

The Photographers' Gallery off Oxford Street has given O'Donnell & Tuomey its first London commission. Although recession turned a newbuild into a refurbishment, the Irish practice, as always, **makes a little go a long way**

Words Hugh Pearman | Pictures Dennis Gilbert

WATCH THIS SPACE

IT HAS TAKEN DUBLIN-BASED Sheila O'Donnell and John Tuomey quite a while to get to build in London. The Photographers' Gallery project in Soho, just completed, will be followed by the much larger and more complex student hub for the London School of Economics, now on site. Despite the long wait, they still consider the capital their second home, having worked there for five years after college in the office of Stirling Wilford — on the Staatsgalerie and Clore Gallery. But I am meeting them in Dublin, in the old school house near St Patrick's Cathedral which has been their studio since 1991 and which, to judge by its familiar grubby, cluttered and slightly peeling interior, hasn't received much attention from a paintbrush since then.

That year was a key one for them, denoting the time when — having founded their eponymous practice in Dublin in 1988 — they led the celebrated Group 91 collective of like-minded young Irish practices charged with the task of reviving the then run-down Temple Bar area of the city, which they did with conspicuous success. Since then they have been shortlisted three times for the Stirling Prize, steadily built up a reputation for buildings of intellect and substance such as the new Lyric Theatre in Belfast, continue to work in the Netherlands and — as Tuomey ruefully relates — just missed out on several high-profile competitions. 'We're in the habit of losing



New galleries on the top two floors have generous ceiling heights and a sense of the outside world.





competitions to David Chipperfield,' he says, tongue in cheek (they beat Chipperfield on a strong shortlist for the LSE). Coming second to Bennetts in the Royal Shakespeare Theatre contest hurt though.

Right now they are doing a couple of schools in Ireland as well as the London work, and a large model of their timber-built tower for this autumn's Venice Biennale (as invited by Chipperfield, so it goes) stands in the office – now unlikely to be realised at the scale they originally envisaged, for cost and weight reasons. But what's really keeping them busy is one of those competition wins, for the expansion of the Central European University in Budapest, lavishly endowed by financial genius (and Hungarian-born) George Soros. Coincidentally that was also founded in 1991, an early consequence of the collapse of the Eastern Bloc. Democratic political science, public policy and of course economics are to the fore. O'Donnell & Tuomey is doing what it has always been noted for: the careful stitching-together of new with old. It is just the kind of large, prestigious, international commission the practice deserves.

And they teach, of course. In the context of this teaching-and-practice-themed issue, they have taught everywhere, especially America, but a constant since 1981 is their alma mater, University College Dublin. Tuomey is professor of architectural design there, and O'Donnell is co-ordinating the diploma-level Upper School. The way Tuomey puts the practice-teaching relationship is: 'It relieves pressure in both places.' For O'Donnell it's all about getting right into the individual projects. The cycle-ride from the office or their home in the

Ranelagh district to UCD and back seems to help both clear their minds. About half their students subsequently go to London, as they did themselves at first; about one-third stay in Dublin; and the rest these days find their way to the Far East. O'Donnell and Tuomey duly take me to UCD, where they have mounted a small exhibition (oddly, their first there), *Brick*, which neatly summarises the prodigious, almost obsessive, attention to detail of the practice. It's all about the designing of the complex angled facades at the LSE student centre, all in hand-made Coleford brick with a prodigious number of one-off and small-batch specials to cope with the geometry. The practice has drawn and located every one of the 175,000 bricks in the building (see page 57). Its aesthetic is, I suggest, and they don't demur, very Jim Stirling 'red buildings' period.

The Photographers' Gallery (another competition win) almost got away. Their original scheme was for a completely new building on the site – the model for it stands on the table as we talk – but that was in 2006, just before the global financial crisis. The Arts Council-funded gallery commendably kept its nerve and its architects, but reined back its ambition by opting to modify the existing 1910 light-industrial building on the site. It was, both architects confess, tough to have to start all over again. 'But we didn't sulk,' says Tuomey.

Tucked away on a corner site on Ramillies Street in the backstreets between Soho and Oxford Street, the gallery is in a very London kind of quiet world a few steps (literally) away from hectic activity. Here is a mix of shop service entrances, warehouse doors and the backstage get-in for the London Palladium. As a design exercise, making useful

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TOP RIGHT: View from the top floor window north through a cleft in Oxford Street.

TOP LEFT: Simple, uncluttered gallery spaces with oak floors do not distract from work on display. This is the fourth floor.

RIGHT: A break-out space on the fourth floor provides views to the Soho streets.

BELOW: Tying new into old – new and refurbished sections of the building interlock visually.



clear-span gallery space out of a tight little steel-framed brick building, it is not unlike the challenges the practice faced in the run-down streets of Temple Bar in the late 1980s, where they part-adapted, part-extended, a cluster of buildings to become the Irish Film Institute. This became the guideline for adaptation and reuse of the whole area.

Here, what was a four-storey building becomes six with the addition of two lofty, relatively lightweight-construction extra floors on top. Visually, these are tied into the appearance of the whole building by bringing the dark-chocolate Sto render of the new top floors in sections over the original brickwork right down to the ground on the north and east elevations. Tall get-in doors are set in panels of hardwood, echoing the industrial-scale doors in the area. 'Old and new go in and out of focus with each other,' as Tuomey puts it. The top floor culminates in a large picture window (itself recalling a camera or periscope) looking north through a cleft in the Oxford Street buildings, one of them modified by Amanda Levete. This vista is also exploited

by a genuine camera obscura installed in the building. Another very big picture window stares east across the street. At ground level a further large area of glazing, set in the same black terrazzo cladding used for the ground and basement floor and lower stairs, wraps around the corner to open up the building and its cafe to the street. The gallery levels are floored in oak, walls are simple painted surfaces, stair balustrades are in grey-painted sheet steel. The new top two floors provide the largest gallery space, but there is a 'close control' gallery in the existing structure on the second floor, dedicated to fragile historic photos. Offices are on the first floor, the education space on the third, the shop is in the basement, accessed by a cut-away ground slab. It's a straightforward way to apportion the mix of uses on a confined site for an institution that attracts half a million visitors a year. The architects, and the gallery's director Brett Rogers, hope to persuade Westminster Council to pedestrianise the street outside which will then allow for more events and external projections.

By the characterful standards of O'Donnell and Tuomey this is a fairly muted building – pragmatic, relatively low-cost, with detailed design and supervision by architect ADP working for the design-build contractor. It shows O'Donnell & Tuomey's skill, refined over many years, of making much out of little – little in this case being a contract value of a mere £3.5m, compared with the practice's £23m project at the LSE. It reads as a complete building, not as a roof extension. Modest it may be, but it makes its moves skilfully and provides the gallery with prime exhibition space right in the heart of tourist London. ■

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DATABASE

THE PHOTOGRAPHERS' GALLERY, LONDON

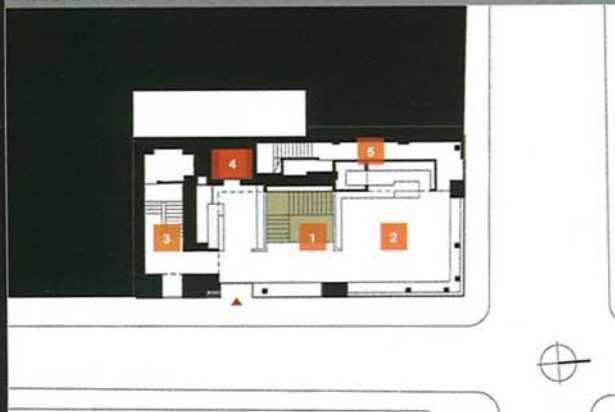
EAST ELEVATION



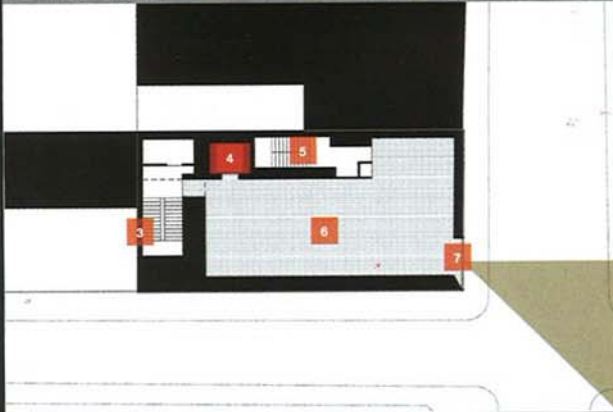
SECTION



GROUND FLOOR PLAN



FIFTH FLOOR PLAN



KEY TO DIAGRAMS

- | | | | |
|-----------------------|------------------------------------|-----------------------------|---|
| 1: Stairs to basement | 5: Escape stair | 8: Shop and print room | 12: High-ceilinged galleries in rooftop extension |
| 2: Café | 6: Gallery space | 9: Offices | 13: Services level |
| 3: Main stairs | 7: North-facing 'periscope' window | 10: 'Close control' gallery | |
| 4: Lift | | 11: Education space | |

IN NUMBERS: 225 m² area of site, 1,104 m² existing building floor area, 1,345 m² extended building floor area, 7 habitable floors including basement, 2 general galleries, 1 windowless 'close control' gallery, 1 office level, 1 education level, £9.2m total cost including building purchase, £3.4m construction cost



THE 'SLEEVE'

Key to the success of the composition of the new Photographers' Gallery is the fact that the new-build roof extension is made part of the aesthetic of the whole building. This is done by using a 'sleeve' to give the impression a new structure has been slipped over the old.

A dark, not-quite-black Sto render clads the new lightweight steel-framed two upper floors and plant level – the bulk of this section being reduced by a partial timber screen right on top. But rather than stopping there, it is brought right down to street level, clearly standing proud of the red Edwardian brickwork of the host building. Two bands of render on the two street elevations perform this task. At ground level they merge with the tougher black terrazzo framing the entrance and café.

The 'sleeve' has new windows flush with its surface, in contrast to the recessed windows of the original. It is completed at ground level with two large ground-level timber panels in sustainably-sourced Angelim Pedra wood, one for each of the two street elevations and both containing doors. These are set flush with the render and terrazzo and thus also stand proud of the original brickwork. With the brickwork cut away at the ground level corner to visually reveal the café, the old surface of the building with its large multi-pane steel-framed windows is now expressed as three large recessed panels in dialogue with the new material. Hence O'Donnell & Tuomey's photographic allusion: the building going slightly in and out of focus with itself. The consequence of this compositional framing device is that the building has a clearly-expressed bottom, middle and top. It has an underworld too: the cut-out ground-floor slab and generous terrazzo staircase to the basement shop and print department link it visually to the entrance and café. HP

CREDITS

Client: The Photographers' Gallery Trustees
Architects: O'Donnell + Tuomey Architects
Design and build contractor: Kilby + Gayford with ADP Architects
M&E engineer: Max Fordham LLP
Project manager: Cragg Management Services
Quantity surveyor: Huntley Cartwright
Structural engineer: Dewhurst McFarlane and Partners
MEP/Fire Engineer: Arup
Access consultant: David Bonnett Associates

SUPPLIERS

Carpentry: Adrol
Dry lining and ceilings: Kent & Roberts
External acrylic render system: Sto Ltd
External hardwood window frames and panelling: Woodcraft Joinery
Insitu terrazzo: WB Simpson & Sons
Internal doors: Ezyjamb by Linear
Ironmongery: Dorplan
Oak flooring: Woods of Wales
Roof membrane: Woods of Wales
Glazing: Birchdale Glass
Secondary glazing: Selectaglaze
Washroom IPS: Venesta Washroom Systems
Washroom tiles: Solus Ceramics