

Design for life

RPP Architects on celebrating 40 years in practice in Belfast

When it comes to taking time out to reflect on a landmark birthday, most companies revel in the opportunity to celebrate. In the local construction industry, however, despite the fact things are finally looking up, there is still some hesitancy about 'blowing your own trumpet'.

Surfacing on the other side of what has undoubtedly been the deepest and lengthiest recession in living memory, RPP Architects has tentatively decided to take stock and reflect on its 40 years in business in Belfast before looking forward to the exciting new projects which lie ahead in 2017.

The evolution of an architectural practice Robinson Patterson Partnership was established in 1977 by George Robinson and Barry Patterson. The firm initially made its name in retail, undertaking extensive work across Ireland for Dunnes Stores, and also in its work for the Northern Ireland

Housing Executive. As its workload and reputation grew, the partnership moved to Clarence Gallery on Belfast's Linenhall Street and became a limited company in 1984. The distinctive, glass-fronted former linen warehouse, situated just behind the BBC, was not only home to the firm for 30 years, but also won it its first RIBA Award in 1989.

A rebrand and change of name to RPP Architects followed in 2006 when the current directors, Harry McConnell, Peter McGirr, Alan Shields and Simon Robinson took the helm. The firm moved that year to its current offices, a striking four-storey red-brick building, situated on the doorstep of Belfast's historic Gasworks district, on Donegall Pass. RPP Architects today employs 38 people and has offices in Belfast and in Derry.

A dynamic approach looking beyond the local market

The leadership of four distinctly individual directors, each with their own experience,

skills, specialist interests and personal approach to the business, has undoubtedly been an asset to the firm and its clients. RPP Architects has continued to grow its portfolio of work across diverse industry sectors: from commercial to education, retail, healthcare, transport, leisure and tourism, as well as designing beautiful, one-off bespoke homes.

Commercial fit-outs, particularly hotels, retail and office accommodation, have also proved to be an important area of business for the practice, with many projects coming from the UK and from US-backed firms locating in Northern Ireland. In recent years, the practice's business has spread far beyond the Northern Ireland market to projects in Saudi Arabia, the UK and the Republic of Ireland.

Understanding the industry and embracing change

When asked his view on this milestone birthday, RPP Architects Director, Alan Shields, said: We try our best to keep abreast, if not ahead, of developments in

RPP Architects Directors Alan Shields, Harry McConnell, Simon Robinson and Peter McGirr at the new AC Hotel by Marriott Belfast at City Quays 3

our industry. I am proud to say that we are now one of the first firms in Northern Ireland to offer a dedicated in-house Principal Designer who is capable of overseeing all areas of health and safety. This is a massive advantage for our clients in large-scale construction projects.

"RPP is also in the process of embracing the challenge of what is possibly the biggest change to come to the construction industry in years, namely BIM (Building Information Modelling). We see this new and exciting way of working as a real positive and we are confident that our current investment in hardware and training will bring great benefit to our clients across all sectors."

Projects to be proud of

On the topic of significant past projects, Director, Peter McGirr said: "Looking back, it is hard to choose one project that defines RPP Architects' work over four decades. Projects that stand out for me though are ones that have made a positive impact on

our city and community, transforming the space they occupy.

"There are 'landmark' buildings, such as the McClay Library at Queen's University, the Bank of Ireland Headquarters on Donegall Square and the Europa Hotel, which are easily recognisable and certainly form part of the Belfast cityscape. Then there are projects such as the 2015 RIBA National Award-winning Old See House, a community Mental Health Resource Centre in North Belfast, that continues to break new ground in mental healthcare.

"As a practice, RPP Architects is also immensely proud to have provided in the region of £100m of social housing and community regeneration schemes across Northern Ireland over the last four decades."

Attention to the finer detail

When asked what he believes has contributed to the longevity of RPP Architects, Director, Simon Robinson, said: "RPP Architects has always been passionate about the finer details and we always try to go that extra step for our clients. This is especially true for the private homes we design and we take a thoughtful approach to each and every private home, extension, refurbishment or interior that we design.

"Unlike other architects, the firm offers a dedicated Interior Design team who can help our clients with all the choices they make throughout the design process: from selecting a site, to landscaping, choosing paint colours, lighting layouts, fabric choices and designing furniture, staircases and bookshelves. Our clients tell us that they really appreciate this level of support throughout the design and build process."

Exciting times ahead for Belfast and RPP Architects

Director, Harry McConnell, said: "2017 is shaping up to be a very interesting year for RPP Architects. We will be continuing our work at City Quays, providing hotel and high-grade office accommodation. This will include the opening, in early 2018, of a brand new waterside Marriott hotel housing top chef, Jean-Christophe Novelli's first restaurant in Ireland.

"Another significant project that will be



RPP Architects staff celebrating the firm's 40 years in practice

delivered later in 2017 is Belfast Harbour Studios. The 120,000 sq ft film studio is situated on a former 340-acre reclaimed site, known as Giants Park, and will certainly enhance Belfast's credentials as a film and television production destination."

Film studios, hotels and hospitals for 2017

Work began in December 2016, at Belfast City Hospital, on the new 80-bed mental health inpatient unit. This facility will see the transformation of services for acutely mentally ill adults in Belfast and the surrounding area and is a true first-of-its-kind facility for the UK.

RPP Architects continues to dominate as a leading force for design in the hotel sector this year. Projects include: the Grand Central, a brand new hotel for the Hastings Group at Windsor House in Belfast; a luxury four-star boutique hotel, as part of the redevelopment of the waterside in Derry; and the £5m expansion at Co. Antrim's Tullyglass House Hotel, in Ballymena.

Bright things on the horizon

RPP Architects has much to reflect on and be proud of from its last 40 years in business in Northern Ireland. Whilst the journey in business is never smooth, this firm, like the city of Belfast itself, can be confident and proud, and look forward to bright things on the horizon. ■