Market Square, Stradbally,
Co Laois, Ireland

Stradbally is a small rural town set in a rolling landscape in the Midlands of Ireland, having a population of 1,300, but also serving a wider hinterland. The name derives from the Irish Sráid Báile, meaning ‘street town’. The settlement originated at the site of a medieval monastery, developing to its present form in tandem with the large country demesne of the Cosgrove family at Stradbally Hall. An aerial depiction of around 1340 shows the demesne as a large formal landscape in the French style, with the town at its periphery. The town is shown centred on the Market Square, which had an earlier market house at its centre. Over the course of the nineteenth century, the town expanded south of the river in a linear manner. The present Market House, essentially an iron covered market, was constructed in 1899. The building is unique among Irish market houses, being an open covered market, unlike the traditional enclosed ‘hollied type’, which was the norm in Ireland. A marble shield fixed to the front records that it was erected in 1899 to commemorate an esteemed local doctor called William Perceval, who died that year.

It is built of wrought iron with a corrugated iron roof. Its construction details were derived from the typical Irish haybarn but with decorative scrollwork and having a tent-shaped roof, made possible by a variety of improvised and highly idiosyncratic junctions.

The project was in large part funded by Laois Partnership under the LEADER Rural Development Programme, with additional funding from Laois County Council, the Stradbally Credit Union and the Electric Picnic, a popular music festival held in Stradbally demesne each September. The principal conservation challenge was to retain the unique architectural and technical significance of the building by preserving the detail and materials of its historic construction. However, the project set out to go further than the conservation of the building to include the reinvention of the public space as an amenity for the town. The public toilet was replaced at another location, opening up views to and from the square, and to the landscape beyond.

The ground plane was surfaced with concrete in an exposed-aggregate finish, to reflect the simple character of its setting. This was edged with the blue limestone typical of the area, which resolved the gentle slope of the square with wheelchair access at two points, and steps at the lower end. A timber market table which had once stood inside the building, was reinstated, as well as a water pump, shown in photographs and on historic maps.

An important part of the intervention was to relocate the main bus stop, which had been front of the building, to the rear, enabling the Market House to serve as a bus shelter and an important social gathering place. In addition, it is used as a small market, and as a place for open-air events. The lighting has been devised to highlight the tent-like underside of the roof, and is particularly effective at night time when it reinforces the character of the Market House as the focal point of the town, and highlights the intricate nature of its simple decoration.