Feeling more like a village than a school, St Angela’s College is liberating and uplifting, writes Shane O’Toole.
Every once in a while a project comes along that just socks you in the jaw. A real surprise, even when you know it is from a heavyweight puncher who has been winding this one up for a decade and a half. You scramble momentarily to recover your senses, your thoughts. Because at first glance there is nothing much to see here. No conventional take-away image, no cover shot. To a large extent the school is invisible. It has no face. It poses the hardest question of all in today’s image-saturated architectural world: what is architecture?

When I ask John Tuomey to describe the longest-evolving project in his career, he replies gnomically, sounding like an ancient mariner exercising an old hobby, ‘It’s like Cork in a bottle.’ Hidden from view and approached through a narrow gap between tall houses and high walls halfway up St Patrick’s Hill, St Angela’s College is a big and complex city-centre school for 530 girls. But before that it is a secret miniature hill town, miraculously assembled against the odds behind the steepest street in Ireland.

That is Tuomey’s message in a bottle: his metaphorical vitrine captures the essence of this hilly, maritime, voluptuous city. The analogy is confirmed later, looking towards the site from the opera house down by the river. The school fits seamlessly into the urban panorama, identifiable only if you know what you’re looking for. Occupying the fourth of five stacked-up, broad-sided terraces, this new line on the horizon is a citadel in camouflage, comprising three protected Victorian buildings and three new elements that manoeuvre their way down the hill past the historic structures.

St Angela’s was founded in 1887 by the Ursuline Order of nuns in a former police station on St Patrick’s Hill. The first student to cross the threshold was Mary Ryan, who went on to become the first female university professor in the British Isles. Within a few days of opening, the school was full and there was a waiting list for places. Building began immediately on the High School, which was opened in 1888.

When O’Donnell + Tuomey were commissioned 111 years later, the school buildings comprised two long, tall, narrow Victorian blocks arranged at right angles, with almost half the students occupying prefabricated classrooms set within a sea of tarmac that covered the rest of the site. There was neither a school hall nor a sports ground, but superb esprit de corps proved that was no barrier to sporting success as St Angela’s became serial national champions at table tennis, having improvised fold-away ping-pong tables in the classrooms. The plan was to redevelop the lower part of the restricted site and provide a sports hall with a schoolyard on the roof. Various schemes faltered until 2009, when the nuns decided to sell their convent and orchard garden on the adjoining site, unlocking a much bigger project on the south-facing slope that slopes 18 metres, or five storeys, across its 100m length. Crucially, the school authorities and their architects had held their collective nerve throughout all the years when there was anxiety about the constricted site being too small for the brief – the provision of open space, in particular – and the always-easy option of moving the school out of the city to a green-field site was mooted by the Department of Education, but resisted.

Protected structures that had to be retained included the five-bay, two-storey convent, formerly Richmond House, dating from 1820, and the High School and Main House, built in the 1880s and 1890s. Existing floor levels in the Main House set the levels of the teaching floors in the new buildings. Fortunately, the lower floor of the convent approximates in level to the top floor of
the Main House, permitting floors to run across courts and to the performance and library) down a series of stairs and stepped alleys, through passageways and across courts to the performance and play area at the bottom of the site, without entering a building.

‘It has to be a place where you can never get lost but could imagine getting lost,’ says Tuomey. Wandering the labyrinthine sequence of spaces is a rich and magical experience, full of atmospheres, like the Venetian camino e calle crossed with the topography of an Italian hill-town: think something along the lines of Castel del Monte in Anton Corbijn’s 2010 film, The American, but smaller and safer). The whole cannot be taken in at once but is slowly revealed by navigating your way along a journey of discovery, which is as good a metaphor for education as exists, and remembered not through the eyes but through your feet, becoming a physical rather than visual memory.

The biggest challenge was to incorporate a full-sized sports hall that can also seat 600 on the site. Usually the largest form, here it is almost tragi-comic, set at the bottom of the site across from the High School. Perched on its roof is a gleaming green ball court overlooking the city below, where the school’s new sports teams have been elevated on a pedastal, the world literally at their feet.

This happy impression of rare privilege, conferred not by size of budget but by thoughtfulness, slow architecture, recurs in many parts of the school, from the library in the old convent whose reading rooms would be the envy of an Ivy League college, to the orchard garden with its antique gazebo \( \text{90} \), students can promenade by twists and turns from the orchard garden (off the art room and library) down a series of stairs and stepped alleys, through passageways and across courts to the performance and play area at the bottom of the site, without entering a building.

It obviously helped, too, that O’Donnell + Tuomey are no strangers to designing buildings without a face, and willingly accepted a preconception of the brief that would have deflated the ego of many another architect. Their first major work, the Irish Film Institute in Dublin, had no facade. Moreover, it was on that project that they first developed their strategy of focused subtraction and addition, and demonstrated the ability to ground urban buildings in a supportive network of alleys, routes and squares – an architectural attitude they have raised to new heights at St Angela’s.

‘This is the pay-off for working on old buildings,’ says Tuomey. ‘You should be able to do it in new work but you can’t, because you’ve got too much. All my working life, I’ve been trying to get the site to reveal itself, as if it invented its own context,’ he continues. ‘That was the ambition. Now I understand. The school reveals the city. Remember Addabbo Zehra’s answer when he was questioned about the Villa Malaparte: “So you designed a house?” “No,” he replied. “I designed a landscape.”’

The slow gestation of this project – over more than 15 years – and the condensed thought that was its consequence must have played almost as significant a role as the topography of the site in generating the extraordinary urban and educational qualities as evidenced here. Not to mention the symbolism embedded within the scheme: from action to thought, from body to mind. Sport, play, eating and various congregations at the bottom of the hill; art, literature, nature and space to reflect alone or in polite company in the more rarefied spaces up top; and slap-bang in the middle, an umbilical cord, connecting the school to the city. It obviously helped, too, that O’Donnell + Tuomey are no strangers to designing buildings without a face, and willingly accepted a preconception of the brief that would have deflated the ego of many another architect. Their first major work, the Irish Film Institute in Dublin, had no facade. Moreover, it was on that project that they first developed their strategy of focused subtraction and addition, and demonstrated the ability to ground urban buildings in a supportive network of alleys, routes and squares – an architectural attitude they have raised to new heights at St Angela’s.

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Architect O’Donnell + Tuomey Structural & civil engineer Malachy Walsh and Partners Services engineer Arup Consulting Engineers Photographs Denis Gilbert 3, 9, 5-6, 8, 12 O’Donnell + Tuomey 4, 7, 9-11