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The Lewis Glucksman Gallery at University College is intended to:

• provide a cultural and artistic centre on the university campus which would link to the wider community and become an important civic space in Cork

• provide changing exhibition galleries for exhibitions from the UCC Modern Art Collection, and allow for a wide range of travelling and special exhibitions of international standard

• provide an educational institution that promotes the research, creation and exploration of the visual arts.

Located at UCC’s main entrance gates, the building includes display spaces, lecture facilities, a riverside café and gallery shop.

Podium — The podium is the point of access up to the gallery and down to the café. The entrance hall opens onto the podium, which intersects with the route of the pedestrian approach from the main avenue and the riverside walk. The podium is clad in limestone, relating the new building to the architectural language of the campus. It emerges from the limestone escarpment like a man-made extension of the landscape. Acting as a pier between the main avenue and the river, it is both landscape and building, plinth and pathway.

Gallery — The gallery is raised among the trees in an interlocking suite of rooms, with selected views up and down the river into the trees and towards the campus. The timber-clad gallery is intended to be understood as a wooden vessel which resonates with its woodland site. Gallery spaces are interconnected in plan and section to provide a variety of scale and lighting conditions appropriate to the exhibition of a wide range of artworks and artefacts. At the core of the gallery sequence is a suite of close-control environmentally conditioned spaces for museum-standard display conditions and multi-media and acoustic performance.

Café — The café opens to the west onto the parkland between the river and the limestone escarpment, providing views from the lower ground to the college above.

Landscape — Sir Thomas Deane’s 1854 design for a neo-gothic quadrangle, dramatically sited on a wooded escarpment above the meadows of the River Lee, is an important monument of picturesque architecture in Ireland. The lower-ground grazing meadows, originally crossed by streams and a mill race, were reclaimed and drained at the end of the 19th century. The new building occupies a minimal footprint between mature trees, which pre-
viously encircled two disused tennis courts. By building tall, to the height of the trees, the bulk of the building is reduced and the parkland setting of the university is conserved.

Construction – The base of the building is a limestone-clad concrete structure with galvanised steel windows cut into the solid plinth. Timber-clad gallery spaces are supported on a concrete ‘table’ structure, cantilevered from columns to protect the root structure of the surrounding trees. Granite-aggregate concrete was sandblasted to reveal reflective mica in the surface of the structure. Angelim de Campagna, a sustainably sourced hardwood, is bent around the external envelope of the gallery structure, with galvanised steel bay windows peeling out from the wall surface. Services are routed in the thickness of the walls and floors to minimise extraneous visual intrusion in the gallery spaces. The intention is that the natural finish materials (sawn limestone, galvanised steel and untreated timber) should age and weather into the landscape.

area – 2,300m²

design to completion – 1999-2004

photography – Denis Gilbert / VIEW

Section through galleries and café

Plans – lower-ground floor, ground floor (café level), 1st floor (podium), 2nd floor and section
Plans (above) – 3rd floor (close-control gallery), 4th floor (top gallery). Elevations – east (top) and north.
ASSESSORS' COMMENTS

MATEUS - This is an extraordinary site, with the trees and the river. This is the perfect site. This is the perfect brief. But with a site like that, and a brief like that, so strong and so powerful, one can never judge a construction apart from its context.

BYRNE - I think this is an important building. I like the economy of its footprint on the site, and the clarity of the three conditions. You are either on the podium, in the podium, or in the trees.

MATEUS - But look at all the columns. The architects talks of a cantilever, and that's what they wish for. My point is that this cantilever would be more real by having the columns suppressed. If you were doing this in Portugal, the concrete core would probably be able to support everything else.

MURPHY - While I appreciate your comments about the purity of the cantilever, that doesn't worry me so much. The building has great movement in the confines of a woodland dell. And as for the gallery spaces, well, there is enough square footage there, and use and experience will prove what art can be exhibited to advantage, and what art will require the use of temporary stud walls and plasterboard to offer more neutral space.

RILEY - There are many beautiful aspects to this project - the way it sits next to and above the river, the light and the rounded forms. I am not sure it would be an ideal art gallery though.

BYRNE - It provides a fine new public space for the city of Cork, an art gallery in the trees above the river.

MURPHY - I saw this building under construction, but not since it was completed. From the perspective of a gallery director, you could argue that the only conventional gallery space here is the smallest room in the building, the biggest area of wall is curved, and there are windows everywhere. But I still think it's a great addition to the university and the city.

BYRNE - The galleries are almost peripheral and look a little residual. They are organised, it seems, towards the windows and the views of cathedral, college and trees in a very nice promenade.

MATEUS - But look at these triangular window spaces, for example. They break up the wall continuity. The driving force here is not the space itself, but the relationship with the exterior.

BYRNE - The project is also to a certain extent about how the college meets the city - it's making a friendly gesture.

RILEY - Given all the advantages inherent in the project - the site, the programme, the client - I do think the results could have been better. The elements are all good, just disproportionate in some ways. The columns seem to be too insubstantial, the space under the building too large, the stairs too narrow.

BYRNE - I still think this is an important building for the university and city.

RILEY - Even though I have expressed some reservations, I would like to see the project in person to really understand it. Until then, my judgement would have to be provisional.