House on the Shannon

Cathal O'Neill

Interview with Tom de Paor

Cathal O' Neill stepped down as Head of the School of Architecture last September. He will retire as Professor in September 1996, having spent this year teaching in projects in all years in the School. To celebrate Cathal's remarkable contribution to the School over the last thirty five years the AGA News asked Tom de Paor to prompt Cathal in a review of his career and of the transformation of the School of Architecture since his arrival as a first year student in 1949.

On Becoming an Architect

TdP: Tell me about the teachers you've had?
CO'N: One of the most influential was Seamus O'Shea, a tall and good looking Kerryman who taught me at Scoil Colmcille, the primary model school in Marlborough Street. The most memorable thing about his class was a game he played - in a press in the classroom he had a large number of wooden objects: cylinders, cubes, pyramids. He made constructions from these objects, which we looked at. We were then all sent to our desks to draw what we saw from memory. I was very successful at this and he would say to me "beidh tu i do ailtire". I didn't know what this meant. My parents didn't speak Gaelic so they didn't know what he was talking about. It wasn't until later that a bilingual member of the family translated that he was saying "you'll be an architect" and I took that at face value.

TdP: When did you start to learn something about architecture?
CO'N: My father had some friends who were architects, and they would explain to me quite uninteresting aspects of being an architect, for example how to pare a pencil or how to stretch paper on a drawing board. Despite this, my mind was made up, I was going to be an architect. I entered UCD in 1949 and enjoyed it.

TdP: Was it very different from UCD today?
CO'N: I suppose I arrived at the school at a turning point - Professor Downes had been appointed shortly before that and he was a Modernist with an interest in 20th century European Architecture. At the same time we still carried out projects to do with Classical architecture. For example we learned to draw the Roman alphabet, to draw and render different orders in Chinese ink, and in the summer we did measured works of buildings such as the Customs House, Dublin Castle, the Royal Exchange and so on.

TdP: Was modernism taught?
CO'N: Well it wasn't taught in history lectures by Professor McDermot, he only dealt with pre-20th Century. But the work that was produced in the studio from my 1st year onwards was invariably modern in its appearance and intention, construction and materials. Some of it was 1930's Scandinavian but it was modern. It was in my time almost unheard of to produce a neo-classical building. Nevertheless we spent every summer from 1st to 3rd year inclusive as a group, the entire class, measuring a prescribed building,with ladders and foremen provided. We were required to have it drawn on water-colour paper using pencil and to present it on the first day of term the following year and marks were allocated.

TdP: You won the travelling scholarship?
CO'N: I won that in fourth year, in 1954, and it was a turning point for me. In those days there was no possibility of a student finding architectural work. Inevitably students went to England to work in canning factories and the like for a month or so, earned as much money as they could for the months June and July and then took the money and went to the continent to see buildings. Winning the scholarship at the end of 4th year meant I suddenly had a surprisingly large amount of money, in addition to which my father bought me an Lambretta scooter to celebrate the occasion. I had a scooter and I had money so I went off in June, as soon as the exams were over, and stayed away until October.

TdP: What did you see?
CO'N: Well, I did the grand tour and the problem was that it was extremely difficult to find simple things like the address of Corb's buildings in France. You looked up the book and it gave you the name of the building but it never gave you the location, there were no maps produced at that time of architectural sights, especially modern architecture and there weren't guide books, even in '54. I went to Paris first and spent two weeks there looking at Corb's buildings and the one that struck me most, I suppose, was the Swiss Pavilion. I stayed in the University hostel across the road, and I did a measured study of it.

TdP: You went to Rue de Sevres, you met the man.
CO'N: Yes, I went to meet the man but I was so innocent- first of all I went to the wrong Rue de Sevres. Eventually, after several days of frustration, I found the right one and I met the man. He was very busy but he said that, yes if I came back when I was an architect he might be able to give me a job. As it turned out I never went back. The curious thing about him was that he struck me as being very small, my memory of him is a small man remarkably like a deceased uncle of mine. So I really didn't have any sort of engaging conversation with him, I just met the man, who was obviously a bit preoccupied.

TdP: Then you went south?
CO'N: Then I zigzagged down through France. I didn't focus exclusively on modern buildings even though that of course was my main interest. I looked at the cathedrals and other historical buildings. I remember when I submitted my report to the Institute that the Secretary of the Institute rapped me on my knuckles, saying that the purpose of this scholarship was to study modern architecture and implying, of course, that I had gone outside the brief by looking at buildings that were not 20th century.

TdP: Was Ronchamp there?
CO'N: No, it wasn't built until the late fifties. But I did go to Marseilles, I was really headed for the Unite, a widely publicised building .I spent two weeks there in a hostel and every day I went on a pilgrimage to the apartments, got into quite a few of them, 3 or 4, met people who lived in them, photographed them but mostly drew them, measured them, and walked around them. Looking back at the efficiency with which the modern student goes on a one week holiday to Switzerland, Germany, France and sees 150 buildings its hard to explain how I could spend 2 weeks in Marseilles looking at one building, but it was to do with the pace of the time, inefficiency, lack of information, a lot of the buildings were inaccessible and you had to argue with and talk to the janitors.

TdP: You met Picasso?
CO'N: I did. That was more engaging, more fruitful, I suppose, than Le Corbusier but not as fruitful as it might have been. I went to see him in Vallauris which was where his studio was. I met him there but I was in the company of other people and we were shown around the studio and the pottery and that was it. I had an

English friend called Michael Hooper who was a History of Art student at Cambridge and who also had a Lambretta. We met in a youth hostel and exchanged notes about how you got these things to start, when they were overheated and so on. At his insistence we went to a town in the south of France, Antibes, to see an exhibition of a Spanish painter. As we were leaving a car drove up to the steps. Picasso got out and came up the steps. As he came past me he said hello, because I had been with him the previous day.As you can imagine I was quite pleased with this. He went into the gallery and we followed him to discover that he was actually opening the exhibition. Most of the audience were Spanish, very well dressed men and women. There was some wine which we enjoyed.

I had an idea, I told Michael to take my camera, to go up on some steps and to take a photograph of me talking to Picasso. I went up to Picasso where he was standing surrounded by a group of people he clearly knew, and at an appropriate time I interrupted. I said a few words, and held out my book and asked "Can I have your autograph?". He took the sketch book and looked at me and after what seemed to be a long moment of silence he said to me something in Spanish and the group laughed. Michael was gesticulating to me, but I couldn't hear what he was saying. There was a long pause and suddenly Picasso just wrote his signature on the sketch pad and handed it back to me and everybody laughed again. So when it was all over I asked Michael what he had said and he replied: "Picasso asked you 'Will I draw your portrait?'". All I would have had to say was "si" and maybe he would have, but of course I missed the opportunity.

TdP: There was a lesson there.
CO"N: There was, always say yes.

TdP: Then there was Milan.
CO'N: Then I went on down to Genova and on to Milan for the Milan Triennale. Buckminster Fuller was showing there - he was constructing large geodesic domes from cardboard, and I may be wrong about this, but I think they were the first ever shown in Europe. They were quite ingenious, sheets of cardboard which were cut and folded in a particular pattern producing a triangle, a thick three dimensional triangle, a little like the things you put on the road when your car breaks down. He was looking for student help and I volunteered with about five or six other students including Michael Hooper. We got the stapler and stapled these things together, very quickly. You just walked up on them as you stapled and you formed a geodesic semisphere.

I then went to see Ernesto Rogers whom I believe is Richard Roger's father, he was a partner in that firm with the four names. He was a delightful man, extremely sophisticated, suave English/Italian gentleman abroad. When I went to see him, and I got to see him surprisingly easily, he said to me "Oh, I was expecting you" and I said "What do you mean?" and he said "Oh I saw you around town on your scooter." Now at that time red haired, red bearded Irish men on scooters were scarce. It was very common for students to wear blazers, we had a college blazer which was a rather nice green colour, quite sporty and I suppose quite distinctive, so he had seen me around the town wearing it. He brought me to dinner, showed me his work which was very modern and he was extremely hospitable and amiable.

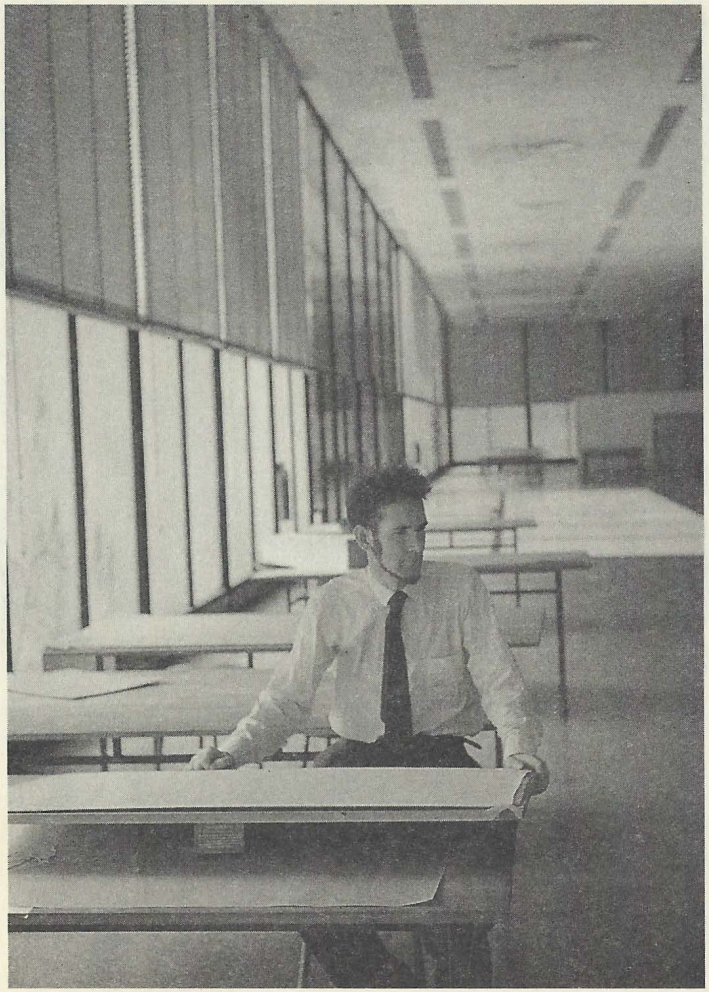
TdP: Then you went to Rome?
CO'N: I went to Rome from Milan and came to Florence on the way back.

TdP: You saw the railway station?
CO'N: Yes the station was there and it was striking. I was, and still am, incredibly impressed with that station, I still look at the slides. Currently in 3rd year we are doing an airport, an exercise in spatial and structural composition, and one of the problems the students are having is this business of creating a space and a matching structure which somehow or other reflects the movement of people inside in terms of going to and from planes. The Rome station I find fascinating in its success in that regard. When you come from the street you walk in through a filter, if you like, of doors and shops and bookstands and you move with the light, the slots of light that are set into the structure. These strips of glass go from the front wall to the intermediate wall which is where the ticket counter is located. You go through that filter and you proceed, continuing along the same line, the same direction, and you get on the trains, which then go out of the station in the same direction, so there is this is terrifically clear linear movement reinforced by the light pattern and the structure in the roof.

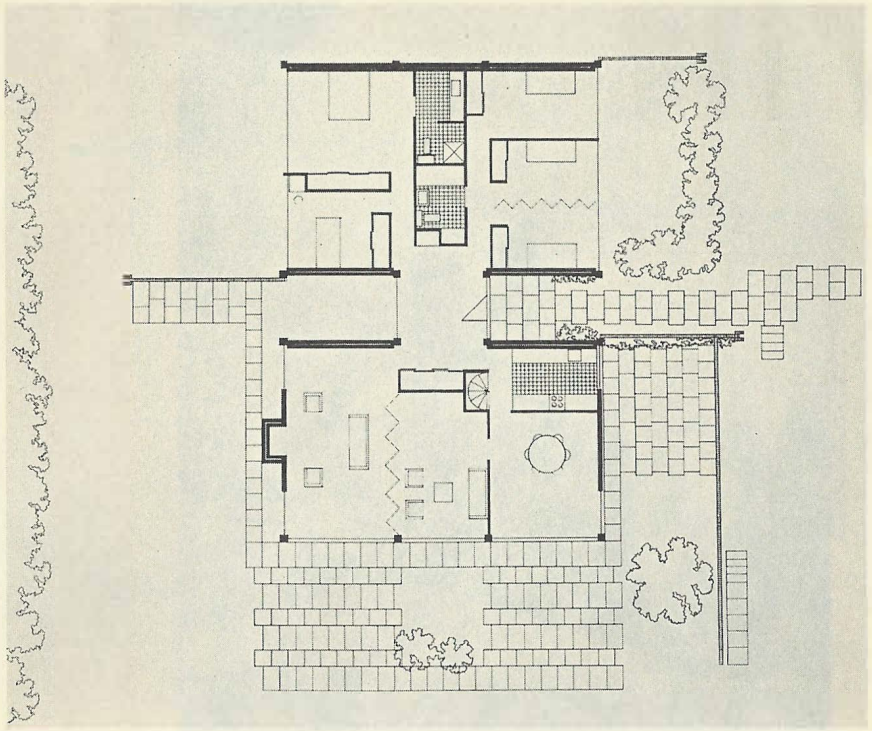
TdP: Terragni?
CO'N: Didn't see him. I went through Como but didn't know about him and I think that's interesting because that's typical of the sort of absolute voids you could have in your knowledge, you picked things up from going through magazines, there were no nice compact directories of modern European Architecture, there were no comprehensive books at the time. Even Space, Time and Architecture, published, I think, just after the war, was quite selective.

TdP: Then you made your thesis. Did you have a tutor?
CO'N: Matthew McDermot was the only tutor. Professor FitzGerald would come in from time to time and have a look but there were no crits. You did a thesis which you had to have finished by Easter because they had to be photocopied or photographed and sent off to the external examiner in draft form. Then from Easter to summer you did working drawings, a pretty complete set of working drawings. The external examination was in June.

TdP: Was there much work for graduates?
CO'N: Not much of a chance of work. Most of my class got odd jobs around the country or went to Britain or wherever but I was fortunate enough to get a job with Prof. FitzGerald. But I had an increasing feeling that nobody knew what they were doing, everybody seemed to be freewheeling. When I asked people why they were doing something they said, "Well, why not?". I really got increasingly frustrated by this and I thought to myself somebody must know why they're doing what they're doing. There must be some theory, there must be some direction.



In the Crown Hall, I.I.T.



Keenan House, Plan

TdP: Did Mies come to mind then?

CO'N: He didn't come to mind immediately. As a student I was interested in Scandinavia where I had been on several trips. I knew a lot of the work there, and I was very in tune with it. Frank Lloyd Wright I greatly admired, Le Corbusier fascinated me, Mies was very much number 3 or 4. But, firstly he was the only one of those who was teaching and secondly I knew of some people who had gone to Frank Lloyd Wright's Taliesin and it was not a great experience. It had to be an English-speaking course and that really meant America. I had no regard really for British architecture. It came down to Mies or other schools. Information about other schools in those days was extremely difficult to get. I think it is true to say that I spent 18 months trying to get to the bottom of simple things like getting the addresses of schools, who do you write to, how do you apply, how much does it cost, how do you get a visa for America etc..

TdP: Robin Walker?

CO'N: He had been in the school and graduated before I started. I knew of him, though I had never met him, and I had heard he was in IIT. Kevin Roche had been too, another man I had never met in Dublin because he was, I think, ahead of Robin. I wrote to Robin and he wrote back a letter and said that I should go there, but quickly, because Mies was in his last few years. I married Deirdre in May 1957, 2 years after graduation, and we went out to Boston. We spent the summer in Boston and then in September moved to Chicago. Our first day of class, Mies came around.There was a class of I think about 8 people for the first year of the 2 year course and there was about 5 or 6 for the second year. He spoke to each person and asked where they were from. He was a somewhat self- conscious, shy, man. He looked much older than he actually was, he seemed like a man in his eighties when in fact he was only just 75. He set us our first task, to make a house.

TdP: No site?

CO'N: Nothing, choose your own site make a house anywhere you like, you had three weeks to make it, to just do it. We had two other concurrent classes - Planning with Hilbesheimer and Visual Perception with Walter Peterhans. Now planning was pretty elementary and was mostly to do with site planning, orientation and structure. Composition with Peterhans was to do with abstract compositions using white card and black lines in making designs, very prescribed lines and very limited aesthetics essentially, training the eye. You were given a board and two black lines and you moved the lines around to make compositions. These exercises went on - there was one design per term.

Now Mies's exercise was the house, the first one, so after the three weeks we came back and all presented our different houses drawn in different ways. I redesigned a house in Fitzwilliam Square. I anticipated I suppose, the fire in the British embassy, I assumed that a house in Fitzwilliam Square had been burnt to the ground and I was required to replace it, so I made a vertical house. I made the drawings of that and Mies found it quite hard to understand. My drawings were carefully done in pencil. I didn't made a model as some of the others did. I was quite surprised at the range at the skill of the other people demonstrated.

We immediately moved into the second project which was a courtyard house. We all had the same basic model, a rectangle roughly 3/4 of a meter long by a 1/2 a meter wide, to a scale of I don't know what - the walls were about 3 inches high, I suppose. You were each given a programme in which you were making a house with one courtyard, a house with two courtyards, a house with three courtyards, house with two courtyards and four columns. One end of the model was removable. You composed the courtyard house using pieces of material and columns and a flat slab and free standing wall and some landscape elements, usually one or more pieces of sculpture.You composed these spaces and the structure and the elements in this somewhat abstract way and then on a weekly basis your composition was reviewed.

TdP: Just by Mies?

CO'N: Yes. There was a stand for the models which was of a height of about 1/2 meter high so that when a model was placed on this stand on your desk, anybody that was sitting on the stools was pretty much at eye level with the base of the model. You always looked at models from ground level and you were discouraged from looking down on models. Mies sat on a stool, smoking a cigar, looking into your courtyard. He would sit and it would seem like an hour had passed by, when in fact it was only 15 minutes. He would sometimes ask you a question - what is that - and you would say - oh that is the bedroom and he would say - hum - and he would then move one or other pieces in your composition like a chess player, marginally, maybe 3mm and continue staring at it. The rest of the class, 4 or 5 of us, sat around taking part in this and looking at it and trying to see what he could see, or what we thought he could see. Eventually, inevitably he would shake his head and say "no, no, no, it is not right you must work more, you must work more" and he would just get up and shuffle off to the next project.

This exercise went on and in our innocence we thought there was a correct solution. Of course Mies realised that there was no correct solution, that there were only variations. The exercise was designed to teach you how to look at buildings, how to develop a visual memory, how to manipulate space and compose it, how to understand the connection between structure and space and function and essentially how to use your eye. People who had got over that stage were then required to design a building. I designed a church. Again you went through the same process, did the sketch design, presented them to Mies but you never presented work that wasn't very finished. You never attempted to try to explain your scheme in words - the drawing had to stand on its own and be self evident. You waited for him to say what is that, how does that work.You kept quiet - it was like a monastery. Kevin Roche left after the first semester because apparently he couldn't stand the silence.

TdP: Then you did a kind of thesis?

CO'N: If you passed your first year you got a grade and you were then given permission to do your thesis in the second year. In second year I designed a cathedral for the year, a cathedral for Dublin.

TdP: Where was the site?

CO'N: I had no site actually, quite typically. The issue was to do with the subject matter, the function, the space, the structure and Mies was quite interested in church design. He liked to talk about his time at cathedral school in Aachan, going to the Munster. He always talked about the stones in the Munster and the way that the building was so strong that it didn't matter who came in, whether it was cardinals in slippers or ladies dressed in finery or whether they were local farmers in their boots, they all came in and walked on the stones of the Munster. The building was so strong it could take all these different uses or people or situations.

TdP: Did you know him socially?

CO'N: Yes. I wasn't very forward in that sense but one of my classmates, a guy called Conrad, had a birthday party for Mies in his apartment in Carmen Hall (designed by Mies), an end of term party and one or two others. We had a party always for Hilbesheimer on the winter solstice because Hilbesheimer was always interested in orientation and sun, so we always had parties where we wore sunglasses and had books on nature and sun-bathing. When we went into Carmen Hall and we got into the elevator, Mies was fascinated. He kept looking around like a total stranger, feeling the side of the railing and muttering to himself saying "Hum, ja this is good, ja, you know I've not been in this building since it was built, it's good ja, ja I'm happy, ja I'm happy". And we were absolutely astonished that he had never been in the building but maybe he meant he had never been in it in use.

Of course Mies was a totally different person when he had a couple of American Martinis. He was sitting down in Conrad's apartment and the five or six of us were there sitting around at his feet asking him about his contact with Frank Lloyd Wright and of course Corb, Gropius. He had worked with Gropius and Le Corbusier in Behrens office. It seems to be the case that he and Gropius and Le Corbusier attended a lecture given by Frank Lloyd Wright in Berlin, that must have been some evening.

Mies told a story that when he was in Behrens's office- you realise that Le Corbusier was only there for a brief time, Gropius was quite senior and Mies must have been quite well established because he was the project architect on the German embassy in Moscow. Anyway Le Corbusier was the young boy in the office and he had notoriously bad eyesight. When he was out of the room Gropius and Mies cut out a piece of yellow cellophane in the shape of a zeppelin, an airship, and they stuck it up on the window and then went back to their drawing boards. When Le Corbusier came back in they didn't say anything to him at first. After a few minutes one of them looked out the window and said "hey look, look at the airship" and Le Corbusier ran over and looked out at this yellow thing on the window and thought for a moment that it was an airship. Mies would tell this story and laugh- he thought it was so funny, his big jowls would shake with laughter. He had a very engaging smile, the big cigar in the hand and the martini in the other hand and he would laugh at the memory of Le Corbusier, of being one up on him.

TdP: Was there a real implication about his judgement in that?

CO"N: I don't think so, I really think it was the pleasure we all have as we get older remembering back to those early days. They must have been wonderful days for him. We would ask him what he thought of Aalto and he would say "Ah Aalto, hmm, very hospitable man, very hospitable man, and a very good drinker, no we never talk architecture, he and I never talk architecture".

TdP: You went to work for him.

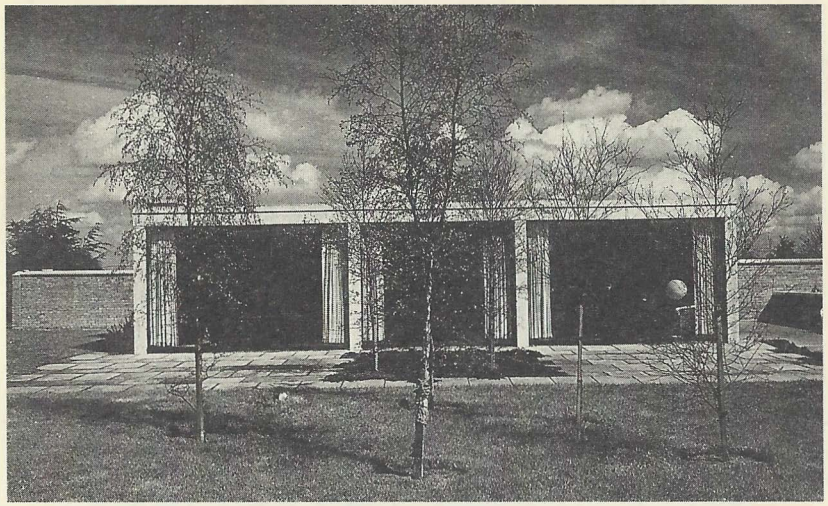
CO'N: I went in to work on a project, the Iowa Home Savings Bank in Des Moines, Iowa, which was a very manageable three storey building over basement office building.Just before I went in the clients changed their mind, and the scheme that Mies had was cancelled and they started a new building altogether, so I was in at the ground floor.

Unfortunately when I got it to completed design drawings and just about to start the working drawings I got a letter from Professor Desmond FitzGerald. I had written to him the previous year, with an idea for a programme of teaching in the school. I had gone to a lot of trouble and prepared a very elaborate brochure of work, of the different sort of work, particularly Paterhans's work and ideas about modernism. I suddenly got this letter out of the blue to say that a vacancy had arisen, this was mid December, and could I come home immediately, could I start on January 5th, doing 6 hours a week. If I didn't come home there was no guarantee that the job would remain open any longer.

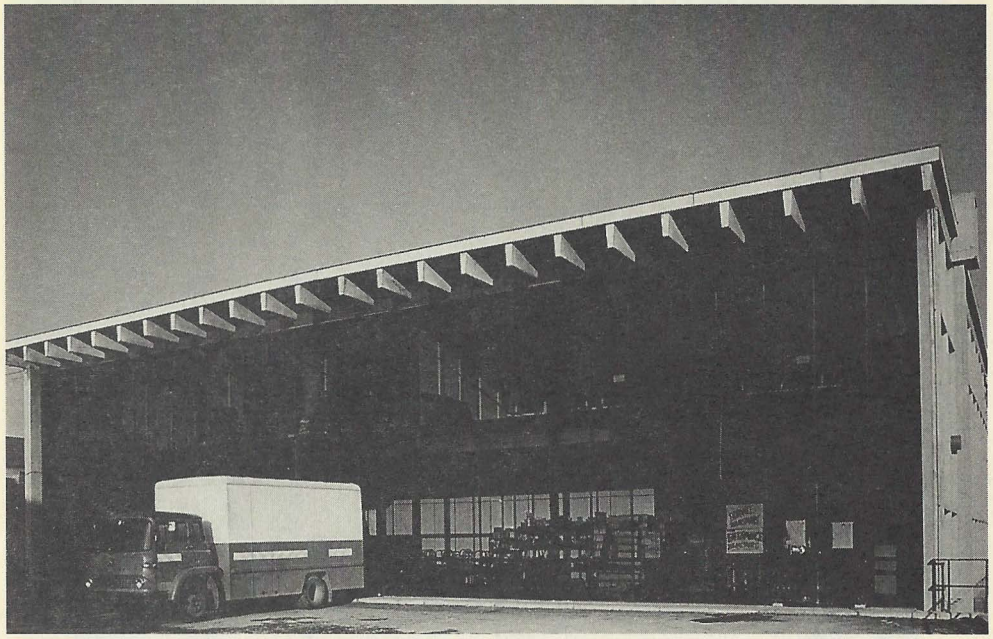
TdP: Big decision

CO'N: Big decision- We had two children at the time and Deirdre and myself were living in an apartment in downtown Chicago. Deirdre was very uncomfortable in the cold. Long term it didn't look as if we could go on living in Chicago. Of course I didn't want to move then because I wanted to finish the Des Moines building but I had a big decision to make. In those days nobody had been taken on in the staff for the previous 10 years. Year masters came in, got a job, and stayed there until they got to 65 or a bit more, so it seemed a big chance. I talked to Hilbesheimer about it, who was a very approachable guy, very like Professor McDermot, down to earth. He thought I should go. He said "You go home to Ireland, buy a small farm have some cows and make one house every year". Mies wouldn't make a decision for me. I asked him whether it was possible to make architecture in Ireland and told him something about the fabric of the society and the scale of the place. He said you can make architecture anywhere, you can make architecture in Africa but you must understand the society, you must understand the means, the material. You must work hard at it but you can make architecture anywhere.

do your thesis in the



Keenan House, Monaghan



Warehouse, Phibsboro

both things. He once said to us that architecture is concerned, in the first instance, with purely functional

TdP: What did you take from America?
CO'N: Well I suppose I was absolutely overwhelmed by the influence of Mies, by the work, by the work method above all by his philosophy which was, essentially, extremely simple. It was to do with having a simple clear direction and I like to liken it to navigation aids. The fact that you have good navigational aides, good charts and all of that, doesn't reduce the strain of the voyage but at least there is a purpose and some destination ahead and some recognition, of course, that when you do have a landfall, that something has been achieved.

Reading his proclamations, I suppose you'd call them, it seemed to me he explained the nature of architecture very simply, I suppose in just three or four messages. One was the use of the German word Baukunst, the art of making, which was a very good description of architecture as an art and a science and the notion that it was both things. He once said to us that architecture is concerned, in the first instance, with purely functional considerations but that it can reach up through all levels of human endeavour to the realm of pure art. What I liked about that was the inclusiveness of it, that you can enjoy or you can be involved in architecture at a very simple level dealing with function or necessity but that you can also operate at a range of levels right up to realm of pure art. I suddenly realised that all this business about style, shape and this sort of fashion and that sort of fashion was a distraction. Really it was to do with understanding the society in which you operated and in which you lived and to see or to understand it so clearly that an inevitable architecture would be produced by that society.That was what I brought back from America, not as some sort of a firebrand or evangelist, but as somebody coming back seeking to tap the energy, the economic development, the renewed confidence we had in ourselves in the 60's and to try and interpret this in some way and to shape it into architecture. That is really what made me so optimistic, and confident. I came home with a 6 hour a week job and nothing else.

TdP: How was UCD?
CO'N: Well UCD was quite strong, I think it was well established. Prof. FitzGerald had been there for 8 years. He was a strong personality, UCD had some good dedicated teachers. It had greatly improved conditions when I came back, new studios, new library, full time secretary all sorts of other supports, and the University in general had grown.

TdP: Where did you begin?
CO'N: The 'Prof' gave me a job of teaching 6 hours a week in visual perception in 1st year and that was my first job, the intended first job, but immediately when I came back there was a crisis because Fred Rogerson, who had been running 4th year, had got a big commission and had to reduce his hours. I was asked would I also work with him in 4th year. In the meantime, I got a job with Fred who had advertised for a planning consultant because he got the commission to do the new town in Limerick. So I worked on the job and I involved Hilbesheimer.

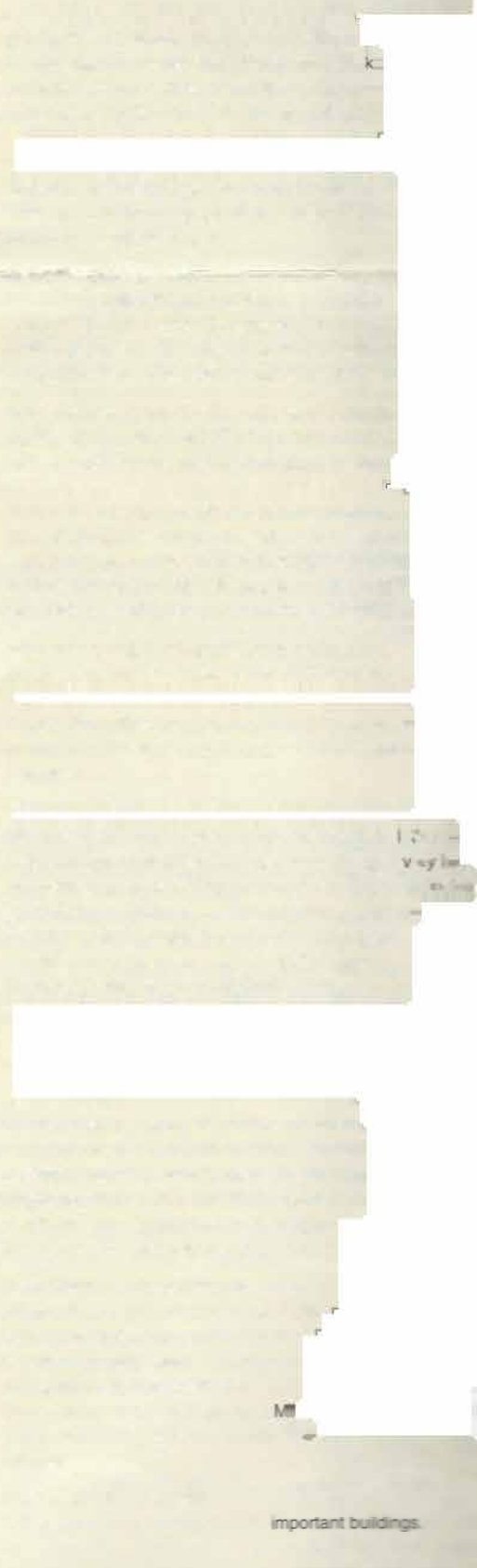
TdP: Hilbesheimer was involved in the planning of Shannon.
CO'N: Well not really, because I couldn't get Shannon Development to appoint him. I couldn't get Fred Rogerson, a Liverpool graduate and a planner from Liverpool, to appoint an old German architect from Chicago to act as a planner. On a number of occasions we wrote to Hilbesheimer who gave us his initial thoughts on the subjects as an introduction to the possibility of us hiring him, but he was never formally appointed and then the correspondence dropped and that was the end of that. In any case I had a falling out with Fred over policy on design in this matter and so I resigned from the job in October 1961 and at the same time took up more hours in UCD and set up my own practice with no work.

TdP: Between 1961 and 1969 you were making buildings.
CO'N: As Hilbesheimer suggested I was making a house a year. The ones I made were the Keenan House in Monaghan, a house for myself on the Shannon and a couple of project houses which were never built but which were in the same, I won't say style because Mies would never permit us to use the word style, with the same intention let's say. I also entered for the ESB competition and I was awarded the second prize. When the exhibition was on there was a notice over my drawings saying second place. I had this notice pinned in my office for ten years - Second Place - because second place is in some ways no place.

TdP: Describe the scheme.
CO'N: The scheme was very Miesian. It was bronze first of all, the first bronze building in Ireland, it pre-dated the Bank of Ireland of course by ten years. It was an effort to try and pick up the rhythm of the street, of Fitzwilliam street, to try to pick up the colour. I worked with a company in Manchester who were experts in the colouring of bronze because of course bronze comes in a huge range of colours, patinations. My point was that the patination would vary, because of course it varies with the weathering over its lifetime as does the brick and, well, the rhythm, the grid was the same as the house, the seven and a half meter house front and the plan was very strict

TdP: Does it tie back to that first house project you did with Mies?
CO'N: No, it doesn't because that first house project was quite scatty, it was pure exhibitionism on my part because you had three weeks to try to show the master architect all the tricks you knew. It was like one of these ballet concerts where they do little bits from each ballet, I was doing little bits from everything. It ties more back to Mies's office buildings I suppose.

TdP: When did you make the warehouse in Phibsboro?
CO'N: It actually started in 1964, but my client had a lot of difficulties because he had no clear plans as to how to do it and then he had no money. We made quite a number of projects on that site and the building opened in 1969, so it started from '65 onwards I suppose.



important buildings.

TdP: What do you think of that now, looking at it?

CO'N: Well I think that there is something I like about it, I mean I'm pleased about a number of things about it - it's clear, it's structurally rational and I think it's spatially successful for it's purpose. I like the way it uses the basement for a car park with the natural lighting around the perimeter. I think its a very strong building and in the context of Mountjoy Prison and all those buildings I think it does stand up. I liked the notion that the front wall was removable and the whole building could be extended forward by as much again. The original planning application was for a recreation centre with indoor activities of all sorts and the possibility of an ice rink in the forecourt. It subsequently got permission for an office building and it was also used as a warehouse so it had three uses. It was designed to have this variety of permissions, so it was in many ways it was Miesian in it's notion of the universal space.

TdP: The Revolution?

CO'N: The revolution was inevitable, I suppose, because of the time, because FitzGerald was getting older, because he was a very autocratic man in any case and as he got older he became more so. I suspect like a mutiny that occurs on a ship, there was a feeling that we literally weren't going anywhere and one felt that he really didn't know and other people didn't know. I suppose it was approaching chaos.

TdP: Did this relate to what was happening in Paris and Europe.

CO'N: Oh I'm sure it did yes. That was widely publicised and of course the students who travelled during summer and read the papers knew about it. The work in the studio was very, very uneven, it would vary from one year to another, depending on who was teaching, not like in most schools where there is a sort of common culture of work that is pretty consistent through out the years. There was quite a lot of disagreement amongst the staff. It wasn't a simple question of everybody against the 'Prof.'.FitzGerald was isolated but there were at least two or three different groups of staff. I suspect the students were not all together unified, there were the main leaders who wanted change, they didn't really know the details, they just wanted change. They were very confident but nobody for a moment thought FitzGerald would be blown down because there was no precedent.

TdP: There was a lot of discussion internally.

CO'N: Yes, the staff had, from 1967 onwards, something called the staff association and we had staff meetings and FitzGerald heard about this and obstructed it by arranging school meetings at the same time. His meetings which were to do with administration, who was going to do what when and what were we going to do when the busy month came. Our meetings were to do with architecture, to do with the theory of education.

The matter came to a head very quickly because the RIBA had had a visit in '65 with which they were dissatisfied and then they were to come back in, let's say, '68 and the School didn't provide them with the necessary documentation. The University set up a very heavy-weight board of enquiry with 8 or 9 members, chairperson, secretary. They came to a very quick conclusion and that was that Prof. FitzGerald must go, must stand down and that some other members of staff must go. They decided not to replace the Professor, in the normal way but to appoint a director of the school, who would be employed directly by them and who would run the school for three years, a sort of monitor, at the end of which they would refill the chair. So Prof. FitzGerald stepped down, stepped sideways in a sense, he retained his title and there was some legal arrangement to satisfy him, and the college with the help of the Institutes trawled Ireland and elsewhere and chose Ivor Smith who was a well known teacher in Cambridge. He came and interviewed every member of staff and he, I suspect, one way or another, managed to get rid of a number of members of staff.

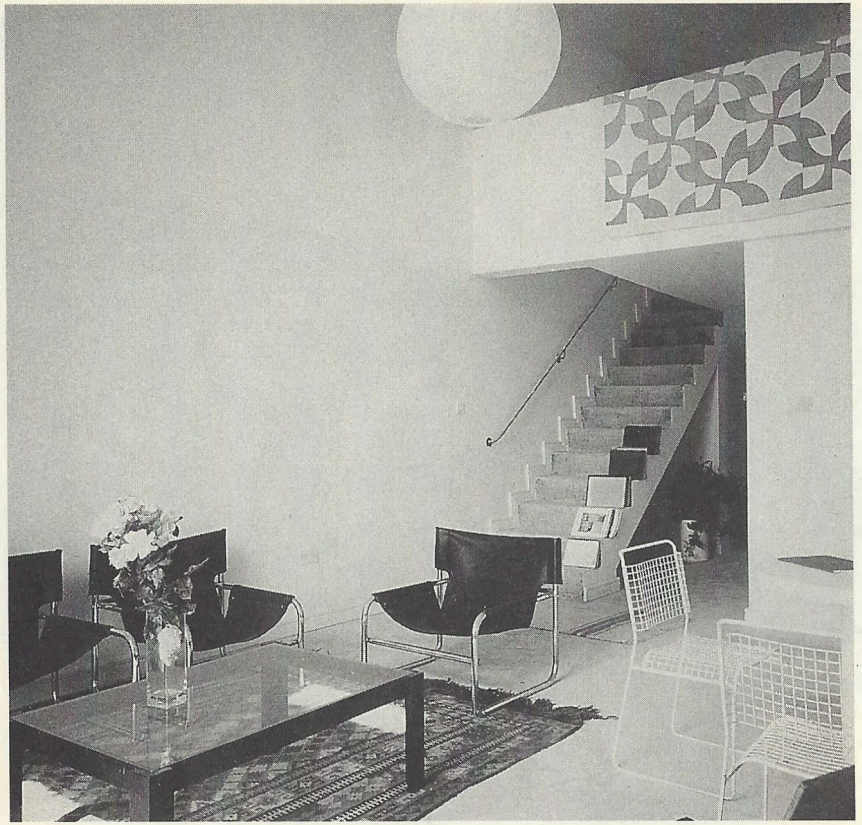
When we resumed in Autumn 1969 we had Ivor Smith and a very slimmed down Irish staff, and a very large number of people who became known as the flying circus, who were for the most part, young, very, very bright, very, very energetic, articulate, stylish people. They came in from London, Glasgow and one or two other cities and they worked extremely hard. They came in on say Thursday and worked all day Thursday, Friday and very often all day Saturday. They came every other week. And I think it is to Ivor's credit that most of the people he chose at that time were people who had no reputation, young, in their 30's I suppose a few in their 40's but for the most part the core was a young group of architects.

TdP: They were theoretical?

CO'N: Yes, they were theoretical, they weren't academic, they were practising architects, a lot of them had never taught before, apart from a little tutoring at the AA, London University or Cambridge. But the extraordinary thing about it was if you looked back at the staff list of '69, '70, '71, '72 almost every name, every person that came to Dublin, has since developed a big reputation. People like Kenneth Frampton, Ed Jones, Chris Cross, Andy McMillan, Izzie Metzstein, Adrian Gale, Mike Gold, Bob McCloud, Barry Gasson, Jeremy Dixon, John Miller, Alan Colquhoun, Peter Cook; and of those a large number subsequently became heads of schools.

TdP: Including yourself.

CO'N: And me. And others made important buildings.



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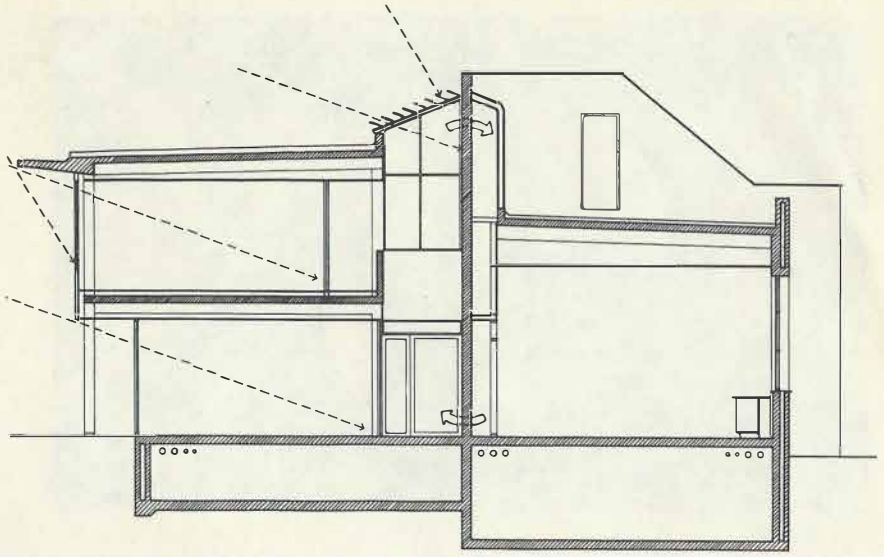

Office and Laboratory, Monaghan

TdP: What was the atmosphere like in the school?
CO'N: The school was a pretty chaotic place in those days, it was like a play with no script, everybody was running around doing things spontaneously in every direction and that was the nature of their work. They were intuitive designers and it was derogatively spoken of by one or two critical staff members, Irish members obviously, as the goon show. But the main thrust of their work was intuitive, the notion of democratic architecture. They were very concerned with social engineering, the idea that somehow architecture could radically change the way people lived and used buildings.

Thinking back on it there was something curiously hazy about the architecture that they projected. It is very difficult to think of a building that any one of those people designed, there is no image that comes to mind, there are words, there are interests, there are intentions. I was much more sharply focused in the field of architecture and building and making buildings which have clear structures and clear programmes etc.. I have to say I felt alienated. I was a bit amused, a bit disorientated. However there was a momentum there. When I did become professor it wasn't a question of saying "Oh well, that's the end of that, lets start now and do some real architecture."

TdP: Was the issue of history, that whole 70's thing about post-modernism coming up then?
CO'N: The pressure was building up, but it was there before that though, because Venturi had written his book but it hadn't become that widely circulated.This group, they were eclectic certainly, they were knowledgeable and well read and they liked to refer to buildings, and they liked to play games at crits where each one tried to out do the other in the number of buildings they could refer to, the more obscure and the more further back it seemed, the more effective. I watched this with some amazement. I suspect Ivor was trying to support me because he asked me to give a public lecture to the school. He must have press-ganged all these visiting people, I gave it probably on a Thursday or Friday evening and they were all there.

TdP: You do yourself an injustice there, I'm sure they were interested.
CO'N: Well I wonder, well, maybe I do. In any case I showed them this work and I showed them Chicago and so on, and they were polite about it but there was, I suspect, total puzzlement and misunderstanding. They just didn't seem to know what I was talking about, it seemed to me, and there was certainly no sympathy. But they were friendly, I was friendly with these people.

Taking The Helm

TdP: In 1973 you assumed the mantle.
CO'N: The competition was held in 1973 and I was appointed in May of that year but I didn't actually take up the position until October. I had to start again so it was a big job and quite daunting and I was fortunate in that I had the summer to think hard about it. I kept going back to first principles, going back to Mies and what would he do and so on. I had some very simple ideas. I thought the school should have some very clear and stated objectives. The School, since it was a National School of Architecture in Ireland, rather than a private school like IIT, had an obligation to the community that was funding it. I set down the objectives of the school as being firstly, the preparation of students for careers in architecture and secondly, the advancement of our knowledge of architecture. And by our knowledge I meant the community's knowledge, not just the people inside the school of architecture. I thought it was important that the word 'Architecture' and the belief in architecture would be predominant in the work of the school, and the planning of the school.

By now I had come to identify a number of essential matters in architecture.
The first are the forces which generate architecture; the second, the materials and methods by which buildings are made; and the third is the creative action - the realisation. It struck me that these were the core subjects which people should learn in college. I evolved a rolling programme where all three would be taught, but where you learned a little bit of one, then went to the next, and then to the next and repeated the process at a higher level.

In my first years, in my innocence, I thought that you made plans and you announced them - you told people that's what you wanted to do and you hoped they would do it. I realised then that in academic circles you can't impose views, you're dependent on people not simply to carry out your wishes but to express themselves, to bring their own talent and learning and ability to bear on the issue. I came to the conclusion that you simply stated ideas as ideas, you didn't advocate them, and if in the discussion the weight of opinion was against you and clearly the idea was thought not to be a good one, then you simply withdrew it. Fortunately many of my ideas found support and were then implemented. In this way you have the support of the staff, maybe not all the staff but a substantial number of staff.

TdP: Steering from behind.
CO'N: Yes, steering from behind, which,I suppose, is where you usually steer the boat from.

TdP: Did you bring new people into the school at that point?
CO'N: The only people on staff whom I didn't bring into the School are Philip Geoghegan and Dermot O'Connell. Now I could be wrong about that, and of course there are many others whom I took on and who have since left. Again I was a bit naive, people came to me, groups of 2 or 3 people who were friendly or who might have had a shared opinion and said that they wanted to join the staff. I'm talking about the 70's when it was possible to take on people. Sometimes I realised that they were forceful people with strong opinions and of course the temptation was to say no, I'd better take more pliable people, but fortunately I tended to take on people, I won't say controversial people, but people who were opinionated, who were serious, active, and I think this is a good thing because they bring that with them to their teaching.

TdP: Has the work in the school changed over the years?
CO'N: Oh yes, I mean we had a very ropey period there in the 80's, I think we lost our way a little bit, the old compass was faulty. We weren't unique in that but the business of the post-modern movement was the closest thing to a crisis in the school. There was division amongst the staff, there was confusion amongst the students and the quality of the work was extremely uneven. I suspect a lot of the work was of poor quality. It was a difficult period.

TdP: Do you think the school has contributed to making great architecture?
CO'N: Well, I'm happy about some things and I'm not happy about other things. Whatever successes we have had were made possible by the exceptional staff and the enthusiastic students.The creation of an atmosphere of serious academic endeavour, the notion of a serious culture of study, I think that has developed, I think that was enjoyable.

There are a lot of very good buildings being made by graduates both in Ireland and abroad, I think that's something very pleasurable. Another success, nearly forgotten about now, was in our making the school a forum for discussion on architecture. There were very important exhibitions on architecture, very frequent lectures, and of course there were publications like Annexe and so on. I'm also pleased to have overseen the smooth transfer of the school to Richview.

I think my biggest single disappointment was in my hope that we would become a nation educated in architecture, an aesthetically aware nation of people who had a regard for architecture who had some feeling for it, and I have to say I doubt if we have made much headway there, if any at all. I think at a superficial level there is great interest, I mean you have property pages in the newspaper, you have programmes on television, but I really do think that the fundamental knowledge and appreciation and respect for architects has not grown at all.

I had an ambition about running a schools programme, about touring the country with our graduates and students who would go around the schools and run seminars etc. But I just ran out of energy and maybe money. If I had another ten years to go that would be my next objective. As against that we have a large number of graduates who are out there making very distinguished buildings, serving the community very well, leading the community in the whole field of environmental concerns and revitalising towns and cities and all of that is very rewarding. As I said before there is a core of people who are extremely talented as teachers, a big group of them. I think that because of that and the contribution they have made to architectural awareness and education, I'm sure the future of the school is assured.

TdP: This is your last year and you are teaching in all years, various projects. What are your plans when this year is over?
CO'N: I'm going to go back to making architecture I hope, starting October next year. Reviewing my career as an architect I realised that from '61 - '73 I made very particular kinds of buildings, very controlled and with a certain amount of consistency. Then, I don't know for what reason, whether it was the pressure of the job in college, or lack of time, or drying up of talent, or whatever, but certainly from then on until recently my work seems to have been much more blurred and less consistent and less satisfying in many ways, what I would like to do now is to try and return to my earlier buildings, to try to revive the spirit of them and to try to make buildings again which I find clearer and more satisfying.

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