



From Past to Present

S1E1: From Past to Present: In Conversation with Jim Quinlan

Description: Sarah and Jim take a look back at the early design of the Luas light rail in Dublin - including the earliest engagement with people with disabilities via the Passenger Transport Accessibility Committee - and reflect on Jim's experiences of planning public transport for people with disabilities at home and abroad.

Guest: Jim Quinlan

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Hello and welcome to All Aboard TII's accessibility podcast this is a podcast about accessibility and sustainable public transport brought to you by Transport Infrastructure Ireland I'm Claire Scott and I'm joined by our All Aboard podcast host Sarah O'Donnell throughout the series we would be hearing first-hand accounts from people who use and design public transport systems and specifically the role accessibility plays in these experiences and who is this podcast for in the first instance we hope to connect with people with disabilities who use our services but also it's for anyone who is drawn to human interest stories and has a curiosity to learn more and of course we hope to attract listeners who are designers and decision makers for Transport Systems who through the podcast might get a better understanding of some of the problems and potential solutions that are out there so without further Ado let's give this a go and get all aboard TII's accessibility podcast.

What's the focus for this episode? Hi Claire, so in this episode we're talking to architect Jim Quinlan about his experience of working with people with disabilities at the very earlier stages of the Luas Light Rail design way back in the early 90s. We also chat to Jim about his architectural and transport design adventures in such far-flung places as Dubai, Israel and Qatar and how public transport and attitudes to disability differ from Ireland and along the way we also chat about some of his own personal experiences around disability it's a great interview hope you enjoy it

We're joined now by Jim Quinlan project director with Barry Egis who are The Design Consultants for the Luas Finglas extension Jim you're very welcome to All Aboard TII's accessibility podcast thanks Sarah lovely to be here so Jim before we get on to the Luas Finglas I want to travel way back in time and to talk to you about your previous role as Chief Architect with the railroad procurement agency and I'd specifically like to talk to you about your participation in the passenger transport accessibility committee or PTAC as it was known so tell us about how that came about and about your engagement with people with disabilities...so a little bit of background...I qualified from UCD in 1982 and went to live in the UK and I was lucky enough to work for Dr Bernardo's for 12 years and Dr Bernardos has specialised in facilities for children and young adults with disabilities both physical and mental and that was a great grounding for me in the whole area of Universal Design yeah and so when I came back around about 2000 came back to Ireland to work on the Luas and I already had I think a reasonably good understanding of what the issues were for Designing for people with disabilities or mobility impairment and as you mentioned I took part in a committee that was set up by the Department of Transport which featured the key public transport agencies so Dublin Bus, Bus Éireann and CIE and the Light Rail Project office as it was at the time dealing with the Luas and representatives of the various disability groups or NCBI, Irish wheelchair Association that there was a broad representation of people on that committee and it was really formed as a way to coordinate and ensure that all the issues of using public transport for those with disabilities were addressed and baked into the designs that everybody was doing and all of the new schemes and it was also about interoperability and being able to move from one system to the other. We also talked eventually on the committee we had some people from the taxi associations and also from some of the private coach companies yeah and you

know we looked at ways that everything could connect up and we talked about all the issues of you know the first and last mile which is always a problem for Mobility impaired users using public transport and so that that was very interesting and you know a lot of good work came out of it and I suppose it's important to say that that kind of consultation that you were involved with was even before the 2005 Disability Act and to put it in context as well Manchester was also building a tram system at the time and they made the decision to go for the high floor tram that's right but the Luas was following the French model so that was a very good decision absolutely yeah we went for low floor trams low platforms short ramps not too steep we spent a lot of time aside from the PTAC committee we spent a lot of time meeting the individual groups themselves and in fact when the first trams were delivered we organized special trips for to allow people to familiarize themselves even before it opened to the public we had guided tours and groups of people who were partially sighted or blind people who had hearing difficulties and in fact even during the testing and commissioning phase we had some of the wheelchair users testing out the facilities on board the tram and making sure even in we did some simulations for emergency braking situations to make sure that it was safe and that helped in the final configuration and design of the vehicles themselves and we tested the gap to the threshold and platform you know all of the issues making sure that you know the level difference was no more than 50 millimetres you know and really testing out all of the ideas we weren't able to do everything that that everybody asked for some things you know because of safety issues or infrastructural issues couldn't be done but I think we addressed at least 90 percent or 95 percent and the great thing is that it has continued since then and you remained I left in 2008 to go and work in the Middle East and but the ideas that we planted in those early stages of the Luas continued right through and to this day absolutely I mean so many positive things came out of that I recall the issue of the Gap and change has been made to that and of course the ticket vending machines that's right yes adjusted and the yellow stripe on the on the vehicle itself so lots of very direct and positive outcomes came from that consultation one of my few times when I actually went out and did some work in the depot we had tested with a wheelchair the platform Gap and we noticed there were some problems for the small wheels at the front getting stuck between in the platform and the threshold of the vehicle yeah so we fitted some wider thresholds on onto the LRT vehicles and I actually got it a chance to do some physical work out in the Depot on one of the trams myself so very good I enjoyed that immensely it was great and then we took it out and tested it and it solved the problem and all the subsequent trams were fitted with the wider threshold fantastic and as you say the PTAC is now the Department of Transport accessibility consultative committee and the user group continues to this day and I have to say lots of members of that User Group continue to ask after you so this obviously your legacy there was very impressive

So to go to was it 2008 you made a big change in your life I did you moved from RPA in Dublin and headed off to first Dubai and then to Jerusalem to work as an architect also on light rail yeah so maybe tell us about your role in those countries and how their systems might compare to ours okay so in Dubai I was working on the Al Sufouh tram which is a small tram that connects the Mall of the Emirates to

the Marina in Dubai and links to the Dubai Metro at a number of locations so one of the key things there was making sure that there was accessible links between the Tram System and the Metro System one of the difficulties in Dubai is that the streets are not really designed for pedestrian use that much it has improved over the years but at that time it was very difficult and it was very car centric and I mean that's interesting because Dubai in a way is a City built from scratch so entirely almost apart from old Dubai accessibility wasn't really consideration maybe in the city or the built environment yeah in the city and you know during the early days of the city really it was designed along more of a kind of American style you know car dominated very long distances and even Sheikh Zaid road the main thoroughfare through the centre of the city has 12 lanes 6 lanes in each direction and there are very few crossing points and very few bridges over it so people take taxis from one side to go around to get to the other side you know but that has changed and you know as people have really become more conscious of you know the importance of accessibility and pedestrian areas and walking is that there's far more places now for people to do that with adequate shelter obviously because of the extreme temperatures but I took a lot of the stuff that we did on Luas and applied that to the design of the stations in Dubai fortunately it was exactly the same vehicle so that that was that was a fairly straightforward one to deal with and the big difference is that the stations there are enclosed and fully air conditioned so your ticket barrier is at the edges of that enclosed building and you get into the building and then you board yourself exactly and there's an airlock there's a lobby as you go into the building itself it's all glass with the a solid roof so it's well shaded but fully air conditioned and there are platform screen doors that allow you to get onto the vehicle and we looked at all of the things you know platform screen doors was a new innovation for the tram system and you know for people to be able to manage that so we look very closely at floor markings and you know arranging how people would actually you know get on and off the vehicle because it has been a problem here and it's I think still happens to some extent you know when the trams are very busy people getting off if you're in a wheelchair and you're in the wheelchair space and you're trying to get off the tram it can be very very difficult and of course that's will be an issue potentially on Metrolink where we will have the platform doors as well absolutely so you know we did we designed the floor markings so that there were clear indications of where people should stand when they're waiting to leave the way off the vehicle clear so that people would get off first before other people try and enter into the vehicle and I think that's worked reasonably well very good so

After that then I went to Jerusalem and I spent three years in Jerusalem working again on another tram system and believe it or not the same tram again so very convenient and here in Jerusalem the design was very like Dublin so open platforms minimal shelters and that was that was really a very straightforward system they already had part of the system in place and up and running I was in charge of extending the lines to new areas and so it was a matter of just doing the same thing again yeah but of course Jerusalem is such an ancient and historically kind of unique City there must have been kind of unique challenges there not to mention I suppose you know the kind of cultural and social you know

issues that they have there absolutely and you know one of the big issues for Jerusalem of course was that you know the tram was going through you know Palestinian areas as well as you know Jewish areas and so in the early days you know there were some tensions I think now people have calmed down somewhat and you know everybody is able to use it it's a good open system it replaced a bus high floor bus system yeah that ran along you know the same routes and of course like most cities you know perhaps apart from Dubai older cities all had tram systems like Dublin had you know the old tram system Jerusalem also had an old tram system that was there for many years but I enjoyed it you know and that particular project I enjoyed it and I recently spoke to one of my ex- colleagues they haven't actually opened it yet so the extensions that I worked on but they are expecting to open them next year so very good I hope to get a trip back to have a chance to see that and just as a matter of interest just given the kind of history of conflict were people with disabilities more prevalent or more did you find that they were kind of war injuries or not necessarily not necessarily again I think you know in the old city of Jerusalem it's not very accessible you know the pavements are very difficult to manage the you know it's very hilly so you don't tend to see you know that many people in wheelchairs right for instance but the one thing I think that is significant there is you have quite an aged population and so there are a lot of older people who have you know difficulties you know with mobility and simply because of their age I'm getting to that age myself and you know so it's that is something that you see yeah quite a bit but other than that I wouldn't say it's particularly different to other cities in the world and what an incredible experience to have lived there yeah no I was I consider myself extremely lucky

so I when I when I finished in Jerusalem I then went to work in Qatar and I worked on the Metro System in Qatar which is a something very different I worked on the Gold Line which was 10 large underground stations on a line that runs parallel to the coast and there we were really dealing with all of the issues of access via lifts and escalators we applied you know universal design principles we looked at passenger information displays it's a fully automated system as well which means that there has to be an extra layer of safety on top because as you can imagine with the Luas and similar LRT systems the driver is control is controlling what's going on so he can see you know with his cameras he can see the outside of the vehicle you can see inside the vehicle he's able to hold the doors open longer if needs be or you know if somebody's is trapped in the door he will release it he can't he can't leave the platform or talk to someone through the cab or exactly he can speak to somebody you know the emergency communications on the on the platform on the on the vehicle itself with the automated system it's very different yeah so again you know the system in Qatar uses platforms green doors yeah fully air conditioned obviously you know systems and so there is a measure of control that way and we took some of the lessons from Dubai in terms of the markings on the floors and you know creating areas and one of the things because the station is very large in Qatar we put a lot of seating into the stations so that people could actually have a chance to stop and rest some of the stations are 60 meters deep so long distance long distances down to the platform and even though you have escalators it's still very long distances to travel and sometimes you have banks of elevators or

escalators with landings in between so we put seating on the landings we looked at the lighting you know we again you know tried to adopt the principles of universal access for all yeah older people younger people everybody exactly and I think that's the key thing that you know it's not about designing for people with specific impairments it's about designing something that is easy for everybody to use absolutely and if you know if you adopt that approach you know it all makes sense level boarding easy to view signage to the way you're trying about traveling through the space exactly you know and also you know an important aspect of all that is the whole idea of having a secure and safe space and you know since I've come back I've been impressed in some of the work that's been going on here in TII with the gender lens and the work that's there you know looking at you know broader issues with regard to safety and security and feeling perceptions of security and it's all going to benefit the system because all of that is actually going to encourage more people to use it and the more people that use it the safer it is exactly one of the things that that we did in Dubai that was interesting, we had a system of guidance that actually started at the platform so you had a tactile guidance for people who were visually impaired yeah that would take you from the station to different destinations so you would you would you would start from you know if you're coming from inside the station it would take you to a particular exit and we had tactile maps for people to use so that they could navigate their way around so the tactile paving would bring you to the map yeah then there were other tactile paving's that went off from that central map to the left or to the escalators or to the taxis or to the you know the exit points so it was able to guide people and one of the things that that we did excuse me one of the things we did before opening the system was that we had some specially trained staff available and at every station there was somebody there who was able to guide people and once you effectively trained people yeah how to use the station it was very easy for them then to now have it independently become independent yeah fantastic and so many lessons there for Metrolink as well you know when you think of the you know it is going to be different to light rail but and it presents different challenges but like you say think about universal design from the very beginning I think Simplicity if you design it well you don't need to rely on masses of signage and guidance yeah because sometimes that can be counterproductive and you see systems you know I'm sure you and you know the listeners have been to airports around the world where you've got so many signs yeah you just you don't have a clue which way to go yeah so you know one of the things for me always is you know a good wayfinding system something that's intuitive visual links between where you are where you want to go to that you can actually see you know where you're going to go and really just to make it as natural and you know as easy as possible

Fantastic so Jim on a personal level back in 2019 is it 2019? Yeah you had an accident which left you partially blind in one eye yeah so no I'm fully blind in my left eye left eye and you're an architect so obviously you know this that's a very visual profession so maybe you know that must have been pretty worrying at the time maybe tell us a little bit about the accident and the impaction it's had so it was a just a freak accident I fell and I smashed my glasses and the glass caused some damage to my left eye and despite surgery it wasn't possible to save it so for the

last few years now I've been getting used to you know navigating with just one eye one of the things that happens with people who just have one eye is that you can't perceive depth anymore you lose your 3D Vision yeah so it's very difficult to judge distances and so you know it's been an interesting experience to be on the other side of the table if you like as a as a you know a mobility impaired person you know suffering from a visual disability and you know I think my pet peeve is staircases and the stripes yes and so many places don't put the high contrast stripe along the edge of the stairs or a step and you know it's a real problem yeah and you know because you can't differentiate the actual depth of the of the treads or if there's a step in the even in the street yeah you know so that's something that is a problem thankfully it hasn't affected my career and I've been able to continue you know doing my work and after a eye test I've also been given a new driving license and can still drive I do have to take extra special care you know in terms of maintaining distance to vehicles in front but it's you know it's just something that you would adopt your lifestyle to when and you get used to I have other disabilities that are not so apparent I have a problem with my right arm following a failed surgery a number of years ago and I have very little grip in my right hand and so this can sometimes lead to some difficulties as well and all that I mean you know I can see it myself with elderly parents and everything opening jars the kind of opportunity every day everyday packaging all of that yeah some packaging is impossible and you know simple tasks that you would take for granted you know can become very difficult and you know one of the things that that for me is very difficult now is opening doors that have a very heavy mechanism or a very heavy closer because I have no strength in my hand anymore you know that that becomes a difficulty so you know it's salutary lesson you know and you know the reality is that we do have a population that is living longer and as people age you know just the aging process itself people start to suffer from disability either through an accident or you know through illness or whatever the reason more and more people you know are reaching an age where they will live with some sort of permanent disability so it's more important than ever that we make universal design make the right choices at the beginning and often it is a choice but people are unconscious of the alternatives are there it is and you know I'm glad to say that over the last 20 years I suppose I've seen that you know things have been baked into legislation and you know there's a far greater awareness you know when I started work in Bernardo's in the early 80s the only guidance that we had at the time was the very famous book designing for the disabled by Selwyn Goldsmith and Selwyn Goldsmith was an architect who in the 1960s wrote a guide a design guide for designing for people with disabilities which is still very relevant today but Selwyn had had contracted polio when he was a child and was partially paralyzed and it was because of that and the difficulties he had that he published this book and that was what we use in Bernardo's and you know as I say still it's been updated and modified and it's still relevant and still important but it just goes to show that you know personal experience of these things can lead to something really good you know that over time that will make those changes happen and you know when you get support from government agencies you know when you have all of the various bodies representing people with disabilities working together yeah and working with their community working with their counsellors and you have designers and agencies who are open to doing that like the work that you know you and your colleagues are doing you know with the user group you know to just keep moving forward with that keep improving

and you know absolutely should be open doors for people literally you know and have the I mean with the United Nations convention on the rights of persons with disabilities like that's a right based thing but you'd like to think that it shouldn't always be a fight you know that it needs to just be embedded it's less of a fight than it used to be yeah for sure

So I mean clearly like all of your life experience has been brought to bear and now you are back working on light rail in Dublin yes as we say life comes around and you know back to where you started so yeah delighted to be back I'm back in Dublin since January although I was working on the on the job remotely during the Covid lockdown but since January (2022) back here in Dublin and working with your good self and your colleagues on extending the Luas up to Finglas yeah and all of those lessons learned are being pumped into that piece of work and looking forward to completing the design of that this month actually and starting the railway order application process in the coming 12 months and then next year we hope to apply for the railway order and after that it will be a question of tendering and then getting the thing built so it would be a nice way to finish for me it will finish my career I'm at an age now where you know this will probably be my last really big piece of work and it's just nice to be back working on something that I started with yeah and like I think just the way the design is going at the moment a lot of you know those lessons over the years are being applied so you know when we're going through green spaces and Parks this consideration of more vulnerable pedestrians the interaction with bicycles and of course all of the stop platforms and all of that continuing the kind of best practice there so and you know we're also looking at you know some of these things in the context of sustainability and the environment so for instance you know one of the things I know you're heavily involved in it is the whole issue of lighting on the on the platforms and you know lighting in the public areas through the parks you know minimizing it but having enough that it's safe comfortable uncomfortable having it responsive so that you have Lighting in the park areas that only comes on when activated by somebody actually walking past yeah so you know we're kind of blending in that whole thing of safety and accessibility usability efficiency energy efficiency sustainability you know all of these things all come together but they complement each other you know they you bring them together and you end up with something really good at the end of it yeah absolutely it's going to be a great project yeah I'm looking forward to a trip on it when it's done fantastic and finally Jim Quinlan we can't interview you without talking about music and I just know from wherever you've gone in the world music finds you or you find it and just talk to us about what music means to you what part it's played in your life and I feel anyway it seems to be a big part of what makes you such an optimistic person so yeah I suppose so I mean you know I grew up at a time when music you know was your main source of entertainment uh you know we didn't have a TV until you know I was seven or eight years old but you know people in the house played music I learned music in in primary school and then all the way through college I you know I played music and you know when I went to the UK and worked over there we formed a band in the you know in Bernardo's and everywhere since then that I've worked including in the RPA you know I've had I've had bands and played music I find it you know for me it's relaxing

and you know I enjoy entertaining and I've been lucky enough to be able to record some albums and you know continue everywhere I've gone I've played music and I've made friends very quickly in the music communities you know I'm still friends with a lot of people and actually I back here in Ireland I've met up with my old friends that we used to play music with and we got together for a couple of sessions and some recording so you know it's somebody once said that architecture is Frozen music and I don't know if that's the case or not but certainly I get enormous enjoyment out of it and you know it it keeps me sane fantastic thank you so much Jim you're very welcome lovely to talk to you and we will play out with a song one of your own songs thank you very much yes thank you Jim

♪ **Jim Quinlan's outro song** ♪

Take me away from this place

Far from the noise and the cities embrace

Take me to somewhere they know my face

So many steps now I need to retrace

All of the secrets I thought I knew

All of the things I thought I would do

Shadows illusions still coming through

Lead me to some place closer to you

Saving it up got to give it away

A reason for coming is not a reason to stay

Lure of the bright lights beginning to fade

Playing my songs like they have always been played

All the people I once knew

All of the places I passed through

On the highways there's only a few

Bring me some place closer to you

I know the time its coming soon

The singer forgets how to sing the tune#

I pray for the rain as they stare at the sun

The relevant dust is all they've become

And all of the dreams that have almost come through and all of the words we remember them too

I'll change my direction wish that I knew

We hope you enjoyed our conversation with Jim. Thank you to our host Sarah O'Donnell to Trevor Cudden on Sound, to our production team Kathleen Jacobi, Rachel Cahill and Claire Scott, to Sinead Foley from TU Dublin who designed our fantastic graphics and to everyone else who helped make this podcast. Please send us your comments and feedback to allaboard@tii.ie. For more episodes from All Aboard please go to Spotify iTunes or wherever you get your podcasts. Until next time...