

The vision of a radically expanded UCD campus

The evolution of Belfield's campus has put UCD among some of the best in the world, president Hugh Brady tells
Louise Holden

As the last UCD students leave the Earlsfort Terrace campus, the Belfield campus is reaching a significant point in its evolution. President Hugh Brady has a vision for the physical development of the campus which he believes will position the college among the best in the world.

The Belfield campus is unique. At 132 hectares and with a staff and student population of almost 30,000, Belfield can be compared to a small city. Only 25 per cent of the campus space is built on, however, and 10 per cent of that space is currently used for car parks. The rest of the space is green fields, sports fields and woodland. The potential is enormous – realising it takes foresight.

"The core business of a university is teaching, learning and research," says Brady. "We want UCD on the field with the big players such as Princeton, and to do that we must attract the brightest and the best. That means developing the academic infrastructure to the highest possible standards."

"However, there is more. Students demand a great deal from their universities – they want a collegial atmosphere, they are looking for a journey of discovery."

"That is why we want to draw all manner of life and activity into the campus, doubling the number of residents and inviting the wider Dublin community and the world into Belfield."

The Gateway project will be the most visible manifestation of the campus development plan. A shortlist of 10 architectural firms is soon to be whittled down to one, and the winning group will be charged with trans-

forming the UCD entrance off the N11 – the one with which most commuters will be familiar.

"We want to draw people into the university with an exhibition centre, arthouse cinema, retail outlets, a hotel and signature works of architecture that will define the campus," Brady explains.

It is his hope that the new Gateway space will be used by the wider Dublin community in a variety of ways, performing a central civic role. For example, there are plans to build a large public lecture space where speakers can

address wide audiences, not just students.

A pedestrian walkway will link the Gateway space to the existing pedestrian 'spine' that students of UCD tread each day. However, change is pending right across the campus.

"We are taking a long-term, holistic view of development on the campus," according to the President. "We have prioritised the retention of green spaces and

woodland. Future building development will have a smaller footprint than what has gone before, and we plan to use the sites that are already developed, rather than building into the natural environment."

This commitment includes a 10-fold increase in the boundary woodland and network of pedestrian walkways.

New buildings will be required, especially for R&D activity. UCD is committed to playing a central role in the realisation of the Government's Strategy for Science, Technology and Innovation 2006 – 2013. This will require added infrastructure, but the Campus Plan allows for considerable development into the future that makes the smallest possible impact on the environmental endowment of the college.

"The spaces between the buildings are just as important as the buildings themselves," Brady maintains. "All new building work will give priority to circulation and student spaces, contemplative spaces and social spaces – in short, nooks and crannies."

He gives the example of the new law school design, which is currently at the planning stage. "The principles informing the new law school provide a checklist for all future building on campus – sustainable, social buildings complementing their surrounding landscapes. Landscape architecture will be just as important as building architecture."

The 10 per cent of campus land currently given over to on-surface car parking will be reclaimed, and cars will be housed in multi-storey car parks

further away from the heart of the campus, and linked back by pedestrian malls.

The considerable architectural wealth of Belfield is also to be nurtured by the Programme for Preservation of Period Houses. The original estate houses have already been subject to major restoration.

THE BELFIELD CAMPUS was originally made up of 11 different estates: Ardmore, Belfield, Belgrove, Merville, Roebuck Castle, Roebuck Grove, Roebuck House, Richview, Rosemont, Thornfield and Woodview. Seven of the original houses have survived to be restored and allocated more appropriate uses over recent years.

Merville House, for example, is now the site of NovaUCD Innovation Centre, the nerve centre

of knowledge transfer. Situated at the corner of Foster Avenue and the N11, it was the first site of architectural importance to be tackled under the Programme for Preservation of Period Houses.

Merville was built around 1750 for the Right Honourable Anthony Foster, then chief baron of the Irish Exchequer. Since it was purchased in 1958, a number of restoration projects were carried out, but only under the recent Programme for Preservation has Merville House been comprehensively refurbished and returned to its original beauty.

Floors, plasterwork and reception rooms have been reclaimed, with academic activities now housed in the modern wing and converted coach houses, designed to complement the old house.

Other key spaces for students, such as the arts block and the sports complex, are undergoing rolling development as well. The addition of a swimming pool and gym will considerably enhance the university's attraction for recreational and professional athletes – there are already 100 sports scholarship students studying at UCD, including several Olympians.

"We want this campus to offer much of what a small city might offer, up there with top universities across the globe. Successful physical development of the campus will lend itself to the attraction of the brightest students, the best academics, business partnerships, research and development activity, commercial transfer and community participation at all levels," says Brady.



UCD president Dr Hugh Brady at the Belfield campus. Photograph: Matt Kavanagh