

Living the Dream!

On the 3rd and 4th of May members of Architects for Health (AfH) paid a visit to Northern Ireland to see some examples of recent healthcare architecture in and around Belfast. The visit was hosted by John Cole, Chief Executive of Health Estates in Northern Ireland.

We started the visit at Health Estates with an introduction by John Cole on the current Northern Ireland approach to strategic health care planning and procurement of the estate. John drew out the greater central influence and control the Board has over the nature of new development. There was a determination that design should be a response to health needs, meeting both specific and generic requirements. The Trust structure favoured in Northern Ireland was one that combined acute and community services engendering more 'joined up' thinking on how services could be configured. He used the term the 'Virtual Hospital' – one without walls that enabled services to move as close to the patients home as possible. John described the vision for the arrangement of facilities to effect the strategy ranging from the local health centre to the specialist regional acute hospital centre.

In seeking procurement of new infrastructure John Cole acknowledged that Northern Ireland was currently in a fortunate position. Not only were building costs 20% lower than in England but the future capital investment programme was a minimum of £3 billion. This enabled the Board to focus on the design quality requirements which would be largely delivered through the use of the exemplar design route. This enabled user buy-in to a tested exemplar design and had the benefit of challenging tenderers to equal or improve on these. Successful tenderers were selected on quality criteria rather than 'cheapest' cost.

The buildings which we were to visit would demonstrate the Boards commitment to quality and also to the use of art to enhance the patient experience.

Our first visit was to the Bradbury Centre in the Lisburn Road. This new community based centre represents the modern thinking of integrated services including primary care, social care and community healthcare. Built on a very tight site with frontages directly on the road, it nevertheless has used external art work by artist Martin Donlin to herald the entrance and has included a lofty atrium space with a glazed roof to provide a space where patients and visitors can enjoy refreshments in a pleasant environment. They can also use the atrium as a wayfinding tool as it makes it clear where all the various services are located. The warmth of the wood detailing to the atrium and the clever use of internal glazing particularly welcomes all who come into the Centre.





From the Bradbury Centre we went on to visit The Arches Centre, Hollywood Road. Built slightly earlier this building represented a successful phased project that demanded a new development followed by a full refurbishment of an existing building integrated into one Centre with a brilliant large light atrium incorporating a 'live' tree. Again the atrium featured a central cafe area where people can stop and take a break and just enjoy where they are. The atrium is a key enabler of orientation, assisted by the use of open stairs to reach the upper floors in addition to the lift for the not so sprightly!

External artwork is impressive and gives the building real impact and appeal as you walk towards it. It made a positive invitation to go inside.



On the second day the group was taken to the Mater Hospital, Crumlin Road to see the recent extension to the original hospital. The 'joining up' appeared very seamless using a beautiful atrium and adjacent courtyard. We were very taken with the artwork in the atrium, particularly the set of paintings of local people.



The landscaped courtyard was one of the most attractive on our visit and enhanced the whole healing environment of the hospital. The retention of an original arched entrance and the repositioning to link with the existing hospital further reinforced the feeling of safety and well-being.

Leaving the Mater Hospital, we visited the last of the Community buildings, the Carlisle Centre, Antrim Road. This was in the final stages of commissioning was again set within a constrained site with a storey height difference across the site. Creative design has used this challenge to advantage – the site's levels difference enabling two levels of parking (one underground) separated for staff and public but both able to directly access the building.





The atrium was a delight and again featured open staircases and café space as well as enabling wayfinding by the way the services and departments 'showed' themselves at each level, all visible from the atrium floor.

The design incorporated an attractive stepped courtyard that provides increased daylight and aspect for the building as it wraps around it.



After lunch the group's final destination was the Cancer Centre at the Belfast City Hospital, Lisburn Road. This too had been developed on a very tight site and looked into the main hospital site. With no space for extensive external landscaped views the design focused on the provision of a central courtyard with well landscaped terraces on upper floors. We were told the terraces were not at their best when we viewed them. They must really wow patients when they are!



We left Belfast having been enriched by the health buildings we had seen. Todd Architects, who along with Penoyre and Prasad had designed most of the buildings seen, were with us much of the time to explain the concepts behind them. We saw some of the healthcare facilities beyond the public spaces and these were for the most part representative of the 'generic' space approach in Northern Ireland. The open plan supported offices have generally been embraced by staff and enable more flexible working and team integration than the previous cellular approach.

Our lasting impression, though, as we left to catch our flights back to the UK, was of health care centres that welcomed and atria that brought light into the heart of the buildings and uplifted the senses. The artwork and quality of finish added to the overall feeling of well-being. Well done Northern Ireland and thank you, John Cole for hosting the opportunity.

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