

'Bigger and better' Opera Centre plan

DEVELOPMENT

Anne Sheridan

"BIGGER and better" is how Dublin developer David Courtney described the revised planning application for the €350m Opera Centre, which is currently before City Hall.

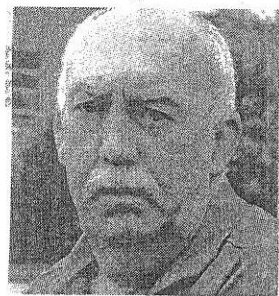
Mr Courtney, 47, of the property company Spain Courtney Doyle and a director of Superquinn, is one of the six Irish businessmen who bought the multimillion euro company, Regeneration Developments, from four British investors last year.

"We're very excited about this project. We think it's great for Limerick to have a development of this magnitude. It reflects on the quality of the design that we can have interest from tenants in the current market, which is very difficult for developers," he told the Limerick Leader following a presentation of the plans to city councillors this Monday.

When questioned if the British chain, Marks & Spencers, will be acquiring an outlet as already mooted by the chain themselves, Mr Courtney replied: "There's good interest for many anchors, but it's early days."

"We believe the current application will work to attract the anchors Limerick city needs and to rejuvenate the shopping experience. The previous scheme didn't fit their requirements in terms of the space allocated. The first [application] did very well to get from where it was. This is the next incarnation of it," he said.

Mr Courtney also confirmed that buildings on Ellen Street will have to be knocked to make way for the Mid-West's biggest retail development.



Cllr Long: retain brickwork

An Bord Pleanála had previously ruled that these buildings should be repaired and preserved. However, Mr Courtney and Jim Barrett, a former Dublin and Limerick city architect, said at the meeting the buildings would have to be demolished.

"We have made huge efforts to try and retain it, but the loss has to be Ellen Street," said Mr Barrett, whose projects as Dublin city architect included the Spire and the Millennium Footbridge.

Mr Courtney said in order to widen footpaths and improve the shopping experience in that area, the buildings would have to be demolished.

"We looked at the various combinations and permutations, but, unfortunately, from our experience in terms of the width of the street it does involve the

loss of those buildings. We haven't come up with any other way to do with it," he said.

Local architect Cait Ni Cheallachain is one of a number of objectors to the most recent application, and specifically outlines the future of these buildings in her objection to the planning department.

"This demolition to change the Georgian building line is not acceptable. The buildings were deemed to be important before, and they still are," said Ms Ni Cheallachain.

When built in 2011 - pending planning permission for Limerick City Council and possibly An Bord Pleanála - the 40,000 square foot retail centre will include a 200-seat food court, 500 car parking spaces, 40 retail units and three anchor units over three levels, as well as a rooftop garden. A piazza or cafe area on Bank Place looking over the river is also part of the new designs.



Cllr Leddin: better design

At the meeting, Cllr Kathleen Leddin welcomed the revised application and designs, stating that she believed the original design was "appalling."

Architect Paul Ferguson of Douglas Wallace Ferguson Wheeler agreed that the original design was "a bit contrived", but said it was now "timeless". Mr Douglas said that, when the Opera Centre was built, it will not "be about shopping and go. We want people to dwell and enjoy the experience."

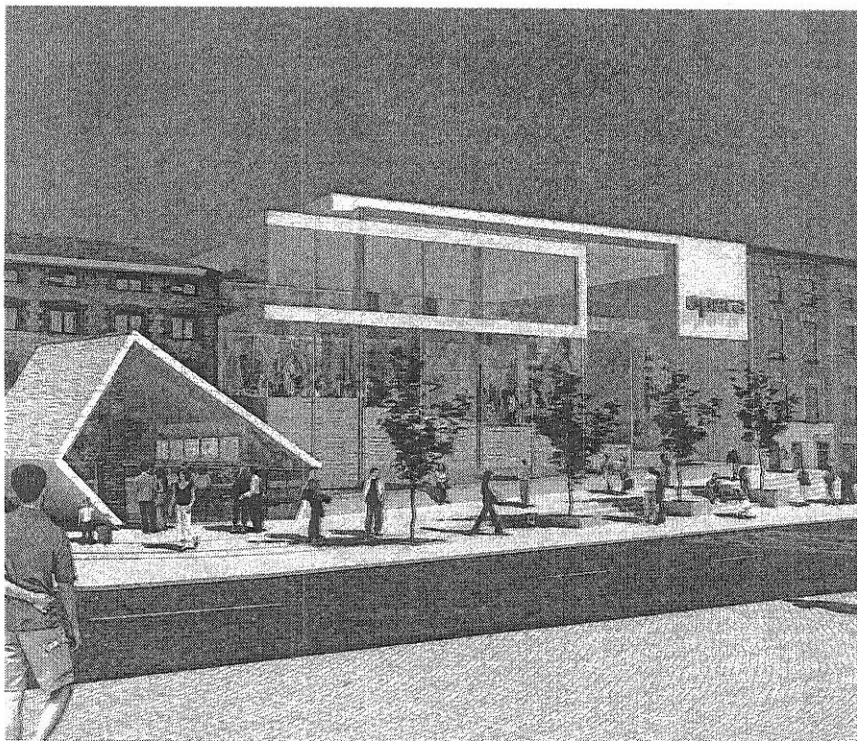
Cllr Jim Long suggested to the developers that the brickwork from a number of old buildings should be retained and incorporated into the modern, glass structure.

Mr Barrett said their architect has now compiled a list of items that should be retained.

Joe Clarke, manager of Trinity Rooms, was at the meeting as The Granary building, where the club is situated, has also been incorporated into the revised application. Trinity Rooms have lodged an objection against the development, describing it as "unlawful and invalid".

In response to Cllr Kevin Kiely's question if the company, Regeneration Developments, had entered negotiations with the existing businesses in the area, Mr Courtney said: "It's premature to enter negotiations with them. Our experience is that until such time as we get a final decision we won't be able to enter any meaningful discussions."

A decision on the proposed development is due on July 13. However Mr Courtney said he expected that the plans for the Opera Centre will again go before An Bord Pleanála.

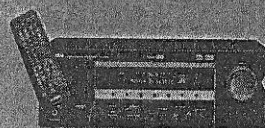


An artist's impression of how the Opera Centre would look from Charlotte Quay. A decision on planning permission for the development is due on July 13

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