

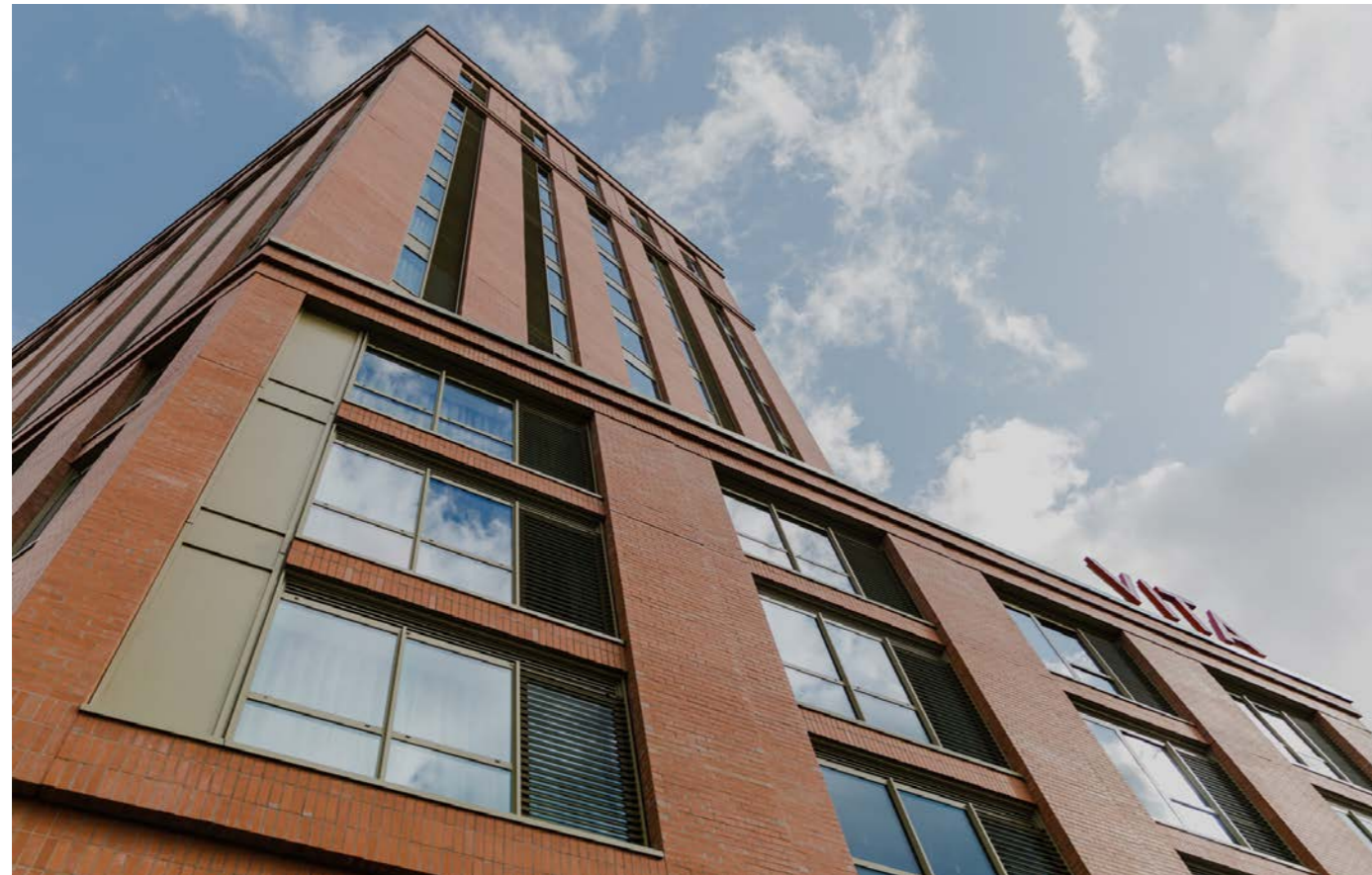
# Vita, Bruce Street, Belfast

As I travelled into Belfast City Centre for my tour of Vita Belfast, I had two relevant issues nesting in the back of my mind. One was the appropriateness of high-rise development in the city, and the other was the prevailing wariness of student housing as a building typology. Vita Belfast – located on the junctions of Bruce Street, Little Victoria Street and Holmes Street (the former site of The Venue, for fans of Belfast dive bars) – opened its doors to students in September 2023 and provides a plush and comfortable base for 269 students, including on-site Gym, Social Hub areas, Private Dining Room, and bookable Private Study Rooms. It certainly is a far cry from the damp Holyland HMOs I attended for house parties during my own student years.

The fifteen-storey building sits on the southern edge of the high-rise cluster of buildings between Great Victoria Street and Bedford Street. Surrounded by more modestly scaled buildings, but carefully considered massing creates an easy dialogue

between these potentially competing scales. The primary south-facing elevation to Bruce Street is tall and slender, emphasised by full-height windows. Part of Todd Architects understanding was that the Vita scheme is located an area of Victorian warehouse heritage, so they undertook research into the fin de siècle ‘skyscrapers’ of New York and Chicago, with particular reference to the elongation of neo-classical warehouse and industrial buildings of Europe, resulting in a clearly defined base, central portion and top offering a subtle classical flavour. This is contextually appropriate both to the physical history of the site and to the city developers’ source of wealth; linen manufacture in the late nineteenth century and opulent student housing in the early twenty-first.

The historic street pattern was fundamentally altered thanks to the partially realised road plans of the sixties and, therefore, the building line differs from the east end of Bruce Street to the west. A choice was needed as to which one to adopt for



10 Perspective



## THE TEAM

**Client** Vita Student

**Architect**  
TODD Architects

**Structural and Civil**  
Ian Black Consulting

**M&E Consultants**  
Caldwell Consulting

**Developer** MRP

**D&B Contractor**  
McAlear & Rushe

**Photography** Joe Laverty



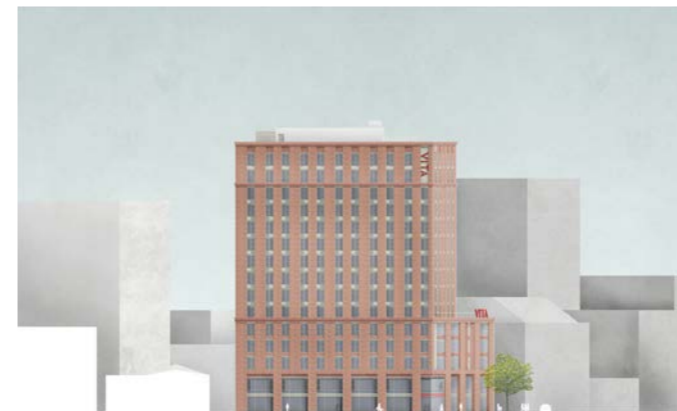
the new building. The decision was made to go with the line defined by the more intact former warehouse to the west. The base stories of the building fill the footprint of the site, the building line creating a sharp acute corner to the east, while the upper floors are set back slightly, the eastern angle not quite as sharp to the higher stories. This reduces the impact of the tower block on the immediate streetscape, with the building reading as two distinct masses; one scaled appropriately to the context of Bruce Street and the other creating a dialogue with the broader landscape of the city.

The brick detailing on the external envelope is a real success. The depth of the window reveals, soldier-coursed heads to openings, and the projecting corbelled courses defining the PoMo classical proportions combine to offer a richness to the building that sets it apart from other nearby high-rises,

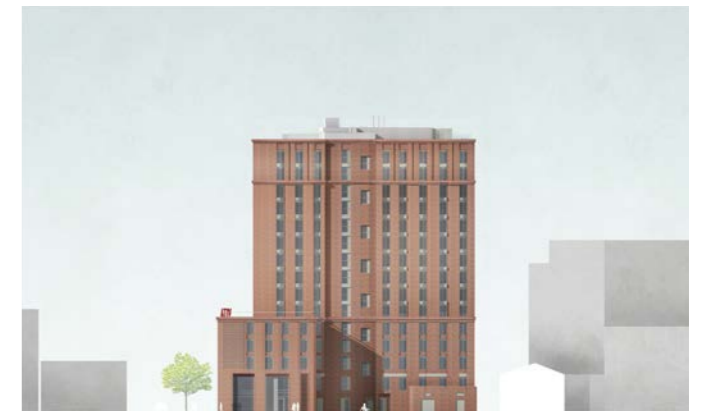


particularly those dating from the late-eighties-boom along Great Victoria Street. The broad fenestration and substantial pilasters of the base building references that of the Victorian warehouse, while the skinnier bays and more closely spaced fenestration of the upper tower reads as a stretched version of this, where the echoes of Sullivan are the loudest.

Internally, the public spaces to the front of the building are generous and light. The reception area is an L-shaped public concourse, wrapping around key amenities including a laundry room, mail room and staff offices. A broad metal stair - located within the sharp angle to the southeastern corner of the concourse and painted in the eye-catching red of the Vita brand - leads to a more protected social space; the interior design here warmer and softer than the ground floor lobby space. Different scales of furniture create a range of public study



Little Victoria Street Elevation



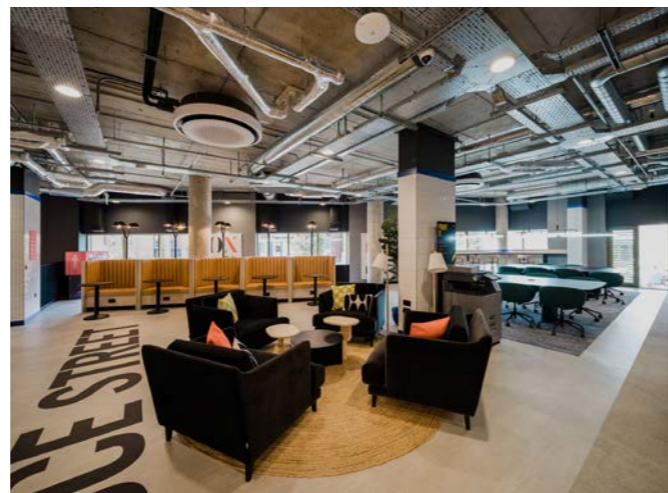
Holmes Street Elevation



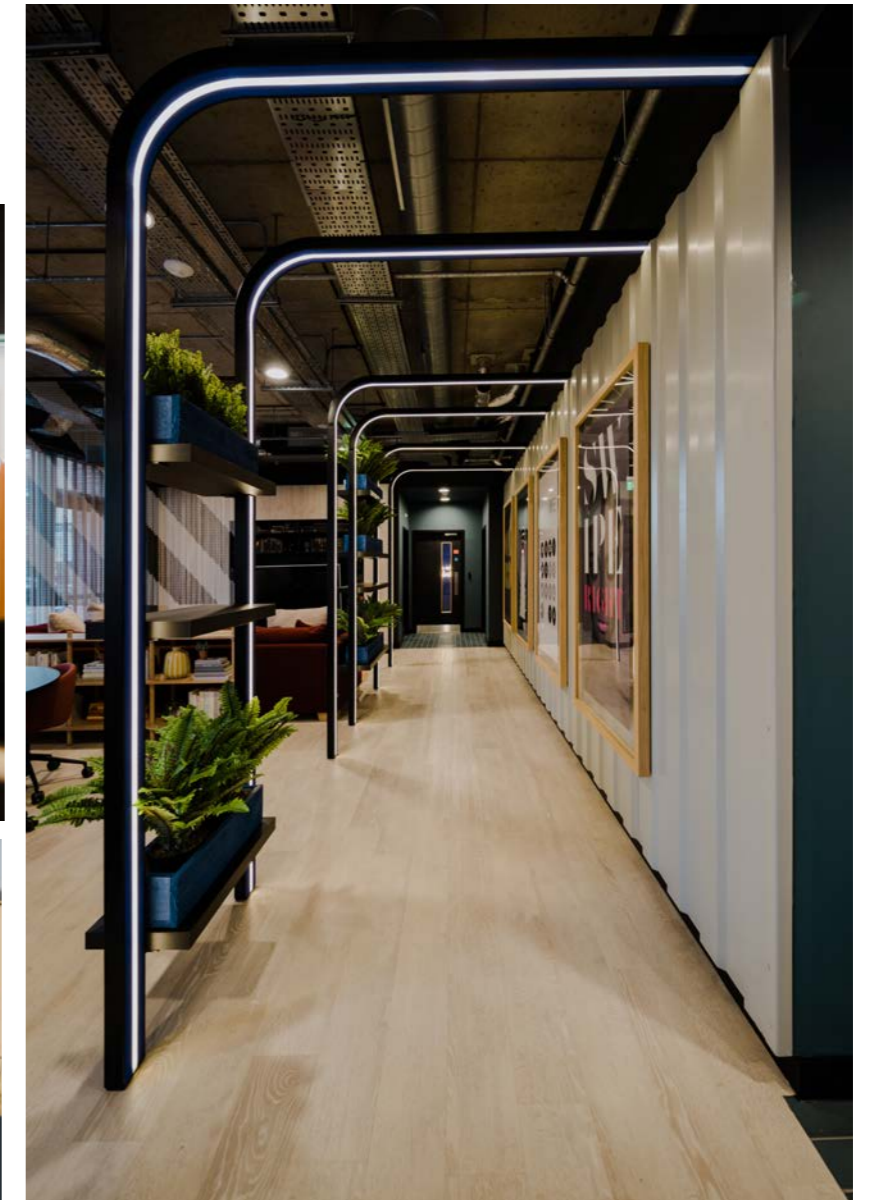
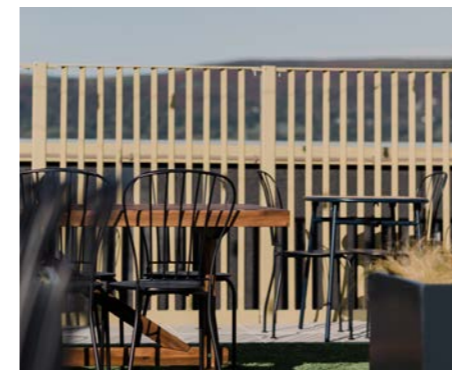
Bruce Street Elevation



Bay study top and base



## Architect's Account



spaces, from individual to group areas, along with bookable private study pods for when deadlines are approaching and more intensive and private periods of cramming are required.

Thanks to full occupation at the time of the site visit, I did not get access to any of the rooms. However, the plans and photos indicate they are comfortably proportioned studio-style rooms, with a bed, desk and small kitchenette. They are divided into four sizes, Lite, Classic, Premium and Deluxe starting from £232.00 a week, which includes access to the gym, free use of Vita-supplied bikes, weekday grab-and-go breakfasts, housekeeping and access to several gaming stations dotted around the building. VITA also regularly organise communal events to encourage a sense of community and mitigate against the potential isolation that students can experience during the transitional and formative early years in higher education.

The architect was keen to give credit to both the client; Developer MRP; and the contractor, McAleer & Rushe.

Nearing the end of my tour of the building we reached the external rooftop terrace, with sweeping views of the city. Up here, the building feels very much part of that cluster of tall buildings from which - from the ground at least - it felt relatively removed. Here, the discussion shifted from the building itself to the appropriateness of tall buildings in Belfast. My viewpoint is that we were spared the overdevelopment of The City of London or Celtic Tiger Dublin and therefore still have the luxury of exploring low-rise massing that still meets the changing needs of the city.

There exists an argument, however, that just because Belfast is not a high-rise city doesn't mean that it can't accept height and appropriate density in the right locations. Vita Belfast finds itself on the edge of a high-rise cluster, a site that is easily

Located at the edge of the Linenhall Conservation Area, VITA Belfast on Bruce Street occupies a prominent site which mediates the transition between south Belfast and the city centre. Its equidistant positioning between QUB and UU campuses, coupled with its proximity to the Weavers Cross Transport Hub, makes it an ideal location for exemplary purpose-built student accommodation.

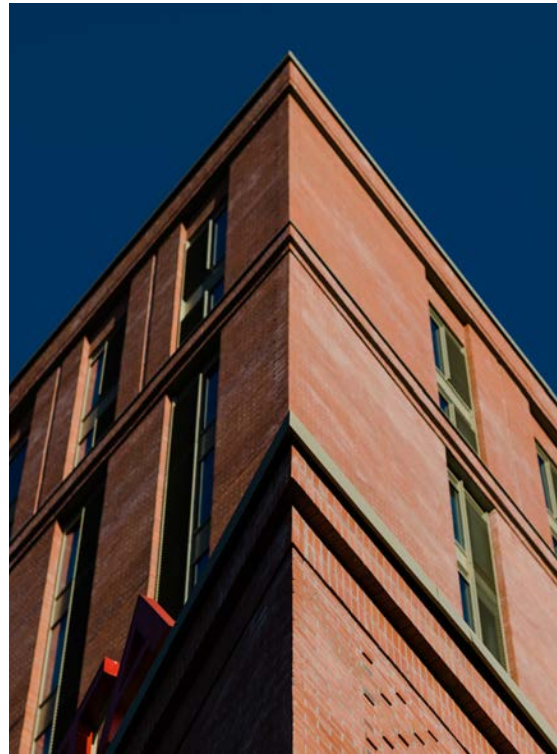
Red brick Victorian warehouse buildings whose facades are rich in architectural detail and ordered to a tripartite base, middle and top arrangement, informed the design. The material palette is restrained, with the detailing of brickwork emphasizing the architectural order of the elevations. Throughout design development the developers, MRP, informed the process with their local specialist knowledge and their commitment to high-quality contextual design was unwavering. The detailing and material colour and textures

are intended to have a dialogue with the Linen Quarter warehouse buildings, with the interior design developed with VITA to be bespoke to their brand requirements. The shared amenity spaces provide successful zones for social activity, and the 100% take-up of the building illustrates the success of the concept.

The unsung heroes (until now at least!) of the project are the McAleer & Rushe construction team, who despite the confined city centre site, the complex façade and the compressed program, delivered exceptional build quality.

**Jim Mulholland, Director**

**Project Team: Colin Gibson, Martin Lennon, Maurice Rafferty, Rachel Aitcheson**



defined as one of these ‘right locations.’ It will be interesting to see if the current pedestrian gulf of Bruce Street becomes a clearly defined edge of this cluster, or if the cluster expands down the Dublin Road. The planning approved 11-storey student housing proposed for the Filthy McNasty’s site already implies that the edge is somewhat blurred.

To further complicate the argument, we have what urban commentators and faceless keyboard warriors see as a problematic building typology; student housing. To this, the architect has a very well-reasoned response. For several decades now – probably since the earliest indications on the likelihood of a successful peace process – there have been campaigns to get people back living in the City Centre following the mass exodus of the early seventies. However, the city centre simply does not possess the infrastructure to support family living; where are the schools, where would you do your shopping, where are the community centres, doctor surgeries, etc?

What student housing can begin to do, in creating a proto-city centre community, is to create a demand for these kinds of facilities within the city core, allowing them to naturally grow. The architect notes that most successful world cities have a youthful population activating their central cores. Neither are they as transient as the detractors would have you believe; many students choose to stay in accommodation like Vita Belfast for the duration of their degrees, by which time they will have established relationships and potentially put down permanent roots. Further to this, I believe those critical of inner-city student housing very much have a point when it comes to the creation of ghettos; areas where student housing prevails as the only typology. Having student housing shuffled throughout the city centre appears a much healthier

urban approach. On this level, Vita Belfast is well located, equidistant between the two universities and on the fringe of a number of vibrant commercial city quarters.

As I left the building – thanking my guides for being so generous with their time and engaging in an honest discussion – I wouldn’t go so far as to say I had changed my mind on the issues. However, I had come to appreciate some of the subtleties in the arguments, making me less fundamentalist in my views, certainly with regards to urban student housing. While my views on high-rise buildings remain largely unmoved, I can see the decisions that combine to elevate Vita Belfast from just another tower block to one that possesses positive qualities that are both architectural and urban. ○

**Dr Andrew Molloy**

