

The Architectural Development of St. Camillus' Hospital

by Emma Gilleece

Limerick City hospitals, in the first half of the twentieth century, represent a wide range of conflicting ideological, cultural, historical issues in their design and function; from financing and staffing to drawing the line between the public health and the public good. St Camillus' Hospital opened during a time of questionable funding, as the church still ran Irish hospitals and the idealism of Irish Independence had to be maintained at any cost.

Nineteenth Century Healthcare

Before the Second World War the hospitals that served Limerick city were St John's Hospital (est. 1780), Barrington's Hospital (1829), the Lying-In Hospital, Bedford Row (1812) and the County Infirmary on Mulgrave Street (1811). In 1931 the urgent need for a hospital for the treatment of tuberculosis and other contractible diseases was identified and the Limerick County Borough Board of Health soon set about applying for sanatorium grants to establish a 'separate block of the City Home and Hospital for the reception and treatment of advanced cases of Tuberculosis' under Section 6 of the Public Charitable Hospitals (Amendment) Act 1931.²

Right: Irish Hospitals Sweepstake ticket 1940, from the Irish Sweepstakes File, National Archives, (Image by Emma Gilleece 2010)

Gambling for the Hospitals

From the late nineteenth century until 1947 the cost of the public health services was borne almost entirely by local authorities who derived their funding from local ratepayers.³ The government was not prepared to come to the aid of the hospitals by increasing the level of parliamentary grants last fixed in the 1850s. This most notable field of architectural activity during the early years of Irish Independence was stimulated by the establishing of the Hospital Sweepstakes in 1930, originally intended to raise funds for some voluntary hospitals in Dublin, but soon expanded

to become the prime source of finance for a comprehensive hospital-building campaign throughout the state. Prior to the advent of the Sweepstakes no public hospital building of any significance had been undertaken since 1904.⁴ Throughout the 1930s Ireland became internationally known for its sweepstakes and received world press coverage, both good and bad.⁵ While the Irish Hospital Sweepstakes Trust was in existence St Camillus' received £229,480 in capital grants.⁶



New tuberculosis hospital after completion from Brendan Connellan *Light on the past, Story of St Mary's Limerick 1838-1938* (Limerick, 1938), p.60

Limerick Union Workhouse

St Camillus' Hospital was constructed on the site of a nineteenth century Limerick Union Workhouse on Shelbourne Road and associated infirmary built in 1839-41 to the design of George Wilkinson on an 12-acre site on the east side of Shelbourne Road, across the Shannon to the north-west of the city. It was designed to hold 1,600 inmates consisting of the aged poor, the destitute, the sick and deserted women and children were moved here after the closure of the House of Industry which later became the Strand Barracks.⁷ The thinking at the time was for these 'undesirables' to be moved out of sight, away from the residences along Clancy Strand. It still operates as a hospital and other HSE related activities, including the city registrar within the oldest part in a Tudor-Gothic style. Suburbia eventually

reached out to the workhouse in the early part of the twentieth century. The early development of the Shelbourne Road was facilitated by the opening of the Wellesley Bridge in 1835 connecting Newtown Pery to the Clare side of the Shannon. The area is characterised by large private residences set within spacious plots.

Staffing

This was the first workhouse facility in the country where the Mercy Sisters ministered (since 1860). They lived in the adjoining convent dedicated to St Camillus from which the hospital derived its current name. Even though they were fulfilling what they believed to be a nun's vocation tending the sick, as early as 1867 there was a strong debate 'over getting rid of the Sisters of Mercy' as it did not sit well with the Protestant members of the Board of Guardians.⁸ The religious nursing orders however were not involved in the running of maternity hospitals either in the Lying-in Hospital on Bedford Row or the later Mid-West Regional Maternity Hospital, as it was believed that their modesty would be wounded.⁹

The City Home

In 1920 the Limerick Union Workhouse was converted into the Limerick City Home run by the County Board of Health. It was a multi-purpose health and welfare institution for the treatment of fever patients, the elderly and the confinement of unmarried mothers and their babies. The threat of being sent to the 'City Home' would silence any naughty child in Limerick. After the establishment of the Free State one of the first issues to be tackled by the government was the health of the nation. The existing public hospital system was based on the British Poor Law system. Those who could afford it had general practitioners treat them in their homes. The passing of the Local

Government Act of 1925 meant that the Boards of Guardians were abolished and workhouses closed. Due to desperately low funding being made available there was little choice but to base the re-organised scheme of hospitals on the existing buildings. Nationally thirty-three workhouses were converted into county homes, nine became county hospitals and thirty-two became district or fever hospitals. Tuberculosis and other infectious diseases were the main reasons for Irish adult mortality rates and infant mortality was among the highest in Europe.

Modern Hospital

After the fever epidemics caused mainly by slum housing in the city the need for the treatment of acute medical and surgical cases associated with advanced tuberculosis was never greater. The new hospital St Camillus' which opened in 1933 was designed by Limerick architect Patrick J. Sheahan.¹⁰ In 1934 an ophthalmic section was added. It is a multiple bay, three-storey Art Deco design. The new building served as the fever hospital and sanatorium during the 1940s until the 1960s where major thoracic surgery for the treatment of tuberculosis and its complications was performed. It also housed the paediatric and neonatal unit prior to these services moving to the Mid-West Regional at Dooradoyle (now the University of Limerick Hospital) and to St Munchin's Maternity Hospital on the Ennis Road.

Art Deco Hospital

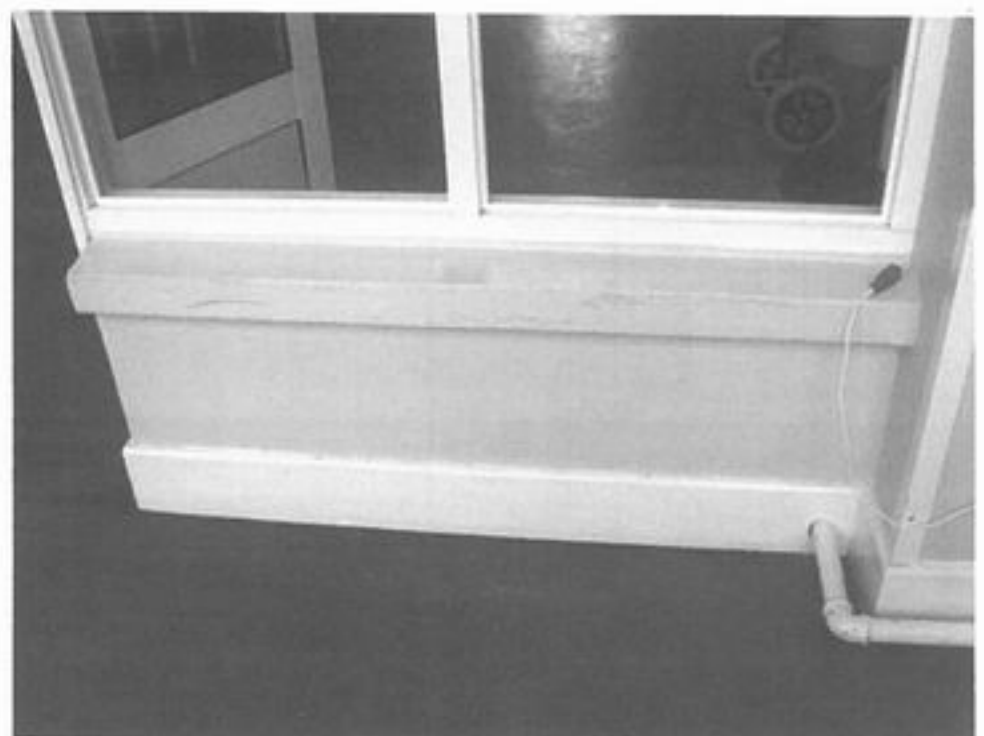
The geometric forms and symmetry is derived from Classical models reinterpreted in new ways. The facade comprises of a stepped rendered panelled parapet descending with each subsequent bay to either side from the centrally-placed entrance bay. Sheahan would repeat this formula in the jazzy breakfront for the Mid-

West Regional Maternity Hospital. The roof is flat and unseen behind the parapet wall. The Art Deco's streamlined appearance is more commonly used in this country for the design of cinemas and the dance halls of the 1930s. It was set within the centre of site southwards, behind the nineteenth century stone workhouse. Contemporary writing on the importance of patient access to free air and sunlight was represented in the concrete balconies on the upper floors. These have been filled in by glass in recent years to create valuable extra accommodation. Unfortunately the PVC windows have compromised the overall aesthetic. It was these geometric voids, typical of Modernist architecture, against the solidity of the wall surface that provided interest in the building when it was first built. Being former balconies these new rooms are narrow (94.5cm in width) are entered via French doors in the centre of the glazed partition allowing natural daylight to fill the rest of the ward. The now internal window sills betray these rooms former outdoor existence.

Its clean lines and smooth rendered walls epitomised the awareness of the necessity of cleanliness and sterile surroundings. Other recent interventions include the blocking up of the main entrance of a square-headed front door. Access is provided through a wheelchair friendly entrance, constructed to the right. A new doorway is created by using the ope of the neighbouring window. The simple yet elegant stepped door case and doorstep are still intact, flanked by square-headed lancet side lights with plain rendered architrave. The original building was extended in 1949 with a wing added either side the full height of the building and the ground floor received flat roof additions. These extensions provided 100 beds for fever patients and Sheahan was again employed as consulting architect and the building contractors were Sisk & Sons. Dr Noel Browne, Minister for Health,



Stepped Art Deco facade. (Image by Emma Gilleece 2010)



Remaining hint that this room was once a balcony (Image by Emma Gilleece 2010)

officially opened the Thoracic Unit, x-ray department and new rehabilitation block at the City Home and Hospital on the 15 September 1949.¹¹

Limerick Doctors and Societal Change

Dr Browne is best known for the failed attempt at introducing the famous Mother and Child Scheme. The first signs of discontent in the medical profession during the proposal stage came not from the Dublin headquarters of the Irish Medical Association (IMA) but from a group of doctors in County Limerick led by IMA executive council member Dr James McPolin.¹² With the publication of the 1947 Health Bill Dr McPolin stepped up his campaign against state medicine by publishing an article in the influential Catholic journal *Christus Rex*, outlining his objections to the Bill. The Limerick doctors lobbied the Central Council of the IMA to strengthen resistance to operating it. It was the first time that an Irish government had received a formal protest from the Church hierarchy about a specific piece of legislation.

The external façade to the building and the original stairwell are placed on the Record of Protected Structures. Visually it represented the government's strategy to use design to communicate modernity, a break with traditions and technological advances. Interventions such as the reconstituted balconies are one of the compromises this building has made to remain a sustainable hospital. The building adds to the morphological development of this historically important site that is associated with a continuous tradition of public health care since the opening of the workhouse. The hospital operates today as a continuing care facility for elderly patients and houses the State's first purpose-built Rehabilitation and Strokes Units of the Department of Medicine for the Elderly. It will be left to another researcher to uncover the darker side of public healthcare on that site during those vulnerable years of Independence.

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Below: Former entrance to hospital. (Image by Emma Gilleece)

Left:
Former balcony
(Image by Emma
Gilleece 2010)



Left:
Entrance to St
Camillus' Hospital.
(Image by Emma
Gilleece)



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