

Buildings of Trinity College Dublin

The architectural character of Trinity derives largely from its role as a city-centre metropolitan college. It was Dublin Corporation, for instance, that granted the land in the late 16th century; the principal front of the College makes a monumental contribution to the closest thing which the city has to a public piazza; its extensive College Park is the resort of citizens who otherwise have little or no contact with the College, while its library attracts nearly a million visitors a year. Offering residence to nearly 700 students and staff within the walls (a number to be increased by a further 250 with the completion of a block of new residences along Pearse Street, designed by McCullough Mulvin Architects), it lends vibrant life and business to the city, both by day and by night.

Over the centuries, Trinity—in its buildings and open spaces with their planting and sculpture (by Henry Moore, Alexander Calder, Arnaldo Pomodoro and others)—has risen architecturally to the challenges and opportunities thus offered. In Christine Casey's words "Trinity has the largest group of monumental 18th-century buildings in Ireland and is the most complete university campus of the period in these islands". In the 19th century it erected one of the most distinguished landmarks of pioneering Ruskinian gothic. And its Berkeley Library of the 1960s is a landmark of Irish architectural modernism.

But what of the earlier buildings of this 16th-century university? Where is the evidence of the 12th-century priory given to the College in 1592, or of the College buildings which predated the earliest surviving ones, the Rubrics of c. 1700?

Very little is known of these early buildings, but much could be learned from an archaeological excavation of the site they occupied in Front and Library Squares (most of which has not been built upon). The vestiges must survive a few feet below the cobbles and lawns.

What characterises the buildings and open spaces on these 40 acres of central Dublin?

Most obvious, perhaps, is the division of the site into western (largely classical building, with extensive use of granite and Portland stone) and eastern (mostly 19th-century buildings and later, devoted to the sciences). These two parts lie on either side of the College Park and its playing fields.

The whole site is a deep rectangle, lying east–west, between Nassau Street, Pearse Street and Westland Row. The 18th-century buildings and squares to the west are off the grid of this rectangle, and this has led to some unreconciled difficulties. Buildings such as Physics and Botany (both by W.C. Marshall, 1904– and 1906–) for instance, are aligned with the distant western squares, while nearby buildings follow—at an angle—the line of Westland Row. Ahrends Burton and Koralek's Arts Building (opened 1978) in Fellows' Square solves the problem neatly with a wedge-shaped plan.

The College presents itself to the city in two notable ways. First, the perimeter along Nassau Street is remarkable, with a spectacular quarter of a mile of monumental cast iron railings (John and Robert Mallet, 1842), offering to the city views over the College Park and the Museum Building. More conventionally notable is the West Front (Theodore Jacobsen, 1752–) facing College Green. Withdrawn behind two curved lawns, with statues of Oliver Goldsmith and Edmund Burke (John Henry Foley, 1864 and 1868), this is a flamboyant tribute to the generosity of the mid 18th-century Irish Parliament.

The banishment in the 1820s of Anatomy and its cadavers as far away as possible probably explains the eventual relegation of many of the sciences to the east end. These are housed in some worthy late 19th-century buildings which nod deferentially to the Museum Building across the cricket pitch: such is Chemistry (McCurdy and Mitchell, 1885–) and Zoology and Physiology (John McCurdy, completed 1876). Others such as Scott Tallon Walker's Institutes (Smurfit,

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Panoz, O'Reilly), along with their Watts and Hamilton Buildings (1988–2000) which follow the line of Westland Row, rehabilitated the street's 19th-century houses and linked these to new, elegant, austere buildings facing College Park by means of a spatially exciting internal street, in a handsome contribution to both conservation and modernism.

Much more expressive are the extensions (Grafton Architects, 1996, 2005) for Mechanical Engineering to the Parsons Building behind the Pavilion. Here the architects display on a small scale the sculptural intrepidity which made their university buildings in Milan and Peru famous throughout the world.

The Business School (Scott Tallon Walker Architects) was opened in 2019. Like the Biomedical Sciences Institute (RKD Architects, opened 2011), it is a monumental example of the easterly development of the College. Discreet on its north front where planting softens the entrance from Pearse Street, its challenge was to contribute to the coherence of the north-east corner of the College's island site. Conscientiously 'green', with its planted brise-soleil, roof-top solar panels and rain-water salvage and distribution, it offers spectacular views of the College and of the city from roof-top terraces. More significantly, it houses the College board room, reflecting the recent shift of the centre of gravity of the College from west to east.

In the view westwards from the Moyne Institute (Desmond Fitzgerald, 1953), three fine buildings can be seen on the far side of the College Park: the Ussher Library (McCullough Mulvin Architects with KMD Architecture, 1998), the Berkeley Library (ABK Architects, completed 1968) and the Museum Building (Deane and Woodward, 1853–7). Acknowledging the classical and cruciform grid of the western end of the College which was originally determined by the plan of the 12th-century priory, happily none of these was cowed by the pressure of tradition. The Museum Building broke, more dramatically than we can easily realise today, from the overwhelmingly classical language of the mid 19th-century College. Instead of Doric or Ionic or Corinthian (like its recent dull neighbours of the 1830s in New Square by Frederick Darley), Deane and Woodward looked to gothic Venice, and the Alhambra, and to John Ruskin, in a building whose radicalism, polychromy and sculptural variety landed them the commission for the Oxford Museum a few years later. The same independent approach to the architecture of the past led them (1859) to transform the Long Room in Thomas Burgh's Old Library (1712–32) from Augustan splendour to thrilling Romanesque.

The same confidence was shown by the expressed intention on the part of the College in building a new library to be placed between the Museum Building and the Old Library. It was specified that the new building was to be as fine a representative of the 20th century as its neighbours had been of the 18th and 19th centuries. Paul Koralek's Berkeley Library (completed 1967) is universally acknowledged to be one of the finest modern buildings in the country. In 2010, the Long Room Hub, designed by McCullough Mulvin Architects, was established in its setting as the research institute for the Arts and Humanities.

Front Square, extending from the West Front to the Rubrics, is—apart from the success of its individual buildings—the only example in the country of extensive formal planning, involving different buildings related to one another along axes and cross-axes, where they, with planned focal points and the spaces between them, are composed and managed to scenic effect. This is the architecture of Greenwich Hospital or of the Place de la Concorde. This is the only 18th-century example in Ireland of such Beaux Arts planning.

Passing from the spaciousness of College Green through the strategic constriction of Front Gate, the view ahead is suddenly formal and suggestive, and is partly screened by the advance to right and left of the Examination Hall and Chapel (both by William Chambers, 1777– and 1787–). Straight ahead is the focal point of the Campanile (Charles Lanyon, 1852–), beyond which the view of lawns and trees is closed by the warm colour of the brick Rubrics (probably Thomas Burgh, c. 1700).

This glorious mise-en-scène is only partly due to conscious planning: numbers 1–10 and the West Front were intended to form three sides of a square (Parliament Square) to be closed by a

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range of building on the line joining the present Chapel and Examination Hall. Chambers's Chapel and Examination Hall put paid to an enclosed Parliament Square. The Provost's House (1759–), a neo-Palladian residence, and a Dining Hall (1760–65) soon followed the completion of Parliament Square.

And Library Square was, until the 1830s, enclosed by a range like the Rubrics along the line of the present Campanile. It was the London architect Decimus Burton who suggested the opening of Library Square to the rest of Front Square. And thus one of the very finest academic squares, or quads, or courts, came into being, the happy joint creation of design and chance. The success of this decision rested on the fact that the immense scale of the Old Library (excessive for its early 18th-century neighbours) was adequate to hold its own in the newly opened-up square.

And the architects of all this?

In the 18th century the College missed the chance of employing the two most distinguished architects resident in Ireland, Edward Lovett Pearce and James Gandon. But they managed to attract William Chambers for the Examination Hall and Chapel, at least until he was tempted to abandon Trinity in favour of the commission to build Somerset House in London. Richard Castle, the German architect of Russborough and Powerscourt, built the Printing House (1734), and a Bell Tower which did not survive the century. He built, too, a Dining Hall (1741–) but all that survives of this is probably the basement Buttery of the present Dining Hall (Hugh Darley, c. 1760–65). Theodore Jacobsen, architect of the West Front—for which he wanted an octagonal dome over Front Gate—was an amateur architect recommended, perhaps, by his design of the Foundling Hospital in London. And he seems to have given the design free of charge.

The most distinguished Irish architect to be employed in the 19th century was Benjamin Woodward, a partner in the firm of Deane and Woodward. Woodward died young, but the Deane family maintained a connection with the College as late as the Hall of Honour and 1937 Reading Room by Thomas Manly Deane. Another knighted architect of the establishment, Thomas Drew, designed the Graduates' Memorial Building (c. 1900), as a not entirely successful tribute to Burgh's Old Library on the other side of Library Square.

The College, in other words, has over the centuries chosen architects of varying accomplishment: some brilliant, some recommended by personal contact, some dull enough, some radical, some conventional. Many of these have battled with the task of designing their buildings to sit happily beside great traditional architecture. The most successful ones were not overawed into pastiche.

There has been nothing straightforward about the evolution of the architecture of Trinity. Parliament Square, like Library Square, was designed to be enclosed; the West Front was to be domed; the Wellington Testimonial was to go up in the College Park (an idea soon scotched, to be replaced c. 1840 by the proposal to run a viaduct across what is now the rugby and cricket pitches); Lanyon's Campanile was to be part of an arcade along the west side of Library Square; the architects McCurdy and Mitchell wanted to replace the Rubrics by a neo-renaissance block of residences; the Dining Hall was destroyed by fire in 1984 (but of course rebuilt with the help of de Blacam and Meagher Architects); Paul Koralek's successful design in the competition for the Berkeley Library was only one of 218 entries. Many a plan has been made, considered and abandoned.

In this, the College shares the kind of evolutionary history of the city to which it owes—and contributes—so much.