

Masters of reinvention

The creative industries have been hit hard by the economic woes in Ireland, with both companies and rates of pay shrinking.

Clare Dowdy looks at how designers have been surviving – and even thriving – through the hard times with campaigns such as the Keep Going Sure it's Grand project

1-3 Programmes for three productions at Dublin's Abbey Theatre, featuring the theatre's logo, designed by Design Factory

4 and 5 Two screen-prints by Fergus O'Neill, created as part of a project to pay off Ireland's €42bn (£35bn) banking crisis debt – by sending €1 from the sale of each print to Ireland's Department of Finance

6 and 7 Settle bench and Form table, both by O'Driscoll Furniture

For the past three years, the Irish economy has been at crisis point, and the effect on the country's creative industries has been acute. Architects have been particularly hard hit, with more than 50 per cent out of work. No surprise there, given the rupture of Ireland's now infamous property bubble. Advertising too has taken a blow, with freelance art direction rates falling from €100 (£84) an hour to just €25 (£21).

Design is also feeling the pain. 'There have been lots of redundancies, reduced hours and salary cutbacks, leading to a huge increase in freelance designers on the market as well as numerous smaller companies fragmenting off from larger ones, and formed with limited redundancy money,' says David Joyce, past president and creative director of language at the Institute of Creative Advertising & Design. It all sounds pretty familiar to anyone working in the UK design scene.

Many of those consultancies that are most closely linked with the built environment – which in the halcyon Celtic Tiger years of 1995 to 2007 were shooting client-shaped fish in a barrel – have suffered the most, and are having to think hard about reinventing themselves.

The owners of high-end furniture company O'Driscoll Furniture admit that it's been tough, with business down 50 per cent in the past two

years. 'Most of our work was coming through architects,' says partner Simon O'Driscoll. 'Hotels, restaurants, corporate fit-outs. There was almost an over-reliance in that sector.'

But it wasn't only the interior and furniture designers who suffered. At the Celtic Tiger peak, 30 per cent of brand consultancy Design Factory's work was for 'ancillary services for design for the built environment', says consultancy creative director Conor Clarke.

Not everyone put all their eggs in the construction basket. Ciaran O'Gaora set up brand consultancy Zero G Design seven years ago and avoided property developers 'because I didn't trust them'. His consultancy has gone from four full-time staff two years ago, up to six.

Meanwhile, WPP's Brand Union Dublin office has shrunk from 28 to 17 staff through what managing partner David O'Connor calls natural erosion, although he's planning to increase numbers again this year. But even those who avoided property are having to stretch into new areas. Zero G now has clients in the UK, US, India and South Africa, meaning its overseas work has doubled to 40 per cent in the past two years. O'Gaora would like to increase the ratio to 50-50.

Odos and O'Driscoll Furniture are also looking abroad. O'Driscoll is trying to reposition the business, 'producing a range that suits more people's pockets', he says, meaning one that's

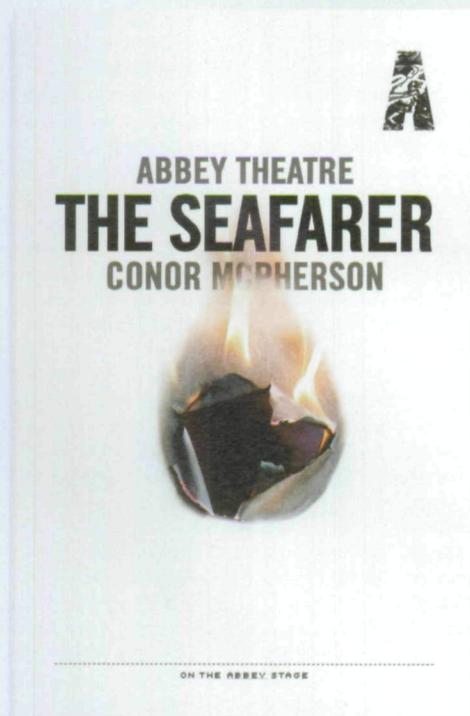
more cost-effective and less labour-intensive, as commercial orders from architects have dried up.

'The work was just feeding a practice rather than moving in the direction you want to go, so it's a lesson we've learnt,' says O'Driscoll.

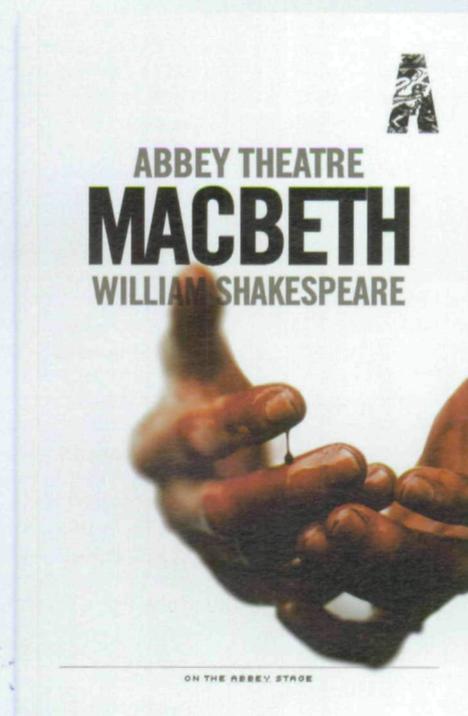
The group is also hoping to target the public sector, and has already found success with its Spine bench, which Dublin City Council has installed in the Smithfield area of the city. Its DC chair has also found its way into a 600-seat restaurant for Dublin University and in Trinity College's student accommodation. Meanwhile, Odos is building up its commercial work with a library refurbishment for the Royal College of Surgeons, a large restaurant, a dental practice, and a recently completed hotel fit-out in Kildaire.

So some work is coming out of the built environment. 'We had a lot of inquiries from architects two years ago looking to gear up to appeal to new markets,' says Clarke. That meant

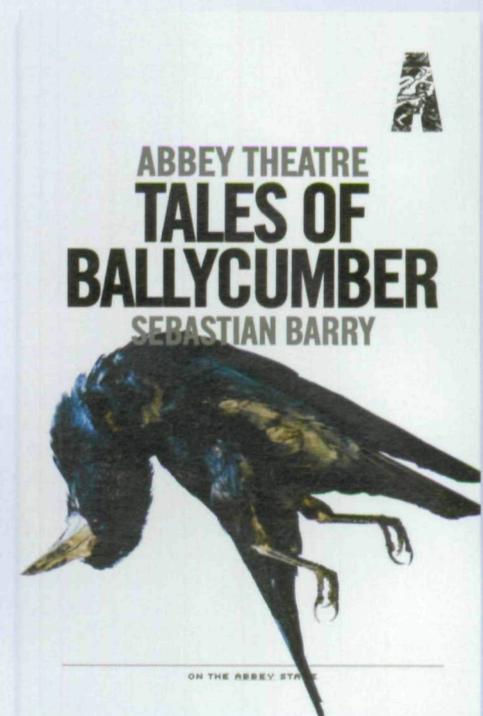
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brochures and websites for prospective Middle East clients. But at the same time designers are having to watch out of the corner of their eyes for the harder-hit architects and ad agencies that are looking to encroach on their territory.

Joyce points to the positive efforts of the industry to reinvigorate itself. 'There has been an increase in self-initiated and collective exhibitions, and design-related projects. Designers are thinking more creatively about their own careers and not just their clients, and are engaging in the wider interests of design.'

He cites the second Offset conference last year, and the Keep Going Sure it's Grand project, 'which looks at the current situation with humour', as well as the Institute of Creative Advertising and Design's Creative Coffee Collective, which aims 'to offer support to those who have been made redundant or simply find themselves quiet in the studio by arranging coffee meetings and evening events for creatives'. What's more, ICAD has introduced an unwaged membership rate.

As part of Ireland's efforts, Dublin is pursuing a bid to become the World Design Capital in 2014. And back in the studios, it's mostly about keeping going. For Clarke, that means 'not compromising on the quality of the work, keeping a close eye on the business aspect, and making sure you still enjoy what you're doing'. ■



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