

Buildings of Trinity College Dublin

The architectural character of Trinity derives largely from its role as a city-centre metropolitan college. Its grant of land, for instance, came from Dublin Corporation in the late 16th century; its monumental West Front forms, along with the 18th-century Parliament House, the closest that Dublin has to a great piazza; and in welcoming Dubliners and foreign tourists inside its gates (the Old Library receives almost a million visitors a year), it has assumed the character of public park more than of cloistered academy. Home to 1,000 resident students and staff, the 40-acre 'island site' lends vibrant life and business to the city.

The College has been a building site for most of its history; it still is. The Printing House has only recently shed the scaffolding erected for its preparation as a space for the display of the Book of Kells (and has sprouted, as a temporary extension in Printing House Square, a smaller sibling of the red building which now fills New Square). And work on the Campanile (Howley, Hayes Cooney Architects), completed in 2024, was acknowledged by a conservation award (2025) from the Royal Institute of the Architects of Ireland. Printing House Square itself (McCullough Mulvin Architects) was completed in 2022 with 250 student residences, a sports centre and the College Health Service; and careful conservation of the oldest building in the College, the Rubrics of c.1700, has attracted many awards. The E3 building is rising at the East end to house an integration of engineering and natural and computer sciences; and the lawns of New Square are filled with a dramatically coloured temporary structure made necessary by the emptying of the Old Library during radical work needed to improve its environmental condition – temperature, humidity, fire protection – and tourist facilities. Unfortunately, recent tall building outside the College does grievous harm to some views of the historic architecture within the walls.

And responding to changing fashions in gardening, the College has enthusiastically embraced in its grounds the cause of biodiversity, so that John Henry Foley's *Burke* (unveiled 1868) and *Goldsmith* (unveiled 1864) now rise amidst the alien corn conversing with the Augustan formality of the West Front (by Theodore Jacobsen, 1750's).

With the growth of the College beyond Westland Row its centre of gravity has moved: for instance the Board no longer sits in the Provost's House of the 1760's on Grafton Street but in the Business School (Scott Tallon Walker Architects, opened 2019) which is in the east of the island site. As the map at the end of this Calendar shows this island site is divided in two by the College Park and Rugby ground. To the west, older buildings are laid out on a rectangular grid which has its origins in the lay-out of the College of 1592 (and hence of the 12-century priory of All Hallows); to the east, buildings mostly for Science (Chemistry by McCurdy and Mitchell, 1885-; Zoology and Physiology by John McCurdy, completed 1876; the Smurfit, Panoz and O'Reilly Institutes and the Watts and Hamilton Buildings, by Scott Tallon Walker Architects, 1988-2000) somehow reconcile the conflicting geometry of the western grid with that of Westland Row.

Perhaps the most difficult problems of site were presented to – and elegantly solved by – the Naughton Institute and Sports Centre (by RKD Architects and Wilson Architects, opened 2008) bounded by the railway line, Pearse Street and Westland Row. And some of these buildings were influenced not only by the grid but also by the style of the older buildings to the west: Chemistry and Pathology defer to Deane and Woodward's masterpiece the Museum Building facing them on the other side of the College Park. Close to the Pavilion (by Thomas Drew, 1885) and Moyne Institute (by Desmond Fitzgerald, 1953) Pritzker Prize winners Grafton Architects, however, strike a markedly independent note in their extensions to the Parsons Building for Mechanical Engineering (1996 and 2005), work with which they initiated their extensive career in university architecture.

The influence of the 18th and 19th-century buildings to the west of the College on the lay-out and style of more recent nearby work is seen too in modern additions to the historic squares.

Buildings of Trinity College Dublin

Passing from the spaciousness of College Green through the strategic constriction of Front Gate, the view ahead is of formal classical planning with its axes, cross axes and symmetries. To right and left the porticoes of Examination Hall and Chapel (both by William Chambers (1777-)) advance towards one another, adding to the scenic quality of what lies beyond. And beyond is the Campanile (Charles Lanyon, 1852), the focal point of Front Square and entry point to Library Square which is dominated by the Old Library (Thomas Burgh, 1712-32) and the Rubrics (probably Thomas Burgh, c.1700).

But however remarkable this classical formality is, a growing college must enlarge and add to its libraries, and residences, and lecture rooms. The College has done well in managing this difficult task.

In erecting its School of Engineering or Museum Building by Deane and Woodward in 1853-57, it broke radically from the existing classical tradition of the rest of the College: Doric, Ionic, Corinthian were banished in favour of a glorious vindication of the neo-medieval (and theological) theories of John Ruskin. The result was what is probably the most beautiful building in the College, notwithstanding damaging alterations made to the interior many years ago before the rehabilitation of taste for Victorian architecture.

A similar belief in the best of contemporary architecture characterised the choice of the architect Paul Koralek as architect for the Boland Library¹ (completed 1970), now generally acknowledged to be one of the finest modern buildings in the country. It was specified by the College that the building was to be as fine a representative of the 20th century as its neighbours (Museum Building and Old Library) were of the 19th and 20th centuries. Its subsequent extension, the Ussher Library (McCullough Mulvin with KMD Architecture, opened 2003), is a worthy addition. McCullough Mulvin's Long Room Hub (2010) completed the enclosure of Fellows' Square with library buildings, and makes its contribution to views within Front Square (as their Printing House Square does to New Square).

There has been nothing straightforward about the evolution of the architecture of Trinity. Parliament Square, like Library Square, was designed originally to be enclosed; the West Front was to be domed; it was thought that College Park might accommodate the Wellington Testimonial now in the Phoenix Park and, later, a railway viaduct; 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 with neo-Renaissance residences; the Dining Hall was destroyed by fire in 1984 (rebuilt with the help of de Blacam and Meagher Architects); Koralek won the international competition for his library in competition with 217 other architects. Many a plan has been made, considered and abandoned. It is thus a happy joint creation of design and chance which lies behind Christine Casey's judgement that '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'.

¹Named by the Board as the Berkeley Library in 1978, denamed by the Board in 2023, and renamed by the Board in 2024.