

ARCHITECTURE IRELAND



Irish School Design – The Next Generation: Coláiste Ailigh, Letterkenny, County Donegal

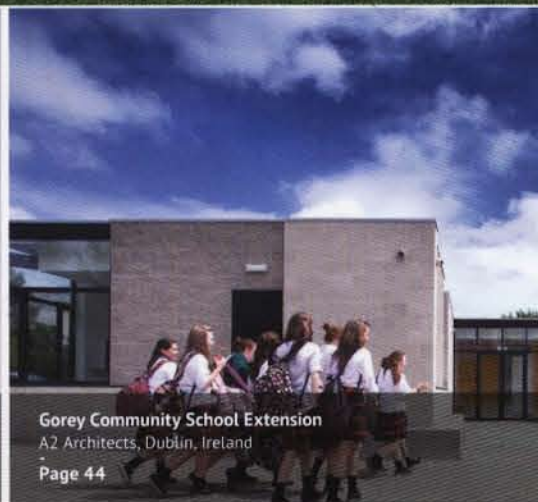
By McGarry Ni Éanaigh Architects

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The Future of Irish School Design
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ARCHITECTURE IRELAND MEETS ROBERT BOURKE ARCHITECTS, WINNER OF 'BEST EMERGING PRACTICE 2014' IN THE RIAI IRISH ARCHITECTURE AWARDS



> INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT BOURKE BY JAMES BASHFORD

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Architecture Ireland: You started Robert Bourke Architects in 2010, how did it begin?

Robert Bourke: If we go right back, I graduated from Trinity College with a four-year degree in Structural Engineering, after which I went into Architecture in Bolton Street for two years. I took a year out in Berlin and then completed my 'Part 2' in East London University. I stayed on in London, working for a small practice called Gumuchdjian Architects, but after five years, I decided to come back to my home city and took an eight-month contract with Seán Harrington Architects, where I worked as site architect on the York Street social housing project. That same year the economic crash happened, much to my shock. I had always intended at some point in my career to set up on my own. I hadn't really planned to do it so soon but because I had no choice, I decided that this was the time.

The practice began from working out of my bedroom to eventually moving into a shared office with Ailtireacht. Then I moved across the road to Strand Studio with a group of architects including Steve Larkin, Clancy Moore and Garbhan Doran. It was a great set-up, but the space itself could get very cold—during one winter we all had to move home due to the temperature. Regardless, that whole environment was fantastic for everyone. So I decided to set up my own version of that and found our office on North Great George's Street two years ago, agreed a reasonable rent, and imported the furniture from the old office. That's how it happened. The practice didn't develop by plan but grew organically.

AI: Do you think starting your firm during the recession was beneficial?

RB: It was essential. The mood of the recession was one of taking any opportunity you can, and maybe it was also the right climate for working more with ideas. There was the time to spend focusing on producing quality work rather than trying to keep abreast of multiple projects that had to be churned out quickly. In recessionary times, you have a lot of time to put into each project. Projects like *A Space for Learning* would never have been possible if we had set up during the boom. It was worth it.

AI: How would you describe your firm in three words?

RB: That's a difficult one, but I think if I had to choose three, they would be: engage, discover and create.

AI: What made you enter the Emerging Practice Award?

RB: I always liked the idea of the award, and I think it's a fantastic initiative, but I never felt ready to enter it until this year. I think the sort of work that we've made in the last year has started to go beyond the work of a typical start up practice, i.e. house extensions. It's also thanks to the opportunities offered by the Irish Architecture Foundation, such as the *A Space for Learning* project and *Place Shapers* as well as my previous background in London, working on a school building, that has made me pursue education. It was those smaller, more experimental projects that are now leading to commissions where we can finally put our ideas into practice. That, and winning the Learning Pavilion competition, made me feel that we had a wide enough variety of work to enter for the award.

Winning is really an honour. We are still in disbelief but we are very happy and hope that it will stand to us in the future. Ideally, it would lead to larger and more ambitious projects!

AI: How do you think that you can utilize the award to your advantage?

RB: We know from experience that work comes in the most unusual ways, so we will continue to try to get the most out of every project. You make your own luck, and so we don't have a set plan. We would like to publicise our work more and see where that leads.

AI: In general, what is your work method?

RB: The investigation side of things is very important and takes various forms depending on the type of project. The more conventional way would be simply to survey a house and talk to the client to see what their needs are, but in the case of something more unusual like an urban design project or a playground or an outdoor classroom, our investigation would be tailored to better suit the people for which we are designing, the brief, and what we would hope to get out of it. It can take various forms, workshops or a simple discussion.

We then test it through this iterative process of forward and backward investigation, communicating with the various people involved—the client, planners, and contractors—in this way we try to get the most out of a project.

Read the full interview with Robert Bourke on **Architecture Ireland Plus**

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