

Name- Órla Casey BA MPlan

Qualifications- BA in Politics and English at UCC (2008-2011)

Masters in Planning and Sustainable Development at UCC (2011-2013)

Current Title- Assistant Planner, City & Country Group, England

Having finished my two years of planning at UCC in June 2011, I was painfully aware of the condition of the construction industry in Ireland. While slowly emerging from the doldrums of the height of the recession, I knew that the industry had a long way to go to full recovery. Many people thought that the timing of studying planning at this stage, in July 2011, was a bit mental. "Why would you want to get involved in an industry where your job prospects aren't as healthy as they were 5 years ago? Isn't the construction industry dominated by men? Isn't planning what got us into trouble in the first place?" were questions and common misconceptions often asked by friends and relatives. I didn't see these questions as a negative, but rather as a challenge. I looked up to some of the people in the industry and their companies, where they had begun during the recession during the 1980s and had grown to be successful. If they saw an opportunity where others didn't during a previously challenging economic time, then why couldn't I?

During my study, I had worked hard at trying to be as involved as possible in the Irish planning community. Having worked with the UCC Planning Society, the local Cork branch of the IPI and sitting on the national IPI Council as a student representative, I knew it was important to voice a realistic opinion of the conditions of planners early in their career, conditions which can be exacerbated during a recession. Fresh out of university, I secured a work experience placement at McCutcheon Halley Walsh in their Cork office. Being aware of what the job opportunities were at the time of graduating, I knew that it was vital to get my foot in the door somewhere, as getting real planning experience early on is crucial. I wanted to hit the ground running while I still had all of my two years' worth of planning knowledge still fresh in my mind. It was quite exciting to put my knowledge into practice and to assist with a variety of projects under very experienced planners. This work experience turned into a Job Bridge internship, and it was encouraging to sense the momentum gaining in the health of the construction industry. There was a bit of a buzz around council offices and this brought a wave of optimism that I hadn't experienced first-hand before.

Knowing that my internship was coming to an end, I began to apply for jobs. I had to jump through several hoops to get my current job, but it was a confidence boost to know that the Irish planning schools aren't overlooked by British employers, in favour of graduates closer to home. In fact this different perspective is something that they are continuously seeking. My internship ended in late February 2014, and I began work in England two weeks later. I'm currently working for City & Country, just outside of London in Stansted Mountfitchet. I was determined to find a company to match my particular strengths and interests, heritage conservation and urban design, and this company fit the bill. City & Country viewed the economic crisis as a genuine opportunity, and continued to grow even during the recession. It's exciting to work on such important and unique heritage sites from a conservation perspective, while seeing the bespoke transformation of buildings that were in different states of vacancy or dereliction before being pulled back into full use, securing their future for generations to come. The attention to detail in design and craftsmanship is what City & Country do best, and it's a pleasure to work on these projects. I still get 'pinch me I'm dreaming' moments while walking or driving around our sites, which makes getting out of bed in the morning a far easier task.

My career path since graduating shows that now is the time to make a mark as a planner, and bring skills to the table which correct the mistakes of the past, but also improve the built environment for future generations to come.