

# TBG+S WRITING COMMISSION 2017

Gavin Corbett

Essay #4 *Nexus*

## Temple Bar Gallery + Studios New Writing Commission 2017

The TBG+S Writing Commission aims to expand ideas around writing about art by inviting Irish authors to create a series of pieces inspired by the exhibitions at Temple Bar Gallery + Studios. In 2017, TBG+S has commissioned Gavin Corbett to write a piece of short fiction inspired by each of the exhibitions in the gallery programme. This piece was written in response to *Prime* by Camille Norment.

**Gavin Corbett** is from Dublin. He has published three novels: *Innocence* (2003), *This Is The Way* (2013) and *Green Glowing Skull* (2015). *This Is The Way* won the 2013 Kerry Group Irish Novel of the Year award and was shortlisted for the Encore Prize. He has been published widely as a journalist, and has written and broadcast for RTÉ Radio. Last year, he was Trinity College Dublin's Arts Council Irish Writer Fellow.

*A response to 'Double Movement' by Gavin Murphy*

The city of the future, as dreamt up in post-war Europe, left only its traces here – planted in the caries of a Dublin ruined not by bombs, but by poverty, damp and indifference. International Modernism’s idiom is a sort of architectural Esperanto, but it borrows more from the world of sci-fi than it does from classicism. It breaks cleanly with the past and, in Dublin, never quite connects up with the future that outflanked it. And so it’s stranded, and where it remains it most likely decays. This is the forgotten city of my parents’ time, and of my Uncle John, and it died on the day that he did, when the bombs finally arrived – shattering the windows of Liberty Hall on May 17, 1974. It’s a city of better times that never materialised.

The ideals and aesthetics of the International Modern movement share a lot with a strand of pop culture that I’ve always been fond of but didn’t have first-time experience of, and so its remaining Dublin details pique a confused nostalgia in me. I pass the former State cinema in Phibsborough every other day; something about the way its falling arrangement of punch-card windows switches right, then left, then right again puts in my mind a twangy, angular guitar solo by Hank Marvin or Duane Eddy. In Glasnevin, near my home, I hear Joe Meek and ‘Telstar’ by the railings of the former Carroll’s cigarette factory, with their recurring Sputnik motif. Across town, a bubbling ruby-and-saffron stained glass window in the utopian Mespil Road apartment complex might have been taken from the design for a *Catcher in the Rye* first edition or a bossanova LP. Liberty Hall is pure exotica, a zen sentinel, a piece of soundstage scenery from a Bond movie: its hat recalls Japan, and in Japan in the mid-1960s, when Dublin’s only skyscraper was built, the future had already arrived.

There was another reference for Liberty Hall’s fussy fascinator, of course, much closer by. Michael Scott’s Busaras, and its wavy canopy, its cliff-faces of glass, was meant to be the progenitor for all of this and more. Astonishing to think that it was the first building of its kind in these islands – that it was going to lead the way not just for Ireland but for Britain too. But there was something sad infused in it from the start. In its very siting – convenient to the North Wall, the emigrant’s departure gate – the International Modernist building admitted the local, national failure. I can imagine the project being optimistically spun as an Irish node in the British post-war consensus experiment – a turnstile through which our nurses would pass on the way to staffing the NHS; the same for our manual labourers who would build Britain’s motorways and social-housing schemes. Then back through the turnstile and onward bus travel for weekends home.

It must have stuck out of its surrounds in the old Monto like a spaceship from a B-movie. Grainy photographs from the 1950s show an area of coal yards, lumber yards and docks. At the bottom of Gardiner Street, just around the corner, stood the offices of The Irish Catholic. Nearer, on Beresford Place, a building was emblazoned with the huge sign: APOSTOLATUS MARIS. In front of the new station was James Gandon’s Custom House,

filthy with smut for most of the 20th century, its name seeming more blackly ironic by the year. Hemmed in by the arc of the decrepit city, the station was the wrong side of its provincial antipodes.

Nowadays Busaras is flanked to the east by the glasshouses of the IFSC, and the Portland stone of the Custom House has been scrubbed to match the brightness of the station’s sheer southern gable-end in the same material. It’s not as incongruous now as it was in 1953, but it still dazzles. Every approach offers an entertaining prospect. James Joyce Street gives the best view of the northwest corner tower, with its winged eaves and polychromatic soffit. Arrive from the south over Matt Talbot Bridge and be greeted by the wrinkled tongue in the maw. From the North Strand, the line of square balcony windows are pierced through the depth of the building by southerly light.

Busaras amounts to the most astounding piece of public art in the city. Gavin Murphy’s film lists the materials that went into its construction – the best of finishes from all over Europe. Bronze windows from Denmark. Connemara marble and Cavan bricks. Travertine from Italy. Faience from Holland. Busaras was not only an International Modernist building, it was a monument to the ideals of the movement.

But perhaps the most powerful ideas pulsing from Scott’s building were incubated accidentally. Within years of its opening, the cinema in the basement gave way to a theatre, and suddenly the most daring playwrights from Ireland and beyond had found a welcoming venue – Beckett, Friel, Joe Orton and Neil Simon among them. There’s something thrilling about the idea of an avant garde theatre below a bus station. In the poet John Montague’s memoir *Company*, he describes a mid-century theatre scene fermenting in the cellars of Georgian Dublin houses, “the former landlord class being literally undermined from below”. The Eblana was contemporaneous with these theatres, but I imagine it having a symbiotic rather than parasitic relationship with its home, drawing inspiration from the enlightened temple above, and in conspiracy with the working men and women milling around the concourse.

*Double Movement’s* haunting chiaroscuro images of the Eblana reveal a venue in suspension, like the dust that circulates in its atmosphere. The better for its potential to be realised again, although I live merely in hope. In the meantime, I’m happy for it to stand as a symbol: a future sidelined, a perfect continuous conditional place, a would-be, could-have-been space. A dream nexus – perhaps where Bella Cohen and Le Corbusier might meet, joined by Godot, at last arrived by bus, from his rubbly netherplace on the continent where it all began.