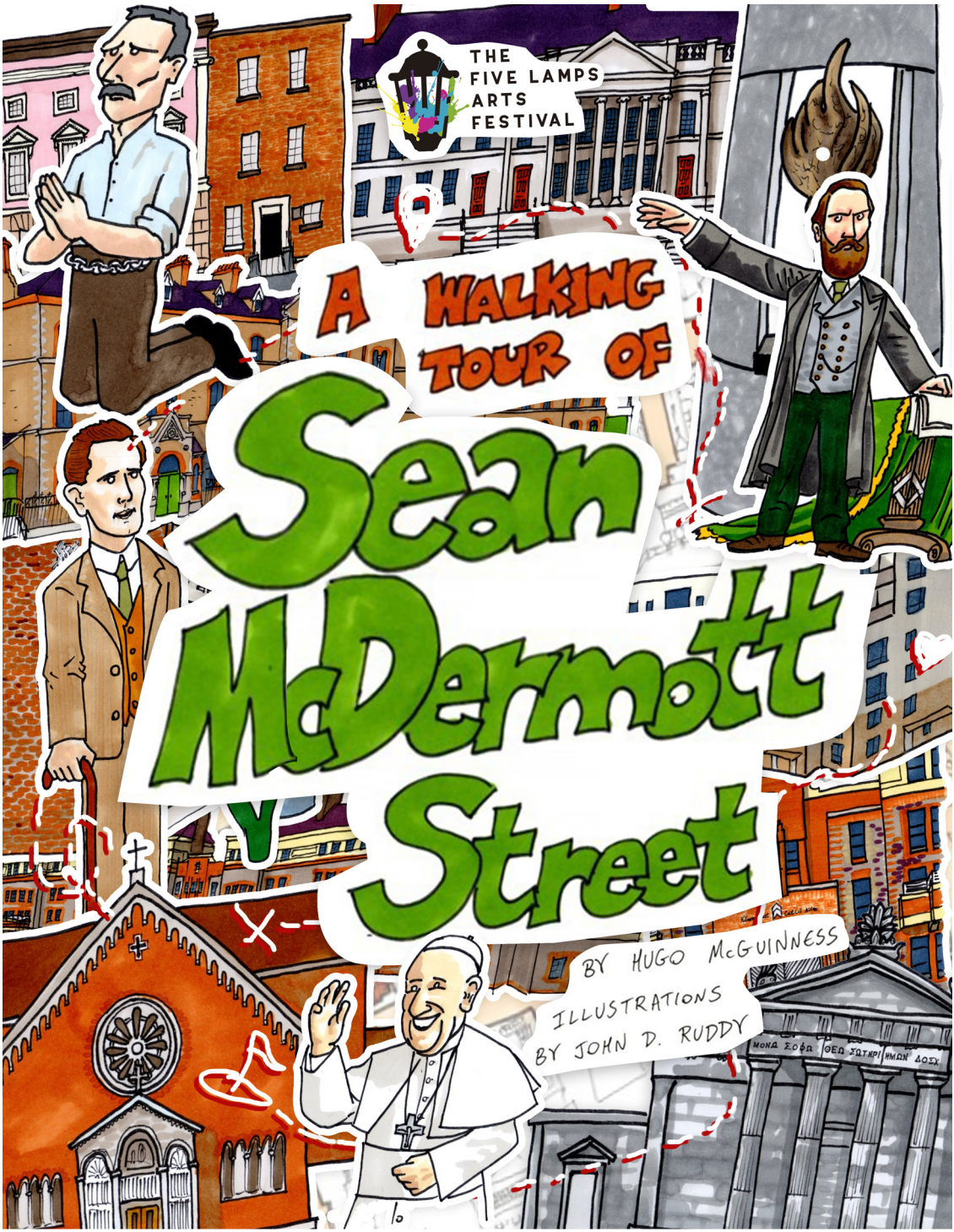

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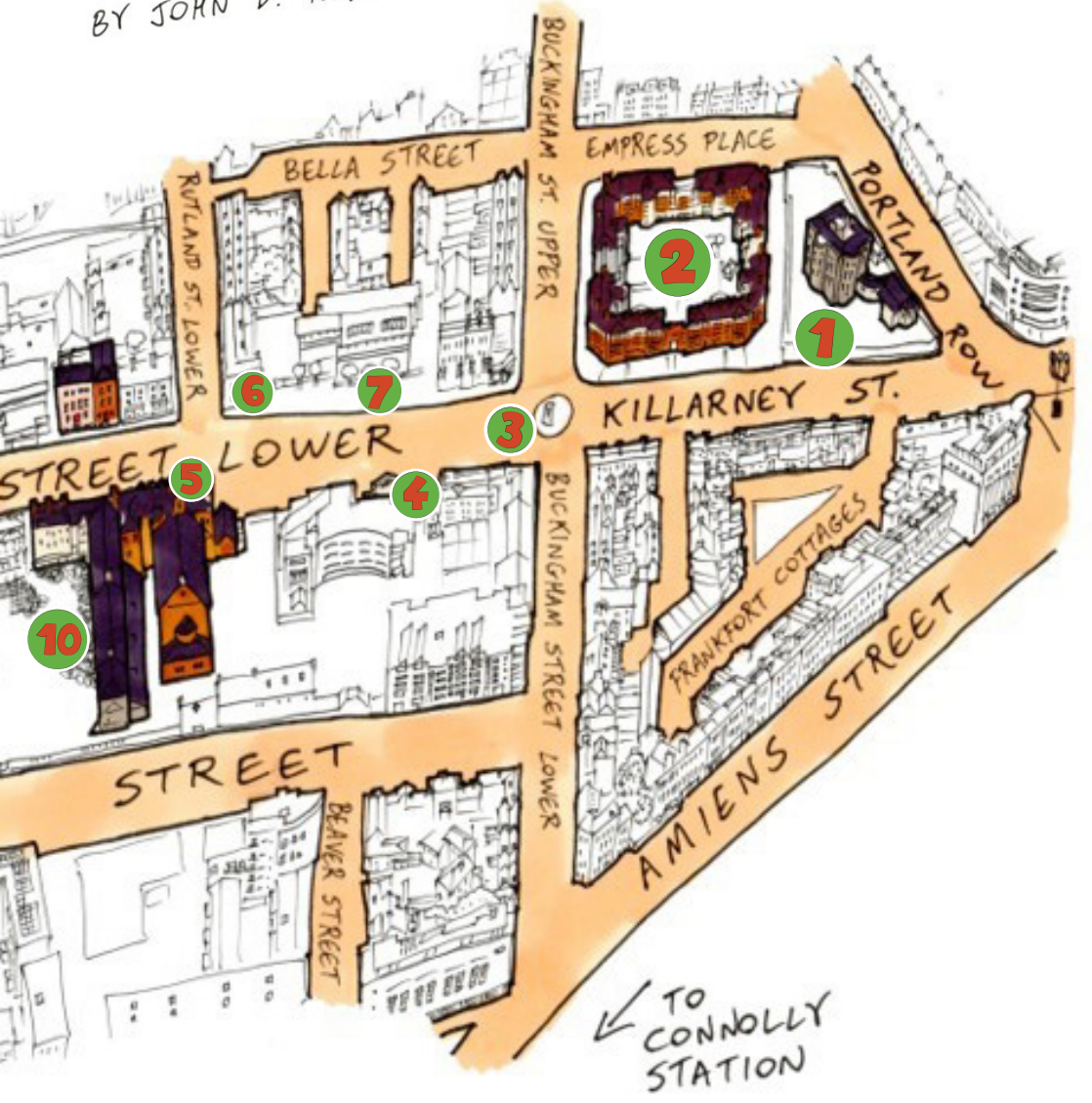
A Walking Tour of Sean McDermott Street

BY HUGO McGUINNESS

ILLUSTRATIONS
BY JOHN D. RUDDY



1 EDWARD STRATFORD, ALDBOROUGH HOUSE, AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF LOWER GLOUCESTER STREET.

In 1792, Edward Stratford, 2nd Earl of Aldborough and Viscount Amiens, laid the foundations for what would be the last great city house of the Georgian Era to be built in Dublin. Stratford had been bequeathed a portion of the North Circular Road Estate of Colonel Paul, and through some judicious bargaining with Paul's other heirs, acquired significant holdings between the North Strand and the developing Gardiner Estates. Having inspected the land in May that year, Stratford realized that a house on this site would dominate the northern entrance to the city and quickly drew up plans with the architect Richard Johnson inspired by his London home built in the 1770s.

At the time Stratford commenced building, the largely undeveloped North Circular Road had become fashionable for a walk or drive to the coast and numerous celebrity watchers of the era recorded the coaches and four, (or sometimes even six), of the nobility to be seen in the vicinity of what was still un-reclaimed land around what is now Seville Place. Summerhill had been developing since 1788 "with such rapidity" that one writer speculated that soon it would become the "finest row of houses" in the city. That same year Buckingham Street was laid out for building in what was describe as a street "which will be as elegant as anything in London." Gloucester Street itself had been laid out in 1770 so the commencement of Aldborough House was the final piece of the jigsaw in developing what should potentially have been one of the most elegant quarters of Georgian Dublin.

Between 1770 and 1776 Stratford had built Stratford House in London. Stratford Place, in which that house is located, was, through Stratford's influence, developed in an elegant Grecian Revival Style. Given that the Dublin House was heavily influenced by his London residence; it is probable that Stratford would have overseen the development of Lower Gloucester Street into a thoroughfare

which would have rivalled anything being developed in Dublin. However, his untimely death in 1801, allied to the Act of Union of 1800 meant that his estate was broken up. Property prices crashed – a house worth £2000 before the Union was only worth about £500 by the 1820s, and Aldborough House, still unfinished and heavily in debt, would remain unoccupied until leased by the German Educationalist, Gregor Von Feinaigle, whose Institute, known as the Luxembourg or "Lux" occupied the property from 1812 to 1838.

Von Feinaigle's teaching method involved a memory technique and although it appeared impressive it would later give a name to a term usually applied to Bankers and Stockbrokers which is far from complimentary.

In the 1839 the house was taken over by the Government and used as a musketry training centre for the RIC. However, it appears that several of the policemen ended up wounding each other so the location was vacated and taken over by the Army as a Barrack in 1843 during Daniel O'Connell's attempt to hold a monster meeting at Clontarf. Within months of the army taking over letters appeared in the newspapers pointing to the appearance of prostitutes on Lower Gloucester Street and claiming that house prices and the future development of what was still largely unused building plots would be affected. The army remained in situ until the property was acquired by the Post Office. The former gardens of Aldborough House were taken over by Dublin Corporation in 1935 for the development of Social housing.

2 St Josephs Mansions
Killarney Court

Urban legend recalls that Alfie Byrne, the 10 times Lord Mayor of Dublin, while cycling through his North Dock constituency in the early 1930s came down rather than up Killarney Street. Known somewhat cruelly by the media as the "shaking hand of Dublin," Byrne found himself stunned when confronted by the rear of Aldborough House rather than its more familiar Georgian façade. So taken was Byrne by what he saw that he allegedly decided this was the solution to the then inner city's housing crisis and immediately mounted his bicycle and headed towards the Corporation Headquarters to persuade them to buy Aldborough House and turn it into a super tenement.

Whether true or not the Corporation did buy Aldborough House although their main interest was the former gardens which then largely consisted of warehouses. Aldborough House itself was returned to the Post Office, who had failed to acquire alternative premises, in order to speed up access to the site causing one councillor to claim the city was about to fall victim to Communism.

Tenders went out by 1936 and shortly afterwards St. Joseph's Mansions, built in the Dutch influenced yellow and red brick, Art Deco style, then favoured by Architect, Herbert George Simms, was under way providing 138 homes for inner-city tenement dwellers. Interestingly the complex included a Welfare Clinic.

In 2003 a major rejuvenation of the complex was undertaken. Flats were enlarged and the number of units were reduced 106. Lifts were installed, access balconies enclosed, in an award-winning development. This new complex was renamed Killarney Court after the section of Lower Gloucester Street which had been renamed Killarney Street in 1908.

3 Home Monument

Unveiled by President Mary Robinson in December 2000, Home by Leo Higgins, set out to provide a permanent marker to those who died either directly or indirectly as a result of Heroin use in the North Inner City. The project evolved from a tradition started in 1996 of erecting a Christmas tree on which stars, each of which had a name of a member of the community lost to Drug Abuse were placed. By 2000 these numbered 126 stars.

The monument was significant for its Community involvement with Higgin's design, of a limestone doorway, encasing a bronze gilt flame, being chosen by a community-based panel of relatives of those who had fallen victim to Drugs. Significantly, Higgins invited the community to incorporate jewellery and other momentous of those being remembered into the casting of the Bronze Flame.

4. GLOUCESTER STREET PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Built in 1846 at a cost of £1800 to a design by the Scottish born architect Duncan Ferguson Campbell Gloucester Street Presbyterian Church was a first for many things in Dublin. A contemporary report noted that the church, built of Irish granite, was the first to be built in the "Grecian Doric Order" in the city. Ferguson was described as a young and up and coming architect and the reviewer noted his economic way of lighting the interiors "costing not more than half the expense of lighting in the usual manner with pillars and brackets."

With a growing congregation, the appointment of Dr. David Love Morrow as minister in 1884 would have a major influence over the community's future. Morrow was open minded in relation to religion and was probably the inventor of what might be termed Golf Ecumenism. In 1889 he organized a lecture by a man named Ahmed Aziz from Hindustan, who dressed in native costume and speaking in Arabic, gave recitals from the Koran in what must be the first public reading of the that holy book in a place of worship in Ireland. The following year he organized the move of the congregation to Clontarf which was viewed as controversial at the time and which many were unhappy about. However, there was growing frustration at the lack of a school operating under a Presbyterian ethos and with no spare land available in Gloucester Street to build one it was necessary to relocate.

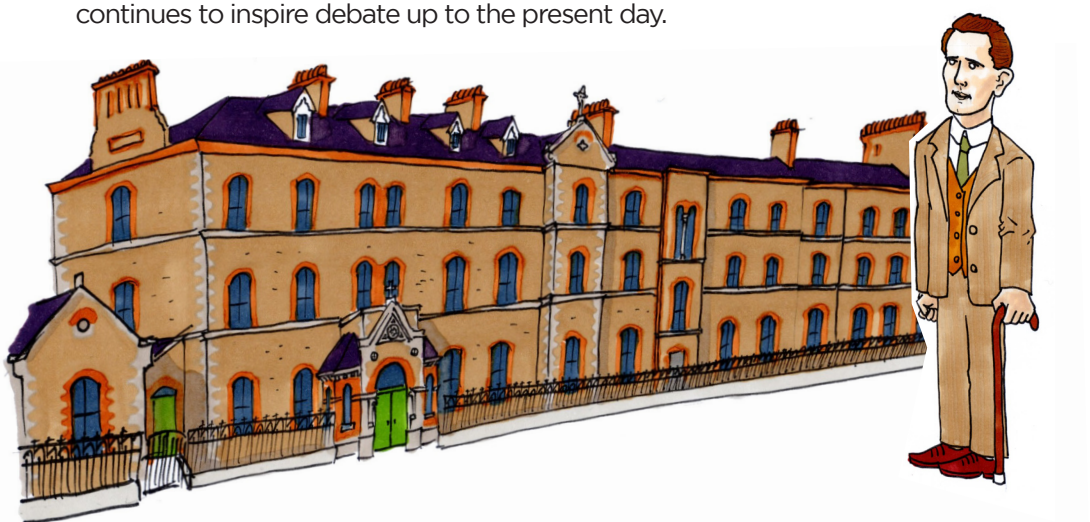
The moved to Clontarf in 1890 came about following an offer by the Vernon Family of a site on the intersection of the Howth and Clontarf Roads on the provision that they build a bell tower – an unusual feature for a Presbyterian Church. The expansive nature of the site meant that not only could they cater for their growing community but open schools for infants, boys, and girls, who would be taught under a Presbyterian ethos.

The Salvation Army operated at the old Gloucester Street property for a number of years after which it became a grain store and later a factory producing poultry feed. Following a fire in 1987 it was decided to demolish the remaining structure which was both dangerous and a health hazard. The front, which had survived the worst of the fire has a preservation order.

5 Monastery of the Sisteres of Charity and Refuge

Although commonly known as the Magdalene Laundry or Convent the correct name for this institution on Sean McDermott Street is the Monastery of the Sisters of Charity and of Refuge. Founded in1821 by Rev. John Vincent Holmes at 106 Macklenburgh Street for "troubled homeless women", by 1836 they had moved to 19 Macklenburgh Street under the direction of Fr. John Lapham and were accommodating 45 women. In 1868 John Burke, Bricklayer/Architect, built the first phase of the current structure linking Railway Street to Gloucester Street. Five years later the Sisters of Mercy were brought in by the Archbishop of Dublin to manage the institution. Additions were added by Thomas Loftus Robinson and then in 1886 the Sisters of Charity and of Refuge were brought in to take over. This was a French Order founded by Saint John Eudes to assist women who had fallen into prostitution. 1886 3rd phase of development of a 6-bay window extension by William Henry Byrne who also builds the church. The final development was in 1924 by Ralph Henry Byrne.

By 1904 the monastery accommodated 100 women increasing to 140 in 1952. Although closed since the 1970s its troubled history as a Magdalene laundry continues to inspire debate up to the present day.



6 SAINT THOMAS' SCHOOLS

The cement washed façade of the building on the corner of Rutland Street and Sean McDermott Street betrays little of its origins. Through a bequest of £71 from Summerhill resident, Viscountess Harberton, the first of three schools were set up at this location around 1810. The first, taking its name from its benefactor, was a live-in school for orphaned Protestant Girls. Then a school for Orphaned Boys was opened next door and finally an infant's school opened in a third building. Ultimately all three buildings were linked and the school, now known as St. Thomas or Gloucester Street School, became a regular day school, although it still catered for a few orphans who lived upon the premises.

Although the school aimed to teach children to read and write, from its foundation it had a secondary purpose as a Sunday School which in 1845 was said to have 300 children attending each week. The school was privately financed largely through annual fundraising sermons, one of which in 1821 raised over £150. By the 1880s it came under the influence of the evangelical Protestant Irish Church Mission and began to proselytise among neighbouring Roman Catholics.

A Parliamentary inquiry in 1883 found that there were 130 children and 137 infants attending the school daily, 40 of whom were Presbyterian. They claimed that none of the children were Roman Catholics. However, one enterprising Catholic boy, sent there by his aunt, claimed that nobody asked too many questions and many Catholics in the area got their education at Gloucester Street. He on the other hand, having obviously alarmed a well-meaning Catholic resident of the area who feared for his soul, found himself being paid weekly by that person to quietly move to the Central Model School which of course he never informed his aunt of. Later in life, as a successful businessman, he would fondly look back at the school as having given him his first lessons in his future vocation.

7 GLOUCESTER TERRACE

Built at a time of renewed economic optimism Gloucester Terrace, represented one of the most adventurous developments in the city since the Act of Union. Designed by father and son team, George and John Thomas Papworth, the elegant terrace dated from 1832 and a contemporary writer claimed it was like Regents Park, London, and "far superior to houses of a much higher value in Dublin." Built as a single block with a central pediment entrance with ionic columns, the terrace encompassed six houses each containing 6 rooms. Although somewhat small, the upmarket nature of the development attracted residents who used their homes to conduct business such as investors, merchants, and lawyers.

However, the acquisition of Aldborough House by the Government In 1839 and its subsequent use as a barracks would halt further upmarket developments on the street and ultimately lead to the decline of the Terrace. As residents moved away from the street in the 1860s those who remained complained of the rise of prostitution in the nearby Monto district and questioned whether any of the vacant building plots would ever be taken up. Not surprisingly much of the housing on the street was only built in the 1890s as much of the housing stock in the area declined into tenements. This was the fate of Gloucester Terrace and although surviving photographs from the early 20th century are impressive, by the 1950s it was suffering from serious decline and dereliction and was demolished in 1958.

8 CARPENTERS ASYLUM

Although not actually part of Gloucester Terrace, the Carpenters Asylum gives us a slight glimpse into just how elegant that development was. Believed to have been designed by Frederick Darley and George Papworth, both of whom served as patrons to the Asylum, the institution was inaugurated in February 1832 by the Operative Carpenters Trade Union to provide a home for co-workers no longer capable of continuing with their trade. The house was completed in 1836 but twelve months later they were still soliciting subscriptions to finish the premises. It seems the majority of those who subscribed were actually architects, and very quickly No. 36 Gloucester Street became a type of architects' club with little provision being made for aged Carpenters. A parliamentary report of 1861 showed that while they claimed to accommodate up to 44 persons there was in fact only 1 Carpenter living there.

In 1856 the building became the headquarters of Buildings Trade Association of Dublin – a type of congress of those in the carpentry, bricklaying, and other associated trades. Subsequently the large hall became a centre of political debate and did much to consolidate the rise of the Irish Parliamentary Party in the North Dock Electoral Ward as well as generally politicize the area. Today it is a Dublin Simon Community Supported Housing Centre.

9 OUR LADY OF LOURDES CHURCH

In January 1916 what affectionately became known as the Old Tin Church was erected on derelict land near the Gloucester Diamond. Borrowed from a parish at Beechwood Avenue in Ranelagh the church served the community up to 1954 when the current Romanesque Church was built. In 1970 the Parish of Our Lady of Lourdes was founded and in honour of this the remains of the venerable Matt Talbot were removed from Glasnevin Cemetery and entombed in the church on Sean McDermott Street in 1972.

10 THE FARRELL FAMILY STUDIOS

The simple late Georgian shopfront of the former Matt Talbot Stores betrays little of its late 19th century importance in the development of the city as know it today. Running from Sean McDermott Street along the length of Gloucester Lane, this was the location of the Farrell Brothers Studios, a team of six sculptors, all born in Railway Street, the most import of whom was Thomas Farrell (1827 – 1900). Like his contemporary, John Henry Foley (1818-1874), after whom Foley Street is named, Thomas Farrell's work adorns much of the public spaces and buildings of the city centre, with the statues of John Gey, and William Smith O'Brian in O'Connell Street, being from his hand. Unlike Foley, Farrell chose to remain in Dublin and spent life promoting both the arts and education for those of an impoverished background. Because he never left the country, many of the major public commissions of the era went to Foley, even though many felt that Farrells work was superior. Farrells brothers were competent craftsmen but lacked his ability and after his death the studio went into decline.

11 ST MARYS MANSIONS AND LIBERTY HOUSE

By the late 1930s Dublin's North Inner City had a major housing crisis. Tuberculosis was rampant and much of the existing tenement housing stock was in danger of collapsing. While a program of retro-fitting some of the old Georgian tenements where possible, from 1933 Dublin Corporation had begun clearing much of the derelict housing around Railway Street. However, the compulsory purchase order process was slow and the government's housing agency, responsible for all new building, was growing increasingly disenchanted with what they saw as the expensive and wasteful use of materials by Dublin Corporation Architect Herbert George Simms. While Simms used his decorative brickwork and red terracotta tiled roofs to enhance the streetscape, it was felt unnecessary and suggested that far better uses could be got from a greater use of

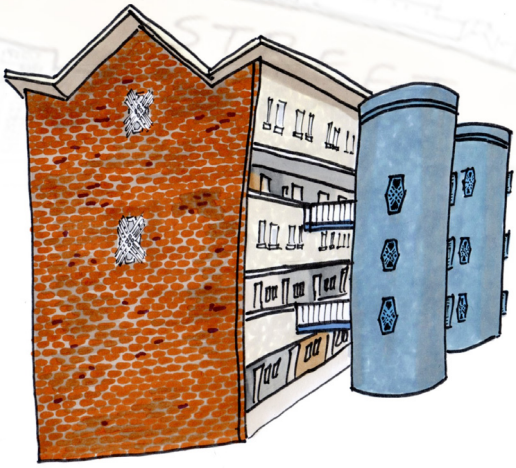
pre-cast concrete, and a single, cheaper, type of brick. One of the major factors involved was the fact that rents had to be heavily subsidized and while those at Liberty House started at 2 shillings when it opened, when some years later there was an attempt to raise rents to 5 shillings there was a rent-strike as the tenants, largely unemployed claimed they couldn't afford it. Local tenements in the area had an average rent of 2 shillings and 2 pence.

Ultimately the outbreak of World War II would have a devastating effect on building supplies with little or no brick or steel being available. Liberty House got across the line before the war shortages really began to affect, but St. Mary's Mansions, to be built beside it, wouldn't be so lucky. Inspired by the modern Dutch apartments blocks of De Klerk of Amsterdam, Liberty House, while a much simpler design than Simms earlier works, curiously incorporates curved corner bays with recessed balconies. Its claimed that this was because tuberculosis was so rife among residents that these corner flats would allow affected tenants to sleep outdoors which was seen as an important part of treating the disease. Whether Simms actually though of this or it was just adapted by tenants is unclear.

Mary's Mansions, however, was caught up in numerous delays, so much so that by the time of the North Strand Bombings in 1941 little progress had been achieved other than clearing the site. Up to then over 600 air raid shelters had been built in the city but few of these could accommodate more that 50 people. With growing fears of another raid, (Wexford was bombed in 1940, while there hade been other incidents at Terenure, the North Circular Road, and the Phoenix Park) it was decided it might not be possible to build blocks of flats due to material shortages but there was no shortage of cement and so Mary's first function was to serve as the largest air raid shelter on the North Inner City.

Large scale exercises and re-enactments of bomb raids were staged, often using smoke bombs and phosphorous grenades to give the effect of incendiary bombs. So sturdy was the construction of these cement air raid shelters that they have facilitated the raising of the structure by two floors in a multi-million refurbishment of the complex currently underway.

12 GARDINER STREET FLATS



By the late 1950s Dublin's inner city was once again facing a housing crisis. Consultants brought in by the government suggested building high-rise apartment blocks. When it was found that each unit would be more expensive than a house in the suburbs, they suggested reducing the room size of the apartments to reduce costs. Into this debate stepped the new Dublin City Architect Daithi Hanly. Hanly set out to create something new and modern which at the same time would integrate with the surrounding Georgian Architecture of the streets where such complexes were likely to be located. The result was the "Gull Winged Roof" Complex, a design unique to Dublin and which through standardizing the design and materials provided quality homes in a cost-effective way.

The first of these was Gardiner Street Flats opened in January 1960. For the first time Social Housing in Dublin had in-built bathrooms, while the Tower Entrance featured a number of safety devices aimed at Children and the elderly.

HUGO MCGUINNESS

Hugo McGuinness is a local historian specialising in the Dublin 3 area of the Docklands, Fairview, and Clontarf. His particular interest are the 1916-22 period in these areas and the evolution of Mud Island in the 18th and 19th centuries. Just recently he presented a short documentry on the WW1 Dublin Dockyard War Munitions Factory for Dublin Port.

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