

To Anthony McGarry  
Mervyn Colville  
Philip Ryan

1<sup>st</sup> December 2009



DIARMUID GAVIN DESIGNS  
TAKING GARDENS FURTHER

**THE PROPOSED ANGELS REMEMBRANCE GARDEN,  
GLASNEVIN CEMETERY, DUBLIN.**

In the past few months I was approached by email by Anthony McGarry with regard to the proposed development at the Angels Plot in Glasnevin. Anthony has a child there and is worried about the plans being put in place by the Trust and the method and schedule of their delivery. I was vaguely aware of the issue through an RTE television news report some months previously. It had struck me at the time that this was a difficult situation and I had vague memories of understanding the difficulties of differing parties.

When Anthony's first email was brought to my attention I resolved to deal with it at some time in the future. In one sense I was honoured to be asked. The cemetery being such an important part of Irish life and most importantly to be invited to give an opinion on a delicate and emotional subject intimated that I was strongly trusted by which I was honoured. I, of course, procrastinated but was jolted into a reaction by a second email from Anthony. Through Helen at my London office, arrangements were made to meet.

At that meeting over coffee we were joined by Anthony's wife and two other ladies whose names I can't recall but who were part of I think an action committee opposing the new plans for the Angels Plot. Over the course of an hour a picture was painted for me of the situation. Families in mourning for little ones who were worried by the proposals, by the schedule and by the attitude they felt they'd encountered from the Trust. To date, some of the communication had been carried out in public through the media. I spent most of my time listening to some very genuine people describing their real fears and concerns. The issues were many and understandable. The ones that particularly resonated for me were the fact that the graves would be unmarked, that tributes (stone cherubs, windmills, teddy bears and other ornamentation) could no longer be left; the fact that visitors would be walking over the resting place of their loved ones; the feeling that the Trust wanted to turn the graveyard into a visitor attraction; the fact that some trees on the site were to be cut down; the feeling that

---

Diarmuid Gavin Designs  
Studio 4, Folly Mews, 223a Portobello Road, London W11 1LU  
Tel: 020 7727 2002 and 020 7727 9678  
Fax: 020 7727 9123  
Company Reg. No: 4966 302  
VAT NO: 835 7892 78

the new proposed design didn't reflect children at all; that it didn't appear to be joyful in nature; that it included roses which may look beautiful at various times of the year but were thorny and therefore dangerous to children; not evocative or inviting for them.

Time was spent talking about the approach of the Trust to date, and the fact that plans were learnt of through the media and there was some mis-representation going on. The small group gathered was anxious to have me on board. I agreed that my name could be used from that moment on in association with the wishes of some of the parents for help and possibly for a new design. I did suggest that there should be no more press releases to the media as that only got people's backs up and that it might be good to let it be known soon that I'd agreed to be involved as it may stall the imminent clearing of mementoes from graves as a particular deadline was approaching within the week. On hearing that a meeting of some involved parents was happening imminently I asked if I could get people to write down maybe a paragraph each of what they felt about the place their child was buried, not concentrating particularly on the issues but how the place, the Angels Plot, made them feel. I also asked that people would set out their main worries in order of importance so that when many people had done this a consensus of the top three or four issues for parents and families would emerge. I stressed that this being a difficult situation, whatever happened in the end would mean that not everybody would be happy. It would be impossible to achieve consensus because of the personal difficult issues involved.

The meeting was informative and pleasant. I was unsure of what I could contribute and apprehensive but felt and feel it is important when you are asked to participate in a situation like this, you do what you can.

I have an odd professional life which sometimes makes me unavailable for a period of time and this situation occurred. I went off to England to film an intensive television programme. I was expecting to receive some feedback from the gathering of parents, some of their personal thoughts and the list but this didn't happen. Very recently I had an email from Anthony asking me had I been in contact with George McCullough, the chief executive of the Trust.

Subsequently last Friday out of the blue I was contacted by somebody from Slattery Communication who was seeking to establish was I involved in any way with any parties interested in the developments at the cemetery. This led swiftly to an invitation to meet Philip Ryan, the grounds and facility manager and Mervyn Colville, customer service manager, who are jointly taking over from George McCullough with dealing with the issue of the Angels Plot, which I gladly accepted.

So at 4 pm today I went to the cemetery and in the presence of Mervyn and Philip viewed the Angels Plot and had a meeting about the history of briefly the cemetery itself but mainly about the Angels Plot, how long it had been there and the proposed development. It was a friendly, constructive and open engagement and led me to a greater understanding of the situation. They informed me that on the internet site Facebook people had become aware of my co-operation with some of the parents and the fact that I had agreed in principle that it may be possible for me to put forward an

alternative design after I had met with the Trust authorities. I learnt that in this particular Angels Plot, there are up to 40,000 children and infants buried. The Angels Plot consists of shared graves with normally up to 30 burials per grave. The other Glasnevin Angels Plot has previously been successfully redesigned and was inaugurated by President McAleese at an event attended by thousands of families in 2005.

There are great difficulties with the plots. Rules about memorials and ornamentation haven't been strictly enforced by the cemetery which has led to a culture of individual plots being marked out and filled with mementoes. This can cause upset between families because the plots are shared. An impressive redevelopment is taking place throughout the whole of Glasnevin cemetery with substantial Exchequer funds being made available. The works to date appear to me to be well considered. I was particularly impressed by works carried out on mature trees in the plot. An opening is to be made a direct entrance is to be created linking the cemetery with the Botanic gardens which will allow family visitors to wander from the graveside into the amenity that the gardens provide. I think that this sounds lovely. And the cemetery is being developed to encourage more visitors from outside which will bring in much needed funds to aid its work. The Angels Plot is not however being redesigned as a visitor attraction. Its overall appearance at the moment is undoubtedly messy. Work is due to begin very shortly to level the land inhabited by the graves. This will involve the spreading of hundreds of tonnes of topsoil over the site but not digging or disturbing the settled ground. Trees that are planned to be removed won't be dug up – they will be cut down to ground level and the roots will decompose. The new proposed design for the rose gardens is a simple and indeed beautiful plan and is in keeping with the Victorian nature of the graveyard. Its design has been agreed with many hundreds of families. Others including the parents I have met very definitely disagree with the plans. The design has also been approved by Isands (the Irish stillbirths and neonatal death society). I feel that Philip Ryan as the designer of the plot has done a lovely job and I have to say I was very impressed by his attitude today and how he continues to gently talk to some very emotional visitors to the plot. I think there is a great understanding of what people are going through but also a frustration in other alternatives not being produced. There is a strong feeling that with so many people agreeing to the current proposals that the Trust has been tolerant in holding back on works. Families who have agreed to the new designs are now confused as to why now I am in the picture and I am certain from my meeting today that action as outlined in the communication from the Trust will in the months ahead definitely be taken, that ornamentation will be removed from graves and the land will be levelled in preparation for a new design. I think that the Trust feel that a stalemate can't be allowed persist and the work needs to start soon.

In terms of my feelings about the design, well, this is a very difficult situation. There are graves everywhere. As was pointed out to me by the gentlemen today I was walking over graves that I didn't realise - so creating a design that allows access in any way is always going to involve walking over some burial ground. I think the marking of individual plots for those that require it is very important. There is an example presently in the office of a teddy bear marker which can be inscribed, a prototype for the way that the Trust are thinking. Because of the exacting nature of their records, the Trust feel that every single burial site can be easily identified and

indeed that some graves that are presently marked on the surface at the moment and visited by families aren't in the right positions. To allow for some personal opinion on the design for a few moments...I think that ideas of grief have moved on and ideas for memorials have moved on. From an aesthetic point of view I was disturbed by what I saw on the television on the reports on the original graveyard – it did look very messy and today while I appreciate what the mementoes mean for individuals, the overall picture is quite desolate. But I feel that maybe children should be remembered in a less formal way and the idea of the rose beds, while certainly being beautiful especially when surrounded by a margin of a low box hedge and with benches for seating within the area could be lovely, maybe another design that was gentler and less formal could be appropriate. It is going to be impossible to please everybody with this plot. There are so many obstacles. I very much like the logo of the Trust itself, the abstract shape of the Angels making up the petals of a flower and I couldn't help feeling that as a plan two or three of these angels contoured and grassed soil could form the basis of a way forward.

I feel that in the brief period left before works will necessarily start all parties should talk together. Again I come back to the simple but sad fact that not everybody is going to be happy with the end result whatever that is. But I am confident from my brief dealings with the various parties that everybody's aim is exactly the same – a dignified place of resting and remembrance with each special area easily identified. From this point on, I would like any meeting I have to be open. I don't use the internet myself but for communications purposes if my thoughts need to be discussed I am absolutely happy for these ideas to be published in any forum. I would however ask that selective use isn't made. Once again, this week I am engaged in a television project, this time with my phone and any means of communication being taken from me for eight straight days. Everyone has my office address to follow up and Helen there will get all communications to me as soon as this is possible again.

Diarmuid Gavin  
30 November 2009