



**PURPOSE** CASE  
**BUILT** STUDY

# Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action

This membership body created a headquarters to strengthen the work and profile of voluntary organizations and contribute to the transformation of a once-divided Belfast neighborhood.

---

# Executive Summary

## **Organization**

Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA)

## **Location**

Belfast, Northern Ireland

## **Construction Type**

New construction

## **Opening Date**

2001

## **Project Area**

1,800 square meters (19,375 square feet)

## **Project Cost**

£1.8 million

## **The Atlantic Philanthropies Investment**

£692,000 (\$1.1 million)



The Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA) is an umbrella membership body serving the voluntary and community organizations collectively known as the Third Sector. NICVA’s mission is to strengthen the sector by providing advocacy, support, and leadership. The importance of the sector was elevated as the government struggled to provide social services during “the Troubles”—three decades of sectarian conflict beginning in the late 1960s. Third Sector organizations expanded their efforts during this era, and NICVA adapted to support them with trainings and tools, by hosting convenings, and through facilitating policy work.

When the Troubles came to an uneasy close in 1998, the Third Sector evolved to support the government’s peacebuilding efforts. While NICVA played a key role in steering the continued growth of the sector, physical space limited its operations and impact. A labyrinth-like facility with small rooms and columns made it hard for NICVA to attract and serve members. The building’s location in South Belfast was inaccessible to many Third Sector organizations.

To address these challenges, NICVA leaders chose to construct a new headquarters that would support the organization’s mission and serve as a center for the Third Sector. They also infused the project with an even greater vision: to help build a peaceful and fair Northern Ireland. The organization had support to pursue its aspiration through sizeable grants from The Atlantic Philanthropies and other philanthropic and public funders.

NICVA made the courageous decision to build on a site in North Belfast that served as a peaceline between predominantly Protestant and Catholic neighborhoods. Although the community viewed the area as “still in a spiral of decline,” NICVA’s building design

represented confidence in its future. A large, open foyer would connect the two previously divided communities physically and symbolically. Windows and other design elements would bring accessibility to an area that typically fortified structures due to violence. NICVA emphasized stakeholder involvement throughout the project process, communicating with staff, area residents, government officials, and others to build relationships and create a shared vision for the new facility.

The building opened in 2001 to a positive response from neighbors and has generated significant benefits since that time. NICVA expanded its programs and services and increased membership from 250 to more than 1,000 organizations. An attractive facility drew participants who might not have otherwise attended convenings. It also contributed to professionalization of the Third Sector, helping it move from a group of “golden-hearted amateurs” to become a legitimate complement to the government. The high-quality design also made a powerful statement in a section of Belfast struggling to recover from the Troubles. NICVA’s success encouraged investment and brought many Third Sector organizations to its location on Duncairn Gardens—helping create a center for social change-making.

This case study is based on research conducted by MASS Design Group in March 2015. Funded by The Atlantic Philanthropies, it illustrates how a capital project can strengthen its primary constituents, while also serving social change and economic growth in its neighborhood.

---

## Purpose Built Series

Capital projects often bring lasting benefits to nonprofit organizations and the people they serve. Given this opportunity, foundations grant more than \$3 billion annually to construct or improve buildings in the United States alone.<sup>i</sup> Each capital project affects an organization's ability to achieve its mission—signaling its values, shaping interaction with its constituents, influencing its work processes and culture, and creating new financial realities. While many projects succeed in fulfilling their purpose, others fall short of their potential. In most instances, organizations fail to capture and share lessons learned that can improve practice.

To help funders and their nonprofit partners make the most of capital projects, The Atlantic Philanthropies and the S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation commissioned *Purpose Built*—a multi-faceted study by MASS Design Group, a nonprofit architecture and research firm. In 2015 and 2016, MASS conducted interviews, reviewed literature, and examined a diverse set of completed projects around the world; each project was supported by one of the above funders.

The study generated a set of core principles as well as tools for those considering or conducting capital projects:



*Introducing the Purpose Built Series* is an overview of the study and its core principles.



*Making Capital Projects Work* more fully describes the *Purpose Built* principles, illustrating each with examples.



*Planning for Impact* is a practical, comprehensive tool for those initiating capital projects.



*Charting Capital Results* is a step-by-step guide for those evaluating completed projects.



*Purpose Built Case Studies* report on 15 projects to illustrate a range of intents, approaches, and outcomes.

See the full *Purpose Built* series online at [www.massdesigngroup.org/purposebuilt](http://www.massdesigngroup.org/purposebuilt).

---

i Foundation Center, *Foundation Maps* data based on grants made in the United States, 2006-2015.

**The building helped the Third Sector evolve from a group of “golden-hearted amateurs” to become a legitimate and vital complement to the government.**



**Above.** The Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action's building on Duncairn Gardens in North Belfast is on a peaceline between predominantly Catholic and Protestant neighborhoods.

**Cover.** The building's glass windows expressed confidence in the safety and redevelopment of the neighborhood.

## Introduction

The Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA) is a membership organization with a mission to represent and promote charities, voluntary and community groups, and social enterprises—collectively known as the Third Sector—to help build a fair and equal society.<sup>1</sup> Founded in 1938 as the Northern Ireland Council for Social Services, the organization changed its name in 1986 to better reflect the breadth of the actively growing Third Sector.

From the 1960s to the 1990s, NICVA operated in the context of “the Troubles,” a conflict between the Unionist Protestant majority and the Nationalist Catholic minority over the constitutional status of Northern Ireland. The Troubles resulted in dramatically increased segregation between the two communities, amplified by episodes of paramilitary action, bombings, and other acts of violence.

In this context of heightened sectarianism and distrust, and with conflict hampering the government's ability to provide social services, Northern Ireland's voluntary and community organizations expanded to provide needed services and promote peace and reconciliation. NICVA responded with new supports for these players, and evolved through this experience—becoming a key intermediary for the government, facilitating policy work for the Third Sector, providing

resources that help members meet current guidelines for social legislation and statutory services, delivering a wide range of training opportunities, and serving as a convener of organizations.

The Troubles came to an uneasy close in 1998 with the signing of the Belfast Agreement, leaving deep scars on the region's political, social, and physical fabric. NICVA saw its role as vital in the post-conflict landscape of Northern Ireland—and also realized that its facility was a barrier to success.

### BARRIERS TO GROWTH AND CONVENING MEMBERS

From its old Victorian building in the verdant suburbs of South Belfast, NICVA sought to serve as a unifying body for voluntary and community groups. By the late 1990s, however, NICVA had significantly outgrown this facility. Adjoining townhouses had been converted into a space that was partitioned into a labyrinth-like cluster of small rooms, with some offices accessible only through other offices. Staff members described an over-crowded workplace with desks located in hallways and columns that blocked sightlines.

This facility inhibited NICVA's ability to convene, train, and attract new members. NICVA needed to rent outside space for conferences or events. Some Third Sector members perceived NICVA's location as practical only for organizations within the Belfast city limits. In addition, the NICVA facility had a historic designation that limited

possible renovation. One staff member recalled the challenges, saying, “We didn’t like having to build our organization around the building.”

---

## Project Mission

NICVA’s intent for the project centered on both parts of its organizational mission—to serve the Third Sector and to help build a peaceful, fair, and equal Northern Ireland. NICVA leaders believed that there was an opportunity for its new headquarters to do more than house programs; it could contribute to the physical regeneration of a conflict-ridden section of Belfast. One board member recalled the council’s interest in the question, “How does the positioning of a building help with wider change and development in the place in which you’re trying to deliver your services?”

To pursue its aspiration to advance a more egalitarian society through the diverse people and organizations it represented, NICVA needed a facility that would adequately house its staff, enable a greater range of support services to its members, and be accessible to a wide array of organizations in Northern Ireland. It also needed to serve as a visible hub and convening point for the sector and bolster member interaction. These goals guided site selection as well as design priorities for the project.

---

## Process

### SELECTING THE SITE

After a year’s search, NICVA identified a potential site directly on a “peaceline” in North Belfast’s Duncairn Gardens. Peacelines are physical barriers intended to minimize intercommunity violence, built in critical places between Catholic and Protestant neighborhoods. The Duncairn Gardens peaceline was a particularly contested space. At the height of the Troubles, it earned the moniker “Murder Mile.” In the years leading up to NICVA’s selection of this site, the surrounding area experienced extreme disinvestment and neglect due to ongoing violence. The land was affordable as a result, and the location had other advantages. While outside of the city center, the site was easily accessible from major highways that connected cities across Northern Ireland. It also offered ample on-site parking, a desirable amenity for NICVA staff and members. While some perceived the site to be a risky investment, NICVA’s leaders saw an opportunity to bolster the rebirth of North Belfast and to



**Above.** The Troubles left behind deep social tensions. By the late 1990s, the dramatic segregation of Protestant and Catholic communities had resulted in a patchwork of starkly divided, often walled-off neighborhoods.

make a dramatic statement of confidence in a harmonious future for Northern Ireland.

While the majority of buildings were vacant, the North City Business Centre (NCBC) was actively working on redevelopment of the area. The NCBC had established its presence and completed the first phase of an office park for social enterprises on a major intersection between Duncairn Gardens and North Queen Street, but it had yet to attract businesses or take down the peace wall separating communities. NCBC planned to expand the office park and NICVA’s new building would boost these redevelopment efforts.

### FUNDING THE PROJECT

In 2000, Big Lottery Fund Northern Ireland committed £736,000 to support NICVA’s project. At the time, it was estimated that NICVA’s existing facility would sell for £300,000. A strong economy resulted in the sale taking place for £500,000. The Fund’s approach called for an offset of support for any building sale proceeds over £300,000, resulting in a reduced final commitment of £536,000. In this regard, NICVA was unable to benefit from a strong real estate market at the time of its building sale.

The Department of the Environment (now the Department for Social Development) also contributed £300,000 to the project, recognizing the opportunity to create community confidence and rejuvenation through a neutral space. One representative commented on the project’s potential to revive the area, saying:

In North Belfast we had no major public buildings, no major institutions, no structure that made us feel that this was part of a city. There were no major employers . . . so to some extent our task was to see if we could physically bring a piece of unused land back into use.

NICVA originally planned to dip into its reserves to fund the remaining cost of the facility, but an investment of £460,000 from

The Atlantic Philanthropies ensured that NICVA would not have to incur any debt for the project. Representatives from both Big Lottery Fund Northern Ireland and the Department for Social Development commented that Atlantic's closing gift helped provide assurance regarding their respective investments. Speaking about the multiple funding sources, one funder commented, "Because NICVA [was] able to leverage other funders, it inspire[d] confidence that our intuition [to support the project] wasn't far off." The Atlantic Philanthropies later contributed an additional £232,000 in 2001 to upgrade the IT facilities.

### DEVELOPING A DESIGN STRATEGY

NICVA engaged a local architecture firm, Tate Stevenson Architects, to design a building with staff offices, large conference rooms, breakout spaces, and training rooms available for use by member organizations. Unlike NICVA's prior building, the new headquarters would be purpose built, with spaces tailored to specific activities and programs. The final scheme featured a four-story building, with rentable spaces on the ground floor and a large, open foyer in the center. Staff offices, meeting rooms, and internal support spaces would be located on the upper floors. The design sought to create functional yet welcoming spaces. These spaces were well suited to primary NICVA uses, yet flexible and versatile to accommodate a range of needs. During the design and construction phases, NICVA leaders chose high-quality materials and finishes that would minimize maintenance and save costs over time.

### CREATING NEUTRAL, ACCESSIBLE SPACE IN THE MIDST OF DIVISIONS

NICVA and its architects developed a design that embodied its peacebuilding vision. They would take down the peace wall and locate the building directly along the peaceline; the structure's long façade would face both neighborhoods equally. The placement of the building was an overt expression of NICVA's principles, and sought to establish neutral space between two conflict-torn communities. As one project architect recalled, at the outset of the project, "It was great to see this area being regenerated, but it felt as if you were building a fortress within another area because of the high walls and the high fences. It was very much, 'You drive in here, do your business and drive out again.' So one of our first points of departure was to say, 'Let's take a section of the fence down and open it up to the street . . . it would also give [NICVA] their own sense of identity on the street as well.'"

The design of the building expressed NICVA's ethos of equity and participation. In a time when buildings in Belfast were heavily fortified with defensive architecture, barred windows, and barbed wire fencing, NICVA placed a conscious priority on design qualities and features that prioritized openness and accessibility. The design incorporated large windows and a bright, airy lobby that created an interior corridor connecting its two communities. To address safety concerns, these elements would be paired with discreet protective measures, like tempered glass and safety shutters that could be rolled down at night.



Left. NICVA's site is located along the peaceline on Duncairn Gardens that divides Catholic and Protestant neighborhoods in North Belfast. By constructing its new facility in this location, NICVA sought to establish a neutral presence between the two communities.

## INVOLVING STAKEHOLDERS IN AN INCLUSIVE VISION

NICVA recognized that the process of planning and constructing the building would be as important as the design, and took action to create a shared vision for the project among a wide range of constituents, including potential funders, government officials, member organizations, and area residents. With the help of active local partners, NICVA held meetings to build relationships and communicate goals for investing in the Duncairn Gardens site. NICVA engaged community groups, such as the Ashton Centre and Lower North Belfast Community Council, to assess the measure of residents' receptiveness toward the new building. Even though its organizational mission did not include offering direct programming to residents, this effort reinforced the perception that NICVA was giving back to, rather than taking from, the community. According to one government representative, "NICVA was acting out not just community development in value, but community development in practice."

Efforts to encourage staff buy-in during the process were also crucial. Initially, a number of employees feared that the North Belfast location would be unsafe. As one recalled:

Many of the staff weren't happy coming here, in terms of location, because of the need to travel over here. The perception of this area was a scene of very frequent rioting

in those days because it's right on the peaceline. So, people who weren't familiar with the area didn't want to come.

Recognizing this issue, NICVA leaders engaged staff at multiple points in the design process and held meetings to address concerns and create opportunities for feedback. As construction progressed, staff members were given tours of the site. This involvement helped people overcome skepticism and develop appreciation for the project. Staff members were energized and motivated by the vision for the building, and felt that it enabled them to "live the mission" of the organization.

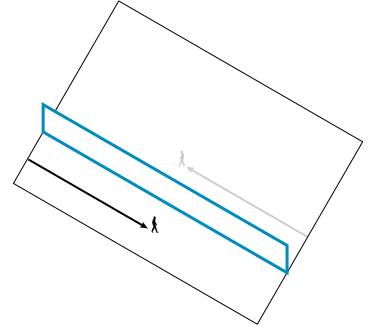
NICVA and its local partners believed that the new facility on the peaceline would be welcomed; however, they could not guarantee that the move would be a safe one. In this regard, NICVA leaders took a calculated risk—especially since the relocation would not generate a significant number of jobs for residents in the Duncairn Gardens area, and since NICVA would not be providing direct services to the local population. To mitigate potential hostility or negative outcomes for the project, NICVA worked to communicate neutrality and build positive relationships with community factions before and during construction. These relationships enabled NICVA to engage community leaders in finding solutions as project issues arose. For example, community members helped ensure that stolen building materials were returned to the construction site.

**Below.** The entry lobby of NICVA's new building opens out to Duncairn Gardens, bringing accessible design to a neighborhood that had been fortified in response to violence.

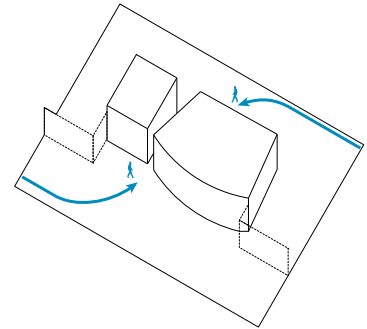




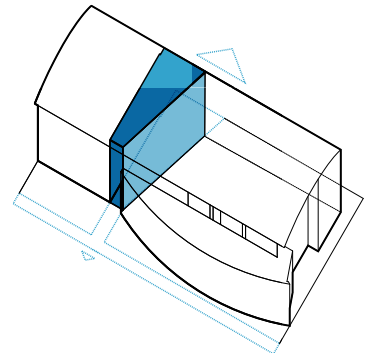
**Left.** During the Troubles, a peace wall on Duncairn Gardens divided the Protestant and Catholic communities.



**Left.** Today, NICVA's building stands on the old peace wall site. NICVA removed the wall and opened the building to two communities that were divided by the peaceline.



**Left.** The design features large windows and a bright, airy lobby. The lobby creates an interior street that connects the two neighborhoods.





---

## Impact

Guided by strong and savvy leadership, NICVA was able to articulate its project vision in a compelling way and construct its new headquarters in two years, opening the doors in 2001. The building has sent a powerful message to people in its surrounding communities, and provided a place where NICVA could grow its programs and host convenings. In nearly 15 years of operating in Duncairn Gardens, NICVA steadily increased its ability to serve the sector and elevated its profile. The planning and design decisions made in this project also resulted in benefits that extend beyond the facility's footprint.

### A STATEMENT OF CONFIDENCE IN NORTH BELFAST

Neighbors received the building as a tremendous success. A NICVA member from a Third Sector organization recalled that, "Almost overnight, all of the serious reservations people had became secondary—this was the sparkle factor." Those who had previously opposed NICVA's move, arguing that it would be unrealistic to invest in North Belfast, now lauded NICVA as gutsy and innovative. NICVA's emphasis on creating a neutral, nonpartisan space made a bold statement about its values. The commitment to locate in the Duncairn Gardens site was deemed a remarkable expression of belief in a neighborhood that was divided.

In the words of the chair of another community organization, "It demonstrated shared leadership at a time when leadership needed to be shown, in an area where conflict and deprivation were side by side." By investing in a beautiful, inviting building, NICVA was able to draw a range of people to participate in its programs, including government officials who otherwise might never have come to North Belfast.

### EXPANDED MEMBER SERVICES

The building has allowed NICVA to increase its programs and services significantly. NICVA actively hosts conferences, workshops, and trainings for voluntary and community groups. Consequently, its membership has grown from 250 before the capital project to more than 1,000. Member organizations have access to a range of programs and are able to rent NICVA's state-of-the-art facilities at a reasonable cost. Moreover, the income generated from room rentals, events, and publications (none of which would have been possible in the former space) has served as a modest and helpful source of discretionary revenue for NICVA.

Equipped with a new space that can host events more frequently, NICVA has become a convening point for the sector. The building

is a go-to space for activities ranging from small group workshops to large, cross-disciplinary conferences. One NICVA staff member spoke to the organization's enhanced capacity, saying:

We couldn't actually do the quantity of work we do without this building because it would be too expensive. [NICVA's facilities] are more economically affordable. There is no way we could hold the number of public events [elsewhere] for the amount of people we do.

It provides a meaningful interface for groups that might not otherwise interact, and draws together government representatives, social enterprise leaders, and leaders of both Protestant and Catholic organizations. One of NICVA's board members expressed that:

The number and extent of people at events is amazing—people from all walks of life, people that wouldn't normally come together. It's also an important place for diversity and networking to happen with the private sector.

### ELEVATED CREDIBILITY AND A MORE CAPABLE THIRD SECTOR

This project shifted NICVA's stature within the Third Sector. As one member reflected:

NICVA was a different organization back then . . . there was membership but no relationship . . . certainly the building has raised the standing of NICVA. Now, it's more of a modern organization with something to say.

The facility became a hub that benefitted Third Sector organizations through both programs and visibility. A NICVA staff member described its significance as follows:

The building provided credibility . . . if you're going to be a voice, you have to have somebody listening to you. And obviously you want powerful people to be listening to you . . . that's part of NICVA's role, really, to take its members' aspirations and put them into the ears of the people who can make decisions and change things. And part of [achieving] that is your credibility. It's your image. It's your clout. It's your status. And this is a serious building.

NICVA Chief Executive Seamus McAleavey believes that the building helped the Third Sector evolve from a group of "golden-hearted amateurs" to become a legitimate and vital complement to the government with ability to conduct advocacy and affect policy. By insisting on a quality facility, NICVA set an example and raised expectations and aspirations for other organizations. In the words of one board member, "For too long, the community and voluntary sector has gotten second best. NICVA took the bull by the horns in broadcasting this message to the sector."



**Above.** NICVA's presence in Duncairn Gardens has helped to draw other social enterprises to North Belfast, including Groundwork and Play Resource.

### A CATALYST FOR INVESTMENT IN A NEGLECTED AREA

The new building also played a major role in spurring redevelopment on Duncairn Gardens. NICVA brought high-quality design and construction to a place that had experienced years of disinvestment due to ongoing sectarian conflict. One community leader reflected:

[North Belfast] was still in a spiral of decline and I think NICVA arrested that decline. It made a very powerful statement. And I think on the back of that, it created a confidence that enabled other investment to take place . . . NICVA was an important part of turning the tide, creating a sense of let's stop this decline, let's see this area as a place where good things can happen.

Inspired by NICVA, the North City Business Centre and others invested in spaces along Duncairn Gardens—including social enterprises and community service providers such as Groundwork,

Play Resource, and the Ashton Community Centre. Some organizations drawn to the area have copied aspects of the NICVA building's aesthetics, eliminating defensive architecture to create welcoming façades on Duncairn Gardens. This success led The Atlantic Philanthropies to provide a grant of £3.5 million in 2014 to support further development in the area, with NICVA acting as a funding agent to improve nonprofit and community facilities in deprived areas of North Belfast.

Combined, these efforts have brought greater visibility and investment to North Belfast and transformed an area once known as "Murder Mile" into a safer, more stable area, and a central place for social change-making. As one stakeholder reflected:

Fifteen years ago if you had driven up Duncairn Gardens you would have been swerving to avoid the debris from the previous night's riot. That doesn't happen anymore . . . there are sandwich shops, little social enterprises . . . people are confident in going to that community now in a way they wouldn't previously have been.

This dynamic generated activity and made Duncairn Gardens feel "lived in" and helped shift the perception of North Belfast. One respondent commented:

A statement of beauty raises expectations, it raises aspirations . . . That whole idea of overcoming urban brutal environments is really important; and investment can yield disproportionate good outcomes.

### NEW IMPLICATIONS FOR ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

The new facility, which included individual offices spread across several floors, brought unanticipated changes in NICVA work culture. The overcrowding and office passageways in NICVA's prior facility resulted in constant contact between staff members. In the new building, people could close their doors and, in the absence of scheduled meetings, not see others all day. As one staff member recalled:

We had to work differently. We had to use this space much more actively . . . The old building forced us to interact. This building didn't force us to interact in the same ways at all, and so, we had to work harder [to] structure interaction. We had to get in the habit of walking around the building. If you don't encounter people accidentally, [then] you need to engineer informal interactions as part of your management style.

In the months following the move, NICVA worked on this issue in multiple ways. For example, tea breaks at eleven o'clock each morning encourage staff to leave their offices and socialize with each other.

---

## Conclusion

In almost 15 years since opening its new building, NICVA has significantly expanded its programs and services, increased its membership fourfold, and become a hub and convening point for the sector. An attractive, purpose-built building fundamentally transformed the perception of NICVA and of the Third Sector, elevating the profile of NICVA and its members and contributing to professionalization of the sector. NICVA conducted thorough planning, took advantage of low-cost real estate, and secured government and private philanthropic grants. As a result, NICVA was able to design and build its new facility quickly and without debt—factors that positioned the organization for rapid growth following move in. The organization's commitment to design quality has also contributed to relatively low ongoing costs for maintenance and upgrades.

Resident engagement before, during, and after the building's completion has put the organization in good standing with its neighbors and the community at large. NICVA worked with architects to communicate its project mission and intentions to the community, avoiding the use of defensive architecture that is common in divided neighborhoods. Furthermore, NICVA chose to remove a portion of the peace wall on Duncairn Gardens and build directly on the peaceline. Investing in high-quality design and construction on Duncairn Gardens—an area of disinvestment and blight—contributed to redevelopment and brought greater visibility and investment to North Belfast, including attracting more Third Sector organizations and transforming the area into a center for social change-making.

---

## Videos

For additional information on this case study, see the following videos available at [www.massdesigngroup.org/purposebuilt](http://www.massdesigngroup.org/purposebuilt):

*The Unique Value of the Building*

*Amplifying the Organization's Mission*

*Legitimizing the Sector*

---

# Lessons from Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action

## Envision greater possibilities for impact.

**An expansive vision encompasses a stronger sector and community:** From the start, lofty ambitions were tied to the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA) project. Constructing a new headquarters would help NICVA serve as a hub for the country's nonprofit and nongovernmental organizations. NICVA leaders also viewed the project as a means to advance the organization's cross-sectarian ethos and contribute to local peacebuilding efforts—featuring a courageous decision to tear down a wall and build on the peaceline between Catholic and Protestant communities.

The facility's design made a visible statement about inclusion. In a time when buildings in Belfast were heavily fortified with barred windows and barbed wire fencing, NICVA placed a priority on openness and accessibility. NICVA's approach was an expression of confidence in a formerly divided Belfast neighborhood, and helped spark redevelopment and draw other organizations to the area. The area has become a center for social change-making organizations, and an area of North Belfast that feels lived in.

In ways that range from offering expanded programs to providing a model for the kinds of facilities that community and voluntary organizations can operate, NICVA's building has helped professionalize and increase the capability of North Ireland's Third Sector. In the words of NICVA's Deputy Chief Executive Úna McKernan, "It was always supposed to be more than just a building."

## Engage stakeholders for insights and buy-in.

**An inclusive approach nurtures trust and broad ownership:** NICVA's leaders encouraged ownership in the project by all stakeholders. Responding to staff anxieties about the move to North Belfast, Chief Executive Seamus McAleavey and former Deputy Director Rainer Pagel invited feedback during the design and construction phases, and provided tours of the building site. These efforts helped staff move past their initial fears and become motivated by the project's mission to advance the Third Sector as well as help heal a neighborhood.

Engagement efforts extended to external audiences including potential funders, government officials, member organizations, and area residents. For example, NICVA joined with local partners to hold meetings with residents intended to build relationships and communicate the goals for NICVA's investment in the Duncairn Gardens site. Even though its organizational mission did not include offering direct services to residents, this effort created a perception that NICVA was giving back to, rather than taking from, the community. According to one government representative, "NICVA was acting out not just community development in value, but community development in practice."

The commitment to involving all stakeholders in the project vision led to immediate acceptance of the building as it opened in an area formerly known for conflict—and to accolades for NICVA as a bold, values-based organization.

---

## Lessons from Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action

### **Invest in design excellence.**

**Both one-time and life-cycle costs matter:** Leaders at NICVA placed a high emphasis on quality building construction and made the extra upfront investment this required. For example, materials and finishes were selected based on maintenance and longevity criteria, not just through consideration of initial costs. These decisions have paid off over time. The building is still in excellent condition after almost 15 years of operation. No major repairs or renovations had been required (with the exception of technology upgrades to maintain high-quality services such as video conferencing). Routine facility checkups and a preventative maintenance approach have also helped keep the structure in top condition.

In these ways, a building that was designed to achieve large ambitions for its organization, sector, and neighborhood is continuing to perform its purpose with minimal ongoing expense.

---

## End Notes

1. "NICVA's Vision, Mission and Values." The Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action. <http://www.nicva.org/about-us/vision-mission-and-values>.

---

## Image Credits

All images courtesy of MASS Design Group.



*The*  
**ATLANTIC**  
*Philanthropies*

 **S. D. BECHTEL, JR.**  
**FOUNDATION**  
STEPHEN BECHTEL FUND

**MASS.**