

O'Connor, Deirdre

by Andrew O'Brien

O'Connor, Deirdre (1951–99), architect, was born 25 September 1951 at Ranelagh, Dublin, eldest among five children of Brendan O'Connor (d. 1964), engineer, originally from Mostrim, Co. Leitrim, and Sheelagh O'Connor (née McManus). After the death of her father, when Deirdre was 13, her mother married (1967) Dermot Rush (d. 1999). Her mother died of cancer in 1995, soon after Deirdre had been diagnosed with the same illness. She entered (1968) the College of Technology, Bolton St., Dublin, won the RIAI/AAI combined prize (1971) and a travelling scholarship (1972), and qualified Dip.Arch. (1973). In the Architectural Association of Ireland she was a member of the committee (1973–4), joint secretary and treasurer (1974–5), and vice-president (1975–6). She worked with Dublin architects Robinson Keefe & Devane till 1976, in which year she was elected MRIAI. At the school of architecture in UCD she won a Cement Roadstone housing research fellowship (1976–7) and was a tutor there (1977–90). In 1976 she was elected the first female president of the AAI and was appointed AAI representative on the RIAI council. She joined (1978) Dublin architects Arthur Gibney & Partners, becoming a partner in the practice in 1981.

Her *Housing in Dublin's inner city* (1979) was jointly published by the housing research unit of the UCD school of architecture and Cement Roadstone Holdings Ltd. The aim of the study was to examine the housing problems of the inner city, which she identified as a c.4,000-acre area between the Grand and Royal Canals, Dublin, and to suggest redevelopment policies. The inner city's socio-economic problems, she argued, had been created by Dublin's rapid growth in the 1960s. Consequently problems of transport, commercial development, urban blight, and population decrease had arisen. She recommended the provision of a large range of house types and sizes to suit all socio-economic groups, and urged serious local and central government commitment to encourage inner city renewal.

She was chairman of the public affairs division of the RIAI (1985–6) and was elected FRIAI (1987). She was architect of the campus redevelopment at NIHE Dublin in the former Albert College, Ballymun (1988). A visiting critic at the Dublin Institute of Technology school of architecture, Bolton St. (1989–92), she was external examiner there (1993, 1995, 1996). O'Connor was involved in the design of buildings at Dublin City University (DCU) at Glasnevin, Dublin, and was architect of the James Larkin lecture theatre, which won an RIAI regional award in 1992. The 400-seat Larkin theatre was the largest single teaching space on the DCU campus. Other major commissions included the new elevation and esplanade at Dr Steevens' Hospital, Dublin, for the Eastern Health Board (1992), and the Bookend apartment building at Essex Quay, Dublin. She co-edited with John Graby the Phaidon architectural guide to Dublin (1993). She was architect (1997) of the Restaurant Patrick Guilbaud,

21 Merrion St., Dublin, a volumetric design with a high central space and two lower peripheral seating areas forming aisles on two sides of the main area. Her sensitive design allows a sympathetic display of an impressive modern Irish art collection. She retired from full-time practice in August 1999.

O'Connor served on the RIAI council for fifteen years, including two as vice-president (1991, 1994), and was a member of the editorial board of the RIAI journal *Irish Architect* for five years. She was convenor (1989–91) and chairman (1992–4) of the RIAI gold medal jury. Architect, teacher, administrator, and adviser, O'Connor strove for over twenty years to show the difference that the design of buildings on a human scale could make to the quality of life in Dublin. She died 3 October 1999 at her Greystones residence after a long illness. She was survived by five brothers and was buried beside her parents at Kilquade new cemetery, Co. Wicklow. The RIAI established a medal in her honour in May 2000.

John Graby, *150 years of architecture in Ireland: the Royal Institute of Architects in Ireland 1839–1939* (1989), 97, 113; Deirdre O'Connor, 'Larkin Theatre, D.C.U.', *Irish Architect*, xci (July–Aug. 1992), 18–19; Cathal Crimmins, 'Dr Steevens' Hospital', *Irish Architect*, xcii (Sept.–Oct. 1992), 29–34; Deirdre O'Connor, 'Restaurant Patrick Guilbaud', *Irish Architect*, cxxxiii (Jan. 1998), 38–40; Jimmy O'Connor, 'Deirdre O'Connor – an appreciation', *Irish Architect*, cli (Oct. 1999), 3; *Ir. Times*, 4 Oct. 1999; 23 Oct. 1999 (photo); RIAI archives; 'RIAI presents inaugural Deirdre O'Connor Medal', on the RIAI website, www.riai.ie/index.html (accessed Feb. 2007)