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Interview with Derek McGarry

Derek McGarry is Head of Innovation and Engagement at National College of Art and Design, Dublin (NCAD), where he is in charge of design-led research projects. The department works with stakeholders in different sectors (medicine, healthcare, tourism, retail) to elaborate design concepts, prototypes and materials. Derek leads the NCAD technology transfer office Origin8 focusing on the commercialising of intellectual property and supporting campus company start-ups. He has a 30-year experience in third-level design education both in Ireland and the United States. Derek was also on the Board of the Crafts Council of Ireland and Rediscovery Centre.

Valérie Morisson: Derek McGarry, you are Head of Innovation and Engagement at NCAD in Dublin, a 250-year-old institution welcoming 600/700 design students among whom 5 to 10% coming from abroad. After a long engagement at NCAD, the School of Design, you became president emeritus of the Institute of Designers in Ireland. You also took a very active part in Origin8, a scheme promoting creativity and innovation but also commercialisation in an attempt to strengthen the links between the various stakeholders. NCAD gathers students in art and design. Are the two branches of the school independent or do staff and students get involved in exchanges between the two schools? What would be the common values or engagements?

Derek McGarry: NCAD Fine Art and School of Design modules are taught independently following the first semester of year one. After the first year of our undergraduate programmes, the School of Fine Art and the School of Design are separate entities to a large extent. In my mind, I like to think NCAD provides time and space for students to experiment and explore while learning their discipline and being exposed to many others.

VM: Ireland has long boasted an expertise and excellence in design. Would you say that design was connected to Irish identity? Is there a part of contemporary design that still is related to national traditions and can Ireland still market an Irish design?

DMG: Irish design has a long and rich tradition. Internationally, this is most evident in what would be recognised specifically as Celtic design. A contemporary Irish design identity is less easy to recognise as we are less connected to our traditional past. However, Ireland does a great job in marketing contemporary Irish design. In fact, in recent years the Irish government has invested heavily in supporting Irish design companies and promoting Irish design nationally and internationally. Today, the Irish creative industry is internationally recognised as a world leader.

Here you really see evidence of the innovative mix of art and design expertise that is required to excel in this sector.

VM: You have probably witnessed important changes in purpose, teaching and practice over the last decade. Are technical changes the most important ones? Is creation mostly technique-driven?

DMG: Creation is mostly about invention and innovation, not about technical skill. One should argue that creative thinking is a technical skill in itself. Developing hard and soft skills through experiential learning is extremely important. This cannot happen in a vacuum. It must be connected to the real world, to community and to industry. Developing enterprising graduates who can add value in the workplace and society is now more important than ever. We certainly do not seek to educate within a silo, quite the opposite in fact. Both our Fine Art and Design Schools develop excellent specialist generalists. NCAD graduates develop knowledge and skills to be able to adapt, compliment and contribute in most creative contexts through extensive experiential learning and studio practice. NCAD deliberately sets out to look beyond the perceived boundaries of art and design to collaborate with non-design fields such as business, computer science, social science, healthcare, tourism, etc. In fact, my role as Head of Innovation and Engagement is to enable staff, students and our recent graduate alumni to work with external organisations that require art and design expertise. NCAD Origin8 is our client gateway and technology transfer office. On average we deliver fifty / sixty external projects per year. Many of these are for clients who require design knowledge and expertise. Concept development, prototyping and design for manufacture are specialist design skills that add significant value to most businesses and we work with many who can avail of Irish state grants, such as €5,000 innovation research vouchers, do just that. Other clients need communication design help, such as presentation materials and packaging design for venture capital pitches. In the last five years, I have seen a dramatic increase in the number of clients who come to NCAD for human factors, task analysis and behavioural design focused help. Our Medical Device Design, Interaction Design and Service Design Masters programmes provide an exceptional research facility for a portfolio of innovative companies in the private and public sector.

VM: One sees nowadays in art schools a revival of crafts and a desire to revisit traditional technique and form in the light of new technologies or values. Do crafts and technology intersect in your and your students' practices?

DMG: Traditional and contemporary craft techniques are both highly valued skills sets but without creative and innovative thinking they can be less relevant. Developing a technical and visual literacy better enables creative thinking.

VM: Has sustainability impacted the way you and students work at the School of Design?

DMG: Absolutely. Integrated approaches to sustainable and ethical design are now almost beyond negotiation in product development. They are now at the centre of the design process.

VM: What are the new challenges for the School of Design?

DMG: Technology has led to new ways of teaching and learning. Yet art and design teaching and learning still place a significant emphasis on studio practice and learning your craft. This is changing to more fully embrace other forms of teaching and learning such as blended learning. However, the pace of change is much slower than that adopted by many non-art and design disciplines. It's very much about getting the balance right and that's always a challenge. Currently, NCAD provides space and time for relatively small groups of students to continue this form of education. Yes, there are significant demands from the government to increase student numbers but, we expect our students to attend classes for six hours a day five days a week. If they are not attending a taught lecture, or on a research field study, they are in their workshop studio practicing and honing their skills. And, that's probably how it should be. NCAD is very outward-facing. We want and need to engage with the world on our doorstep and far beyond. We set out to develop partnerships with external clients and organisations deliberately to infuse our programmes with outside influences. This is where the magic happens. This is where innovation happens. This is not easy, as it requires many resources and much time but it is what sets NCAD apart from our nearest competitors. NCAD offers some really innovative design programmes. We continue to be a national leader and place highly on the international world rankings. However, no one at NCAD is complacent about this. We are continually evaluating the success of our graduates in the jobs market and cognisant of the ever changing, or dynamic, demands of the creative and other industries. This is a fluid landscape. We are continually pushing to improve.

Interview carried out in January 2020.

Valérie MORISSON

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