

Kilkenny: extending the frontiers

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Kilkenny Design Workshops

Last November a shop opened in New Bond Street, London, stocked with 'the best of Irish workmanship and design' — carefully selected products from over a hundred studios, workshops and small factories in Ireland north and south.

Not in itself, perhaps, an unusual event, for it is the rule rather than the exception for foreign countries to have a West End outlet for their better products but the Kilkenny shop is the visible part of an organisation that has been operating not 500 miles from London over the past quarter-century, applying ideas in many cases new to Britain and previously untried in the promotion of design and craft work; an organisation whose uniquely practical methods and success are not widely known outside Ireland.

The problems that Kilkenny Design was set up to solve were different from equivalent problems in Britain as a whole, but they were precisely similar to those that persist in some of Britain's more rural and industrially depressed provinces, and to problems in many underdeveloped countries.

Essentially it was not so much the problem of how to improve design standards, promote the interests of designers and craftsmen, or upgrade education and training in those spheres, as of how to *create* design consciousness and activity almost from scratch. Most of Ireland's design and craft traditions, for historical and economic reasons, were long lost by the early sixties, and the few practising designers were either in advertising and packaging graphics or concerned with the moribund ceramics or textile industries. In addition there were thriving architects and fashion designers, but they tended not to stray into other design disciplines.

It was particularly strange and sad that the crafts were almost nonexistent in a country so small, so aware of its own special culture and becoming so successful in attracting tourists from Britain, America and the continent.

The cheap gewgaws that confronted tourists in the gift shop were mainly from Hong Kong and Japan, and all too often decorated with mendacious shamrocks, harps or homely Irish proverbs. Worse, the Irish products that were offered frequently did not even come up to the standard or value of the imported rubbish, and this problem was

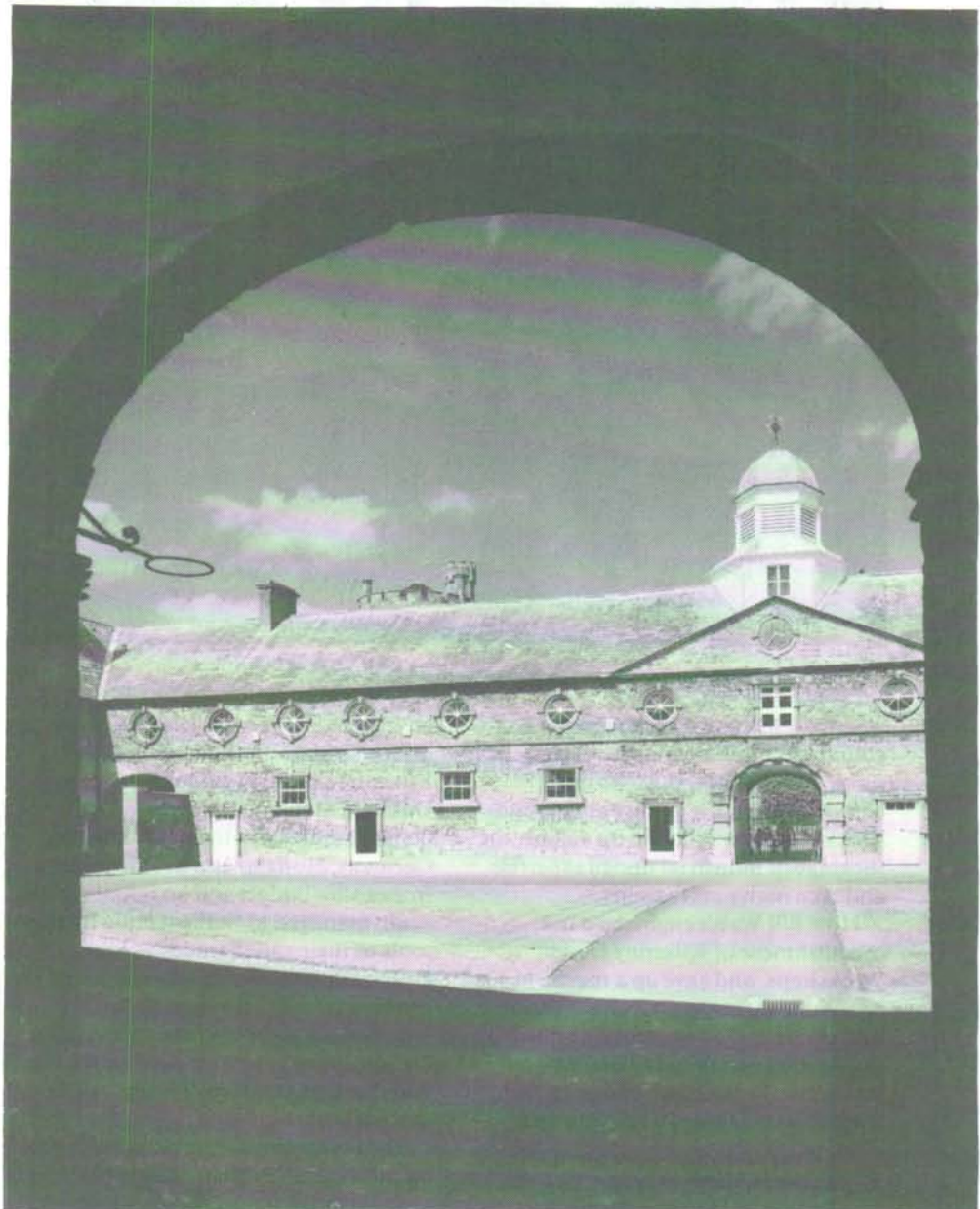
not confined to the gift shops. Nobody expected that a Republic comparable in population but not industrial development with a medium-sized English city could make its own motorcars or typewriters, but there was no earthly reason why it could not be nearly self-sufficient in more basic products like clothes, shoes, furniture or indeed processed food, or why it should not pay for its imports by exporting at least some of such simple artefacts.

In fact it did not, and Ireland's delicate import-export balance depended almost totally on unprocessed

agricultural produce sold to Britain. Irish industry could provide only poor products to the least well-off segment of its own population, and then only with the help of protective tariffs that were soon to be swept away, for EEC membership was already in sight.

The general manager of the Irish Export Board in the late fifties and early sixties was William H. Walsh, a man with practical experience of industry and — a rare thing at the time — experience of manufacturing and profitable export. It was he who saw what many other people did not, that it

A view of Kilkenny Design





Kilkenney Design Consultancy — interior view of design studio

was not sensible for such a small country to hope to compete in terms of price, and that its industries must compete instead in quality and design. This in turn brought him up against the shortage of industrial design expertise and even native craft ability.

How Bill Walsh engineered the establishment of Kilkenney Design Workshops, and gave up a more profitable career to direct his creation is told elsewhere.* In the scope of this article it is enough to say that he envisaged the 'seeding' of design and craft skills in Ireland by setting up a

government-owned workshops in the disused stables and coachhouses of Kilkenney Castle, two hours' drive from Dublin. He shipped in experienced designer craftsmen from Scandinavia, Germany, Holland and Britain and, from a slim budget and no initial capital at all, managed to fit them out with the tools of their varied trades — kilns, looms, silversmiths' benches, screen printing tables, lathes and so forth. Twenty-four years later the success of the seeding may be measured by the fact that the workshops staff is nearly 100 percent Irish.

Thus from the start the emphasis was on practice rather than theory; on prototypes for industry rather than

ideas on paper; on designers whose job was to get in touch with industrialists and thoroughly familiarise themselves with their equipment, skills and potential for development, and to design accordingly.

With a little publicity and some persistence and gentle reason to overcome the prejudice against 'foreigners coming in to teach us our business', the idea worked and Kilkenney Design began to establish its own special style and reputation.

Since the designers were producing experimental prototypes and because money was short and public interest strong, it was not long before the 'exhibition hall' at the front of the stables turned into a shop where surplus prototypes could be bought: woven products, printed linen, turned wood and local marble, one-off and short-run ceramics, cast and wrought iron, and even candles.

That was the beginning of the Kilkenney shops, and their later evolution was no less organic or responsive to actual needs. As the workshops began to fulfil their prime function and see their ideas going into industrial production, it was natural that the shop should start to show and sell their clients' products. Then, when opportunities could be made to put on in-store promotions overseas (Heals of London was one of the first to host a Kilkenney display, and similar arrangements were made with American stores), the Export Board was naturally anxious that the products of other Irish manufacturers should benefit. Kilkenney Design was no less anxious — if selling was to be part of the business of a design agency — that stringent standards should be set, and that only the very best of products should be selected for promotion alongside their own designs.

Thus it was not long before the present Kilkenney shop policy was shaped: to sell any Irish product that came up to the designers' standards of quality, value and design integrity, and that fitted into the product scope of the shop that had already begun to emerge: things for the home, apparel, jewellery and giftware.

The shoppers of Ireland beat a path to Kilkenney and it soon became clear that a branch could be profitably opened in Dublin. Ten years ago suitable premises

* *Kilkenney Design: 21 years of design in Ireland* by Marchant and Addis: Lund Humphries, London, 1984: £11.95.

had been found, complete with space for a furniture showroom that was used to spark off new initiatives among Irish manufacturers, and for a restaurant that quickly gained a reputation for wholesome home-made food.

While this highly commercial development was going on on the marketing front, Kilkenny's design work for industry was developing hardly less successfully, though in quite different directions. Originally the chief concern had been with the traditional craft-based industries, but in the late sixties and seventies Ireland's Industrial Development Authority was at work attracting new industries from overseas and instigating local enterprise, so the design consultancy found itself responding to new demands for industrial product design, and for

ancillary work like corporate identity and packaging.

Kilkenny Design has never lost its first interest in crafts, largely because its shops are so dependent on them. The workshops were instrumental in founding the Crafts Council of Ireland, and indeed many of the craft workshops now proliferating had their origins in Kilkenny, and were influenced by their momentum of growth and their high standards. Kilkenny Design started a craft renaissance, and if its design consultancy is now 90 percent concerned with other disciplines, it is very much to its advantage that it has never lost touch with its beginnings, and with its early craftsmanlike attitudes.

And craftsmen are a vital part of the enterprise, which is still a group of workshops in fact as well as name.

Spinning, dyeing and weaving; an exceptionally well-equipped ceramics department with gas and electric kilns, testing instruments and well-practised skills in model and mould making; a resourceful machine shop which produces complex industrial prototypes as well as fine-detailed simulation models in every conceivable material; a furniture prototyping shop which turns its hands to exhibition and other work as well; a graphics studio that with darkroom, screen printing and laser printer can simulate just about anything up to elaborate three-dimensional packaging, a photographic studio and even (he adds, claiming craftsman status) a copywriter. The precious-metals workshop may seem an anachronism, but although its apprentices have now populated Ireland

A range of products available in the Kilkenny Shops.





with what was a dying race of silver- and goldsmiths, it is still seen as an element that must be preserved, and it more than pays its way with commissions for trophies, churchware and facsimiles of antiques and by producing jewellery for the shops.

In the seventies the design studios became more and more busy with work for factories: furniture, which was the main design development project to spring from the shops' marketing work; capital and consumer goods of every sort, and particularly electronics. The latter may seem a surprising development for a small and still mainly agricultural country, but it came about because by now Ireland was an active member of the EEC and could offer a well-educated workforce to American and Japanese companies that needed to get a foothold in booming Europe. Without major steel mills, Ireland could still not attract car manufacturers (De Lorean's proposals incidentally were rejected by the canny IDA before he took them to Northern Ireland), but for light industries and assembly work it offered highly advantageous deals to foreign manufacturers.

There are cons as well as pros associated with such 'puppet' industrial development, but in many cases factories gained reasonable autonomy, and were often glad enough to find design expertise on their doorstep in Kilkenny. Moreover, the young graduates who obtained training and experience in such firms often saw some chink in a market and set up their own

businesses to exploit both it and their new-found expertise. Kilkenny Design can point to a handful of such firms that have grown to international status and now employ hundreds of people — firms which started as two men in a shed, with a little help from the designers.

Kilkenny Design itself — including the new London shop — employs less than 150 people, of which two thirds are housed in the stables and coachhouses built in the mid-eighteenth century by the Earl of Ormonde. Finely restored by architect Niall Montgomery, the stone buildings form two courtyards that have the sleepy, rather abstracted air of a university campus, with a clock-tower to complete the illusion and carriage-wheel windows to remind one of their origins. The hive of industry and talent they contain has a lot to teach public administrators about how to promote good design effectively within a strict budget.

Recent economies by the Irish government have meant that state-owned companies have had to make themselves as nearly self-financing as they can, and the annual government grant-aid to Kilkenny Design has already been reduced to 17 percent of its five million turnover. The shops contribute most to the operation, but the design consultancy is steadily increasing its profitability, and even the hitherto non-earning information department, which fulfils the company's design promotion function (in fact the shops and consultancy are hardly less

Above: Picture the service engineer's dream ... a light, durable carrying case containing all the equipment he needs to identify and cure a fault in any given piece of electronic hardware. Impossible? Not at all. It's called the Multi Test.

Developed by a new Irish company, Electro Concepts, and designed by Kilkenny Design, the Multi Test consists of a master terminal with a five line liquid crystal display to relay information concerning a fault, and a small keyboard to operate a number of encoded instructions; up to six Test Pak pods designed to fault-find specific pieces of electronic hardware; a complete service kit of tools; a set of pre-programmed service engineers discs; and a digital multi-meter. And it all fits into a streamlined, inexpensive carrying case.

The Multi Test system has enabled a computer training and advice company to expand into a new market, for this compact system makes life a lot easier for both in-house maintenance in a large electronic firm and for the field service engineer. And Kilkenny Design have designed the logo for the Electro Concepts Multi Test system, their stationery, and promotional literature.

effective as promoters) is now earning fees from third-world development agencies by sending designers to Nepal, Thailand, Barbados, the Philippines and other countries to help them take the sort of initiatives that have worked so well in Ireland.

Such missionary work comes naturally to Kilkenny Design because from the beginning it has been involved in 'designer development' — training

and work-experience schemes for graduate designers, and various activities in collaboration with design colleges; in particular it awards annual bursaries that send the most promising young Irish designers and craftsmen overseas to widen their horizons with additional training, research or work experience.

At least twelve young unemployed designers and craftsmen are taken into the workshops each year to work alongside the Kilkenny designers for six months, thus bridging the awkward gap between college and real-life design work, a scheme which is financed jointly by Kilkenny Design itself and the European Social Fund, and which leads to employment in the great majority of cases. These students are accommodated in Butler House, the beautifully restored eighteenth-century town house that was once the dower house of the Castle nobility. Here the staff have their canteen, and there are rooms available for seminars, and a well-equipped audio-visual theatre.

As in every activity in the workshops, there is some functional overlapping here; for instance the canteen staff prepares most of the food for the Dublin and Kilkenny shop restaurants. The whole operation tends towards organic interdependence of this sort, so that for instance you are as likely to find a textile designer in one of the shops supervising a new display, visiting a design college to lecture or assess students' work or closeted with one of the shop suppliers to advise on marketing policy or fashion trends, as working for some client.

Interdisciplinary or 'holistic' projects are the rule rather than the exception in a consultancy where graphics, packaging, industrial, interiors and textile designers work together in one big studio and mingle with modelmakers, potters, silversmiths, shop sales staff and accountants for their morning coffee break. The results are often exciting and unexpected. A client who approaches the workshops with some industrial product-design problem may easily find himself going

back to his office with totally new lights on his corporate-identity design, or ideas for improving his publicity literature or his showroom layout — all in addition to solutions to the problem he brought in that owe as much to Kilkenny's marketing or technical know-how as to their design abilities.

It is not a matter of consultants forcing ideas upon the unwilling, but simply a practical and usually welcome demonstration that in any business each factor depends upon others, and that experienced designers who are trained to analyse creatively and 'beg the question' can often put their finger upon factors that are traditionally — but wrongly — considered outside their sphere of competence.

If anywhere in the world an organisation is extending the frontiers of design — pragmatically and without any theorising — and can claim to have exerted a revolutionary effect on the attitudes and economy of its country, it is surely in the little cathedral city of Kilkenny.

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