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The brief for the new Medical Research Laboratories at University College Dublin's Belfield campus comprised two distinct functions – a research institute for highly specialised investigations in medical microbiology, and laboratories for the routine testing of medical samples. The separate activities share technical resources. The site, on sloping ground among mature trees, is a sheltered location in the campus, on a main pedestrian axis between the entrance car park and bus stop, and the central formal lake.

Single-storey laboratories are planned around a landscaped courtyard and connected to an existing testing facility. Service access is segregated in a delivery yard at the opposite side of the building from staff and visitor entrances. The building is planned to maintain the existing trees, which give a special character to this part of the campus.

The research laboratories are raised above the ground, like north-facing studios, with long views over Dublin Bay. A central stair hall provides a social space between laboratories and offices. Extract fumes are filtered and exhausted via the high chimney roof form, with no pipes on the skyline. The steel-frame structure is clad all over in fibre cement panels, with wooden canteen and conference rooms grouped under the main body of the building.

The brief is specific to the particular functions of research and testing, and the building contains a number of separate dedicated laboratory suites. However, despite the requirements for segregation, the structure had to be designed to accommodate envisaged changes of equipment, technology and function, and the potential for future extension to the west. This requirement for flexibility is reflected in the structural, services and access systems of the building.

A complex brief, stringent technical criteria, restricted budget, and the requirement for clear spaces for concentrated work are resolved in a simple and expressive architectural form, which is the first building visible from the main entrance to the college.

Area – 1,300m². Stage – completed February 2003.
ASSESSORS' COMMENTS

BETSKY – This is the kind of building I would love to be able to visit. It has such a terrific set of images, but does it really work? How does it sit on its site? It's a beautiful composition.

ROBBRECHT – If you look at the plans, it's a very mature piece of architecture. It's true, these photographs present a very strong image. But I consider this as a very strong building, one of the really good projects.

O'NEILL – Yes, it's really strong. I think it's beautiful.

CONROY – I think it's a very strong project.

ROBBRECHT – Also, the materialisation of the cladding, the way it is detailed, is very impressive.

O'NEILL – There's a maturity about the planning which translates all the way down to those images of how it's put together. It's just all so well considered. I like the image at night-time; it's very powerful.

BETSKY – But what really goes on over there [in the undercroft]? I mean, I agree with all of you on its architectural quality, I was immediately taken with it. But the more I look at it, the more I start wondering what goes on in that very high undercroft and in that hollow.

CONROY – This little timber piece passes in underneath that space overhead. There's a lot of bravura sculpting going on there.

BETSKY – But what goes on there, and what does it look like up close?

ROBBRECHT – Maybe it is lifted up to make a statement, to create a landmark at the entrance to the campus. I have real confidence in this quite beautiful building. Look at the plan and the section, and the way these interesting, mature plans are realised in sophisticated volumetrics.

O'NEILL – Yes. And it's also a serious building.

FINUCANE – I really like the west elevation, and I love the plan. I also like the way it sits in among the trees. Now, a certain amount is due to photography, but it's also down to the building.

BETSKY – But, I am puzzled by some things. Where is that upper-ground testing laboratory? Where is that? Where is that whole building? All we see is the tower. And if they
claim it’s about the context, why do they never show the full context? Even the model doesn’t show the context. I agree with everyone – it’s a beautiful object. But I’m really suspicious about what happens there [in the undercroft], and what that timber screen really is about. Maybe it’s all fine. I mean, it’s a very compelling set of images.

O’NEILL – I think this building would be really impressive if we went to visit it. I think that it doesn’t describe itself and its particular context in the campus quite as well as it might.

FINUCANE – That makes a great argument for going to visit all the buildings shortlisted for an award.

CONROY – It’s very impressive in the photographs.

BETSKY – I am very seduced by this as an object. Some of you have seen it in reality? So I’m trusting the local assessors that this really works in context as well as it looks here. Because from the photographs – and I really want that to go on record – it is incredibly annoying that they don’t show us the relationship to the surrounding buildings.

ROBBRECHT – It is still, for me, a very strong and sophisticated building, one of the really good projects here.

O’DONNELL + TUOMEY – founded in 1988 by Sheila O’Donnell and John Tuomey. The practice has developed an international reputation for cultural and educational buildings, including the Irish Film Centre, the National Photography Centre, and Ranelagh Multi-Denominational School. Currently engaged in the design of university buildings, schools, housing and mixed-use buildings in Ireland and the Netherlands. Urban design projects include the Temple Bar regeneration in Dublin and the Zuid Poort master plan in Delft. Both partners are studio lecturers at UCD, and have taught at schools of architecture in the UK and USA. The work of the practice has been widely published (including an Architecture Profile from Gandon Editions) and widely exhibited, and has received many national and international awards, including the AAI Downes Medal in 1988/90/92/97/99 and 2002.

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