St Angela's College Cork - O'Donnell + Tuomey Architects

Page 44

Newry Leisure Centre
Kennedy Fitzgerald Architects
Page 52

Public Realm Westport and Sculpture
Winner of the 2016 RIAI Public Office Award
Page 60

Irish Pavilion, Venice Architecture Biennale
Yvonne Farrell and Kieran McGonigle
Page 56
ST. ANGELA’S COLLEGE CORK

This project has been sixteen years in the making. We were first commissioned to consider the development possibilities of the site in 1999. Working closely with the school community, we worked our way through various design options. The eventual project was developed out of a slow careful process of subtraction and addition, a critical evaluation of the liberating possibilities offered by the restrictive constraints of the context. In the end, the given difficulties gave rise to a scheme with a more urban, perhaps civic, character than if the project had started out with the easier advantage of an open flat site. The school is designed like a hill-town, with city lanes and terraced courts connecting the new and old together, like a topographical miniaturisation of Cork’s urban conditions.

St Angela’s College is situated on a steeply sloping mid-block site on Patrick’s Hill in Cork city centre. The existing school acquired the neighbouring convent site, allowing it to expand on this restricted urban plot. New interventions work their way down the hill, passing between existing historic buildings. A continuous external route from top to bottom negotiates the 18-metre drop in site levels, connecting orchard garden, courtyards, classrooms, and playgrounds.

Four nineteenth-century buildings were refurbished and two new purpose-designed buildings were added, one for sciences and one for arts. The biggest challenge was to incorporate a full-size sports hall on this confined hillside. A clear-span concrete structure is located on the lowest part of the site. Its roof, at the level of the entrance from the street, makes new ground on the site and provides a sunny terrace and ball-court with views out over the city below.

Another challenge was working with a standard Department of Education secondary school brief to a tight budget on a very complicated and non-standard site. Red sand from Cork red sandstone was added to the mix for the concrete paving, in continuation with the typical street landscape of Patrick’s Hill. Architects and builders worked closely together to get the best value out of the project, to make a lasting public building on a very special site. The school opened its doors to 550 students and 50 staff on the 6th January 2016, the feast of the Epiphany.

1. St Angelo’s school is designed like a hill-town with city lanes and terraced courts
2. The site is located on Patrick’s Hill with civic views over the city
A CITY WITHIN A SCHOOL – ST. ANGELA’S, CORK
BY STEPHEN BEST

Can paying huge sums on an amazing new school building be vindicated? In the face of acute austerity, the easy answer is possibly, no. To be great, a school does not need to have great architecture; providing that staff are devoted, it could be anywhere.

St Angela’s College, Cork, has dedicated teachers and is popular, with a long waiting list of applicants, but when the floor area in cold draughty makeshift teaching accommodation outweighs that available in permanent buildings, it seemed something had to change. Prefabs have been a feature of Irish schools since the 1970s when the gardens and play-spaces of our schools were wrenched into a shanty town of temporary buildings, of the type that has become a permanent feature of many modern secondary schools.

In 1999, St Angela’s ran an open design competition and appointed O’Donnell + Tuomey to consider the development possibilities of the site. After waiting for 16 years patiently, the school reopened in January and everyone is now housed in a real building. Was it worth the wait?

The school mediates a precipitous site, which falls north to south. Its 6000m² of floor space is sandwiched between Richmond Hill and St. Patrick’s Hill, a broad thoroughfare that negotiates the greying rocky escarpment.

The intricate plan of outdoor rooms and mini squares between the buildings drops 18m, a full six storeys, across the site. At the top is a serene orchard a remnant of the genteel life lived by the occupants of Richmond, the upper house, previously owned by brewer Jeremiah Murphy. There is surely no more magical place in Cork to sit. Richmond is now the school library. At the bottom of the complex is an informal, outdoor, dining terrace with relaxed stepped seating for chatting or perhaps impromptu theatre, in-between is all the friction and buzz that makes schools what they are.

The entrance off St. Patrick’s Hill, at the centre of the building, opens into a modest open-air courtyard. An informal space, it reverberates with the spatial and material character of the whole. The palette of raw materials is robust and dignified, with human-scale places to sit. Just beyond the narrow reception is the stepped street. Running north to south, it is a broad thoroughfare that negotiates the full length of the enclosure. The street is pinched in the middle, between the Main House and the Science Block. Either side of this slate-lined nexus it expands both east and west to form a series of ingeniously positioned interconnecting terraces and courtyards. The views between these spaces are contained, entwined within the walls and buildings, which intensifies the campus-like feel.

The street has a familiar urban character. It is a kind of town in miniature, a city within a city. Intimate places to sit and rest are sprinkled all through, while adel niches are carved into the building fabric to provide shelter for rainy days. These are the kind of places that are found in the best cities, they encourage and facilitate a vibrant network of human relationships, which develop a sense of community, and perhaps the nooks and crannies of imaginative escape.

Two outdoor spaces stand apart; a small walled garden with broad seating behind the main house, and the rooftop all-weather pitch above the sports hall. The first, safe and secure, is popular as an informal outdoor classroom. It represents the intimacy and privacy of school life. The second has a broader relationship to the outside world, a belvedere that projects forward high above the street, a place to see and be seen. It is reminiscent of Piazza dei Caffarelli, next to the Piazza del Campidoglio in Rome. It provides a spectacular panoramic far above the chaotic city below, views sweep in a broad semi-circle, taking in all of the city from the industrial part to the bucolic surroundings of University College Cork.

The new additions are visible from the city below. They announce the school on the skyline. Yet, although substantial, they do not overpower the group. Their impact is carefully mediated by the use of a subtle sloping roof-scape of dark grey zinc-cladding, which echoes the rhythm and texture of their domestic neighbours, which tumble down the hillside like a greying rocky escarpment.

Up close, the new buildings have a purposefully civic character. In contrast with the surrounding townhouses, the window openings are a mix of apparently randomly sized and spaced circular portals or expansive bands of glass, which sit in muscular warm toned fibre cement frames. The circles typically signify circulation, while the larger openings provide ample lighting for the classrooms.

Whereas the views from the stepped street are enclosed and private, inside, from the corridors and classrooms, the views expand outward, east to west. They are threaded through the building to frame subtle glimpses of the city beyond.

Constructed using a simple concrete frame, the new parts are externally insulated and clad in a ‘Welsh Slate’ render. Although harmonious with the adjacent 19th century fabric, which is predominantly uncoloured Natural or Roman cement, it doesn’t have the warm purple tones that bloom on these buildings in the rain. While the walls are perhaps a little grey, the floor is redolent with colour. The ruset sandstone, which is mined nearby, has been employed playfully in the surface finish.

Folding gently up the hill from the lowest level, the crushed stone pavement forms

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The oxide-red metal work features regularly in the work of O’Donnell + Tuomey. Existing and new buildings are connected by new routes. A striking carpet of red, which darkens dramatically in the wet. Offset against this, descending from the outdoor sports field above, is a startling, raw, bone-white, concrete stair, the consequence of using local limestone as aggregate. These familiar colours, signify the architecture of Cork. Making buildings from materials won from the ground in which they stand endows them with a sense of place, and instils a broader sense of community. Inside, the red and white theme continues. The oxide-red metalwork, a familiar trope in the O’Donnell + Tuomey canon, wraps and twists its way theatrically around the brilliant white exposed concrete structure, throughout the common areas of the school.

The existing buildings are treated with respect. Where new meets old, the original surfaces are left naked. They reveal their scars and wrinkles. This is part of an elaborate game, which explores the fabric’s history. Elsewhere the 19th century interiors have been carefully restored to their original brilliance. While the school is populated with the usual annul of standard commercial loose furniture, the fixed millwork is reassuringly made of tough no-nonsense birch-faced-plywood, the kind loveable stuff that old fashioned schools were made of, and which only gets better and better with use.

High quality thoughtful design is difficult to measure in monetary terms. Good architecture can’t make good teachers, buildings can’t get young people through the Leaving Certificate or make a successful hockey team. But it can help to bring these things about when staff and students think of their learning environment as a place that elevates the heart, works well, and shows thought, imagination and dedication in its making. St Angela’s is an extraordinary group of buildings, an informal settlement that is humane delightful and well made, which grows out of its particular context and encapsulates elements of intrigue. Not only is it justifiable, there should be many more like it.

Stephen Best is a Senior Lecturer at the Dublin School of Architecture (DIT) and the Sunday Times’ architecture critic. He is also the Second Vice President of the RIAI.
Outdoor spaces include generous piazza-style areas with views over the city.

The new sports hall benefits from the natural light.

Link corridors frame views and make connections.