

# Em@il Bag

Plan Magazine chews the cud with Landscape Architect Dave Ryan who has built his reputation over the past 13 years working on projects in Ireland, Sweden and Britain. Dave has broad interests in Architecture, Heritage and Planning.

**Plan:** What inspired you to become a Landscape Architect?

**DR:** I was always passionate about Art and Technical Drawing at school so it was a logical choice for me to go for Architectural Technology.

After becoming an Architectural Technician and spending time working in the construction industry doing various different jobs, I wasn't satisfied. The result was that I read CAO descriptions of what a Landscape Architect was and there and then I had my eureka moment.

**Plan:** Where did you study Landscape Architecture?

**DR:** Given that there were no undergraduate courses available in Ireland back then, I applied to in Leeds Metropolitan University as it was one of the top Landscape Universities at the time. It was a really exciting time for me as I had the opportunity to go on an Erasmus exchange to Uppsala, Sweden. Uppsala was marvellous and without doubt, it was the reason why I decided to go back to Sweden to work later on.

**Plan:** What plans did you have after graduating?

**DR:** Once I had saved enough money, I decamped to Stockholm. I was able to find work with a Landscape Contractor. Quickly, I found myself working on many of Ulf Nordfjells gardens or gardens for the Royal Family. In the evenings, I learned Swedish.

My ambition was to secure work with a Landscape Architectural practice - that achieved I ended up working in one for 5 years. I worked on a huge variety of projects from planting plans for residential areas, parks and roundabouts, to schemes for creating safer streets, renovating existing streets and parks to creating new parks, squares and housing estates.

One project that illustrates the variety of projects I was involved in was the renovation of the roof terrace of Sweden's densest residential area in Porkala, Stockholm. A group of engineers worked on repairing the roof deck and replacing existing waterproofing over the massive parking garage. On top of that we

designed a new landscape scheme, including footpaths, lighting, vehicular access, bicycle parking, recycling centres and playgrounds. The outcome was a very green, pleasant and safe outdoor environment that has worked very well for the residents in the area.

**Plan:** What made you think of coming back to Ireland?

**DR:** I had to admit that the feeling of adventure had waned somewhat and out of character for me I began to ponder my future and what I wanted to be in later years. So I decided to uproot and come back to work in Ireland. After two years back in the country, I started my own practice.

**Plan:** Is working abroad something that graduates should try to do?

**DR:** Obviously, working abroad is not for everyone, but I certainly enjoyed it and got a lot from it. In my opinion, successful Irish companies are looking to employ open minded, well-travelled and creative people, in the same vein that modern international companies do.

**Plan:** How does your personality gel with your working life?

**DR:** I think I am a very technically minded person who likes minimalism and clarity of vision. I have in the past been very outdoors oriented doing a lot of rowing while I was in Sweden, but since being back in Ireland its photography that tickles my fancy.

Since opening my own office, my business isn't the only thing that has grown, I now have three children so I don't have time at the moment for too many hobbies.

I have a good eye for detail and I have that functionally oriented creativity that makes for designing very pleasant outdoor spaces that are not over elaborate.

**Plan:** What is the climate like in Ireland today for Landscape Architects?

**DR:** There are many positives. The Irish Landscape Institute has recently started 2 new chapters and we now have the opportunity to meet fellow members more often and have continual professional development on our



doorsteps. As a member of the ILI in the South West Chapter we have had the opportunity to decide directly what form CPD is to take.

Its still a very tough climate out there, and more competitive all the time. We need many, many more Landscape Architects to rejuvenate our small towns and villages, our public spaces and streets, and we need so many more trees and parks and play areas. But will someone please tell our local authorities and county councils this, because at the moment there is still amazingly little work to go around.

I have found this year that people are more open to networking and making introductions, so I personally have a feeling of optimism about the next 12 months for our sector.

**Plan:** What do you feel is the biggest problem facing Landscape Architecture in Ireland today?

**DR:** Today we work in a very competitive environment where it is more important than ever to stand out above the crowd, to have a concise and clear offering, to have an edge or a specialism and to have a marketing strategy. This I believe many Landscape Architects are taking on board and very many new web sites and advertising approaches have been seen over this past year or two.

The offerings or services of a Landscape Architect are often not simple enough or well enough defined to be reduced into a simple buzz words or phrases. My approach has been to divide services advertised on my web site into 7 different categories. I am still very much developing my business so I have purposefully chosen a web site system I can change and manage freely.

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When looking on tenders many public projects such as schools have no requirement for Landscape Architectural input. Masterplanning projects on tenders often refer to engineers or architects with no reference to the role of the Landscape Architect. Playgrounds are put out to tender with little or no design input. These are major issues where public bodies do not perhaps recognise the value of the external environment in Schools and the public realm generally and are not aware of the expertise that the Landscape Architect can bring to the table. Your average man on the street still has not heard of the profession Landscape Architect.



*Porkala, Stockholm*

In Sweden the Landscape Architects are busier than ever before. The Swedish government seems to have timed the building of many large public realm projects for recession times in order to support the construction sector. It is unfortunate we were not able to plan for this recession adequately; as I feel many other countries have, describing recession times as cyclical events. Dare I say it... perhaps we'll be more prepared next time round!

**Plan:** How would you describe work as a self employed Landscape Architect?

**DR:** From when I made the decision to go out on my own back in 2009, I knew it was going to be tough. The decision for me was to stay in Ireland, starting a family at the same time, and hence there were few other opportunities other than to start my own practice.

My skills now as a business person are more important than anything else. The reward in being paid for the job is related directly to that project, it's not a salary, but is connected directly to the quality of work you have

produced, and so there is a big feel good factor with that. Also working with other professionals who think the same way is very enjoyable.

A recent example of a project where I felt the team gelled really well together was when I designed a garden of celebration for the Sisters of Mercy in Limerick. An additional reward for me was the satisfaction of the client; it was a project that worked out very well. The sisters were celebrating their 175th anniversary of being in Limerick. It was a collaboration between Quinn Architects and myself together with the appointment of Lámh Eile as Landscape Contractor. The garden was to be extremely low maintenance and to fit seamlessly into the historical landscape of Limerick City Walls, the Old Priory Wall and the Convent Cemetery.

**Plan:** Do you have any pearls of wisdom for current students and recent graduates of Landscape Architecture?

**DR:** My advice for what it is worth is not to look at political boundaries as obstacles but

rather opportunities to experience something new and fresh. Work is out there if having a bit of an adventure is your thing. As a fully qualified Landscape Architect be prepared to grasp any opportunities that present themselves within the media, in politics, agriculture, forestry, teaching, travel guides, landscape adventure guides, or in some way of working with and/or further understanding the landscape in some way shape or form.

**Plan:** Looking ten years ahead, what do you see for Landscape Architecture?

**DR:** I see very many more projects using an invitational method of request for tender as is now popular in Sweden and other countries. Where a local authority might like to see some initial design carried out before they are forced to choose which team of professionals to go with. So they invite in a predetermined number of local outfits and set a fixed fee against an initial sketch stage competition. The preferred entry goes on to complete the project. This method of securing work will be better for up and coming designers and small offices like mine, making it much easier to compete.

I see European led directives on Green Infrastructure and tree cover in urban areas being rolled out, and Urban forests, Street trees and Parks becoming very important assets for our towns and cities. This GI will become the lifeblood of our profession in future years and will hopefully lead to a serious improvement in the status of Landscape Architects. It has to happen that Landscape Architects might also foray into political roles and possibly planning and other decision making roles in the future which will be all for the better.



*Sisters of Mercy in Limerick*

Dave Ryan is an independent consultant with over 13 years of experience as a professional Landscape Architect, and is a corporate member of the Irish Landscape Institute. Dave has built a reputation for providing a quality and affordable service. The company has offices into the Georgian heart of Limerick City, next to Peoples Park. Together with a small group of Landscape Architects he has started a South West Chapter of the Irish Landscape Institute and also is involved with Tidy Towns in Limerick, working on the ground with local groups. [www.daveryan.ie](http://www.daveryan.ie)