

A HOME FOR ALL

This design and delivery of the “Old See House” Mental Health Resource Centre represents an exemplary collaborative process between client and architects involving a very exacting brief, environmental, and functional demands. Unusually, with so-called public-sector commissions, the process started with a selection of architects going through a competitive-interview procedure.

RPP Architects in partnership with Richard Murphy Architects were selected because, during their interview, they convincingly displayed a refreshing and ground-breaking approach to the design of mental health facilities which aligned with the same forward-thinking objectives of client representative, Karen Brookes of the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust.

Harmony was however not the tenor of the many client-architect briefing and design development meetings which were frequently dominated by informed, opinioned and healthy debate.

The precise functioning requirements of the Old See House often clashed with pure aesthetic considerations. The resolution of which was made more difficult by having to also take on-board the strict regulatory guidelines associated with such a facility.

Given the complexity of the challenging demands needed to deliver a building of this nature, an outcome as good was never going to be achieved without continual robust debate between user-client and architects. ▶

THE TEAM

Client / Belfast Health & Social Care Trust

Architect / RPP Architects Ltd
(in association with Richard Murphy Architects)

Q Surveyor / Sammon Surveyors

Structural & Civil Engineering / Aecom

Landscape Architect / Aecom

M&E Engineers / Williams and Shaw Ltd

Lighting Concept Design / Light Bureau

Planning consultant & Interiors /
RPP Architects Ltd

Main Contractor / Felix O’Hare & Co Ltd

Photography / Gary Parrot





► The overarching ambition of both the architects and client was to remove the perceived stigma associated with such facilities and thereby eliminate all institutional characteristics which, before the arrival of Old See House Centre, dominated the architecture of the local provision.

The particular application required to successively achieve de-institutionalisation was far from being superficial. Every associated design proposal and decision demanded and received detailed consideration at both a macro and micro level. The Old See House's accommodation is divided into two distinct suites.

Referred to as the "House", to underpin its intended domestic character, this suite provides for residential patients, preferably referred to as 'clients', whose stage of mental well-being requires twenty-four hour supervised treatment. The requirement for direct access from the public domain and an own front-door for the 'House' dictated its siting at the forefront of the site, facing the Antrim Road. The "House's" associate suite, which sits to its rear, accommodates the outpatients or 'day- clients' and caters for a variety of therapeutic activities aimed at providing recovery programmes each tailored to individual needs.

The entrance to the 'day' suite is aptly understated thereby mitigating any apprehensions which may exist with the centre's visiting clients.

The modest characteristic of this entrance and its lobby also works very well in relieving any prospective client tension through creating spatial contrast with that of the interior of the foyer which it immediately serves. Upon passing through the lobby the immediate sensation gained is that of spaciousness, gentle reassurance, delight and therapeutic-relief.

It is no coincidence that this generous and most tranquil space, its ante rooms and the deftly sculptured landscaped garden are designed specifically to address an entire spectrum of reflective and active therapies.

The foyer space is omni-functional and performs as a waiting area, reception and cafeteria with a circulation regime that effectively obviates the need for institutional corridors.

Careful consideration has been afforded to the seating arrangements to avoid historically-familiar regimented 'waiting-room' layouts. Client privacy and discretion are achieved through embracing each seating pod with a gently ►



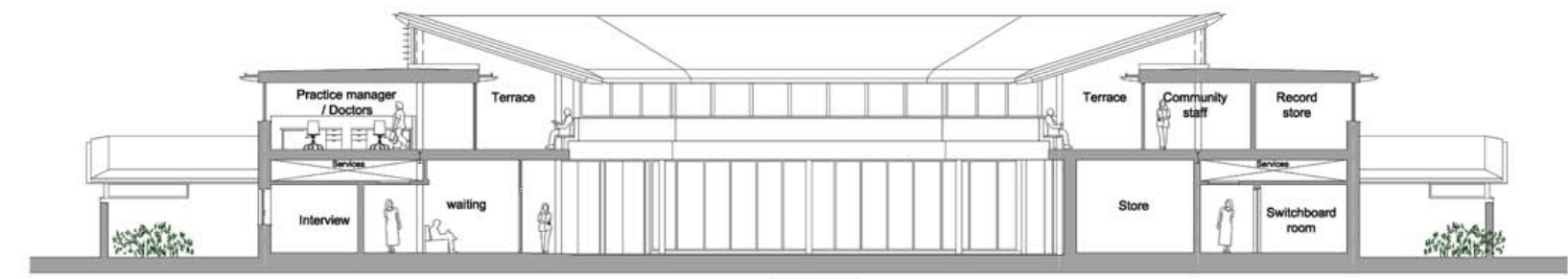
CASE STUDY THE OLD SEE HOUSE



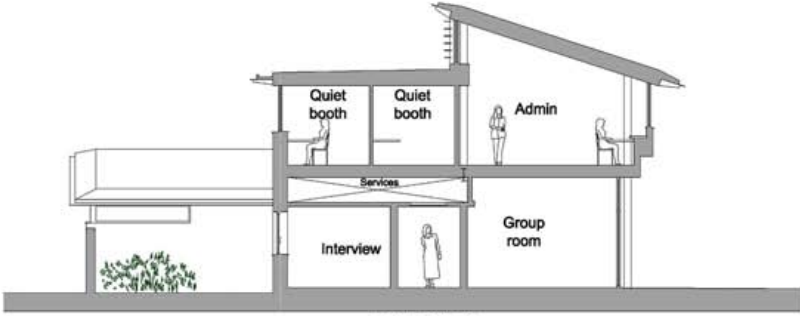
Above / Elevations



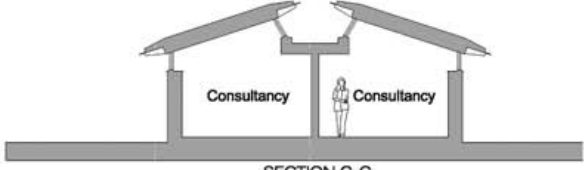
EAST ELEVATION



SECTION F-F



SECTION H-H



SECTION G-G

Above / Sections



► curved mid-height screen, each facing away from the other. The cafeteria area too enjoys this sensitively-conceived arrangement.

Consulting and Interview rooms hug the foyer's embracing 'U' plan layout each tailored to address differing health-related purposes. As Karen Brookes proudly pointed out; in the interest of creating sensible spatial efficiencies, all are shared-rooms and not dedicated to any single staff member.

Probably the rooms which most concisely display the ethos behind the design of the Old See House Centre are those rooms where clients, sometimes with family members or friends, are interviewed. The interior form and layout of these rooms emphatically relegates the old quasi-confrontational 'across-the-table' interviewing posture to the distant-past. ►



Left / Landscaping Plan

- KEY
- A Tobermore Retro Bracken
 - B i Deck / Safe Grip
 - C Stone Flags
 - D 80x80mm Stone sets pointed with epoxy grout
 - E Stone Cobbles
 - F Stone Gravel
 - G Planting
 - H 300mm Profiled Stone Cills 1m x 300mm Stone Flags (3units per 1 Metre Length)
 - J Rough Meadow Grass
 - K Proposed seating



► Consultants' desktops are minimised in extent and incidentally set to the side. Interviews take place across a coffee table from a well-appointed armchair. Gently concaved softly furnished banquette-seating set in a cupped niche provides a relaxing and reassuring setting for clients. Indeed the amorphous forms of these alcoves are manifest throughout the foyer which together with their rich beech-clad enclosing walls contribute to the easy-going ambience experienced there.

It is well acknowledged that the benefit of natural light, ventilation and views outwards contributes substantially to any healing process. With very few exceptions, all rooms in the Old See House Centre benefit from windows which extend from floor level to almost ceiling height, the obvious requirement for privacy being ingeniously resolved by arranging that windows to adjoining rooms, which share views onto landscaped 'walled' mini-courtyards, do not face each other.

Whilst good architecture encompasses both interior and exterior as one entity and not separately, from the aspect of pure critical functionality the Old See

House Centre is essentially an 'interior' building per se. In this instance, however, the architects addressed both the interior and exterior simultaneously and with equal balance, allowing the operational demands to, in an aesthetically controlled manner, influence the exterior form thus resulting in an excellent and comprehensive architectural outcome.

On parting, both Karen and project architect Simon Robinson modestly declared satisfaction with this very fine piece of well-functioning architecture with Karen adding that a distinct improvement in treatment successes is being experienced, which must surely be a result of the very carefully considered and delivered architecture. ●

Barrie Todd

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