spectrum of green alternate with those of sharp shapes bleached by sunlight or receded into shade. On the perimeter walls, thirty-one black-and-white photographs taken by Roger Sturtevant complement the panel displays. Shown at the 1995 exhibit of Wurster’s houses at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, these images invite a procession from one house to another; each is hung at eye level (with low-budget hooks) and canted slightly outward so as to let visitors get close and feel as if they were almost entering the commodious built spaces.

Wurster may be most famous for not seeking the kind of architectural infamy dependent upon the creation of striking form or conspicuous materiality. Only a few houses display moves that grab one’s eye: the Pope house’s concrete block walls framing a square courtyard dramatically opened by a huge circular cutout; the Coleman house’s interior glass curtain wall disclosing a curving staircase; the Henderson house’s central, glazed atrium. None of these high-wire acts are visible on their building exteriors, however. While the Pope house’s walls curve alongside the garage, and the Walters house’s northern side similarly bends as a gesture toward its expansive view of the Bay and Marin County, the shapes of even the most modernist among the houses ubiquitously recede into right-angled walls punctured by regular window grids. How can an architect become as celebrated as Wurster on the basis of such a nuanced—or dull, depending on one’s opinion—design approach?

Perusing the exhibition offers clues. Moving from the redwood boards of the Gregory farmhouse or Clark house to the concrete blocks that make up the veneer of the Dondo house brings to mind Wurster’s preoccupation with materials, whether traditional or industrial, that provide an architectural counterpart to the infinitely varied textures of California nature. Moreover, the houses not only open themselves to the outdoors through windows and doors, they also showcase a varied counterpoint of interior-to-exteriral spatial relationships: living rooms in the manner of courtyards, bedrooms alongside porches, entrance halls opening not only to interior rooms but exterior terraces, decks, and verandas. Collectively, the designs point far less to the work of other architects, contemporaneous or historical, than to the goal that long-standing vernacular ways of dwelling should imbue the modern residential lifestyle in California. Courtyards thus matter as much as glass curtain walls. Wurster’s design contribution lies in the judicious assimilation of select, new structural technologies and materials into older modes of building.

In light of the importance of understanding settlement with respect to its environment, the exhibition might have benefited by varying its content beyond the houses. While models or a time-line may not have been worthwhile in this regard, maps with locations of the residences would have given visitors a sense of the geographic distribution of his practice: from Big Sur to the Monterey and San Francisco Bay Areas to the Central Valley and onto Lake Tahoe. More to the point, information on the social and business backgrounds of his clients as well as the natural ecosystems of his varied house sites could have brought this fine exhibition of houses in the landscape deeper into the unseen details underlying Wurster’s attempt at what could be characterized as slow architecture. How could a series of one-off houses for wealthy and, very likely, mobile clients, ameliorate our modern age’s break with traditions of building and dwelling in the land? To what extent does the exhibit’s photographic portrait of those houses assist in Wurster’s down-to-earth and, simultaneously, romantic architectural goal?

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Related Publication

Open House Dublin
Irish Architecture Foundation
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Henrietta Street, 8 October 2011. We are in theatrical surroundings: a short, sloped cul-de-sac in an unkempt part of Dublin’s northern inner city, lined with thirteen enormous, stark Georgian houses of which a few have been restored, while the others are intact but tottering. There is a crowd of people, nervous and excited as befits the drama of the place, and jostling to be among the first to have access to number 10. Probably built in the late 1720s, this was the townhouse of Luke Gardiner, the developer who created some of the most important urban set pieces of Dublin, including this one, the city’s grandest residential street from the early eighteenth century (Figure 1). Groups of ten at a time are admitted for tours all afternoon, and are lucky to be guided by an architect who knows the much-remodeled house intimately and is from the firm that recently carried out conservation and restoration work on it. Now a Catholic convent, on any other day of the year 10 Henrietta Street is only accessible to its resident nuns and their guests. But this is Open House weekend, when buildings all over the city and suburbs of Dublin can be visited by anyone interested in architecture, and, in many cases, willing to wait in line. This year’s program involves 130 events including building visits, walking tours, exhibitions and symposia.

The first Open House was held in London almost twenty years ago, and the idea has spread around the world. While the Open House Worldwide network has twelve official members including Open House Tel Aviv, openhousenewyork and Open House Melbourne; related events include “Doors Open” weekends in many American cities.

Dublin’s Open House is distinctive in being directed by an organization with a specific remit—the Irish Architecture Foundation (IAF). The IAF is charged with promoting public engagement with architecture, and this gives them a strong communicative role, reflected in the number of talks and debates that are held as part of Open House Dublin. From its inception in 2006, Dublin’s Open House has been curated by Sandra O’Connell, who has determined not only the theme but also other focal points, such as a specific area of the city and the work of an
individual architect. This year’s theme was “the architecture of change” and the architect was Herbert George Simms, Housing Architect to Dublin Corporation from 1932 to 1948.

The relatively unstudied Simms was responsible for 17,000 dwellings in Dublin. Radical for their time and context, these were generally apartment complexes overtly influenced in material and detail by the Amsterdam school, although more sober in their expression. A “SIMMSposium” about him launched this year’s Open House and tours explored his work. The focus on Simms exemplifies the way Open House’s populism can encourage knowledge and research. Before the Open House this October, Simms was an enigmatic figure—there was no known photograph of him. A feature on a popular show on Irish radio generated a number of first-hand accounts by people who knew him, however, and turned up a number of photographs including his personal travel albums of housing throughout Europe in the 1930s. Now accessioned to the Irish Architectural Archive, these previously unknown records are likely to inspire architectural historians to give greater consideration to an architect who greatly influenced the city’s built environment.

Sandra O’Connell’s essay in the guidebook that accompanies the exhibition provides a wealth of information on the city’s architecture. In addition to listing each event, it focuses on the way contemporary Irish architects have responded to the “great political, economic and social change” of recent times in Ireland. She is referring to Ireland’s post-boom condition, evident in the dearth of new large-scale construction and the decimation of the Irish construction industry. The program this year illustrates one effect of this. A number of the new architectural projects involve the adaptation of existing buildings, such as the offices of the firm Michael Scott (Figure 2). It is described by architectural historian Christine Casey as “the architecture of change” by citing the Architectural Framework Plan for Temple Bar of twenty years ago that marked a turning point for urban regeneration in Ireland. In this project, Group 91, formed by a group of young architects, redesigned a network of early Georgian streets to create a new city area. This year’s Open House celebrated the way the Group 91 architects managed to adapt their expression. A “SIMMSposium” about him launched this year’s Open House and tours explored his work. The focus on Simms exemplifies the way Open House’s populism can encourage knowledge and research. Before the Open House this October, Simms was an enigmatic figure—there was no known photograph of him. A feature on a popular show on Irish radio generated a number of first-hand accounts by people who knew him, however, and turned up a number of photographs including his personal travel albums of housing throughout Europe in the 1930s. Now accessioned to the Irish Architectural Archive, these previously unknown records are likely to inspire architectural historians to give greater consideration to an architect who greatly influenced the city’s built environment.

O’Connell further interprets the theme of change in terms of “how architecture can itself be the catalyst for positive change” by citing the Architectural Framework Plan for Temple Bar of twenty years ago that marked a turning point for urban regeneration in Ireland. In this project, Group 91, formed by a group of young architects, redesigned a network of early Georgian streets to create a new city area. This year’s Open House celebrated the way the Group 91 architects managed to create a network of spaces and impressive individual buildings by organizing urban walks with the architects and hosting an exhibition of photographs of Temple Bar “on the eve of transformation,” when the area was severely dilapidated and earmarked for demolition to make way for a bus station.

A feature of architecture in Dublin in the last decade has been a reappraisal of its modern legacy. A wholehearted embrace of modernist planning, at times alongside hostile local attitudes toward the Georgian core, had seen the breathtaking destruction of about two-fifths of the historic fabric between the 1950s and the mid-1980s. Consequently, for many, modernist architecture has particularly negative associations. Open House fulsomely acknowledged this by programming a popular Destruction of Dublin walk with journalist Frank McDonald, a rather mournful event that revisited the most dramatic scenes of crimes against architectural heritage.

Although many indifferent and loathed buildings were constructed in that period, a few have become icons of a more heroic age. Chief among them is probably the bus station Busáras (1946–53) by the firm of Michael Scott (Figure 2). It is described by architectural historian Christine Casey as a poetic conflation of Le Corbusier’s Armée Salut (1929) and his Pavillion Suisse (1932), although lightened by skilled decorative schemes, most impressively through the lyrical use of colored mosaic. This was among the most popular buildings at this year’s Open House—the only twentieth-century building with more visitors was the Liberty Hall. Built in 1965, Liberty Hall is the highest building in the city center and is under threat of demolition. The plans to replace it have been vigorously contested by the Irish branch of docomomo. A relatively straightforward glazed tower that serves as the headquarters of a trade union, Liberty Hall is formally more interesting than Busáras. Its popularity with visitors might be partly for the views it offers across the city.

Indeed, a strong feature of this year’s Open House was the chance to see Dublin from a number of perspectives. The Dublin Docklands by Water offered a boat tour exploring the newly developed urban quarter and waterways where the river Liffey makes its way to Dublin bay. For the North Docklands, passengers on Dublin’s light railway were guided by planner Pauline Byrne around a once-inaccessible industrial area, now opened up to the city.
through new bridges and redevelopment. Most charmingly, the Phoenix Park Military Cycle involved a two-wheeled tour of military structures guided by the chief superintendent of the park.

Open House Dublin takes place not just in the city center but also throughout its suburbs. However, this year, there was a clear focus on the northern Georgian terraces, of which the “sloping elegance” of North Great Georges Street was the highlight (Figure 3). Unlike poor Henrietta Street, marooned off a busy traffic route, North Great Georges Street is adjacent to the heart of the city. Running down a broad hill, its grand brick terraced houses date from the 1760s to the 1780s, and are mainly four stories over a basement with three-bay elevations, their plainness relieved slightly by differing fanlights and door-cases. The great coherence of Dublin’s largely speculatively built Georgian terraces makes access to the interiors vital for understanding variation in expression, in particular the work of eighteenth-century craftsmen. That there were four different open houses on the street this year was greatly edifying, as visitors could consider, for example, the claim that the neoclassical decorative detail of number 40 suggests a later date than its neighbors. What made the visits a particular delight was that the guides were mainly those who had restored them and now live in them; architectural details aside, they told heroic stories of architectural conservation and pointed out some unusual discoveries. The restoration of number 11, for example, uncovered some eighteenth-century graffiti—a piece of plaster set in the wall, evocatively incised with an Irish name in a Gaelic hand, an English one in copperplate.

For Nathalie Weadick, director of the Irish Architecture Foundation, a clear sign of Open House Dublin’s success is not only the growth in the number of visitors but also their profile. When Open House was first held in 2006, the majority of visitors were from the architectural profession, whereas this year 76 percent were not. Although the theme of change seemed so broad it might act as a catch-all, the judicious selection of buildings and programming of events created a number of subthemes, making it possible to focus on just one architect, era, building type, or approach. Already working on next year’s festival, the Open House team is not concerned with increasing the number of buildings included in their program. Instead, their emphasis remains on creating the conditions by which the city and its architecture can communicate in innumerable ways to its visitors and citizens.

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Related Publication

Notes