

Taoiseach backs plan for new Irish Arts Center



Aidan Connolly and Pauline Turley of the Irish Arts Center outline the center's major rebuilding plans for Taoiseach Enda Kenny Monday. PHOTO COURTESY IRISH ARTS CENTER.

By Orla O'Sullivan
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"I'm impressed by what I've seen," Taoiseach Enda Kenny told a Saint Patrick's Day gathering at the Irish Arts Center in Manhattan to unveil design plans for its \$54 million reconstruction.

The announcement of what is being flagged as the foremost center for Irish culture in the U.S. came, appropriately, on March 17th.

"I'm impressed by its potential," how it's going to evolve over the next 50 years," said Mr. Kenny with a smile.

The plan is to have a new premises - seven times the size of the existing one - yet still at

the same site, on 51st Street and 11th Avenue on Manhattan's West Side, by the end of 2016.

There's to be a theatre twice the current size, another café/music venue about the size of the existing auditorium, studio space, a community garden, and lots of outreach online.

A \$16.5 million funding gap remains between the money raised to date and the \$54 million cost envisioned, but Aidan Connolly, executive director of the IAC, said in an interview that he is, "absolutely confident" that money will be raised.

The taoiseach alluded to the shortfall in his comments, saying, "I'm aware of the financial

situation." He said that various agencies would come together in the U.S. and Ireland, including the Office of Public Works.

The chief state architect at the OPW, Ciaran O'Connor, is the IAC's project design architect.

The taoiseach added that New York Mayor De Blasio is "very interested" in the IAC's plans, as conveyed in "a very positive meeting" the two had earlier on St. Patrick's morning.

Other ambassadors for the IAC's cause include Liam Neeson, Gabriel Byrne and the current darling of late-night television, Jimmy Fallon.

Neeson accepted an award on behalf of the IAC last Friday at a gathering of about 300 Irish

businesses in the New York Stock Exchange for Ireland Day.

Saying he was honored to accept the IAC's award for promoting "Brand Ireland," Neeson added that with the new center, "Finally we will have a place that represents the unprecedented stature of Irish art and culture."

Although the current center has hosted many performers with global name recognition, it has done so from a premises not equal to such greatness. Its low-ceilinged foyer gives way to an auditorium that seats fewer than 100 and, in the other direction, to a narrow, sinking stairway leading to classroom/office space and a leaky roof.

"I hope it won't take you that long to build it," Neeson added,

Increasingly, the current center has been too small for the IAC's work. A sold-out poetry tribute to Seamus Heaney last November, hosted by Gabriel Byrne, was held in St. Anne's Warehouse in Brooklyn. And the IAC has celebrated Bloomsday in the 800-seat Symphony Space uptown, instead of its own 99-seat theatre.

Aidan Connolly said the new IAC will retain both its sense of intimacy and "outward orientation." Technology will help in that, with some classes--in music, language, dance, going online.

The revamped center will have a new, main entrance on 11th Avenue and will expand westwards in an L-shape and up five floors, while keeping the brick facades on both 51st St. and 11th Ave.

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