lettering from the plinth moved to the gardens of Butler House, Kilkenny. The area was then simply paved over. The Nelson Pillar Bill was passed in 1967, transferring responsibility for the site of the monument from the Nelson Pillar Trustees to Dublin Corporation.

Opened in 1818, the General Post Office on O'Connell Street was designed by Francis Johnston and quickly became one of the most important landmarks in the city. In 1916 Pdraig Pearse and James Connolly, leaders of the Easter Rising, proclaimed an Irish republic from the steps of the GPO. In the ensuing siege the Volunteers sheltered in and fought from the building, under heavy fire from an English gunboat. A fire broke out, destroying most of the interior and the GPO remained closed until 1929, when renovation work was completed. The fine fluted pillars at the front of the building still bear the shell marks of 1916.

For the 100 years since the 1880s, suburbanisation resulted in the loss of almost all the middle-income population from the north inner city. Rationalisation and modernisation saw the much of the traditional industrial base either close or move out. By the mid-1980s, despite a focused investment in the Henry Street retail area, the hinterland of O'Connell Street suffered from extensive physical decay and pervasive social and economic problems. In this context, one can appreciate why the street found it difficult to prosper.

Up until the 1960s the three most impressive structures on the street were the General Post Office and Clery's Department Store - sited on an axis running transversely across the street and Nelson's Column sited on the Henry / Talbot Street axis. The vertical emphasis of the Column was a contrast to the width and almost overwhelming length of the street - a contrast that the street is soon to enjoy again.

The past 20 years have not been kind to O'Connell St. The central challenge of the O'Connell Street Integrated Area Plan is to reclaim a better, more secure and prosperous future for the street within a thriving, modern, cultural capital. The vision for O'Connell Street includes a broad-based commitment

to create the kind of quality environment, range of uses, and powerful sense of place that can live up to its unequivocal role as the main street of Ireland's capital city.

## 2. Integrated Area Plan

For most people, O'Connell Street is the centre of Dublin city – it is where traditionally the trams stopped and in later years nearly every bus route passes through it. O'Connell Street has been in decline since the 1960s. Up until the 1960s O'Connell Street was known for its cinemas, the GPO and Nelson's Column. With the destruction of the column and the closure of all but one of the cinemas, the street has become a garish strip of discount stores and fast food restaurants. As the street increasingly became a no-go area after dark due to drugs and street violence, and business interests became concerned with a perceived fall in the quality and pulling power of the street, Dublin Corporation formed a committee to come up with a development plan for the street and its environs.

O'Connell Street is the main thoroughfare in Dublin City. It is the hub of a bustling city centre shopping precinct. In February 1998 Dublin Corporation launched a new action plan for O'Connell Street. This plan came about because of the very real concern that O'Connell Street was not living up to its potential as the finest street in the city and it had serious problems that needed to be addressed.

As part of the scheme, an area covering O'Connell Street, and parts of the surrounding streets has been designated for the execution of an integrated area plan. The area stretches from Parnell Square, Marlborough Street, to Westmoreland Street, D'Olier Street and College Street. As part of the scheme, individual buildings and groups of buildings of merit have been listed. Others that the corporation feel should be redeveloped or are in need of repair have also been listed for attention.

The plan looks at an area wider than just O'Connell Street and takes in the adjoining properties back as far as Marlborough Street on one side and Moore Street on the other. It also extends north to include Parnell Square and south across the river to College Street, along with Westmoreland Street and D'Olier Street.

The O'Connell Street plan concludes that nothing short of a redefinition of the existing uses is necessary if the street is to become effective as the main street of the capital and of the country. This will involve the development of a range of uses that generate animation, vitality and the kind of atmosphere that draws all sectors of society into the street and makes people want to stay.

### Proposals

The main proposals in the O'Connell Street integrated area plan are:

- To improve the pedestrian environment in O'Connell Street
- To create a dramatic new space in front of the GPO
- To remove one lane of traffic from each side of the street
- To provide a major new feature on the site of Nelson Pillar
- To bring about improvements for pedestrians in the adjoining Westmoreland and D'Olier Streets as well as Parnell Square
- To create a new pedestrian route from College Street to Marlborough Street via Hawkins Street and a new pedestrian bridge across the Liffey

The main recommendations of the development plan include:

- Widening of the pavements and central mall and reducing the number of traffic lanes in either direction to two lanes
- Construction of a Luas station (new tramway system) in Lower O'Connell Street.
- Construction of a plaza outside the General Post Office for use during civic celebrations and events.
- Extensive replanting of trees in a more geometric fashion to provide strolling boulevards in the paved areas.
- A competition to find a replacement for Nelson's Column to add a vertical emphasis to the street.
- It is also intended to introduce other improvements such as the upgrading of poor quality buildings and shopfronts, the construction of buildings on vacant sites and the reduction of car parking in locations such as Parnell Square.

In the long run it is hoped for the removal of traffic from the entire stretch of road from Parnell Square to Grafton Street. However, this can only happen once all of the changes proposed in the Dublin Transportation Initiative's strategy have been implemented.

### 3. In Focus

#### a) The Monument of Light

*" .... this is a brave and uncompromising beacon, re-affirming the status of O'Connell Street as Ireland's principal urban thoroughfare.... It will in effect reinvent the cultural dimension of the urban space of O'Connell Street."*

[Ian Ritchie Architects](#), London are the winners of the O'Connell Street Monument competition. The competition was organised for Dublin City Council by The Royal Institute of Architects of Ireland. The winners received a prize of £10,000.

The new monument is a pivotal element of [O'Connell Street Integrated Area Plan](#) and will become a symbol of Dublin in the 21st Century. The area zoned for this monument is the former site of the Nelson Monument at the junction of Upper and Lower O'Connell Street on the north-south axis, and Henry Street and North Earl Street on the east-west axis.

The winning design was chosen from an original international field of 205 entries. The majority of the entries were from Ireland but were also received from Europe, America and even Iran. The field was shortlisted to three, Jonathan Bennett, Dublin based architect, Ian Ritchie Architects of London and Hunt McGarry, Architects, also based in London.

The panel of assessors were the Lord Mayor of Dublin, Cllr. Senator Joe Doyle, Joan O'Connor, Architect and Chairperson Jim Barrett, Dublin City Architect, Henri Ciriani, Parisian based architect, Dick Gleeson, Dublin City Council, Tom Rae, Dublin Chamber of Commerce, Vivienne Roche, Sculptor.

The proposed new monument is to be located on O'Connell Street at the junction with Henry Street and North Earl Street in the position formerly occupied by Nelson's Pillar. The new monument will comprise a conical spire of rolled stainless steel plate which tapers from 3 metres in diameter at the base to a 0.1 metre pointed pinnacle at a height of 120 metres. The top 12 metres of the structure will be illuminated from within and the top 500 mm of the structure will be made of conically cast optical glass. The structure will be founded on reinforced concrete piles. The structure requires a soil excavation of approximately 8 metres diameter by 5 metres depth and this will involve the excavation and removal of 750 tonnes of material. The support piles will be installed using specialist-drilling rigs that will drill down into the underlying rock. A 7-metre diameter circular base of bronze will be laid at the base of the monument that will be flush with the surrounding paved area. There will be an underground access and maintenance chamber to accommodate electrical supplies and drainage equipment. All excavation works and construction of the foundations will be undertaken within a construction compound that will be fenced off.

### Design and Technical Summary

#### Light

During daylight, the light of Ireland's sky over Dublin, the streetscape and its people will be softly reflected in the stainless steel surface of the cone monument. From its base up to about 4m, the stainless steel will be polished in an abstract design to provide a slightly higher reflective surface than the remainder of the cone. From dusk, the lower two thirds of the monument's stainless steel surface will be softly lit. The tip of the monument will also be illuminated.

#### Height and Elegance

The stainless steel cone will be 120 metres high from ground level and 3 metres in diameter at its base.

#### Reflecting the Climate

The upper part of the monument's will gentle sway in direct response to the wind reflecting the character of its climate, landscape and people. The monument's tip will sway up to a maximum of 2.5m under 30 year return extreme wind loading.

### **The Monument**

The Light Monument is a cone 120 metres high made of rolled stainless steel sheet. The stainless steel is shot peened to give a surface that will reflect, softly, the changing light of the sky, and be maintenance free. (The shot peening is a two stage process - the first pass with stainless steel beads, and the second pass with 1mm glass beads).

### **The Tip of the Monument**

The luminous tip of the monument is 12 metres in length. The material will be a specially patterned perforation of stainless steel illuminated by a 2kw searchlight within the cone, located 50 metres above ground level. The lamp is accessible for maintenance. The last 500mm of the tip will be made of optical glass.

### **The Base of the Monument**

The Light Monument cone will pass through a 7 metre diameter circular base of Kilkenny black marble. The change from white Wicklow granite to the black marble was made in order to better present reflections and the pulsed mercury, and to give the monument a visually stronger base. This will incorporate a raised Celtic spiral machined into the marble surface. This spiral will be hand drawn and transferred as a template to the stonemasons. Mercury will be pulsed onto the surface of the marble from the perimeter, and will flow towards the cone. There will be five zones corresponding to the protective glass joints above the marble.

### **The Synergy between the Tip, the Cone and the Base**

The luminous tip, the reflective stainless steel of the cone, the pulse and reflection of mercury will embrace light as the essence of the monument.

### **Human Relationship and Street Landscape**

The integration with the surrounding streetscape will be through the design of its base. The human scale relationship to the monument will be achieved by people and their reflections, the fascination of watching pulsed mercury flowing over the black marble.

O'Connell Street and the North Ward in which it is situated are relatively late in date, having been reclaimed from the tidal flats from the seventeenth century onwards. Most of the archaeological investigations within the area have produced post-medieval finds and features, and the relative dearth of material suggests that it is unlikely that extensive archaeological remains survive in the area around the pillar site or in the area to be developed as a public space. The EIS carried out in advance of the new monument and public space proposed for O'Connell Street has established that it is likely that the foundations of Nelson's Pillar are preserved below ground, and as the foundations of the new Spire are a similar size to the pillar's, that these will have to be removed and recorded before the construction of the new monument.

## b) O'Connell St. Street Furniture

*"The vision for O'Connell St. must include a broad-based commitment to create the kind of quality environment, range of uses, and powerful sense of place that can live up to its unequivocal role as the main street of the capital city..." O'Connell St. Integrated Area Plan*

Dublin City Council and the Royal Institute of Architects in Ireland (RIAI) announced on, 8<sup>th</sup> April 2002, that London bloc Architects, with consultancy from Buro Happold, won the open design competition for O'Connell Street Furniture.

The competition organised by the RIAI, on behalf of Dublin City Council, was a two stage open competition to design a family of street furniture structures to be repeated along the entire 550m of historic O'Connell Street to enhance the public space ambitions of the capital's premier street, and in time come to be recognised and associated with the quality and ambition of the city. The purpose of the competition was to seek a high quality design for a number of kiosks to which will accommodate retail uses such as coffee, flower and newspaper selling, but will also provide WC, information and phone facilities.

The suite of furniture will include two cafes, a ticket and information offices, five retail units, two news stands, two self-cleaning WCs, twelve public telephone boxes and nine bus or taxi shelters.

Following the announcement London bloc's David Hebblethwaite, commented, *"This prestigious competition win is very important to us and Buro Happold. The scheme allows us to work with some of the most vibrant and important public space in a major European capital, and relates closely in ambition to our other streetscape and public space projects that are beginning to take shape in Europe. We were immediately interested in the approach taken by Dublin City Council in developing the design to act as a catalyst for public space. bloc and Buro Happold's interpretation of the brief was to find the maximum generative effect with a very limited streetscape intervention"*.

Edith Blennerhassett, group director of Buro Happold added, *"We were delighted to be associated with such an innovative architectural project which will be an important feature of O'Connell Street and the urban regeneration of the city"*.

To achieve the ambition of the competition, bloc and Buro Happold stretched each unit to create superthin buildings, bordering on two-dimensional, orientated with the flow of people. Stone ends are turned up from the street paving and pulled as far apart as possible. Stretched between them is a thin film of glass and timber. This creates long facades, slender in the direction of traffic and long for the general pedestrian flow. Each wide face opens to have a presence on the street up to two times the plan size of the structure. A relief plan of the street is cut into the stone of each thin face and LED lights are incorporated to orientate the public and provide both visual and Braille signage. The glass walls and roof are wrapped in timber slats that act as shading and security, creating a glint, going from opaque to transparent as the viewer moves along the street, revealing the use inside.

The seven types of unit designed are:

- a) Café (2 no.)
- b) Tickets & Information (1 no.)
- c) Retail Unit (5 no.)
- d) News Stand (2 no.)
- e) Self Cleaning WC and retail (2 no.)
- f) Public Phone Boxes (12 no.)
- g) Bus or Taxi Shelter (9 no.)

#### 4. The Future

##### a) O'Connell St. & Environs – Architectural Conservation Area

An Architectural Conservation Area is an area of special architectural, historical, archaeological, artistic, cultural, scientific, social, technical interest or value. The O'Connell Street area is the first designated architectural conservation area in Dublin City Borough.

The O'Connell Street Architectural Conservation Area straddles both sides of the River Liffey. To the north of the river, the area takes in all of O'Connell Street, extending to Parnell Street to the north, Marloborough Street to the east and Moore Street / Moore Lane to the west. To the south of the river, the area incorporates both D'Olier Street and Westmoreland Street extending to Hawkins Street to the east, College Street to the south and to the rear of buildings fronting onto the west side of Westmoreland Street.

The O'Connell Street area is of special architectural importance – it is a reminder of the great classical era of urban planning and building carried out by the Wide Streets Commissioners in 18<sup>th</sup> century Dublin. It also has an historical and civic importance. The purpose of the conservation plan is to protect and enhance this special character.

The objectives of the Architectural Conservation Area Plan are to:

- Conserve, restore and rehabilitate the existing building stock of the area.
- Ensure that all proposed developments are carried out in a manner sympathetic to the architectural and civic character of the O'Connell Street area.
- Regenerate the historical urban area through the implementation of a programme of street improvement schemes, including the upgrading of the existing network of streets, footpaths and public spaces.

For the first time, general controls over works to the exteriors of non-protected buildings or structures have been introduced. These controls apply as follows:

- Planning permission will be required for all works to the exterior of non-protected buildings that are not consistent with the external appearance of these buildings, the neighbouring buildings and with the character of the O'Connell Street Architectural Conservation Area.
- All changes and alterations to architectural features of merit on the main facades of non-protected buildings or structures and identified in the Architectural Conservation Area Plan will require planning permission.

Although strict controls will be applied to all development works in the area, some works will continue not to require planning permission including:

- Routine works of maintenance when there is no change to the form of the element under repair or to the type of materials.
- Changes to land use within the same use class as defined by the Local Government (Planning & Development) Regulations 1994 – 2000.
- Solely interior works.