

# Saint John's Square: Richard Woulfe speaks

**THE RESTORATION** of St. John's Square in Limerick City, a national project from Ireland in the European Architectural Heritage Year, was referred to at length in an interesting and scholarly paper read by Mr. Richard Woulfe, Law Agent, Limerick Corporation, at a recent seminar conducted in Cork by An Foras Forbartha, and having for its theme "Conserving the Built Environment—The Parameters of Choice".

The seminar, which extended over three days, was held in the Imperial Hotel, and the attendance included managers, engineers, architects, planners and administrative staff in local authorities and private practice. It was the second of three seminars organised in association with the national committee for EAHY-72, and its objectives were to provide information on the social, economic and technical aspects of architectural conservation, to establish the case for selective conservation and to provide a forum for discussion on the parameters of choice.

## City manager

In addition to Mr. Woulfe, the other members of the Limerick Corporation who attended were Mr. T. P. Mac Dermada, City Manager; Mr. S. O. P. O'Callaghan (consulting architect); Mr. Larry Coughlin, Mr. Paul D'Arcy, Miss B. Hayes, Mr. M. MacCurdy, Mr. A. J. Kinsella attended from Limerick County Council.

In his paper "The Administrative Problems," Mr. Woulfe examined in depth the practical problems which must be answered by the conservator before positive action is taken. These come under the heading what conserves and what makes him the conservational to secure the desired conservation? What powers and agencies should be involved in the process? What laws exist to secure conservation without acquisition of the building by Governmental authority? What laws exist to enable Governmental authority to acquire the building by agreement and compulsion? Who does the work on the building and who pays for that work?

The greater part of his paper was given to the ana-

wring of these administrative and legal questions, and in the concluding part—which we give here—he considered them in the specific instance of the Urban renewal now going on at St. John's Square.

Concerning the early history of the Square, Mr. Woulfe said a development of eight houses was put in hand in 1750 by John Purdon in co-operation with the landowner Edmund Seán Ó Perry and subsequently two further houses were added since identical in plan and symmetrical in elevation but slightly larger and richer in external finish. It was calculated that each of the original houses comprising three storeys over basement and built of stone cost £300. They were used as residences for the rich merchants and as town houses for the landed gentry.

With the building of Newgate, Perry's residents deserted the Square in favour of the more fashionable new area, which in turn lost status in favour of the detached residences in North Circular Road. St. John's Square—left to neglect and many of the houses became slums until finally a number of the houses were condemned by Limerick Corporation.

Mr. Woulfe went on: "The Corporation housing proposals did not fit in the rehabilitation of the Square. It was not suitable for Local Authority housing because of its location and because it was the wrong size; this was created a difficult area. Happily, the houses on the northern side of the Square had not got into the derelict state of the other houses, and in the early 1960s pressure on the Corporation brought in the Representative Church Body, the clergy of St. John's Cathedral, Mr. Talbot and the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, which owned one of these houses."

In 1962 the Corporation's City Architect, Mr. Phineas O'Callaghan, produced a report advocating the preservation of the Square and suggesting the reconstruction of six houses in the Square. His report was adopted by City Council at the end of 1962. The Planning Act of 1963 was a further incentive.

## Purchased

"In 1968 Limerick Corporation purchased two of the houses at the Western side of the Square, but not only the residues of relatively short leases now having 24 and 32 years to run, respectively, for 1 and 2 John's Square. A doubt on the road proposals for the area added to a lack of purpose on the mind of the Corporation. Because the road through the square was a link in the National Primary Route, the Corporation's Roads Department had to produce an alternative roads proposal. The definition of an alternative route and the production of a detailed roads proposal constituted a problem of administrative difficulty of considerable proportion.

The Corporation could not see an immediate return from rehabilitating the houses and a shift in this point of view can be distinguished in the



The restoration of St. John's Square is a national project for European Architectural Heritage Year 1972. This picture shows the square as it was in the early 1930's.

growth of educational establishments creating a demand for flats in the area. The final impetus was given by the proposal of Mr. Seymour Major to rehabilitate the houses on the southern side of the Square and the two houses on the northern side (not owned by the Corporation). The determination of 1970 as European Architectural Heritage Year set the seal on the conservation project.

In September 1971 the City Manager, Mr. T. MacDermada, set up a committee to implement the pilot project with Mr. Phineas O'Callaghan (now in private work) as consultant. They found the short leases of Nos. 1 and 2 an inhibiting factor and decided that while the facades of these houses would be preserved, the interiors would have to be cleared out and reconstructed. The bulk of the rehabilitated buildings would be used for residential accommodation for students, including student nurses at St. John's Hospital.

"Progress on acquiring the superior interests in the property has proved slow and the acquisition of those superior interests is included in a Compulsory Purchase Order now in course of preparation," Mr. Woulfe said. "Because the property is to be used for housing accommodation, the Corporation is able to utilise the Housing Act, 1969, as a stated purpose of the C.P.O."

He continued: "St. John's Cemetery, which is now in use, has been handed over with the surrounding cemetery to Limerick Corporation by the Representative Church Body. The Corporation, in order to weatherproof and then rehabilitate the church building and will probably use it as a local museum." The wall surrounding the cemetery will be replaced by railings, glass providing a green lung for area.

The project has involved the finding of an alternative road route. Vehicles traffic will be prevented from going through the Square but not from entering it.

A direct labour unit was established to carry out the reconstruction.

It is hoped to retain the skilled unit for similar works in the city and that the project will establish specialised skills.

The Corporation established a special architectural monitoring of the private development in

the other houses to ensure that all work would be compatible with the overall scheme for the development of the Square and regular reports are submitted to the committee by the architectural department of the Corporation. It is recognised that Mr. Seymour Major's project is contributing to a substantial way to the rehabilitation of the Square.

The Inter-Departmental Committee was established for this first project of Limerick Corporation in the conservation sphere. It is felt that in a city the size of Limerick the Planning Act provides an adequate framework for identifying and categorising the buildings suitable for rehabilitation, and the local National Monuments Advisory Committee, together with local voluntary organisations, have an important role in this work. In this latter regard it was recognised that co-operation in order to achieve practical results would be the biggest single problem. The Corporation has been aided in this by engaging specialised advice. It was seen that the strong architectural emphasis in the work demanded the unswerving attention of an architect and the services of a quantity surveyor and engineer.

Mr. Woulfe stressed that little progress would be made in preserving buildings of benefit to the public unless a statutory system was established for the provision of capital.

## Withdrawn

He pointed out that there was no national system of grants for conservation, and that an amnesty grants scheme had been recently withdrawn. "There is no revolving fund and nothing like the grants/low interest loans available on the Continent of Europe. To sum up then, Ireland lacks a legislative code specially concerned with conservation. The United Kingdom Town and Country Planning Act, 1972, might well be looked at here—it links a system of grants or loans to encourage restoration of buildings and there is no system whereby the pump of conservation may be primed by in-

itial capital injection. Other areas where advances might be made lie in possible tax or rate relief".

He concluded: "We live in a society which has become used to consumption and obsolescence; changes in the economic climate may mean a constant and here the last word must be left with Timothy Chantall's piece without old buildings in life is like a person without a memory."



Eugene O'Brien, who last weekend won the boys 15-17 All-Ireland championship at the Oireachtas Rince na hÉireann, held at the Mansion House. Eugene is a pupil of the Nolan School of Dancing.

L.L. photo

Presenting **Richmond** ...from John

