

An Taisce

Summation read into the records at the close of the An Bord Pleanála Oral Hearing on the planning permission granted to St Colman's Cathedral by Cobh Town Council.

Presented by Noel O'Driscoll, Secretary, An Taisce – Corcaigh

We have arrived at the end of our involvement in this planning process. An involvement prompted, not just by our concern, but by the many phone calls to our Headquarters. We have had concerns for a considerable time over protected structures in Cobh. From and An Foras Forbaithe report in 1979 onwards Cobh UDC did not see fit to accept the reports suggestion that certain buildings in the town should be protected by legislation. The UDC only addressed this in 1998, and only then in broad brushstrokes. By this time Cobh Cathedral was midway through its admirable and worthy restoration project.

The process of renovation and restoration proceeded without recourse to Planning until the introduction of proposals to move from *restoration* to *construction*

By then the Heritage Act, Planning and Development Act (2000) and Planning Regulations had been introduced.

It was stated in evidence to the Hearing that the original proposed Guidelines on the Act as they apply to a Protected Structure, it being a church - were rejected by the Religious groupings as it was felt that the heritage considerations outweighed the churches' requirements.

HERE IS THE NUB OF THE ISSUE, the adopted Guidelines, it is believed by the Catholic Church - that the phrase '... shall respect liturgical requirements' actually reversed this situation.

In essence if the Dioceses / Bishop, citing 'Liturgical requirements for works that they claimed fitted under the this heading, *had to be granted* Planning Permission. In fact the planning process was largely academic as the outcome had to be the same if you accept the view of the Applicants.

It is An Taisce's view that this is a Planning issue – the Church is *at once* a place of worship *and* a protected structure and is subject to the full requirements of Planning with its checks and balances.

Cobh Town Council's shambolic planning process was predicated on the Planning Officer's certainty that *he had no choice* but to grant permission. I think he agonized over this so to square the circle, as it were, he had to dismiss his specialist Conservation Officer's advice. What followed was an exercise in 'smoke and mirrors' to comply with the law and avoid the embarrassment of having to make refunds.

Our view is that this planning application is too intrusive to the fabric of the building, is irreversible and would take from the architectural coherence of the building. It may be forgotten that in our submission to Cobh Town Council that we urged a less intrusive

alternative versus the original plan to accommodate liturgical requirements. The revised plan as presented to An Bord Pleanála at this Oral Hearing has failed to assuage our concerns.

Through the choreography used to obtain planning permission, the Bishop, I feel has not won the hearts and minds of the people in his dioceses. Should the Applicant be successful I fear it will be a hollow victory with the consequence of hollow collection plates for the continued restoration of this fine Cathedral.

In conclusion, it is our view that the Guidelines are unclear as regards to this type of application. This has become a test case planning application and we urge the Board to restore the balance intended in planning vis-à-vis protected churches – alternately, failing this, create an office ...with a clerk....and a rubber stamp to deal with applications from church trustees.

Thank You

Noel O'Driscoll
Secretary – An Taisce Corcaigh
2nd March 5, 2006 , Midleton Park Hotel