Have skills, will travel

What is life like for the young surveyors, architects and engineers who have moved abroad in search of work? And will they come back?

**Gemma Tipton**

Having left Ireland for the four corners of the world, will the emigration generation of surveyors, architects and estate agents come back, or are the opportunities in their adopted countries too great? How difficult is it to start over in a new part of the world? Professional bodies here are ensuring Irish qualifications match up with international standards, making it relatively easy to up sticks and move, but what is life like on the ground?

**Liza Jane Kelly**

*Sales director, Marsh & Parsons Estate Agents, London, England*

Timing isn’t necessarily everything. Liza Jane Kelly left Ireland in 1999, “just as the Irish boom took off”. Having worked at Sherry FitzGerald for six years in Dublin, she realised that she wanted to broaden her horizons. “So I went, just as people started to talk about the Celtic Tiger.”

The London she found herself in then was very different from her work environment today.

“It wasn’t as busy, and there was less focus on customer service than there had been in Ireland, though that’s changed completely in the meantime. You also saw fewer Irish people working in the property business there. That’s changed too.”

Initially working with an international estate agent, Kelly is now sales director with Marsh & Parsons. “The issue in London is lack of stock,” she says of that city’s notoriously expensive property prices.

“What drives London is so different, it’s really international, but also changes by area. ’Superprime’ London was quiet in the first six months of 2013, which I put down to worries about Mansion Tax and job security. “But ‘Outerprime’, areas like Clapham and Fulham, took off, driven by the domestic market. We saw prices go up 20 per cent in those areas, and 12 per cent in London as a whole.”

London’s property market didn’t see a collapse like Ireland’s did. “It paused. The rental market took off, and there was an increase in what we call ‘accidental landlords’, people who had been planning to sell and then held off.

**Work ethic**

“Now the economy is better, people are feeling better, and they’re finding it a little easier to get mortgages. Developers and investors are also back, buying and taking risks again. When interest rates rise a little we might see more properties coming on the market.”

Areas on the up include Earl’s Court, Battersea, Brixton and Ealing. “Battersea particularly – they’re doing up the power station, and the US Embassy is moving [to the area].”

Kelly believes Ireland is back up on its feet. “The work ethic of Irish people has done that, and it’s what makes them succeed here too, that and their charm. Yes, London is expensive to live in, but work hard and you do well.”
Diarmuid Waters
Site engineer, Eso Al Sharafi Steel,
Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates

Leaving Ireland in 2011 was a wrench for Diarmuid Waters. Strong family ties in his native Limerick, where he also gained his degree in civil engineering, meant it was a reluctant move.

Working in London was followed by short stints in Australia and Canada, and despite offers of jobs in Ireland, he felt the challenge of working in the Gulf region was “too good to turn down”.

“The positions in Ireland lacked long-term security,” he says, though he also admits the opportunity for international experience, plus “the lure of a warmer climate” meant Abu Dhabi was an offer he couldn’t refuse.

Abu Dhabi had been going through a period of rapid construction growth, but the opportunities also brought challenges.

“Adapting to the heat of the summer was the hardest part of my working day,” he says. “And having red hair and fair skin doesn’t help”.

Although, he adds, communications can present an equal challenge, with construction teams on the huge sites coming from multiple nations including India, Bangladesh, Indonesia and the Philippines.

“Most of the men’s first exposure to English is when they arrive here for the first time. Having said that, they adapt quickly and make a significant contribution to the expat community here.”

Never-say-die attitude
With his girlfriend still living in Ireland, Waters keeps a close eye on what’s happening at home. “Every week you read about another business going into liquidation, and many of these are local businesses I grew up around, which makes the news all the more difficult to take in.

“But Limerick has always had a never-say-die attitude. The city has had its critics over the years but has always strived in the face of adversity.”

More recent trips home have raised his levels of optimism, however. “The City of Culture has created a great buzz around the city. I will definitely be coming back, though when remains to be seen.”

Recognising that the experiences he’s gaining are invaluable, Waters says he would nevertheless jump at the chance to work in Limerick.

“Don’t get me wrong. I have a wonderful lifestyle here, one that has allowed me to meet many new friends and enjoy new experiences. Some of these just aren’t possible at home, but it’s not home all the same.”
Michael Creedon
Surveyor, Wasco
Brisbane, Australia

Taking refuge from Brisbane’s summer heat in an air conditioned office, Michael Creedon has been hearing about the storms lashing his native Co Cork.

Having finished his degree in Limerick in 2003, and following further study and work with both PJ Hegarty and Bowen Construction, he decided to make the move to Australia in 2011. “Not only was there very little construction in Ireland, but I decided to move into oil and gas.”

Australia gave him the chance; he flew out on spec, and got two job offers very quickly. Working initially with Clough, he then moved to Wasco, who are based in Kuala Lumpur and are relatively new to the Australian market, working on constructing high-pressure gas pipelines. “When I left,” he says, “there were absolutely no opportunities in Ireland, but there appears to be more now.”

Creedon has been doing his research, as he’s planning his next move. “The Irish people here are noticing that it’s getting like it was in Ireland, they see it because it’s so recent for us.” House prices are spiralling and in his sector a number of the big projects are nearing completion. “Arrow Energy just closed with a loss of about 300 jobs, and the comparison between Brisbane now and two years ago is stark.”

Qatar and Kuwait were options, but recently married, and a fan of the outdoor life, Creedon now has his sights set on Canada. “Canada reminds me of Australia a number of years ago. There are plenty of jobs, and a demand for people with my skills, though the visa requirements are more difficult.”

Education system
Canada is also a bit closer to his family home in Kinsale, and the idea of swapping the scuba diving he’s been doing in Australia for skiing is a draw too. “We were in Vancouver for Christmas. You can ski after work, it’s just 20 minutes to the nearest mountain. There’s an amazing education system too.”

Any move back home would be in the long term, though Creedon misses Ireland’s culture and music. “Will Ireland have big energy projects for me to go to? Probably not, and while it seems to be improving, the rates [of pay] will still be quite down.”
Niamh Keane
Surveyor, Knight Frank, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates

Niamh Keane couldn’t have gone to college at a better time, and couldn’t have finished at a worse time. A graduate of DIT Bolton Street, with a degree in valuation surveying, she began her studies in 2004, and left as things collapsed in 2008.

She remembers “a sense of nervousness. We had started at a time full of opportunity, and came out to the opposite end of the spectrum.” She had been working part time throughout her degree, for O’Shea O’Toole & Partners in Waterford, but decided to see a bit more of the world.

“It was more of a personal decision than a professional one. I wanted to travel. Despite the downturn, there still were opportunities in Ireland, many of my friends did get work on graduation, and are still with the same companies, but I also remember the negative sentiment and sense of disillusion.”

Based in Abu Dhabi since 2008, and initially working as an English teacher, Keane used her qualifications to complete a masters degree in construction project management. Now working for Knight Frank, she is at the heart of the UAE’s emerging real estate market.

Land banks
“It’s a market that is emerging and maturing slowly, and the country is growing as an increasingly important trade and logistics hub and tourist destination,” she says. “The biggest difference I find is the opportunity to get involved in larger scale projects with different economies.”

The work ranges from small office units to proposed hotel sites, large industrial zones to substantial land banks. Another key difference is the regulatory environment. “The market here is very opaque; information is not openly shared, there are land ownership issues and a lack of planning controls.”

A large ex-pat community brings a sense of home, and Keane also cites Skype as crucial for staying in touch with family and friends.

“There’s a strong Irish Society, who hold events, Gaelic football matches, a St Patrick’s Day ball … It’s fine at the moment, but come July and August the humidity can be unbearable and when working outdoors that can be very tough.”

Keane believes Ireland is changing. “I’m seeing a turn, and the impression from colleagues in the industry is that people are recruiting again.”

So would she come home? “In time, it’s something I would consider if the circumstances were correct and the right opportunity arose. Right now, I’m happy where I am.”
Laurence Lord
Architect, AP+E, Copenhagen, Denmark

Laurence Lord left Dublin in May 2008, having worked with FKL architects for two years. “I had graduated during the construction boom when work was more plentiful, so consequently I had a distorted view on what being a practicing architect was,” he says.

“There was lots of murmured discussion concerning a construction slowdown, but this was still before the global meltdown in October, when the exodus really began.”

A few years in London, where the work “was on a larger scale and more international” led to a return to Copenhagen where he had studied previously, and to setting up Architecture Practice + Experimentation (AP+E) with Dutch architect Jeffrey Bolhuis, who Lord had met while working in Dublin. AP+E have offices in Amsterdam and Copenhagen.

Public realm
In both Denmark and the Netherlands, Lord says “the economic climate is not radically different to that in Ireland. Everybody is making tentative steps out of the recession”.

One key difference he has found in Denmark is the role of architecture in society, where it is seen as an important part of the culture and the public realm.

“There is also an easier acceptance by larger groups of clients and the general public in progressive and experimental work.”

This climate suits the ethos of AP+E, and Lord also cites the influence of the downturn in changing how many architects work. “Pre-crisis, the client came to the architect with a project, now we need to create work that we believe in and then try to sell it. In this way, the crisis is an opportunity and stimulus for architects to refocus.”

Currently exhibiting as part of the Bi-City Biennale of Architecture Urbanism in Hong Kong & Shenzhen, AP+E has also just won a commission for a learning pavilion in Ireland and has been working on a new concept for high-rise communal housing development.

With family here, Lord travels home frequently, and also works on an Irish project, such as ReMapping the Midlands, following an RIAI competition. “Of course the recession has changed the architecture climate dramatically, but there is still a lot of potential. My experience outside of Ireland has given me a fresh perspective on what is possible there.”