

City architect Jim Barrett looks out over Limerick from the balcony of the architect's office at City Hall. Below him is the Shannon River he wants to dam.

(DERMOT LYNCH)

## City architect Jim Barrett plots a changing Limerick from a new HQ

# STEERING A REVOLUTION

By ALAN ENGLISH

WHEN you ask Jim Barrett a question, he gives you a straight answer. The city architect has little talent for dodging awkward questions. Nobody, it seems, taught him the art of the carefully constructed, cliché-ridden reply. But then, he's only been a civil servant for five years.

The Corkman came to Limerick Corporation from the private sector. He was a partner in a Dublin firm of architects, but things were slow in the world of commerce. The Irish construction industry was in decline, so he switched to the public service.

Watching him move around the new City Hall, you form the opinion that Jim Barrett changed jobs because he needs to be part of the action. In Limerick, he is.

The city streets are changing dramatically and Barrett, unquestionably, is steering the visual revolu-

tion. He has a strong and confident belief in his own generation of architects. Diplomatically, he makes the point that to champion constantly the splendour of old buildings is to damn today's architects.

### Reminisce

"People still reminisce about the old buildings, but we can't go on forever copying past forms and past things. We must make our own statement. There's something of a crisis of identity about it, because to look back on old buildings all the time suggests a lack of confidence with our own generation." That is something he has no time for.

Sometimes, it's possible to feel sorry for Jim Barrett, the public servant. Twice a month, he has to turn up at Corporation meetings and answer to our elected representatives.

If ever there was a group of people deeply suspicious of modern architecture, it is the elected members of Limerick Corporation.

"Through the chair," they grumble, "is there any guarantee that this will not turn out to be one of those horribly modernistic monstrosities that

are cropping up everywhere?"

Barrett defends the work of his colleagues with great patience. Sometimes, when the questions coming at him reach new depths of ineptitude, he has to summon on all his inner strength.

For example, take the new £2 million city centre park at Arthur's Quay. Work will begin there this week, when Newbridge contractors Murphy International arrive on site. They'll begin by constructing a riverside walk, extending 15 metres into the river.

Jim Barrett and his colleagues at City Hall have been working on the project for quite a while now. Its most striking aspect will be a spectacular new tourist office to replace the Granary location.

### Complain

People complain that the present tourist office is off the beaten track, hard to find. "This one they won't miss. I can guarantee you that," says the city architect with a smile. It is designed on the same architectural philosophy as the new City Hall. If anything, it's more radical. Naturally, when the plans were revealed to councillors at a Corporation

meeting recently, there were voices raised in acute concern.

"Through the chair," one muttered, "I'm a bit worried about the football shaped building at the front."

Neither was there a standing ovation for the railings all around Arthur's Quay that will secure the new park. They ruined the splendid view from Henry Street, another councillor said.

But Jim Barrett pointed out that an architect has many factors to contemplate at the drawing board. As it turned out, the railings were necessary because of the stiff winds that blow down by Arthur's Quay. The railings act as a block. The riverside walk will be all the more pleasant for being untroubled by gusting winds.

"You can't just design for a building's own sake. There must be a user and buildings or parks must respond to that," Jim Barrett says.

"It's not good enough to merely have the city better than it was last year. What we're designing has to be good in itself, rather than better than what was there before. We've got to make sure that we get it right."

He is very aware of an imbalance of recent development in the city. Almost all has taken place in the lower side of town. The Corporation was fortunate to own a good deal of vacant land, and they used it.

### Priority

They don't own so much near the next big priority, the docklands. City Hall are almost ready to turn the derelict docks around. There are 40 or 50 acres to play around with, but the site at Mount Kennett is the only one in the Corporation's own-

ership.

A major hotel chain is expected to announce plans for a 220-bedroom hotel in the next six weeks. The docks are crucial to Jim Barrett's vision of how good Limerick can get. "It's the soft underbelly that must now be attacked."

"The best natural asset that the city has is its river. Compared to other cities, we are not utilising it as much as we could."

The plan is for a major boating centre, complete with marinas, viable if the river was dammed at the docks. Limerick would have a huge lake in the city centre with access to Lough Derg and the entire Shannon waterway.

On the down side, the Curragour Falls would go. Jim Barrett: "Even at the cost of losing the Falls, this is something that I personally would love to see." To make it happen, private investors must share this enthusiasm. Mr Barrett is confident they will.

There are other priorities, of course, and plenty of them. King John's Castle is shaping up and unlovely Nicholas Street will have to be sorted out. Garage owner Pat Keogh has accepted an offer to move to a new site, and other changes will be made. Nicholas Street, the oldest in the city, is crucially located in the medieval quarter.

The Corporation, frustrated for so long by derelict property, is fully intent on using the impressive new weapon at its disposal, the Derelict Sites Act. What it means is that if you own a derelict property and you don't do something about it, it costs you. Dear.

"The Act will give us an awful lot of muscle. It's going to concentrate people's minds that it's time to get off the pot and do something. It's a significant weapon in our armoury and we will use it - very much so."

The reason he cites for so much visible activity by Limerick Corporation in recent years is the decline in demand for local authority housing. As a result, City Hall were free to work on the neglected inner city. The available land they owned "put us in the driving seat".

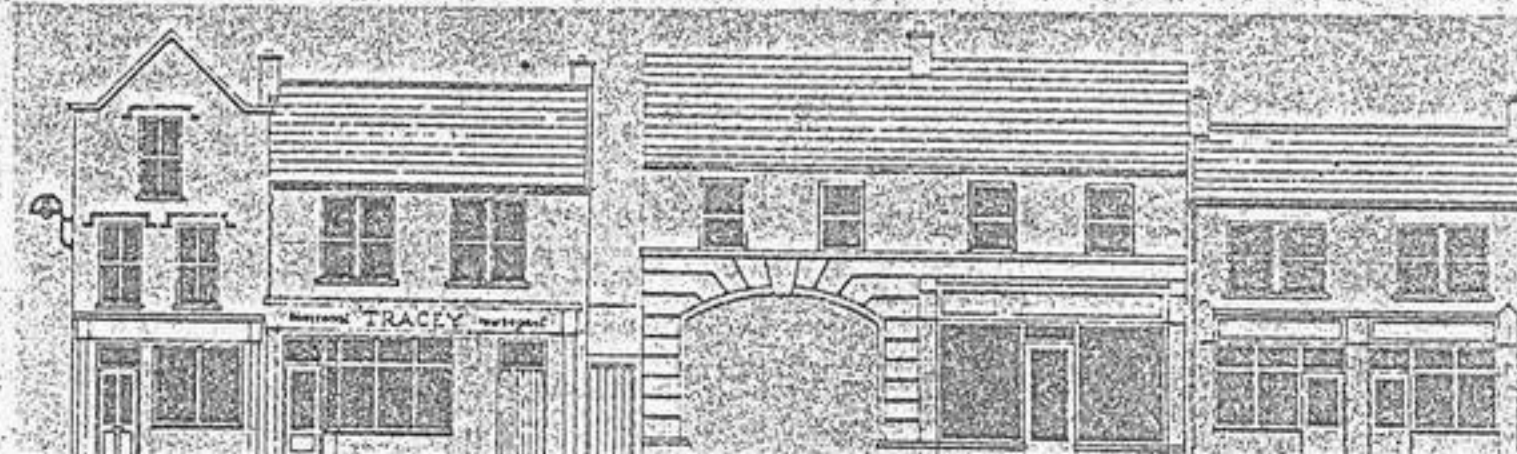
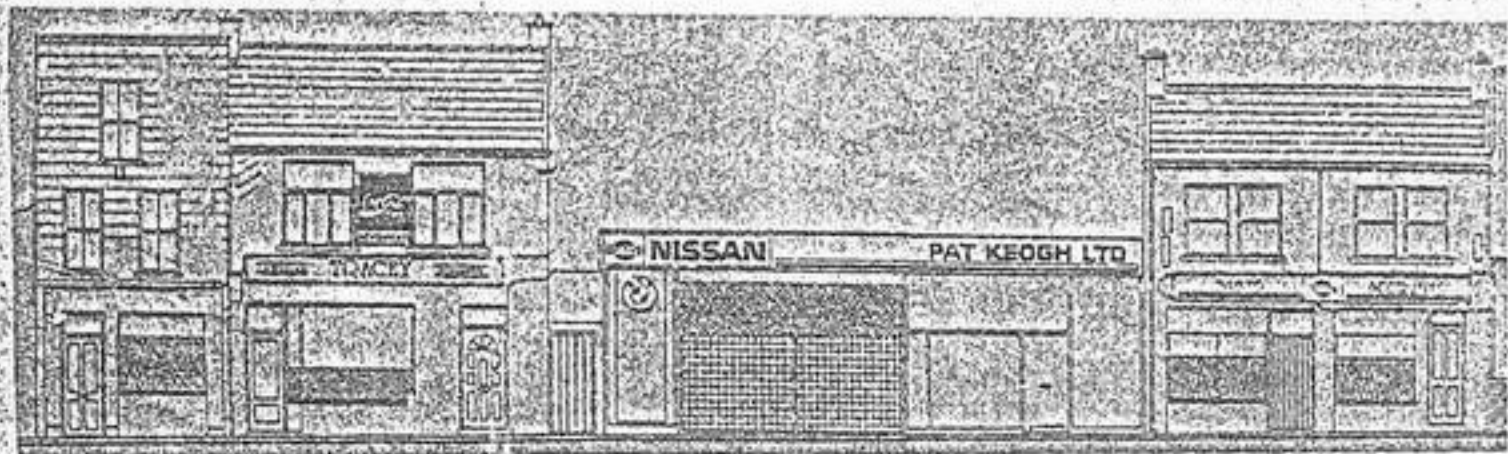
Pedestrianisation at O'Connell Street is also close at hand. It involves two blocks, the one George Hotel is on and the block below. The implications for city traffic have already been closely examined.

The motivation for the move was O'Connell Street's lack of a focal point. "You sort of drift into it from the Patrick Street end and you're never aware of a centre. You don't meet any focal point until you reach the Daniel O'Connell monument."

And there's more. Quite enough to keep the architect's office at City Hall busy for a long time. They're fighting a deadline right now. Various projects, like the city centre park, must be ready for next year's Treaty 300 celebrations. This "concentrates the mind".

Being a part of all that is happening in Limerick is "very satisfying" for Jim Barrett. He enjoys his work.

"It's more than just a job. It's a lifestyle. If you could make it nine to five it would be great, but unfortunately it doesn't work like that."



The old and the new: part of present Nicholas Street (left) and City Hall's vision of how it could look. Pat Keogh's garage is destined to move soon.