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An Interview with Sally Starbuck, Director of Gaia Ecotecture

by Emma Good

1) Can you introduce yourself and explain what you do?

I am an Environmental Architect, accredited Client Advisor and, with Paul Leech, a director of Gaia ecotecture, working in Ireland & the UK. I have a particular interest in improving Indoor Air Quality (IAQ), with hemp-lime construction for instance, and have had research papers published on the topic. I design with natural ventilation, breathing materials for healthy vapour control and overall durability in mind.



I am also the architect of a community building and residential-workplace units, including a purpose-built studio for Gaia ecotecture in Cloughjordan, Co. Tipperary, part of the eco village there. It is a uniquely member-controlled, purpose built, community which integrates economic, social & environmental sustainability.

2) What is the most rewarding part of your job?

I love drawing, as a method of interaction with people and places. I also enjoy the many realms that design opens up and collaborating with a variety of people and organisations on the interface of science, technology and the arts.

3) What sets your business apart from the rest of the market?

Our four-dimensional design approach is to analyse the initial brief and develop ideas for the client; with whom, if an organisation, we use well-proven participatory practices.

We choose to build mainly with timber with durable cladding of natural materials where appropriate. The carbon saved by timber structures is equivalent to the building's carbon emissions in use over ten years.

We design within conditions that already exist on a site, such as topography and microclimate using permaculture principles. In that context, we propose improvements which give the project the best chance of success, be that in being granted planning permission or through minimal-energy consumption.

4) How popular is eco architecture and has demand increased?

There will always be dreamers attracted to alternative lifestyles, taking responsibility for themselves. Nature shows us that diversity adds resilience to any system whereas a monoculture tends to skew the dynamic, leaving smaller species with no habitat.

The housing-market seems to present few choices, perhaps an apartment in the city or a house on the outskirts. This generates patterns of commuting too far or for too long. Workplaces, until COVID-19 at least, have concentrated in urban centres. From now on, we expect demand for combined residential-workplaces to emerge since many people have been working from home due to the current pandemic. The payback will be perhaps a better work-life balance.

Individually, most people are attracted to the spacious quality of day-lit interiors which ecological architecture delivers. Many seek the health benefits of improved IAQ especially for their children's sake. When changes can be matched by the savings in running cost, only the period of disruption offers any impediment. This is directly relevant to the deep-green energy refits needed on a widespread scale if we are to meet our carbon-reduction targets. Typically, those approaching retirement realise the good-sense of investing cash or saving on reduced running costs, while younger clients feel lucky to get onto or up the housing

ladder within affordable levels of debt.

Those motivated and interested are increasingly well-informed and often concerned about the environmental impact of their project so seek specialist advice. Ecological design is typically most beneficial to owner-occupiers; clients who consider the capital cost, running costs and longer-term maintenance. Government incentive, financial or otherwise can be effective in widening that scope.

5) Do you think Ireland's attitude towards sustainable architecture and construction is changing for the better? Is this the future?

Ireland's attitude towards sustainable architecture and construction has been improving but very slowly. We are missing targets for carbon-emissions reduction and need some sectors to prioritise transitioning from fossil fuel consumption. We are now well within the crucial decade to 2030 indicated by the scientific consensus.

Sustainable architecture and construction is key, but depends on how Ireland prioritises the return to normal life following this pandemic and reduced economic circumstances. As we deal with the difficult months ahead, due to COVID-19, it seems that hygiene, cleaner air and minimal ambient noise are raising people's awareness of the environmental improvements possible from working coherently together. This is hopeful.

Gaia ecotecture supports the RIAI's annual fundraising, 5th-15th May 2020.

In response to COVID-19, the RIAI are moving 2020's campaign online e.g. using Skype etc.

Every cent raised will go directly towards the work of the Simon Communities of Ireland to combat homelessness, this year especially. Working with a Registered Architect can unlock the potential of any domestic project no matter what scale and type.

Book an hour's consultation with an architect in return for a €95 donation to Simon on the link below:

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