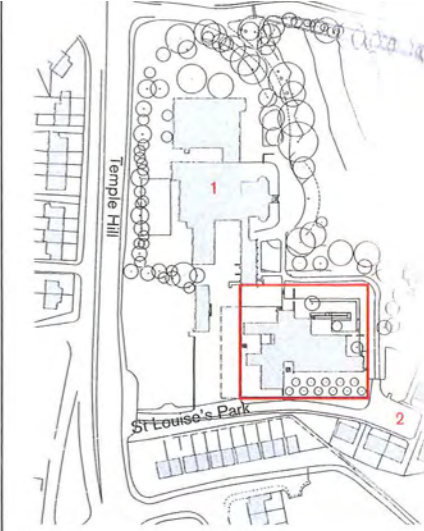




Building study

Within a generation, one in six people in the UK might live to be 100 years old, according to a recent report from the Department of Work and Pensions. This is a projected statistic, but still a firm reminder that many more people are living into old age than ever before. This means that the problem of care for the elderly is only just dawning upon many families and, of course, upon the state. Precisely when the welfare state is being undermined on all sides by dubious ideological manipulation, the need for support for health and welfare is actually growing.

This situation may lead to the creation of new building types to provide specialist care for part time inmates while also giving them a sense of belonging to a community. Such flexible institutions may provide a sense of solidarity among afflicted individuals while alleviating relationships with their families, relatives and friends.



Site plan

- 1. Convent
- 2. Traveller's settlement



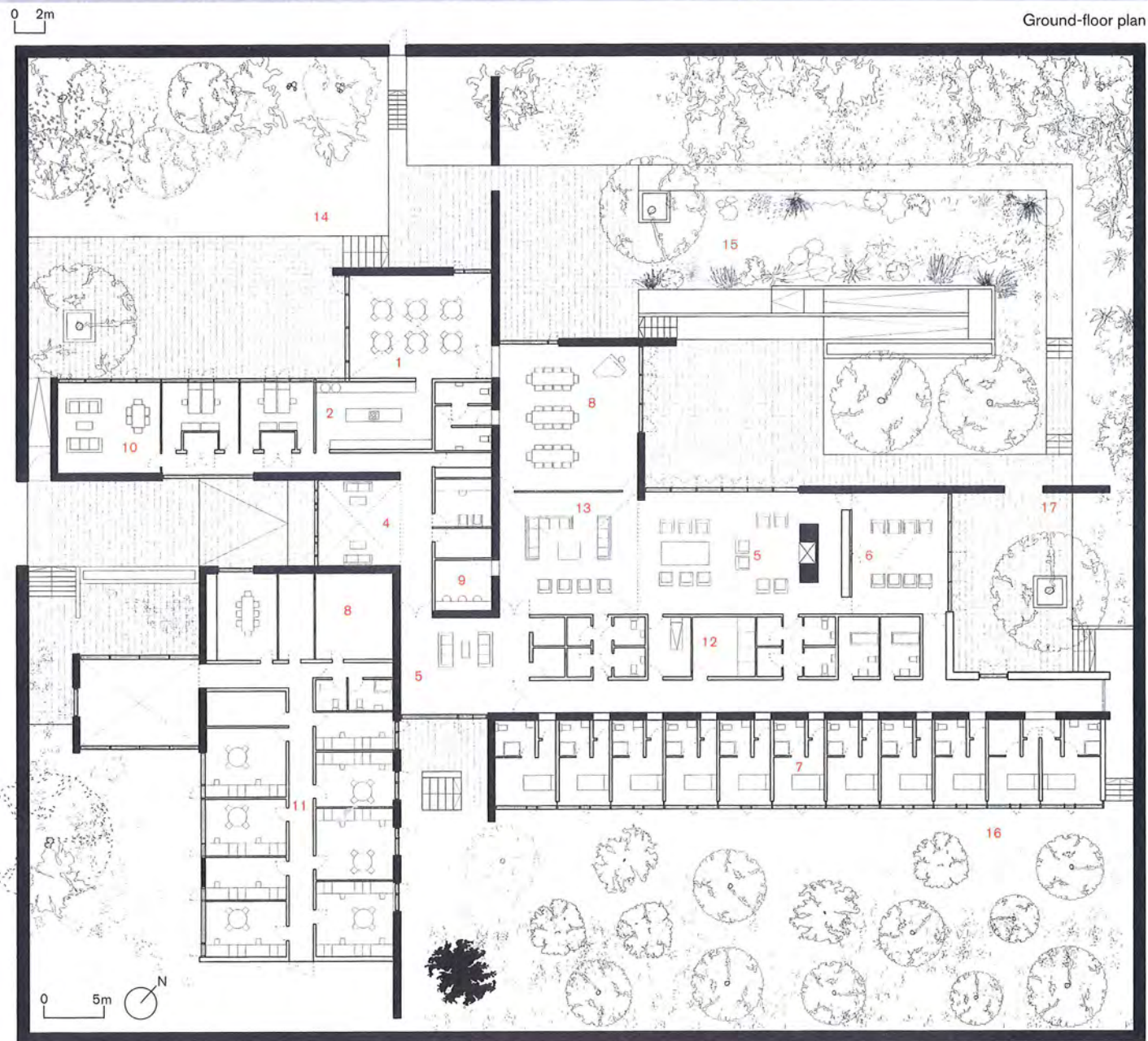
This is precisely the relevance of schemes such as the Alzheimer's Respite Centre at Blackrock just to the south of Dublin, designed by Niall McLaughlin Architects. Alzheimer's disease affects memory and the sense of belonging in the world: it causes confusion about the sense of time and the sense of place. A person with this condition has to be reminded all the time where he or she is, and where he or she comes from. There is a strong impulse to wander around by circuitous routes, but this is >>

Building for a longer lifetime

Niall McLaughlin's Alzheimer's Respite Centre is a new type of building for an ageing society, says *William JR Curtis*.
Photography by *Nick Kane*

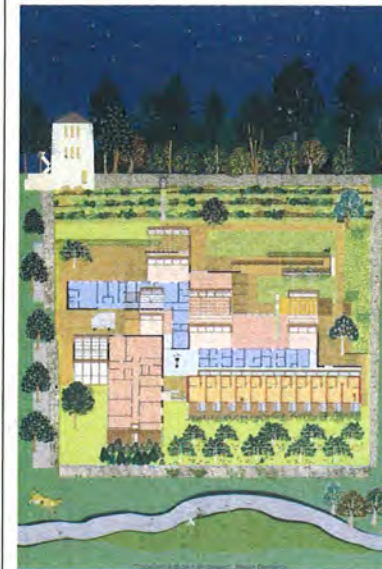


Section through entrance and central space



Ground-floor plan

1. Dining room
2. Kitchen
3. Activity room
4. Reception
5. Sitting room
6. Quiet room
7. Bedrooms
8. Meeting room
9. Hairdressing/therapeutic remedies
10. Staff room
11. Offices
12. Medical
13. Central space
14. Morning garden
15. Afternoon herb and scent garden
16. Evening garden
17. Prayer garden



Top Wooden lanterns float above a 'labyrinth' of brick
Bottom, left to right A 'Persian miniature' conceptual drawing; corridor with bedrooms to the right and medical facilities to the left; the interior connects visually with the perimeter wall

combined with the need to come back to a recognisable and safe base. The Alzheimer's Respite Centre responds to these psychological and physical requirements by establishing a protected precinct of courts, gardens, interconnected social spaces, and private individual rooms, all of which connect with the walled gardens outside. The social purpose of the building is beautifully translated into a plan that combines a safe perimeter by incorporating an existing orchard wall, an interlocking pattern of gardens and buildings, a series of high, well-lit



pavilions with sliding doors permitting a wandering route, and a private zone for lower individual rooms, a bit like the cells in a monastery or convent.
 'To fix a plan is to have had ideas', said Le Corbusier, and the drawings of the Alzheimer's Respite Centre reveal a dynamic interplay between walls and planes of different length in a pinwheel arrangement that permits spaces to flow into each other as one moves around, guided in part by diagonal views, variable room heights, and changing intensities of light. The overall atmosphere established is >>



one of great calm: it is a rest home in which groups can be found working together on projects, watching television, or just sitting quietly in armchairs. The Respite Centre takes the pressure off families in which a member suffers from Alzheimer's, by according the enfeebled individual a temporary home, but without the depressing features of much hospital and clinic architecture.

There is a sense of protective enclosure without one of being imprisoned; there are always alluring views of plants, lawns, allotments and, of course, the low walls, which are mostly made from a warm, pale yellow textured stock brick. The other main material is wood, which is used on the pavilion roofs and for windows, doors and panels. These materials are sympathetic in themselves but they are handled with great skill and conceptual elegance: the story of this work is told through the interaction of a brick labyrinth of extending planes and a timber system of pavilions conjugated with beams, panels, transoms and roofs, all adjusted to the human scale.

In other words, McLaughlin has succeeded in establishing an architectural language appropriate to the ethos behind his project. When I visited the Respite Centre, I was struck by the attention given to humane details such as low, built-in benches made of wood in individual rooms where family members could be expected to spend a lot of time. The zone set aside for staff and help was discreetly separated, while each person's room was signalled by a different bright colour at the entrance. The visitor proceeds through layers before coming to the patient's wing >>

There is a sense of protective enclosure without being imprisoned



This page and facing page
Bedrooms are surprisingly small, contrasted with the spaciousness applied to communal areas inside and out



Credits

Start on site
June 2006
Contract duration
September 2008
Internal floor area
1,392m²

Annual CO₂
emissions
294,000 kWhrs
(estimate)

Form of contract Government Departments and Local Authorities Contract (GDLA B2 with Quantities)/Traditional Procurement
Cost per m² £1,950
Total cost £3.7 million
Client Alzheimer Society of Ireland
Architect Niall McLaughlin Architects
Structural engineer Buro Happold Consultants
M&E consultant Buro Happold Consultants
Quantity surveyor Tom O'Arcy & Co.
Landscaping Desmond Fitzgerald
Building control officer Oliver Muir, Don Laoghaire Rathfarnham County Council

which is sequestered and quiet. The only disappointment in all this was the failure of the long walls shown in plan to develop spatial continuity. The rooms are more compartmentalised than they appear in the drawings. The entrance zone is not really up to the same level as the rest of the building, having something of the air of a reception area in a modest hotel. The joy of this complex is in the garden spaces, which in and of themselves have a healing effect. In fact, the centre is installed in

the remains of an 18th-century walled kitchen garden with some solid granite walls. It is interesting how much of the best recent Irish work is slotted into intervals left over by old institutional buildings and their surrounding dependences.

The Respite Centre is well integrated into the fragmented context and stitches it back together in an intervention of architectural surgery. McLaughlin's evocative coloured conceptual drawings for the project (which recall Persian miniatures in the way they present plan and elevation simultaneously, and also remind one of some of Hassan Fathy's drawings or those of Balkrishna Doshi) present the Respite Centre as a sort of verdant paradise: truly a garden of healing. Behind these somewhat 'false naive' presentations there is a highly sophisticated understanding of the history of modern architecture.

The extending planes and centripetal spaces put one in mind of Mies van der Rohe's unbuilt 'Brick Pavilion' of 1922, while the wooden lanterns floating above a labyrinth recall Rudolf Schindler's own house in Hollywood of the same year. The abstraction of monastic prototypes has had a little help from Luis Barragán's secretive residence at Tacubaya, Mexico City, of 1947. Part of the art of architecture is to hide the art of architecture, and the Respite Centre has a commendable sense of modesty.

At a time of social fragmentation, excessive architectural gestures, and artistic narcissism, what a relief to find a building that is caring in its purpose, intelligent and cultivated in its form, and well-crafted in its construction. McLaughlin and the client, the Alzheimer Society of Ireland, deserve praise. In the future, this building may well serve as a prototype in dealing with the social, physical and emotional problems likely to emerge in an ageing population. ■

To read more about this project by the architect and for specification details, visit www.architectsjournal.co.uk