

# Streets of Dublin Show the Scars of Battle With Builders

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**DUBLIN** — Dublin is a city in a state of siege. In a war between the promoters of speculative construction and the protectors of the city's heritage, battles are being fought on both sides of the Liffey, from Hume Street to Mountjoy Square, with skirmishes in the most fashionable neighborhoods.

The battle scars are the broken fanlights and window glass of wrecked rows of 18th-century houses, and rows of boarded up and deteriorating historic buildings on otherwise sound blocks. Derelict new construction, started but never finished, has left gaping wounds in streets of uniformly classical beauty, and rubble-strewn lots are like bombed-out ruins.

The cause of the destruction is Dublin's current economic growth, a badly needed prosperity that passed this city by in the 19th century, leaving it virtually intact as one of the great Georgian cities of the world. The result of the boom is a precipitous rise in land values and a wave of new business construction competing for addresses in the best and most historic parts of town — a condition that is attracting speculators like the proverbial honey.

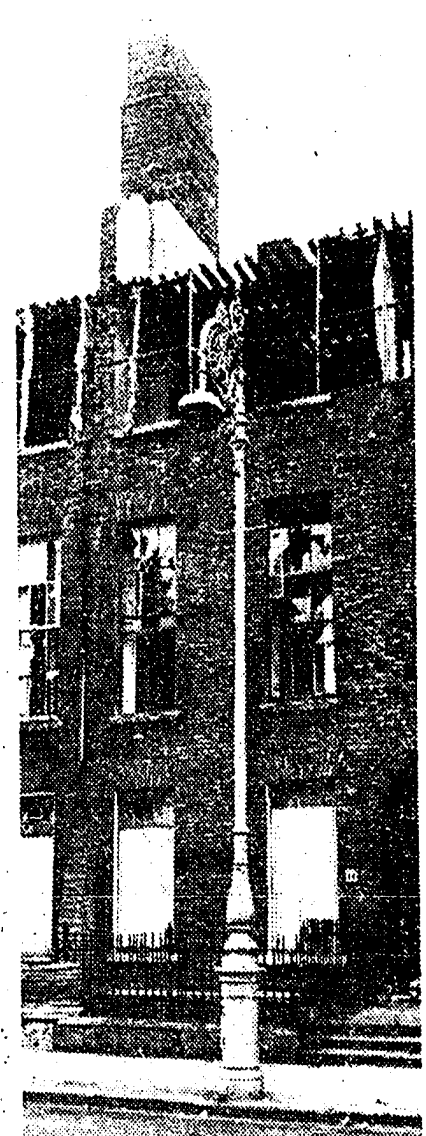
**Constantly Broken Price Records**

Land-price records are broken almost daily. A recent figure of £95,000 (\$176,000) an acre was the subject of a lead editorial in The Irish Times called "The New High-Priced Ireland," with the comment that it would only be a matter of time before that record was beaten in the current speculative fever.

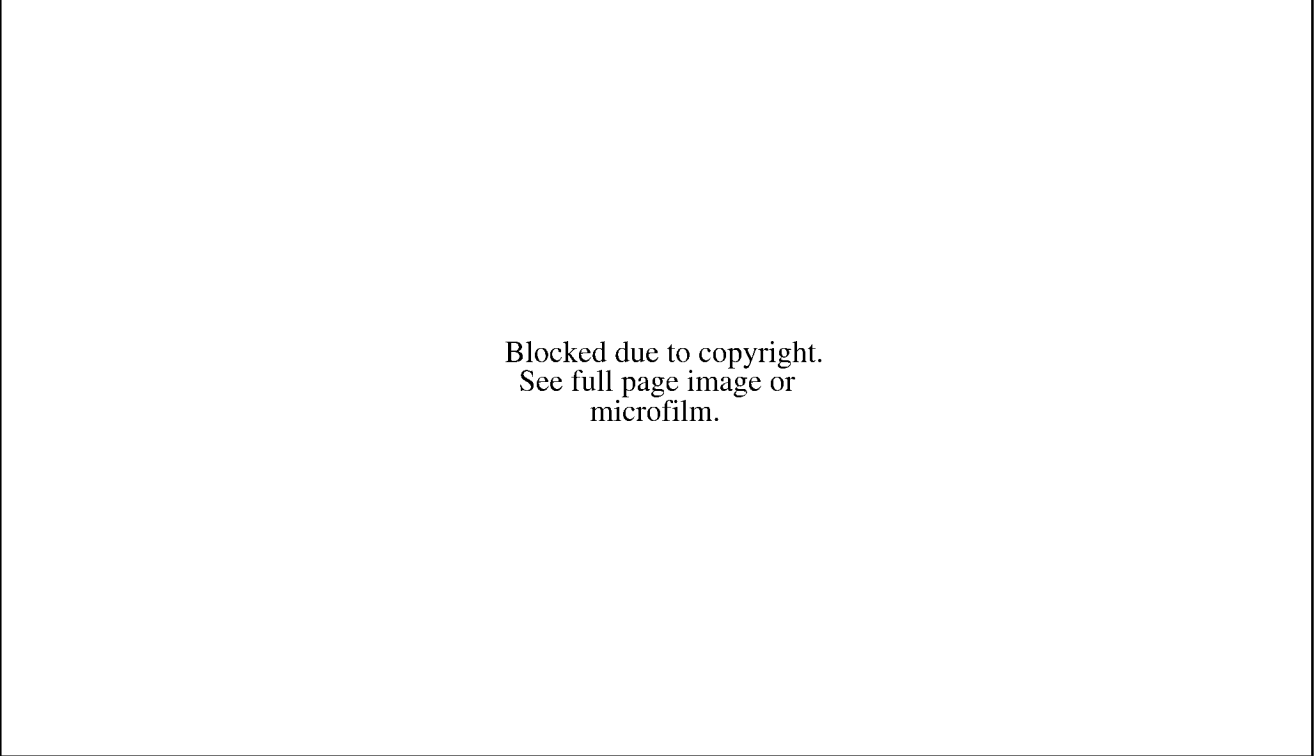
Because profits for the conversion of residential to commercial property in the center of Dublin can be 5 to 10 times what the present land use would yield, the incentive for eviction, demolition and new construction is far greater than for rehabilitation or preservation.

In addition to the deterioration being encouraged by purchasers in a gamble with percentages, the city is now pockmarked with so many new projects begun and then abandoned when funds ran out that an inventory of those eyesores has been called for by the Dublin City Council.

Even with the accelerating destruc-



On Mountjoy Square, in contrast, fine old homes have been destroyed.



The New York Times / Garth Huxtable

**A well-preserved block of homogeneous Georgian row houses stretches along Dublin's Fitzwilliam Square**

tion, Dublin remains a city of special charms. Although much of this appeal has been associated with its literary character, Dublin has unique architectural qualities.

**An Intimate Human Scale**

Continuous rows of homogeneous Georgian construction maintain an intimate human scale marked by singular style and grace. There are long streets of four-story, handmade brick structures with arched, colonnaded doorways and delicate fanlight tracery surrounding doors in a rainbow of colors. The interiors vie in the elegance of their Adam-style plaster details.

These 18th- and early 19th-century buildings often make up entire neighborhoods or border landscaped squares, with vistas unmarred by 20th-century intrusions. Merrion and Fitzwilliam Squares, on the fashionable south side, remain much as they were, the houses now converted to professional offices prized by doctors, lawyers, architects and small, specialized businesses such as advertising agencies.

Across O'Connell Bridge on the north side, identical streets, dingy and unrestored, accommodate rooming houses and marginal commercial uses. Mountjoy Square, one of the most beautiful examples of this 18th-century urban genre, has been restored on one side and is in ruins on the other, where preservationists were unable to save a particularly distinguished stand of houses.

These battles are fought, and often lost, by private organizations that include the Irish Georgian Society, the National Trust for Ireland and a local association called the Dublin Civic Group.

**Popular Support Is Absent**

Looked on as elitist groups led by either a moneyed or an intellectual aristocracy — Desmond Guinness is the crusading head of the Irish Georgian Society, and a passionately articulate history professor, Kevin Nowlan, leads the Dublin Civic Group — the preservationists have been unable to command popular support.

The traditional Irish mistrust of wealth and privilege, born of centuries of poverty, has been carried over to a lack of interest in historic properties that originally served both. With no effective landmarks legislation for threatened structures, that antipathy has played right into the hands of the speculators.

At this moment the streets around St. Stephen's Green, one of the choicest Dublin areas, are under attack. The east side represents the outcome of an earlier struggle with the forces of destruction, which led to a compromise that has turned out to be one possible answer to the problem of new building.

After a donnybrook with the developer, citizen groups succeeded in getting a preservation-minded architect involved with his plans, and instead of the pro-

posed demolition, restoration and some discreetly faked infill have kept the Georgian street front almost as it was. An entrance through the block leads to new office construction behind it.

The south side of the square was not so fortunate. The old buildings were bulldozed and a row of new banks and offices were erected to the old cornice height, as a sop to traditionalists, in the bland, faceless mode common to all cities today. Somehow this is more offensive in Dublin, where the uniform character and quality of the old city makes their dissident banality seem particularly out of place.

On the west side of the square the speculative process is clearly at work right now. Short-term leases that have brought in the purveyors of fringe chic and other obviously temporary uses have already undermined the area's stability. Maintenance has stopped and floors are empty above transient ground-floor stores. One section has been pulled down for parking.

At the corner of the green, in a gesture of civic insensitivity, the street has been widened to create a traffic island instead of the former serene sense of closure. The corner has been further eroded by the unexpected demolition of one of Dublin's best hotels, the Russell, with no replacement on the site. That action precipitated the area's downward slide.

The disease has spread to Harcourt Street, another fine Georgian row just beyond the green. The rape of Harcourt Street includes boarded-up buildings next to the open rubble of the corner, followed by a well-kept stretch flanked by a gaping hole and a silent crane left from an aborted construction project, before the Georgian fronts resume.

**Rusting Steel, Shabby Concrete**

On the opposite side of the street the rusting steel and shabby concrete of an ill-conceived and unfinished shopping center breaks the row. Periodically, signs are posted on buildings being allowed to decay that announce them as future development sites.

No protective action is being taken by the city to prevent the destruction of Dublin's unique urban fabric. Beyond the "listing" of historic buildings, their protection is largely unenforceable.

There are two listed categories; the first gives full protection to a limited number of landmarks; the second permits demolition or alteration under certain circumstances. Plans must be filed with the city, but change or razing is allowed with predictable regularity, often because the damage is already irreversible.

The only deterrent is something called a third-party appeal, in which an individual or group may register an objection and ask for a hearing. After the hearing the plan can be refused, granted or modified, but this procedure is understand-

ably pressured by forces for development that government is reluctant to discourage.

At present the process is producing a curious compromise that preservationists consider an ingenious architectural and political cop-out. Demolition permission is granted with the proviso that the new construction be "in keeping" with the neighbors left standing on the mutilated row. This usually takes the form of a fake Georgian facade to replace the real Georgian buildings razed, which permits the construction of greater interior commercial space.

More acceptable to urban critics is the practice of restoring the original buildings and constructing the new space behind them, as has been done successfully in some places. But conservation or recycling are barely beginning to be perceived as desirable or profitable activities, and the city is establishing no incentives to make them so.

The facades that have been called the most elegant in the British Isles continue to be cannibalized. And the traditional addresses that are now in such demand for corporate letterheads are increasingly unrecognizable on Dublin's streets.