

Special Report from Conway Mill Preservation Trust – West Belfast

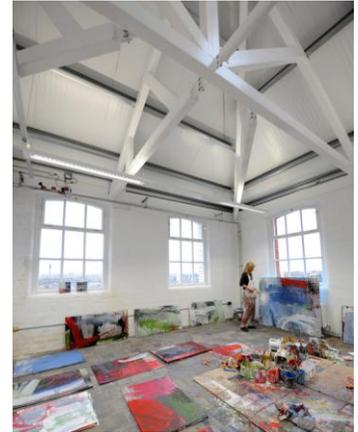
REFURBISHED CONWAY MILL OFFICIALLY LAUNCHED



Newly refurbished entrance to Conway Mill.



In attendance at the launch left to right: Minister for Social Development Alex Attwood, Fr. Des Wilson, Mrs. Elizabeth Logue, founder of Doors of Hope now Conway Mill Trust, and Deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness.



Artist Melanie Woolley's newly refurbished studio.

The impressive new atrium space was the venue for the official launch and dedication of the newly refurbished Conway Mill on Thursday 25th November 2010. The refurbishment was carried out by the well-established Belfast construction company H&J Martin and work included much-needed structural repairs, building conservation and the internal refurbishment of the two mill blocks. As well as retaining a heritage building and improving the once run-down facilities, the refurbishment has also provided 20 new artist studios in the heart of the community, as well as creating much-needed employment opportunities for local people through the creation of 16 new workspaces and enterprise units for new and expanding businesses in the area.

Jim Neeson, Chairperson for Conway Mill Preservation Trust Ltd opened the event by welcoming everyone to Conway Mill. He also gave a warm welcome to the Deputy First Minister, Martin McGuinness, the Minister for Social Development, Alex Attwood and the local Sinn Fein MP for the area, Gerry Adams, who attended the event along with over 100 invited guests from the local community.

Mr Neeson went on to say “I am very proud to be Chair of this flagship building for this historic launch. It is a monument which proves that the community can make a difference when given the chance. Never once during those dark years did our committee or our community ever consider that this project would not be completed. The tenants and artists who stayed with us and those who left and are returning are to be commended for their spirit and doggedness in the face of adversity. The tenacity, hard work and vision of the founder members have finally paid off. With the financial assistance of the funders and Government, we have realised this dream.” Mr Neeson then welcomed the funders and guest speakers to the stage.

First on stage was the DSD Minister, Alex Attwood. Referring to the new facilities he said, “I am delighted that my Department was able to support this project through the neighbourhood renewal fund. This iconic building will act as a flagship for regeneration in the Greater Falls Area with the creation of over 100 jobs within 4 years.”

Local MP for the area, Gerry Adams was welcomed to stage. He spoke about the management committee in the early days - Frank Cahill, Fr. Des Wilson, Liam Burke, Alfie Hannaway, Jimmy Drumm, Jean McStravick, Sean O’Neill, Tom Cahill & Colm Bradley and their efforts to ensure Conway Mill came into community ownership, promoting social enterprise and education. Mr. Adams also referred to British state’s policy of political vetting during the 1980s and 1990s.

Following Gerry Adams, Jim Neeson welcomed to the stage the remaining funders for the refurbishment project; Dr Denis Rooney (International Fund for Ireland); Paul Mullan (Heritage Lottery Fund); Paul Brush (Department of Enterprise Trade and Investment); Roisin McDonough (Arts Council NI); Ian Lush (Architectural Heritage Fund); Fred Taggart (Prince's Regeneration Trust). All of the speakers commented on the stunning transformation of Conway Mill and paid tribute to all those who had worked so hard on the project.

There was a short musical interlude when entertainment was provided by local traditional vocalist Gráinne Holland; she sang three beautiful songs - one in Irish, one in English and one in Scots Gaelic. Then Jim Neeson welcomed the deputy First Minister, Martin McGuinness, to address the audience. Mr McGuinness described the project as an inspiration and a tribute to the vision of the local community. The Minister said: "While others saw an old mill that could be knocked down, the committee saw an opportunity. The project is based on the notion of self help and about empowering people to define their own future, to take charge of their economy, their education and their identity. All people, given the opportunity and support, will prosper."

After thanking Mr McGuinness Jim went on to welcome the final speaker and very special guest to the stage Father Des Wilson. A long term supporter of Conway Mill, Father Des was invited to officially launch and dedicate the new facility. Father Des said "I have always thought of the revitalisation of Conway Mill as a symbol of the revitalisation of West Belfast and therefore of the whole city."

Jim thanked Father Des for his dedication and commitment to Conway Mill and went on to say: "The refurbishment of Conway Mill is an important milestone, not just in its long history but also for the community in West Belfast."

Finally, Jim thanked the Conway Mill Staff, the Contractors, the Tenants and Artists; he also paid particular thanks to Conway Mill's friends and supporters in the USA, thanking Elizabeth Logue for making the journey to attend this special occasion. He also wished Bob and Jean Kaniecki of Conway Mill Trust a continued recovery following their car accident in September.

Guests were then invited to tour the buildings, while the Andersonstown School of Music kept them entertained during the buffet lunch.

Financial support was provided by The Department for Social Development (£2,509,000), the International Fund for Ireland (£970,850), the Heritage Lottery Fund (£950,000), Peace II through the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (£ 476,040), the Arts Council of Northern Ireland (£329,843) and the Architectural Heritage Fund.

Conway Mill Preservation Trust have to date invested over £55,000 into the construction phase of the project. They have also pledged further funds towards the shortfall, which at the time of writing is projected to be in excess of £260,000. CMPT are currently exploring a number of avenues to raise this additional money including fundraising events in Conway Mill.

A tour of the Conway Mill is a must if you are traveling in the West Belfast area! See first-hand the vast improvements to the Mill, the Conway Education Centre's Day School, After School and Woodworking Shop as well as Conway Health Matters complementary therapy programs. We are sure you will be very impressed how far the Mill has come from its beginning 28 years ago. Thanks to the Mill's management committee, staff and volunteers for all their hard work and dedication.