

Byers, David

by Lawrence William White

Byers, David (1953–2008), architect and civil servant, was born in January 1953 in Newry, Co. Down, the only son among three children of John Byers and his wife Phyllis. The family had links with Ballyjamesduff, Co. Cavan, where Byers spent much of his childhood and youth. He was educated in Dublin at Wesley College and the College of Technology, Bolton Street, where he graduated in architecture in 1977. Apart from a brief period in private practice (1979–81), he spent his entire career in the Office of Public Works (OPW).

Byers established his reputation through his work on several high-profile OPW projects of the 1980s–90s. He was part of the architectural team that executed a major project of restoration and construction in Dublin Castle (1984–9), involving provision of a modern conference centre in anticipation of Ireland's presidency of the EC in January–June 1990. The vehemently expressed opposition of conservationists, fearing that buildings in the eighteenth-century upper castle yard would be gutted and reduced to a 'static series of façades' (*Ir. Times*, 19 April, 11 May 1985), was largely placated when Taoiseach Garret FitzGerald (1926–2011) initiated consultation between the OPW architects and concerned conservationists. Byers and his colleagues conceived the project as a marriage of old and new forms (a concept consistent with the development of the Castle complex over the centuries), and avoided visual confusion or disparity of scale between the old and new elements. The modern, stone-clad main conference building was rendered invisible from the brick-clad upper castle yard by its construction behind the yard's north-west corner and placement of many of its facilities, including the main conference hall, at basement level. Restoration and extension (to house ancillary conference facilities) of the former Genealogical Office, the centrepiece of the north range of the upper yard and crowned by the landmark Bedford Tower, included removal of the distortive, nineteenth-century attic storey, thus restoring the building's original, elegantly neo-classical lines.

The Castle project proved a watershed in Irish architectural history and a signpost to Byers's own subsequent career. After a period of intense controversy surrounding property development, modernist architecture and preservation of historic structures, the project initiated a new era of greater sensitivity among architects and their clients – especially public bodies – to issues of architectural conservation. Byers's later work was dominated by projects involving restoration of period buildings, adaptation of such buildings to new uses and modern technologies, and placement of new buildings in historic precincts in harmonious dialogue with the existing built environment.

The same architectural team, including Byers, that executed the Castle project then worked on refurbishment (1989–90) of Government Buildings, Merrion Street, Dublin, the last major building erected (1904–22) under British administration of Ireland. The dramatically domed centre block, occupied till 1989 by the UCD College of Science, was thoroughly overhauled internally by conversion of the college's facilities into government offices, meeting rooms, new circulation spaces and a basement press centre, occupied on completion by the Department of the Taoiseach. The *pièce de résistance* was enlargement of the entrance hall by replacing the lecture theatre behind it with a bifurcated ceremonial staircase in pale beechwood, with the half-landing adorned by a large stained-glass window by Evie Hone (qv), 'My four green fields'. Described as Ireland's largest ever refurbishment project, the initiative was awarded an RIAI Dublin regional award for 1991 and the RIAI silver conservation medal for the period 1987–92.

As general manager of Dublin Castle for a period in the 1990s, Byers oversaw further implementation of the twenty-year restoration and reuse plan drawn up in the mid 1980s, which involved opening substantial sections of the Castle complex to the general public for a range of purposes. He made available the upper castle yard as principal venue for the annual Heineken Green Energy rock festival, and was central to development and promotion of the Castle conference centre for varied uses by public bodies and commercial clients. A major initiative was provision of new quarters (opened in February 2000) for the Chester Beatty Library by a refurbishment and extension of the eighteenth-century Clock Tower building, located in the Castle's long-neglected southern precincts. The existing U-shaped building, comprising a central block and two long, parallel wings, was restored to house the library's support services, while the modern extension encompassed climate-controlled spaces for storage and exhibition of the library's collection of rare books, manuscripts and objets d'art; a high-ceilinged, glazed atrium linked the new and restored elements. The large expanse alongside the library was landscaped as a public park, the Dubhlinn Gardens (occupying the site of the 'black pool' of the River Poddle from which Dublin derives its name). The drab character of the Castle's southern precincts was further transformed by Byers's decision to paint several façades in bright, vibrant, pastel colours.

Serving as an OPW assistant principal architect (1997–2001), Byers headed the design team on the Leinster House extension (1998–2000), intended to relieve overcrowding in Leinster House by providing additional office space for oireachtas members and accommodation for the expanding system of oireachtas committees. The development of a restricted site, immediately north-east of Leinster House proper and also bounded by the National Library and National Gallery, posed the challenge of shoehorning a modern structure into an architecturally and historically rich environment. The two-block extension was carefully designed to minimise its visual impact and to harmonise with the lines, dimensions and articulations of the existing structures. Designated Leinster House 2000, the project received an RIAI Dublin regional award for 2001. Byers was instrumental in negotiating the purchase

(1999) of Farmleigh House and its 78-acre demesne by the Irish state from the Guinness family, and was architect on the OPW's restoration and refurbishment (1999–2001) of the building, located to the immediate north-west of Dublin's Phoenix Park, as the Irish state's principal accommodation for visiting dignitaries, for high-level government meetings and functions, and as a public amenity.

In March 2001 Byers was appointed commissioner of public works in charge of state property and projects, one of the OPW's three commissioners, his responsibilities including management of the state's portfolio of over 4,000 properties; he was the first architect to be named an OPW commissioner in modern times. His tenure (2001–08) was dominated by implementation of government policies involving disposal of substantial office space and other properties in Dublin alongside acquisition of properties in other parts of the country. A programme of 'transforming state assets', initiated by the Fianna Fáil–PD government in 2003, involved the OPW in identifying vacant, underutilised, underdeveloped and surplus state property, and assessing its suitability for alternative use or sale; Byers oversaw a new unit established in the OPW's property management services to facilitate the programme. Within months, this programme was linked to the ambitious plan for decentralisation of state services announced by finance minister Charlie McCreevy in his budget speech of December 2003, involving the projected dispersal, within three years, of nearly 11,000 Dublin-based public servants to fifty-eight specified locations in twenty-five counties; the headquarters of eight government departments and some fifty state agencies and semi-state companies were slated for relocation. The OPW was charged with sourcing and developing the regional offices necessary, by identifying appropriate OPW-owned sites, or by acquisition from local authorities or private owners. The plan was envisioned by government as self-financed, proceeds from the sale of surplus Dublin property being vacated by state bodies being directed to acquisition and development of properties in the provinces.

Disposing properties at the height of the early-twenty-first-century property boom, Byers realised some €373 million in the five-year period of 2004–08, some three-fifths of which accrued from just two sales in 2005: the site of the former veterinary college in Ballsbridge sold for €171.5 million, the largest property sale ever achieved by the state (the record €84 million per acre was a loudly trumpeted transaction of the boom); and a site on St John's Road/Military Road near Heuston rail station, a former Posts and Telegraphs depot, was sold jointly by the OPW and the privatised communications utility Eircom, the state receiving €44.9 million. As the Dublin property boom subsided, so too did revenue gleaned by the OPW from property disposal; only €11.2 million was achieved in 2007–08.

Roundly criticised from many quarters, on grounds of logistics, efficiency, management principles, cost, planning, coordinated regional development, and underlying rationale, the decentralisation plan was ultimately shipwrecked by the collapse of Dublin property values and the straitening of public finances amid the financial crisis commencing in 2008. Suspended pending review by the Fianna

Fáil–Green government in October 2008, the plan was cancelled by the Fine Gael–Labour government in November 2011. (By June 2010, less than 3,200 staff – 29 per cent of the projected total – had been dispersed to thirty-seven locations.)

In other aspects of his role as commissioner, Byers was involved in preparing a conservation and management plan for the Phoenix Park, which included significant restrictions (announced in October 2006) on motor traffic within the amenity, intended to address the growing problem of traffic congestion. He oversaw the OPW's restoration of Castletown House, Co. Kildare (the earliest and largest Palladian house in Ireland) and its surrounding grounds, which included building conservation, historic landscape restoration, acquisition of additional parkland, and development of visitor services and facilities. Byers also oversaw restoration of Oldbridge House, Co. Meath, and its refurbishment as the Battle of the Boyne Visitor Centre on the site of the 1690 battle, officially opened in May 2008. He made available buildings in state ownership for such cultural events as the Festival of Music in Great Irish Houses.

In 2007–08 Byers redefined the role of the OPW building maintenance services division by removing it from responsibility for general maintenance of modern offices in the Dublin area (which was outsourced on a measured term contract) to concentration on upkeep of historic state properties in the Dublin region, and of Castletown House and Kilkenny Castle, involving conservation and restoration on planned work programmes specific to each site. He thus initiated the revival of a range of specialised crafts skills within the division, and organised relevant training for young tradespeople. He was the state's chief negotiator in securing an agreement in August 2007 to purchase the majority of holdings on the Great Blasket Island, off the Dingle peninsula, Co. Kerry, with a view to the island's development as a national historic park and preservation of the island's deserted old village; the sale was effected (after Byers's death) in early 2009.

Inspirational, charismatic and outspoken, with definite ideas about how best to serve the public interest, Byers exerted a profound influence on shaping state policy regarding public buildings, marked by a strong commitment to enhancing public awareness of Ireland's built heritage by opening historic buildings to a wide public in ways that were relevant to contemporary life. A bold, imaginative and maverick thinker, ever ready to challenge conventional opinion, he was adept at cutting through bureaucracy to achieve an objective, and for moving swiftly and assuredly to accomplish an agreed plan. Both visionary and pragmatic, he had both a head for the master plan and an eye for the fine detail. He was a skilled organiser of events of all descriptions, including presidential inaugurations, state visits, varied state occasions, conferences and launches. At 6 ft 5 in (1.65 m) in height, and with a taste for flamboyant neckties, he cut a conspicuous figure when greeting dignitaries to such events. The many and varied OPW projects with which he was engaged allowed him indulge his keen interests in cultural heritage, military history and the arts.

A passionate enthusiast of motor racing, Byers had a long involvement with the sport at several levels. In 1985 he helped revive 'round-the-houses' car racing on a circuit of his design in Ballyjamesduff. A long-time member of the Irish Motor Racing Club (latterly, Motorsport Ireland), he served as president (1987) and became secretary in 1992. He was part of a consortium that took over the lease of Mondello Park, Co. Kildare, in 1993, and became a director of the facility, where he was a familiar presence and participant at Fun Cup meetings. He was regularly involved in organisation of, and as a competitor in, the annual Phoenix Park motor races. An avid football fan, and frequent attendee on League of Ireland terraces, he was a loyal supporter of Shamrock Rovers and the English club West Ham United.

Byers married Anne O'Connell; they had two daughters, and resided in Dún Laoghaire, Co. Dublin. Immediately after completing a circuit at a motor racing event in Wales, he suffered a heart attack and died, aged 55, on 6 September 2008. A humanist funeral service in the Mansion House, Dublin, was followed by a private cremation. The David Byers Perpetual Trophy was first presented to the winner of the revived Dublin Grand Prix Formula Libre automobile race at the Phoenix Park meeting of August 2009.

Ir. Times, 26 Sept. 1984; 21 Mar., 16, 19 Apr., 11 May, 6 June, 6, 8, 9, 22 Aug. 1985; 24 Apr. 1986; 23 Apr. 1987; 16 Dec. 1988; 14 Dec. 1989; 2 Feb. 1991; 16 Oct. 1992; 9 Dec. 1993; 29 July, 13 Dec. 1994; 20 Sept., 16 Nov. 1995; 30 Mar., 23 July 1998; 1, 2, 3, 5, 18, 21, 23, 24 June, 2 Dec. 1999; 3 Feb., 19 Oct. 2000; 15 Feb., 26, 30 July, 3, 5 Sept. 2001; 8 Mar. 2002; 2 Aug. 2003; 10 Oct. 2006; 21 July 2007; 24 Mar., 6, 7 May, 7 Aug., 8, 10, 12, 13, 17 Sept. 2008; 4, 6, 7, 16, 20 Sept. 2010; 18, 21, 25 Nov. 2011; Ciaran O'Connor and John O'Regan (ed.), *Public works: the architecture of the Office of Public Works 1831–1987* (1987), 94–9; *Plan*, 'Dublin Castle restoration and conference centre', xx, no. 2 (Feb. 1989), 3–20; *ibid.*, 'Government Buildings, Merrion Street, Dublin' (Mar. 1991), 3–8; *ibid.*, 'Clock tower, Dublin Castle, refurbishment', no. 2, 1996, 21–6; *Build*, 'Preserved for the nation', xxiv, no. 10 (July–Aug. 1989), 18–27; *ibid.*, 'Government Buildings: Ireland's largest ever refurbishment project' (Mar. 1991 supplement); David J. Griffin and Caroline Pegum, *Leinster House 1744–2000: an architectural history* (2000), 121–31; *Obair: Bulletin from the Office of Public Works*, nos. vii–xx (June 2002–Dec. 2008), *passim*, downloaded from OPW Publications, www.opw.ie, esp. xx (Dec. 2008), 10–11; OPW, Annual report, 2004–09, downloaded from OPW Publications, esp.: 2004, 2, 19–20, 36; 2005, 27–8, 34; 2007, 38–41; 2008, 27–8, 41–2; Patrick Walsh, *Castletown, Co. Kildare* (2007); *Kerryman* (North ed.), 9 July, 6, 13, 27 Aug., 22, 29 Aug., 17 Sept. 2008; *Sunday Independent*, 14 Sept. 2008; *Dingle News*, 24 June 2010; Clara Cullen and Orla Feely (ed.), *The building of the state: science and engineering with government in Merrion Street* (2011), 56–61; 'Farmleigh House, Dublin', www.horganlynch.ie/property/farmleigh-house-dublin; Castletown: news

and events 2007, www.castletown.ie; 'History of Government Buildings', Department of the Taoiseach, www.taoiseach.gov.ie; RIAI Irish Architecture Gallery: Irish Architecture Awards, www.irisharchitectureawards.ie; internet material accessed Feb.–Apr. 2015

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