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# Finishing touches as DIT opens doors in heart of Dublin city

[Joe Humphreys](#)

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For all the engineering and design behind the €38 million first phase of the Grangegorman campus, which opens to DIT students on Monday, the first thing that meets the eye is a tree.

"The architect James Mary O'Connor saw it and said 'education started with someone teaching under a tree so we'll keep that'," explains Louis Gunnigan, team leader for engineering on the project.

The solitary sycamore stands out in a landscape of grey, flanked by what used to be "the female house" of St Brendan's hospital, the notorious asylum that once stood here. The building is now called Rathdown House, connecting to an earlier history when the 72-acre site was owned by the Earl of Rathdown.

It's all part of continuity that is central to the spirit of the plan.

The 200-year-old hospital wards have been restored and converted into teaching space, the morgue now acting as the IT hub. A garden in memory of former patients is being landscaped, and a corner of Dublin once hidden behind high walls is being opened up, not just for students, but for the public too.

O'Connor himself is part of that continuity. An architecture graduate of DIT in the 1980s, the Phibsborough native made his name in the US before returning to help design the Grangegorman master plan. "It's thanks to him we're building the campus around a tree," Gunnigan laughs.

In the North House, once the main block for male psychiatric patients, staff are unpacking materials and rearranging work stations in preparation for the arrival of the first 1,000 students. The faculties of social science, art, design and photography will move en masse next week from the outposts of Portland Row, Temple Bar and Mountjoy Square.

Some of the original floorboards and fireplaces are still in place, and even some of the old hospital signs were retained. For former chaplain Fr Piaras O'Duill OFM Cap, who got a sneak preview this week of the redevelopment, the memories were flooding back. "I could not believe what I saw here today. I mean, I can picture this building and the beds along the sides and the poor patients there, and I'd be visiting them throughout the week."

## Museum

O'Duill (83) who came into the hospital in the 1950s under the stewardship of Dr Noel Browne was instrumental in retaining historical records and artefacts, now stored in an archive, and due eventually to be housed in a museum here. "One thing I am very much aware of is when the patients came in here because they were psychiatric patients they thought of their roots, they thought of their families, they thought of their religion, and very often they'd come looking for the priest."

Browne – famous for introducing the mother and child scheme – "wasn't religious in any way", O'Duill recalls, but "he did an awful lot of good for myself, my soul. This was my first assignment and I never left it."

St Laurence's Church where O'Duill once said daily Mass has now been restored and is used by the community, as well as by students as a lecturing space. An outhouse renamed Bradogue, after the river which runs under the site, now houses student societies and a media centre.

The next stage, funded under a €200 million public-private partnership, is already taking shape. Student accommodation is being built – the first 600 beds to open by 2018 – off the main, arcing walkway. Below that resembles an industrial mine as the playing fields are levelled. This is before foundations are put in for a sports complex, due to be hidden under a bank of earth in what's known in architecture as a "ha-ha" design.

One of the unusual features of Grangegorman is that it is built on a steep slope, and it stands from its main artery unexpectedly high above the city. The Guinness windmill tower across the Liffey appears as a mere thimble, while the Dublin mountains lie face-on in the distance.

When the second stage is completed by September 2017, students from Kevin Street and Cathal Brugha Street will move into a central quad. Others will move into an east quad, boosting the student population to over 10,000, and the North House will be turned into the campus library. To avoid unnecessary refitting costs all the

furniture is on wheels or easily movable from one building to another.

### **‘A good match’**

Gunnigan, who will be part of the first group of academic staff to move into the clock tower building next month, says the former asylum ultimately proved to be “a good match” in terms of design. “In some ways, it was a problem because of the age of the buildings. But in many ways the configuration of the building suited what we wanted.” The large open wards of the North House were ideal lecture theatres and “also the smaller parts of the building suited DIT because DIT works in small classes and we needed lots of break-out spaces”.

Educational needs were at the fore in design, adds DIT president Prof Brian Norton. “We spent a lot of time thinking about a very basic question. In a digital age, why would people come to a campus? And it actually comes down to the ethos of what we do. DIT is about practice. So a lot of our spaces are about the demonstration of making things, interaction between students and colleagues, formal and informal.”

Norton noted that funding for the second stage of the project is agreed, in part thanks to a Government stimulus and philanthropy. The last stage – the Aungier Street move – was “up for discussion” and would include raising money through property disposal. Separately, DIT plans to apply for university designation under forthcoming legislation and “with a fair wind” this would be achieved within two years, he says.

It has been a long road but a necessary one, he says, as “it would have cost us more to stay where we were . . . Sometimes you have to pinch yourself – it’s actually happening after many, many years.”

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