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KILKENNY DESIGN WORKSHOPS

25 YEARS OF DESIGN IN IRELAND

THESIS FOR THE DEGREE OF B.DES. IN INDUSTRIAL DESIGN

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- INTRODUCTION -

Kilkenny Design Workshops were a direct result of an idea shaped by a committee formed by the Irish Export Board, Coras Trachtala. It was born about the same time as the visit of a five member Scandinavian team to Ireland in 1961. The team of designers visited Ireland to assess the state of design and to recommend changes which would help raise the standard of design in Irish produced goods. However, Kilkenny Design was not a direct result of their findings. Coras Trachtala sought the administrative responsibility for industrial design in Ireland in 1960. Having been granted this, one of their first actions was to invite a group of Scandinavian design experts to report on the state of design in this country. This single act was the first state involvement in design in Ireland. Their main purpose in involving themselves with design was to improve the standard of our exported consumer items. They saw an improvement in the design of exported products as an integral part of the successful exportation package they were trying to achieve.

Earlier in the century other countries had already identified this as a way of boosting their export trade and had acted to achieve the objectives which Coras Trachtala was tackling in the early 1960's. While countries such as France and Spain had chosen similar ways to Ireland's invitation of Scandinavian groups, Ireland went a step further in her solution of the problem. She saw the findings made by the Scandinavian group as very useful but short term in its effects and felt the need for a longer term, permanent solution. The committee in charge of this envisaged a more



permanent implant of design skills through an organisation which would have a lasting influence on industry and on Irish design generally. They hoped it would bring with it advantages of training and continuity of experience and ensure empathy with the problems peculiar to Ireland's industry. This decision by Coras Trachtala led to the development of the Kilkenny Design Workshops and to a twenty-five year government involvement in the development of design in Ireland. The decision of the committee and the commitment of a government which was very anxious to promote industrial development resulted in a unique situation where a government took direct responsibility not only for the development of design, but also for the direction it would take. The Fianna Fail Government of that time committed itself to this task. The wisdom of this decision and the consequences thereof are the areas this thesis intends to address. It is specifically concerned with the state of design in Ireland in the first four decades of the century, the formation of Coras Trachtala, the visit of the Scandinavian team, the formation of KDW, its servicing of Irish industry and their influence on Irish society. It deals with KDW's development through the sixties and their change in direction in the early seventies. The thesis also deals with the performance of their industrial design agency and their change of emphasis in 1974-75. It also explains how and why Kilkenny closed down and what has happened to its resources.



- BACKGROUND TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF KILKENNY DESIGN WORKSHOPS -

When the Free State was established in 1922, Ireland was in a poor economic position. The industrial revolution had never reached Ireland. Industrial development in Britain had acted only in negative ways on the Irish economy. At a time when Ireland was trying to develop some industry for herself Britain was flooding the Irish market with inexpensively produced goods. Native industries couldn't compete with British produce at home so there was no question of developing an export market. On top of that the building of British canals, railways and roads had taken the Irish Labour force across the Irish sea for generation after generation. This situation followed from the system of landlordism in the late 19th century and was very fresh in the Irish memory.

Ireland's pride emerged demoralised from the 19th century. In reaction to its recent history a great cultural renaissance bloomed at the turn of the century. The Irish language, a remarkably pure survival from long before English emerged was learned and its literature studied, just as the last vestiges of its use as a living language on the west coast seemed ready to succumb to all-conquering English.

The Irish cultural renaissance, however, was strongest in literature, drama, language and music. There was very little evidence of any extensive revival in things visual or industrial. Perhaps the reason for this is that Irish culture had to survive secretly for many years by word of mouth.



The learning of the Christian celts which had re-enlightened Europe after the dark ages had been passed on by the hedge school masters; their liturgy was practiced at the mass rock or behind closed doors with the family rosary; their politics was that of a secret brotherhood. Their crafts and skills were mostly utilitarian except where, as in Lace for instance, artistry had a commercial value.

So the background of design in Ireland at the time of the formation of the free state was not strong. Even Irish architecture up to that time showed a mixture of imported european styles or else buildings in the style of the people who had invaded Ireland e.g. Norman castles and victorian churches. Also in Irish furniture and housewares of the past there can be seen a lack of design. The products were appropriate for use but there was very little excitement in their form or colour or little evidence of skill in craftsmanship or even much interest in its shape.

Some of the very early examples of Irish architectural design such as the round towers, decorated crosses, illuminated church books and precious metal work were held to be special to the Irish visual tradition, and with them devices like the Shamrock, St. Brigid's Cross and the Harp. These motifs have very little pout in the 20th century design and their value has been spoiled by over-use in the last sixty years.

In government publications and other visual forms the Irish Free State was undistinguished and unambitious. When we began to govern ourselves we carried on a tradition of dreariness in this respect and we did little more than replace the Crown with the Harp. Our national flag was designed in a



European style giving the green, white and gold tri-colour. There was much debate in the 1920's when a flag demonstrating our revolutionary heraldry was considered and later abandoned. The one feature that gave the state some visual distinction was its first official language, for Irish was to be used side by side with English and the ancient Gaelic script, one of the very few variations of the Roman alphabet to have survived with the common forms that are known as Roman and Italic was adopted. The use of this type-face in the writing of the Irish language continued through the decades until the 1960's when the language was no longer taught using the old letters but changed and written in the modern Roman type. Through the 30's, 40's and 50's street signs and postage stamps and government documentation were all written in the <sup>OLD</sup> lettering and it was the decision of the Education Minister which began the change in the mid-sixties. Similarly the coinage designed in the early twenties depicting native Irish animals translated from medieval book illuminations, demonstrating great skill in the use of shallow relief and the purity of the designs was changed in the seventies when decimal coinage was introduced.

More "Celtic" but less pleasant translations of medieval book illuminations were applied. So the few, Ref. "21 Years of KDW", design achievements made by the Irish government were abandoned in the late sixties and early seventies in favour of more modern, bland designs to show our solidarity with other European countries about the time we were hoping to be accepted into the European community.

When in the late fifties, the Irish government, through Coras Trachtála and the Industrial Development Authority began to attract industry from abroad



and to develop it internally, the Irish public had little concept of what modern industry was about or how it operated. It didn't dawn on many people that what was made in factories first had to go through a complicated design process. The artist and the craftsman were held in the same respect and few discerned the different functions of each. This, however, is understandable as so little industry and even less design had existed in Ireland up to the 1980's. The role of the designer in the production of consumer items had been extremely important long before the 20th century in the more industrialised countries where the profession was recognised and respected. However, it wasn't until the huge growth in the consumer market in those countries after the industrial revolution that the great growth for this area occurred. It began to be taught in schools, design consultancies were established and there was an overall heightened awareness of the need for designers in industrially developed countries.

Ireland had to make all the progressive steps in one and accept the modern design processes operating for the first time in this country. However, the difficulties in introducing and accepting the system were minor compared with the problems of the government's economic policies, during the first forty years or so self-government a strong Sinn Fein policy dominated economic thinking. To create a manufacturing industry, Ireland had to raise protective import duties, with the secondary effect that imported goods tended to be for the rich and Irish products for the poor, who didn't have much choice.

The achievement was nevertheless considerable. Perhaps Ireland could not have become a modern manufacturing nation by any other strategy, but the



fact is that when at last the Republic was formally declared in 1949, and when at the same time economic self-sufficiency demanded more elastic and equitable foreign trading, Ireland had a great deal of catching up to do, particularly in product design.

While international prosperity began to boom in the fifties, Ireland was in the grip of perennial depression, with emigration continuing unabated as it had done for a century. The state responded with remarkable enterprise and flair to this daunting situation, building up in the fifties a tourist promotion body that is still the envy of many countries, an airline that gained similar respect and many other state-owned bodies to stimulate industry and to learn from more developed nations.

One of these groups was Coras Trachtala which, soon after being established in the late 50's was given responsibility for the development of industrial design in Ireland. It then brought a Scandinavian group to make a report on the state of Industrial Design in Ireland. Representing teaching as well as practising design skills in different disciplines, the five man team spent two weeks visiting factories, colleges, museums, and shops. Their report, "Design in Ireland", published by the Export Board in 1962, was based on a selective but well balanced survey. Although predictably critical of the level of design awareness in industry and a little idealistic in its recommendations, it was perceptive and optimistic: It said:

"Ireland by virtue of her lack of sophistication in matters of design, has a unique opportunity, denied by circumstances to many



more developed countries, of making a great contribution not alone to her own prosperity and culture, but to the culture of Western Europe. We believe that with courage and foresight the possibilities can be realised". Ref. "Design in Ireland", Scandinavian Report 1962.

This quote from the report indicates the optimistic attitude of the Scandinavian designers. However, the Export Board readily admits that any of their decisions or activities in the design of this country were not a direct result of the findings of the Scandinavian report. One might think that, having made the effort of bringing a group of international experts to carry out a study, a group which had extensive experience in the area and which could look at the situation with some perspective, the Export Board might have followed their recommendations. Their report, while partly ignored by those who organised its creation, won a good deal of respect in later years, not just for its accurate findings on the state of design in Ireland in 1961, but for its demonstration that most of their findings still ring true even today, thirty years later. This fact alone indicates the success of the efforts of the Export Board at that time.

Knowing little or nothing about design in Ireland before this visit, the Scandinavian group made some interesting observations in their report. They firstly identified the tradition in Irish design and identified it as having three different manifestations. These include the rural handicraft, the European tradition and early Christian Culture. They noted that the early Christian motifs were still often used by designers on our stamps and coinage etc. They felt that they lose their proper character when produced in modern processes and rarely harmonise with the surroundings of our time.



This statement is contrary to the philosophy exercised by the Irish Government in the designs used in all their publications, currency and stamps etc.

Another interesting observation made by the group that should have affected CTT's plan of action was their attitude towards the Georgian tradition in Ireland. They first regarded it as English in its origins, even if the considerable supply of Georgianism in Ireland was modified to give it some special characteristics. This, in their minds, gives us a parallel with Denmark. Both Ireland and Denmark have a large overpowering neighbour and as Ireland has been influenced by England, so Denmark has been influenced by Germany. For many years the Danish Kings and nobility were almost entirely German, furthermore, since the reformation, Denmark adopted Lutheranism. Ireland never adopted the English form of worship, but it had an English government and an English-minded ruling class. It has had materials and products from England and for innumerable years the handicraft and architectural culture of the country has been influenced by England. But Ireland in confronting the English market has frequently adopted the most common and hackneyed features of English production.

The report went on to discuss specifically the state of particular areas of Irish design including the textile industry and design, hand knitwear, tweeds, carpets etc. They looked at our glass design and production ceramics, pottery, metalwork, furniture, souvenirs, graphics, packaging and held a specific discussion about our stamps. The report went on to discuss ways of improving the situation. Their central theme in this part of the report was to create a national awareness in design by involving the



general public, since they are the consumers, and the products to be designed depend on the public for their sale. The report suggested using popular channels of information, newspapers, magazines, radios, television, exhibitions in shops and museums, and visiting exhibitions from abroad etc. This would contribute to raising general awareness of design in the country and perhaps making people more responsive and more aware of the differences between products. If this were achieved, Irish manufacturers could introduce new products and redesign existing ones without being afraid of getting a negative response from the market place. If all this were set in motion then the role of design in Irish manufacturing could change so that not only the standard of design would have been raised but industry would have benefited by job creation. However, this all important area of the report was almost totally ignored by the Export Board who choose to develop a different system. This left the public with no increased awareness and no more willingness to accept and hence buy therefore, and did not give design in Ireland any real boost.

The establishment of Kilkenny Design Workshop by the government showed more interest in direct short-term job creation than any interest in design. They created a little community of people each doing their own thing in a confined "handicraft" environment. Not alone was it running against the recommendations made by the experts whose opinions they so eagerly sought but it was more a return to a DeValera type mentality where they hid away in a rural town designing and creating furniture, articles of wood and ceramics which were almost exclusively sold in Ireland but perhaps producing a few souvenirs for American tourists. It did little to develop our exports or our image in other European countries and strengthened the



old Sinn Fein philosophy that the Lemass government was so desperately trying to get away from.

The Coras Trachtala committee which decided to develop the Kilkenny Design Workshop as a solution to raising design standards in Ireland felt that the recommendations made by the Scandinavian report were short term and that theirs was a more permanent one. Reading the Scandinavian report proves that their recommendations were as long term as was feasible without needing the capital input of something like KDW.

One part of the report stated:

"Good design is an undeniable necessity to the growth of our exports, but standards cannot be raised for export goods only. The factors which determine the quality, good or bad, of the designs we produce are deeply rooted in our homes, our schools, our shops, our historic traditions; our whole way of living".

The committee seemed to have plucked this paragraph from the recommendations and discarded the rest. In fact they stated themselves that the above quote embodied the single most powerful argument for the strategy that was to follow. They wanted to implant permanent design skills which would have a lasting influence on Irish industry. We now have the benefit of hindsight and can see how this permanent implant didn't prove to be everlasting even with continuous government aid. It was disbanded in less than twenty-five years. With the benefit of hindsight we can examine the progress achieved during this time and assess just how different the



public's perception of Irish design is, assess our international image and see how our exports have grown and what role design and in turn KDW have played in this. And, most importantly, we can examine design in Ireland as it stands today and show exactly how well the whole Kilkenny Design Enterprise worked and what have been the effects of its disbandment.

### THE EARLY YEARS

The developers wanted the new organisation to have an identity of its own, overshadowed by none of its existing state agencies in Dublin. To achieve this they felt the need for a location away from the capital city. The notion of decentralisation was a popular one in most countries and nowhere was it more necessary than in Ireland. With one third of the population living in Dublin, decentralisation was already a government objection. However, decentralisation is suited to labour intensive departments under government control where fax machines etc. can bridge the gap but not in the case of KDW which was in constant need of imported supplies and needed to distribute goods. This is where the idea of locating outside the Dublin area seems strange, as Kilkenny is "off the beaten track" and its comparative remoteness makes building distribution networks all the more difficult. They also had their main retail outlet in Kilkenny which gave them limited market potential compared with a similar type of shop in Dublin. However, this was overcome by compromising their decentralisation strategy and opening a retail outlet in Dublin. It could be said that wanting a separate identity and a wish not to be overshadowed by state agencies was an attempt to avoid being looked upon in the same light as a



lot of inefficient, out of date, bureaucracy ridden government bodies who are looked upon in a negative way by most of the Irish public. It would also appear that they wanted to look independent, as if they were a commercial enterprise, existing on the income from sales and balancing their own books. This attitude is, however, reasonable and understandable and they never made excuses for the state aid they received. It must also be conceded that the location in Kilkenny was ideal for such activity given the layout of the actual premises and the general atmosphere and sense of cultural tradition and heritage that prevails in Kilkenny.

Usually when a government body feels the need to intervene in commercial and industrial affairs, special legislation is introduced by the appropriate Department of State and the new body is made directly answerable to its Minister through boards of Directors appointed by him.

However, in the case of the Kilkenny Design Workshops, shortcuts were taken and a private company named KDW was set up, wholly owned by itself and without direct deference to a government Minister. So, as KDW came into existence in April 1963 it appeared to be in a spectacularly comfortable position, evolving without any political lobbying or debate.

If one returns briefly to the late 1950's when Ireland was making a big effort to become an industrialised nation, the need for increased exports was immediately recognised and the Export Board was set up to help achieve this. They quickly realised that the goods they were promoting abroad were not good enough to compete in the global market and it was this realisation that motivated them towards taking action on the design input in Irish



goods. Their thinking was, quite correctly, that if goods were better designed they would sell more of them abroad: Simple and sound logic, however, from this realisation in 1957-8, to the opening of KDW in April '63 they seem to have shifted their emphasis. When KDW opened in 1963 there existed a group of designers whose expertise lay in woven and printed textiles, ceramics, metalwork and woodturning. The development of expertise in these areas and the improvement of the design of their end product was truly desirable. However, if one looks at the goods Ireland was exporting in the early sixties and the direction the government was trying to take with the goods we produced it was clear that a very small percentage was in the quality craft area. However, it was a sound starting ground and later in the decade other activities did develop. A 1965 catalogue of the work of KDW states that the emphasis on craft-based industries during its formative years was deliberate and purposeful. It state that:

"Attention has been concentrated on traditional products. This is where innovation starts, where a country's cultural characteristics show themselves, and where the standard for its manufacturerers is set".

This was a logical approach, and given that it was the first design agency set up by a government anywhere, hence with no blueprint to go by, it was logical to start on familiar ground. However, while the development of the Irish economy was still their main priority it seemed in some way that it was acceptable to loose sight of that goal, at least in the short term. Given the financial commitment of the government and the time span set on



results from the project in terms of improved exports, it has to be asked if the approach suggested by the Scandinavian group would have had quicker and more beneficial results for the government balance of payments. It must also be stated that the products that they produced were beyond the price range of the Irish public. Hence <sup>AWARNESS AMONGST</sup> the public was extremely limited. Kilkenny Design therefore assisted in making good Irish design elitist.

When KDW became established one would expect it to turn its attentions as quickly as possible to improving the standard of design in exported Irish goods. It was seven years now since this need had been identified and KDW had a new policy of reviving Celtic craft, consolidating specialist small-scale industries, such as the working of precious metals and poplin weaving. Commendable as these practices are and <sup>AS THEY MAY BE</sup> important in the mid-sixties KDW had lost sight of its original aim and was going on a "craft trip".

Publicity material for Kilkenny Design back in 1963-4 clearly laid out two areas of concern. First that they intended to design goods primarily for multiple production and secondly through this they desired an Irish identity that was strong in respect of design. Ironically, when KDW was formed the majority of designers took their influences from an international arena and it was often said that the early Kilkenny work was not portraying or developing an Irish design identity but was clearly Scandinavian in its form. Ref. Crafts Council "Progress Report" 1972. They failed to outline the ways of establishing an Irish identity and while the methods or production and materials used were native to Ireland, they imagined that if they were going to compete with Scandinavian designed



goods in the marketplace, they had better produce along the lines of what was less risky than producing new forms. They also wished to separate themselves from current Irish producers like Waterford Crystal who were producing a distinctive product and whose designs, while considered kitsch in some ways, were very clearly identifiable. Kilkenny appeared to betray their principles. If Kilkenny Design Workshops received a brief back in 1960 which stated that they should "develop the crafts movement in Ireland, reintroduce old materials, revive old methods of production, and introduce some new fresh design ideas", Ref. Kilkenny Design "Craft Awareness" 1965, then they would be doing a superb job.

Craft production is still suited to multiple production and therefore it could be argued that the production and sale of well designed and produced craft goods on the international market was in keeping within the general aims of CTT. However, this is of very little use to an Irish company which produces a consumer product for export to the European market and which may be weak on the design of their goods. They find they have nowhere to turn to in Ireland that can help improve the situation. There was only one design consultancy, that being Kilkenny, and they weren't in the business of designing industrially based, as produced consumer items. So CTT, the branch of the department of industry in charge of improving export sales, had fallen short of their goal when the needs of the average Irish manufacturer were not catered for under the development project which became Kilkenny Design.

If the best that KDW could do for mass product exportation was the production of large numbers of craft items which sell relatively little and



which only appear in craft shops, then they weren't doing much for the image of Irish design abroad.

Under the heading of goods for craft based industries which Kilkenny successfully designed, they also involved themselves in handicrafts which never evolved into mass produced items and which took them further away from their original aims. It took until 1971 before they identified the problem and they then helped with the foundation of the Crafts Council of Ireland.

The search for an Irish design identity was not forgotten by Kilkenny Design. They had a very clear philosophy on this. They claimed that Irish design was something that should be discovered by research rather than something to develop through practice. This was their argument when confronted by people wondering about Irish identity in design twenty years after KDW's formation. One would imagine that it would be simpler and much quicker to conclude something from research rather than from development. Whatever the approach and whatever the philosophy, it is still a topic of debate that if Ireland has a design identity and is aware of it, how does it manifest itself? It is very little use if the people in the Irish art and design world who have trained antennae for such matters are the only ones who can clearly see this design theme running through Irish produce. It would be much more beneficial if the average German or Dutch consumer could identify the Irishness and be encouraged by the high level of design to make a purchase. KDW wasn't altogether concerned about this as they thought the Irish and everything to do with them would always be exceptionally definable and describable, easier to generalise about than



others, and possibly more immune than most to the homogenising effects of mass production and mass communication. Then surely they must have thought that to create a national design identity would have been a successful and more easily achieved goal than they had originally anticipated.

Kilkenny Design Workshops were not officially operating until 1965. It was not until that year that they got down to helping Irish Craft producers with their design of their produce. Their approach to this business was curious in that they choose to approach companies with ideas they had for their products, often backed up by prototypes. This was expensive and time consuming and in many cases the companies, which regarded the KDW work as good and appropriate, chose to leave the new designs as a rainy day alternative. As long as their company continued doing well they decided not to invest in the new designs as they could very often mean changes in production lines, also the risk involved in introducing a new line of products was often unattractive to them. This approach to business was particularly unsuccessful as the deferred payments terms that they had with companies caused KDW to incur significant losses. However, they quickly realised the shortcomings of their approach and before long they were seeking specific design commissions and the speculative prototype design was only seen as a door opener.

When the workshops officially opened in 1965 the opening was followed by an exhibition of some works. There was quite a lot of informal buying of surplus prototypes; this started what was to be the retail outlet in Kilkenny and was identified as a possible point of influence on manufacturers, a means of market research for designers and a source of



revenue. The shop in Kilkenny proved to be a good source of revenue for a while and its success, despite the high cost of ordinary objects, encouraged them to expand retail outlets, which included one in Dublin and much later on, for a short time, one in London - which was unsuccessful and caused KDW some embarrassment as well as financial losses. However, as part of a marketing strategy a "Kilkenny Shop" was opened in Altman's Fifth Avenue Store in New York in 1967, to sell new Irish products. It remained there until 1970. Efforts were made to keep the New York store open indefinitely but Altmans incurred losses and insisted on its closure. Similar ventures were attempted in Heals of London and in Ghirandelli Square in San Francisco and after operating successfully for short periods they soon followed the fate of the New York Store.

As the Sixties progressed KDW sought and gained design commissions from such organisations as Rosenthal, Wamsutta, and Bernat Yarns. They were establishing themselves as an international design agency which gave them the opportunity to win popularity and respect in major manufacturing countries such as Germany. But where did that leave Irish industry? The Irish government were aiding KDW to compete with private design agencies abroad, to win contracts to design goods for foreign companies and whose goods Irish products were trying to compete with. In essence the Irish Export Board was funding the improvement of German, French and English design while the Irish firms competed with these products with their second rate items, not because they couldn't produce well designed products but because of a lack of awareness amongst Irish manufacturers, a fact outlined to the Irish Export Board by the Scandinavian report in 1962, and one which KDW was set up to remedy. So KDW was out on its own, just like a private



company competing with other agencies, except the detail about using government money. The design agency did very little for Irish design as a French manufacturer would hardly be aware of the "Irishness" of their work, and certainly, the consumers who bought the products didn't think particularly about Irish design after their purchase. A good example of this was a major two year programme which KDW undertook for Wurtrtembergische Metallwarenfabrik (WFM), the leading German tableware manufacturer, for the design of a wide range of products, including cutlery, cast iron cookware, spun metal ware, glass, ceramics and woodcraft. KDW did all the work for this company; the designs were brought back to Germany and manufactured there, giving jobs to German people, the end results could be seen for sale in many shops in Britain beside Newbridge Cutlery who were trying hard at the time to keep their workforce employed. Part of the Newbridge Cutlery problem was the amount of company tax they were paying.

During the 1960's the Industrial Development Authority like CTT, another satellite department of The Department of Industry, was promoting Irish industry abroad and making every effort to change the emphasis of Irish Industry from a craft based to an Engineering based. They successfully did this by attracting foreign industry and giving grants to Irish manufacturers who were developing or extending industry in this country. So successful was their promotion strategy that the output of engineering firms grew by 280% between 1960 and 1972 and at that time showed every sign of continued acceleration. Ref. Industrial Development Authority "Development of Industrial Base" 1973.



Kilkenny Design Workshops were adapted for the design and prototype building of craft based industries and had left very little room for a change of emphasis. Its organisation, staff, equipment and premises were suited to their earlier activities. They realised that adaptation would demand major internal changes. KDW found themselves, in 1972, moving further and further away from the direction that Irish manufacturing was going in and as a result was of less use than ever to Irish manufacturers. It must be said however that KDW reacted well to this by undertaking a survey of the need for design services among Ireland's engineering industries where, despite rapid growth, there was little understanding, much less acknowledgement, of the potential role of design. The survey was followed by a plan for a new operation which would actively encourage engineering based manufacturers to use industrial design services and would make available such a service precisely tailored to their needs, together with modelmaking, prototyping and technical information support.

At last KDW had the intention of providing a service for Irish firms which would assist them in manufacturing better design goods for the mass production market. They were also aiming to provide services for companies which the Industrial Development Authority were trying to encourage and also made it less likely that they would find themselves totally out of line with Irish industry again.

To realise their intentions, however, KDW needed capital investment for the expansion of premises and equipment and initial subjection to prime and promote their activities. The Report coincided with cutbacks in state expenditure immediately following the first international oil crises. The



government weren't as forthcoming with handouts as they had been, so KDW found themselves faced with their biggest expenditure plans since their formation and without any resources to carry them out. It must be remembered that this was a time of huge cutbacks for many of the organisations the state were involved with. A great many semi-state or semi-state funded organisations providing vital services to the public had their allowances cut to the detriment of a lot of people. An example of this were the cuts in hospital expenditure in the west of Ireland at the time. So Kilkenny Design was in effect told to "Survive on the money we continue to give and sort out your internal problems yourselves". Ref: Kilkenny Design "Staff Briefing in Butler House" 1975. Considering the pressure the government was under at the time this was seen by many as a generous stance for them to take. It must also be remembered that these decisions were made under a Fine Gael government while during the formation of KDW and during its early years of development Fianna Fail were governing the country.

Kilkenny decided then to undertake the changes slowly and to try to concentrate more on the profitable areas of their business. In 1974, soon after their crises period, one of the biggest fundamental changes occupied in the history of KDW. The government decided that Kilkenny should have a broader contribution to make to the nation's development so their ties with the Export Board were cut and Kilkenny was made directly answerable to the Minister for Industry. This was making them look more like a semi-state organisation having to answer directly to a Minister and having all their activities monitored. In general they had much less freedom from then on. This change, while seen as a negative move internally in Kilkenny, did have



its positive effects in that the Department of Industry was in touch with Irish manufacturing and the direction it was taking and could assist Kilkenny in its change and development. There was another positive aspect to the move which wasn't immediately recognised. When KDW was made answerable to the Minister for Industry its responsibilities were broadened and it was made primarily responsible for the the advancement of design standards in industry. This allowed them to adjust their services more systematically to the opportunities which they had seen grow since the sixties. The responsibilities to increase design awareness among consumers enabled them to take advantage of the growth potential of their retail and exhibition activities. So Kilkenny was no longer directly in the business of improving the design quality of the mass produced Irish goods going abroad, a job it never did properly and one which it was just preparing itself to undertake seriously for the first time when the government decided it was no longer the role they wanted Kilkenny to play.

It was now the mid-seventies - Kilkenny was under new leadership going in a different direction. The changes made included undertaking the awards scheme for young designers - previously handled by CTT, expanding their shops in Kilkenny and Dublin, carrying stock of other Irish manufacturers, such as Stephen Pierce Glassware, which along with a small number of other manufacturers Kilkenny thought worthy to go on display, and selling under the Kilkenny name. The shops were becoming more and more important to the survival of KDW. Between the years 1970 and 1980 the number of employees doubled to 130 but without those employed in the Dublin shop the growth was less than 30%. Over the same period the government grant remained static in terms of real value and although the operating budget tripled, much was



accountable to increased retail turnover. So what started off as informal buying of surplus prototypes at the official opening in 1965 had by 1975 developed into a small chain of shops that were providing badly needed revenue for development in Kilkenny.

The Government's position on KDW and its handling of it from the very start was curious in its decision making. It varied from making it a branch of the export board without responsibility to anyone and being very generous with funding, to making it directly answerable to the Industry Department and freezing its grants and then to confuse the issue completely, the control of Kilkenny Design Workshops was given to the Department of Finance. Being under the care of the Department of Finance brought some changes in the short term but more importantly, it was the move that was to assist in the eventual disbandment of Kilkenny in the mid eighties.

The increased emphasis on retailing to assist funding was occurring at the same time as the shift in emphasis on the design side. So Kilkenny had several separate activities taking place at once. They were small scale producers of craft items for their shops. They were retailers running these shops and they were a design agency for industry, designing and building prototypes of engineering type goods. Since they were making the move to design for industry, more than for the craft world they found they had to change a lot of the machinery and equipment that they had built up over the years.. The decision to become a small producer of craft items was further justified by the existence of equipment like potters' wheels, test kilns, plaster and casting moulds equipment, slip mixers and a large production kiln. The setting up of the manufacturing unit was further



justified by the training opportunities it provided and it enabled KDW to testmarket new designs.

If one examines the staff turnover at Kilkenny Design over the period 1965-1980 one can see how time and time again people left having gained enough training and experience from KDW, to set up their own craft business and when, in the mid-seventies, KDW started stocking the produce of other craft manufacturers, much of the work was that of past employees. The south-east and especially county Kilkenny has an above average number of craft producers, especially potteries. This was a difficulty for Kilkenny Design as trained staff seemed to be leaving as soon they could afford to go. However, the other side of this was that more people were being trained and there was an increase in the number of good craft designer manufacturers in the country. Kilkenny had in fact created competition for itself. This competition produced goods of equally good design and with a high standard of workmanship. They sold well, both in KDW shops and in other outlets in Ireland and abroad. This situation continued for a while and then during the recession of the late seventies Kilkenny Design's retail sales began to drop. A short time afterwards KDW sold off its slip mixers and test kilns etc. to the people they had employed, trained, helped to establish competed with, whose produce they stocked and who were partly responsible for the downfall of the craft manufacturing in Kilkenny Design. In other words they found themselves at a point of change once more, where they had to alter their activities because of a difficult situation they created for themselves.



By 1980 Kilkenny Design had stopped all manufacturing for retail sale, with the exception of the precious metals workshop. This was retained against the general direction that KDW was following at the time because of its desirability as a national facility for apprentice training. The courses in gold and silversmithing which it offered, and the examination procedures, were officially recognised by the Department of Education and the costs were offset by sale of products in the Kilkenny Shop and by fees from special commissions.

In Kilkenny's fifteen official years of business they had adjusted their activities and operations several times, for several reasons. They had at least twice to adjust to changing scenes on the industrial front. Once when they were going astray, while industry concentrated on industrial and engineering type activities KDW concentrated on craft. They also adjusted to changes in Government and their varying policies.

As the new decade started Kilkenny Design Workshops were at a new beginning; once more they were facing in a new direction. They had new problems emerging and were making adjustment to deal with them. The executive staff of KDW at this time were bureaucrats appointed by the government who not only had no background in design but had a limited understanding of it as well. So when management didn't understand what was necessary for their development they were at an immediate disadvantage. Ref: "Discussion with KDW former employees". Also the wages in KDW had not risen with the cost of living and remained very low. This acted as another incentive for people to leave. As soon as they were trained they realised they could earn more if they were self employed, so Kilkenny found



it difficult to recruit management from within its own ranks. Therefore, managers were brought in from outside and like the executive staff these people were usually coming from a poor design background, and so had very little to offer the permanent staff of KDW. This also caused a certain amount of friction between management and staff. There was a strong feeling among the long-serving staff at Kilkenny that the limited capabilities of and large number of management were leading to a lack of definite direction the company might otherwise have been taking. As well as these problems with management, they also believed in greater commerciality, which is a positive thing in most circumstances, but KDW was there to service Irish industry and to heighten design awareness. These priorities were first and foremost in KDW's brief and then an awareness of their own balance books. Before the Dublin shop was closed this commercial attitude showed itself in that they had withdrawn a lot of the exhibition space and replaced exhibitions (which attracted a lot of good press and attention) and stocked more the craft items that were selling well. There was, for a time a furniture design department in KDW and the produce from their workshops was for sale in the Dublin shop. Given the nature of the manufacturing facilities in Kilkenny each newly designed piece of furniture could only be made in limited quantities and therefore cost considerably more than other similarly styled mass-produced furniture. However, they were aware of this and they gave over a full floor to the furniture. When the new management came in 1982 they immediately closed this floor, so the public was left without any examples of the work of one of the few quality furniture makers in the country. Exhibition space was also reduced at the Kilkenny shop. This apparently careless handling of the company by its managerial staff is not surprising



when one considers how small KDW is in comparison to other state owned bodies, it can be expected that they would receive very little attention from the Civil Service. The Civil Service involvement in KDW at this stage should not be ignored. They were the people who were doing a lot of the dealing on behalf of the government they determined the fate of Kilkenny to a large extent. By the early 1980's one of the Civil Service' main concerns was cost cutting and this was apparent in their handling of KDW.

Since responsibility for Kilkenny Design Workshops was taken from CTT there developed an interesting relationship between them. CTT was still responsible for promoting Irish exports and still dealt with many product development problems. They chose on a number of occasions not to support KDW but to give their work to other design agencies that were springing up around the country and often to design agencies abroad. The reasons for this are seen by many to be a result of the responsibility of Kilkenny Design being taken away from CTT. They believed that Kilkenny would prosper under their rule and felt disappointed to loose control. They then chose not to support them when the opportunity arose in the future. This was a blow to KDW and not all their fault. It also brought them bad press and ~~lowered~~ their morale and, made them less useful in the government's eyes.

With the emergence of a number of independent design agencies around the country Kilkenny had further competition. Their work was seen by many companies to be grossly overpriced. This was becoming a serious problem in winning contracts. Another problem with getting contracts was that it is usual for management to deal with clients and in the case of Kilkenny these



were often people who didn't know enough about design to discuss projects with clients. Ref. "Discussional notes from interviews with former employees". Probably one of the biggest blows to KDW was the fact that they no longer had the support of the government in terms of doing state design work. When it came to designing semi-state logos, letterheads or typefaces for any businesses connected with the government, the government chose to ignore Kilkenny time and time again. Very often they used foreign agencies. This was very bad for Kilkenny's image as well as their self-esteem and was noticed by many firms at home and abroad.

So by 1983-4 Kilkenny was beginning to suffer; they were no longer of any great use to Irish industry and were winning less and less design contracts. Several newspaper reports had shown them in a very bad light. Many of the quality people had left and there were increasing problems with management. The government were cutting back on all public services in an effort to control the national debt and it was seen as inevitable that Kilkenny was going to have its support reduced if not withdrawn very soon. It came in 1985 when the government told KDW that they had four years to become independent and after that the government would pull out all its support. Kilkenny Design Workshops again found themselves making plans. They clearly saw that in making themselves independent they were aiming to create a company with commercial interests only. It would be run by people who would be central in making it an independent company. They realised that they would have to recruit more professional staff - quality designers, pay better wages - to keep them and run a very big public relations campaign to promote the new image of Kilkenny Design. They also



knew it was vital to reduce running costs so they could compete for orders and not be continually over pricing.

Their plan went ahead and they reduced staff and sold off some assets to raise capital. They closed the London shop in 1986 and successfully fought for new contracts, which they would never have priced for previously. Kilkenny was being run by people who knew what to do and who were interested in the well-being of the company. The management were in touch with the designers and the designers were in touch with the clients and good industrial relations were achieved. This situation was in sharp contrast to previous years. A story which is often told in KDW circles which epitomises the situation is that of the chairwoman of Kilkenny Design in 1982 sitting down to a board meeting, and when the subject of further funding for the product design side of KDW was brought up she turned to her secretary and asked her "what is product design"?.

The new independent Kilkenny aimed at and were succeeding in achieving an improvement in industrial relations and were building a more honest business.

However, in February 1988, two years into their rationalisation plan, the press were asking Kilkenny about their finances past and present as part of a story about their re-development plan. The staff of Kilkenny were never fully told about the financial aid. It was the committee elected by the government who knew the precise financial situation. The questions regarding their finances could not be answered by the interviewee, so the newspaper story painted a very negative picture of the financial state of



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KDW. The speculation that Kilkenny were going broke under the new independence regime (which was not fully in control) was spreading and the government refused to publish a report to denounce the rumours. This further fuelled speculation that Kilkenny were not going to be able to cope without government support. The situation developed to the extent that creditors to Kilkenny who were owed for materials were beginning to look for reassurances in the form of early payments and with the news of its possible early closure they were finding it difficult to get credit for materials. The situation worsened. In November 1988 at a meeting between the Chairman and Chief Executive of KDW and the Taoiseach and Finance Minister, Charles Haughey opened the meeting by stating "we're here to close you down as quickly as possible" and adding to that Ray McSharry stated, "yes, and as cheaply as possible". This was only half way into the agreed four years they were given to become independent and indeed they were hoping to achieve their goals in three years. However, Butler House and all the KDW courtyard buildings were put up for sale and the state funded design agency was now, at the beginning of 1988, a thing of the past.

The government put in a receiver to sell off the assets and there was considerable interest in some of its property. For instance the Dublin shop was quickly sold to Blarney Woollen Mills.

The people of Kilkenny city took a great interest in the buildings and workshops in Kilkenny and at public meetings held in Kilkenny they set up a committee to help raise money to keep the premises in the control of the people of Kilkenny. The front shop was sold off as retail business, and a



committee headed by the County Manager started to raise the capital to buy out the place. This was successfully done and several craft based businesses and a design agency have taken leases of parts of the premises in which they operate their own business independently. Butler House has been turned into a guest house, against considerable opposition from hotel owners in the City who argue that they helped raise the money to purchase the premises and now they are competing with it for business. The history of state involvement in industrial design and in Ireland ends here.



- CONCLUSION -

The success of the Kilkenny Design Workshops project can be gauged by outlining their achievements and failures compared with their original goals.

The Coras Trachtala committee stated that in contrast to the recommendations of the Scandinavian report they wanted to: "develop a permanent implant of design skills through an organisation which would have a pervasive and lasting influence on industry and on the Irish people generally, bring with it advantages of training and continuity of experience and ensure empathy with the problems peculiar to Irelands industries".

This quotation from a report they issued in 1962 was a loose brief they set for themselves and it outlined their intentions for Kilkenny. It must be remembered however, that the original committee were all members of Coras Trachtala and in the course of the life of KDW the responsibility for running the workshops was taken from CTT and thrown around between different ministerial departments in later years. However, there were several common objectives among the all interests parties:

- A. To improve the level of design awareness among the Irish public.
- B. To give Ireland a design identity abroad.



- C. To improve the level of design of Irish produced goods.
- D. To make examples of good Irish design available to the general Irish public.
- E. To train young Irish designers to service the different areas of manufacturing where an improvement in design standards was desirable.

When outlined in pointers like these it is hard to see what KDW ever achieved. In relation to improving the level of design awareness in the Irish public, it must be said that their shops, which is where the public knew KDW from, were carrying a range of items at a price which excluded over 80% of the Irish public. What may have heightened design awareness a little was the exhibitions they sometimes ran, which were open to the public and which showed good examples of Irish design. However, the Kilkenny shops never enticed the "man off the street".

Kilkenny Design never worked through Irish schools, never had a tour going around showing the Kilkenny story to school children as was done by many groups trying to attract attention to themselves. For example, the plight of the starving in Africa. We can see how the level of awareness amongst the Irish public has grown through the delivery of the message into people's homes and through the schools.

Kilkenny were creating, developing and selling Irish Design. They were, for a large part, "Irish Design". Therefore they should have been promoting and selling themselves much better than they did. This is



especially true since the aid they were receiving in the early years, when the propaganda should have started, seemed to be ad-lib.

Sadly, the level of design awareness in Ireland did not benefit greatly from KDW. Such heightened awareness as has occurred is due to a number of factors with which Kilkenny can at best claim to be connected with.

In terms of giving Ireland a design identity abroad, KDW did not create a mass market for Irish design, nor even a cult following. The greatest connection KDW had with other countries was the staff they recruited from continental Europe and America. The shops in London and the U.S. were nice ideas and the sort of thing one would promote in principle. However, one or two shop fronts didn't give an international image to either KDW or to Irish Design and the abrupt ending of these enterprises proved this.

They also set about improving the standard of design in Irish produced goods, which was the central theme of the project. In terms of the level of design amongst craft producers operating out of old mill houses throughout the rural towns of Co. Kilkenny KDW did a very good job. However, in terms of real production, or as real as it gets in Ireland, the level of design in the goods coming from Shannon, Tallaght or Finglas industrial estates was never affected by KDW, not because they failed in their dealings with these producers, but because they never had any dealings with them. Their agency to assist modern mass production outlets and producers of consumer goods was started too late and run too inefficiently to ever be of any real use. It must be said, however, that



if Irish industry had developed like that of other countries then perhaps KDW would have had more opportunities to prove themselves.

Kilkenny Design Workshops also set out to make examples of good Irish Design available to the general public. To do this one has to properly design consumer items that the public generally buy and not design and sell items that are non-essential to the average consumer. The area of mass-consumed and mass-produced items was not generally covered by Irish manufacturers, so it was difficult for KDW to get into Irish homes with examples of good design. The exception to this is of course the area of well produced craft items example of which are to be found in many Irish homes in the higher income bracket. Also it was never fashionable to have Irish designed goods in ones home. It was fashionable to have Scandinavian furniture, French designed clothes and Italian ceramics. The only Irish design that most people could correctly identify were the items produced for the American tourist market, kitch, kitch, kitch. So in light of these considerations, it is understandable how KDW made very little impact.

The Irish student award scheme worked well for Kilkenny for many years but when the quality staff started to leave Kilkenny so did the work and in later years the quality of work which students were learning from and the quality of people who were directing them had dropped significantly. However, the scheme was a big success in Kilkenny's favour. The general training of people to design and make the produce of KDW through the years was also a success, even if they did leave. The fact that they had an unusually high turnover of staff worked in favour of Irish design in general.



The idea of Kilkenny Design Workshops was far thinking by the government and Coras Trachtala at the time of its creation. It had the potential for becoming a full design movement along the lines of the Bauhaus. The initial commitment of the government, the location of its activities and the need for such a project all went to giving the enterprise every chance of success.

However, Kilkenny did not succeed. There were various problems which made success difficult and various self inflicted disasters which guaranteed its failure! Firstly, the management sector was lacking in its understanding of the world of design. They were mostly bureaucrats who didn't want to look any further than balance sheets. They had poor relations with the designers and producers of the workshops. They had poor relations with their clients which stemmed from a lack of understanding. Kilkenny had a poor base to work from, they were serving industry that wasn't really there and when this was realised they turned to craft design and production which was nice because of the ease with which prototypes could be built. Then, having success with this they became blinkered and forgot to keep an eye on what was happening in Irish industries. When they eventually realised their mistake in the early seventies they responded with the offer of a commercial design agency which did little for the creation of a design "movement". The industrial relations problems and managements problems continued to exist. Somehow, even with paying low wages, they managed to overprice on their jobs. After that, poor public relations and poor treatment by the government in terms of financial aid coupled with a lack of direction and the shifting of responsibility from one government department to another completed their downfall. However, apart from the



financial waste, and the careers and lives that were disrupted by its closure, Kilkenny Design Workshops was a positive experience for the Irish people. It was a learning experience and has left some items which are proof of an effort made by somebody some time. It has set a base for another project along similar lines which could be shaped from the experience of Kilkenny. With the colleges turning out qualified staff the resurrection of the economy and the integration of Ireland with the rest of Europe, perhaps it is time to try again.

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