

Wejchert, Andrzej

by Lawrence William White

Wejchert, Andrzej (1937–2009), architect, was born 21 May 1937 in Gdańsk, in the semi-autonomous Free City of Danzig, sandwiched between the Polish Corridor and the German province of East Prussia, son of Tadeusz Wejchert, who ran a shipping business, and Irena Wejchert (née Mojgis). Two years after his birth, Danzig became the first theatre of the second world war when the German invasion of Poland was spearheaded by an assault on the enclave, which was then annexed by the German Reich. Amid the political turmoil in post-war, communist Poland, in 1948 the family moved to Warsaw, where Wejchert received secondary education, and then studied architecture at Warsaw Polytechnic. Graduating with honours (1962), he worked in the school design section of the design office of municipal buildings in Warsaw.

In 1964 Wejchert won an international competition for the master plan of the new campus, in Belfield, of University College Dublin, against over 120 competitors from forty-six countries, including many prestigious firms. Notified of the award by telegram on the eve of his departure on an exit visa for Paris – ostensibly to view master works of art and architecture, but also to visit his friend and wife-to-be, Danuta Kornaus (see below) – he disembarked from the Paris train at Amsterdam and spent all his money on a one-way air ticket to Dublin; unable to pay for excess baggage, he abandoned his clothing and arrived with only the suit on his back and a suitcase stuffed with architectural books. Astonishing the UCD authorities by his youth and inexperience, Wejchert agreed to undertake the project in association with an established Irish firm, and thereupon worked closely with Andy Devane of Robinson, Keefe & Devane.

Wejchert's UCD master plan proposed to reinforce and expand the existing, hedgerow-defined field pattern on the site by dense plantings, thus creating a series of enclosed 'gardens', each with a faculty building, placed on both sides of a gently curved, central spine, defined by a canopied pedestrian mall. In the event, his fundamental concept was not achieved, as over time Belfield endured a fragmented development, with new buildings situated randomly and the conceived pattern of enclosures only partially realised. The competition also included designs for three major campus buildings, of which two were erected: arts and commerce (1969) and administration (1972). Wejchert designed similar elevations for both buildings (which are linked at first-floor level by an enclosed, transparent walkway), giving each a continuous horizontal window pattern and a projecting service tower. Arts and commerce, the larger of the two, comprises ten blocks of varying heights grouped around internal courtyards. The elevation pattern of the smaller administration building is interrupted by recesses and tall rectangular columns that address a sloped ground gradient and express externally the building's most distinctive feature: a two-storey, brightly lit main hall containing an open-plan general office

and public concourse. Characterised by 'physical transparency and democratisation of space', the interior design has been compared to Frank Lloyd Wright's Johnson Wax headquarters in Racine, Wisconsin (O'Neill, 128–9). The first atrium building in Ireland, it was awarded the triennial gold medal of the Royal Institute of the Architects of Ireland (RIAI) for the years 1971–3.

Two of Belfield's most conspicuous structures were included in Wejchert's original plan: the formal lake, which besides its aesthetic purpose can function as a water supply in a fire emergency; and the 60-metre, reinforced-concrete water tower, with its pentagonal stem and duodecahedral tank. Wejchert's later Belfield commissions included the sports centre (1981), containing facilities for indoor sports and changing areas for field games; it was highly commended by the RIAI gold medal jury for 1981–3.

With Wejchert's reputation thus established by his award-winning work at Belfield, in 1974 he and his architect wife Danuta established the practice of A & D Wejchert. Over the next four decades, the practice executed some sixty-five major projects across a diversity of fields, all to a consistently high standard and many of outstanding quality. Injecting Irish architecture with a new and vibrant energy, they won many awards, commendations and other distinctions. Both Wejcherts frequently entered competitions in Ireland and elsewhere, partly to enhance the profile of their practice, securing thereby new clients and commissions, but also to explore fresh ideas and freely express their virtuosity outside the constraints of a contract. In 1999 the practice became A & D Wejchert & Partners, and in 2016 was restyled as Wejchert Architects.

Owing to Andrzej's prior experience and reputation, the early work of A & D Wejchert concentrated on educational projects at all levels. In 1974 the practice won second prize in a competition for an experimental school design for the Department of Education, leading to several schools commissions, most notably the identically designed community schools at Ballincollig, Co. Cork (1976), and Ballynanty, Limerick city, and the Brookfield second-level school, Tallaght, Co. Dublin (1985). The Wejcherts' most adventurous school design was the Dalkey School Project National School, Glenageary, Co. Dublin (1984), which became the flagship school of the nascent, multi-denominational Educate Together movement; intended to facilitate the shared-area teaching method, the flexible design allowed temporary re-sectioning of the interiors to accommodate a variety of uses.

Andrzej Wejchert supervised most of the third-level educational projects executed by the practice. He worked on development plans in 1972 and 1993 for University College Cork, and designed two of the new buildings: the students' centre (1996) and the O'Rahilly Building (2000). Both were finished in local white limestone to harmonise with existing structures on the campus, and his design of the O'Rahilly echoed the Irish neo-gothic style of the neighbouring 1849 quadrangle. His extensive work, from the late 1990s, at Waterford Institute of Technology addressed

accommodation needs occasioned by a dramatic increase in student numbers, and included designs intended to maximise energy efficiency; the library (2000) received a Department of the Environment sustainable building award, and the nurse education building (2007) was cited as best sustainable project in the RIAI awards. Wejchert's design of the Helix Performing Arts Centre (2003) at Dublin City University grouped three performance spaces – a concert hall, theatre and small studio/rehearsal room – around a three-storey foyer with an exhibition area and circular grand stairway, open to external view through a curved glass wall; it was named Opus building of the year.

Wejchert's prolific work in the industrial, office and retail sectors included development plans for the extensive National Technology Park at Plassey, Co. Limerick (1982–9), which opened in 1984 as Ireland's first science and technology park, and for the more modest South County Business Park, Leopardstown, Co. Dublin. Especially successful was his design of Beresford Court (1991), Beresford Place/Lower Abbey Street, Dublin, for Irish Life Assurance plc, which was named *Plan* building of the year (1992). Constructed in six levels over a basement car park, the building's two wings form a V-shaped plan enclosing a multi-storey, top-glazed atrium that rises from the first-floor level, and through which light floods the open-plan offices at the upper levels and an enclosed garden on the atrium floor. Arthur Gibney (qv) compared the sudden and 'immensely dramatic' realisation of the volume of space upon one's arrival at atrium level to the spatial climax of a seventeenth-century baroque church (*A & D Wejchert*, 161).

Over many years, Wejchert worked on successive phases of the Blanchardstown Centre, Co. Dublin, at its inception in 1985 the largest retail project then current in Ireland. His design of the first-phase shopping mall, completed in 1996, addressed the natural fall across the site by having a higher-level ground floor meet a lower-level ground floor at a two-storey hub. Subsequent designs involved extensions to the shopping mall, and ancillary retail parks and office blocks. Among the latter, the Quinn Direct building (2003; latterly, Liberty Insurance Centre) was conceived as a landmark structure dominating the locale: ten storeys in height, capped by a top-floor penthouse office suite, with a U-shaped floor plan around an atrium, clad in curtain walling with a curved façade facing the N3 motorway. The nearby eBay Atrium Office (2003) comprises two five-storey blocks surrounding three sides of a glazed atrium. Within the Dublin city centre, Wejchert worked on redevelopment of the ILAC centre (1997–2002) and on the Gaiety Centre, South King Street (2009), a mixed-use commercial and residential development with a conspicuous, faceted-glass façade.

From the mid 1990s Wejchert fulfilled several commissions in his native Poland. His work on the Sobanski Palace complex, Warsaw (1997–9), involved refurbishment of a nineteenth-century aristocratic townhouse into an exclusive business club while respecting the structure's historic fabric (modern kitchen, toilets and mechanical room were placed in an underground extension), and erection on the grounds of an

elegant modernist office building clad in reflective glass, comparable to a glistening glass sculpture. The project was named best public building in Warsaw in 1998–9 and received a diploma from the Polish Ministry of Culture for best modernisation of an historic structure (2000).

Described as probably the most successful immigrant architect in Ireland since James Gandon (qv) (O'Neill, 127), Wejchert was a fellow of the RIAI, serving for sixteen years on the institute's council, and twice elected vice-president; he also sat on the body's professional conduct committee. He was a member of the RIBA and the Association of Polish Architects, and taught in the UCD school of architecture. Awarded an honorary LLD by the NUI (1997), he was an associate of the RHA and served on the board of governors of the NGI. From 1982 he and Danuta resided in a house of their own design, 'Carillon', off Church Road, Killiney, Co. Dublin. (They also executed commissions for several one-off, single-family homes, most notably a house at Ardcarraig, Co. Galway (2003), set sensitively within a large private garden, and Heather Cottage, Howth, Co. Dublin (2004), which in material and its irregular, low-profile form merges with the traditional stone walls of the local landscape.) They had a daughter, Agnieszka Wejchert Pearson, an architect based in Britain, and a son, Michael Wejchert, a structural engineer. Andrzej Wejchert died at his home on 12 May 2009. The funeral was from St Stephen's Roman catholic church, Killiney, to Shanganagh cemetery.

His wife, Danuta Kornaus-Wejchert (1938–2014), architect, was born 23 March 1938 in Lwów (Lviv), Poland (now in Ukraine), daughter of Pawel Kornaus and Lucia Kornaus (née Szlachepko). Her interest in architecture arising from an early fascination with and proficiency in mathematics, she too was an honours graduate of the architecture faculty of Warsaw Polytechnic (where she and Andrzej met), after which she worked in the building design office of the Polish health department. She continued her architectural studies in Paris at the L'école Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, and designed medical buildings with Agence Auffret, Paris. Following Wejchert to Dublin in 1965, she worked in the firm of Robinson, Keefe & Devane till she and Andrzej launched their own practice. (Also moving to Dublin in 1965 was Andrzej's elder sister, the sculptor Alexandra Wejchert (qv).)

Besides her close involvement in A & D Wejchert's schools commissions of the 1970s–80s, Danuta Kornaus-Wejchert worked on one of the practice's most highly acclaimed early projects, the Ailwee Cave visitor centre in the Burren, Co. Clare (1979), the function of which was to regulate ingress and egress for the natural formation and provide spaces for interpretative display, souvenir sales, and a tearoom and restaurant. In design, scale and materials, the building blends unobtrusively with the grey limestone of the hillside setting to the extent that from a distance it might be mistaken for a natural outcrop. Commended by the RIAI gold medal jury for 1977–9, the structure was named *Plan* building of the year (1980), and received a Shannonside environmental award (1979), a Europa Nostra diploma (1980), and an An Taisce commendation (1981). In Dublin, Kornaus-

Wejchert worked on Smithfield Village (1983–7), a mixed-used redevelopment, with residential, commercial and cultural components, of a derelict site formerly occupied by a distillery and adjoining a large cobbled market square; her design retained some of the existing architectural features, including a listed 1895 chimney that she surmounted with an observation platform.

A prolific participant over the years in national and international architectural competitions of a diverse nature (conference centre, university, hotel, aquarium, science park, church) in Europe, Asia and Oceania, Kornaus-Wejchert was highly commended for her entry in a Dublin Roman catholic diocesan church competition (1975), resulting in commissions for sacral architecture. These included Holy Trinity church, Donaghmede, Dublin (1978), designed with a unique structural system that roofed a Maltese cruciform plan; church of Our Lady, Blessington, Co. Wicklow (1982), built to a triangular plan (an adjoining primary school (1987) was designed with harmonising materials and forms); Knock Apparition Chapel, Co. Mayo (1992), enclosing behind a glazed façade the church gable where occurred the putative apparition of 1879; and St Mary of the Rosary church, Cong, Co. Mayo (2003), an extensive refurbishment of a 1973 church, including a new limestone exterior complementing the adjoining ruins of a twelfth-century abbey. The building complex at Newlands Cross Cemetery, Co. Dublin (2000), comprising three interlinked pavilions set amid gardens, received an RIAI regional award for 2001.

Her participation in the Tallaght hospital competition (1985) resulted in commissions allowing Kornaus-Wejchert to revive her early career engagement with healthcare architecture. Seeking the humanisation of healthcare buildings, she employed colour and pattern, natural light, expansive spaces, and proximity to natural features to create environments that encouraged tranquillity and healing. These guiding principles were applied in her execution of a new psychiatric unit at Naas General Hospital (1986–9). Inspired by the town's tradition of painted gable-ended houses, she designed a complex of small-scale, house-like components with pitched roofs, gabled walls and multi-coloured plasters, orientated to face a park and lake, thus simulating a normal residential neighbourhood integrated with the wider community; the project received an RIAI regional award (1990). Her other healthcare projects included subsequent development phases at Naas General and varied work at James Connolly Memorial Hospital, Blanchardstown, Dublin (1998–2003), Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital, Drogheda (2004 and 2008), Letterkenny General Hospital, Co. Donegal, and health centres in Swords, Co. Dublin (1998), and Irishtown, Dublin (2008).

Danuta Kornaus-Wejchert was an RIAI fellow and a member of the RIBA and Association of Polish Architects. She died 7 May 2014 at the Blackrock Clinic, Co. Dublin.

The Wejcherts were both gentle, unassuming people, softly spoken with old-world manners; giving every visitor their full attention, neither would dream of taking a

phone call in a client's or guest's company. With an intuitive capacity for identifying the key issues in any architectural project, they enjoyed a warm rapport with clients and builders. 'A rare gift in Ireland, they seem[ed] to prefer to listen rather than to talk' (O'Neill, 129). Their architectural ideas arising from the nature of a project rather than an overriding, doctrinaire theory, their designs were always a direct response to the programme and the site. Accordingly, their buildings had a bespoke flavour, and eschewed any ready association with a consistent stylistic pattern. In consequence, though many of their buildings are widely familiar to the Irish general public, most are not readily identifiable as theirs, a fact that, along with the couple's personal modesty, may explain their relative anonymity beyond their profession.

A retrospective volume on the work of the practice, with informative text and lavishly illustrated with photographs and architectural drawings, was published in 2008.

GRO (death certs.); *Ir. Times*, 25 Oct. 1995; 19 June 2008; 14, 15 May 2009; 12 May 2015; Cathal O'Neill, 'A strategic portfolio', *Irish Arts Review*, xxv, no. 3 (autumn 2008), 126–9; *A & D Wejchert & Partners* (2008); *Architecture Ireland*, no. 246 (May–June 2009), 23; *ibid.*, no. 275 (June–July 2014), 17; rip.ie; *A & D Wejchert & Partners Architects*, www.wejchert.ie (internet material accessed Mar. 2016)