



Competition stage image illustrating the landscape proposed to be rising up from the left to the grandstand in order to integrate the grandstand in the Curragh landscape, but increase spectator capacity (Image: Grimshaw Architects)

A Rare Opportunity for Landscape Design

In 2017 Dermot Foley Landscape Architects (DFLA) were offered the opportunity to redesign the entire land-holding at the Curragh Racecourse, which is one of the world’s most famous venues for flat racing and is situated on the edge of the only fragment of ancient hygrocybe grasslands remaining in Ireland. This landscape is a remnant of an ancient land and its sensitivity required DFLA to develop a successful Landscape & Visual Impact Assessment as well as a design that would cater for the numbers of visitors and events, with zero negative impact on the landscape of the Curragh itself but also on the Pollardstown Fen which is located two kilometres to the north of the site.

The Curragh and Natural Processes

The Curragh is an outwash plane formed by melting water at the end of Ireland’s Glacial Age. This glacial clash between stone, gravel, clay and other sediments has played a fundamental role towards the context within which the Curragh sits. The effects of the geological process, however, are no longer visible, but provided a potential for a design concept to reflect how the Curragh was once formed. DFLA’s design celebrates both the glacial materials hidden below the surface of the landscape and the land form which is particular to this part of Ireland.

Re-development of a Historic Landscape

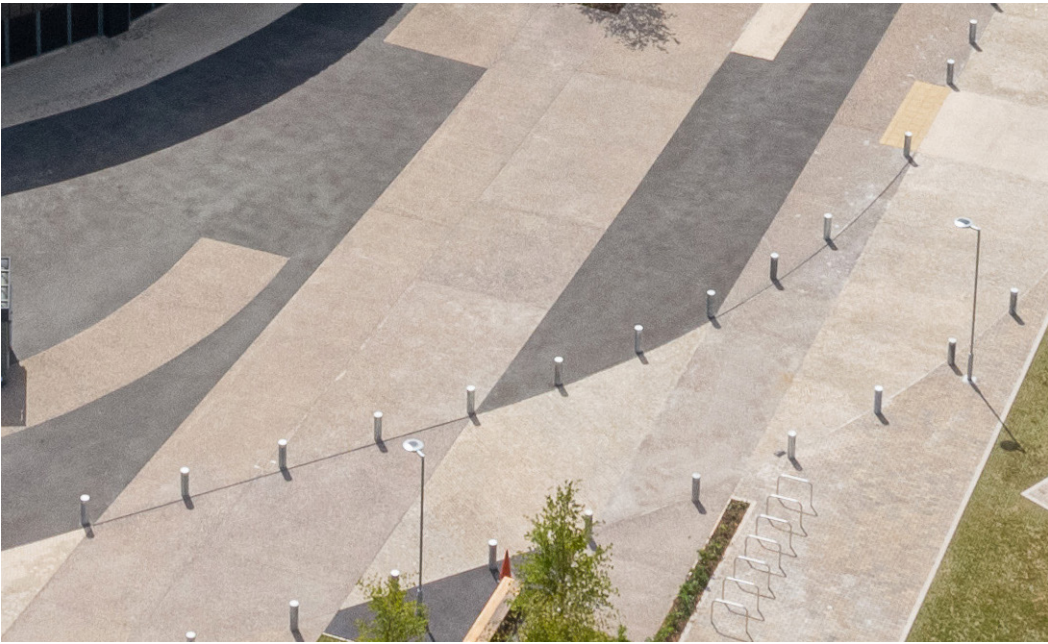
The project was an incredible opportunity to re-develop an extensive and historically significant landscape – a landscape of which it is said druids traversed in procession from the valley of the River Barrow to the valley of the River Liffey. The landscape design challenge was to optimise the grounds for full capacity race-day gatherings, while also creating a sense of intimacy during the numerous smaller events throughout the year. This began with the transformative site planning process and the relocation of parade rings, pre-parade facilities and historic structures such as the Queen’s Room. Then a palette of materials that would reflect the geology of the site was selected and these materials were laid out in an open-ended composition that would reflect the landscape itself and the dynamics of racing. New trees were then located to enhance views from the north, past the new facilities and across the great plain of the Curragh.

The redevelopment of the Curragh Racecourse received a UK Civic Trust Award in 2020.

‘... to reinvent a landscape that would cater for large crowds during the internationally renowned racing events but would also feel intimate during smaller events...’



Materials and atmosphere (from top to bottom) - aerial photo overlooking the sharp terraces reflecting elements of the glacial history of the Curragh and the dynamics of racing (Photograph: Gareth Byrne); the terraces and seating on a quiet day, illustrating the effect of maximising sward and minimising hard standing within the enclosures



Materials and atmosphere (from top to bottom) - a detail of the main spectator entrance plaza, which is paved with a rich composition of materials that reflect the underlying glacial geology of the site (Photograph: Gareth Byrne); the new parade ring on 'race day'



Competition stage image illustrating the landscape proposed to be rising up from the left to the grandstand in order to integrate the grandstand in the Curragh landscape, but increase spectator capacity (Image: Grimshaw Architects)



Plan of the enclosures and main spectator entrance plaza (NTS)



Aerial photo overlooking the Curragh Racecourse and the palette of materials that reflect the geology of the landscape. The materials are laid out in an open-ended composition that reflect the landscape itself and the dynamics of racing (Photograph: Gareth Byrne)

All images by Dermot Foley Landscape Architects (DFLA) unless otherwise credited.