

The Battle for Moore St

A little bit of history repeating

Minister Darragh O'Brien will not discuss Rising relatives' proposals. Taoiseach Micheál Martin held a behind-closed-doors meeting with Hammerson and supported their scheme though the Taoiseach should never comment on a live planning issue



Darragh O'Briens

By Patrick Cooney

Background

The Battle of Moore Street is the longest-running and most successful heritage campaign in this State. The battle is over the site of Ireland's 'Alamo', undeniably the birthplace of our Republic where leaders of the Rising retreated from O'Connell St. In February 2022 it celebrates its twenty-first birthday facing into a second An Bord Pleanála Oral Hearing following Dublin City Council's planning permission in January to UK Developer Hammerson to destroy most of the most important modern historic site in Dublin.

Modern History

In 1999 there was a planning application to demolish the entire Moore St area. I contacted the National Graves Association who whipped up a campaign to take on the then owner of the site, Chartered Land. What started out as a small-scale campaign to save Number 16 Moore Street where five signatories of the Proclamation including James Connolly spent their last hours as free men, expanded into a mass movement. Blood descendants of the 1916 executed leaders joined us, lending the campaign a unique authenticity.

Over two decades the campaign met five Taoisigh, seven successive Ministers of Heritage, countless TDs, councillors, planners and public servants. We encountered unbelievable institutional incompetence and dishonesty.

Countering this we hosted packed public meetings, and staged street actions and guided walking tours of the 'battlefield'.

In September 2021 the campaign launched to widespread public approval our own vision for Moore Street, complete with digital renderings and a scale architectural model. And yet the Government refuses to do the proper thing and compulsorily purchase the site.

The Planning battle

Back in 2009, we faced our first Oral Hearing in a Soviet style conference suite at Dublin's Gresham Hotel. Unlike Chartered Land we had no planning experts batting for us, but fought hard with an enthusiastic passion. Our case must have imprinted on the inspector as she found in our favour but her recommendation was not followed by her own board. We had to go to court.

Some Law

In 2016 on the centenary of the Rising relatives of the 1916 leaders faced the Irish government in the High Court - a strange place, the gimcrack theatrics of its habitués chiming uneasily with its institutional staleness. The state's appointment of Michael MacDowell as its lead SC was a calculated insult considering his grandfather's attempt to call off the Rising. Before proceedings started there was an attempt by Hammerson to begin demolishing the terrace, but a spontaneous rallying of campaigners led to it being swiftly occupied while we sat in court. The judge, Max Barrett, seemed something of a maverick, with a background as a solicitor not a barrister. The two-week hearing passed in an indecisive fog of legalese and arcane ritual.

On 17 March 2016 Judge Barrett read his judgment. It was framed in an impenetrable language, but the repetition of the term "granting relief" sounded positive. It was only when our solicitor who sat facing me visibly slumped in his chair that I knew something momentous had happened. I asked him: "Have we won?", He replied "Everything". Barrett had made much of the site a National Monument. Unfortunately ultimately the Supreme Court was to overturn much of his imaginative and learned judgment.

MSAG

The government filibustered by cobbling together the Moore Street Advisory Group, essentially a talking shop for 'stakeholders' the MSAG was suffocated by public-service

duplicity. Despite this, we managed once again to hold the line and steer the group's reports from developer-friendly surrenders to solid conservation manifestos.

History repeats

In 2015 we had worked with then Fianna Fáil Senator Darragh O'Brien drafting his Moore Street Renewal Bill which reimagined the area as primarily a cultural and historic hub. It is a compelling and detailed document. In the 2019 election he stood as a TD, winning a seat and also becoming the Minister for Heritage. I emailed him offering congratulations and requesting an urgent meeting to discuss the Bill. He replied warmly saying we'd be meeting very soon.

Since then, despite numerous emails, telephone calls and third-party interventions, O'Brien has not met us. Worse still, Taoiseach Micheál Martin held a behind-closed-doors meeting with Hammerson reps and allowed his praise of their planning application to be used in a company press release to accompany that planning application. A Taoiseach should never comment on a live planning issue.

Following the City Council's recent decision we now face into our second Bord Pleanála oral hearing, perhaps a judicial review, the Supreme Court and if necessary the ECJ.

But we have in essence won the battle for Moore Street. Our victory lies in the simple fact, that though shabby, the 1916 terrace still stands. There will be an election quite soon and the main opposition party Sinn Féin has committed to implement the vision we have fought for.

Your sense of history need be no more acute than your sense of irony to see parallels between this behaviour and the Rising itself, with Fianna Fáil somehow transformed into collaborators with the old enemy, and the insurrection being fought in windowless rooms. That the stakes are so different is the legacy of those who fought and died, around Moore St. The least we can do is properly mark their legacy. **L**