To School under a Big Sky: A review of Extension to Carnaun National School by Paul Dillon Architects

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The east Galway countryside sits under a huge sky. Flat fields bounded by dry stone walls and low hedgerows spread out on a long horizon. The national routes leading to Athenry, Tuam and Claregalway are cut through a maze of narrow bótharins that turn, twist and divide. Buildings on or very close to the road boundary, at times, width and view along these narrow lanes.

Originally dating from 1891, Carnaun National School is one of the model primary schools rolled out by the State. The beauty of the model school programme was that it provided a common language of elements, materials and details that gave a consistency to school buildings, but it also provided enough flexibility within the model to allow for bespoke responses to site and size of school. Simple roofs, vertical windows, rough dash plaster, external covered play shelters and simply articulated entrances are part of the language of this model.

An existing four-classroom school, the brief for the most recent extension to the Caraun National School called for an additional classroom, resource room, and general office. The original building, which had already been extended in 1961 and 1993, comprised tow long classroom blocks, staggered in plan, with an external play space to the north. The more recent of the two blocks was set back from the road and contained tow classrooms and a staff room accessed from a single-loaded corridor.

The latest extension, designed by Paul Dillon Architects, is deftly inserted into this forecourt space, sharing an existing corridor for its circulation. Its roof generously overhangs the building line on its long axis, creating a sheltered space around the new entrance for children, parents and staff to pause, wait out a passing shower, or have a chat about the day. The new office and resource room are adjacent to the entrance, overlooking this external sheltered area. The east-facing classroom exceeds Department of Education standards area of 80m2 and is designed to function as either a classroom or a room for assembly.

Careful considered detailing knits the new into the old. The roof of the new and old share the same pitch, but not the same height – allowing the sheltered entrance to be part of the language of the existing, but given slightly more civic emphasis. The ‘hooking’ of the extension into the existing building happens at the flat-roofed corridor and service areas. Intelligently designed full height iroko screens control the daylight, heat, and comfort within the classroom. These comprise tall, fixed glazed lights over solid opening ventilation panels and built-in benches that also house radiators.

Response to place and type

Paul Dillon says of the project, that it is ‘an innocent enough little building’. His comment goes some way to explain the modest but skillful approach to scale, material and detail evident in this extension. The skill of making an addition to a building which – despite being unambiguously contemporary in its detailing – seems to have always been there, produces what is a finely-honed contextual response to both landscape and typological language.
At the scale of the landscape, the closeness of the extension to the road line provides one of those moments of compression that signal community and civic structure. The roof pitch and clipped eaves show a deep understanding of the importance of skyline in this place. Through its compact clustering of programme, the original external play area maintains its uninterrupted space and, by extension, its long vistas across the landscape.

At the level of the type, the rough dash gives a respectful nod to the primary school model, but instead of abutting patent reveals, the new dash wraps in tight around the windows and doors, signaling that something different is here. Windows are tall and vertical in conversation with those in the older sections of the building, but detailed to control light, air and heating to contemporary standards.

This extension was funded through a Devolved Grant in a programme that allows schools to have some autonomy in the procurement of small extensions. They operate within a tight budget and to prescribed time scales. But when compared with the standardization of area to which larger school projects under the watch of the Department of Education Planning and Building Unit must adhere, this project demonstrates the advantage of facilitating schools to procure a bespoke extension, tailored to the particular needs.

When I visited the school, I was reminded of the work of artist Blaise Smith, who spent a year painting the life of Presentation College Carlow in 2012. Smith’s long period of observing and painting a school over the course of a year revealed to him that, despite a surface similarity, each school has its own way of doing things, which is expressed both in the school building and its grounds, and in how it is used. Smith remarks in the accompanying catalogue, Schoolwork (2012) that, ‘a school is a small community of people within the larger community, a group working towards something and the working environment embodies their activity’.

While adhering to a common curriculum, all schools are slightly different in how they teach and in the type of school environment they wish to create for and with their pupils. Devolved school projects, such as this extension to Carnaun by Paul Dillon Architects, take careful account of this difference and facilitate it to grow with the lives of the children, staff, parent and the wider community.