

## Scale of hospital a key issue for planning board

FRANK McDONALD, Environment Editor

THE ENORMOUS scale of the proposed Children's Hospital of Ireland on the Mater site on Dublin's Eccles Street has emerged as the key issue in the first week of An Bord Pleanála's oral hearing on this €650 million Government-approved project.

The focus by objectors on the height and bulk of the multilayered scheme is inevitable as it is one of the biggest structures ever planned for Dublin, as well as being significantly taller than the stadiums at Croke Park and Lansdowne Road.

Rising above a four-level basement car park, the hospital is "stacked" – five storeys of major diagnostic, topped by a "therapy park" with a rooftop terrace on the next four floors, and a curvaceous seven-storey block of inpatient wards floating above.

This element is evocative of a multideck ocean liner, permanently "moored" on top of a nine-storey building and highly visible on the city's skyline as an "anomalous" feature, in the words of one supporter, or simply "wrong", according to objectors.

As a linear block, the proposed children's hospital would have an impact quite different to a tower – not just because of its overall height which, at 73.89m (243.8ft), would be 14.5m (47.8ft) taller than Liberty Hall, but also because of its length and breadth.

The oversailing ward block would extend to 150m (495ft) in length and about 30m (99ft) in width, narrowing in the middle and tapering at each end. In other words, the most visible part of the project would be equivalent to eight Liberty Halls side by side, and twice as deep.

According to critic Shane O'Toole, who appeared for the hospital promoters, the "sculptural" ward block "literally elevates the position of sick children . . . above all else", giving them "wonderful views . . . which will be better than from any penthouse apartment in the city".

He rejected concerns that the intrusion of such an enormous edifice into the northside Georgian core would jeopardise Dublin achieving Unesco world heritage site status, citing examples of buildings that had "dramatically changed the unique character" of other cities.

But neither Cook Fournier's "biomorphic" Spacelab in Graz nor Renzo Piano's Nemo science museum in Amsterdam, like a half-sunk ship in the harbour, are seriously out of scale. And Robbrecht en Daem's concert hall in Bruges, while bulky, is not anything like as tall.

Hospital architects O'Connell Mahon and NBBJ insist that the undulating form of the Eccles Street ward block, with its "thoughtfully engineered glass skin", would "sit favourably" on Dublin's skyline, catching and "subtly reflecting the ever-changing light and sky".

They have made repeated references to Dublin City Council's 2008 Phibsborough/ Mountjoy local area plan, which supported the development of a "world-class" children's hospital on the Mater site and recognised that this would entail a "cluster of taller buildings".

However, the plan also said: "Every effort must be made to ensure that increases in height will not have any negative overshadowing effects on adjoining properties or impact negatively on the settings of the protected structures both on the site and its periphery."

The plan envisaged that significantly taller buildings might be located on the Eccles Street frontage than what O'Connell Mahon/NBBJ have proposed. Indeed, they have made a virtue of the fact that their scheme would be only four storeys high on the street.

"The Eccles Street block fills the existing void which resulted from significant demolitions of existing buildings during the 1980s and will complete the street in a manner that is consistent with good urban design objectives, appropriate to the character and urban grain . . ."

The vast bulk of the hospital is set back from the street, partly hidden by a high canopied entrance forecourt, on a site that is already elevated at least 20m above sea level. As planning consultant Eamonn Kelly conceded, its scale would be "dramatically different".

City council management's view, in a submission to An Bord Pleanála, is that "while it is clear that a building of this scale will impact significantly on the character of the city, this is an inevitable part of the compromise necessary to achieve development in inner urban areas".

Yet the height-and-bulk issue was barely considered in the decisions made by the Health Service Executive, former minister for health Mary Harney and her successor, James Reilly – and two governments – to proceed with this scheme, at a direct cost to taxpayers of €540 million.

The independent review commissioned by Dr Reilly last May only refers obliquely to this central issue, noting that "generic" eight-storey buildings on greenfield sites in Blanchardstown, Newlands Cross and Tallaght would be "significantly lower than the current proposals".

Yet although it would be cheaper to develop the children's hospital on any one of the three alternative sites, the review recommended that the present scheme should go ahead on the basis that writing off €24 million in planning and design costs "may be politically sensitive".

Nobody considered that the objective of "co-locating" paediatric and adult hospitals might be achieved if the site occupied by Mountjoy Prison – directly across the North Circular Road from the Mater and due to be replaced – was developed for the Children's Hospital of Ireland.

Neither has any consideration been given to what will become of the existing children's hospitals in Temple Street and Crumlin after they are vacated. Will new uses be found for these buildings or will they become playgrounds for vandals like the empty Army barracks in Naas?

The only lateral thinking that has been applied to the project is evident in the form of the proposed development – the decision by its architects that a huge and highly visible horizontal slab, however well tricked out, is the most appropriate response to their almost impossible brief.

An Bord Pleanála's oral hearing is expected to continue for a further two weeks, but it would not be surprising if the board eventually gives its approval for the scheme; after all, it represents the realisation of Government policy, which the board would be loathe to ignore.