

Georgian buildings in grave danger - 1bn remedy sought

by Marie Hobbins
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IN stark contrast to the whirr of ongoing development in the city centre and on the riverfront, the future of some 500 Georgian houses in Limerick is under threat, unless a concerted drive is set in motion to conserve this valuable heritage asset.

A conference, hosted by the Irish Georgian Society in association with Limerick City Council, explored the challenge presented in regenerating Limerick's Georgian quarter, which has suffered under-investment and neglect, including dilapidated and subdivided buildings and planning constraints.

The conference highlighted the need to urgently establish an action strategy.

Dick Tobin, senior planner with Limerick City Council, revealed there are 500 Georgian houses in

the city that may not have a long future, due to very shaky foundations.

"It would take approximately one billion euro to restore these buildings. We would be looking for over 400million euro from the Government - but authenticity is valuable.

"The challenge is how to make these buildings useable. Parking is a big problem, but frequently there are big garden areas to the rear of the buildings which could be used for parking and exterior lifts could also be an option".

Property developer, Michael Tiernan, pointed out that identifying tenants would be another challenge.

Denis Leonard, director of Limerick Civic Trust, detailed how the Trust had acquired, and gradually restored, the



Bishop's Palace and the Georgian House at 2, Pery Square, and the meticulous work involved in restoring plasterwork, marbelling, a fireplace, the roof and the installation of under-floor heating.

"Admittedly, a lot of work is involved but it can be done - we have to be creative in how we go about attracting people to live in the Georgian quarter," he said. Issues discussed extended to how families could be attracted to live in Georgian houses, how to interest business people to take up occupancy, and an extension of pedestrianisation to the

Georgian areas.

Observing that "this wonderful architecture is not being given any consideration," Mr Leonard said there are no signs indicating the Georgian Quarter, The People's Park, St Michael's Church and Leamy's School. Nick Sheaff, director of the Irish Georgian Society, was critical that the city's new hotels are receiving more attention than Limerick's architectural heritage.

"Most people live in the suburbs and just drive to town, with the result that the sense of citizenship is very weak and there is not a strong enough sense of community in the city".

Mr Leonard said that a priority would be to appoint a heritage and conservation officer.

"Most other cities have heritage and conservation officers - the Heritage Council of Ireland pays 50 per cent of their salaries - Limerick City Council must be urged to make these appointments.

"Tax incentives must be provided to drive a regeneration project forward. We need to now put together a working group to take it forward but it could be done. In Newcastle, in England, they had 400 Georgian houses in a derelict state, but have successfully restored them".

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