

Mnemonic Spaces - Accessing the National Archives of Ireland

“The First step was to imprint on the memory a series of *loci* or places. The commonest, though not the only, type of mnemonic place system used was the architectural type. The clearest description of the process is given by Quintillian. In order to form a series of places in memory, he says, a building must be remembered as spacious and varied as possible, the forecourt, the living room, bedrooms, and parlours, not omitting statues and other ornaments with which the rooms are decorated. The images by which the speech is to be remembered are then placed in the Imagination on the places which have been memorised in the building. This done, as soon as the memory of the facts requires to be revived, all these places are visited in turn and the various deposits are demanded of their custodians. We have to think of the ancient orator as moving in Imagination through his memory building *whilst* he is making his speech, drawing from the memorised places the images he has placed on them. This method ensures that the points are remembered in the right order, since the order is fixed by the sequence of places in the building.” (1)

Truth is under attack on many sides today. The veracity of facts and history is being challenged by political discourses based on emotion and prejudice. The effective counter to these attacks is the development and maintenance of strong institutions. This is why UN development goal number sixteen sets out the objective – “*To promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.*” The creation and maintenance of accurate records of births, deaths, and census data archived in independent national institutions, are fundamental to citizen’s rights.



July 1922, Herbert Wood, Deputy Keeper of the Public Records standing in the ruins. UCD Archives, Fitzgerald Collection

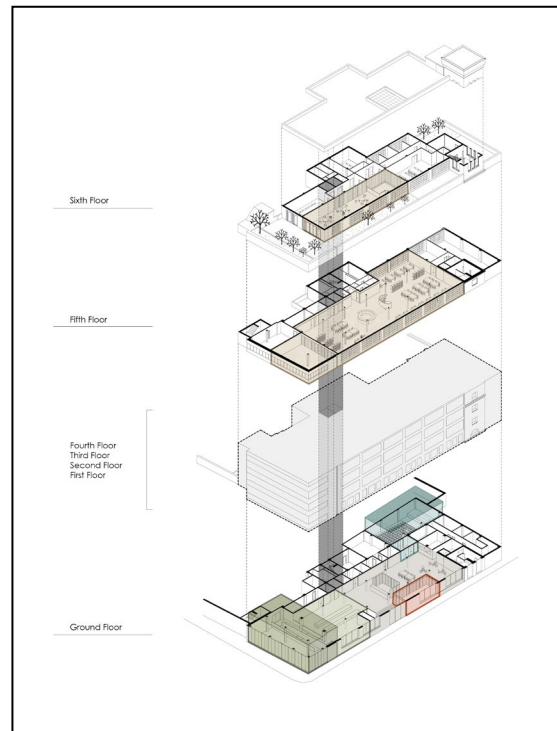
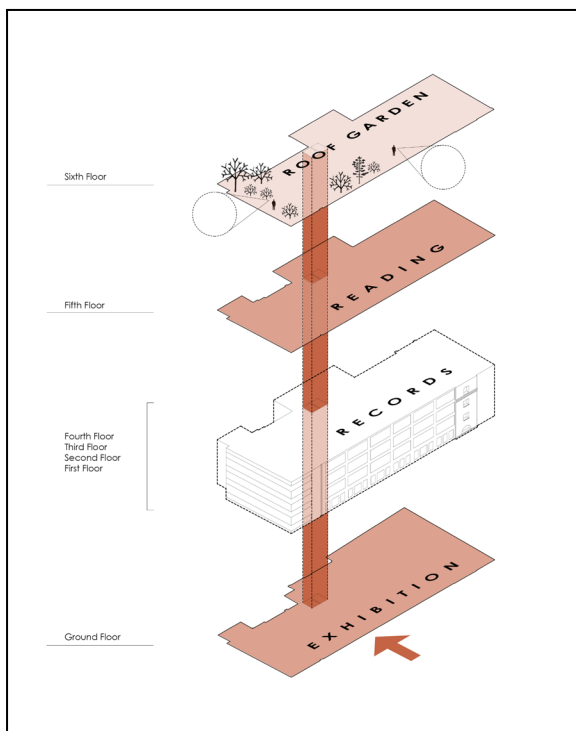
Following the independence of Ireland in 1921 there was a civil war in 1922. During the Battle of Dublin, the Public Records Office in the Four Courts was unintentionally destroyed with the loss of many important documents including all the major census data from the nineteenth century. Fortunately, the 1901 and 1911 census returns had not yet been transferred to the Public Records Office at the time of the fire, so they have survived. In 1988 the Irish state established The National

Archives of Ireland, charged by statute to maintain records of all government departments. The new institution gathered the remaining documents from the Public Records Office along with those saved from the 1922 fire and combined them with the documents from the State Papers office (founded in 1702). The Archives are housed in a converted biscuit factory in the centre of Dublin City. The main building was a six-storey concrete structure from the nineteen thirties. A later section built in the early nineteen sixties has a concrete brick façade with ribbon windows, and this block forms a street-corner linking the earlier concrete building with the rear warehouse section.

The combined building was converted in the 1990s and is largely filled with dense archival storage, with a reading room on the fifth floor. The concrete structure was wrapped externally and fitted-out internally in a postmodern style. Visitors can obtain a reading card to be admitted to the reading room and there is a genealogy service for people who wish to trace their ancestors.

Building as Artefact

In 2018 John McLaughlin Architects were commissioned to design new spaces of exhibition and dissemination through a series of interventions in the building. At the outset we undertook a detailed analysis of the archive and its users, in order to determine the exact brief. By intensifying storage in the warehouse section, it became possible to free up space in the body of the main concrete building for other activities. The sectional organisation of the biscuit factory was based on heavier activities being on the lower levels, with the lighter outward-looking programs housed above. This suggested an archive organised around the storage of documents and artefacts closer to the ground with the study and dissemination activities accommodated in the upper floors.



The major shortcoming of the existing arrangement is the lack of public exhibition space or an auditorium to disseminate the contents of the archive and a lack of facilities for visiting researchers. The existing genealogy service has the most public visitors and it was agreed that this would be better if it was located near the entrance before the more secure zone requiring reading card access. These requirements suggested a public-facing ground floor with storage above. Research into the history of the original factory building revealed that there had been a gymnasium and outdoor terrace for the

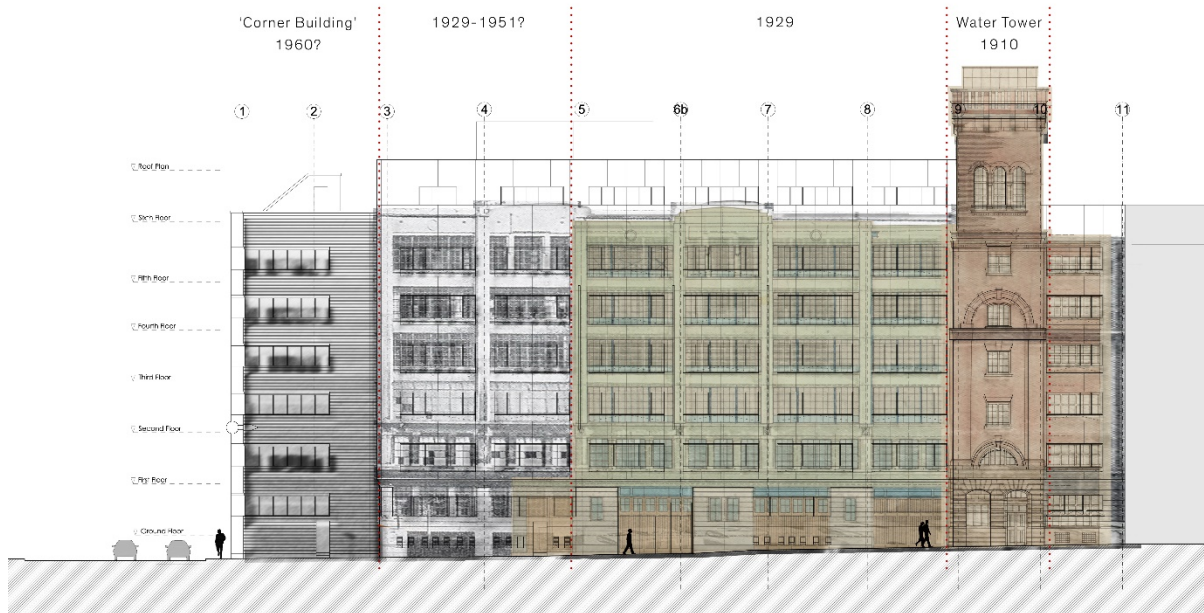
workers at roof level, so we decided to rework these as facilities for archive staff and visiting readers. In bringing to light the social history of the factory as an artefact in its own right, we sought to explore the ethical relationship between the building as factory, and the building as archive. As Wessel de Jonge has commented in relation to adaptive reuse of historical buildings –

“Riegl’s value set demonstrates that any act of conservation is somehow a compromise between, on the one hand the ideal of maintaining the historic ‘truth’ of material authenticity of the historical form and fabric as much as possible, and on the other hand the inevitable need to adapt technical and/or aesthetical performance to current needs.” (2)



Our design approach builds on a body of work that we have developed through our practice in the space of exhibitions and biennales since 2012, exploring how knowledge can be displayed and disseminated through layered spaces. Responding to Rem Koolhaas’ proposal for a research-based biennale, our pavilion of Ireland at the Venice Architecture Biennale in 2014, (curated in collaboration with Gary A. Boyd), used an open ten–square matrix to display a history of infrastructural architecture in the re-making of Irish identity since independence. An expanded edition of this exhibition was commissioned by the Arts Council of Ireland in 2016 to commemorate the 1916 “Easter Rising” that led to Irish independence. These pavilion structures were conceived as contemporary insertions into the older “host” buildings – both the *Arsenale* complex in Venice, and a nineteenth century Real Tennis Court building in Dublin. They allow simultaneous readings of the modern pavilion and the older host structure as both being equally present. The pavilion sought to act as both a *cadre* (frame) and *agencement* (framework), embodying a structured space imagined as being essentially provisional, that attempted to both hold and present material *and* a way of seeing. (3) For us this links to a wider cultural reading of ruins and historical artefacts where they embody a set of temporal and historical paradoxes –

“The ruined building is a portal into the past; its decay is a concrete reminder of the passage of time. At the same time, the ruin casts us forward in time; it predicts a future when our present will slump into similar disrepair or fall victim to some unforeseeable calamity. The ruin, despite its state of decay, somehow outlives us. And the cultural gaze that we turn on ruins is a way of loosening ourselves from punctual chronologies, setting ourselves adrift in time.” (4)



Architecture and Memory

Our approach to the architecture of the factory building is to pare back the nineteen nineties additions to reveal the older cast-iron and concrete structure behind. In this way the original building is uncovered as an artefact in its own right. Adaptations involve either the cutting through of concrete slabs or the insertion of walls or screens. This architecture of the consolidated ruin draws on ideas expressed by the landscape theorist Sebastien Marot in his book *Suburbanism and the Art of Memory* where (5), inspired by a passage in Freud's *Civilisation and its Discontents*, he proposes -

“On the one hand, it would lead us to conceive of the preservation of the past in the city as a relatively trustworthy and precise model of the functioning of psychic memory. Accordingly, memory would no longer be considered as a four-dimensional reservoir where events and feelings would be stored, in perspectival order, as complete pictures, to be recalled at will. Instead it would be seen as a process of transformation that, like the city, develops by the rearticulation, layering and reuse of fragments – in short by reconstruction. But on the other hand, the idea would emphasise the fact that, in urban or territorial space, the act of reconstruction does not necessarily imply that earlier states are effaced; on the contrary, under “suitable circumstances”, access to the temporal depth of the tissue remains possible.”

The Archive is the national space of memory, and is essential to the construction of our history. Such an institution can act as a locus where things and statements of events can be formed into histories that challenge and impact on the dominant discourses in society. It is the place where history itself can be “brushed against the grain” (6) and the taxonomy of exhibits can allow open readings for new correspondences to emerge. Read this way, the archive would function both as a repository for our social history and as a generator of knowledge. The architectural project creates the context for these processes. The stripping back of the biscuit factory to expose the rough concrete and cast-iron layers of its construction is intended reveal both the building’s proper history, and to provoke a sense of ephemerality and incompleteness. The rawness of these layers carries an atmosphere of freedom with open spaces filled with daylight, to give a sense of the building as an occupied landscape (7).



Notes

- 1 - Yates, Frances; *The Art of Memory*, (London: Routledge, 1966).
- 2 – De Jonge, Wessel; *Designing from Heritage: Strategies for Conservation and Conversion* (TU Delft; 2017)
- 3 – Boyd, G.A. and McLaughlin, J., 2018. No Fixed Form: The *Infra-Éireann – Making Ireland Modern* Pavilion and the Sites of Modernity. *ARENA Journal of Architectural Research*, 3(1), p.3. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.5334/ajar.60>
- 4 - Dillion, Brian (ed.); *Documents of Contemporary Art: Ruins*. (London: Whitechapel Gallery and MIT Press, 2011)
- 5 – Marot, Sébastien; *Suburbanism and the Art of Memory*; (London; AA Publications, 2003).
- 6 – Benjamin, Walter; Theses on the Philosophy of History, in *Walter Benjamin: Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Ardent (New York: Schocken Books, 1969) Reprinted edition (London: Fontana, 1992).
- 7 – For a discussion of approaches to adaptive reuse see - Plevoets, Bie, and Van Cleempoel, Koenraad; *Adaptive Reuse of the Built Heritage: Concepts and Cases of an Emerging Discipline*, (London: Routledge, 2019).