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Denis Leonard - On the Tiller of Limerick Civic Trust

By Jimmy Woulfe

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LIMERICK'S new look architecture has won much outside admiration for the developers of today.

The preservation of the old Limerick has made Limerick Civic Trust a role model for the rest of the country.

Projects on Georgian Limerick have won national and European environment awards for the trust.

It has an impressive CV of achievement and the man with his hand on the tiller from day one is Denis Leonard, it's director.

Denis was in a way provoked into getting a Civic Trust formed in Limerick while in conversation with a Dublin friend.

He told Denis he would not take up any kind of transfer to Limerick as he would see it as a backward career step.

"That remark made be a bit shirty and I decided it was time for action," he recalled.

Denis, then a banking executive in Limerick, was active in Junior Chamber of which he was president.

"We decided in junior chamber to do a project on community response and I said I would answer the Dubs by pointing out the quality of life and what we had to offer."

The Limerick Image committee was formed and the chief executive of Shannon Development, Paul Quigley came up with the idea of a Civic Trust for Limerick, having seen one operate in the UK.

"There was not Civic Trust in Ireland at the time, even though they had been in operation in England since 1957. Paul Quigley brought over David Fletcher and he spoke to the Limerick Image group and we thought it was a

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great idea."

The project developed apace. A public meeting was called at Mary Immaculate on February 17, 1983 as the Image group felt it was time to gather all the hurlers off the ditch and kick into action.

"David Fletcher came over and was the principal speaker and there was a very big attendance. It was chaired by the Mayor Tony Bromell and among those present was the Minister for Justice, Michael Noonan, TD. This proved there was a great desire for a Civic Trust and we were right in our judgement on the matter," said Denis.

An initial steering committee, chaired by Denis moved ahead with a project to build a new boundary wall at St Mary's Cathedral. This was followed by the Limerick Memorial near Jury's Hotel and restoration work at the Potato Market which was their first big undertaking.

Initially the projects targeted by the fledgling Civic Trust were low-cost environmental improvements in conjunction with AnCo, the state manpower agency at that time.

Employment grants, funding from the corporation, Shannon Development and private subscriptions from the people of the city kept projects funded.

In those initial days the trust had a turnover of about £4,000 and in the second year this went to over £50,000.

The Trust was employing 47 people on different schemes through AnCO and it was being managed on a voluntary basis with Denis, who was chairman, supervising things from an office in his own home.

"Seamus Gubbins took over as chairman. A decision had then to be made to go one of two ways: reduce it back to a manageable size as a voluntary organisation or employ a fulltime director and move forward."

Denis applied for the advertised position of director and got it.

The work of the Civic Trust was then expanded to include research and to cope with this an additional office was taken in the Tait Centre.

And in 1987 the trust bought the ruined site of the Old Bishops Palace for £1,000.

"It was just a shell of a building and there was a demolition order on it. We rebuilt it with the help of money from the National Lottery and we also took out a bank loan. That was a good decision to rebuild it in situ. It has given us an identity and other organisations use so it is a community/civic building and it looks a stunning building."

Projects which brought the Civic Trust national recognition were the restoration of the Jewish cemetery in Castletroy and the Quaker cemetery in Ballinacurra.

"In both cases the communities had been reduced greatly in numbers. There were only two members of the Jewish community in Limerick and it had gone beyond their capabilities of maintaining it. The overgrowth was up to five feet high and it was rampant. The Jewish community came up with money as did the County Council and Paddy Hoare, the builder helped. Fas also came in and we commenced work on it. The opening was seen as the great reconciliation. Members of the Jewish Community were delighted. As well as the Chief Rabbi, the re-dedication ceremony was attended by Bishop Newman

and Bishop Darling and that in itself was a very historic occasion. It also presented Limerick in a very ecumenical light. Many members of the Jewish Community travelled from Limerick for the ceremony. At the Quaker graveyard we made representations to see if the Civic Trust could do that up. It is located near Punch's Cross and there had been a lot of vandalism there. The Quaker Community has made a great revival in Limerick and have built a new meeting house near the graveyard in the old care-takers place. We did something very good there which was only right as the Quakers were very good to Limerick people during Famine times. You could say when their tie of need came to help them out we were there to do that. It also gave a different dimension to the Civic Trust."

International recognition was bestowed in the trust for the work it carried out at the Crescent and the O'Connell monument when it won a European architecture heritage award in 1992.

"That was a great plus for the city as there were 956 entries from all over Europe. The Milk Market also won an award that year and this proved how Limerick had succeeded in looking after its architectural heritage."

Denis is quite frank that he is less than happy about the water feature installed by the O'Connell monument.

"We are not running away from the problem. The big problem stems from the lack of a strong flow of water and we might have to re-pipe. There is meant to be a cascade there and we are going to resolve it."

The blue mosaic at the base of the statue has also aroused a lot of criticism, but Denis says this feature is the least of their problems as it can easily be covered over.

He says the flower beds need also reshaping as they are too close to the road and are constantly being damaged by passing traffic.

The success of the work on the facade of buildings in the Crescent, prompted the trust to pursue their work on the revival of Georgian Limerick.

"We always felt that Georgian Limerick was the poor relation. All the designation had been in the Englishtown and the Irishtown where there was a total revival. The Georgiantown fell behind in its restoration. We decided to have a Georgian showhouse to display the beauty and splendour of Georgian Limerick."

An opportunity presented itself when a building in Pery Square came on the market. It was built in 1838. The trust purchased it for £175,000 with the help of a Department of the Environment grant.

Work is now almost nearing completion on the building and the trust have restored it to its former Georgian glory and it recently won an AIB Greater Ireland Award.

"It is a stunning building and will be a great asset to the city. It will be opened officially next December for the Millennium"

In tandem with the restoration, the Civic Trust has carried out research into the origins of Georgian Pery Square.

"Pery Square was built by the Pery tontine which is a fascinating story in itself and we are writing a book about it. It was a rich-mans game and was a syndicate of people who pooled sufficient money to erect the building development. They each bought a life share in the tontine. That was the

gamble. The longer you lived the better chance you had of winning. If you died your share went. There were 89 shares originally. It took from 1840 until 1913 for 83 members of the original tontine to die. The six remaining members then each got a house in Pery Square and the tontine was wound up."

The restored building will also include a museum.

Work is also being carried out at the City Wall at Johns Gate by the trust. Other works are also being carried out at the canal and a second publication on Georgian Limerick is also in train.

Said Denis: "We employ between 85 and 95 at any one time through five different state schemes and our turnover is now over £900,000. I think the Civic Trust is a major success story and a credit to the people of Limerick who backed it from day one."

Others have followed where Limerick Civic Trust has led and there are now 13 other Civic Trusts in the Republic.

"We have help start up 11 of these, and this is a great achievement to have people from Dublin, Cork, Waterford and major towns approaching us to find out what we have achieved and how we went about it. This something that Limerick can be proud of that the Civic Trust is the role model for the rest of the country."

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