

ARTS COUNCIL CHIEF EXECUTIVE LAUNCHES ARCHITECTURE & THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT POLICY, ST PATRICK'S SCHOOL DONEGALL STREET, BELFAST 16 JANUARY 2003

I think I should begin by making clear the driving idea which has governed the long process of discussion and consultation and which lies behind the policy we are here to launch this morning. That idea is simple. Architecture, with its associated principles of town planning and the built environment, is an art form.

For many, their built environment often does not meet even the simplest of their needs – the need for a decent home, for access to local amenities and open space, for a pleasant and stimulating place to work, for opportunities for leisure, and for fresh air and a quiet, clean and safe environment.

Our ability to meet these needs, to meet our social objectives for an inclusive society that provides opportunity for all, largely depends on the quality of the built environments we make. Good building design and good architecture affirm social values and bring coherence and order to our built environment for the benefit of us all.

The art of architecture and the principles of town planning have more effect on our lives and behaviour than any other art. Accordingly, confronted by insensitive developers, people are concerned by what is happening in their cities and towns. One benefit of this, however, is that it has stimulated public awareness of the *aesthetic*, as well as the functional, aspects of architecture.

These considerations have played the leading role in the Council's support, through its Lottery Capital fund, for buildings as radical and striking as the Marketplace Theatre in Armagh City, the Millennium Forum in Derry City, the Burnavon in Cookstown and the Island Arts Centre in Lisburn City. These are considerable investments in the lived environment of our communities as well as in the extent of arts provision across Northern Ireland.

Since 1995, the Council has invested more than £23.5 million on buildings in Northern Ireland. In addition, the growing awareness of the importance of public space has been demonstrated in the Council's developing policy on public art – since 1995, £1.6m has been allocated to 40 projects (including such flagship initiatives with integrated artworks as the Royal Hospital for Sick Children and the Mater).

The Council has always given support to exhibitions and publications on architectural subjects, but with this policy there is a *strategic* commitment to promoting public understanding of architecture, as well as helping direct its future development in Northern Ireland.

It is a mark of the extent of the commitment of the Council to these principles that we took the step of appointing an Architecture and Public Art Officer, the first time that such a post has existed on a par with literature, music, drama and the other artforms for which we are responsible.

Of course, the creation of high-quality architecture is a process of many partnerships and, no more than with film, does the Arts Council have the resources alone to

directly commission and deliver a built environment from concept to reality. But the measures outlined in this policy, which have the backing of government, will ensure a principal role for the Council in shaping and influencing new-build and new-use development.

But it should be remembered that it is not only the major capital awards, reckoned in millions, which have an influence over the design. No one should underestimate the capacity of small-scale funding, strategically deployed, to revolutionise perceptions, expectations and outcomes at the micro-level. To this end, I can also announce today that, from April, the Council is offering Special Initiative funding of £120,000, funding to kick-start smaller-scale projects in the field, to fund lectures, exhibitions and publications. This is dedicated money allocated out of the current year's budget, but this is not the only funding available. Both architecture and public art can also be funded through the Capital programme.

The key point is that the Council will be seeking to work in *partnerships* with other agencies. We welcome Belfast City Council's recent Built Environment Conference, held last October, and the commitment shown by government departments to the values expressed in the policy and I am particularly pleased to announce that today we are keen to establish a substantial award for excellence in achievement for architectural design in Northern Ireland and will be engaging with other parties to bring that to fruition.

This is a beginning, certainly, but it also represents a major commitment on behalf of all the agencies and individuals involved in drafting this policy to setting the development of our public spaces on an entirely new footing.

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