

Abbey Theatre

Relocating the Abbey Theatre to the GPO in time for the 2016 Centenary Celebrations is an idea that Senator David Norris is passionately pursuing. In this article, written for the Property Valuer, he outlines how his dream can become reality.

Picture it – as Sophia the granny figure from the American Sitcom *The Golden Girls* might say – Dublin 2016; O’Connell Street; The GPO – iconic site of Pearse’s Easter Rising and the first reading of the Proclamation of the Republic – reopening as centre piece of the 1916 Centenary Celebrations, not as a post office, not as a museum, but reborn as the new home of the internationally celebrated Abbey Theatre. I am all for museums and there should certainly be a major commemorative element in the foyer of the Abbey/GPO. But given a choice between yet another token museum and the possibility of vibrant cultural life represented by theatre, it’s theatre all the way for me. Of course the ticketing area and foyer could remain open to the public during normal hours and historic guided tours of the both ancient and modern elements of the building provided in response to public demand. In this manner, the two functions of commemoration and celebration could be combined.



This idea came to me more than three years ago while discussing the future of the Abbey with an old friend Cormac Rabbitt who acted as technical advisor during my 20 year battle for an underground railway in Dublin. My first preference would always have been for the Abbey to stay where it was on its original site and I had earlier played a major role in preventing its transfer to the south side of the city in order to provide what was described with breath taking effrontery by the proposers as “A Cultural Anchor” for a commercial development.

It seemed the Abbey site had been exhaustively examined and its redevelopment ruled out. I then transferred my support to the Carlton site until this was made untenable by the self interested wrangling of a series of investors and developers. But O’Connell Street would have been so wonderful I said wistfully. Cormac agreed. Then our eyes lit up simultaneously and we shouted in unison THE GPO.

Just consider. The Abbey apparently cannot stay where it is. The building, reconstructed after the disastrous fire of 1951 is a nightmare for actor, audience and director. It is impractical for actors and for the technical side because of space constriction and unimaginative design. Unlike its temporary home in the old Edwardian Queen’s Theatre in Pearse Street it has no atmosphere at all. This is even despite the best efforts of Fiach MacConghail in providing a fully raked auditorium by removing the appalling half balcony that hung timidly out like a partly opened drawer. Moreover, the GPO building is actually closer to the historic site of the medieval St. Mary’s Abbey after which both theatre and street were originally named.

The one thing every one is agreed upon is that the Abbey needs new facilities, more space and a properly designed theatre in an appropriate place. I have raised the possibility of moving the Abbey to the GPO on a number of occasions in the Senate and met with enthusiastic approval from both sides of the house led by the leader of the Government party, Senator Donnie Cassidy, and Senator Paul Coghlan of Fine Gael, both of whom have extensive experience in the area of popular culture and tourism. When I mentioned it recently in casual conversation with the Taoiseach Brian Cowen he said “Of course it’s a good idea. Didn’t I suggest it myself last year?” Support has also been received from leading figures in the artistic and commercial world such as Ireland’s leading playwright Brian Friel, the distinguished former artistic director of the Abbey Patrick Mason, the Director of the Gate Theatre Mike Colgan and the property developer and owner of the Point Theatre Harry Crosbie.

Opposition, however, exists and is led by Junior Minister Martin Mansergh who has dug his heels in in support of a variation of the earlier proposal, this time to rebuild the Abbey in the middle of Georges Dock in the financial services centre. If anything could be described as elitist this is it, and I have described it as the “Duck Pond” proposal. After the recent political scandals in the United Kingdom it may actually become known as the “Duck House” and, if not prevented by something more

imaginative, open its doors with a translation of Ibsen’s *The Wild Duck* into Irish.

In any case this decision, if it is one, has been declared immutable. This is despite the fact that neither the public nor the Oireachtas have been made privy to the terms of the deal or the means by which it was concluded. Of course the Dublin Dockland Authority, the other party to the deal, is to be commended on the splendid work it has done in opening up the public prospect of the river Liffey with cobbled quayside walks pleasantly lit and planted, and with seating provided for passersby. But there are other aspects of its composition and dealings that have not always been transparent and have led to some controversy. Moreover, the location suggested is out of the way for ordinary theatre-goers and cannot be easily found or accessed by the general public.

By contrast the advantages of the GPO site are manifest and inarguable. First of all it is owned by the State and due shortly to be vacated as a postal facility. There is therefore no acquisition cost. It has historical associations with theatre. For many years it was the headquarters of Radio Eireann and all major radio drama was broadcast from the GPO’s Henry Street studios. Secondly, the existing Abbey site could either be sold or used as collateral to raise funds for the building work. This should help to make the entire transaction exchequer neutral. In any case in the event of a budgetary shortfall I have no doubt whatever that for so significant a national cultural project EU support would be available. Even failing that I am certain that the mystical combination of Yeats’s Abbey and Pearse’s GPO would lead to a positive queue of Irish American sponsors.

Then there is the question of spatial compatibility. I was told initially that the site was too small. I discovered this to be quite untrue. I approached Professor James Horan and Noel Brady from DIT’s Bolton Street Faculty of Architecture. As a result of their helpful cooperation the idea became the subject for their 4th year architectural students. This culminated in a series of brilliant and imaginative proposals by the students. Even more importantly it emerged from their researches that the site is more than adequate and indeed exemplary from the angle of spatial dimension and flies, backstage areas, scene docks, deliveries, as well as double auditoria and rehearsal space. As a result of the shelling from the gunboat *Helga* in 1916 the only remaining original element of the building is the magnificent portico and entrance front facing O’Connell Street. The rest is effectively an empty shell awaiting imaginative redevelopment.

And what could better stir the artistic imagination than this iconic combination? The relationship between the Rising and the literary renaissance, between Pearse and Yeats, already exists. Recalling the audience response to his wonderfully stirring curtain line in “*The Countess Kathleen*” Yeats wrote –

*“Did that play of mine send out
Certain men the English shot”*



Culture provided the imaginative spark that formed the catalyst for the armed revolution. It was after all an insurrection of poets.

Moreover the location is very much in tune with the egalitarian aspirations of the revolution. It is the one building whose location is instantly and universally known to every citizen throughout the State. It is easily accessible by every means of transport – train, tram, taxi, Luas, bus, proposed Metro, car, bicycle, rickshaw and even shanks's mare. It will be both *of* the people and *for* the people. It will also neatly fuse elements of the Ascendancy, of which both Yeats and Lady Gregory formed part that led to Francis Johnson's architectural masterpiece with the new revolutionary reality that Yeats and Gregory assisting superseded it. Thus it could symbolise a harmonious coming together of these two traditions in Ireland.

Let's face it, despite the heroic efforts of Dublin Corporation, O'Connell Street is still pitiful as the main thoroughfare of a major European city. Paris has the Opera, London Covent Garden, Milan La Scala, and New York the Met. Are we going to dump our national theatre in a duck pond merely because it is the easy and unimaginative thing to do? Have we not yet had a surfeit of mediocrity? What a transfiguring impact the arrival of the Abbey would have on O'Connell Street and on the whole sorely neglected north side of the city! Dublin would at last become what it claims to be - a proud European capital. How well it would gel with the idea of a new cultural hub including the City Council's splendid plan for the redevelopment of Parnell Square, the flourishing Gate Theatre, the relocation of the central city library to the Ambassador Cinema and of course the heroic James Joyce Centre in North Great Georges Street. There may even be further positive knock on effects. The surrounding areas, particularly that blighted and neglected axis of Parnell Street from the Parnell monument to Gardiner Street

which forms such a degraded link between North Great Georges Street and O'Connell Street, might at last be refurbished.

I believe strongly that this idea would have widespread if not universal public support. After I outlined the notion on the final Questions and Answers programme a little while ago I discussed it for some minutes outside the RTE studios with Fergus Finlay and the next day sent him a further email. To my great surprise and delight he wrote a superb opinion piece for the Examiner newspaper.

Subsequently we both appeared on the George Hook radio show on Newstalk. The response from the public was extremely strong and overwhelmingly positive. My only caution in promoting the idea so far has come from my fear that attempting to get the establishment to change course at this stage might afford some sly elements in the Department of Finance an opportunity to shelve the whole Abbey Theatre redevelopment initiative. **This must not be allowed to happen.** In these grim times the whole nation needs a boost, a bit of visionary "OOMPH" to raise our spirits. Redeveloping the Abbey Theatre in the GPO would demonstrate our national pride at a very reasonable cost, if any, and if we start now it will be ready by 2016.

For me now the gloves are off. The idea is in play. As I said at the opening - picture it! 2016 O'Connell Street; Easter Week – the Abbey Theatre reopening in the GPO with a revival of O'Casey's great Dublin Trilogy including "The Plough and the Stars" in which Pearse himself appeared as a character, a red carpet issuing from that heroic portico as European heads of state arrive. ■

WELL – WHY THE HELL NOT?