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For the Irish Arts Center, a New Home to Expand

By **ROBIN POGREBIN** MARCH 16, 2014



A rendering of the proposed new Irish Arts Center, a \$54 million project that will increase the center's space sevenfold.
Credit Ciaran O'Connor, Office of Public Works, Ireland

Aidan Connolly has to employ a multitude of slashes to describe the cramped quarters of the [Irish Arts Center](#), a hearth for Irish culture that he operates from a former Hell's Kitchen tenement on West 51st Street.

The first floor features the “dance studio-slash-lobby-slash-boardroom-slash-rehearsal space,” Mr. Connolly, the center's executive director, said last week. The top floor has the “classroom-slash-storage room-slash-meeting room-slash-green room” and is just below the leaky roof and up three flights of stairs.

There is no elevator at the Irish Arts Center. Nor is there a cafe, or enough seats for people who have come over the years to hear performers like the singer Julie Feeney or the actor Eamon Morrissey.

But all that is going to change under a plan the center's leadership has formed to build a new \$54 million home around the corner on 11th Avenue between 51st and 52nd Streets. The groundbreaking is due March 2015 with an opening by the end of 2016.

“It didn't adequately reflect the importance of the institution's contribution to New York culture,” Gabriel Byrne, the actor and center supporter, said in a telephone interview. “I thought we should work towards, not just a new building, but a new definition of what it means to be Irish — not just in this city but in this country.”

Since 1972, the center has aspired to be the premier, multidisciplinary home for Irish arts in America, honoring historic figures and discovering talent. Last fall, for example, the center presented a tribute to the Irish poet Seamus Heaney at St. Ann's Warehouse in Brooklyn (the center has to go elsewhere when the crowds are large); and in May, the center will present an evening with the young author Johanna Lane reading from her debut novel, "Black Lake." On its annual book day, on Monday, the center enlists writers like Colum McCann and Pete Hamill to help distribute free Irish literature around the city.

But its impact has been limited because the center never had the physical plant of, say, the Asia Society, the French Institute Alliance Française or other ethnically shaped cultural institutions. "It's hard to project our level of pride and confidence, simply because of the state of the facilities," Mr. Connolly said.

Under the new plan, the center is taking over a 1916 building, now occupied by Cybert Tire — constructing five new stories but maintaining the brick facade. The new building will increase the center's space sevenfold — to 35,000 square feet from 5,000; its theater will grow to 199 seats from 99; and the operating budget will double to \$4 million.

Mr. Byrne said the center could serve as an incubator for Irish contributions to the arts. "Irish-Americans have to grow their own culture," Mr. Byrne said. "They can't be dependent on simply bringing in things from Ireland. The Irish-American voices are largely silent. There just isn't a factory for that to grow."

The arts center wants to be that factory, its own incarnation of the Brooklyn Academy of Music or the 92nd Street Y — with theater, live music, book events, conversations and film — and to attract audiences from all over. "It's not simply a place for Irish people," Mr. Connolly said. "It's a place for exciting, competitive work that jumps off of Irishness."

That said, the center also wants to serve as a "home away from home" for visiting Irish artists and to help them navigate New York's performing and literary scenes.

To make the center more of a social hub, there will be a cafe with 80 to 90 seats, so that people feel encouraged to hang out and stick around. "You'll be able to go in and have a cup of coffee or a glass of wine," Mr. Connolly said.

Though the center's larger theater will accommodate more ambitious productions, its management remains committed to maintaining a sense of intimacy. "No matter where you are in the space, you're still going to feel like you're in your living room," Mr. Connolly said.

The project's design architect is Ciaran O'Connor, the chief state architect for Ireland's Office of Public Works; Davis Brody Bond is the architect of record; Jonathan Rose Companies is the project manager.

Originally, neighborhood residents complained that the building was too tall. The height was reduced by consolidating activities: Instead of having a dedicated entertainment area, for example, the new dance studio will also be an event space. In addition, the new building will connect to the current one, which will continue to be used for classes and other functions.

Founded as a grass-roots organization, the center was professionalized by Jim Sheridan and Terence George, who served as directors in the 1980s, before their successful film careers (Mr. Sheridan directed "In the Name of the Father"; Mr. George, known as Terry, wrote the screenplay).

To some extent, the Irish Arts Center is just looking to keep doing what it does but in a better environment, like offer classes in language, music, dance and history. The organization does not market its classes because it cannot accommodate more people. And moving large instruments upstairs to the third-floor classroom is its own headache.

"The harp is challenging," said Pauline Turley, the center's vice chairwoman.

The center has raised \$37.5 million so far: \$30 million from the city, \$3.5 million from board gifts, \$3.4 million from the Irish government and \$600,000 from the state.

Mr. Byrne, who with the actor Liam Neeson has helped attract donations to the center, said the new home would be important not only as a place to generate artistic activity but also as a place to bring Irish people together and cement their ethnic identity. "Identity is connected to memory," he said. "We remember our history, we remember our politics, and we bring it with us.

"When you have a fractured community," he added, "that kind of memory gets dissipated over time."