
Visit to the John and Aileen O'Reilly Library, Dublin City University, and the Ussher Library, Trinity College Dublin, 10-11 June 2004

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This was SCONUL's first 'buildings visit' to Ireland. We joined a party of 30 or so, from as far afield as Edinburgh and Essex, who were attracted by the idea of contrasting venues in Dublin: a day in the suburbs at a new university, followed by a half-day in the city centre on a historic site. The weather played a supporting role in this contrast, offering us clear blue vistas one day, and intermittent downpours the next.

On the edge of Dublin City University campus, the John and Aileen O'Reilly Library makes an impressive landmark, with its eye-catching domes sparkling in the sunshine. This € 22M building, which opened in September 2000, won a SCONUL Library Design Award in 2002. It is a beacon of learning and research activity at night as well, shining over the wider community, and aptly symbolising the regeneration of the area. The library is named after the parents of the major benefactor, Sir Anthony O'Reilly, a former chair-

man of H J Heinz Company, who was brought up in the neighbourhood.



The beautiful interior space (10,700 m²) certainly lives up to the exterior promise. A large and airy entrance leads to an elegant central atrium (a cafeteria and lavatories are kept entirely separate). Under the imposing staircase is a Zen garden, adding to the prevailing air of studious calm. True, the library was unusually empty due to the time of year, and the Zen sands sometimes need re-raking when students relieve their tensions by re-patterning them! Everywhere the building materials (granite, stainless steel and glass) produce a calm and bright atmosphere, conducive to study, and an accessible, inviting and flexible space.

The building is three times the size of the previous facility, offering 1200 user spaces, and over 300 desktop PCs. The feeling of light and space everywhere was emphasised by the subtle colours – blue chairs, dark grey carpet, light wood, white walls – and all looking as if it had only just opened, reflecting the obvious pride and ownership of DCU staff and students in their library. There also appeared to be a well-controlled environment – only later did we learn that the exter-



nal environment sometimes baffles the building management system in the basement – opening upstairs windows, contrarily, in gales and rain...

There was a large assistive technology room, and drinking water fountains throughout. On the other hand, wheelchair users might have found the heavy doors difficult. We were interested to learn that students were allowed to read text messages on their mobile phones, but that any other use was an offence, with ultimate fines donated to a charity chosen by the Students' Union.

At present there is enough space available to reserve areas for specific types of user. These are designated postgraduate and research 'Commons'. The former provides protected space away from other students; the latter (perhaps not yet taken up with much enthusiasm) has computers, printers, and comfortable seats, to provide a social space conducive to interdisciplinary discovery (or gossip). There is also an 'Information Commons' with 100 PCs, and a training suite with 30 PCs, which can only be booked for use by library staff.

North American design inspiration led to the creation of seventeen collaborative study rooms, all named after benefactors. These have been very popular with students, (although they are apparently not soundproof). Another American idea is the 'mentoring suite', a room where students can assist their peers in the learning process.

Paul Sheehan, the director of library services, spoke about the local and Irish contexts, and the benefits of 'Atlantic philanthropy'. DCU's mission was to aim for social inclusion, and to contribute to multinational economic development, with information seen as the infrastructure to research.

Paul McDermott, chief executive, DCU Educational Trust, spoke inspiringly of the role of the fund-raising team, which is never off-duty. He gave as an example of the chance encounter on an aeroplane which ultimately led to the building of the O'Reilly Library. He recommended taking every opportunity to engage potential benefactors. If you first of all ask for advice, money may follow. It was also important to involve donors in the process all the way, including after the building has been put into service.

A different perspective was given by the operations manager of Invent, Ron Immink. He is an enthusiast for promoting the role of the knowledge-based economy via DCU's enterprise incubation unit. In his view, information is the key to

entrepreneurship, and the business community an important part of DCU's agenda.

A cross campus stroll, past some less distinguished buildings, led us to a superb lunch in the 1838 Club, where even the bottled water bears the DCU logo. There can be a tendency to feel soporific after lunch, but the day was carefully planned to keep us upbeat with the original vision from Dr Alan MacDougall, the former Librarian, responsible for commissioning the project, and from David Cahill, representing the architects Scott Tallon Walker.

Miriam Corcoran, sub-librarian, planning & administration services, spoke on the users' experience, standing in for the Student Union President. The students made intensive use of the building, and took obvious pride in it. In a recent survey, 93% rated the library as excellent or very good. Nevertheless they, and the library staff, did have some concerns over issues such as maintenance, access, helpdesk staffing, appropriate numbers of PCs, and noise.

The day ended with an early conference dinner 'on commons' at Trinity College. The warm fire in the reception hall was all the more welcome because many of us had been drenched in an unexpected downpour. The meal was brought to a sudden end by an impressive Latin grace and a request from the catering staff to make way for a much more important group of diners.



We reassembled the next morning, in a basement training suite, in a more traditional environment, to hear how Trinity College Dublin had solved their need to expand existing library space on a historic and constrained site. The James Ussher Library, which opened in April 2003, is named in recognition of one of the College's founding fathers who collected the core of the Old Library in the seventeenth century.

The € 23M euro building was part-funded by the Irish Programme for Research in Third Level Institutions, to provide a single complex with the existing Berkeley and Lecky libraries, and to complement the Old Library. With acquisitions of over 100,000 items a year, the Ussher Library was to combine the roles of national legal deposit library and busy undergraduate teaching library, with a sophisticated brief to rationalise and improve accommodation for users, conservation and storage.

The Librarian, Robin Adams, welcomed us with an introduction, followed by a tour. Our first impressions were that the building was rather gloomy in parts, with too much heavy concrete, and dark ribbed rubber. An interesting “orientation space”, linking old and new buildings, was not being used to best advantage. A few pillar-mounted OPACs faced an abandoned enquiry desk in a space now apparently used mainly for returned books and trolleys.

However, the reading rooms were very impressive, with open vistas across the campus. High quality architect-designed desks and low lighting levels provide a learned atmosphere, which does encourage ‘absolute quiet’. The staff report that the building does support contemplative solitude (a hard-won campaign had successfully kept down noise, mobile phone use, even numbers of drinking water bottles) – but they have also recognised their lack of group study space. All 750 individual study spaces are equipped with network connections, but there had been a budget shortfall in PC provision.



The 8-storey glass atrium was a striking feature, which might cause anxiety for anyone prone to vertigo. It successfully divides book and reader accommodation, provides some natural light in all areas, even the basement, and is designed to act as a chimney in case of fire. Fresh air is provided through vents, and hot air filters out through the top of the atrium. Mesh windows can be opened but only to an extent which does not compromise the security of the bookstock.

The tour included a visit to the Glucksman conservation department, underlying again the particular role of TCD, as a provider of diverse research information to visiting scholars, with a national responsibility in manuscript as well as book collections.

Ruth O’Herlihy, of McCullough Mulvin Architects, spoke of the challenge of designing a building which would relate to the campus and to the city streetscape. The basic idea was to link three blocks, making them totally accessible, and with nothing over-elaborate in the design, just timeless, pure lines.

Trevor Peare, library project officer and Keeper - readers’ services, spoke about one year’s practical experience. He believed separating books and readers had been a success, with finishes and environments adapted to each. American examples had shown that you cannot have both total flexibility and a good environment. There had been no easy answer to integrating staff and reader areas: staff were either too accessible, or had to be protected in a gold fish bowl. There had been other issues, such as the sheer size and distances to cover for users and shelvees. The budget for signage had run out. However, a recent LIBQUAL survey reported concerns about overcrowding, heating and noise in other parts of the library, but users had nothing but praise for the Ussher Library.

In both libraries, the importance of early visits to the best buildings in USA and Europe was stressed as the key to the preparation of vision and brief. Local success was heavily dependent upon suitable space being available, a corporate vision, generous funding, and a team effort from top down in the institution, with the full involvement of all library staff.

Both DCU and TCD shared the ideas of high quality design, a peaceful study environment, an inspiring atrium, attractive vistas, and an aim for the ‘wow’ factor – or as they say in Dublin ‘the bejaysus factor’ !

The visits were extremely worthwhile and enjoyable – for the exchange of ideas, a chance to see best practice, and to meet colleagues. Many thanks to all those who contributed, not least to Philippa Dyson, support manager, learning resources, University of Lincoln, who co-ordinated the event.