

Fantasy and Reality

The opportunity that arose in 1916 was lost.

R.M. BUTLER, MAY 1923



O'Connell Street, c.1890
IAA Photographic Collections, 12/29V3



O'Connell Street, c.1930
IAA Photographic Collections, 12/29V34



'Bird's-eye View of the Greater Dublin Restoration Proposals', Organising Committee of the Greater Dublin Reconstruction Movement, December 1922
IAA 93/136



Proposed National Theatre, Parnell Square, 1922
Dublin of the Future, Patrick Abercrombie, Sydney Kelly and Arthur Kelly, Dublin, 1922, plate 33



City of Dublin, New Town Plan, 1922
Dublin of the Future, Patrick Abercrombie, Sydney Kelly and Arthur Kelly, Dublin, 1922, plate 5

In September 1916, as a deliberate contribution to the debates about rebuilding and urban planning swirling around Dublin, the results of the Town Plan for Dublin international competition organised by the Civics Institute of Ireland in 1914 were finally announced. In November 1916 the eminent town planner Raymond Unwin was invited to Dublin by the Civics Institute to lecture on the winning entry, that of Patrick Abercrombie, Sydney Kelly and Arthur Kelly. Abercrombie also lectured on the scheme that November, and again in January 1917 when all the plans entered were put on public display. The winning scheme was finally published in 1922. If the unexpected opportunities of 1916 and after identified by R.M. Butler and others were not to be lost, radical thinking such as that in the Abercrombie plan needed to be embraced.

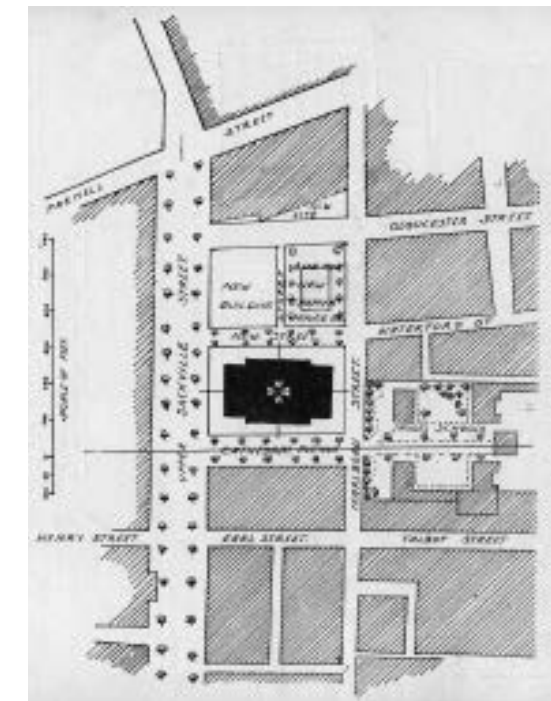
Abercrombie's was not the only vision for a new Dublin. In 1922 the Organising Committee of the Greater Dublin Reconstruction Movement published a plan which saw a new cathedral covering Castle Street and a portion of Dublin Castle, the national parliament relocated to the Royal Hospital Kilmainham, new municipal buildings on the site of the GPO, a new GPO on the site of the Custom House and an art gallery and public garden on the site of the Four Courts. Even R.M. Butler had a go, partially as a riposte to the Dublin Reconstruction Movement. Confining himself to O'Connell Street, Upper, he proposed a new street layout and cannibalised the old Pro-Cathedral to create a new national cathedral.

Cathal Brugha Street aside, none of these grand visions came to anything, foundering on the cold realities of sectional property interests, institutional conservatism, the difficulties

imposed by war restrictions, and, perhaps most critically, an absence of capital. It is telling that in all the rebuilding across the country, only one architectural competition was held and that was for the new City Hall in Cork. Of course there were notable achievements: three great buildings were saved, at least in external form, and a great street was rebuilt. New materials and new techniques were used to create the new O'Connell Street, with uniform parapets and stone façades instead of brick. As with so much else about the aftermath of the revolutionary period, the effect was to leave the street utterly changed and yet curiously still the same.



O'Connell Street, Lower, viewed from Nelson's Pillar, c. 1950
IAA Photographic Collections, 12/29V28



O'Connell Street, Upper, proposal by R.M. Butler, 1923
Irish Builder, 19 May 1923, p. 366