Taking place

O’Donnell & Tuomey exorcises the genius loci, says Robert Bevan

It was always rather too neat to categorise Sheila O’Donnell and John Tuomey simply as “Irish rationalists”, despite ongoing concern with Aldo Rossi – although it rather suited buildings like the Irish Film Centre.

Now it seems far too simplistic a description: “The focus has shifted,” says Tuomey. The concern with “exotica” and analysis of place and intention are still there but: “The shift has been towards architecture itself: it’s less to do with the symbolic role. The focus is clearer on the actuality.”

Their projects continue to demonstrate a strong response to context and to working within the continuity of Irish architecture – as evidenced in the much-vaunted Rathgar Multi-denominational School (see page 4). This also recalls the memory of the previous much-loved school on the site and reflects a desire to engage in built form with the social life of the classroom.

What you do, however, about a sense of place that is not to be cherished but is disturbing? O’Donnell & Tuomey’s scheme to create a furniture college out of a former industrial school (a reform school) run by Christian Brothers in windsewer Connaught has just this problem. The project will house a café, a library, a machine hall and a restoration workshop as part of the college. It will also make use of a structural timber frame – a rarity in Ireland.

The aim has been to integrate what was a repressive institution into the life of the nearby village and to foster contemplation rather than rigid discipline. Through the careful placement of new-build elements near the village, forming a connection and by a shifting of axes, its austerity will be softened without history being erased.

The symbolic still has its place, however, as is clear from O’Donnell & Tuomey’s Hudson House in Navan, Co Meath. It is conceived as cave, courtyard and a tower and evolved in an almost archaeological way out of the carcase of an old workshop which was dug into the ground below its neighbours.

The house results, in part from a fascination with Irish tower houses, as well as a timely visit to the courtyard house at Pompeii. As important, though, is the almost narrative way in which the structural concrete house has evolved to suit the life the clients were seeking – whether this means walking across a courtyard between the bedrooms and the living area or framing views of the sky. Untreated cedar external panelling adds to the elemental qualities – perhaps the shade of Rossi is lurking after all.