

## Ulster Hall Interpretative Displays

### Rationale

The development of a series of interpretative displays within the Ulster Hall arises from

- An acknowledgement of the value of the Ulster Hall as a heritage asset for the city
- A need, recognised both by BCC, and the Hall's other major partner funders to increase both physical and intellectual access to the hall across a wider range of visitors.

### Process

As a result of a recent tender process, Tandem Design has been appointed as contractors in the delivery of the interpretation for the Ulster Hall. The company has formed a project working group which includes internal and external participants across a broad range of special interests. The working group has defined the areas of primary interest as follows:

- The Group Theatre, redeveloped as a gallery, meeting, and circulation space in phase 1 of the refurbishment. Numerous actors and local companies graced its stage in its hey day and several went on to become household names. Numerous photographs and artefacts exist to help tell this story.
- The Classical Story. The Ulster Orchestra will take up administrative residency in the refurbished building. The story of orchestral and choral music forms a significant part of the history of the hall. Tracing the story of the classical use of the building will provide access to a vital aspect of the social history of the city. This theme will also cover visits of significant international performers such as Caruso and Ellen Terry
- The Mulholland Grand Organ is one of the most valuable of the interpretation tools. It allows access to exploration of the significance to Belfast of the Linen Industry through the Story of the Mulholland family. It acts as a valuable education tool in science and technology areas of the curriculum through its physical and mechanical make up. It opens a discussion on the importance of city status and civic pride and allows comparison of our own industrial development with cities such as Leeds and Hull. As a musical instrument it adds to both the classical story, representing in itself an entire orchestra and to the social history of the city in providing wide scale secular access to a traditionally religious instrument.
- Popular Local Music. The Ulster Hall is one of the few early music venues in Belfast still fulfilling its original function. Many of the great buildings built to entertain have been redeveloped or demolished. Within the story of local and popular music we can combine musical, economic and architectural traditions and track cultural and social shifts. This interpretative thread will highlight the buildings vital role as a social focus during both the war and the troubles. Here we will tell stories of significant rock gigs in the halls history, chart the role of the hall in the rise of punk and of nineties dance music as well as highlighting local stars across many eras and genres such as Ruby Murray, Rory Gallagher and Van Morrison.
- The Carey paintings were commissioned to mark the civic appointment of the Ulster Hall in 1903. They are being restored as part of the refurbishment. They will be interpreted as art works in their own right with considerable visual resources being made available to illustrate the restoration process they will have undergone. They will also be displayed as artefacts of the time, providing an insight into the turn of the century view of the origins and history of our city and illustrating the political and social preoccupations of the era.
- Sport played a key role in the history of the Hall particularly throughout the 1950s when local boxing bouts were the mainstay of the building. The importance of the sport socially to the city and the significant victories of recent years will be explored.

## **Delivery Mechanisms**

Interpretation will be delivered through a variety of means:

- A regular weekly guided tour as proposed by the tourism department and delivered by tourist board trained guides
- Open rehearsals. A major development for both the hall and the Ulster Orchestra. Scheduled tours and casual visitors will be granted access to the rear balcony area on Wednesdays and Thursdays in season whilst the orchestra rehearse for Friday night concerts.
- Audio Tour. All accessible areas. The audio tour will be a mix of music samples, personal reminiscence, potentially extracts from speeches, the sounds of sport delivered via a state of the art personal sound system. The highlight of the audio tour will be the opportunity to listen to an organ recital whilst sitting on the balcony and absorbing the atmosphere of the Hall.
- Interpretative Panels in the main entrance areas and North Corridor. The aim of any panel is to educate not only in the target audiences area of specific interest but to also present other stories in a way that draws the visitor in and encourages them to engage with areas that they would not normally explore thus potentially broadening their knowledge base.
- Audio visual presentations will be available on plasma screen to illustrate the process of restoration used on the Carey paintings.
- Memorabilia and personal reminiscence. Everyone has an Ulster Hall story to tell, current or historical and this will continue once the Hall is re-opened, so in essence the city will have a living heritage project. By capturing this through displaying their memorabilia visually or recording their stories and memories we can help to establish a permanent physical connection with people's experiences of the building.
- Website. The aim of the site will be to provide an overview of what the visitor might expect on a visit. Ultimately the potential for uploading personal images from the concert the night before and building a bank of images for future use and continue to add to the heritage timeline. It will also provide links to related websites which can elaborate further on the themes covered, eg. the community archive website.
- Artwork. Local poet Martin Mooney has been commissioned to give voice to the memories of the building itself and its many performers, visitors and staff through a series of poems inspired by archive material. The poems will be displayed on glass surfaces around the building in both public and private areas. The signature piece for the reopened building will be a poem etched onto the glass lift shaft in the main foyer<sup>1</sup>. The lighting design discussed below is intrinsic to effective delivery of this aspect of the art project.

## **Architectural Lighting Design.**

To enhance the experience further is proposed a fully integrated and controllable lighting system for the key interpretative areas and the façade. This system can be used to create an experience tailored to suit the time of day, the type of event and the area in use, creating, for example an intimate and restful atmosphere in the coffee shop. The system is low in energy usage and low maintenance. The design makes the best use of the latest LED lighting systems which emit no UV and are thus particularly suitable for the Carey paintings display. The use of LED lighting for architectural purposes has become more common in recent years with the advent of high-brightness devices and development of complex control systems giving an unlimited choice of colour and brilliance for highlighting focal points, façades and special features to maximise interpretative potential. Specific areas of use are as follows:

### 1) Outer Piazza main entrance (visible from Bedford street)

Since the doors will be open during the working day and the fanlights above them also admit daylight, some type of effects light, strong enough to be visible from the street in all but the brightest days, is suggested. This would take the form of LED floodlights mounted in each corner (at cornice level) and pointed up towards the ceiling to diffuse down towards the floor. High-brightness wall washers would be fixed just under the cornice to give strips of bright colour. Daylight sensing and time-of-day control would ensure that energy use would be kept to a minimum.

### 2) Vestibule main foyer and coffee shop

Less ambient daylight in this area means that more use can be made of colour and lower-power units employed. The ceiling and area above the cornice would be illuminated using linear strips of colour mixing LEDs. Wall washers could be used to create strips of colour (as in the Piazza), or installed in a continuous line all around the room so that the walls are completely covered. The pillars should have dedicated LED strips at high level to enable them to have contrasting colours to the other areas. The coffee bar area should have its own unique system to distinguish it from the Vestibule, again using LED strips and downlighters. It is also proposed that the lighting could punctuate the space by highlighting the lift shaft art/poetry piece. This in turn will attract the eye from Bedford Street and create the heart of the Ulster Hall.

### 3) Corridors

The North corridor will house the Carey paintings which are to be recessed into a false wall. Single-colour (white, with the correct daylight colour temperature) LED strips built into the frame will provide a strong visual display. The LEDs do not emit any ultra-violet radiation and heat output is very low, ensuring that no harm is caused to the paintings.

### 4) The Façade

Bedford Street is considered one of the most successful mixed use areas in the City of Belfast and the Ulster Hall Façade is one of the most important buildings within and yet it lacks any true visual prominence. A successful lighting scheme would instantly address this by highlighting the key architectural features of the building in a way that would achieve high visibility from any of the approaches. It is proposed that high-output colour up-lighters are installed to highlight sections of the building façade. A variable lighting system could be designed to enhance the façade with different settings available dependent on the Hall's use on any given occasion eg the façade would appear in different colours if hosting a pop concert as opposed to a classical concert. This would afford great flexibility and create a fantastic draw for anyone entering Bedford Street.

## **ULSTER HALL POETRY PROJECT**

### **Summary of the Project**

Funded by the Arts Council, a series of short poetic texts, derived from archive material, will be inscribed on the glass surfaces of the lobby elevator, the mirrored interior of the elevator, and possibly on other glazed surfaces in the public and back-of-house areas of the Ulster Hall.

The texts will aim to be accessible but complex enough to reward re-reading (visitors can expect to pass the pieces on a number of occasions during any one visit to the hall). The texts will also explore the crucial distinction between front- and back-of-house, audience and performer, private and public. They will explore moments in the history of this iconic Belfast building, and be linked by the voices of individuals who have performed, worked or visited the building at key moments in the past. In this way, the work will link the renovated building to its history, and remind visitors as well as those who work in the building of their place in the history and traditions of the building and the city of Belfast.

In consultation with the architectural team and graphic designers, the texts will be presented in a typographical style that complements but is clearly distinct from the Hall's signage and branding. The inscription of the texts will ensure that they are tactile, so not only visually interesting but also accessible to visually-impaired visitors.

By drawing on archive material – from the Ulster Hall's own collection, the City Council's archive, as well as other sources such as material from the Linen Hall Library's Irish Collection – the poetic texts will not only exist as artworks in their own right, but will also support educational and outreach work.

### **Artist Background**

Martin Mooney is the award-winning author of three collections of poetry and a number of stage works. He has collaborated in a number of public art projects as a writer, including a 1999 Poetry Places project with the taxi drivers of Antrim, and a collaboration with sculptor Louise Walsh in the Royal Victoria Hospital's Integrated Arts Project in 2001. This project was a partial inspiration for the methodology of the Ulster Hall art project as the original brief included the necessity to opaque glass surfaces and to include textured text throughout the building. He also worked in an arts administration role on the Laganside Corporation's renovation of Writers' Square in Belfast's Cathedral Quarter. As a past writer and editor for the Linen Hall Library's [culture-northernireland](http://culture-northernireland.com) website, he has a wide knowledge of contemporary Northern Irish culture as well as available historical sources.

### **Linkages with other elements of the UH Refurbishment Project**

A key feature of the texts is their focus on the voices of historical characters, many of them well-known, who worked or appeared in the Hall over its history. These include figures such as Charles Dickens, Ellen Terry, Paul Robeson, HM Stanley (the explorer) and others. Equally, though, the texts will draw on memories or accounts of those who worked behind the scenes. This approach should lend itself to integration with education and heritage work in the refurbished hall, and should create a dialogue between visitors, audience members and performers, the wider historical context of the building.

Again, the historical scope of the texts (from the hall's inception to the present day) might well integrate with design ideas based on historic posters and handbills, historic typefaces in signage.

Finally, there is the potential for the texts to be used in educational work, possibly as the basis for writing by school parties, for example.

### **Work in progress**

There are formal issues that remain to be resolved as the technicalities of integrating text into the new space are fully worked-out.

Therefore, the approach taken in these examples of work in progress may change. However, they may give a flavour of the likely outcome of this project.

**Fred McCabe, Ventriloquist**

I had more voices than the great organ –  
pipsqueak, navvy, wee lad, fishwife,  
builder, bruiser, bottle-washer, boot-black.  
Admit it, you did not see my lips move.

When a rowdy mob from the Sandy Row  
barracked the singer and his band  
(Kentish fire, they call that caterwauling)  
it's me who read the Riot Act,

my best Constabulary rising from the stalls  
while I stood in the wings, ready  
to bring my dying art before the people –  
throwing my voice was not the half of it.

**Paul Robeson**

It was after our march on the Poor Law Guardians  
ended in riots, but before the fall of Madrid,  
that Paul Robeson and the Mulholland Organ  
went head to head in the Ulster Hall

and if one sang Old Man River, the other  
gave Danny Boy, to the one's Internationale  
the other replied with the Mountains of Mourne,  
but when we thought it would go on for ever

Robeson found the words of Go Down Moses  
somewhere in the Bible of his ribcage  
and what could the pipes of the great organ do  
but tell old Pharaoh, let my people go?

**The Caretaker**

I was never a man for the entertainments.  
After a working life of star turns –  
soubrettes, ventriliquists, magicians, boxers,  
ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls –

I emerge blinking from beneath the stage,  
with my one memento from lost property:  
Lord Carson's blackthorn, left behind  
when the great crowd chaired him home,

which will swing beside me on my walk  
out of a city crackling with applause  
and catcalls, heading for the hills  
where hedgerows darken and the birds quiet down

and stars rise into their allotted seats.

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