

NIAH Building of the Month

Richard Butler

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Bantry Library, Co Cork, Republic of Ireland, by Patrick McSweeney and Harry Wallace (1962-74)

Set amidst the small market town of Bantry, near the site of a former mill and surrounded by one of the spate rivers which drain from the Knocknaveagh range to the south, is one of Ireland's most unusual examples of Modernist architecture. Bantry Library was designed in 1962 by the Cork County Council architect Patrick McSweeney and the project was developed and overseen by his assistant Harry Wallace. The design is said to have been conceived when McSweeney and his daughter were recovering from the flu, and to pass the time he made a model of a library building. His excitement with this design led him to present the model to a Convention of Librarians in Dublin, where it was enthusiastically received.

Four years passed before plans were ready for public consultation, and four more before funding was secured. The cost was estimated at £45,000 (in fact it cost £60,000), a significant sum at the time, and the cause of some controversy. At a heated meeting of the Bantry Town Commissioners, one misguided councillor was quoted as saying 'it would be nothing short of ridiculous to throw that sum of money into that dump,' and 'it would be far better to cover in the river, make a car park there and widen the road'. More sympathetic was R.P. Keyes, who warned that if Bantry were to say no, the money would inevitably go elsewhere, and just as the town had refused a library offered by the Carnegie Trust in 1912, they would soon regret this kind of short-sightedness too. The proponents succeeded and it was built 1972-74.

The great joy of the library is its romantic interpretation of an array of both ancient and modern sources, from standing stones to Corbusier's Notre Dame du Haut, battered Egyptian pylons to Wright's Falling Water, and even the sweeping curve of a Martello tower, all rendered in 'oatmeal' concrete. Local opinion holds that McSweeney used the megalithic wedge tomb as the principal source for his design, translating its trabeated forms into mass concrete. Indeed the architect, who grew up in the nearby village of Ballydehob, must have been aware of the high density of such monuments in the local area. In reality, however, Ireland's ancient heritage was just one of the sources which McSweeney drew on.

We approach from the town square, walking up Bridge Street. Directly ahead of us, where the river disappears under the road, the north and west facades of the library appear; a Panopticon window forms the focal point at the end of the street. From here the library appears only to have one roof, placed like the capping stone on a wedge tomb, held up by two great Egyptian pylons. The river cascades around the building; its successive waterfalls separating the library from the steep road nearby. Walking up the steps we see the columnar screen surrounding the entrance, like a series of standing stones, with a large canopy projecting out. We are now on a platform over the river, a bridge connecting the road with the library. From here the south façade comes into view, its fluted sweep of concrete like one of the many early nineteenth-century Martello towers which punctuate the Irish coastline. This leads to the unexpected discovery of the subsidiary roof, connected with the main one by the shafts of three light cannons. Beyond this wall there are two large windows with glass from floor to ceiling, divided by a bulky pier supporting a bold concrete gargoyle. Finishing our walk around the exterior, we view the library from an old stone bridge over the river, where we see a patio space by the water surmounted by another canopy. Due to the topography of the site, the library appears sunken and the subsidiary roof no higher than a car parked on the road nearby.

The interior reinforces the monolithic feeling of the entire composition; it is one large space with the exception of a bathroom and two small offices (one of these a more recent introduction). The roof is full height above the main bookshelves, but lower (corresponding with the subsidiary roof) in the reading, children's, and reference areas. The most exciting view is found above the children's area where deep light cannons bind both roofs together, penetrating through what appears to be an impregnable depth of concrete. Wallace, who oversaw the construction, observed that the concrete was so thick in places 'there was space to walk about inside the framework'. Dramatic in a very different way are the light cannons above the main bookshelves which are suspended at seemingly random heights. These were originally designed to be square in section, painted in primary colours, and to have formed an equally dramatic cityscape-like skyline of differing heights on the exterior of the roof. However budget concerns saw the use of precast concrete pipes instead.

McSweeney is best known in Ireland for designing the Cork County Council's tower-block headquarters, County Hall (1968), which was until recently clad with precast concrete tracery. He and Wallace also designed Fermoy Library (1970), a less monumental combination of Egyptian pylons and concrete gargoyles. Bantry, which he thought his best work, was his last for the Council. In his later and very peculiar Church of the Incarnation, Frankfield-Grange (1974-76), we can see some of Bantry's monumentality. Unlike this brick church, both Bantry and Fermoy libraries have been thoroughly and repeatedly painted. McSweeney's uncompromising Brutalist aesthetic may have been too much for small-town Bantry, but nothing can justify the cream colour it is so defaced by today. A replica mill wheel was installed in 2000-01, which saw the demolition of some cantilevered stairs over the lower waterfall.

This building provides particular pleasure to a visitor immediately after heavy rains, when the river is in flood, and one can sit in the warm and well-lit enclosure of the reading area and watch the torrent rush by outside. Sometimes the height of the earthy water approaches floor level, and through the window one can experience the tension between the river's fluidity and the buffer-like monumentality of the concrete. The drama is heightened by the drainage from the roof, which emerges off the concrete gargoyle in a sizeable flow of clear water, splashing into the murky depths below. All of the building now appears to function as a machine, funnelling water down and around, collecting it, spewing it out, channeling it through its hidden ducts, defending itself with sheer mass against the unrelenting power of nature. To further the experience, one should walk to the opposite end of the building and stand in the austere bathroom, lofty but narrow, where a deliberate gap between the roof and the glass skylight allows in the violent sounds of the waterfalls outside, amplified between the large canopy and the main roof above. At this moment the mechanical illusion is complete, and the concrete which only moments ago seemed so solid and impregnable could just as well be floating at sea - the sloping walls the hull, the skylight a porthole, and the crash of the river that of the bay's waves.

1,184 words

Further Reading

Patrick M. Delany, *Architectural Survey* (Dublin, 1972), pp. 46-47.

'Falling Water at Bantry', *Build*, Jul./Aug. 1974, pp. 17-18.

Anne Maree Sheehan, 'Bantry Beauty', *Building*, 16 August 1974, pp. 59-60.

Shane O'Toole, 'Bantry Library, Co. Cork', *Architecture Ireland*, no. 203, Jan. 2005, pp. 102-03.

Acknowledgements

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Bio

Richard Butler is a PhD student and Gates Scholar at the Department of History of Art & Architecture, University of Cambridge, where he is pursuing a history of early nineteenth-century public architecture in Ireland. He has been involved in numerous conservation projects in the Cork area and has published on British colonial architecture in India and on George Gilbert Scott.