NEW IRISH ARCHITECTURE
THE ARCHITECTURAL YEAR REVIEWED

The new house (Fig 1) is hidden behind Hudson’s Bistro on Railway Street in Navan. It cannot be seen from the street. You only notice it when you go down a long corridor at the side of the restaurant. It is a small house, only one thousand three hundred and fifty square feet, designed for Richard and Trisha Hudson by John Tuomey and Sheila O’Donnell. And the site, too, is small – just a back garden. The house is divided into two by a courtyard. The living quarters are divided into four distinct spaces: a den for watching television away from the courtyard; a kitchen space; a recessed space for reading; and a long kitchen table which looks over the courtyard through a window the size of the wall. The living quarters and the courtyard have the same flagstones – Lacken sandstone from county Mayo. The huge window opens outwards fully into the yard, thus in good weather making the courtyard and the living area seem like one space. The courtyard gets the sun for most of the day. At the other side of the courtyard are three bedrooms on three floors.

The finish is fair-faced concrete which gives the house a strange, monumental beauty. There is a starkness in the style: plate-glass, wood, flagstones, cast concrete, nothing else. But there is nothing brutal about the atmosphere because of the attention to detail and proportion everywhere. The living quarters have a raked roof which softens the impact of the concrete; the bedroom block has windows in different places on three floors which makes it look almost playful. One of the Hudsons’ daughters wanted to see the stars from her bed, and this has been arranged by placing a line of glass on one side of the ceiling of her room. The Hudsons, because they sleep late in the morning, wanted their own bedroom sunken slightly in the ground so they would not be disturbed by morning light. Light comes into the other rooms from almost every angle and this also softens the concrete, and it is fascinating to watch the concrete absorbing the changing light.

The Hudson house is interesting because it is modest and easy to live in and did not cost a fortune to build. And yet it seems to me to be a masterpiece of purity and style, a lesson to everyone with a small site and a small budget.

The mews house which the architect John Meagher has designed in Heytesbury Lane in Dublin (Fig 2) has certain elements in common with the Hudson house. It uses wooden openings for ventilation; it takes in light from every angle; it is also a dialogue between two spaces. One of these spaces is entirely theatrical (all of the Hudson house, on the other hand, is muted, practical and domestic). This is an atrium two stories high which takes up the space normally taken by an entrance hall, a stairwell and a landing. Windows and openings from the upper floor look down into this dramatic, bright space, and there are two entrances on the ground floor to an inner sanctum. This wall, full of windows and doors, is built in cedarwood and would be a perfect place for a private staging of Romeo and Juliet. Openings in 1. O’DONNELL + TUOMEY: The Hudson House, Navan. 'There is a starkness in the style: plate-glass, wood, flagstones, cast concrete, nothing else. But there is nothing brutal about the atmosphere because of the attention to detail...' 2. DeBlacam and Meagher: Mews House at Heytesbury Lane, Dublin. 'The house is a dialogue between two spaces: the atrium, two stories high, is highly theatrical, the inner sanctum, in sharp contrast, is more private and domestic...'
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the glass roof are electronically-controlled. There is room here for a long table and there is a plan to place a bench against the wall, thus making it a sort of public space for large dinner parties.

In sharp contrast to this, the inner sanctum is more private and domestic, it is for living in rather than party-giving: it runs from a plate-glass window in a nest of wooden panels at the front to a large open-plan kitchen at the back which opens on to a patio. As in the Hudson house, doors open fully on to the patio. There is a plan to put awnings on the patio and thus avoid views of neighbouring buildings.

The facade of the house is almost as spectacular as the atrium. There are three sets of vertical wooden flag-poles which will hold creepers and creepers will also run horizontally along the top of the facade. The glass for the downstairs and upstairs rooms is set in cedarwood, several panels upstairs and one huge pane downstairs with wooden panels which open for ventilation. Upstairs is a large bedroom which opens onto a balcony at the back and two smaller bedrooms.

The house is full of light; the atmosphere is cool and sharp, unfussy and modern. There is clever detail and detailed finish everywhere. This house is interesting in the same way as the Hudson house: it is a small site where enormous advantages are taken of the limitations.

The Hudson house, designed by John Tuomey and Sheila O’Donnell, has echoes in the multi-denominational school for two hundred and forty children they have designed at Mountpleasant in Ranelagh in Dublin (Fig 3). In the part of the building which backs onto the street, you have the same asymmetrical use of large plate glass windows in a tower-like structure and the same odd sense of well-being you get which is impossible to define – it is often called aesthetic pleasure – from just looking at the building. It is like looking at a Mondrian, or a Sean Scully, or a William Scott in which a small number of lines and textures play against each other, in which the clearly-defined such as brick and wood sits beside the softly defined such as stone and glass, in which the shape and placing of the windows seem inspired and perfect.

The other side of the building which faces a terrace of old houses is entirely different. It looks more like a school, but louvred timber on the first floor cuts off a direct view into the building from the neighbouring houses. There is a covered verandah for playing, and inside the entrance hall leads down to a sunken assembly hall. Once again, in places O’Donnell and Tuomey have used bare concrete, and also used wooden panels which can be opened for air. But here they have also painted seriously-bright colours on some of the walls and put coloured lino on the floors. The building has public spaces such as the eight classrooms and the halls but also has tiny play spaces and small administration rooms. Its style is a mixture of the warm and the austere.

The brick is old, and the stone comes from the walls which once surrounded the site. Soon, the untreated teak and the steel which are to be found on various parts of the outside of the building will weather. This school is the only contemporary building in its immediate environment, and it fits in here not because it has sought to copy another style, but because of its own strength and integrity which should be apparent to anyone passing by.

In Dún Laoghaire Niall McCullough and Valerie Mulvin have designed the large extension to the Dún Laoghaire/ Rathdown County Hall (Fig 5) along the seafront. The original building, with its prominent clock-tower, was built in the Venetian Gothic style; building an extension to this clearly represented an enormous challenge. By not attempting pastiche, but allowing the modern building a dialogue with the old, McCullough and Mulvin have produced a fascinating and subtle solution to the problem.

First of all, they created the entrance not along the seafront,
but on the site of the old post office, thus making the entrance modest and unintimidating. And inside they have created a sort of village square with offices like shops or houses (using in various places raw, or board-marked concrete) and in the middle a vast space, a central concourse which can be entirely closed off to make an auditorium by big, high electrical doors, but during normal hours can be used to cross the square. On the top floor of the building there is a canteen for staff with a full view of Dún Laoghaire harbour and the sea.

The inside of the building is user-friendly and functional, but the real challenge lay in the facade. The old building is done in Dalkey granite, notable here for its flaws and sudden bursts of colour. The granite on the extension also has flaws and bursts of colour and the stone is cut in different lengths and shapes. As in the original, no joint overlaps another. The brief was to get four stories into the extension, while there are only two in the original; thus it is impossible for the new building to compete with the old. What happens instead are echoes and resonances between the two buildings, and it is possible that if you don’t notice them, that this makes them all the more present.

On the far end of the extension there is a block with a huge window which juts out; this reflects the high portico of the origi-
Henri J. Lyons & Partners: Terminal C, Dublin Airport. "Everything is in place to create an atmosphere which is relaxed and quiet. From the subdued colours to the high ceilings and huge raked plate glass windows..."

As the extraordinary increase in the number of passengers through the airport shows, every section of the economy continues to grow. Slowly, every empty space in the cities and towns are being filled, including back gardens, and there are two recent small extensions to old buildings which offer a clue as to how this might best be done with taste and style.

The first of these is a small garden room at the back of 13 Merrion Square in Dublin (Fig 7), designed by Grafton Architects. There is an elegance and sparceness about this design which makes it stand out. The floor of the room and the surface outside are both done in the same Portland stone, and the division between them is a curved, frameless piece of glass. The garden wall is painted a terracotta and the wall of the room a deep, rich blue. There is a strip of glass along one side of the ceiling and a strip of glass at the back of the room. Between the cool stone and the strong colours and the strange angles, the room is washed with light.

The other extension, to a house in Windsor Terrace (Fig 8) on the Grand Canal in Dublin, is by Gerard Carty, an associate of Grafton Architects. This is a kitchen and dining-room addition to a two-up-two-down house. Again, it uses glass to good effect, but this time the atmosphere is more monumental than Merrion Square. This is a transparent box using sliding doors..."
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with a deck outside and a wooden floor inside at the same level. The extension is beautifully made and finished: the lighting and use of red paint and under-floor heating give it a strength and a simplicity. Even though the extension takes up most of the back garden, it adds enormously to the main house. Both this and the extension in Merrion Square show once more what can be done using light as the main element.

The past year has been quiet in Temple Bar in Dublin while work to the west of Parliament Street begins. Some of the restoration work on various buildings in Eustace Street has been very impressive, especially in numbers 11, 16, 17 and 25 where some wonderful wood panelling has been restored or re-created and the houses have been rendered safe and habitable and made as close to their 18th-century origins as is possible.

At the end of Essex Street West is the entrance to a new development by Horan Keegan Ryan named ‘Smock Alley Court’ as a reminder of the streets earlier name with its well-known, 18th century historic associations. There are three buildings containing fifty-three flats now used as social housing and five shops with glazed faience shopfronts in the modern idiom. The apartments face out on to the river and the Wood Quay civic offices. One corner apartment on the top floor has one of the best views in Dublin westwards upriver, the vista closed by the Wellington monument in Phoenix Park. If you look out of the window of any of the eight flats in the Fishamble Street building you see one of the most astonishing sights in Dublin. You see the high glass atrium between the river facing offices at Wood Quay and the bunkers behind them. This is immensely dramatic because you can see neither of the buildings which the atrium connects, simply the glass, the steel and the light. The scene is opulent and glamorous and daring, the last thing you expect. They should make a poster out of it. It is one of the hidden wonders of Dublin.

COLM TOIBIN’S Homage to Barcelona was published in 1994. His latest novel is The Story of the Night.