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<th>Common ground : urban landscaping in Kilkenny</th>
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Public space is critical to the functioning of a collective society. It is the essential space of appearance that enables an interweaving of human affairs and, ultimately, the exercise of democratic power. In a time when public space is often conceived of ethereally rather than materially, and the collective is often confused with the commercial, we aspire to creating a real, open and sustainable public realm.

This project involved the reconfiguration of the urban spaces around Kilkenny Castle to consolidate their public function.

The Parade, rising and tapering towards the castle and bordered by Georgian façades and mature trees, was cleared of car-parking and unified by a continuous stone floor, whose ordering geometry derives from the built context.

The stone surface of Canal Square is feathered into a polished concrete path connecting the river with The Parade through the castle grounds. The river wall is replaced by a light stainless-steel railing, opening up views to the river.

The project is a constructed landscape. It makes background rather than building-as-object, a continuous condition in which old and new elements and materials combine to underscore diverse individual and collective inhabitation. It conjoins the scale of the individual experience and the life of the town.

Granite is jointed and folded in a thickness with small but precise sectional variation across its surface. It is detailed according to its potential collective and individual use. A limited number of other elements and materials (steel handrails, polished concrete benches, a concrete screen and information kiosk, street and ground lighting, a gravel walk, a strip of marble) work as orienting devices to free the ground for civic interaction.

Though specific in context, place and materials, the project is characterised by a positive uncertainty with regard to use. Its emptiness assumes change, across a season or a century. It is a robust stage set for an unknown play.

address - The Parade, Gravel Walk, Canal Square + Canal Walk, Kilkenny
client - Kilkenny Borough Council
design to completion - 1999-2009
area - 9,183m²
photography - Alice Clancy / Paul Tierney
COMMON GROUND

AA! Awards entry panels

opposite – Canal Square and Canal Walk

Studies for The Parade and Canal Walk
COMMON GROUND

The Parade at night
Parade double-bench
Paving details

opposite – The Parade and Canal Walk at night

overleaf – Gravel Walk
ASSESSORS’ COMMENTS

FARRELL – When it comes to urban landscaping in Ireland, local authorities normally put bollards for cars, lights sticking in and out, bits of advertising, and tarmac. Kilkenny is famous for its limestone – it has very black limestone, which is really unusual – so these are the dark stones of the place.

DEPLAZES – It is very restrained. Would it be a special mention, in your eyes?

McLAUGHLIN – I think it could be. There’s a good reason why the architects are being conservative here, which is the context – the castle and the history, and everything else. But I quite like the little white bits as well: you know, it’s a very, very stiff suit, but somehow that tells you it’s more playful or would be more playful, if it was allowed.

JENCKS – At first I thought it was sort of underwhelming. However, I see it’s restrained because of the historical context.

KEAVENEY – You get a sense that this space would be a nice place to be. You would like to be there. They’ve dressed it up nicely, very simply, with nice little details.

JENCKS – It’s got feathering in it. It’s got marble strips. It’s got stainless steel. It’s got a few very strange benches, that have the heaviest backs that have ever been designed.

McLAUGHLIN – Maybe the benches are trying to say, well, here’s a block of that stone – you’re walking on it, so here’s a block of it.

FARRELL – It’s not the back of anything – it’s for taller people to sit at a higher level.

JENCKS – You’re right. And it’s for children to jump off too. Have you been there? It’s a very nice urban space and modest in its approach. I love this bench. It’s fantastic. It’s probably against the law, but...

KEAVENEY – Do they not have skateboards in Kilkenny? It’s amazing, because this country is health and safety mad, and this is an invitation for some daredevil activity.

DEPLAZES – This is clearly worth a special mention. But is this the best intervention in the urban domain in Ireland?

FARRELL – To achieve this level of design, with that level of detailing with the various types of stone there... It might be too subtle for some, but in Ireland it’s a real achievement. And to get a stainless steel railing like that, which would be normal in Switzerland, in Ireland is an achievement.

McLAUGHLIN – It is background, I think. It’s more that kind of discreet, conservative approach to urban landscape... It’s probably all a major conservation area.

FARRELL – There’s also the issue that many urban spaces and parks are over-designed.

GKMP ARCHITECTS was established in 2003 by Grace Keeley and Michael Pike, both of whom graduated from UCD School of Architecture in 1998. The practice is principally concerned with the design of collective housing and public space. Their work has been published internationally and was selected for inclusion in the Homework exhibition in UCD in 2006, and the Defining Space exhibition in Newman House, Dublin, in 2007.

DESIGN TEAM – Kevin Donovan, Grace Keeley, Niamh Ní Mhóráin, Michael Pike

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