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Ireland's Cherry Orchard
National School

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Ireland's Cherry Orchard National School

By O'Donnell + Tuomey Architects and Father Shán Ó Cuív, Board of Management of Cherry Orchard National School, Ireland

This recently completed primary school illustrates how architecture can contribute to creating a safe and warm environment in a difficult area and can meet the particular needs of the student community. In its first year in operation, Cherry Orchard National School is proving to be a successful project. Presented here are the architectural description and comments from the client, the school's Board of Management.

The brief for this new primary school in Ireland is non-standard. It was developed in consultation with the Department of Education and Science, Cherry Orchard Parish priests and their advisors. The social conditions in the Cherry Orchard area of Dublin have led to the inclusion of special facilities for preschool children, for children with special needs and for the care of children outside school hours. The school is the country's first to include this broad range of functions.

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION

Site

The predominant feeling in this part of Cherry Orchard is one of anonymity or lack of identity. Other public and commercial buildings in the area have been subjected to considerable vandalism and are hidden behind palisade fencing.

The site is located on Cherry Orchard Avenue between the Catholic church/parsonage and a family medical centre, both bounded by high railings. Except for these parts of the east and west boundaries, the site itself was not enclosed nor its boundaries marked. To the north, across Cherry Orchard Avenue lies a large open space enclosed by railings and surrounded by two-storey houses; horses can often be seen roaming there. To the south and west the site opens onto an area of waste ground beyond which can be seen the pylons of a major power line, a major dual carriageway road and the Dublin Mountains beyond. Dublin Corporation has begun work to make an enclosed park on this waste ground with playing fields, a playground, all-weather pitches and extensive planting.

Design

The briefing from the Department of Education and Science specified that the school building should be designed in such a way as to minimise its vulnerability while retaining an architectural expression appropriate for a primary school. The challenge was to find a design solution that would give the school a strong identity and to an extent create its own context, a context that would be welcoming and attractive for students from all backgrounds, including the most socially deprived.



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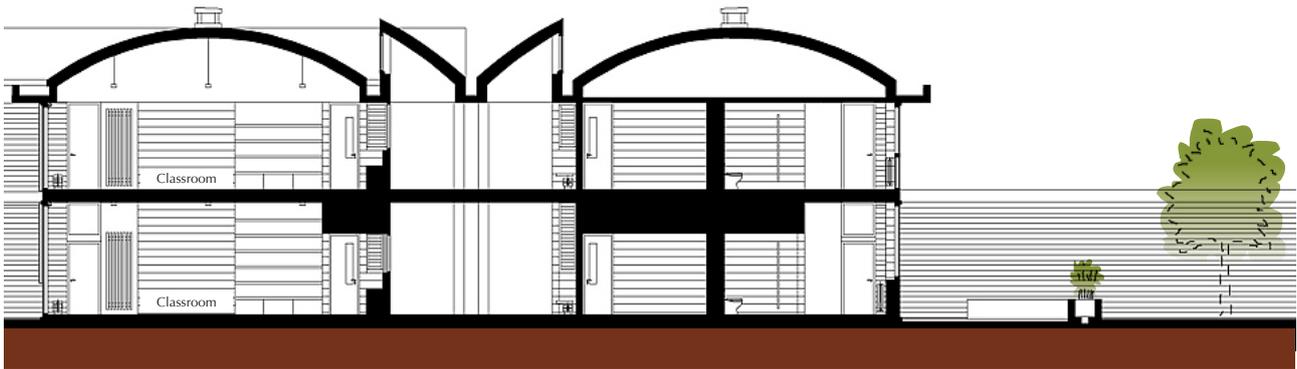


The scheme takes the form of a school within a walled garden planted with cherry orchards. The school is arranged between a series of courtyards within a 3.6-metre-high brick garden wall. The brick wall provides shelter and protection to the school and the outdoor play areas, while giving the building a strong architectural form on the site. All of the accommodation is two storeys high and gives onto the garden/playgrounds.

The junior and senior classrooms are located in the main east-west spine of the building looking onto the two main garden/playgrounds. A wing containing the preschool nursery and special care unit projects south from this spine. This gives the preschool nursery its own protected courtyard play area in the southwest corner of the complex. The classroom spine is connected back to the main entrance by a block housing the general purpose hall/canteen and reception area. Staff accommodation is located on the upper level of this building.

The rooms take their light from the courtyards, and perimeter walls are generally without openings, except for the main entrance, the rear entrance to the ball court play area and a number of openings which give low level views into and out of the gardens. The height of the garden walls has been carefully gauged to allow the trees to be visible from outside the walls.

The vaulted concrete roofscape with projecting rainwater gutters reinforces the distinctive form of the building while deterring unauthorised access to the roofs.



Materials

The concept of the walled garden/cherry orchard is central to the project and creates a strong sense of place while also affording a degree of shelter. The brick boundary wall is the defining element here. The brick and lime-rich mortar provide warmth, colour variation and a richness of texture, which softens the impact of the large areas of brickwork.

Windows are made of unpainted hardwood with an initial sacrificial clear sealer treatment to prevent staining during construction. This treatment will wear away during the first year of the building's life, allowing the hardwood to weather naturally.

The concrete seats and planters in the playground areas and cappings to walls have been sandblasted to expose the aggregate and provide richness.

The brick, hardwood and concrete together form a palette of materials which are robust but which will weather naturally and give the building a sense of being rooted in its site.

Landscaping

The trees in the garden playgrounds have been planted as mature specimens in order to minimise the risk of vandalism. Being visible from outside the perimeter walls, the trees confirm the character of the school as a walled garden and its image as a place of welcome.

The perimeter walls are planted with native hedgerow species in order to re-establish some plant types that would have originally flourished in the area.

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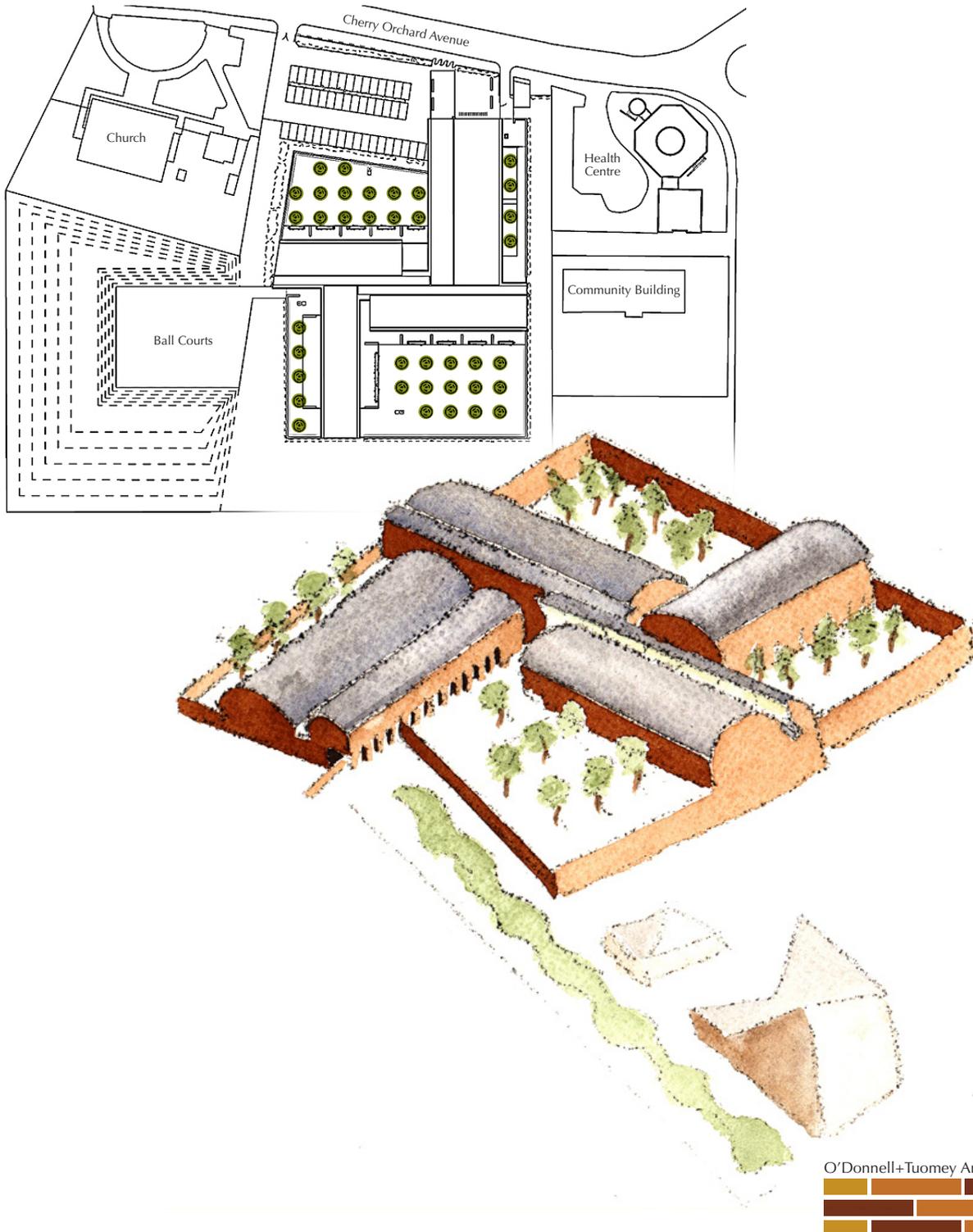
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CLIENT'S COMMENTS

Cherry Orchard, despite its name, which should conjure up images of beauty and fruitfulness, has over the years been dogged by educational failure, unemployment, anti-social behaviour and a general atmosphere of bleakness. A small but successful local project inspired a new approach to education

which could break the adverse cycle. At its heart was the conviction that the physical, social, emotional, spiritual and educational needs of children should be attended to in an integrated fashion within a warm and caring atmosphere from the earliest years. The Department of Education and Science was supportive of the concept and engaged the architects to build a complex that would include not only 16 classrooms but also a fully equipped canteen, a pre-school nursery, and a care unit providing support during and after school hours.

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The architects have translated the philosophy of the project into a building that is both practical and uplifting. The spaciousness, openness and light within the building have created an atmosphere of warmth and welcome that makes children and adults alike happy to be there. This is important in an area where school has often been a negative experience. Many people have commented that it is hard to believe that they are in a school building. They seem to relax as if they were walking in an art gallery opening out on to attractive courtyards.

The arrangement of the various elements of the building facilitates the integration of education and care within the project and lends itself to the children's progression through each stage of their development. The use of high quality materials such as the brick and timber as well as the imaginative design of the curved roofs providing an attractive light on the top corridor lends a new sense of worth to Cherry Orchard.

The philosophy of the project is that children have an innate value and dignity. This new building affirms their worth and is a statement that Cherry Orchard may rightly aspire to the beauty and fruitfulness that its name evokes.

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