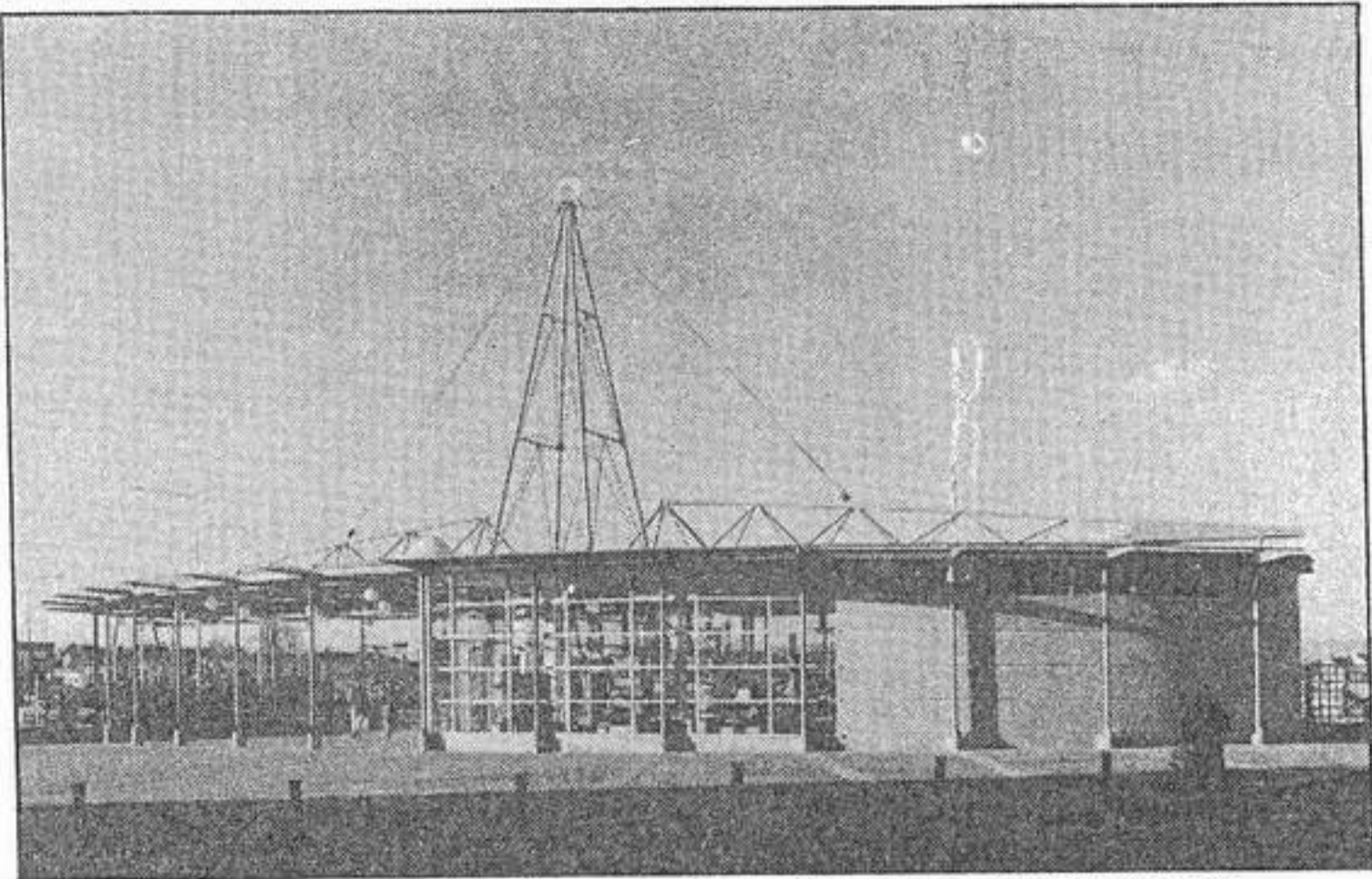


Tropical Fruits Building, Dublin, by Felim Dunne/Beardsmore.



Extension to existing lighting and furniture showrooms, Dublin, by Fitzgerald, Reddy and Associates.



Civic Park and Tourist Information Centre, Limerick, by Murray O'Laire.

Frank McDonald looks at this year's Regional Award winners, presented by the Royal Institute of the Architects of Ireland

A snap-shot of Irish architecture today

THE refurbishment of old buildings for new uses, one of the great challenges of our time, features strongly in this year's RIAI Regional Awards, illustrating that architects — and their clients — are placing much more of a premium on conservation than they did in the past. This also reflects the public mood, which is much less tolerant now of the senseless demolition of historic buildings.

No attempt is made to decide on the "Building of the Year", so there is no overall winner. As John Graby, the RIAI's general secretary put it, "how do you compare, say, the refurbishment of the Taoiseach's offices with the new tourist information centre in Limerick?" Such delicate and complex judgments are left to the institute's triennial awards, in which buildings are judged after they have matured.

The RIAI (Royal Institute of the Architects of Ireland) first launched its regional awards scheme last year, with the aim of drawing public attention to the diversity of contemporary Irish architecture — though there were some who suggested that the real purpose was to retrieve some of the limelight from the awards scheme staged annually by its junior partner, the Architectural Association of Ireland.

It may seem somewhat self-indulgent for architects to be awarding so many prizes to themselves. But if it serves to show the public that there is real talent out there, in shaping the built environment, so much the better. Unfortunately, little enough of it is seen on the ground, because so many of the buildings which are built, in town and country, are designed by architectural hacks.

For the purpose of the RIAI awards, Ireland is divided into five regions — Dublin, Northern, Southern, Eastern and Western —

and there is a special category for Irish architects working abroad, mainly in Britain. In each region, awards are made for buildings costing under £100,000 and over £100,000, to ensure that smaller, more modest schemes are not squeezed out by the big "prestige" projects.

Dublin tends to dominate, with projects in the city accounting for six of the 11 awards. Inevitably, they include the Office of Public Works' £17 million-plus refurbishment in Upper Merrion Street, which the adjudicators described as "a thorough and well-handled transformation of the old College of Science and Engineering to become one of the most visible and prestigious buildings in the State."

Equally visible — and inaccessible — is the West Block of the International Financial Services Centre, flagship of the Government's urban renewal programme, which won an award for its architects, Burke-Kennedy Doyle, in association with Benjamin Thompson and Partners, of Boston. According to the jury, this building manages to be sophisticated, disciplined and carefully-considered.

The new office and residential development on the Grand Canal at Percy Place, designed by Henry J. Lyons and Partners, also features as "a successful new waterfront building combining well-detailed materials with a tremendous sense of scale". Somewhat surprisingly, the more dramatic Bolands Building — by the same architects — is only included among the "also-ran" projects in the awards exhibition.

Two projects which make imaginative use of existing buildings — Bob Bushell's lighting showrooms on City Quay, by Fitzgerald Reddy and Associates, and the Tropical Fruits building on Sir John Rogerson's Quay, by Felim Dunne and Denis Byrne — are included among the Dublin award winners, as is the strikingly

modern fire station at Kill Avenue, Dun Laoghaire, designed by the Borough's architects.

One of the western region awards went to Murray O'Laire for another ultra-modern structure, the tourist information centre at Arthur's Quay, in Limerick, which succeeds in projecting a more sophisticated image for this much-maligned city. Another was won by deBlacam and Meagher for their half-buried Chapel of Reconciliation, in Knock, which the jury described as a building of "great conviction and power".

As a building type, shopping centres haven't provided much of a vehicle for great architectural statements, partly because their layout is largely determined by letting agents. Nonetheless, the RIAI's northern region award went to BDP (Building Design Partnership) for their Castlecourt centre in Belfast, as a successful example of infill — though it meant sacrificing a whole chunk of Royal Avenue.

In the overseas category, Kearney and Kiernan in association with Michael Collins won an award for The Mill, a post-production house in London, which involved the "extremely well-planned" conversion of an existing building. The other went to Brady and Mallalieu for their "delightful renovation" of a small house at Douglas Road, in London. Indeed, the stairs alone is a stunning piece of modern design.

There are lots of other buildings in the exhibition, ranging from The Square, Tallaght, which cost £50 million or more, to individual houses and even gardens, all of which provide the public with a snap-shot of contemporary architecture in Ireland. The exhibition, at the RIAI, No 8 Merrion Square, continues until July 26th, after which it will travel to Galway, London, Cork, Limerick and Belfast.