



Client - Department of Defence
Architects - McCullough Mulvin Architects
Structural Engineers - Atkins
Fire Safety Consultant - Michael Slattery
Storage specialist - Storage systems
PSDP - Bruce Shaw
Quantity Surveyor - Rogerson Reddan
Main Contractor - Gorm Construction

Project size - 2500m²
Project value - €5.7m ex vat
Project location - Rathmines, Co. Dublin

Photography - Christian Richters

MILITARY ARCHIVES

40 | 61 <

REPORT BY MCCULLOUGH MULVIN ARCHITECTS

The new Military Archives, located in Cathal Brugha Barracks in Rathmines in Dublin, is a very particular project. It was one of a series of contemporary buildings around Ireland commissioned to commemorate the 1916 Rising which led to Irish freedom. The Irish Army has a fascinating and extensive archive built up over the years since the foundation of the State; it includes Army records, depositions concerning the War of Independence, maps and films. Many would be even more surprised to find out that the Archive has been open to the public for some time and one of the reasons to build a new facility was to open up and extend this public access further.

The new building is located in Cathal Brugha Barracks in Rathmines. It is made up of two sections - one old and one new - representing at once the tradition and

the progressive nature of the Army. It is a good example of radical re-use of existing buildings for new uses. The old section is one half on an old stone and brick hospital block dating from the early years of the barracks. We have turned this on its end and opened a new entrance in the gable leading to a new public library and reading room lined out in timber; the rest is made up of offices and a conservation laboratory.

The new section matches the old in its character, extending the architecture of gables, but is made of brick; there is a dramatic folded courtyard between the two of them. The new building, which is partially recessed in the ground, comprises two large archive rooms with computer-controlled rolling racking at both levels. It is built to the highest international standards of archive storage.

The use of brickwork was essential to the character of the work. At once, it was used to make a solid closed form, which suited the function of the archive use; its inert character was helpful in providing the

correct environment. However, brickwork was used for more than technical or functional reasons: the incremental nature of brickwork - the thousands and thousands of single bricks that make it up - represented the individual amounts of information that make up any archive. The bricks made the building have a manifest weight - which represented the safety and enclosure of the precious documentation; the weight also represented the weight of history manifest in the contents.

The use of brickwork also matched the existing building, which was to be retained and re-used; its dark yellow colour picking up the character of the early 19th century Dolphins Barn Dublin stock bricks in the older building in the same way that the gables picked up the overall form. The form and character of the new building was also intended to reflect its military function - a simple, severe yet nobly proportioned place of storage.

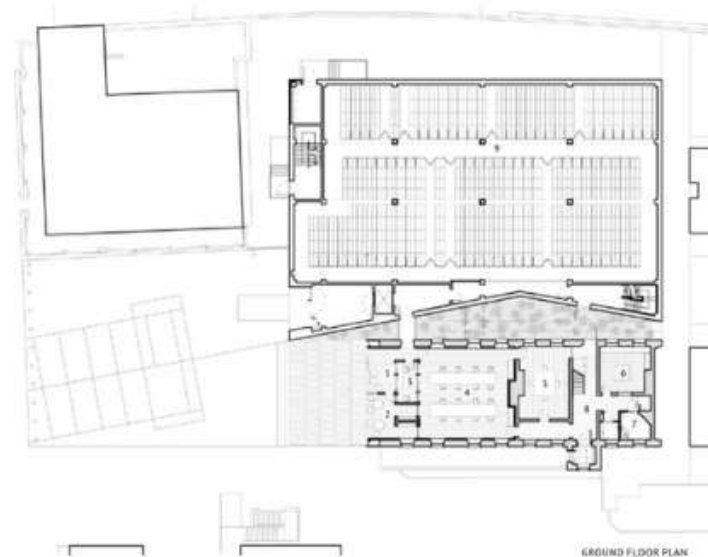
1. Located in Cathal Brugha Barracks, Rathmines, the new Military Archives were commissioned to commemorate the 1916 Rising. The entrance has been set into the gable.
2. The Military Archives are composed of a new and an existing building, which was originally designed as a hospital.





64 | 67 c

FIRST FLOOR PLAN



GROUND FLOOR PLAN

- 1. Reception
- 2. Waiting Area
- 3. Nurses Room
- 4. Reading Room
- 5. Nobby Room
- 6. Conservation Lab
- 7. Tidiers
- 8. Corridor
- 9. Archive



- 1. In contrast to the brick exterior, the reading room is lined in carefully-detailed timber
- 2. The bespoke archive shelving is computer-controlled
- 3. The existing former hospital building has been sensitively restored



6. Active store (new) and reading room (old) are connected via a glass link

'AN EXTRAORDINARY AUTHENTIC WORK OF ARCHITECTURE'
REVIEW BY STEPHEN BEST
 ...

Revolutions become deeply entwined with the fabric of the cities in which they arise. Whereas the institutions of State (although targets of protest) characteristically survive to become inhabited monuments, the tools of communication (essential at the time) tend to be ephemeral. Once plastered across the city, the paper-printed pamphlets, images and words published by the thousand to stir the people into action are soon forgotten, neglected, lost in the passage of time.

McCullough Mulvin Architects' new Military Archives contains 100 years of Irish military history, including some of our most precious documents, artefacts, photographs and film. Safe and secure, they are together for the first time in a single publicly accessible facility. That their place of rest is located in Cathal Brugha Barracks, the vast unseen military complex which sprawls out over 46 acres between Rathmines and Harold's Cross, is both poignant and appropriate.

In Dublin, there are no greater emblems of the struggle for self-determination ignited in 1916 than former British military barracks. This necklace of power that once dominated the city is a potent reminder of the challenges which were faced at the time. Although some of these symbols of ascendancy are now repurposed as museums, art galleries, and plush housing or education facilities two, including Cathal Brugha, retain their original function and are now home to the Irish Army.

Amid the nineteenth century stone, slate and hand-thrown brick of many barracks, new additions have tended to opt for a contemporary language of glossy conspicuousness. They make their presence

felt. Nestled close to the Rathmines Road entrance, in the south east corner, this part new-build, part refurbishment of the old infirmary takes a different approach. The main element, a hermetically sealed box, is blank and buff with resonances of the plain formal qualities of its neighbours.

It is an extraordinary authentic work of architecture, at once deferring to the infirmary, a modest nineteenth century stone building on the right, while making an uncompromising and uplifting modernist statement of its own.

The publicly accessible part of the archive is housed in the infirmary, half of which was demolished mid-century. It comprises of conservation facilities, staff offices and a small, elegant, fully-equipped public reading room, which is smartly lined in fine oak panelling. Adding to the overall sense of stateliness, on permanent display is a rare original copy of the Proclamation of the Republic.

The new mottled dark-grey, brick-clad addition stands apart just to the east of the infirmary. It encloses a windowless state-of-the-art environmentally controlled archive. At first glance, its neutral appearance melts effortlessly into the surrounding cacophony of dull tones and muted textures that have been laid down over 200 years of continuous use.

Yet to the architects' credit, there is no false unity here, no shallow aping of the past. The addition matches the original in tone, massing, proportions and presence, but there also are distinct differences between past and present; there is a conversation between architectural eras, if one takes time to hear it.

The infirmary, for example, employs the masonry as structure, it holds up the floors and roof; in the new it is a thin skin attached to a structural concrete frame. Look closely and you will see its thinness; there are blind windows where the brick is pulled apart to form a ventilation

"THE VIRTUAL HAS BROUGHT UNTOLD ACCESS, BUT IT'S NOT ALWAYS ENOUGH – YOU BEGIN TO CRY OUT FOR AN EXPERIENCE OF AUTHENTICITY".

screen. Many visitors may not notice these subtle details but the overall impression of relating harmoniously to the old is unmistakable.

The two parts, old and new, are linked across a narrow open court by two minimal glass vitrines, impartial mediators that allow light and views to pass between the two muscular forms. This is a respectful way of joining old and new, far better than indulging the latest theoretical speculations in a separate show-off structure. The arrangement is further enhanced by a slight indentation in the plan of the archive. Pulled away at the centre to allow light to flood the void between the dark forms, it has the powerful effect of endowing the gap between with a sense of place.

It is not just the 1916 centenary that has led to a renewed interest in the archive material but also the rise in digital access has had an effect. Technology has disrupted and changed our social interactions with other people. We live in a world where everything is available from behind a computer screen. The virtual has brought untold access, but it's not always enough – you begin to cry out for an experience of authenticity.

Like all great works, the artefacts within the Military Archives must be experienced, not merely seen in images. Correspondingly the architecture that houses them demands to be a real place, to be special, and offer visitors something beyond what they can get through their computers. The Military Archives does just that, it complements and enhances, creating a serene presence in a respectful container. The hermetic potential of the archive has found its humane expression in the heart of Dublin.

- **Stephen Best is a Senior Lecturer at DIT and Programme Chair of the Professional Diploma in Architectural Practice. He is Second Vice President of the RIAI.**