



The arts past and present

Ireland: changing attitudes to restoration

Narrator

In 1973 Ireland joined the European Union, a move that not only increased its prosperity, it also generated an appreciation of the country's architectural heritage.

Barry Murphy

I must say as somebody who took part in the meetings in Europe during the early 70s, it was tremendously exciting and it did give us a feeling of worth and value and when you came home and back and looked at the government buildings around you, you thought, "Gosh, we have something here."

Narrator

Joining the EU kick-started a great phase of restoration, particularly in Dublin. One of the buildings to benefit was Kilmainham Hospital, neglected for over fifty years. This 18th century former military hospital was converted into the Irish Museum for Modern Art.

Vincent Comerford

It very, very readily was accepted as just another very important part of the Irish cultural inheritance and again, placing the Museum of Modern Art there, that I'm sure was done with some deliberation. You know, in other words, to give it a modern focus to shall we say to counter-balance some of its historical connotations.

Interviewer

Could it have happened in the 1960s?

Vincent Comerford

I think not. It was associated with the British army that was the particular connotation of the Royal Hospital.

Narrator

Today the buildings of 18th century Ireland no longer carry associations with colonial oppression. The craftsmanship of the period is highly prized. Georgian houses in Dublin are sold for millions of euros. The Big House is rising from ruin.

Terry Dooley

Having spoken quite recently to one owner, who bought a house and spent quite a lot of money on restoring it, asked him the very question as to why did they buy a house, spend so much money restoring it when they could have invested in a modern mansion? And the answer was quite surprising in many respects because they said that to them this was an act of patriotism; that they were actually doing something to ensure the survival of what they considered to be an important part of the Irish heritage.

Narrator

It's not just the big house that's enjoying a renaissance. In a busy shopping street in Dublin, this former Church of Ireland church, St Mary's, has been given a complete makeover. Views differ on whether a church should become a bar, but an important site has been saved.

Narrator

St Mary's was built in 1704, but it was in a state of serious decay when the builders moved in, in 1998.

John Keating

When we took ownership of the building, the building at that stage had 300 resident pigeons within the building, on this level for instance, which happens to be one of the oldest gallery church in Ireland. The floors up here were unsafe. We had dry rot and wet rot, down the building as well too, so, it was; it was nearly started from scratch.

John Keating

There is no question that if I knew then what I know now that I would have, as my wife says, taken a deep breath until the moment had passed. However, when you started a project like this, I was naturally enthusiastic.

Narrator

So does the conversion of this former church reflect a change in attitudes to the past?

John Keating

I think the building slightly reflects the fact that Ireland has moved on an awful lot in the past 15 years. In that, the customer from my perspective is able to come in and enjoy themselves, in contemporary use – in a contemporary fitting out an old building for an alternative use. Yet at the same time be able to enjoy the history associated with the building and it gives Irish people in some respects and Dublin people in some respects another type of area which they can be proud of.

Barry Murphy

I think that Ireland has moved on. And I think, you know, when you can ignore the past in that way, and simply use the works as works of art for your own purposes, it must show that there is maturing there or a degree of forgetting.

Terry Dooley

In the same way that we have moved on, for example, from the disastrous effects of civil war in Ireland, where up to possibly as late as 20 years ago, it was difficult for historians perhaps to write about it or it was difficult for politicians to talk about it. And in the same sense, we have gradually moved far enough away from seeing country houses as being symbols of colonialism or oppression to regard them rightfully as part of Irish heritage.