

LIMERICK'S NEW LOOK

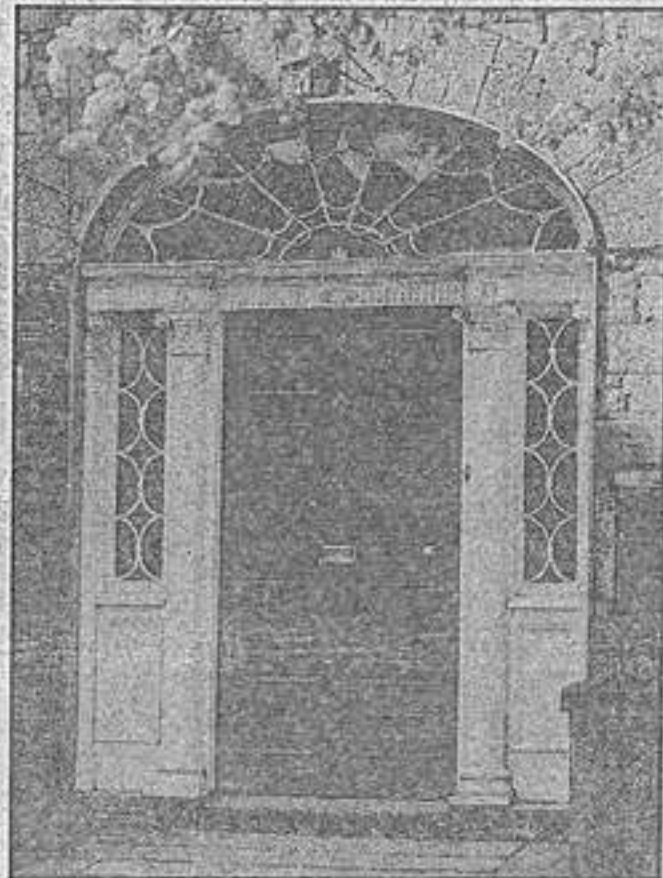
Turning a city around to face the Shannon

The much-maligned city of Limerick, which looked so unloved for so long, is moving in the right direction architecturally, writes Frank McDonald, Environment Correspondent. Jack McManus took the photographs.

WHERE there is no vision, as the old proverb puts it, the people perish. So does the city, one might add, as Dublin surely knows to its cost. It would be an exaggeration to say that Limerick is experiencing a renaissance, but at least this much-maligned city, which looked so unloved for so long, is moving in the right direction — turning itself around, literally and metaphorically, to face the River Shannon.

It is a boldly imaginative vision, which will take years to realise, though several key elements are already falling into place. King John's Castle, rising up from the riverine torrent at Thomond Bridge, is being restored. New civic offices, bright and cheerful, have replaced the forbidding gaol nearby and, most symbolically of all, a quite beautiful public park has been laid out at Arthur's Quay. Occupying the site of a surface car park, it enjoys spectacular views over the Shannon, sweeping downriver from the Castle to Sarsfield Bridge and across to Clancy's Strand. At its southern corner is a stunning tourist information office — a tubular steel structure, in silver and aquamarine, with a roofline which recalls the mast and rigging of a sailing ship. It even has an anchor chain.

Arthur's Quay is only the second park to be created in such a prominent city centre location since the foundation of the State, after Bishop Lucey Park in Cork. With trellis-like railings on the city side and a "decking" area on the river side, it is a



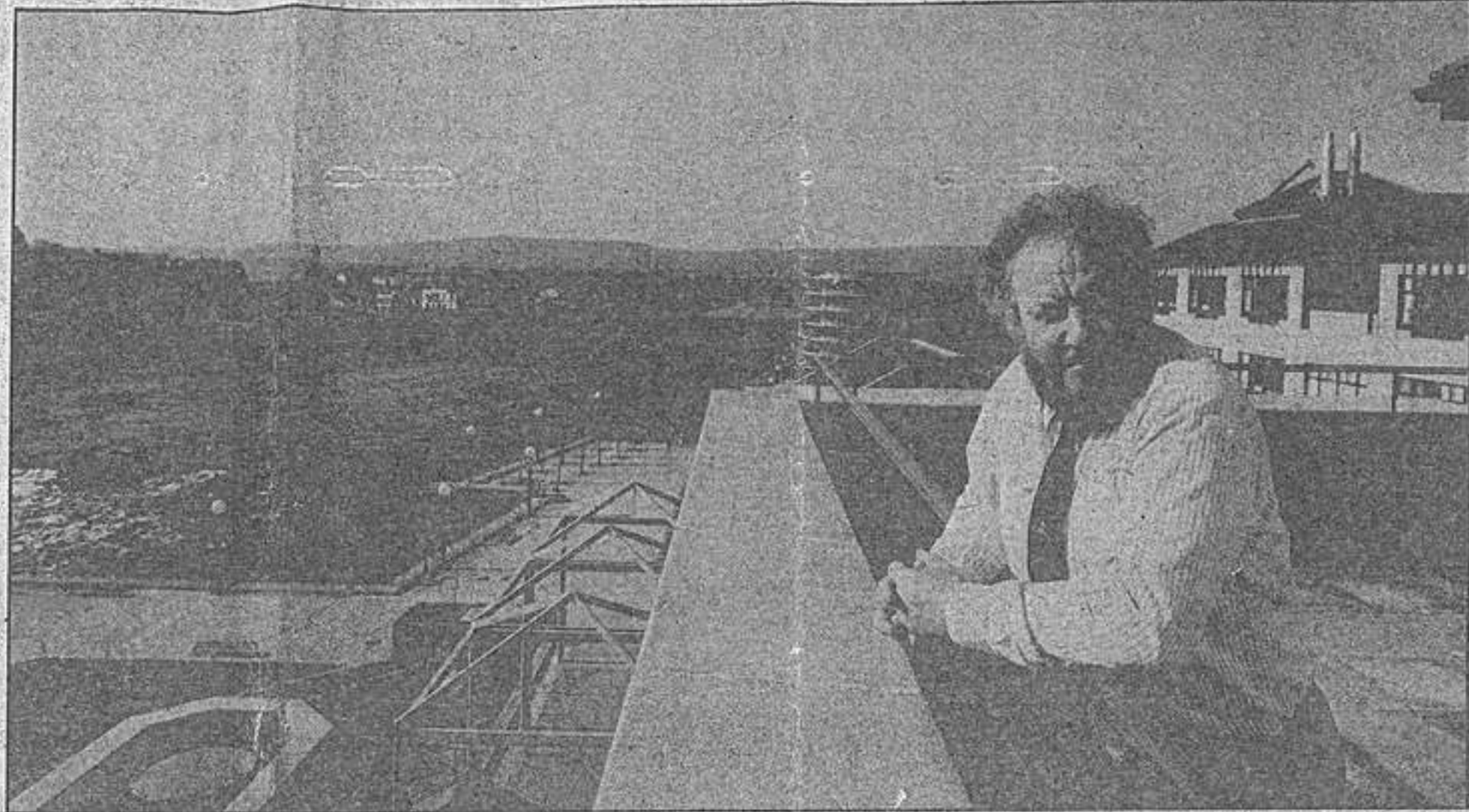
A doorway in John's Square.

unfortunate intrusion of Sarsfield House, a low-grade six-storey office block of 1970s vintage. The pedestrian route continues via an elegant, blue-painted steel footbridge (also by Murray O'Laoire) to the Potato Market and, from there, to the civic offices and King John's Castle.

Limerick faces the Shannon very unevenly, with a frontage ranging from the mercifully suburban Spaight's shopping centre — single-storey with a car park on the

King John's Castle, which is to be the lynchpin of a new "medieval precinct". It is one of Limerick's most historic buildings, though you wouldn't have thought so from its bizarre treatment in recent decades. For standing in the middle of the enclosure here were once 22 local authority houses, built in the 1930s, with front and back gardens.

The story goes that Eamon de Valera, during Fianna Fail's brief radical phase, was



Jim Barrett . . . A wheeler-dealer, buttonholing developers in pubs to ask them why they haven't started work on some scheme or other.

Jim Barrett is one of three Corkmen being credited with pointing Limerick in its new direction.

Changing the face of a city

THREE CORKMEN are being credited with pointing Limerick in its new direction — Tom Rice, the former city manager; Jack Higgins, his successor, and Jim Barrett, who has been acting as city architect in Limerick for the past six years.

Barrett, as nearly everyone calls him, had the distinct advantage

of long years in the private sector before he took the job. He had also won awards for a solar housing scheme in Clonmel and for what is probably Dublin's best inner city infill, at Meath Street/The Coombe.

Hugely enthusiastic (most of the time) about his task of changing the face of Limerick, he is also a wheeler-dealer, buttonholing developers in pubs to ask them why they haven't started work on

some scheme or other when the planning permission was granted months ago.

One of the first things he wanted to do was to get rid of the local authority houses from King John's Castle, so, after convincing the powers-that-be that it was worth doing, he went around and personally persuaded the residents that he would build new houses for them if they got out.

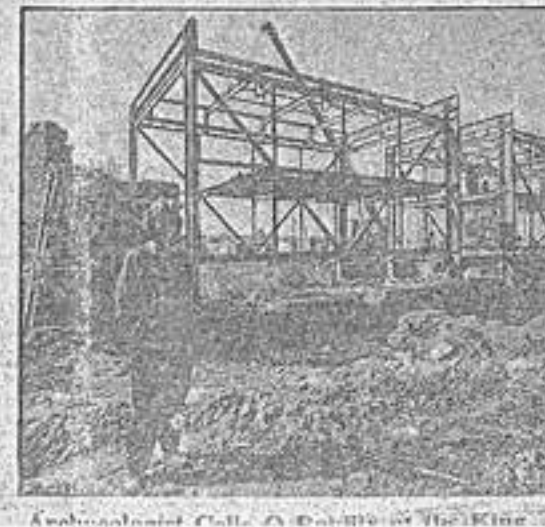
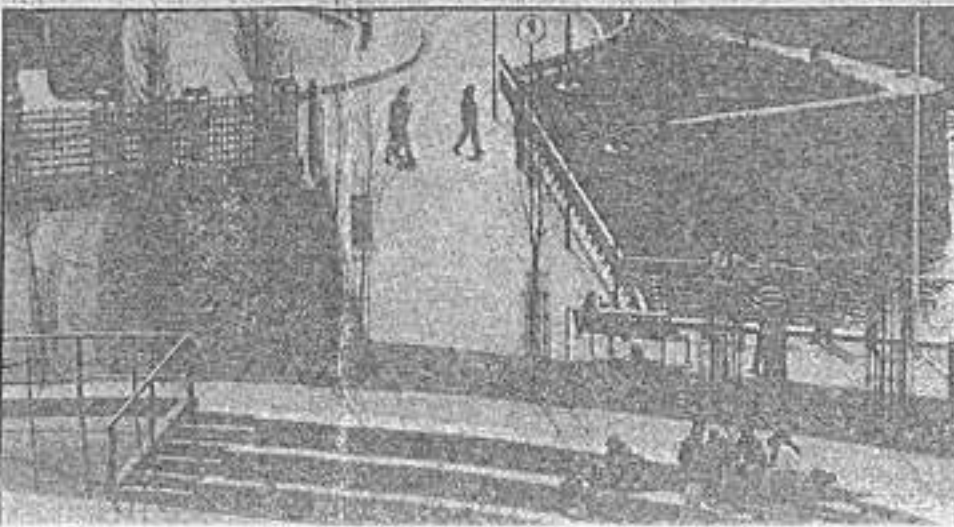
Only one man wouldn't budge

and, hearing that there might be EC funding for the restoration of the castle, he used to call in to Barrett's office. "Do you speak French?", he would ask, "because I'm going to get Jacques Delors after you." Eventually, he agreed to go.

The city architect got into hot water a couple of years ago when he proposed moving the Treaty Stone from its precarious position beside Thomond Bridge to the

square in front of the civic offices. Intense pressure from Thomondgate meant it was moved no more than 50 yards.

In one afternoon, Barrett bought up half-a-dozen run-down buildings on Nicholas Street, one for just £6,000, and all are to be restored by the corporation as part of the "medieval precinct". No wonder the concrete spheres outside the Granary are known as "Barrett's Balls".



Architectural Call: A Building at the King

Some of the new offices at

On the State, after Bishop Lucey Park in Cork. With trellis-like railings on the city side and raked "decking" along the river, it was designed by Murray O'Laore Associates, who are doing more than most to raise architectural standards in Limerick.

The four-acre park was officially opened by President Robinson last January, but it was closed to the people of Limerick until lately because of a problem with public liability insurance. Though rather barren in the centre — it could do with a fountain, perhaps — it forms a most attractive foreground for the large, and reasonably civilised, shopping centre which overlooks Arthur's Quay.

The park is linked with another park in front of the graffiti-scarred Custom House, though both are hugely overshadowed by the

age ranging from the mercifully suburban Spaight's shopping centre — single-storey with a car park on the roof — and the almost equally dreadful Dunnes Stores, at the entrance to the city beside Sarsfield Bridge, to tall and terrible office blocks like Sarsfield House or St Munchin's, which stands — gable to the front — near the famous "Whining Bridge".

To the rear, along Henry Street, are several other office developments carried out in recent years as well as the Savoy Centre, a complex of cinemas, bowling alley and apartments, which required the sacrifice of a fine 1930s cinema interior. Even with a vision, it will take a long time indeed to create a relatively coherent frontage on the city side of the Shannon, to complement what's already there.

Murray O'Laore are involved in the restoration of

The story goes that Eamon de Valera, during Fianna Fail's brief radical phase, was so appalled by the sight of families living by the roadside on the outskirts of Limerick that he ordered houses to be built on all publicly-owned land in the city. Unfortunately, this land included King John's Castle — though it was not then a well-regarded building, having served for years as a British barracks.

There are still people living by the side of the road outside Limerick — this time, it's the travelling community — but the incongruous houses in the castle are gone. In their place is the steel skeleton of an interpretive centre, straddling several layers of archaeology along the line of the long-demolished boundary wall on Nicholas Street. It is the most daring scheme yet for an historic setting anywhere in Ireland.

Not surprisingly, there has been some controversy over the building, with some critics suggesting that it will look like a pair of metal-clad crates linked together with glass and steel. Indeed, even the architects accept that it probably wouldn't have survived if it had to go through the planning process. But it may yet be seen as Limerick's answer to the much-praised pyramid at the Louvre.

Separated from the castle by a green space on the bank of the river are the new civic offices, which the councillors have unaccountably decided to call City Hall. The product of a "design and build" competition won by McInerneys and Burke-Kennedy Doyle and Partners, it comes with shocking pink porticos, dark blue windows set in a "Graniti" facade, multifarious hipped roofs and sheer lift towers.

Inside, along its "glazed street" looking out on a landscaped garden above the river, console brackets from the old courthouse which stood on part of the site are laid upside down, like footscrapers. In the sound-proofed city council chamber, you can still hear the rush of the Curragour Falls while the adjoining district court, in Perry Mason style, has a view of the Shannon from the judge's shower.

The relationship of this new complex with the square outside, which it meets at an angle, is not the happiest, but it certainly projects a more democratic image than Dublin Corporation's bunkers at Wood Quay. Standing above the square, opposite the 1810 neo-classical courthouse, is St Mary's Cathedral, perhaps the least altered of Ireland's medieval cathedrals, which is currently festooned with scaffolding.

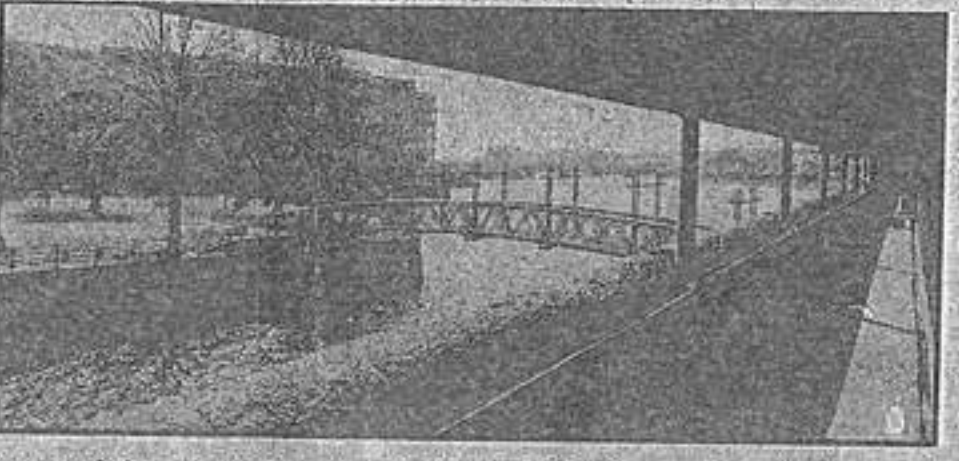
St Mary's is undergoing a £2.5 million restoration programme, for which £1.1 million has already been raised. The Traoiseach, Mr Haughey,



ABOVE: The public park at Arthur's Quay, which has spectacular views over the Shannon.

RIGHT: Restoration work at St Mary's Cathedral, perhaps the least altered of Ireland's medieval cathedrals.

BELOW: The elegant steel footbridge to the Potato Market.



Why demolish Cruises?

CRUISES HOTEL, dating from 1791, has played a leading role in the social and political life of Limerick. It was the Bianconi coach station, the venue for mass meetings addressed by O'Connell, Parnell and de Valera. But now the building it occupied on O'Connell Street is closed and threatened with demolition to make way for a large-scale retail-based development laid out along a new pedestrian street.

According to itself, Limerick Corporation is "committed to preserving the heritage that is essential to Limerick's identity and ensuring its harmonious co-existence with the ambitious projects we are continuously developing". History, it says, "means so much to Limerick. Each generation carries the task of passing that history to the next. And with each generation, that history becomes a little richer".

But Limerick Corporation, like most local authorities, is in favour of "development", in the generic sense, and saw nothing wrong with granting permission last October to Vallbury Ltd to demolish Cruises Hotel, as well as much of Denmark Street, for a "neo-vernacular" scheme consisting of 142,000 square feet of retail space, 93,000 square feet of offices, 25 apartments and a multi-storey car park.

A pair of octagonal towers would flank the entrance to the proposed pedestrian street, but the buildings on either side don't even maintain the parapet height of O'Connell Street. For this and other reasons, such as the fact that the new street would disrupt the grid of the Georgian town, the scheme has been appealed by the newly-formed Living City Group — even though this means taking on the establishment.



Cruises Hotel... Could it be the Shelbourne of Limerick?

There is a view in Limerick that the city needs more high-quality shops, though it is doubtful if its economic base is strong enough to take another scheme of the scale proposed — especially on a site just across the street from the new shopping centre at Arthur's Quay. All shops in the city must also compete with the three large out-of-town shopping centres in Co Limerick, beyond the corporation's boundary.

Cruises could, of course, be refurbished as a hotel, because it is a remarkable fact that there isn't a single Grade A hotel in the city centre. Jury's is across the river, off the Ennis Road, in a squat complex of two-storey buildings, and the latest Grade A hotel to open is the Castletroy Park, out near Plassey. If the shopping scheme is abandoned, might Cruises become the Shelbourne of Limerick?

is one of the patrons but, so far, the State has only pledged £200,000 towards the cost. Work involves major renovations to the roof as well as stripping plaster from the interior and repointing the exterior with white lime mortar, which should weather in time.

Outside, the Limerick Civic Trust is carrying out yet another of its FAS-aided environmental projects — the creation of a new opening, flanked by relocated gate pillars, to link the cathedral more directly to the square below. Across the way is the Potato Market, which it restored in 1987 at a cost of £450,000 though, sadly, its principal use today is surface car parking.

The trust, which is headed by Denis Leonard, was set up in 1983 to "improve Limerick's environment by positive action". Its largest project to date has been the laudable, if freehand, restoration of the c.1700 Bishop's Palace, which had long been threatened with demolition for a road scheme. Cheaply done, for only £160,000, the work has not found much favour among

architectural historians.

The Civic Trust is collaborating with Limerick Corporation and Shannon Development in a £10.5 million plan to develop Englishtown, the oldest part of the city, as a "medieval precinct". However, the corporation still intends to run a new road through the area, to connect Thomond Bridge with the Dublin Road, irrevocably altering the street pattern, which has already been broken by intrusive suburban-style housing.

It is ironic that a terrace of vernacular housing in Garryowen, opposite St John's Cathedral, which would have looked just right in Englishtown, are being blocked up for demolition by the corporation. Just around the corner, the civic design quality of St John's Square would benefit enormously by the relocation here of the flamboyant statue of Sarsfield, wasted in the grounds of the presbytery.

The three-sided Georgian square, with its chunky limestone facades, was the earliest of Limerick's restoration projects, undertaken in the

late-1970s, but it is now blighted by the more recent insertion of PVC windows in the house occupied by the Catholic Boy Scouts of Ireland. Perhaps they took their cue from the Victorian Gothic presbytery, which has also been defaced by the PVC plague.

The corporation appears unconcerned about the proliferation of PVC and aluminium windows, even in Newtownperry, Limerick's Georgian core. This whole area was laid out on a strong grid in the late 18th century, like a smaller version of Edinburgh's New Town. But unlike Edinburgh, Limerick has done little or nothing of practical value to protect its Georgian heritage, and this shows in the streets.

Apart from aluminium/PVC windows, and the hideous profusion of plastic signs, Newtownperry is now facing another threat. It is caught in a virtual pincer movement between the 50-acre urban renewal designated area, in and around the medieval town, and a newly designated tax incentive zone of nearly

100 acres near the docks. As a result, much-needed investment in the Georgian core has been badly hit.

Whatever some politicians and civil servants may think, urban renewal cannot be conjured out of the air, as if by magic. The mere act of designating an area for tax incentives will not necessarily produce development, so the only hope for the docks, according to architect Hugh Murray, who is working on a master plan for the area, is some new forms of economic activity — such as a science park.

But there are still large areas of the medieval town which desperately need renewal, ranging from the numerous limestone warehouses to derelict sites of all shapes and sizes — most notably of all the vast expanse of Charlotte's Quay. This is where the corporation intended to build its civic offices, until it decided to locate on the Shannon, and it still lies fallow apart from a couple of forlorn office blocks

Archaeologist Celia O'Rahilly at the King John's Castle excavations.

Some of the new offices at Arthur's Quay.



Tomorrow:
Maol Muire Tynan on Limerick politics.