

SOLUTIONS: BERKELEY LIBRARY, DUBLIN

'It was the building that made me want to be an architect'

Niall McLaughlin recalls how as a 17 year old set to study English, a visit to Trinity College's campus led to an epiphany



McLaughlin outside Berkeley Library.



The concrete interior of the double-height reading room.



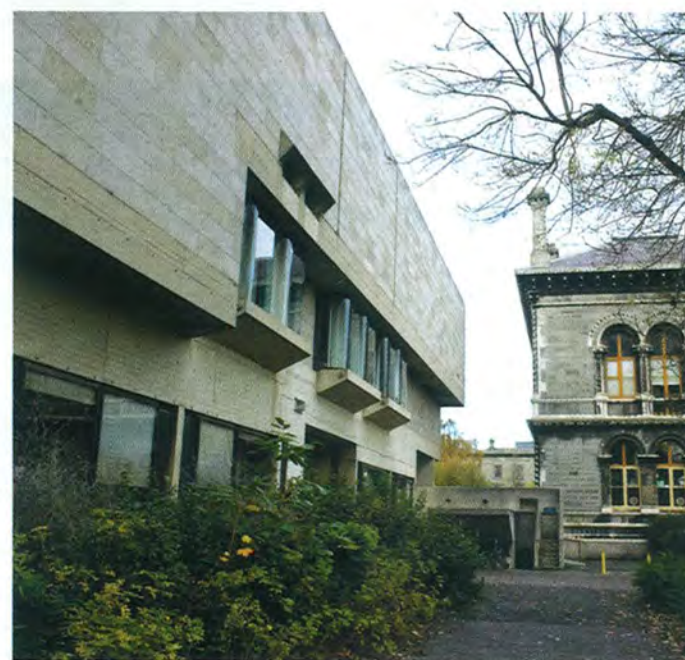
Built-in study spaces inside the library building.



The curved glass windows that caught McLaughlin's attention.

Inspiration
Berkeley Library, Trinity College
Architect
Ahrends Burton Koralek
Completed
1967
Location
Dublin

Berkeley Library was very influential on me becoming an architect. It was the first time I felt architecture could speak to me. It was the summer before I went to study at university. I'd opted to study English at Trinity. I was 17. I didn't study art. I didn't draw. I didn't have any understanding of architecture. But I was spending time around the campus and was very interested in the library, and at the same time the Goulding Studio in Enniskerry by Scott Tallon Walker, which was near my home. They both seemed to be incredibly glamorous. They had an extraordinary high focus that I couldn't articulate at the time. I remember walking through the campus and stopping to look at these amazing curved windows. I climbed up to them to get a closer look and this guy stopped



The library holds its own against the Trinity College Museum.

'It's incredible that it was done by three people who were just starting to feel their way as a practice'

and started talking to me about them, and got me thinking about architecture. A year later when I came to study at University College Dublin, I realised he was the architectural historian Brendan Murphy. After this encounter, I remember saying to a friend of mine that I might be interested in architecture. At the end of the summer you have a sort of last chance

saloon to apply for a different course and with last minute intuition, I chose architecture. I got an interview purely on my exam results and when I was asked about the buildings I liked, the library was the one I talked about. Certain buildings have an extraordinary vividness, a sense of being more intense than others. That special presence is renewed every time I see the building. It seems to communicate to me in a quite different way to language. I think what's great is the sculptural power of the building as an artefact. The neighbouring Deane & Woodward-designed Trinity College Museum is a brilliant Ruskinian building and the library needed to hold its own against that. ABK's library is entirely of its time but contextually situated. When it was completed, it was criticised for not being extendible, for being a finite object. But I think that was right — they could, and did, build another finite object next to it. When you see the building now, 40 or 50 years later, it has become a historic artefact in the city as well.

It is incredible that it was done by three people who were just starting to feel their way as a practice. The relationship between the plastic qualities of the in-situ concrete, the taut skin of the granite and the liquid qualities of the glass is impressive. For me, this

curved glass is incredibly lush and for a 1960s building, such a Victorian thing. It's only since I came to London that I understand better the terms of reference from which the library came. I was reading an essay on La Tourette by Corbusier and realised there was a huge tranche of projects cascading down from it, including the Berkeley Library and Lasdun's Royal College of Physicians. Like La Tourette, the library isn't sitting on the landscape but appears to be above it, dropping down so that it's barely resting on it. The building establishes itself at the top with the planar granite walls and then recedes back in

LENDING LIBRARY
Niall McLaughlin Architects' scheme for Castleford Museum & Library with its arrayed window seats harks back to Berkeley Library.



steps towards the ground rather than vice versa. That's what lets it punch its weight. I recently met up with the ABK partners and what was very touching was Richard Burton recalling when he got a telegram from Paul Koralek in New York saying he had won the library competition and wanted to come back to do the building with Burton and Peter Ahrends. He felt this tremendous gratitude from him that the promise they'd made to themselves as AA students of setting up in practice had been kept. For me, who'd have like to have gone into practice with someone myself but didn't find anyone to do so, seeing

their pleasure in each other's company, their generosity, and their lack of ego was great. When I think of it, I always go back to its confident sense of massing and also the fine details like the suppression of the window sills. I think about the very exact relationship between the stone, bronze shutters and projections of glass. But I haven't applied it literally to a project. Perhaps the project I have designed that takes most from this experience is the competition-winning scheme for Castleford Museum & Library. The idea of taking a book from the illuminated centre and moving to a particular seat at the edge, the stepping back in of arrayed window seats and the beehive-like texture of the space are, perhaps, memories of that original experience. Sadly, my library was not built. But the Berkeley Library was the building that made me want to be an architect. Whenever I come back to Dublin, I always pass through Trinity. For me, the library has weathered and just got better and better. The juxtaposition of its very simple surfaces with the deeply sculptured facade of its neighbour is to me still a very, very powerful architectural moment. Niall McLaughlin was speaking to Pamela Buxton.

Competition win that launched ABK

Trinity College Library was the building that kick-started the acclaimed architectural practice Ahrends Burton Koralek. Richard Burton, Peter Ahrends and Paul Koralek had studied together at the Architectural Association, and had hoped to work together in practice. When Koralek, who by then was working in New York for Marcel Breuer, won first place in the competition for a new library at Trinity College he contacted the other two to set up in practice together to develop and build the design. The building was the first to be built at Trinity College since the 1930s and the largest since the 19th century. The

idea was that the new library would represent the 20th century as the college's earlier buildings had represented the 18th and 19th centuries. It had to accommodate reading places for 470 and book storage capacity for up to 830,000 volumes. The site was between the old 18th century library building that houses the Book of Kells, and the 19th century museum. ABK's new building was positioned on a podium to create a forecourt between the two older buildings. On the ground floor is the catalogue and reference section while the first and second floors create one double-height reading room.



The library entrance shortly after its completion in 1967.

Section



ABK provided a variety of large and small study spaces with different degrees of enclosure and light to give choice to users. Most of the reading spaces are top-lit, and there are views to the surrounding gardens through large bay windows of curved glass in bronze frames, which form the dominant element of the west facade. These form a contrast with the building's main material of reinforced concrete made with white cement and light coloured sand. In the forecourt fronting the north elevation, a series of light shafts provides illumination for the basement accommodation. These shafts were unpopular

with the sculptor Henry Moore, who was due to install one of his pieces permanently on the podium forecourt. Instead he chose another site on the campus and a spherical piece by Arnaldo Pomodoro was later installed near the library entrance. ABK subsequently built again at the university, completing the Arts Building in 1979 and an extension to this in 2003. With the Berkeley Library and the Old Library, this arts building forms Fellows Square. The Berkeley Library is now a Protected Structure. The new Ussher Library was added by McCullough Mutvin/KMD Architecture in 2004.

North elevation

