

# A roof that leaves udders in the shade

**The bold new canopy on Limerick's Milk Market gives the city an all-weather trading area and fresh civic pride, says Stephen Best**

In a city of many divisions, one of Limerick's oldest, dating from the 17th century, is that which distinguishes the two districts at its centre, English Town and Irish Town. The former is the seat of King John's castle, the latter an area of markets south of Charlotte's Quay that — like much of the city — has long been in decline.

Run-down, underfunded and undervalued, Limerick's markets have ebbed in the face of the corporate retailers' advance, as big-box retailers on the city's periphery sucked in consumers, in a pattern replicated countless times elsewhere. Even the Milk Market, which opened on Mungret Street in the 19th century and was long a hub of enterprise in Irish Town, had declined to the extent that it functioned as a market merely for five hours on Saturdays, earning its keep as a car park for the rest of the week. In the first six months of this year, however, the Milk Market was overhauled, its new fabric roof and other architectural interventions, though modest in scope, providing a classic example of how to revitalise the historic urban fabric.

The original market building, which was constructed in 1830, comprised a single-storey covered colonnade, one room deep, that embraced an open courtyard of 1,700 square metres. Fifteen years ago, Limerick Market Trustees, the 27 members of which oversee the

city's markets, initiated a refurbishment plan intended to restore it to its original function. Three years ago, the trustees awarded the redesign contract to a locally based practice, Healy & Partners Architects, whose work has ranged from high-tech retail spaces to conservation work such as the restoration, completed last year, of Killua Castle in Westmeath.

The reworking of the Milk Market involved three significant interventions: a single-storey pavilion with roof-level access; repaving of the courtyard; and a roof cover to protect against the elements. The project is about structural exuberance and the opportunities for social interaction that the now covered market provides. It's a game of sudden revelation always played

by the best architecture, with the bright white tented cover over the courtyard the outstanding feature.

At street level, the market's new, modern insertions contrast sharply with the rather subdued, expressionless buildings surrounding it. The doors into the market's permanent shops supplement its two main entrances, making the perimeter feel more permeable and giving the overall space a sense of transparency, as well as engaging the surrounding streets with the market and integrating the two.

At 24 metres high — the equivalent of eight storeys — and with an area extending to more than half an acre, the market's new covering is the largest single-support canopy in Ireland. Viewed from afar, it has a subtle yet significant impact, a taut white cone rising by day on the horizon, peeking above its four-storey surroundings and establishing a strong visual marker against the brick and slate cityscape. Lit from the interior at night, it appears as a milky white lantern.

Inside, the courtyard tapers from 39 metres wide to 30, with a gentle fall from corner to corner of about a metre, the new roof making the space feel less like an open square than a monumental but still intimate room. Five steel columns hold the canopy in a classic tensile structure, one column in the centre and one at each corner. The columns held in compression are

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painted white, contrasting with the rods held in tension and painted grey that hold the columns down and the canopy tight.

The single-storey pavilion on the Mungret Street side of the square, darkly coloured with a smoked glass balustrade and stained brown timber cladding, takes up 141 square metres of the courtyard.

The canopy, held taut like a drum, does not quite reach the corners, where it is secured, instead

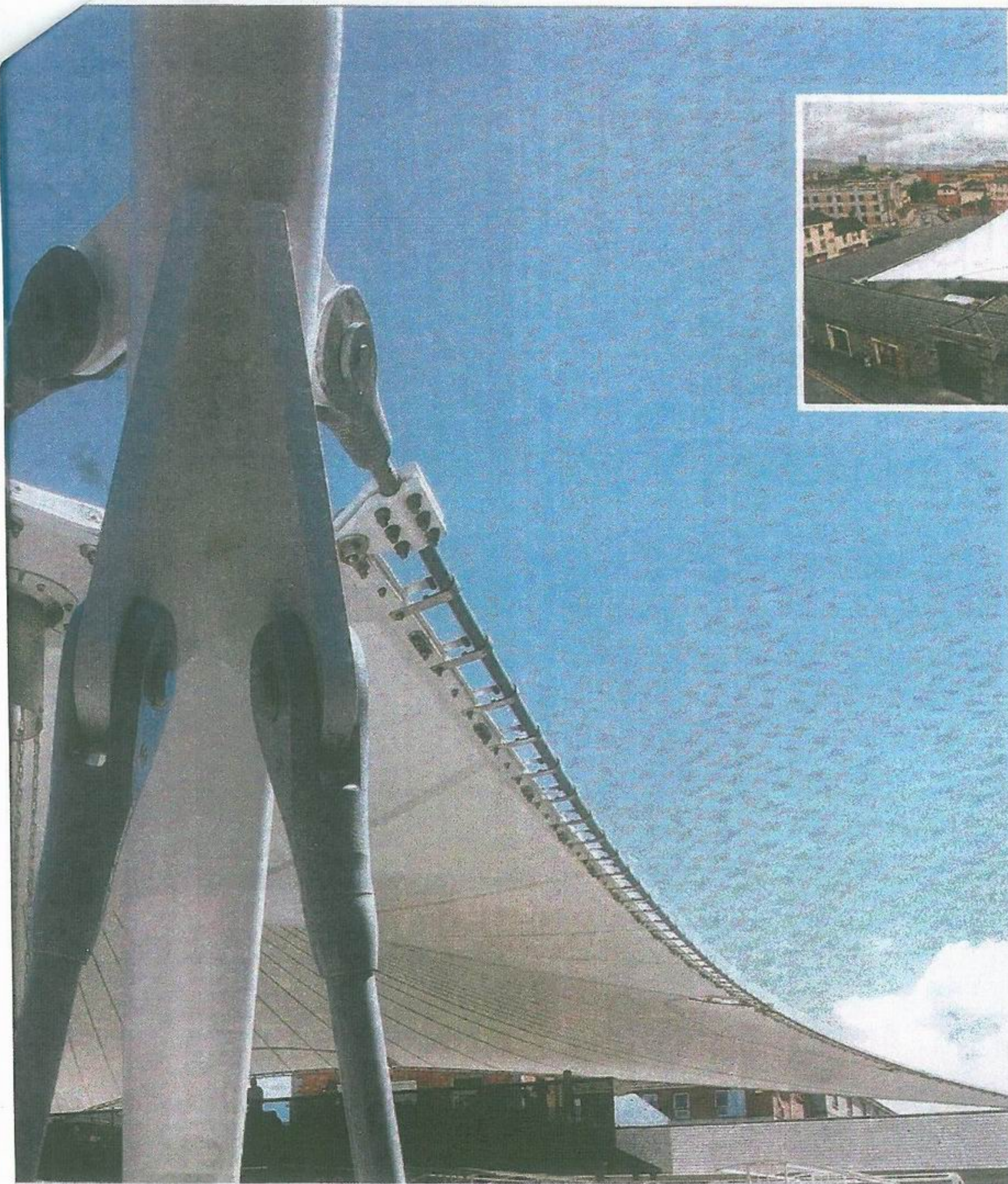
standing clear of the existing structure to form a gap. A glass roof-light provides a visual focus, appearing like an open hole at the apex — perhaps a nod to the Pantheon in Rome.

It appears distant against the bright fabric flowing down from it, an effect emphasised on cloudless days when it seems like a light blue stained glass lens reminiscent of the American artist James Turrell's "skyspace" pieces.

Made from a Teflon-coated fab-







Turning a whiter shade of pale: the giant canopy covering Limerick's Milk Market has given a new centre of focus to a run-down area

ric with a striking radial stitch pattern, the canopy stretches like a sail from the central tensioning ring to the square perimeter. Largely maintenance-free, it requires a power-wash only once every seven years, according to Richard Rice, the project architect.

The fabric is bound to a perimeter cable held down at each corner, with a small gutter hidden above the cable pushing rainwater to the corners and making the edge less of a drip hazard.

The structural engineer on the project was Schlaich Bergermann and Partners, a Stuttgart-based practice whose contribution reinforces the sense that the design, with the architecture enhanced by the engineering, takes its cue from the work of Frei Otto, the German architect, especially his pavilion at the 1967 Montreal Expo, a building considered an inspiration for the high-tech movement that followed.

Although the fabric weighs less than 2 tons, the requirement to

engineer the structure for a once-in-50-years gale meant that each of the eight vertical rods that anchor it has a remarkable load-bearing capacity of 120 tons. This built-in contingency helps explain the monumental appearance of some of the structural elements supporting the roof, which seem slightly out of proportion.

Pinned down in each corner, the canopy creates arc-shaped gaps between it and the existing building, a protected structure. On wet

and windy days, this serves as a physical reminder that this is an outdoor experience. It is also an architectural expression of respect between the new and the existing, each resolved independently and comfortable in its own skin.

The market is a welcoming building with careful detailing and muted tones that complement each other. The new steel-and-fabric structure in modernist white enhances the grey tones of the stone, slate and painted timber

perimeter. Together, they form a muted background for the vibrant activity generated by the market and the colours of the produce.

The canopy would be an uncommon object in any Irish city. Apart from the giant, eight-storey-high central mast, weighing 5 tons, complex structural gymnastics take place at each corner, and this is what drives the aesthetics of the scheme. The current popular trend towards suppressing or hiding structure is supplanted at the Milk Market by minimal detailing and structural expression. It is all cleverly done with little fuss and includes poetic moments such as the view through the glass roof at its centre where you can see captivating views of passing clouds.

The market, with an existing footfall of several thousand on Saturday mornings, aims to extend its influence over the commercial heart of Limerick. The trustees plan to use it as a cultural venue, an indication of the revival of the local market as a social facilitator.

These are early days but the future for Limerick's Milk Market looks positive. Its success will depend as much on the ease of access as the quality of social experience that it offers. Architecturally, it provides a happy juxtaposition between the restored building and the new structure, and has revived old and worthwhile notions about public space and civic pride. ■