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Small, creative, local (like U2): it's the Irish design

Barry Sheehan

Barry Sheehan's comment. He's professor in Dublin, we interviewed him for Professione Designer

DUBLIN. **Barry Sheenan**, Head of Design at the School of Art and Design at the Technological University of Dublin, opens our 2025 artciles within Professione Designer section.
We met him a few steps from St. Stephen's Park, his experience and ability give a panoramic narrative and help to understand some peculiarities of the the Irish educational and productive world. What emerges is an approach to design not very impacted by the celebration of "design signatures", characterized by the presence of some unexpected excellences but above all a protective university education capable of working on people and not on numbers. Education together with young age and fluent knowledge of the English language are key factors for the explosion of *information technology jobs* in Ireland.

What's your opinion about status of "health" of Irish Design?

I would say pretty good. It all depends on how we relate this statement. If we consider a time

horizon of four decades, then we can say with certainty that the state of health is certainly excellent. In the 80s you were somehow forced to go overseas to study design or to work in the creative industries. Not anymore. And part of this path of growth and awareness can also be attributed to U2's performance at Live Aid in 1985. Well yes, the message of the band was strong and important, you can become someone while deciding to stay, live and work in Ireland. Then the rest was certainly made possible by the explosion of the internet. In general I see a series of investments in the restructuring of intellectual capital, a constant flow of technology jobs moving towards Ireland and a favorable ecosystem due to tax relief and the fact that we have a young population that is generally well educated and fluent in English. On design, our main objective is that everything works together and functions properly. My mother doesn't care who designed that building or who designed that car. My mother is interested in ensuring that the purpose for which that project was conceived has actually been achieved.

Tell us something about best design companies in Ireland.

The Irish creative context is not comparable to that of other countries in the European Union. We are not a manufacturing country, an essential prerequisite for those who still associate design with the concept of product. We make few products, this is a fact and if I really have to direct readers towards an Irish specialization I can only mention Medical Design. With the exception of Eileen Gray, an Irish designer from the early twentieth century who is now studied in all courses on the history of design (we have a small permanent exhibition at the national museum, but paradoxically her production has also been very limited), I believe that Grafton Architects and Joseph Walsh deserve to be mentioned. The first, an award-winning architecture studio that won the Pritzker 2020, are known in Italy for having designed the headquarters of the Luigi Bocconi commercial university (a project that won the World Building of the Year Award 2008) and have always represented excellence in design. The second is a self-taught furniture maker who has had the courage to experiment and characterize his wooden works to the point of becoming a true point of reference. He now lives in rural areas. I also think I should mention O'Donnell + Tuomey as they have won the RIBA Gold Medal for Architecture in 2015 and are the architects for the new Academic Hub on our TU Dublin, Grangegorman Campus and Niall McLaughlin (inserire link. He is London based architect and I think is work is extraordinary. Finally In the context of Product Design, Design Partners deserve to be mentioned. They are

based in Bray to the south of Dublin but work for Clients all over the world such as Logitech. They have won the Red Dot Award multiple times. For the rest, we can mention excellent agencies and consultancy firms involved in visual communication, from posters to advertising, web design and publishing.

Topical question. Irish design is independent (from UK Design) or not? Are there strong connections with other European countries?

(Barry smiles). Yes, we are influenced, especially because of our geographical proximity. Brexit was suicide for the United Kingdom, while Ireland remains a strongly pro-European country. We have good relations with France and Italy, but the strongest of all is the connection with the Netherlands when it comes to graphic design.

Just a few considerations on employment opportunities for an Irish designer

There are some analyses and statistics that are published periodically, but I am not convinced by them. What I can firmly say is that the economy is strong at the moment and everything is cyclical, destined for ups and downs, gradual climbs and sudden falls like the global recession of 2008. Certainly, compared to the past, Irish designers are no longer forced to travel. If they want to stay and work in Ireland, they can easily do so.

Can you speak on evolution and trends of Irish Design Education?

Today in Ireland you can study design in Dublin, in Cork, at the Limerick School of Art and Design, but not only. For architecture, the locations are Dublin, Limerick, Cork and Belfast. So, there is no shortage of offers. On average, in a three-year degree class, about 40 students attend, which drops to a number between 10 and 20 in the specialist course. The numbers are slightly lower in the Fine Arts courses. The fees are not prohibitive, we are talking about about 3-4,000 euros per year, while the fee rises to 10,000 for non-EU students. We have a dropout rate of between 10% of interior design courses and 20% of visual communication courses and a certain internal mobility between degree courses. In Ireland we issue a certificate of attendance after two years of study, it is not a degree obviously but it is still a qualification. In any case, we do not see abandonment as a failure, we are strongly convinced that changing direction means

avoiding wasting precious time. Unfortunately, we are not very attractive for students who come from other countries because of the cost of accommodation, despite the fact that advantageous solutions such as the hybrid training method are proposed. We have exchange programs within the Erasmus project and we prefer to concentrate our students in a few European universities (Aalto University, Schwäbisch Gmünd University of Applied Design) and Canadian/American universities (Toronto, San Francisco), instead of scattering them everywhere and making the management of teaching and travel even more complex. Some of them have made careers abroad, see Paul Woods, one of our Visual Communications Graduates working in LA and president of AIGA LA (at the end of the article there are some links to his books). The relationship with students is very different from the Mediterranean one and, in general, from other countries. Here students call us by name (in the UK by surname), while in Italy we still call ourselves professor and in some cases "doctor" (this time we smile together). From my university education I remember the phrase of a professor who said: "*You will learn nothing from me, but you will learn from each other*".

To close: festival, awards and books that you suggest to our reader to explore Irish design.

I would definitely start from 100 Archive, that charts the past, present and future of Irish design by publishing 100 notable communication design projects, selected each year following an open call. It's nice to browse through the members and activities of the Architectural Association and the Institute of Designers in Ireland, the latter organizes two awards ceremonies annually; the Irish Design Awards, and the Irish Graduate Design Awards. Both awards celebrate and reward the best of Irish designers, nurturing the talent of the future and setting creative benchmarks for the industry.

Cover image: Barry Sheehan

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More info

Barry Sheehan

Barry Sheehan is Head of Design at the TU Dublin School of Art + Design at the Technological University Dublin, City Campus, Grangegorman, Dublin, Ireland. A fellow of the Royal Institute of

the Architects of Ireland, Barry has been involved in the design of numerous projects from architecture and interior design to graphics, multimedia and product design. His work has appeared in magazines and newspapers as well as on television. He is a regular commentator on design matters in the national media. He writes a running blog dedicated to the works of James Joyce, www.jj21k.com. He is President Emeritus of the Institute of Designers in Ireland.

Paul Woods' books:
How To Do Great Work Without Being An Asshole
Sh*t They Didn't Tell You: How to Succeed in the Creative Industries

About Author

Ubaldo Spina

Ricercatore, Industrial Designer e BDM presso CETMA (www.cetma.it), si occupa di design research e servizi di design e innovation management. Consulente di startup, PMI e Grandi Imprese, con focus sulla gestione dei processi di sviluppo di nuovi prodotti e fornitura di servizi avanzati di progettazione concettuale e strategica, ingegneria, prototipazione e protezione IP. Esperto europeo nella ricerca di "Tecnologie emergenti per il design" e membro dello Steering Board del progetto WORTH, il più grande incubatore europeo finanziato all'interno del programma COSME per la creazione e il supporto di collaborazioni transnazionali tra designer, PMI e technology provider, è membro della Commissione "Ricerca per l'impresa" dell'ADI – Associazione per il Disegno Industriale. Per conto del Joint Research Center della Commissione Europea, ha co-curato il rapporto "Innovation Ecosystems in the Creative Sector: The Case of Additive Manufacturing and Advanced Materials for Design". Il suo gruppo di lavoro ha ricevuto

diverse segnalazioni ADI Design Index, due Menzioni d'Onore e il Compasso d'Oro ADI per il veicolo a guida autonoma OMNIAGV. Docente nell'ambito delle attività didattiche magistrali della "24ORE Business School, coordina la pagina Design de "Il Giornale dell'Architettura" e le rubriche giornalistiche "SOS Design" (Design for Emergencies), "Design&Startup" e "Professione Designer".

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