

Library Architecture w/Paul Ahern

Ep. 6

[Lisa] Dia dhuit! (Hello!) This is Podcrawl Podchroal, the podcast from the McClelland Irish Library. I'm your host, Lisa, the Assistant Librarian, with architect Paul Ahern. Today we'll talk about the vision behind creating the library.

[Lisa] How are you approached to be the architect of the library, Paul?

[Paul] Well, first, thank you for inviting me here today, Lisa.

The Irish Cultural Center created, uh, the Academy of Irish and Celtic Studies, uh, which ultimately led to the, uh, construction of the library, uh, because when we started holding classes for the Academy in the newly completed Great Hall, we found that there was a lot of interruption and noise, confusion, uh, between the people and the instruments.

Uh, and we needed a more purpose driven space for the Academy. Uh, music classes were held wherever we could fit them in. Banjo classes were held in the kitchen. We needed a separate building for the academy, so I worked on a preliminary design for, uh, the academy space where the library is now. Mr. Norman McClelland saw the academy preliminary drawing design that I had, uh, created, uh, and, uh, was interested in following up with me.

So he and Bill O'Brien, one of our founders, contacted me to talk about the possibility of making the academy building, uh, the proposed academy building, into an Irish library. Uh, there were no funds to build the academy building. Uh, Norman's library idea was exciting, and he had the resources and drive to make it happen. Uh, so we started the design work in about 2004, uh, and we incorporated the academy functions in the library design, uh, that amounts to, uh, sound isolated music practice rooms. So that's how we, we got started.

[Lisa] What is the inspiration behind the library?

[Paul] Well, let's see, the, the library was built and designed in a form that's reminiscent of 12th century Romanesque, Romanesque architecture.

Uh, the main library entrance is inspired by the 12th century St. Bridget's Church - located on Inis Cealtra, that's Holy Island in Lough Derg, Ireland. The building form and size is generally similar to an Irish castle house.

[Lisa] It really wasn't a church, right?

[Paul] Uh, it was designed specifically to be an Irish specialty library. It was never a church. The scope of the project includes the library and other functions including... Irish Cultural and Learning Foundation administrative spaces, retail space for a gift shop and tea and scones, and the Academy of Irish and Celtic Studies. And that's comprised of the sound isolated music practice rooms.

[Lisa] So many people that come in for the first time think it's a church.

[Paul] Well, that's not surprising. There are stone wall churches all over Ireland with similar details.

[Lisa] How long did it take to build the castle?

[Paul] Uh, the project is very long, uh, in terms of the design and construction. Uh, the actual construction, uh, started with the signing of a contract, uh, in December of 2010.

The construction was complete in October of 2012. That's about 22 months. Um, the design phase of the project took, uh, much longer. We, as I said earlier, I started, uh, the initial, uh, preliminary design work in 2004. And we didn't actually begin construction until 2010. So there was a lot of time spent designing, redesigning, uh, submitting through committees, uh, with the, the city planning department and building safety department, fire department, police department, parks department. And so on. It took a very long time to finally get it to the point where it could be built. Uh, but we were all very happy to finally see it go under construction. after the signing in 2010.

[Lisa] Did any materials come from Ireland?

[Paul] Uh, I'm very proud to, uh, say that the library's main entrance, uh, the stone arch, uh, was crafted in County Clare from Irish blue limestone that was quarried in County Galway. The fabricator was a, uh, uh, master Irish stonemason. Uh, named Frank McCormick, uh, representing the Irish Natural Stone Company. Uh, the fireplace in the rare books room, uh, stone flooring, and, and window sills are also made of polished Irish blue limestone. So we've used quite a lot of Irish blue limestone throughout the building.

[Lisa] I, I didn't realize that there was so much here. I knew the entrance way, but I didn't realize that the fireplace too, and that's pretty cool. Do you have a favorite space in the castle?

[Paul] Well, uh, it's hard to pin it down to one space, but there's several unique spaces. For example, the Rare Books Room, the Book of Kells Room, and the Keep. Those are probably my three favorites. Uh, three most favorite, uh, spaces in the library. The keep is especially important to me because it can be used for many creative purposes. Uh, for example, uh, small lectures, music performance, story time and crafts, programs for, for kids, uh, receptions, corporate and private parties, readings, book signings, and so forth. It also has a small medieval balcony. That makes it very unusual.

[Lisa] Yes. And now I have a couple questions about you. Where did you go to university?

[Paul] Well, when I graduated high school, I applied and was accepted into the College of Architecture at Arizona State University. Uh, and I got a degree there in, uh, a Bachelor of Architecture degree in 1973.

[Lisa] Very cool. And what's your favorite style of architecture? Do you have one?

[Paul] Uh, it's, it's, again, this is, uh, difficult to pin down. Uh, I don't really have a favorite style, but I do appreciate buildings that are designed for a specific purpose, on a unique site, that respond to the owner's expectations, respectful use of materials, historical context, uh, and buildings that are sculptural, balanced, uh, beauty, and form, and texture. I also like architectural solutions that are clever, innovative, one of a kind. I have a few, uh, architects that I particularly look up to from the past, of course, Frank Lloyd Wright, Faye Jones, and, um, Santiago Calatrava.

[Lisa] Oh, interesting. 2022 marked 10 years since the library opened its doors. Congratulations on such a milestone. Thank you so much for listening. We hope to see you soon at McClelland Library. Slán! (Bye!)

[Paul] Thank you so much.