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## Beautiful Nerds: Growing a rigorous design research dialogue in the Irish context

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**Abstract:** Ireland is a country with a small and emergent design research community. Relative to other countries, the practice of design itself in Ireland is a recent development with the first formal design courses materialising in the mid-1970s. Without historical legacy and sustained coordinated support from design specific state development agencies, the progress of this nascent Irish design sector has been fragmented and unfocused. Irish Design 2015 (ID2015) a yearlong government backed initiative sought to address this lack of coherence in tandem with increasing the visibility and profile of Irish design. This article reflects on the historical context Irish design research and practice sits within and explores the early success of the ITERATIONS Design Research and Practice review as one of a series of initiatives launched as part of ID2015. It makes the case for robust dialogue and advocacy in addressing the needs of an emergent community of practice.

**Keywords:** Irish Design, Design Research, Design Practice, ITERATIONS Design Research and Practice Review.

### 1. Irish Context

Ireland in the 1950s was a poor and underdeveloped country. In an effort to maintain and honour its newly found independence the government had adopted a stance of self-sufficiency and isolationism which did not prove conducive to economic growth and while other capitalist countries were experiencing increasing economic growth, Ireland's economy was on the verge of disaster (Tobin 1984; Brown 1987). The industrial revolution did not happen in Ireland as it did in other countries. There was little understanding of design and its benefits and as outlined by Marchant and Addis, "there were few industries, fewer designers



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and almost no innovation in Ireland” (Marchant and Addis 1985). Credit for the introduction and early development of industrial design in Ireland is unequivocally attributed to the Irish Export Board, (Córas Tráchtála Teo, CTT) and its then general manager Mr W. H. Walsh.

At this point in time responsibility for ‘design in industry’ was assigned to the newly instituted (1951) Arts Council of Ireland. Design at this time was defined as ‘applied arts’ and as defined would have appeared to fit naturally under the remit of the Arts Council. However, as outlined by Hogan, “despite its best efforts, the Council was not equipped to build bridges to industry”(Hogan 2005). In 1960, the responsibility for ‘design in industry’ was transferred solely to the Irish Export Board as the government came to recognise “the problematic positioning of industrial design in the sphere of cultural provision” (Walker 2013).

Mr. Walsh, the then general manager of the Export Board was fast to act on his new responsibility. In 1961, he orchestrated a survey of Irish design by a group of eminent Scandinavian designers. “The five-man team spent two weeks visiting factories, colleges, museums and shops” (Marchant and Addis 1985) in Ireland and their evaluative survey report ‘Design in Ireland’ (Franck et al.) was published in 1962. The authors were critical of standards of design in Irish industry, commerce and education but optimistic in the potential they saw for development. Particularly, they noted the lack of art and design education in Irish schools, noting that this was where an informed and appreciative public, so necessary for design development is shaped. Expanding on this point, they outline how,

“A remarkable feature of Irish life which we noted, even after a few days, is the manner in which today’s Irish culture has developed a distinct leaning towards literature, theatre, the spoken word and abstract thinking, rather than creation by hand or machine and the visual arts-the other side of human activity in civilisation” (Franck et al. 1962, p1).

This continues today to a lesser extent. Art is part of the school curriculum now, but design specific subjects have only just begun to be introduced. For Walsh and his team, the ‘Design in Ireland’ report provided an impartial international assessment, while also endorsing his future programme for development (Hogan 2005).

Purposeful and fruitful development did happen in the form of the setting up of the Kilkenny Design Workshops (KDW) which was instigated by Walsh in 1963 as part of his development plan. Marchant and Addis describe how

“The organisation would be a missionary centre of influence, but its emphasis would be on practical demonstration. It was to be a community of experienced designers, with craftsmen and technicians who would prove their work in prototype before it was adopted by industry. Irish staff were to be recruited where possible but it was accepted that many of the professional designers and other specialist staff would be recruited from abroad, with Irish craftsmen and trainees working alongside them to gain experience and confidence (Marchant and Addis 1985, p 10)”.

Established in 1963, and by bringing craft and design expertise from abroad, it utilised the proven apprenticeship model for developing a broad selection of design disciplines, from

craft to visual communications and industrial design. It was unique in that it was registered as a private company, providing it with autonomy, while also benefiting from complete state financial support at the start to develop the premises and employ the necessary expertise, making Ireland the first country to establish a state design service. A retail outlet on the premises provided a further source of revenue, but more importantly a test bed for prototypes and a platform to promote good design. Kilkenny Design Workshops (KDW) operated successfully between the years 1963 – 1988. Its early operations focused almost exclusively on craft as it was “seen as the quickest and least expensive means of increasing public awareness of design” (Marchant and Addis 1985, p20) while also developing craft skills and craft based industries. However, its primary objective was to cultivate design for industry, and consequently in 1971, the Crafts Council of Ireland (CCoI) was set up as it was hoped that this might free KDW up to concentrate on this main objective, design for industry (Hogan cited in Quinn 2005).

Now with less responsibility to crafts, KDW conducted a survey of the design needs of the rapidly growing Irish engineering industries. The survey, which took place in 1973, was followed by a targeted expansion plan to provide model making, prototyping and technical support for these industries. Conversely, the expansion plans coincided with cutbacks in state expenditure and the first international oil crisis which left them short of the necessary capital (Marchant and Addis 1985; Walker 2013). Yet, the focus of the Kilkenny Design Workshops did change over time from individual designer-craftsmen “to a multi-disciplinary design team active and influential in most sectors of industry” (Marchant and Addis 1985, p36). This was to be short lived however, because the workshops closed in 1988. They closed for a variety of reasons, but mainly financial due to a phasing out of government grant aid and the recession of the 1980s. Nonetheless, the KDW legacy remains undisputed, having put in place a strong foundation for the development of the craft, industrial design and graphic design industries in Ireland. Particularly, it raised design awareness and set standards of excellence for design practice in Ireland.

Following the closure of the workshops, the Crafts Council of Ireland (CCoI) took over the mainly craft training element of KDW. While the workshops were in operation, the first industrial design undergraduate courses had also been founded. Funding from the European Union led to the establishment of Regional Technical Colleges (RTCs) around the country (Turpin 1994) and Carlow Regional Technical College established in 1970 put in place the first National Council for Educational Awards (NCEA) accredited course in Industrial design in 1973. (Broderick et al. 2004). The National College of Art (NCA) renamed The National College of Art and Design (NCAD) in 1971 also introduced an Industrial design course in 1975. These courses continue to provide design education in Ireland along with a large number of others. The Institute of Designers in Ireland (IDI, 2015), a voluntary body set up in 1972, continues to represent the interests of Irish designers along with the publically funded Crafts Council of Ireland now called the Design and Craft Council of Ireland (DCCoI, 2015).

In the following years, the Irish design industry continued to develop and grow but as outlined in a report on the industry commissioned by a government agency, Enterprise Ireland, in 1999, it has suffered from a lack of cohesion and leadership (Bradley and Mc Gurk 1999, p11). This report, 'Opportunities in Design: Strategies for Growth in the Irish Design Sector' identified a number of issues and factors impacting upon the development of design in Ireland.

- The positioning, structure and cohesiveness of the Irish Design Industry
- The marketing of Irish design internationally
- Awareness of the value of design
- Skill base and training
- Organisational and operational effectiveness of design businesses
- Design education (Bradley and Mc Gurk 1999, p11-13)

Many of the issues identified in the 1999 report still exist today. The low level of design integration within locally owned Irish companies needs to be addressed and with increasing pressure from international markets the need for design specialisation has become even more pressing. Ireland is taking its time, unfortunately, catching up with the European trends having only in the last few years established government funded design centres in Shannon (Design Shannon, est. 2000), Sligo (Centre for Design Innovation Sligo, est. 2005) and Dublin (Design Ireland est. 2000). The remit of these groups is to increase awareness amongst Irish industry about the implementation and utilisation of design as a resource and strategic tool in product and service development, whilst also establishing a profile for Irish design in the international context. At time of writing all of these centres had closed or declined significantly due to lack of funding in the economic downturn of 2009-13.

## **2. The Institute of Designers in Ireland, The Design and Craft Council of Ireland and Irish Design 2015**

As outlined Ireland has had a series of initiatives over the past half century which have sought to elevate the visibility and profile of design and to capitalise on the benefits that design can bring to society and industry. For continuity it has relied on a number of special interest bodies whose remits often overlap and it can be challenging to support design research under any of these bodies. Two of the leading bodies over the past two decades have been the professional body which represents designers and design educators, the IDI, and the government supported DCCol which represents and promotes the interests of largely craft based designers.

The IDI relies mainly on membership fees and volunteers to support its activities. It is now the largest representative body for designers on the island and it has a strong tradition of advocating for policy development, recognition and promotion of design. It holds annual graduate design awards and well-respected industry design awards along with providing a

travel bursary for students. More recently the IDI introduced a voluntary register for designers who wish to have their experience and qualifications recognised in a formal manner. It is expected that this may be a first step towards chartership. The IDI is run by an elected council and nominates a president on an annual basis. It is the IDI that has recognised the need to support the emergent design research community.

The DCCoI (DCCoI 2015) is supported by the state development agency Enterprise Ireland and is mandated to promote and support craft and more recently design. The DCCoI is set up as a client-serving agency that works for the interests of its members. It runs a variety of training and business support programs and has some liaison with education. Traditionally the DCCoI has focused its energies on the craft sector however in the past number of years it has moved to widen its remit to cover the design sectors also. While this has caused some duplication of representation the practicing designers and design educators largely decide themselves which of the bodies they engage with. It was the DCCoI who initiated Irish Design 2015 (ID2015) initiative and secured the funding from the government departments.

ID2015, is a yearlong programme for the development of Irish design, it aims to foster dialogue and collaboration and to bring a public awareness around design and the contribution it can make to the Irish economy, society and everyday lives of citizens. This is perhaps the first time in the history of design on the island that such an ambitious project has been undertaken to embrace all the stakeholders.

“Through our year-long programme of events, we’ll work towards: Raising the profile of Irish design, at home and abroad. Increasing awareness of the value of design in all aspects of life. Building on the international reputation of Irish design. Encouraging links between local and global Irish designers. Showcasing the importance of design to success in business and as a driver of economic growth” (ID2015)

There is currently a palpable sense that this initiative has gained traction with the general public and with policy makers and business leaders. For the first time there is widespread dialogue through national media, television and print journalism about the value rather than just the content of Irish design. Vibrant discussions are developing on a variety of social media platforms and there is almost an overload of conference, niche events and showcases that are generating a collaborative dynamic around design that few of the design community have previously experienced.

“ID2015 aims to foster dialogue and collaboration by encouraging investment in design as a key component of competitiveness and innovation, the overall objective is to sustain and grow employment opportunities and sales and export potential for the Irish design sector into the future.(DCCoI 2015)”

The opportunity to build an all island design research network dovetailed naturally in to this initiative as it allows the convergent themes of design practice and design research to bring a more rigorous dialogue to the fore. Subsequently, one of the projects ID 2015 provided funding for was ITERATIONS Design Research & Practice Review (ITERATIONS, 2015)

### 3. ITERATIONS Design Research and Practice Review

#### 3.1 -The formation of an idea

The idea was born from one of those frustrating discussions around the limitations of the support structures available for design and design research in Ireland. Marc O’Riain, the then incoming president of the IDI and one of the authors here (de Eyto) discussed the opportunity to develop a design research journal back in 2013. However it was not until Irish Design 2015 (ID2015) made a call for project proposals in Autumn 2014 that it was acted upon. As is often typical of a funding call the idea was not fully formed but what was clear was the need and interest from various stakeholders in developing a platform for design research and practice. An outline draft proposal for a review style publication was developed by de Eyto and O’Riain and the core group of collaborators from across the country were asked to support the bid. These included design academics and researchers in research centres and groups who had a clear track record of promoting design research. These included: Design Factors (University of Limerick), The Architecture Factory (Cork Institute of Technology), Design CORE (Institute of Technology Carlow), Letterfrack Furniture College (Galway Mayo Institute of Technology), Limerick School of Art and Design (Limerick Institute of Technology), The School of Creative Arts (Dublin Institute of Technology), School of Design (National College of Art and Design), SAUL (University of Limerick), RIAD (University of Ulster).

#### 3.2- Context

As far as could be established there had never been a formal review of this nature in Ireland specifically addressing design research and practice. Other publications such as *CIRCA* (CIRCA, 2015) and the *Irish Arts Review* (IAR, 2015) have published articles on design but they remain predominantly art and visual culture focused. *Architecture Ireland*, the journal of the Royal Institute of Architects in Ireland (RIAI) also publishes opinion pieces and features on Irish architecture and some design related material but critically it is not blind peer reviewed. Design has had a number of predecessors in professional body publications such as *Creative Axis* and *Ratio* both produced by the IDI. There are of course numerous international examples of well-established academic design journals such as *Design Issues*, *Design Studies*, *The International Journal of Design & The Journal of Design Research*. Irish researchers have and continue to publish in these with some success. The ITERATIONS team also looked to regional examples of best practice such as the Swedish Design Federation (SVID) *Design Research* and publications such as the Journal of the Service Design Network, *Touchpoint*.

There is a specific challenge faced by Irish design researchers who work within the university sectors and this is one of defining the impact of their research. As in many countries, the Irish universities and Institutes of Technology (IoT’s) are requiring design researchers to publish in predominantly international scientific and humanities journals in order to increase

their own profile and that of their institutions. This creates a culture of strategic positioning of design research and is affecting the type of research outcomes that are being expressed. Practice led and practice based design research is in an emergent state in Ireland and consequently few researchers feel confident enough to publish in the high profile international design research journals. The tendency has been therefore for many Irish researchers to angle the research that they undertake to target other niche disciplinary journals which have a high impact rating. In the absence of any REF (Research Excellence Framework) style impact assessment in southern Ireland, design researchers have to justify their activities arbitrarily using metrics largely designed in house in the universities & IoT's. These metrics are heavily dictated by the established Scientific, Business and Humanities disciplines and often do not reflect the needs of design research.

The proposition therefore was to develop an open access review/journal that provided a platform for the emergent design research community on the island of Ireland. From the outset double blind peer review and the inclusion of design practice was deemed essential to the mix. The bid for seed funding from ID2015 was successful and with that the challenge of setting up the review proper commenced.

The reference to 'Beautiful Nerds' in the title of this paper comes from the sentiments of the working group who began developing ITERATIONS early in 2015. Very quickly the conversation around the nuances of the review, its conventions and its focus became passionate, nerdy and of course design focused, akin to the 99% invisible podcasts of Roman Mars (Mars, 2015). A sense of humour mixed with a passion for what design research could be in the Irish context developed.

### *3.3 The Co Design of ITERATIONS*

A clear proposition had been made to ID2015 for seed funding, however the nuance of the review and its conventions had to be developed. The consortium sought to co design the review by working collaboratively and seeking views and opinions from the wider design research and practice community. There was a strong sentiment that something locally appropriate had to develop. Our academic colleagues in the north of Ireland are subject to the rigours of the UK REF (Research Excellence Framework) while in southern Ireland a similar framework is only in development by the Higher Education Authority (HEA).

With this in mind the consortium chose to work towards a 'Green open Access' model (Harnad et al, 2004 & Laakso et al 2011) as this would future proof it for consideration under the UK REF evaluations and also for any developments within the south of Ireland.

In line with best practice rigour was considered essential to the long-term credibility of the review. While the Irish design research community is small it was felt that a double blind

peer review process could be developed where robust critique could be sought and given without prejudice. There is evidence (Ware 2008) that double blind peer review as practiced internationally is less than perfect however, for now, it seems the closest workable mechanism to achieve un-biased feedback. The ITERATIONS board decided that the edition editor holds the position of being the sole individual who knows the identity of both authors and reviewers. It is not always possible to anonymise all submissions, especially those relating to practice where the artefact, design consultancy and or context inevitably signals who the author might be. The editorial board therefore developed a set of guidelines for reviewers in an effort to ensure that consistency and impartiality can prevail.

The mixes of articles on both design practice and design research emerged as a key tenet of the new review. It was observed that some of the most relevant research work being done within the Irish Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) is practice facing, practice led or practice based (Frayling, 1993). In addition many practicing designers and design consultancies had expressed the need to have their work expressed on a rigorous public platform. The first two issues have managed to achieve this balance with a slight bias towards research articles. The call for the third edition has addressed this with a preference for reflections on practice and or monologues or interviews based on design practice work.



Fig 1: ITERATIONS First Issue, Published June 2015

ITERATIONS (Fig 1) was formally launched in June 2015 in conjunction with another initiative of ID2015, the first Irish design research conference entitled *Faultlines- Bridging Knowledge Spaces*. The review was very well received with 500 print copies of the first issue released for sale and distribution over the following weeks and months. The interest from the design community reinforced the need for such a platform and this was backed up by offers of follow on long term funding from the board of the IDI, extra seed funding from ID2015 and institutional subscription. At the time of writing this paper the second issue (Fig 2) has again received widespread interest and the third issue has called for submissions. The developments to date ensure that the review has a sustainable open access model which

gives access to readers from a national and international audience. More importantly perhaps it has contributed to the collaborative nature of design research and design practice in a small emergent community. It has increased the level of discourse to the extent that the editorial board now has the task of enlarging the reviewer panel. Clearly the amount of interest in submission publication has grown as authors take example from previous issues and articles. The review has received critical acclaim locally by being shortlisted for the prestigious IDI annual design awards in the *ID2015 Special Award for Collaboration* category.

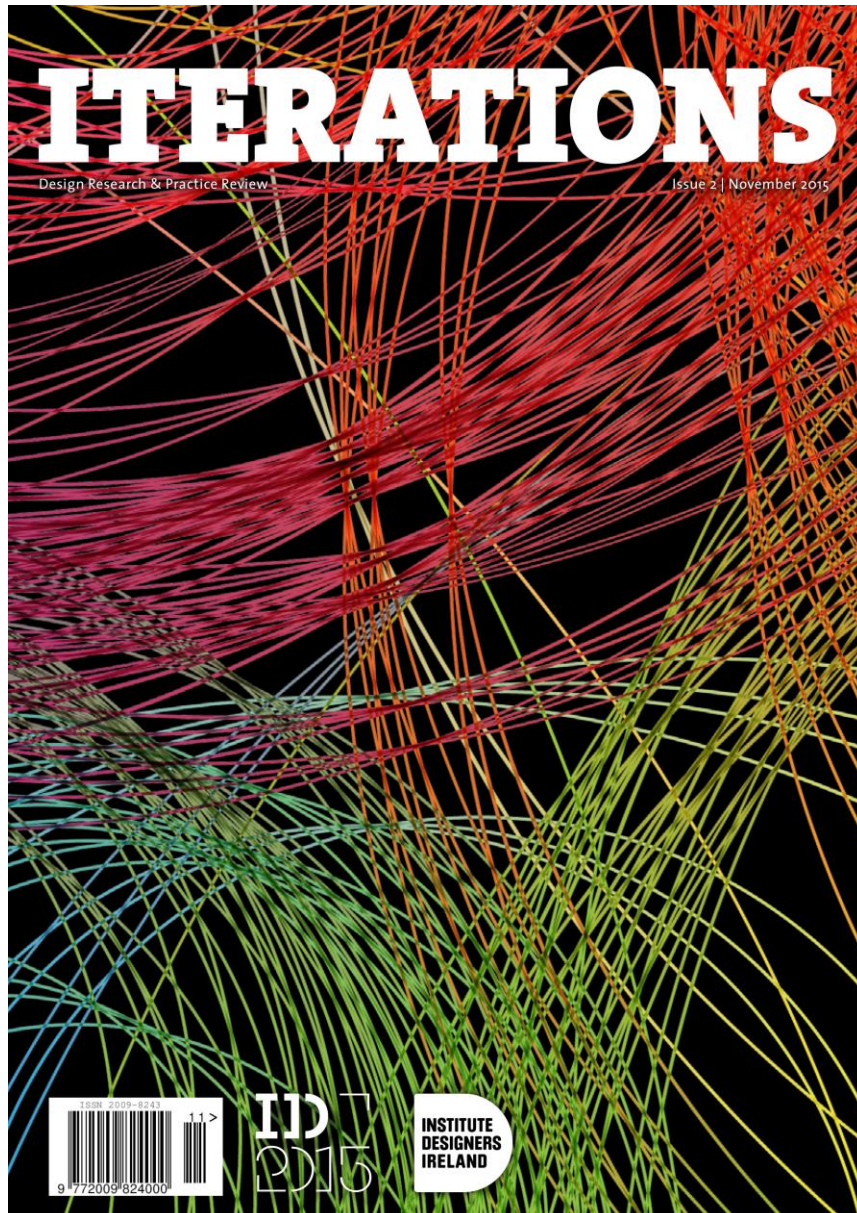


Fig 2: *ITERATIONS* Second Issue, Published November 2015

## 4. Conclusions

At the time of writing the ID2015 year is drawing to a close however plans have already been developed to continue the legacy through a series of initiatives led by the IDI, DCCoI and the state agencies. The Irish design community is small and scattered in various locations on the island however ITERATIONS has created a platform for dialogue to occur within this scattered and fragmented community. This has happened formally through the publication itself but more importantly informally as designers and researchers meet to collaborate on the various activities required to make the publication a reality. The editorial board meetings provide for lively discussions that establish a common consensus on what constitutes 'good' design research and practice in an Irish context. International benchmarking is constantly to the fore in these discussions and the inclusion of the Northern Ireland design research community helps provide a bridge to the UK models.

A series of conferences and seminars such as Faultlines, Déanta (Déanta, 2015) and the IBEC CEO conference (IBEC, 2015) have formalised the dialogue but perhaps in a more encouraging development, there is evidence that collaborative design research projects, MA & PhD co-supervision across institutions and collaborative paper writing is becoming the norm rather than the exception for Irish design researchers. Design practitioners have also embraced the change publishing formal reflections on their process to share with the wider community.

It is too early to tell if this legacy will have long-term effect however the signs are positive. The 'beautiful nerds' will have to reevaluate this impact in the years to come!

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