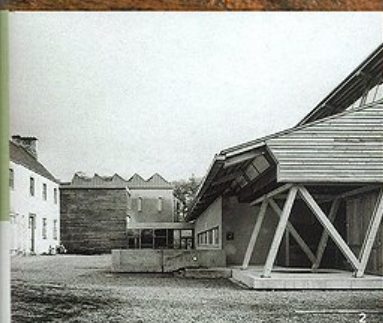
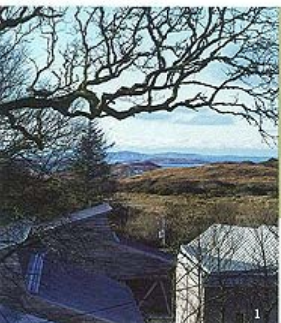


REDEMPTION IN LETTERFRACK

SHANE O'TOOLE finds that the tragic atmosphere that had dogged the buildings of St Joseph's Reformatory has been exorcised.



Some buildings have savage histories. Histories that can leave a place - the bare walls having witnessed too much sadness and absorbed it all - in need of a kind of architectural exorcism, a project of redemption. For almost a century, troubled boys were brutally chastened and subdued in the former industrial school at Letterfrack, Co Galway until, in the words of the poet Richard Murphy:

*'Padded in varnished pews, stunted in beds
Of cruciform iron, they bruise with sad, hurt shame:
Orphans with felons, bastards at loggerheads
With waifs, branded for life by a bad name'*

These days, the tragic atmosphere that dogged the buildings of St Joseph's reformatory for so many years is being gradually dispelled (Fig 1). The buildings belong to Connemara West, a community-owned and managed rural development company, established in 1971. The complex is home to Letterfrack Furniture College—a campus of the Galway/Mayo Institute of Technology—providing facilities for furniture technology, conservation and restoration, as well as a range of community services, including Connemara Community Radio, which broadcasts ten hours daily.

Letterfrack was a poor and neglected area until the Quakers, James and Mary Ellis, settled there in 1849. They more or less founded the town as a relief to the horrors visited on the locality during the Famine. James Ellis had retired from a successful worsted manufacturing business in Bradford, northern England, at the age of 56. His concern for the distress caused by the famine in Ireland—highlighted through Quaker famine reports from Connemara in 1847—led him to purchase the lease on an estate of almost 1,800 acres, mostly bogs and mountains, in Letterfrack. Much of that land is now occupied by the Connemara National Park.

There were few Quakers resident in Connaught at the time and

the nearest Quaker Meeting was in Moate, Co Westmeath. Ellis' intention was to become a resident landlord, to provide employment and to try to alleviate the appalling conditions. Employing 80 men, he drained the bog land, planted thousands of trees and constructed walls, gardens and roads. The country crossroads with a few houses was soon a village with a shop, a two-storey school and meeting house, a doctor's house, a dispensary and a small temperance hotel, along with cottages built of stone and slate roofs for his employees.

It is tempting to speculate on what other remarkable things might have happened had the Ellises remained in Letterfrack for longer than eight years or if their work been continued by others of their persuasion. But this was not to be. When James Ellis' health failed in 1857, he sold out to John Hall, a supporter of the proselytising Irish Church Mission Society, and moved back to Yorkshire with, as Mary Ellis wrote, a 'feeling of the much we have left undone, and the darkness which exists there, where nature looks so fair'.²

In 1882 the Archbishop of Tuam purchased Hall's estate and requested the Christian Brothers to establish an industrial school there. Purpose built to accommodate more than one hundred Roman Catholic boys, St Joseph's opened in 1887. Forming three sides of a square measuring 50 metres each way, the building was made up of three dormitories, a band room, five classrooms, kitchen, refectory, washroom and laundry (Fig 8). The former Ellis home became the Monastery. A row of cottages became the workshops. In later years a recreation hall was added.³

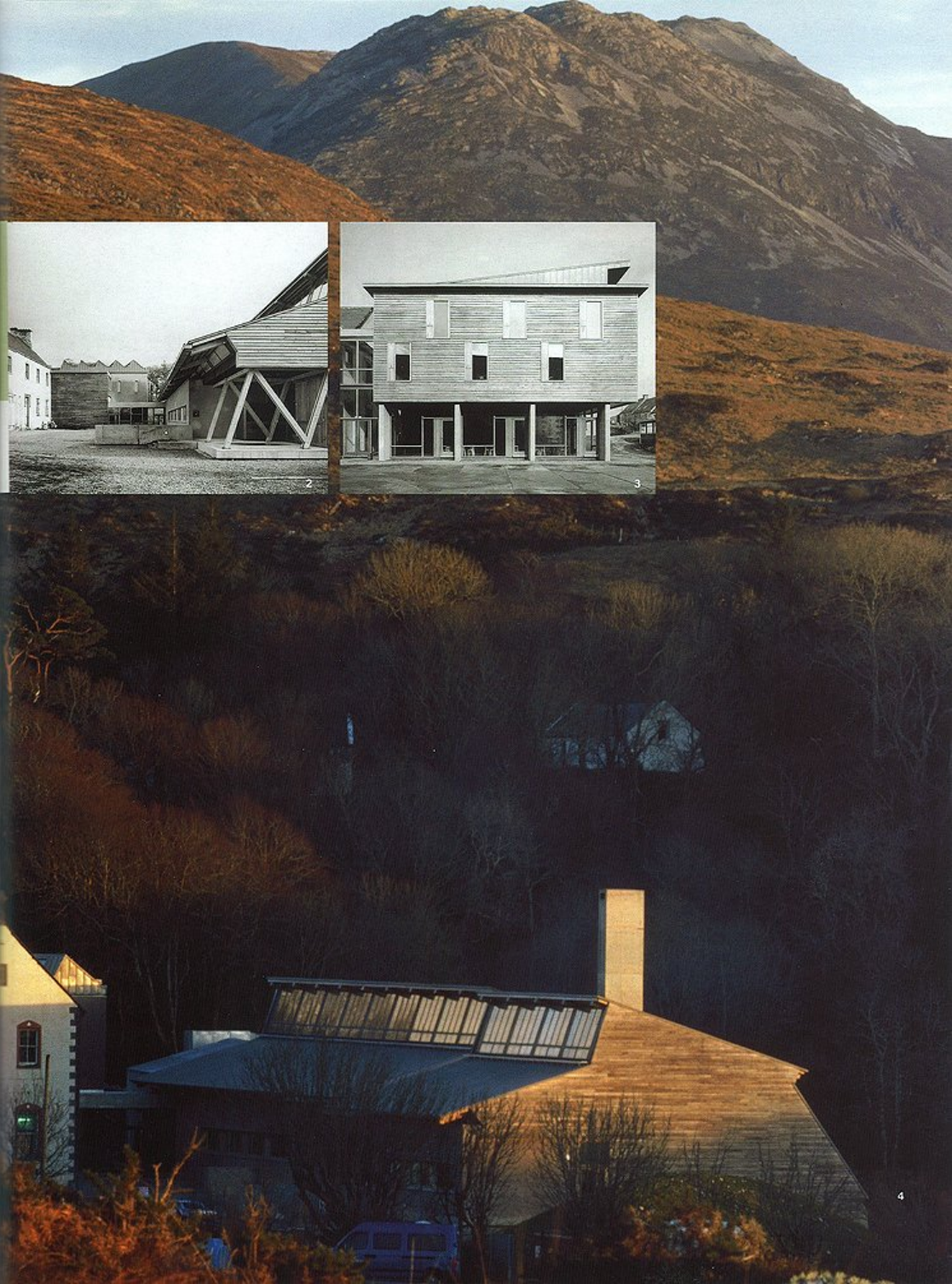
Orphans, beggars, the homeless and truants were sent to St Joseph's, as were children found guilty of minor criminal offences. Few remained past their sixteenth birthday. Along with normal school subjects, boys were given grounding in tailoring, carpentry, shoemaking, knitting, poultry care and mattress weaving.

1 Furniture College Letterfrack: View to sea over rooftops.

2 View of Machine Hall entrance looking towards Benchwork Room.

3 Courtyard elevation of Café/Library.

4 Furniture College buildings in the landscape from west.



The trades of wheelwright and blacksmith were taught. The boys worked the farm that provided most of the school's food and fuel.

After the reformatory closed in 1974, the mountain areas of Letterfrack became part of Connemara National Park, in the Twelve Bens, and the community board bought the imposing but dismal school buildings.

'There had been no intervention on the site for 100 years,' says Kieran O'Donohue, Director of Connemara West. 'We had to find some way of owning it that would protect it for the future'.

They invited several architects to consider what the complex might hope to become, rather than what it then was, before appointing O'Donnell and Tuomey in 1994 because, says O'Donohue, they were 'very good at articulating the historical sense of the site's development and what should happen in that landscape now'.

In a recent essay, John Tuomey identified the creative value of 'the careful gaze' in coming to grips with the interpretation of the phenomena of place. 'We begin by thinking like archaeologists might do', he wrote, 'metaphorically prodding the ground, searching for traces of what made it the way it is and sifting to unearth clues to inspire its further transformation. Our ambition is to build something completely new that feels like it was already there before we started, as if we had discovered the scheme rather than designed it'.

One of the options considered was to demolish the Brothers' bleak building. However, at a series of public meetings the community decided that it should be kept. It was felt important to retain aspects of each different layer of the site's history. Nonetheless, the first move was to strip the school of some of its forbidding formality. The once rigidly straight path leading from the village to the front door is gone, replaced now by a softer, more circuitous approach. Later, the axial entrance porch will be demolished and the front door moved to one of the gable-fronted ends.

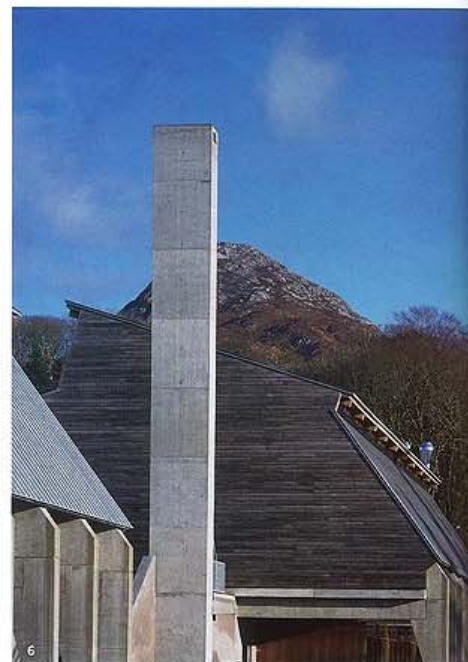
'We want to let some air through the building,' says Tuomey. 'Memories linger in staircases and corridors. So our plan is to

take them all out, together with the internal partitions' (Fig 9).

The old school will be reduced to a structural shell and opened up to its surroundings.

Window cills will be lowered to let people look out. The grim exercise yard, echoing with neglect, will become an academic garden, overlooked by the library and cafeteria (Fig 3).

This metamorphosis will be central to the next phase of the works at Connemara West, due for completion in 2005. Student numbers will increase from 100 to 240 over the period. The work of the past few years has been mostly new-



build. But already the old school is not as dominant. Drawn into a greater whole and having an altered relationship with the village, it is beginning to acquire a kind of anonymity in the dramatic landscape dominated by Diamond Hill, westernmost of the Twelve Bens.

Nature seems big in Letterfrack, and so is the spirit behind this complex. Starting over. There are echoes of another West in the timber-framed, bog-brown sidings of the barns that form the new entrance courtyard. The American frontier towns of the pioneers. High Noon. Mad Max meets the Missions. O'Donnell and Tuomey's buildings always possess character. Pulled forward of the school and bent over—like Connemara trees—Tuomey says the part-concrete, part-timber workshops, 'lean away from the wind and towards the complex. They lean north to let the light in'.

The workshops and the machine hall beyond them are among the most interesting sheds around, harking back to Germany in the early 1920s, to Hugo Häring's Gur Gerkau farm buildings near Lübeck and to Erich Mendelsohn's Steinberg Herrmann hat factory at Luckenwalde. That was a time of new building types, before the clarification of modern movement orthodoxy, a time when the search for an identifiable mode of expression in modern architecture was linked to a curious overlaying of symbolism. Rising out of the black bog below and resting on a ground beam against the hard shoulder of better land, the giant concrete piers of the workshops and machine hall appear as the willing haunches of



At Letterfrack, all superfluous detail has been stripped away by the leading architects of their generation to produce an architecture more direct than anything seen before in Ireland.

powerful beasts of burden (Fig 6). Yet the heavily articulated joints in the concrete legs lend a hard, mechanistic edge to this reading. The freestanding, concrete chimney possesses a cold heart.

O'Donnell and Tuomey have operated in this territory many times before. Tuomey calls it 'the emotional charging of space, the question of character in architecture'. It is central to their work. Ten years ago, in an interview about their Irish Pavilion, originally built for an exhibition in The Netherlands and subsequently re-erected in the courtyard of the Royal Hospital, Kilmainham, to mark the opening of IMMA, they described setting out to provoke an emotional response with their work: 'We work with associations, seeking something that might be evocative. So you are in a territory that is open to interpretation ...'.

Many connections can be made between Letterfrack and the Irish pavilion, built to heighten the experience of viewing Brian Maguire's prison paintings. That was an uneasy, disquieting, psychological space, one with a troubling emotional quality. Here, the concrete, 'charnel-house' chimney rising out of the black bog below may act as a kind of emotional lightning conductor (Fig 9).

The timber structure, the cross-braced frame containing a stairs, the red-oxide steel, the tin shed in the landscape, all these motifs first emerged in the Irish pavilion (1990-91). Gradually, this language was developed and added to at Blackwood Golf Centre, Clanclooney (1992-94), where, in addition, small metal-clad boxes burst out through the walls of the building. The big roofs, bent as if by Atlantic gales, are a faint echo of Tuomey's laboratory at Abbotstown (1981-85). From the un-built UCC satellite campus (1995-99), on the site of a Magdalen laundry, comes the courtyard with its diagonal disruption and of course, the chimney.²

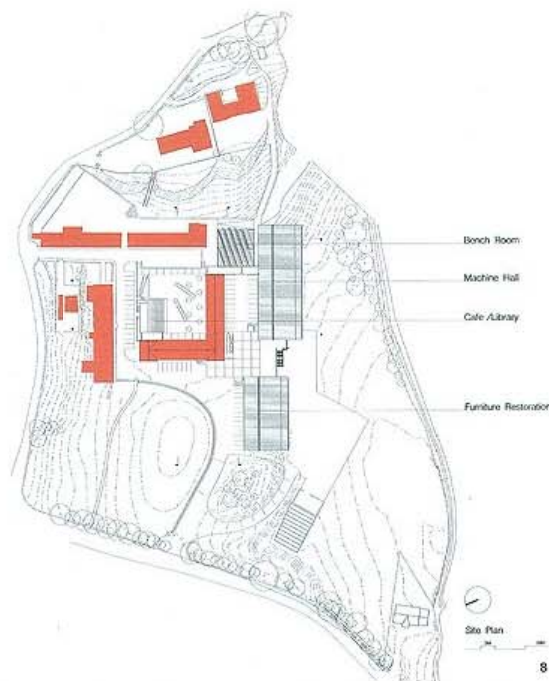
There are echoes, too, in the giant concrete piers of the timber workshops and machine hall, of James Stirling's pilotis legs for Queen's College, Oxford, a project quoted by Tuomey in his degree thesis a quarter of a century ago,³ before both he and Sheila O'Donnell went to work for Big Jim. The bench-room roof recalls Stirling and Gowan's Leicester University engineering building, designed with Frank Newby, for whom Chris Southgate, Letterfrack's engineer, once worked (Fig 2). According to Tuomey, 'All our lives we want to build Leicester, every chance

7 Northlight bench work room.

5 Part elevation of the green oak-clad library.

6 Machine Hall buildings and chimney from below with Diamond Hill





8 Site plan with existing buildings marked orange — the L-shaped building is St Joseph's, 1887.

9 (Opposite) Stair link with view to exterior.

we get!⁹ But the square room, with its north-lights angled to the meridian (Fig 7), is something we have seen from O'Donnell and Tuomey before, in their 1977 entry for the IDA competition for an advance factory in Roundstone, also in Galway.¹⁰ It connects.

Nobody in Irish architecture makes connections quite like O'Donnell and Tuomey. But then they learned at the feet of the master, James Stirling, who, with his lecture to the 2nd Iran International Congress of Architecture in Persepolis in 1974, reopened such possibilities for architecture. Their work as architects has as much to do with process and thinking, as it has to do with objects and building. About twenty years ago, O'Donnell and Tuomey called their competition entry for a suburban housing

project in the flat plains of Kildare, *Urbs in Ruris*. Recalling Stirling's 1978 Roma *Interrotta* project, a revision to the Nolli plan of Rome, described in AD as 'a triumph of modernism and self',¹¹ perhaps what we are seeing here, is the beginning of a gradual evolution or revision of Letterfrack itself. A kind of Connemara *Interrotta*, where the entire oeuvre of the leading architects of their generation, both built and unbuilt, can inform the reconfiguration of the town. Time will tell.

To date at Letterfrack, all superfluous detail has been stripped away to produce architecture more direct than anything seen before in Ireland (Fig 2). Tiny slits of shielded light are admitted where the roofs change pitch. Internal wall and ceiling linings are sheets of orientated strand board or birch-faced plywood, simply butted together. Externally, there are no fascias, soffits or even gutters except at entrances, which are protected by short lengths of large, clip-on box guttering, left open at one end to form a water spout. Materials have been chosen for their affinity with the harsh landscape (Fig 4). Stones from the nearby beach inspired the unpainted, heather-pink lime render. Steel is painted rust-primer red. Weathered green-oak

sittings are dun bog brown like the side of the mountain.

Yet, for all its expressive power, for all of the undoubted character this place exudes in abundance, one feels a profound absence, particularly in the empty library (Fig 5), its lid raised to look at the mountain—in the weight of the concrete trestles, in the surreal way the timber-lined walls and ceiling merge, in the blood-red steel. Boys who died here were buried in the hill above, in unmarked graves. It seems right to pause a while in this place, to remember and reflect, before moving on.

Over the next five years, the magnificent sheds will be extended. In an echo of the pioneering Ellises, the village will be enlarged to provide new housing. And, in what Tuomey describes as the 'unspoken part of the brief', the lingering melancholy that dogged the school will be exorcised. 'We don't want to leave ghosts in the old building,' he says. 'We have to take the old building with us.' ■

Shane O'Toole is company architect with Tegal and writes for the Sunday Times. He has been awarded the Grand Prix at the 1989 Krakow Biennale; the Architectural Association of Ireland's Downes Medal 1996 and the International Union of Architects' Sir Patrick Abercrombie Prize 2002.

Acknowledgements: Photography: Dennis Gilbert/VIEW
Black & White photography: Ros Kavanagh.

1 This extract from 'Letterfrack Industrial School', is taken from Richard Murphy, *Collected Poems* (Gallery Books, Oldcastle, 2000). The poem was originally published in his collection, *The Price of Stone* (1985).
2 Joan Johnson, *James & Mary Ellis: Background and Quaker Famine Relief in Letterfrack* (Historical Committee of the Religious Society of Friends in Ireland, Dublin, 2000).
3 Patricia Heanue, Kathleen Nee and Bob Charlton, 'Letterfrack and St Joseph's Industrial School', in *Hidden Connemara*, edited by Erin Gibbons (Connemara West Press, Letterfrack, 1991).
4 John Tuomey, 'Reading the Site: Thinking, Teaching and Practice About Place', *Building Material* #4 Architectural Association of Ireland,

Dublin, Autumn 2000).
5 Brian Maguire, Sheila O'Donnell and John Tuomey in conversation with Shane O'Toole, *Works 8: The Irish Pavilion*, edited by John O'Regan (Gandon Editions, Dublin, 1992).
6 Shane O'Toole, 'Review of the Irish Pavilion', *9H No.9 On Continuity*, edited by Rosamund Diamond and Wilfred Wang (Cambridge Massachusetts, 1995).
7 See O'Donnell and Tuomey, *Buildings and Projects, 1981-1988* (Gandon Editions, Dublin, 1988) and *Profile 1 - O'Donnell and Tuomey* (Gandon Editions, Kinsale, 1997).
8 Illustrated in *Traditions & Directions: The Evolution of Irish Architecture*, edited by Yvonne Farrell, Michael de Courcy, Sharon O'Grady and David Spillane (Dublin, 1990).

9 Lecture at Kyoto University of Art and Design, Japan, June 4, 2002. O'Donnell and Tuomey represented Ireland in June at the second edition of the EU-Japan joint project, 'New Trends of Architecture in Europe and Japan', curated by Toyo Ito, Alejandro Zaera-Polo and Bob Van Reeth. The Letterfrack project formed the basis of their contribution to the Tokyo exhibition and symposium, which will travel to Salamanca, Belgium and Bordeaux during the next six months.
10 Illustrated in *Figurative Architecture: The Work of Five Dublin Architects* (Architectural Association, London, 1986).
11 'Roma Interrotta', edited by Michael Graves, in *AD Profile* 20, *Architectural Design*, Vol 49 #3-4 (London, 1979).

