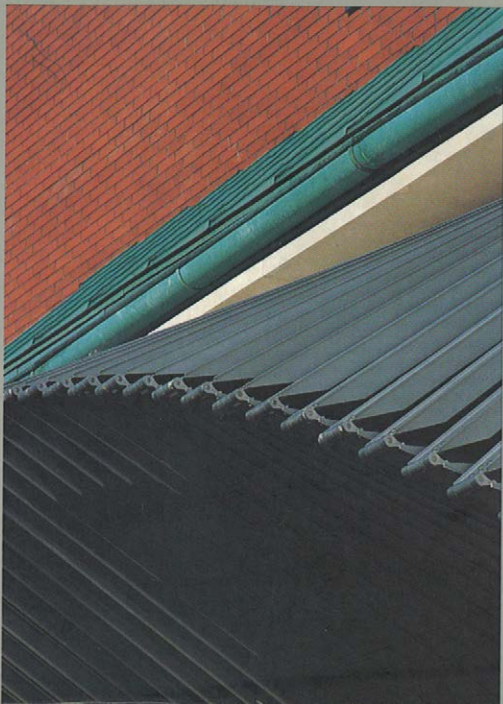


# Dublin

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Angela Brady and Robin Mallalieu



**A guide to recent architecture**

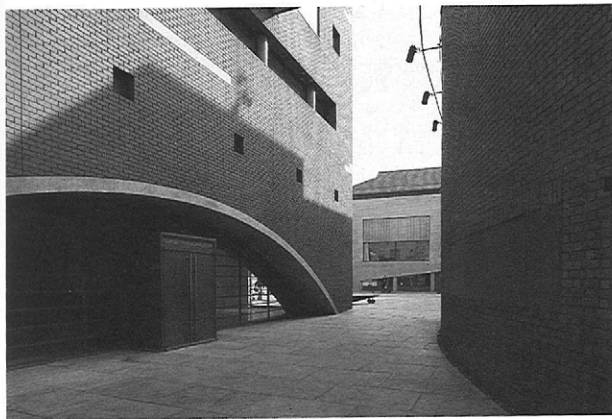
## National Photography Centre and Gallery of Photography

Monumentality is not exclusive to the large scale, as John Tuomey's early mentor James Stirling often pointed out. Temple Bar's most monumental new building, the new National Photography Centre, proves the point. Approached from Essex Street East, its hot red brick and hunky form are almost overpowering, its low, arched entrance seemingly compressed by the weight of the construction above. The walls rise sheer from the street, and there is no stepping or other conventional allowance for the narrow passage into Meeting House Square. The deep-set strip windows, with squat circular columns and sculptured zinc-clad forms, all accentuate the massiveness of the wall and create a sense of Roman grandeur. Fragments of stone quoining scattered amongst the brick and the suppression of conventional detailing such as window sills, reinforce the illusion of something more ancient.

The centre is split into two separate parts: a red-brick building housing the photographic archive of the National Gallery and a school of photography and, across Meeting House Square, the Gallery of Photography. The latter, an equally enigmatic object building clad in Portland stone, hides the flank wall of the earlier Irish Film Centre (also by O'Donnell and Tuomey, see page 194). The buildings on either side of the square are linked, appropriately, by light: movies can be shown outdoors by projecting them from the photography centre on to the gallery opposite (where the large central window acts as a screen).

At first glance the architectural forms appear to have been chosen quite arbitrarily, but they are in fact part of a personal vocabulary developed by architects with a particular interest in the psychological impact and metaphorical use of form. For instance, the nicks out of the right corner of the gallery façade refer to the sprocket holes in film, and the wedge

Group 91 (O'Donnell and Tuomey Architects) 1996



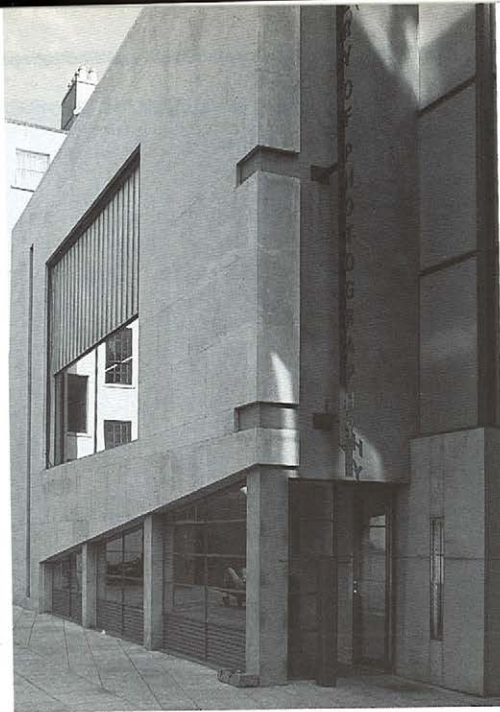
Group 91 (O'Donnell and Tuomey Architects) 1996

form of the ground-floor window refers to the journey from light to dark experienced in a photographic darkroom or the cinema. The use of a highly personalised language, however, is open to misinterpretation – here the gallery elevations suggest, erroneously, the presence of a raked floor auditorium within.

The upper floors of the Photography Centre house the DIT School of Photography and its collection of darkrooms, studios and teaching spaces. These uses presented O'Donnell and Tuomey with a fundamental contradiction – between the architectural desire for light and openings, and the client requirement for darkness (for both photographic work and archive storage). This conflict has been resolved by making openings in the external walls and filling them with zinc cladding. On the main building, the major openings at roof level indicate the location of the photographic studios; but here, at least, lightweight infill panels offer the possibility of window installation at a later date.

Across the square the gallery contains space for photographic exhibitions and allied lecture and workshop events. Entry is from the side, at the high point of the wedge window leading into a ground-floor bookshop. The main gallery is above, reached via an opaque-glass stair tower. It is a double-height space, announced on the main elevation by the large window that doubles as the external projection screen. The main room has a complex section with concealed rooflights and folding exhibition panels; balcony spaces with small rooms provide a variety of hanging possibilities. The stair continues upwards to a roof terrace, from where there are views down to the square.

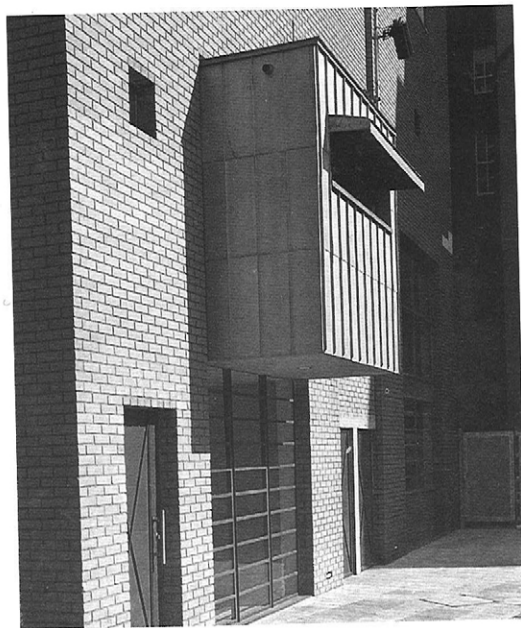
The small but elegant granite-clad façade adjacent to the gallery entrance links the square and the new buildings to the complex sequence of spaces of the Irish Film Centre next door, thus extending further the



richness of the townscape experience. This richness, which makes up the very essence of the city, is evident too in the difference between these two buildings from the same architects – a difference noted by the gallery's bookshop manager who, on meeting John Tuomey at the opening, proceeded to congratulate him on the excellent gallery and to express his relief that they hadn't ended up with the architects of the archive building across the square. Tuomey's reply is not recorded.

ADDRESS Meeting House Square, Temple Bar, Dublin 2  
 CLIENT Temple Bar Properties  
 STRUCTURAL ENGINEER Muir Associates  
 COST IR£2.4 million  
 BUS/TRAIN City Centre  
 ACCESS open

Group 91 (O'Donnell and Tuomey Architects) 1996

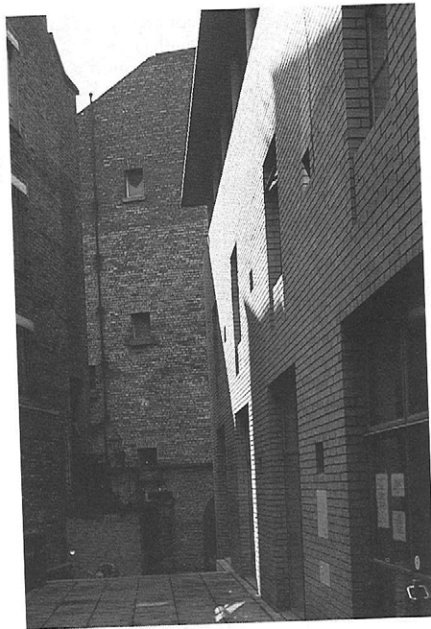


Group 91 (O'Donnell and Tuomey Architects) 1996

The Irish Film Centre was the model for the Temple Bar project, conceived and built before the Structure Plan was even a twinkle in Charlie Haughey's eye. By the time the plan was mooted, the Film Centre was already a living, breathing example of the Group 91 approach to urban regeneration and renewal. It thus played an important part in the decision to allow a group of largely unbuilt architects to participate in the original competition. The Film Centre layout even foresaw the creation of Meeting House Square, long before there was any possibility that it would become a reality.

O'Donnell and Tuomey had been trying to build the Film Centre since 1985, and had prepared schemes for various locations before the present site was purchased from the Quakers, who had acquired a diverse collection of buildings over many years. The existing buildings presented various pros and cons: although the two cinemas would fit neatly into existing spaces, the accommodation was stranded in the middle of an urban block with no main, street elevation. But, ultimately, these severe constraints have been turned to skilful advantage in a *tour de force* of 'townscape' design.

The scheme represents a casebook study of Gordon Cullen's original 'Townscape' thesis. The entrance from Eustace Street, marked by a neon sign, is a narrow tunnel leading to a larger, brighter space just visible at the end. This sets up a 'here and there' relationship, encouraging anticipation and exploration. Reinforcing this impression is the glass floor (metaphorically intended as a reel of film) which links the entrance to the central space. The barrel-vaulted passage leads to the principal central courtyard, whose main façade is concealed until arrival. For film-goers, this is where the ticket office, cinema entry, bar, restaurant and shop are situated. The glass-roofed space has an external character, with a new



'façade' reminiscent, appropriately, of a film set. Entry to the main cinema is behind a blue-rendered wall.

For those using the centre as a short cut through the block, a door in the shop provides access to the other side. This door opens on to a tall, narrow colonnade leading to Meeting House Square. A change in level emphasises the contrast between the dark enclosure of the arcade and the bright openness of the square, and also gives a high-level view of the square on entry. Alternatively, by passing between the columns of the arcade you reach a small courtyard outside the new film archive building and library. From here, steps lead down to Sycamore Street, although progression is compromised by a narrow security gate at the bottom.

Once in the square, a look back reveals a mannered façade clad in limestone. Through the windows of the projection room, the flickering light of the projector adds a poetic touch of drama to the night-time view.

The spatial intricacy and variety of this architectural promenade are complemented every step of the way by a material dialogue between old and new; stylish – indeed, stylised – detailing; and the warmth of naturally finished materials and textures.

ADDRESS Eustace Street, Temple Bar, Dublin 2  
 CLIENT Irish Film Centre Ltd  
 STRUCTURAL ENGINEER Fearon O'Neill Rooney  
 COST IR£1.8 million  
 BUS/TRAIN City Centre  
 ACCESS open daily, 11.00–24.00

