Ireland's Refurbished St. John's Central College

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IRELAND'S REFURBISHED ST. JOHN'S CENTRAL COLLEGE

St. John's Central College, the third largest further education institution in Ireland, recently expanded and refurbished its facilities. The resulting site is more open to the community, and the new building spaces are designed in accordance with their social and academic functions.

Managed by the City of Cork Vocational Education Committee, St. John's Central College is a Post-Leaving Certificate institution, providing vocational and technical training to students who have completed secondary school and to adults. St. John's offers courses complimentary to those of its nearby sister college, Cork College of Commerce with which it shares certain facilities.

The design team was commissioned to evaluate the options available to the Vocational Education Committee to provide comprehensive further education facilities for the college. The team's recommendations resulted in the purchase of the adjoining timber yard site adjacent to St. John's.

The primary intention of St. John's Central College is to prepare students for the workplace. The college can also act as a stepping stone for students who continue on to higher education. The range of over 40 courses available at St. John's cover the areas of art and design, media technology, computers and electronics, construction, tourism and services, and applied science.

The site and the city

The college is located within a short walking distance of Cork's bus and railway stations. The area of the college grounds is approximately 2.7 acres, nested in the middle of a city block with only a small amount of frontage onto the exterior streets. The buildings are fully revealed only upon entering the newly formed inner quadrangle. The site's lack of visibility justified the development of a substantial four-storey building.

In 1997 when the design team began its work, St. John's Central College comprised several separate buildings, including a single-storey building from the 1960s in a poor state of repair, Buckingham House (a 19th century sandstone building which served initially as a women's penitentiary and subsequently as a school), the former St. John's Church which has since been declared a protected structure, and workshop buildings in various stages of dereliction.
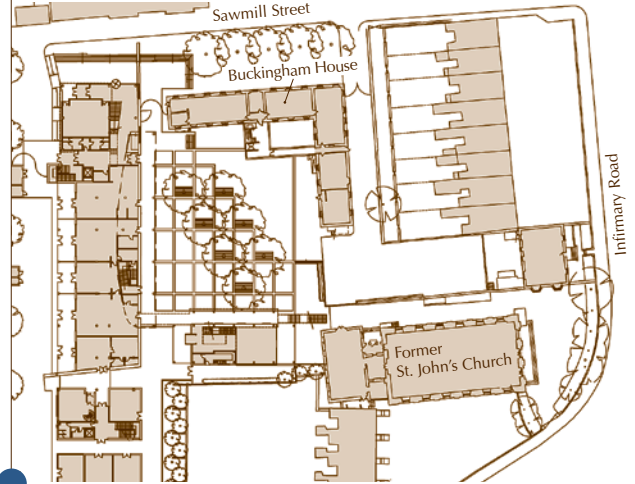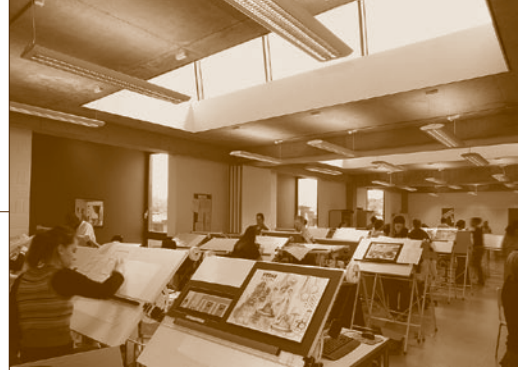
Removal of the 1960s building and the workshops allowed the architects to create a public space by arranging two new buildings, the four-storey main building and a canteen, to form a landscaped quadrangle. The architects' development plan proposes to complete the edges of the quad in future by adding a glazed front to the two sides of Buckingham House and inserting a building adjacent to and linked to the former church.

Demolishing the 1960s building in the latter stage of the contract made it possible to retain most of the existing teaching facilities over the duration of the work.

A stone boundary wall separating Buckingham House from the street was also demolished, opening up the whole of the Sawmill Street frontage and creating an additional civic space. This openness allows interaction with the local community, and projects are being developed to encourage this interaction. Sawmill Street now supports the main entrance to the college and links it to the College of Commerce.

Low maintenance external finishes were chosen for the buildings. On the higher parts of the buildings, reference is made to copper spires and domes that are a familiar sight on the Cork skyline. White self-coloured render provides a neutral backdrop to the copper and the coloured opaque panels in the curtain walling.

Building spaces

The new buildings have a combined floor area of 5 200 m². Two principal movement routes through them promote social and academic interaction. Within the main building, the primary movement route dissects the building on the north-south axis while physically and visually connecting the floors. The secondary east-west movement spine connects the college entrance at Infirmary Road to the base of the south atrium in the main building via the canteen's first floor gallery.

The ground floor of the main building is arranged differently from the other three floors and is screened by a wall following the line of the former timber yard site and thereby recalling the history of Sawmill Street. The ground floor accommodates a four-storey entrance atrium, a 72-seat lecture theatre, and a series of highly serviced engineering spaces which are accessed directly from the quad through the timber yard wall.

The building spaces are grouped according to function, and the material and structure likewise correspond to their use. On the upper floors, to the west of the movement axis, are the practical teaching spaces articulated as orthogonal fair-faced concrete block. In contrast, to the east of the spine are theoretical teaching spaces expressed as curving forms finished in smooth plaster. The arts and crafts rooms are located on the last floor and top-lit to take advantage of the north light through copper roof lights.

The library, above the lecture theatre, is shared with the College of Commerce and has large prepatinated copper walls.

The administration and staff rooms are grouped vertically and are clearly visible from a second, south atrium located at the intersection of the two movement spines.

All the interior finishes are low maintenance.

Realisation

The project was procured in two stages. An enabling works contract encompassing demolitions, piling and site surcharging was followed by the main contract which commenced in May 2003. The combined contract value was approximately EUR 12.4 million. The new buildings were put into use in April 2005.

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