

Perspective

ACUTE MENTAL HEALTH UNIT | AONACH MHACHA | CHAPEL APARTMENTS | BRAIDSIDE PRIMARY SCHOOL

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 **RSUA**
The Royal Society
of Ulster Architects



Building for Mental Health

The majority of people will suffer with some form of mental health issue at some point. For some, this will be a temporary blip; others may struggle with episodes throughout their lives. Both may need professional treatment to aid recovery.

Until relatively recently, mental health was something that was not discussed, something that happened behind closed doors. The taboo surrounding mental health was a poor starting point for making a journey to recovery. The ongoing challenge is still to break down the stigma of mental illness and to open up the conversation for those that need to seek help. The more people can talk about their mental health the better.

A very positive first move is to locate medical assistance for acute mental illness alongside other acute medical services. Bringing mental healthcare onto the acute hospital site gives treatment 'for the mind' parity with treatment 'for the body'. The care is no longer hidden from view, but open, visible and accessible for the community it serves. And, of course, the hospital is the right place for modern, treatment-based mental healthcare. The current model is to rehabilitate and help people back into normal life, often described as the recovery-based model. The building is no longer an institution, rather a place to deliver a programmed plan of bespoke multi-disciplinary medical interventions.

Even the name 'Acute Mental Health Inpatient Centre' is important. Names that were previously used such as 'Oak Leaf Facility' or 'Mountain View House' had an underlying obscurity that are now considered to be unhelpful. It is better to be open and direct. This is the approach taken for Belfast's new unit at the City Hospital.

What should this building be like for patients, staff and visitors? First and foremost, it must feel open, accessible and inviting. It should be easy to navigate. The landscape is critical; one navigates and moves through gardens to destinations. The spaces for living and treatment are carefully linked together around a garden to create the ward. Consequently, each enjoys an abundance of natural light, good ventilation, a clear visual link as well as physical access to the outside, connecting patients, staff and users with nature.

Internally, much effort was made to develop unique interiors that relate to the individual, offering people the opportunity to control and influence their own environment. We strived to give each destination within the building identity through design and sought to avoid the generic.

The primary circulation route around the garden is the path around the perimeter of the garden, and this path incorporates destinations and places along the way and there is opportunity to cross the building through the garden.

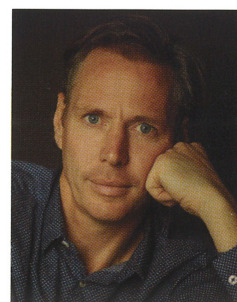
It cannot be overstated how important excellent client engagement is to the success of this building type. Investigating and finding ways to link activity to positive environments both inside and outside were key. Complete commitment between client and design teams at the detailed design stage can bring so much to the finished design.

The building services become significant for treatment, too, for example, the ability to control lighting to be appropriate for mood and activity, to draw curtains or to open a window. These are small things, but they may be important steps in recovery for some.

Mental Health is an area of healthcare that has not always enjoyed the same level of funding and development that other services have. However, in recent years this has definitely changed, opening up the opportunity for designers in every discipline to work together with motivated professionals and Trusts to deliver buildings that provide care professionals with a positive environment to deliver their care and ultimately make a tangible and lasting difference to recovery from mental illness. ○

Simon Robinson
RPP Architects

**See page 22 for Case Study
on Acute Mental Health Unit,
Belfast City Hospital**



Simon Robinson

Acute Mental Health Unit, Belfast City Hospital

THE TEAM

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Main Contractor
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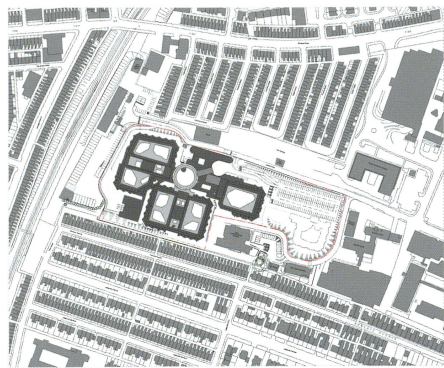




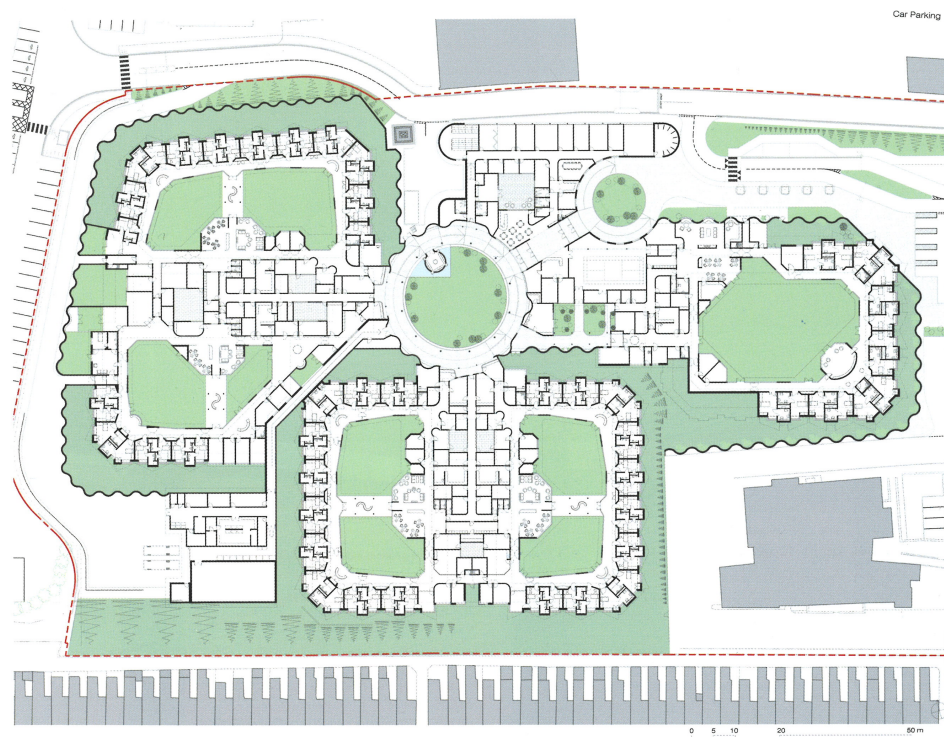
Aristotle may have posited that, "The whole is greater than the sum of its parts." Not so the City Hospital where the parts are generally greater than the whole with good buildings, such as the relatively recent Wellcome Wolfson Institute for Experimental Medicine, and others, to be found within the rather tangled hospital complex that has its origins back in 1841 with George Wilkinson's Workhouse. Not much remains of the older buildings but walking into the heart of the hospital grounds, the eye is drawn to the striking red-brick chimney at the Donegall Road side of the site. Beside it sits the new kid on the block, the Acute Mental Health Unit (AMHU), and an excellent new addition to the whole it is.

The architectural team responsible for the AMHU took a highly collaborative approach which undoubtedly contributed to the success of the project. RPP was the Design Lead, Richard Murphy was the Design Champion with Ricahrd Murphy Architects leading the development up to and including RIBA Stage D, and Devereux Architects provided specialist advice. The RPP team developed the detailed design, all the interior work and delivered the project on site. The team has an

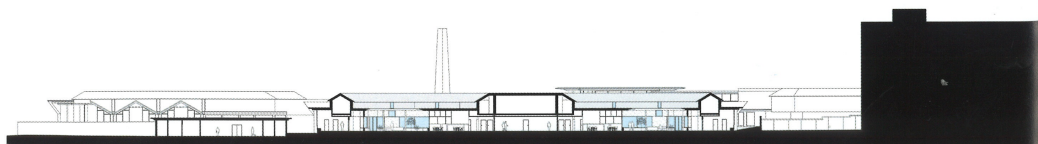




Site Location Plan



Ground Floor Plan



Section FF



excellent track record in designing health buildings generally and mental health units in particular. It was responsible for the much-lauded RIBA award-winning Old See House, an outpatient mental health facility on the Antrim Road, opened in 2014. Nearly 25 years ago Richard Murphy designed the first of the Maggie's Centres, located in Edinburgh. Maggie's Centres, which provide a caring environment and source of support for anyone affected by cancer, were the inspirational concept of artist and garden designer, Maggie Jencks. They were very much designed to put the user at the centre with a focus on domestic rather than institutional spaces and a pervasive sense of calm and relaxation. It is just such an ambience that has been achieved here at the AMHU. The other key player in the design of this deceptively large complex is the landscape designer and multiple Chelsea gold medal winner, Andy Sturgeon. Landscape is central to this project. Indeed, the architects say that rather than the landscape being designed to complement the building, the building is designed around the landscape. The aim of the whole unit is to create a calming, therapeutic and uplifting environment with the circulation route for service users, staff and visitors alike being a journey between gardens rather than along dull, institutional corridors.

The AMHU is a large single-storey complex that, unlike its neighbours, appears domestic in scale thanks to the pitched roofs above individual bedrooms echoing the profile of the surrounding terraces. A crinkle-crackle wall is a great improvement on the usual ubiquitous security fencing and it provides planting areas within the curves and gives an

overall sense of enclosure rather than confinement. The view to the hills beyond adds to the important role of landscape in this project.

The unit is reached along an elegantly designed walkway with abundant planting using contrasting textures and forms which create an invitingly green approach. A large circular polished granite and brick planter leads the visitor round to the entrance. The entrance area with its reception point leads into a central garden, off which radiate all five wards with their "front doors". The highly popular charity-run café at the entrance has fallen victim to Covid restrictions but it is hoped that it will re-open in time. As well as the central garden, each ward has its own courtyard garden, and each individual room looks out on to landscaped areas with window seats judiciously placed. The gardens are designed to provide areas for contemplation and reflection but also for activity and stimulation and water features bring sound and movement throughout. There is even a small pavilion with





no specific purpose except for relaxation, surrounded by the greenery of the courtyard garden.

The organisation of the five wards (male/female/mixed/old age and a psychiatric intensive care unit) is highly innovative and works very well. Instead of the usual central corridor with rooms off it, here bedrooms are located around the perimeter and accessed from a glazed circulation corridor looking out onto the central courtyard which gives a cloister-like feel to the space. This is particularly appropriate given the monastic origins of hospitals. It also puts the garden space at the heart of the unit and of each ward, making it a

major area for everyone to use. The gardens are even lit up at night, another example of thoughtful design in a facility that operates around the clock.

Inside the building the attention to detail is obvious. Plenty of natural and background ventilation creates freshness, not always a feature of hospital facilities, and there is no doubt that plenty of fresh air has proved a boon in Covid times as has the spaciousness of the building, meaning social distancing is not a problem. The airlock arrangement between doors, specified for security reasons, has turned out to be advantageous in minimising infection transmission as staff

and service users move about the building. As well as bright airy communal spaces, individual rooms have also avoided standardised treatment. In the bedrooms, the control of lighting, heating and blinds and even the music is left up to the occupant. Child visiting rooms have funky lighting and views out to the garden space and interview rooms of various shapes and sizes create interest and flexibility. An impressive range of facilities including a spacious gym as well as activity areas in each ward is provided. The furniture and fittings are robust and high quality with clever details like the fire doors concealed into the walls. Service user art adorns the walls. The building also works well for staff. There is a main central service spine with two subsidiary service areas and careful attention has been paid to kitchen, laundry and delivery arrangements and non-public entrances for ambulances and staff. Importantly for staff, ability to observe unobtrusively has been made possible enabling staff and service users to mingle rather than establishing static staff points. The glazed circulation route ensures that staff have a clear view from any point across the garden. Private areas for staff only and changing rooms are also provided.

There is always a balance to be achieved and perhaps nowhere more so than in a mental health unit: a balance between hidden hazards and practicality; between safety and informality; between the need for more beds and the policy-driven impetus to increased care at home and in the community; between spaciousness and individual areas and the need to provide enough staff to operate in such an environment. The AMHU has successfully met these challenges.

There is little to criticise here. The exterior is perhaps a bit busy, the roofscape is not the height of elegance - although the argument that the services maintenance can be completely separated from the clinical areas is quite compelling and was a requirement of the brief. As the architects point out, it takes a lot of plant to create a lot of fresh air! It is to be hoped that the crucial role the landscaping plays in the design and healing process is recognised and supported by a suitable maintenance line in the budget. If this could extend to the rather sad wildflower meadow by the car park that would be a real bonus. This is but minor nit-picking, however, and the unit, particularly the interior spaces, is a triumph. This is a building and indeed gardens which provide inspiring and humane spaces respecting the dignity and needs of its users. Satisfaction surveys clearly show that service users and staff alike are delighted with, and enjoy, the building.

In a sector where the battle for budgets is intense, mental health facilities are not always at the top of the list. It is good to see such a meticulously detailed and well-designed building situated within a major hospital complex close to A&E and, by proximity to other medical units, gaining parity with other specialisms. The Acute Mental Health Unit will set the standard for such facilities in the future and deserves its place on the RSUA Design Awards 2020 shortlist. ○

Karen Latimer

