

News

Irish architect elected president of the Architects Council of Europe

Following a landslide victory, RIAI nominee Selma Harrington has been elected president of the Architects Council of Europe. Based in Brussels, ACE is the representative body for half a million architects across 27 countries in Europe. Its principal function is to monitor developments at EU level, seeking to influence those areas of EU Policy and legislation that have an impact on architectural practice and on the overall quality and sustainability of the built environment.

Harrington's election as president comes at one of the most challenging times facing Irish and European architects, with high unemployment in the sector and a range of ongoing issues affecting the building industry throughout Europe. Construct Ireland spoke to the new president to find out what part sustainability might play in her presidency.

Construct Ireland: To what extent, in your view, must architecture be eco friendly?

Selma Harrington: I believe in eco friendly architecture and believe that we need to embrace it as much as possible within a given context. It is common sense, like rinsing off milk from paper or plastic packaging and recycling glass or composting. It is all part of the same large process of respecting the available resources and natural environment that surrounds us.

CI: Do you think architects have much to learn about green design?

SH: Training of architects, but also educating the public and decision makers is key to embracing green design. Global communications make us realise faster and faster about the damage that our consumerism-dominated civilization has caused to the environment. Victor Papanek spoke about the 'green imperative' almost twenty years ago. That idea requires a change of attitudes and giving up short-sighted selfishness for the sake of common good. Becoming an architect is a process beyond getting qualifications and practice, it requires maturity, sensitivity to the changes both in society and in profession, as well as constant learning. It is also about recognizing the reality of the moment and perhaps giving up the idea of big statements in favour of small steps.

I dream of the real 'greening' of Ireland - a mature, informed and resourced 'big spring clean-out' of our urban and rural space and traffic connections scarred by the Celtic Tiger post-trauma, to empower and re-engage all of us with our space and our future.

CI: What role do you see for architects in the energy upgrading of existing buildings?

SH: By their professional training and role, architects are well equipped to play



an integrative and holistic role that is a key to achieving both general and specific qualities in the energy performance upgrade of existing buildings. I am concerned about a fragmented approach with a pull-down menu of 'upgradable' building elements and services, which, if applied mechanically and without analyzing, understanding and addressing the design, spatial and user aspects of any new intervention, might result in partial and inadequate works and potential latent defects in the building fabric as well as in building use.

We have very useful energy performance software tools at hand, but they are precisely what they say: tools, and they need to be analysed holistically by a qualified architect, with the specialist input as necessary.

Each existing building or unit of space need to be studied on a case-by-case basis and any proposed measures must be applied accordingly.

Of course, this requires that we, the architects, are up-to-date with the new tools, materials and technologies as part of our continual professional education. New tools are applied in the context of all other skills that architects bring to the design of buildings and space.

For us in Ireland, the challenge is to work

with a significant stock of existing dwellings which are more than a hundred years old, and which are in reasonably good physical condition and in continuous use. The life-span of these buildings is much longer than humans live and has withstood test of changes in use of space, introduction of new types of heating, lighting, plumbing, electrical systems and equipment.

Architects sometimes have a detective's role in assessing the building method of an existing building, in particular when working with protected structures that might have undergone a variety of changes and interventions over the years. It often takes time to understand the difference in performance of traditional materials and structures and the implications of modern interventions, combined now with legal requirements and building regulations.

Energy performance upgrades have to be understood together with existing natural ventilation, 'breathability' of materials, required air-tightness, indoor air quality, fire resistance and many other technical components, without losing the ultimate goal of architecture, which is in my view materialised in harmonious spatial form with quality of use and design detail.

(above) Selma Harrington, the newly elected president of the Architects Council of Europe