Trinity College Dublin
Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath
The University of Dublin

The Berkeley Library and the Veil of Order

Paul Koralek in conversation with John Tuomey

Paul Koralek

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Paul Koralek was born in Vienna in 1933. Paul is one-third of architectural partnership Ahrends Burton and Koralek (ABK) with Peter Ahrends and Richard Burton. ABK's first commission was for the New Library for Trinity College Dublin.

John Tuomey

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John Tuomey was born in Tralee in 1954. John is one-half of architectural partnership O'Donnell + Tuomey with Sheila O'Donnell. They were jointly awarded the RIBA Royal Gold Medal in 2015, regarded as the world's most prestigious prize in architecture. John is Professor of Architectural Design at University College Dublin.

"Berkeley Library was very influential on me becoming an architect. It was the first time I felt architecture could speak to me."

Niall McLaughlin, 50 architects 50 buildings: the buildings that inspire architects.

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Preface

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This booklet has been produced to mark the first 50 years of the Berkeley Library, as part of a series of celebrations entitled Berkeley50.

Widely regarded as Ireland's finest modernist building and beloved by many students of architecture, the Berkeley Library is a brutalist gem that looks as good now as when it was opened by President Éamon de Valera in 1967. Trinity College Dublin wanted a building which would last 'forever', which spoke to the 20th century as characteristically as its neighbours the Old Library and the Museum Building did to the 18th and 19th centuries respectively. And speak to the 20th century it certainly does. Koralek's solution also created a brilliant, invisible, two storey space, within a piazza-like Podium which not only links the 18th- and 19th- and 20th-century buildings, but also acts as the busy crossroads and the panopticon of the campus, being the only place where all four squares can be seen.

Designed by Koralek at the tender age of 28 without ever having set foot in Ireland, the Berkeley Library was the first building in what would turn out to be a long and dazzling career. Built *in situ* by master builders G. & T. Crampton using concrete poured into Douglas fir formwork, the building was the product of Koralek's precocious imagination, realised by a legion of respected craftspeople. Now part of a larger complex of three linked library buildings (one of which, the Lecky Library, Koralek also designed) it remains one of the most stunning buildings in Dublin and retains the power to provoke strong reactions in all who see it.

In this transcript of the conversation between the architect John Tuomey and Paul Koralek recorded in 2005, Koralek shares insights both about his first architectural commission and about the years since. Much is now written about the 'library as space; and space as library', but Koralek understood that there should be a 'great variety of spaces' … 'because people do want differences'.

He speaks of 'courage', 'adventure', 'ambiguity', 'inflexibility', 'chaos of feeling' and about 'the romantic view of architecture' that '…was going to bring about a better future'. I have heard many alumni, staff, students and researchers speak movingly about their individual intellectual - and social - development during their time spent in the Berkeley Library. The Berkeley is now part of the DNA of the campus. It is not only at the heart of the city centre campus but, as Koralek says, 'it's got a heart'.

Níall McLaughlin, Trinity alumnus and honorary fellow of the Royal Institute of Architects of Ireland, says the 'Berkeley Library was very influential on me becoming an architect. It was the first time I felt architecture could speak to me'. But the building's influence goes well beyond generations of Trinity community; when Angela Brady, former president of RIBA, was asked for her favourite building, she replied 'The Berkeley Library … for its curved windows and form. It inspired me to take up architecture and still inspires me today'.

During this anniversary year of Berkeley50, the Library has celebrated with events as diverse as a lecture on the philosophy of Bishop George Berkeley; a series of 1960s 'happenings' to coincide with the 50th anniversary of Moog synthesizers; an exhibition on *Krapp's Last Tape*, the Broadway royalties from which Samuel Beckett donated to the Berkeley fund; to being featured in the 2017 Open House weekend. This diversity reflects the breadth and diversity of the College community for whom the Library was created. In the spirit of Koralek's concluding comments about long-termism and looking to the 22nd, 23rd and 24th century, the year will end with an event looking forward to Berkeley100.

I have been Librarian and College Archivist of Trinity College Dublin for three years now, based in an office in the Berkeley with a spectacular view overlooking the cricket pitch, with its own brutalist terrace, where the photograph on pages 17 and 18 of the three women sitting smoking was taken. The more I have learnt about this building, the more I respect and admire it, and am very aware the stewardship of the Berkeley Library is 'on our watch'.

So, as we celebrate 50 years since the opening of the Berkeley, and as we redefine the library for the 21st century, we need to be as bold and visionary as the commissioning 'elders' of the Berkeley Library and as bold and visionary as Paul Koralek's interpretation of the 20th-century library.

Helen Shenton
Librarian & College Archivist
Trinity College Dublin
17th September 2017

Introduction

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John Tuomey [JT]: This is the third in an occasional series of recorded interviews that I'm doing with visiting architects. We're recording it as a document for the library in the School of Architecture in UCD. So, on behalf of the Architecture Department of UCD, you're all very welcome here at the Printing House in Trinity College, which is brilliantly aligned this lunchtime on axis with the midday sun and with the approach to the Library itself, where we can't have such a meeting, because it's still a full-time library. But we have the spiritual advantage of being on axis, and with the door open...

I'm really happy that Paul Koralek has agreed to come and meet us today, for this lunchtime conversation, although there is no lunch, it's at the time of lunch. I have some questions in my head that I've always wanted to ask Paul Koralek, and some I think that we need to ask in order to put this conversation in context.

But, just to begin, and to subtitle the conversation, I thought I might read you a line from a book I'm reading, The Writer's Voice by Al Alvarez. It's a psychological enquiry into the work of writing itself.

> *For a writer, voice is a problem that never lets you go, and I have thought about it for as long as I can remember - if for no other reason than that a writer doesn't properly begin until he has a voice of his own.*

In this book, the writer, a poet, is writing about writing; he's not writing as a critic. And what we're trying to do with these conversations is to have architects talking about architecture. In a chapter called Listening Alvarez refers to Novalis, the 18th-century prophet of romanticism, whose understanding of romanticism was a longing for home, a longing for what is far off. Alvarez goes on to quote from The Veil of Order, a book of conversations between the musician Alfred Brendel and the critic Michael Meyer, in which the pianist, talking about music, leans on an aphorism of Novalis, an aphorism that I'm leaning on here again today.

> *"Chaos, in a work of art, should shimmer through the veil of order." This is an idea that appeals strongly to Brendel: "I'm very much for chaos, that is to say feeling. But it's only the veil of order that makes the work of art possible." He seems to be implying that feeling, the chaos that wells up vertically from the unconscious, is made orderly by the horizontal phrasing and development, but without the chaos of feeling there can be no music. It's the same with language: argument, meter, and the tone of voice create order, but everything depends on the weight and resonance of each word.*

So, from writing to architecture, from music to architecture... all by way of introduction to today's conversation with Paul Koralek, about the Berkeley Library.

Background

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JT: My first question for Paul Koralek, and it's a simple one, is about his European background. Koralek is not an English name. How did you come to England?

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Paul Koralek [PK]: Very simply, because of Hitler. My grandparents were refugees from Vienna and moved to England just before the Second World War. So, although yes, I was born in Vienna, I was brought up and educated in England, so it's sort of in my background.

JT: What age were you when you came to England?

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PK: I was five.

JT: Do you remember Vienna?

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PK: Rarely... any memory is deeply psychological; it's blanked out completely. I never went to school there you see, so I began to learn to read and write in English. I never learned to read or write in German.

JT: And that European aspect of your identity, do you think of that as important for yourself? Or do you think you're an Englishman?

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PK: I don't really think either. I don't think about it in those terms. I'm sure it is important, but it's not something that I can take into account, or feel I need to take into account. Maybe it's given me a slightly broader perspective, so I'm thankful for that.

JT: Your father was a tailor?

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PK: No, my father was a businessman.

JT: Businessman! Where did I get the idea that your father was a tailor? [Laughs]

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PK: His business was cloth fabrics. He was in the rag trade, you might say. He encouraged me to learn what he saw as a profession. But I came into architecture because as a very young child I used to draw houses and everybody said, "He's going to be an architect because he draws houses!" So I got stuck with that idea. It was around about the second year that I began to realise what I was getting myself into.

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JT: So, you began as a house-drawer...!

The Architectural Association (AA)

JT: Let's talk about your time at the AA. You went to the AA in the 1950s. You and your friends Richard Burton and Peter Ahrends were called 'the country boys' - but you weren't from the country.

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PK: We weren't from the country, no. The strongly prevailing philosophy of architecture at that time at the AA was very rationalist. It was based on Mies. It was influenced by Mies and by Corbusier's more rational early work. The three of us became friends because we were never quite convinced about that. And we always, right from the beginning, were interested in a more contextual, perhaps more romantic view of architecture and that drew us together. Frank Lloyd Wright was our great hero, initially. I was interested in his early prairie houses, and so we came to be seen as 'country boys' compared to the more intellectually based European approach to architecture. That's what drew us together to become friends first of all, and then partners later.

JT: When you came to the AA there was a protest on?

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PK: The first day we walked into the AA - I was only 17 at the time, straight out of school – we were told to go on strike because the Principal had been fired. And we didn't have any idea who he was, we were just told to go on strike. It was very much walking into a new world. One has to mention the Second World War at this point. It was shortly after the Second World War, five years after, but five years was nothing for the world to get back on its feet. There had been a massive trauma. And the older student generations at the AA had come back to finish their studies, so they were, you know, very mature people in many ways. The war was seen as if it was going to produce a brave new world. There was a tremendous optimism epitomised by the Festival of Britain, which was a major event at that time. All during our student period we were very close to that, because Richard Burton's stepfather was the Director of the Festival of Britain, so he saw a lot of that happening. It was a tremendous statement of confidence in the future, belief in the future, that architecture was going to bring about a better future. I'm still naïve enough to think it can help to do that, but it was a different view at that time.

JT: And the people who were teaching there, Peter Smithson was teaching there, Bill Howell was teaching, you had Powell and Moya as your external examiners. All that culture of English Brutalism, of 1950s British architecture, that was all at the AA at that time.

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PK: That's right. That was really our education.

JT: And the AA was closely linked to practice, those people intended to build their work, building architecture...

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PK: Certainly the course I did at the AA was about how to make buildings. I'm not sure if it's remained like that entirely, but there was always a big emphasis on the imaginative aspect of architecture. There was an attempt to integrate how plumbing worked. Howell, Killick, Partridge, and Amis were working at the LCC Department, working on flats, and they designed the inside of the service ducts as carefully as the facades of the buildings. They were interested in how the pipes fitted and how every pipe joint was designed.

JT: You were aware of this as a student?

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PK: Yes. I mean this was the culture, this is what we were brought up to do as architects.

JT: They'd bring their drawings in, showing you drawings of the buildings they were working on themselves?

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PK: Yes, because they were all teaching part-time and then also working. Peter Smithson even said, "I'm not interested in teaching at all. If you want to learn from me, you'll have to squeeze it out from me." [Laughs] He was interested in making his buildings. I look back on it with a lot of gratitude and as a very interesting time.

JT: It's a very different atmosphere than prevails in England at the moment, where there is a big division between practice and education. You weren't ever involved in teaching yourself?

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PK: Not much. A little bit but not much.

JT: And London practice wouldn't be part of the current culture of the AA School?

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PK: Certainly not as much as it was then.

JT: At that time the AA saw itself as part of this drive to rebuild Britain and reshape Britain.

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PK: Yes. And the general philosophy was, you know, knock everything down and start again! [Laughs]

JT: It must have been exciting.

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PK: It was an exciting time. The highlight for me of that time was when Corbusier built the chapel at Ronchamp. Peter Ahrends, Richard Burton and I promptly hired a minibus and we drove to Ronchamp. Because this was a moving event and it was something totally new, which nobody had expected from Corbusier, from his rationalism. We responded to that open door, that architecture could be more than a purely rational fulfilment of needs.

JT: What was Ronchamp like then? Was it a brand-new building? Was it finished when you saw it?

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PK: Yes, it was just finished and it was amazing. We actually spent a night in the hostel there and I removed half the skin off my arm on the concrete walls, rolling over in the night against one of those rough concrete walls, which coloured my view quite a bit.

JT: You stayed like pilgrims in the hostel. Did you see it published and feel you just had to go, or did you hear it was good?

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PK: I saw it published, yes.

JT: And did Corb visit the AA while you were there?

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PK: I never saw him, I don't think so. We just went off in our van.

JT: You also talk about the influence of Louis Sullivan on your work.

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PK: Well, through our interest in Frank Lloyd Wight, we became interested in Louis Sullivan. If one can wade through the extremely purple prose, which is quite difficult to wade through, it still summarises a view of architecture that I try to work by.

JT: Louis Sullivan said, "Form follows function."

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PK: Yes. But for him that wasn't a utilitarian thing. It's actually a mystical statement about the nature of form. And I think it has been very much debased in the general view...

JT: The understanding of function...?

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PK: Yes, that it's seen as utilitarian. I think lifting the spirit is as much a function of the building as having enough toilets. [Laughs]

Marcel Breuer

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JT: Before we come to talk about the Library or your approach to the Library, could you talk to us about your year in New York? You worked with Marcel Breuer after you finished at the AA.

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PK: Yes. I have to explain. Richard and Peter and I became friends at the AA – and we had decided very naïvely, and without the slightest idea of how to do it, that we would set up a practice together, and we thought realistically we couldn't do this straight away after the AA, so we all went off to different places to gain some experience. And for various reasons I won't go into, I went to work in France for a while and then I wanted to work in North America, but I couldn't get a visa to America, so I worked in Canada for a while. From Canada I got myself a job with Marcel Breuer. We moved down to New York and I began working in his office. At that time, Richard and Peter were beginning to establish a practice in London, an embryonic ABK, and I felt I wasn't doing my bit. So I decided to do the Trinity Library competition as a token gesture towards helping set up this practice.

JT: A and B were working in London and K was slaving away doing competitions in New York.

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PK: I had tried to do a lot of other competitions before that, but I never finished one, because I was never happy with the outcome, so I took a solemn oath that I would send this one in, whatever I thought of it. By the skin of my teeth I got it in. And it was done working on our kitchen table at home, in a tiny flat in New York. It was all drawn in pencil, mounted on boards and sent off. I didn't even keep copies of them.

JT: And Richard Meier helped you draw it up on the last night?

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PK: Yes, but don't propagate the notion that Richard Meier designed the Berkeley Library! [Laughs] He didn't. But he was working at the drawing board next to me at Marcel Breuer, and we were mates and of course on the last night, I was working all night and he came over to help me...

JT: Marcel Breuer was absolutely fascinated by form, modernist form.

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PK: I found Marcel Breuer a very interesting architect because I saw him as an iconic figure of the modern movement. In fact, he worked like a Beaux Arts architect in the modern idiom. It was very interesting. I mean, his approach to form was Beaux Arts in the sense that it was an interest in form per se. He wasn't really interested in how the buildings worked.

Furniture and houses he did brilliantly, I think, intuitively. And he did several houses for himself. Larger buildings were a little different. I worked on a huge office block competition which was held up off the ground on piloti, and all the work went into sculpting these piloti. Models were built and drawings were done. There weren't any computers, so it was all done by hand and very carefully. What actually went on in this building was never talked about! But the form of these piloti...! It was exquisite. And I don't say this entirely as a negative thing, because a lot of his buildings are very rich in their forms. Almost a sculpture, designed in parts. I mean, in a way, he was a sculptor.

JT: But not lived-in form in the sense that you mean it?

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PK: I don't want to get out of my depth, I worked there for just a year and I'm not a great student of his work, I only know the bits that I came across. But, in general, it was not lived-in form, I think there were certain buildings, single story spatial buildings, where the space is being treated in the same way. But the organisation of complex buildings...I mean you have to remember in that period the whole question of sustainability and energy just didn't enter the mind. We could do anything, we could buy any amount of energy. Glass boxes, solar gain, nobody even paused to consider these things, so the performance of the façade in terms of how it encloses the building wasn't considered. It was how it looked like.

JT: Although Marcel Breuer was a big propagator of the *brise soleil*.

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PK: He was interested in how it was made.

JT: And the shadow it cast...

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PK: Yes, and the shadow it cast, that's true. He got very interested in precast concrete and that probably influenced me a bit in the original Berkeley Library design, because that was to be precast concrete. But he was interested in precast concrete as a sculptural material, as a moulded material and, in a way, that's not so far from where we went with *in situ* concrete.

JT: It's very interesting that you talk about Corbusier, the sculptural side of Corbusier and then you have the experience of working with Marcel Breuer. I'm talking about you finding your voice early so to speak. Not early, from the very beginning. Those signs of the love of the work that Corbusier was making and the influence of Breuer - they do show up in the Berkeley Library.

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PK: Yes. To some extent that would have been an interest of mine anyway, which is why I think I was interested in working with Marcel Breuer. But you could read an influence into it I think. One never knows these things...

"ABK's Paul Koralek should have won an RIAI Gold Medal."

Frank McDonald, The Irish Times.

Critical Reception

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JT: I'm going to come back again to talk about the competition, but first let's go forward to the building having been built and to its critical reception.

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The building was completed in 1967, which is just about 40 years ago now – it still looks brand new in the sunshine today. It had a huge effect at the time. It had a huge effect not just here, but in international architectural culture. People were talking about it and trying to get to grips with it – with its physicality, with its character. Maybe that's why I mentioned the prophet of romanticism at the beginning, because there's a very interesting review in the AR in 1967 where Alan Colquhoun, a rationalist I suppose, is looking for the building to satisfy his intellect. He's looking for consistency. He's complaining of an Anglo-Saxon penchant for picturesque elaboration. He is evaluating all the quality in the achievement and the realisation of the building. But he's not satisfied that the building clearly enough demonstrates a rational approach. But then, moving way ahead, you, on the other hand, in your essay Architecture or Appearances, Some Thoughts from the Drawing Board, you look to architecture:

> *"To create an environment that is satisfying to all aspects of the human being: the physical, the psychological, the spiritual ... the needs of the psyche."*

Do you see a division between the rational and the romantic?

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PK: No, I don't really. I think it's perfectly rational to take in all these factors... the difference is one of subtlety and complexity and you can't quantify everything. I don't see a line anywhere where things move from one category to another, they just grade very gradually from the most mundane to the most subtle and, if you like, spiritual. I don't see the world in dualistic terms.

JT: Colquhoun might have thought you were going off track.

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PK: I don't know what he thought but...

JT: I'm thinking about the agenda of the AA, which you talked about earlier.

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PK: He might well have thought that. But that word "picturesque" is interesting. It depends on exactly what you mean by that. If it means that it has more complexity and more visual interest and isn't all purely rational, then I plead guilty. If it means starting from an image of something picturesque and trying to replicate that, then I would say no to that. Now, of course, what actually happens when one is designing a building is much more complex. I would never set out to reproduce a picturesque effect. Because I don't think it works, I don't think you can get away with it. You can't fool people.

JT: You call your essay Architecture or Appearances – that's a conscious opposition you're making?

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PK: Yes, it is. That's exactly what I'm referring to. I think this quality of interest has to grow out of what the building is. And now I'm going to drift into talking about the Berkeley Library...

The Library

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PK: There are different strands in the design. One of our major preoccupations was this was a building for study. It was to be a research library. It was aimed at the use of fellows and lecturers and postgraduates of Trinity College. And we thought about... what kind of environment do such people like? There's a question as to how far you can generalise it – people are different – but I guess you could generalise to some degree as to the conditions that people feel are conducive to that kind of activity, to concentration. That led us to an inward-looking, top-lit building. It led us to a building with a great variety of spaces in it, because people do want differences, but providing varying degrees of enclosure and containment in the sense of being in a place. And that went on into the detail, in terms of actually designing readers' tables and carrels and fitting them into little nooks and crannies. Nooks and crannies seemed important to us in a building like that. Not a building that is one hundred per cent nooks and crannies, but that has enough nooks and crannies that people can hunt out.

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Shortly after it was opened, I stood at the top of the stairs and watched what people did when they came in. They all went to their different places. There was one table that we didn't want to put in – to get the numbers up we had to add one more – more or less at the top of the stairs. We thought it would be impossible and that nobody would want to work there, but in fact some people went straight to that table.

JT: Right in the noisy public place...

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PK: We were interested in that whole topic. The building's shaped like that. It's not the only thing it's shaped by, but it's one of them.

JT: A classic image of a library, a rational image of a library, like Boulée's Library, or the Reading Room in the British Museum, would be the biggest bookshelf you can imagine, with everything going from A to Z, all in a line. All the knowledge in the world lined up in front of you. But you're talking about a different idea of flexibility.

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PK: Only one modern university library had been built in the British Isles since the Second World War when we decided the library here. That was a building by Yorke Rosenberg Mardall, with stacks of floors, rows and rows of tables and row and rows of books. We took one look at that and thought – no that is not what we would want to work in. That's not a pleasant place to be in.

JT: So, one thing you were reacting against was the Sheffield Library. Is that right?

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PK: Yes, very much so.

JT: Had you been to see that building?

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PK: No. I was a pretty peculiar young architect, and I was working hard in New York, so there was no chance of visiting lots of things.

The Competition

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JT: What you were just describing - that compartmented, concentrated character of the interior of the building – that's a quality that we can feel now and the readers can feel now. I wonder if the competition judges read that when they read your drawings?

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It seems to me that one of the reasons you might have won the competition is because you made the big move of the basement linking into the existing library and then you pushed the building back.

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PK: I think that's right. I mean, this was one aspect. The primary aspect of the design of that building, and I'm sure that's what won the competition, was the strategy for how to make what had been thought of as an addition to the 18th-century library. The competition brief called for an addition to that building, an extension of that building. And I took one look at it and decided that you can't extend this. It's a complete and perfect object. There is no way. However wonderfully designed, I think that one could not have built an extension in the strict sense of that word. In fact, I think the principal design move was to drop the idea of an extension and build a new building next to it, one which was linked underground.

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I had never been to Ireland, let alone Trinity College, so this is against all my principles – to design a building without visiting the site, it's an appalling thing to do! But there was an excellent brief and well-illustrated. Really, all the information you needed was there. And the brief called for a very large book storage area, an admin and catalogue area, and a reading area where you could access books. So the brief fell into three clear categories, one of which could go underground without any problems. That seemed like the clue for how to do an extension which wasn't an extension. And then the other clue came from the pattern of Trinity College, of the west end of the College. The traditional College has a very strong rectilinear pattern just asking to completed. I think the siting of the library was important. Actually one of the judges criticised the siting of the library as being too close to the existing library building and the Museum Building. But by putting it that close we defined a forecourt and also started to define what is now Fellows' Square.

JT: Was the competition site defined as a limited site?

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PK: Yes, very.

"...an inspired building, subtle in its relationship to the existing buildings and squares, plastic in detail and magnificent in its internal lighting effects."

Christine Casey, The buildings of Ireland: Dublin.

JT: It was couched as an extension to Thomas Burgh's 1732 library?

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PK: Yes.

JT: You had to extend that building, but there was a defined boundary?

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PK: The site was from the front of what is now the library forecourt back to Nassau Street, along that strip.

JT: It was described as an extension to the original library, but it seems to me, well not just to me, to everybody, that you pushed your library back and then you pulled the drawer out to make a basement link, and that makes a new square.

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PK: Yes, a new forecourt...

JT: Eddie McParland, who, by the way, sends his apologies because he couldn't be here today, in his history of Trinity College says that forecourt is the only carefully thought out transition from one square to another in the College. You have the rational Thomas Burgh library on one side and you have the more romantic Deane and Woodward 1850s building on the other, and your building in between.

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PK: It's a relatively plain stone façade, which was a way of not fighting with either of those two buildings.

JT: The corner offsets help, by pulling it back...

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PK: Yes, because it tended to be very tight, so the spaces were held. And they bleed out into each other and yet there's a hint of it going through.

The Building

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JT: I don't know exactly, although I've seen some of your drawings from the competition stage, but the building must have changed character enormously when you changed from precast to *in situ*.

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PK: Well, three things happened, I suppose. The first was having won the competition, and not only having won the competition, but actually having been appointed by Trinity College, as a young architect who never so much as built a bathroom extension, to build this showpiece building. I mean it was a huge act of faith on the part of the College, very much encouraged by the chair of the assessors Hugh Casson, who more or less said to the College "You've got yourselves an architect for God's sake, let him run." Which was wonderful. Maybe it was not quite as difficult at that time as it would be now, but the College had the courage to say "Okay, we'll go with him."

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So having been appointed, I then came back to London and the three of us stayed in the UK and worked together on the design. The design as it now stands is very much, more than any other building I've done, the work of all three of us. Which is paradoxical, because I did the competition myself and won the competition. But the final design, we had very little other work at the time, we did start to get some other work, but this building was an extraordinary event and experience for us. If you can imagine at that age having the opportunity to do something like that, never having built anything before! So that all the ideas that we had been… blowing up… while studying and since then, all of that got concentrated in the building, maybe even to its detriment, that's the character of that building. It had a huge amount, it had more design time per square metre than any other building I can think of. Everything was worked on, not once, but a hundred times…

JT: A couple of hundred people entered that open competition and you won it, and you at 28 and you didn't have an office!

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PK: I couldn't believe it. I thought my wife was kidding me when she phoned to say this letter had come.

JT: And then you came and saw the site and thought, "I can't do it."

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PK: I thought three things. One was, "I can't do it." Actually, the three of us came to see the site together. Another was when I saw the site and immediately realised that the competition design was much too spindly and bony, really not substantial enough to respond to these two very massive buildings on either side. And thirdly, everybody told us that there wasn't an established precast concrete industry in Ireland, that there was no way we could build this within budget in precast concrete. So we had to think again.

JT: The American Embassy was being built in precast concrete.

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PK: It was being shipped over in pieces from Holland or somewhere. And that was what everybody was telling us.

JT: They precast it abroad and brought it over here. So you said, we'll cast it *in situ* here…

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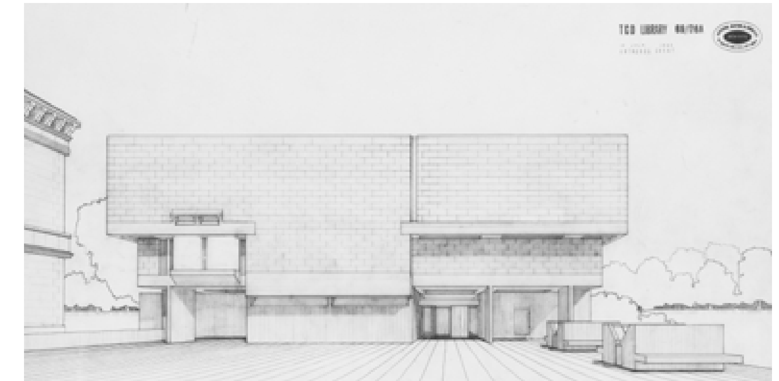
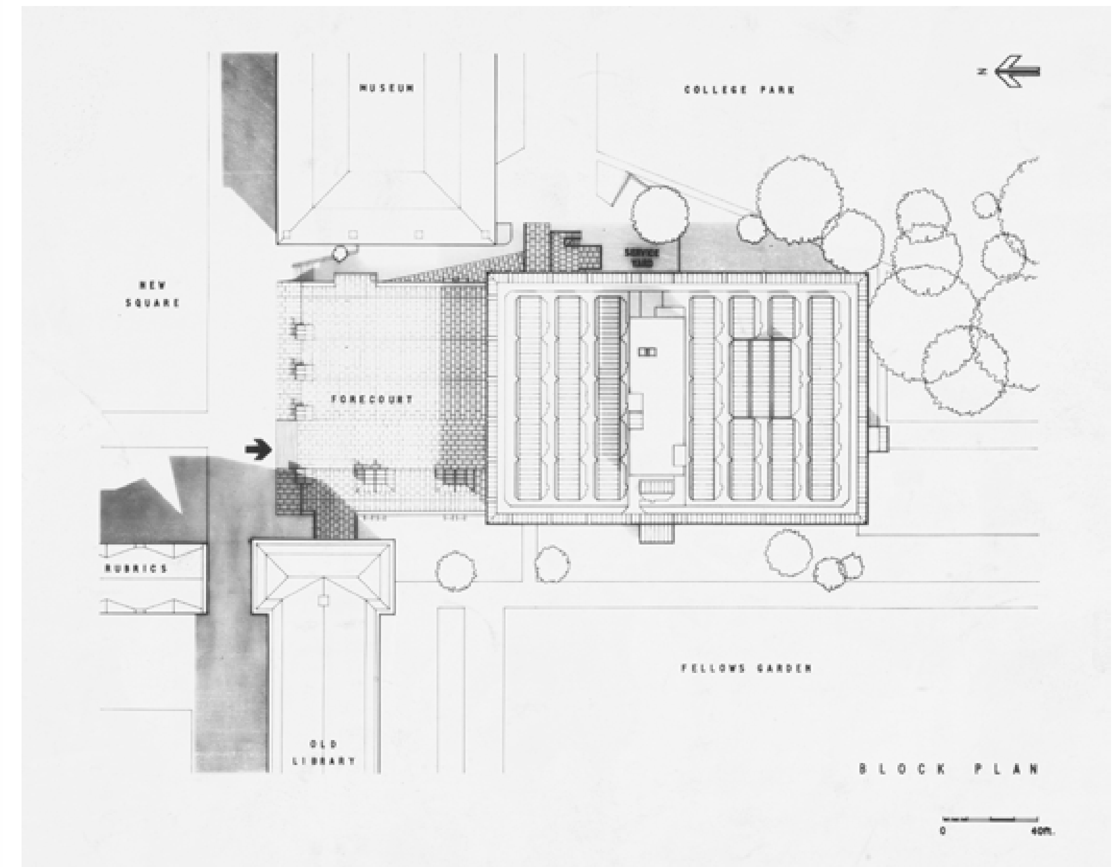
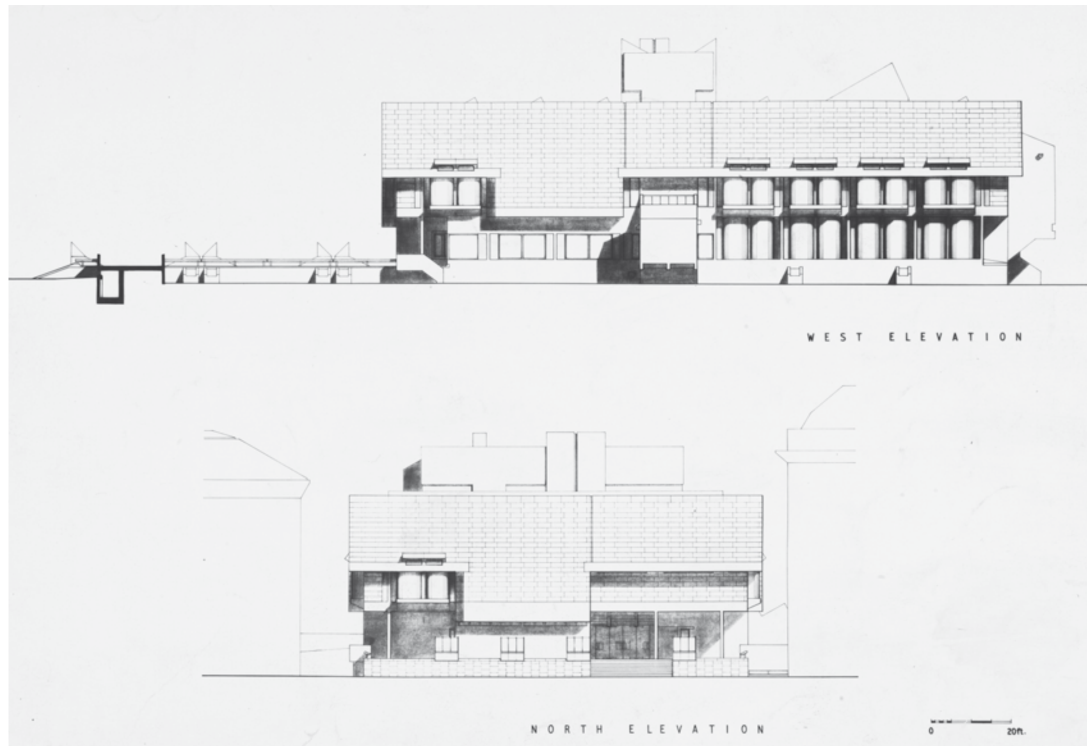
PK: Well we then thought, okay, right, how should we build this? And designing without a design team, we didn't have any engineers or anything… [Laughs] So a bit of engineering was… applied. *In situ* concrete seemed like the best bet. We were drawn to it to produce, in effect, a very solid massive building. *In situ* concrete says that to me.







“My pulse always races a little faster when I come here... I had very particular ideas growing up [in the 1960s] of what the future ought to look like... it ought to look like that [points at image of the Berkeley]! Clean lines, modernism, slightly dramatic, beautiful...”

Roly Keating, Chief Executive, British Library discussing the Berkeley Library while in TCD.

JT: The whole language of it, between granite and *in situ*. The front face of Trinity College is made of granite and Portland stone and the granite goes black and the Portland stone stays white. And on your building the concrete acts like the Portland stone.

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PK: That’s right, we saw an analogy. The concrete is white concrete.

JT: So, you’re making it, in your head, out of the stuff of Trinity College...

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PK: We are. I think in fact the concrete didn’t weather like Portland stone weathers, so it never quite worked, but that was the intention.

JT: Because the concrete takes the black and the granite stays the same. But it belongs here all the same. Did you have granite in the initial design, when it was precast?

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PK: Yes. I always felt, and we agreed later, that Trinity College is built of granite and part of making the building fit into its context was to use the same material. And you’re absolutely right, we saw an analogy with Portland stone and white concrete, so there was that dialogue.

JT: What I think, and I’m sure others would agree with me - because we’re talking about one of the most significant works of modern architecture in the 20th century here in Dublin, and also a completely new reading of the relationship between historical context and modern work - but what is really remarkable about your building is that when you walk around all four sides of it, the architecture continues around all four sides. Unlike the Provost’s House, which has all its architecture at the front. Maybe, in your scheme, the west elevation is the most intense, but the body of the building is fully an object. Yet, it seems very varied and seems to adapt. It keeps spinning around.

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PK: Well, it reflects the variety of things that go on inside.

JT: You cut the corners out so that it doesn’t stop. You go around the corner, and go around again.

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PK: Well, the upper part of the building is a box, it is a box for readers and books, an elaborate box, but it is a box held up in the air. And we were simply designing the sides of the box. And yes, certainly I never doubted that there is a sort of continuity.

JT: So, the upper part of the building is a box, the lower part of the building is a basement bookstore, and there’s a glazed area in between...

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PK: Holding the box up...

JT: Okay. But that’s not the whole story. Because all the way around, the upper part dips its sleeve down, the stone drops down. There’s a game going on.

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PK: The stairs go down, the structure goes down. We’re always interested in ambiguity. I have to mention that word. Nothing is ever just black and white and dead simple. There is a saying of Frank Lloyd Wright’s which I always loved, that “one mustn’t confuse simplicity with the barrenness of the barn door.” I actually like barn doors, but I know what he means, one wants more richness than that. There’s an elaboration and, you’re right, there is an ambiguity because whilst it’s a box it is also a single building that goes down into the ground. It’s all of those things. It’s a sort of balance.

JT: Dan Cruickshank reviewed it, 30 years later in 1997, in the RIBA Journal. He's talking about the west elevation, which everyone now sees from Fellows' Square, the square that you also made with your later Arts Block. He says "it's a rock-like hunk of concrete pierced by shafts which let light punctuate into the building's heart." So, it's a rock, it's pierced, it's got shafts, it's got a heart. It has a lot of depth on its outside.

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PK: Yes, because the outside reflects what's going on inside. It doesn't have it all hanging out, but nevertheless it's a reflection of what's going on inside.

JT: To you this is self-evident, but I think the building is unusual in the architecture of the time. This is why I quoted from The Veil of Order at the beginning, because of the feeling that Novalis calls "chaos." Let's say the building is about the feeling that's inside. There's the discipline of the type, with reading rooms upstairs, orientation space in the middle, and book stacks below. It's a rectangular building, made of granite. Let's say that all that discipline is the veil of order, because the feeling is coming out and there's a tension between a scheme and...

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PK: You've mentioned what was going on at the time. The fact is, very little was going on at the time. There had not been a new building of any consequence at Trinity College since the 19th century. The only modern building in Ireland of any significance, and that was of considerable significance, was the Bus Station [Michael Scott's Busáras/Áras Mhic Dhiarmada, completed in 1953]. There just weren't any new buildings. And there were hardly any new buildings in England. There wasn't this mountain of magazines full of works of interesting architecture. There were very few interesting new buildings. So, there wasn't an awful lot to go on. There were the great modern masters - Corbusier, Frank Lloyd Wright, Breuer, Mies, those people – and, then while we were students, James Stirling's buildings started to appear and that revolutionised things. But they were, you know, few. When James Stirling built his Engineering Building in the University of Leicester, it was an event! It was the only building we thought, of that quality, that had been built in England, in the British Isles, for five or ten years.

JT: But your building, that was an event too. I get the sense that architects and critics were addressing its significance, trying to place it somewhere.

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PK: There wasn't a huge base within which you were working. Any major new building was an event.

JT: Alan Colquhoun, in that same review in the AR, written when the Berkeley was freshly cracked, fresh and new, also mentioned Corbusier still working in France. And he said, "the French master keeps his drama in reserve." I think this shows more of him taking the view that your building was too full of incident. He was worried by the light shafts that are built in concrete and then they have tables attached to them. He thought that that was, let's say, a little overwrought. Is that right?

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PK: I have to say, maybe it is. As I said earlier, there was this very intense exploration of design in every event in the building. I think that one could see that as a strength in the building.

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JT: Yes.

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PK: Because it gives it its richness. Maybe it leads to over-elaboration. I can't judge that, somebody else has to make that decision.

JT: From your word "ambiguity" I think that's what gives this building its resonance. It's because, yes, it is schematically strong, but it is more. It calls up more.

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PK: The other thing that feeds into this is that I see the design of the building very much as the design of the interior, as well as the exterior.

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If I had to prioritise, I think I would prioritise the interior, because that's what the building is about. And that includes all the furniture and really everything the building is and how you use it. Now at that time, there was hardly a furniture industry in Ireland. What one could buy here, without importing expensive Italian stuff, which was out of the question, was really not very satisfactory. So on the back of that, we eventually, I don't know if it's right to say, persuaded the College. I think we probably did persuade the College, and then they agreed, that we should design every teaspoon that went into this building, the tables, the chairs and everything. The chairs were customised versions of standard chairs, but the tables and shelves and most of the furniture was designed for the building.

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Integrating the tables and light shafts seemed like a natural thing to do. Of course, later this was criticised for "inflexibility" – which is true. On the other hand, and perhaps this is a slightly offensive thing to say, but it protects the building against the librarians. It means it's still there. It's too difficult to change it. In the long-term, I think that might be a good thing, because things change all the time. It makes life more difficult, but I think the result is worthwhile. Maybe that is a naïve thing to say.

JT: I like that you use the phrase "in the long-term." We're talking long term! I mean, that building was done 40 years ago, so we're talking long, long, term. Short-term has long passed. This is forever.

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PK: The view of the College was "this is forever". There was a lovely thing in the brief that I wanted to quote. I wish people would still put it in their design briefs. This was actually written into the competition brief: "The building should represent the 20th century, as well as the other buildings in the College represent the 19th and 18th." That's like talking about the 22nd, 23rd, 24th century, when I can look back and say that's a 20th-century building.

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This building is built of granite and lead. The materials last indefinitely. The windows are bronze. All the decisions were made for quality and durability. The building was going to be not too demanding on maintenance, but it was going to last. And there was one wonderful moment. We had worked on the design with and reported to a building committee for Trinity College. Then the tenders came in, and they were quite a lot above budget, which was around £600,000 at that time, and we were about 20,000 over budget, which was such a huge amount of money, it seemed like a mountain of money. And we came nervously with a long list of savings. Then one member of the committee, who became a lifelong friend as a consequence, bided his time, and when everybody was exhausted he said, "Gentlemen, we've got a situation where we have a budget, and the building costs more than the budget. We can either cut costs or we can find more money – I suggest we find more money." And everybody agreed! And so we got our bronze windows and granite walls.

JT: I wanted to ask you to tell us some stories, for instance, you're one of the few people who has leafed through the Book of Kells, but, before I do, could you tell us about those windows, those famous curved windows, and all that bronze?

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PK: The curved windows. There was a development. We wanted bay windows, we wanted glass to counter the very hard angular granite. And out of our design discussions, we had thought of all kinds of ways of doing the bay windows. We had this idea of using curved glass. We'd seen Victorian curved glass windows in London shops, so we tried to find out whether we could do this. There was one man in St Helen's Liverpool, on the doorstep of Pilkingtons, picking up the crumbs from Pilkingtons' table, things that were too small and too difficult for them to handle. And he said he could still do curved glass windows. We liked that because not only was the material itself the contrast, but by curving it, in contrast to the angular granite, it gave us a complementary curve...

JT: ...yes, there's a ripple, a wave in the curve...

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PK: That's right. It's technically very difficult to do. Because you make them as a double curve, as a U-shape, and it's done by getting a plate of glass and heating it at the right temperature and letting it drip over the mould. And you can imagine, if you heat it too much, what happens! So, it's a craft. There was a terrible disaster, where he had knocked over a whole stack of them in his workshop, and he had to do them all again, the poor man, which he did. It is now impossible to get anybody to do them in one piece.

JT: Because the lowest floor is high from floor to ceiling...

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PK: Yes, the library was designed in imperial measure, 12 feet high, 4 metres. It was a very difficult thing. They don't really stack, because they're the same shape, so shipping them over was difficult.

JT: Is that glass thick?

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PK: It's very thick. The process of bending it is very similar to the process of toughening it. They are, in fact, toughened. All these sorts of things happened on this building. We were dealing with craftsmen, and they all entered into the spirit of it. They loved it. It was a challenge and they enjoyed doing it. They wanted to do it. This guy took real pride in making these windows to very close tolerances so they would fit into the bronze frames. We had a lot of that. The bronze frames themselves were not easy to make...

JT: And the bronze shutters?

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PK: That was an idea we had of separating the ventilation from the light and the view function of the building. The shutters weren't particularly difficult. What was difficult was the curved frames, just from the point of view of accuracy and tolerances, and you know, getting the curved glass fitted, each one being a handmade individual object.

JT: They had to measure the glass to make the frame? The glass comes first?

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PK: No, they all worked at very close tolerances and the glass just fitted.

JT: Tell us about reading the Book of Kells.

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PK: Well, the reading of the Book of Kells was, simply... when I first came over to receive the prize - incidentally with a few-months-old baby, which I had overlooked to mention to the College, that my wife and I would be coming with our baby - the College was wonderfully looking after us, looking after everything, but part of the reward was to allow me to look through the Book of Kells. And nobody knew about white gloves at that time so we just... [laughs] lifted the pages, which was a very nice experience, I have to say. There was concern about security of the Book of Kells so a strong room was built in the basement. And for a long time, as part of the security system of Trinity College, the Books of Kells was kept in the library and a 95-year-old retainer carried it down this corridor to put it in the safe every night on his own, and this was the security.

JT: I remember going to see it with my father when I was a schoolboy. It was on display in the Long Room, and they'd turn a different page open every day.

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PK: Well, I think that's still happening. I don't know about it being every day, but I was allowed to take one volume and just page through it! It was a great experience.

JT: And Cramptons' donkeys, were there really donkeys on site?

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PK: There were lots of things. I thought if I retire that I'd write a social history of Ireland based on the changes that have happened from the start of that building until now. We even revived the granite industry. Somebody else was just a few pounds lower in the price, but Cramptons were head and shoulders the best building contractor in Ireland at that time. George Crampton was the Director who looked after the job. We dealt with "the Cramptons." The whole thing was a kind of craft operation. When you're building *in situ* concrete you're actually building formwork. And the formwork was built by cabinet makers.

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My first site visit, they cast some columns and they had some defects and I told them to knock them down and do them again [laughs] wondering what the hell I was doing. [Laughs]

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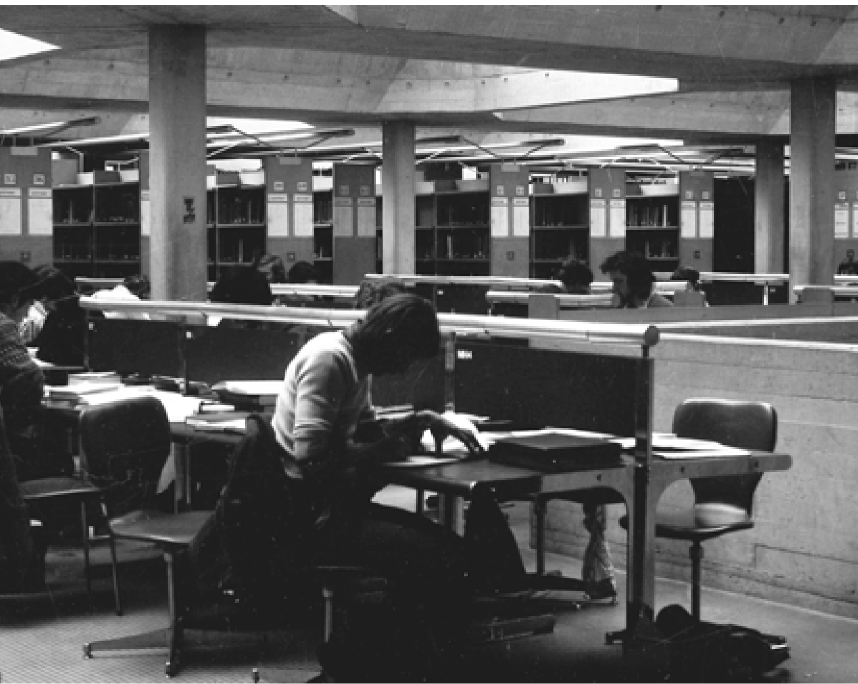
But they accepted that with laughter, and there was laughter every time there was a pour of concrete on the site. The site would virtually stop work, everybody would gather around and see how the concrete turned out. That was the kind of spirit on the site. The formwork is immaculate because it's all about not getting leaks, as you know, and there were all these coffers. And the columns are very slender and they were packed with reinforcement to make them work. They were practically putting the concrete in with teaspoons! But really, that was how it was built. It was built by craftsmen who cared about what they were doing. The Site Manager was a concert pianist [laughs] and that was where his heart lay, and you know he approached the building in that way, he wasn't really interested. When he went on holidays, he sent us a postcard saying, "Have you written any good programmes lately?"

JT: Well, that's nice, when I started with a quote from Alfred Brendel, who was a concert pianist, I didn't realise the Site Manager was himself a concert pianist!



Audience Questions

JT: There must be some questions from people in the audience who came to hear Paul today. Including, I notice, some Trinity people in the audience, who may have some questions?

Audience Member: I have one question: Paul, I was one of the first users when I came in '68 so I know some of the changes, and I work in it now. It may be incidental, but that block of concrete just to the left of the entrance to the Berkeley, which is a base for the Henry Moore sculpture, do you miss the fact it's gone, did it complement the building?

PK: ...Do I miss the fact that the sculpture is gone? – yes, I do. We did our best with Henry Moore, and George Dawson was a leading figure in that, to persuade him to lend it. It's actually my favourite Henry Moore sculpture [King and Queen/Two Seated Figures 1952-53]. He finally did agree to lend it. He was very picky about the siting of his sculptures, and this is on the north side of the building, it doesn't get sun on it and he didn't like that. I think had it been on the south he might have left it there. We tried to persuade him to leave it there but he wouldn't. But I think the Pomodoro is compensation.

Audience Member: I'm in my fourth year at Trinity and I've been working in the Berkeley Library every day, and I'm ashamed that I only recently discovered that there's a wood pattern on the walls. What is the thinking behind that?

PK: There are two answers I have to give you, if I'm honest. One is the textbook answer: a concrete building is made of formwork because it's moulded, poured into different moulds, and the moulds have to be made of something, and in those days, they were simply made of wood. There was no other practical way of making them. I thought if they're going to be made of wood, it seems a nice idea to actually reflect the texture of the wood. The second answer is that Corbusier did it and everybody fell in love with it and we also fell in love! [Laughs]

Audience Member: You spoke of your building in relation to the Old Library. Can I ask what do you think of the new Ussher Library?

PK: That's a very difficult one for me to answer, because it was a competition, and I feel sad that we didn't win the competition… [laughs] but having said that… I don't really want to comment on it as a building, but there was a major problem about how it would link on to the Berkeley Library, and we were brought into those conversations. And the architects for the Ussher were very generous in the way they brought us in and worked with us on finding a solution. In a way, there is no solution. This is where the concrete and the inflexibility of the building actually does pose a problem. I think what has been done was the best available option. I hope - I have to say I hope, because I was partly implicated in sorting it out - that it works well. It makes an interesting sequence of places as you go through. There are pluses and minuses to these things always, but I think it was a good way of doing it, yes. I have to wonder what will happen the next time the library has to grow. This is about the fifth time.

Audience Member: Paul, just one question – I think it affects your Arts Block as well, and it affected the Ussher, the problem of the high-water table and the necessity for the coffered walls. When did you became aware of that problem?

PK: With the Berkeley Library, we approached it with the sort of naïveté of youth and said, "Water, fine, we'll keep the water out, no problem." In fact, it's been okay, our act of faith was okay. It is a huge tank we built to keep the water out. We decided to do it by using waterproof concrete and grouting the concrete rather than having a membrane which we couldn't get at afterwards. So it works on the basis that if there's a problem then you can deal with the problem. And I have not heard of problems of water getting into the basement.

Audience Member: I worked in George Dawson's exhibition committee for a few years and I remember we were being cautioned in the exhibition space you created there, about being careful putting nails on the outside walls, in case it might spring a leak.

PK: [Laughs] Well they would have had to be quite long and big nails! The wall is about 400 millimetres thick.

Audience Member [Trevor Peare, then Keeper of Readers' Services in the Library of Trinity College Dublin]: I used the Library myself as a student in the early 1970s and I enjoyed those nooks and crannies to study in. And the "inflexibility" of the building has been mentioned a few times. Eddie McParland pointed out to me that when that building was designed you were told there was housing to be made for something like 25 staff. Before the Ussher Library came along there was 80 staff working in it, and that's the definition of flexibility. We have certainly re-used the space in different ways from when it first opened, so there is a great deal of flexibility in the building.

JT: You were saying that if there's enough variety, the variety provides flexibility.

PK: Yes, yes, in a way it does.

Audience Member [Sheila O'Donnell, Architect]: Your description of the design process and the building of the Berkeley sounds like an adventure in a world very different than the world we are working in, where everything could be and indeed had to be invented, and where there was a lot of collaboration between craft and design. I know that you still work in Ireland on buildings and I wonder if you find the world we work in now very different, or if you think that any of that still exists in the Irish construction industry, or is there any way we can try to keep that sense of craft. My feeling is that as we get more industrialised the sense of collaboration between makers and designers is lost.

PK: Well, I'll say you're absolutely right. It really was an adventure. It is undoubtedly much less the case now, it's much more difficult to do that now. It certainly has been a lot more difficult. The other thing that has happened is that other technologies have opened up, so there are also new possibilities. Craft is still a big part of designing buildings.

Audience Member [Donal Hickey, Architect]: I always think of the Berkeley Library as having a distinct kind of rigour, which is about this as a place. Layered on top of that is an individuality about the nature of the spaces inherent in it as a place, and I wonder, in designing it, were you thinking about the implications of the spaces that you make impacting on the formal rigour of the library as an object?

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PK: I think that's what I'd like the building to be. I don't know if I would have seen it in that way at the time, but what we did believe in, and still do, is that the building develops its own rules, its own language. You start from a few key moves, and those moves have implications. Obviously, that's a personal interpretation, but a language discipline develops as the design develops. I would hope that has been the case. That's how we try to work. And then, if that is strong enough, one can allow oneself embellishment, it's almost incidental. But that's a fine balance because, if that gets out of hand, you end up with no order left.

JT: No "veil of order".

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PK: I don't know about the order being the veil, I would have thought the embellishments are the veil over the order.

JT: It's been nice for us to have this conversation in this room, in this building, only recently opened up by Trinity. But just one more thing to say about this room. When I was a student in first year in UCD in 1971, we were offered the chance of studying one space, and I chose to study the entrance hall to the Berkeley Library. I was in my second month in college. I made a model of the front entrance hall, with this portico in the model on the opposite side. I made the model so you could look through the portico at the entrance hall and back through the entrance hall at the portico. But this is the first time I've been able to look at that relationship in reality.

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PK: It's the first time that I've looked at it too!

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JT: There is such a strong relationship between the porch and the portico, and that's not an accident I'm sure. Although you didn't place this portico here, you certainly placed that library over there! So as we leave, it's nice to think that we walk out on axis with the entry of the building, a building that was designed in New York in 1961, a building that has become such a well-loved monument of Irish architecture.

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Thank you, Paul Koralek, for coming here today and telling us all about it.

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PK: Thank you.

Further Reading

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Images

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Architectural Press Archive/RIBA Collections: cover, page 11. Cover image dates from 1967. Image of Paul Koralek on page 11 dates from 1961.

John Donat/RIBA Collections, 1967: pages 1, 2, 5, 17-18, 27.

RIBA Collections, 1967: pages 28, 32.

Tony Cains for the Library of Trinity College Dublin, 1976: pages 6, 12, 20, 31.

Architectural drawings on pages 22 and 23 used courtesy of ABK Architects. These date from 1962-3.

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A transcript of a public conversation between architects Paul Koralek and John Tuomey, 17th November 2005, together with images taken primarily in 1967 and 1976.

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