Built with tender loving care

An award-winning Alzheimer's centre in Dublin is a poetic mix of functionality and humanity, says Stephen Best

Sixty metres from a busy dual carriageway in south Co Dublin, its privacy protected by an old granite wall, stands a building that has the capacity to challenge our received notions about medical care facilities. Whereas the design of such facilities has long been driven by ideals of efficiency, the Orchard day-care and respite centre in Temple Road, Blackrock, designed by Niall McLaughlin Architects for the Alzheimer Society of Ireland, embraces notions of delight that eschew the fluorescent-lit corridors of traditional hospital settings.

Located in the former walled kitchen garden of a Georgian house, the centre points a way forward for a humanistic architecture focused not on efficiency but on people's needs and dignity.

A single-storey brick pavilion extending to 3,000 square metres and comprising offices, recreation rooms and 11 bedrooms, the Alzheimer's centre is the flagship development of an organisation established in 1982 to meet the needs of people with dementia and those who care for them. Its mission places people at its centre and, by implication, the architecture of the new building had to do the same. Announced four years ago, after the donation of an acre of land by the Daughters of Charity, the centre opened last July and has already won an award from the Architectural Association of Ireland for its poetic architectural response to a disabling condition.

The entrance to the centre is through a gap in the 4-metre-high garden wall, to a small courtyard that draws the visitor into the reception area, a generously proportioned cube of space, filled with light, that is welcoming – like the front hall of a house. It gives a feeling of domesticity, reinforced by the building proper, where each space revealed, whether room or garden, is on a human scale.

Arranged around a series of serene gardens and courtyards through which patients can wander, the centre forms a pinwheel of spreading arms, each of which embraces a different activity. The northeast wing houses the head offices of the society. To the southeast, staff offices overlook the entrance courtyard. To the southwest are the main day-care facilities, which include the bright, open dining hall, a contemplation room and a busy Montessori craft room. To the quieter northwest, the wing of respite bedrooms faces onto a garden lawn.

Despite its scale, the building appears to take its cues from domestic architecture, with a plan reminiscent of the Rudolph Schindler's Kings Road House in West Hollywood, built in 1921-2 and considered the Big Bang moment of modernist architecture.

In the middle of the Alzheimer's centre is the main gathering space, a sitting room and library that form a metaphorical heart with which all of the other social spaces connect. Anchored by an open hearth, the room flows out in all directions, with views from inside out and from room to room, making the building easy to navigate. Furnished with tables, chairs, bookshelves and sofas, it is a building of small things, in which everything is close, with private views onto small, intimate gardens.

The windows, with thick, dark, handmade timber frames sandwiched between the radiating brick walls, extend from floor to ceiling, without horizontal elements. In some places, they project inwards to form window seats; in others, they project up, drawing illumination deep into the building.

The fluidity and visual connection between the interlocking spaces of the entrance hall create a strong dialogue between interior and exterior that blurs the definition between them and makes the project as much about landscape as building.

Outside, the grey granite of the walled garden surrounds lawns, patios and barbecue space divided by tall walls built from soft, honeyed brick that project out from the building. Together, they provide shelter from the wind and a dampening of the roar of passing traffic, offering moments of calm.

Paths meander between the garden spaces, taking those who walk them on journeys of discovery: around each corner, there is a new perspective, a new plant or tree, a new connection to inside or outside but never a sense of being lost. This sense of orientation comes from the transparency and openness of the building, which together make the complex an arrangement of rooms. It's a quality valued by the Alzheimer's carers, as those who live with the condition are often disoriented and have a restless need to wander.

"The centre has had a tremendous impact on the way we can respond to people with dementia," says Sarah O'Callaghan of the society. "There is more space and more light and this means that we can offer clients a choice of activities."

It is a building with a serious purpose, and it is therefore not surprising to see it has strongly functional elements, particularly the respite wing, with its long corridor flanked by overnight rooms on one side, and treatment rooms on the other. Yet it is in this most institutional part of the building that the architecture is the most unexpected.

The extra-wide corridors that allow wheeled beds to move around freely, the colour-coded doorways and the roof light used to bring daylight into the corridor conspire to make it feel homely rather than institutional. The counterintuitive way in which the corridor ends, however, provides the greatest surprise.

Giving pause for thought: the Orchard centre in Blackrock, above

Two windows flank a projecting window seat. The upper one, naturally, frames a view of the sky, the lower one, curiously, framing a view of the granite wall that is no more than a metre away, and which at first, from a distance, appears to be a painting or photograph, reminiscent of Sean Scully's Walls of Aran. As one draws near it, it turns out to be an optical illusion, but it is symbolic of a building that makes the most of the intangible.

To view the building as merely a functional collection of well-crafted domestic rooms intertwined with a landscaped garden would be to undervalue both its poetic qualities and the innovative shift in dementia care that it represents.

It has a larger significance too, however. If architecture can articulate what we value in society, perhaps buildings such as the Alzheimer's centre can begin a transformation of medical architecture and beyond, one focused not on iconography or efficiency but rather on delight and the human experience.