



# Space

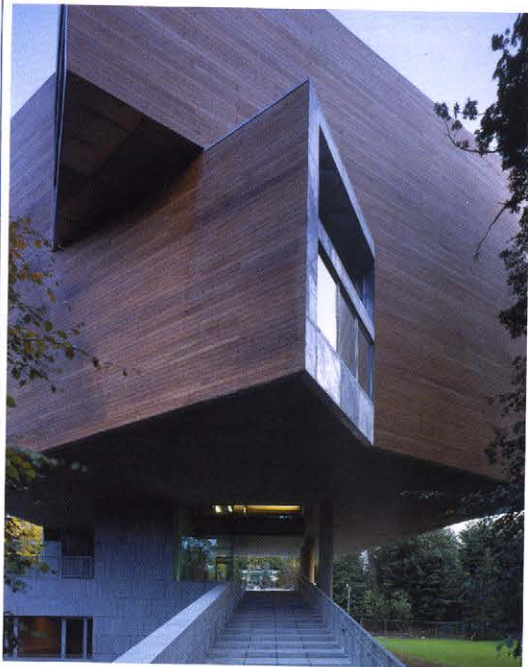
## Architecture for Art

**including a directory of arts spaces in Ireland**

Preface by **Brian O'Doherty**

Edited by **Gemma Tipton**





O'Donnell + Tuomey, Lewis Glucksman Gallery, 2004, photo Dennis Gilbert/VIEW

## In Terms of Site

by Peter Murray

<sup>1</sup>While Limerick and Galway have successfully adapted spaces in existing buildings, University College Dublin has no art gallery. Trinity College Dublin, not one of the constituent colleges of the National University, commissioned the Douglas Hyde Gallery (within the Ahrends Burton Koralek arts building), in 1979.

The Lewis Glucksman Gallery, within the grounds of University College Cork, is set in a highly sensitive site. Until its construction (2003/04), the Lower Grounds of the University, a linear park stretching alongside the River Lee, had never before been built upon. Overlooking these Lower Grounds, the grey Neo-Gothic outlines of Sir Thomas Deane's 1849 quadrangle and Aula Maxima provide a romantic image of a university; dreaming spires rising over a sylvan setting of fields, trees and a riverside walk. The notion of placing a large new modernist building in this hallowed ground was strongly contested, but under college President Gerard Wrixon the project has been carried through successfully, from fund-raising to completion. Cork is now the first of constituent colleges of the National Universities of Ireland to have its own purpose-built art gallery.<sup>1</sup>

Sheila O'Donnell and John Tuomey, the architects of the Glucksman Gallery, have already designed a number of buildings in Ireland for art and cultural activities. Their first essay was a red-painted structure, a temporary gallery made of galvanized iron and wood. Resembling something between a barn and a medieval siege machine, it housed paintings by Brian Maguire and greatly enlivened the courtyard of the Irish Museum of Modern Art during its inauguration year in 1991. While other cultural buildings in Temple Bar, such as the ArtHouse or the DesignYard<sup>2</sup>, have floundered, O'Donnell + Tuomey's award-winning Gallery of Photography (1996) continues to function well, as does their nearby Irish Film Centre (1992). While this may be attributable to programming, the buildings are well-

<sup>2</sup>ArtHouse (1996) Group 91 / Shay Cleary Architects, DesignYard (1996) Felim Dunne & Associates / Robinson Keefe Devane Architects.

designed and people clearly enjoy the experience of visiting them. Another project, the furniture-making college at Letterfrack in Co. Galway (2001), shows their ease with working with wood in a modernist idiom. Although described as modernist, or rationalist, their architecture has more complex roots, and thought goes into uncovering the history of buildings that they adapt, or into exploring the history and environment of sites where they are commissioned to build from scratch. The history of the Industrial School at Letterfrack, and the bleak experiences of many of the young people confined in such institutions, have invested the O'Donnell + Tuomey building with a redemptive character. Its design expresses a generally-held wish in Connemara and throughout Ireland to look forward to a better future.

Unlike many of their architectural peers, who seek inspiration in Los Angeles or Milan, O'Donnell + Tuomey have spent a great deal of time looking at the essential characteristics of older types of Irish buildings, including farm buildings, handball alleys and old castles. Their study of 16th century tower-houses has informed many of their late 20<sup>th</sup> century Modernist designs, in particular the way in which narrow, almost cramped, staircases open out suddenly into large spaces, passageways lead to wardrobe-type rooms, and the sense of being in the building is highly experiential, in terms of textures, spaces and viewpoints. At the core of their design for the Glucksman Gallery is a simple, robust structure, a rectangular core that can be 'read' as a late-Medieval tower-house. Inside this core are staircases, a lift and other services. Made of reinforced concrete, with all forms and surfaces meeting at right angles, the central tower is clad externally in Irish limestone and is seven storeys in height. The narrow slabs of stone cladding are held in place using the Fisher system, hung with 6mm gaps on hidden metal rails. While the horizontal gaps are in a straight line, the vertical gaps are staggered, almost at random, evoking a form of musical notation. The opacity of the limestone is offset by translucent glass windows on either side.

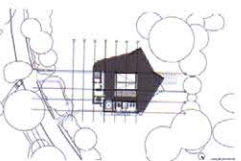
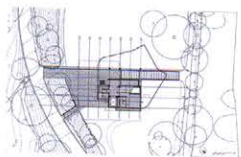
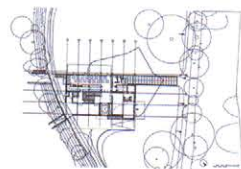
Wrapped around this tower, about ten metres above the entrance level, is a steel and wood cantilevered structure that also extends outwards over the forecourt and entrance area for ten metres. This massive structure is supported by seven cylindrical concrete columns, all but one of which are contained within the plan of the smaller ground floor. The effect of the overhang, or cantilever, is dramatic. It provides shade and shelter for a large area of ground underneath. Its plain underside is enlivened through the addition of mica chips into the concrete mix: they sparkle as they reflect light from inside the building. If the core can be read as a tower-house, the cantilever, clad in unvarnished ship-lapped American oak (called Angelina di Campigna), echoes the wooden houses attached to stone castles in Medieval times. Contained within this structure are the three main exhibition galleries. Two are wrapped around the central core, while a third smaller gallery, at a mezzanine level, is contained within the core. This is referred to as the 'closed control' gallery, and is designed for exhibitions of particularly valuable or delicate artworks. A media room alongside, serves the needs of video and computer-based art. A clever touch is a narrow vertical slot high on the wall of the closed control gallery, through which videos and films can be projected onto the white wall opposite.

The gallery flooring is white oak, cut into narrow strips with a bandsaw, the strips then glued together in a random pattern, with the sawn edges uppermost. Underneath this wooden floor are concealed massive concrete beams supporting the cantilever. The double-height gallery walls curve gently as they wrap around the rectangular central core, giving the internal gallery spaces some interesting moments for those installing exhibitions. In addition, large rectangular windows on both main gallery levels jut outwards at an angle



[above:] O'Donnell + Tuomey, from top: interior, *The Irish pavilion* at IMMA, 1991, photo John Searle; Furniture College, Letterfrack, 2003, photo Dennis Gilbert/VIEW; Irish Film Institute, Temple Bar, Dublin, 1996; [overleaf:] Lewis Glucksman Gallery, 2004, photo Dennis Gilbert/VIEW





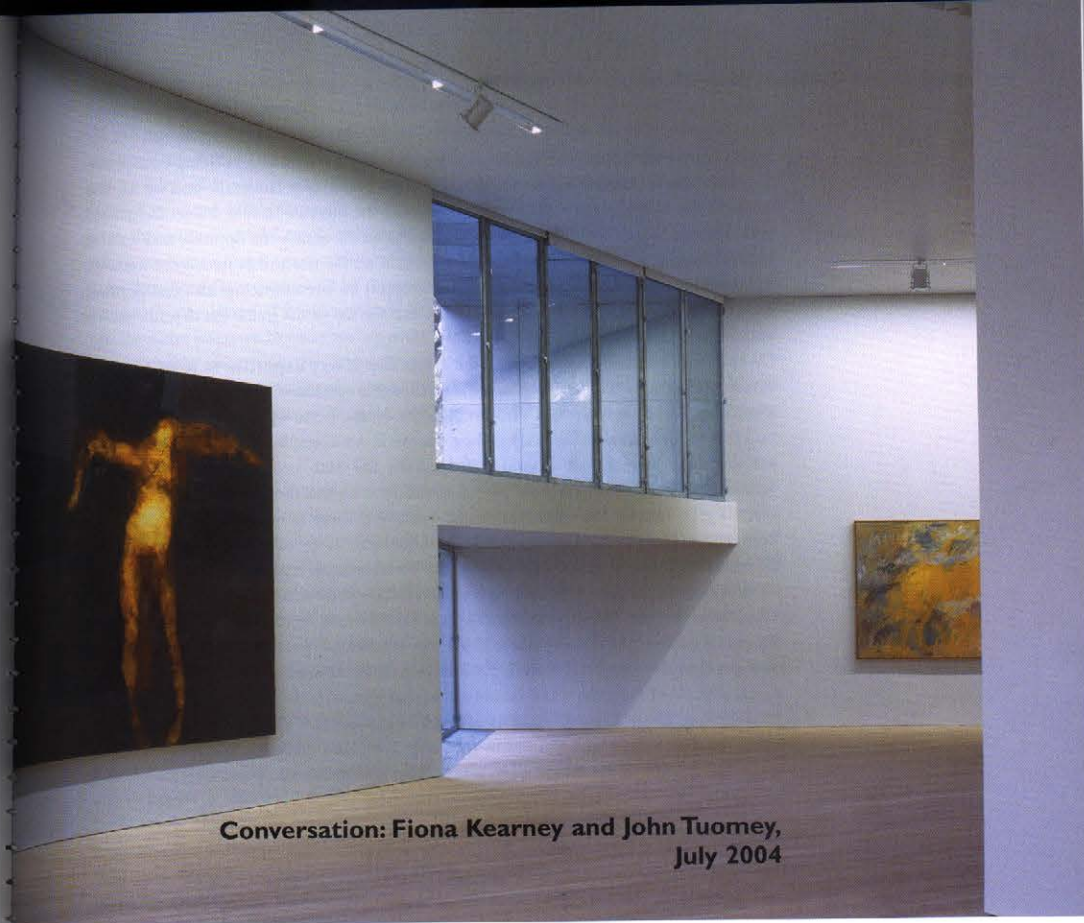
O'Donnell + Tuomey, from top: floor plans for Lewis Glucksman Gallery, ground, to second floor, 2004, courtesy the architects

from the lines of the timber-clad walls, framing breath-taking views of the old Aula Maxima, the steeples of William Burges' St. Finbarr's Cathedral, and the minaret-like St. Anne's Shandon. Above this are another two levels, the top-most being reserved for the plant room that services the building.

The simplicity of the Glucksman Gallery design, which echoes in some ways the brutal strength of the Whitney overhang, is tempered by the architects' introduction of a Rubik Cube concept to the building at several points. The elevation of the building as seen from the south, where the main ramp leads to the entrance, suggests two interlocked elements, while the plan of the upper main gallery with its two vista windows, reveals that it has been turned anti-clockwise through 20 degrees in relation to the floor space below it, as if seeking a better vantage point to view the surrounding hills and steeples of Cork city.

The Gallery has been designed with a high degree of sensitivity to its surroundings. In addition to its primary role as an art gallery, it serves as fulcrum, viewing point, a crossroads, a place for eating and meeting. Although a big building, it has been erected without disturbing nearby trees, the branches of a mature evergreen oak brushing against the timber cladding, twenty metres above ground level. Mooted by Wrixon as a building that would blend discreetly into its surroundings, the Glucksman Gallery is in reality something of a sleeping giant. The two gallery levels, nominally the second and third floors, are in fact at levels four and five. The first floor, with its forecourt, is actually level three. It contains the main entrance and a showcase area, where works of art are visible behind glass to passers-by. Below this are two levels containing restaurant, corporate dining area, kitchen, storage and deliveries. The first impression on seeing the Gallery is one of its substantial physical presence as a building. It is not discreet, but again echoing the stark simplicity of Medieval architecture, it asserts its presence in the landscape without undue showiness or frivolity. Much consideration has been given to allowing the building to settle into its surroundings, with the landscaped green areas of the Lower Grounds becoming vistas to be viewed through plate glass, and sites where open-air sculpture may be displayed. By way of compensation, the Gallery will attract more use by students, staff and visitors of the Lower Grounds and the riverside walk. Future plans aim to provide for a pedestrian footbridge over the branch of the River Lee, allowing access to the Gallery, and thence the main college buildings, from the University's swimming pool and running tracks at the Mardyke. However, in the final analysis, it is how the exhibition spaces perform that will define the success of this building, and while these may be literally eccentric, they do provide an exciting and interesting context for many forms of art, both traditional and contemporary.

Architecturally, the Glucksman Gallery represents a break from the incipient and rather dull tendency towards a Neo-Celtic Revival that has defined the main campus at UCC in recent years. Clustered around the Honan Chapel is a variety of new buildings, generally Modernist but clad in stone and sporting mock pinnacles and battlements. The success of O'Donnell + Tuomey's design is that it avoids literal references to Medieval architecture, while retaining the spirit of the Norman tower-house. The Gallery provides badly-needed high-quality exhibition space for Cork, complementing the city centre municipal art gallery and providing a bridge between the orderliness of the university campus and the disorderly (but interesting) city.



Conversation: Fiona Kearney and John Tuomey, July 2004

Fiona Kearney: One of the challenges of creating this building was in addressing the attractive and historic riverside site of the University's lower grounds. It is a site with an important geographic location because it is situated just behind UCC's main gates. Yet this wooded area had become somewhat detached from the rest of campus life. I think one of the things that the Glucksman is going to achieve is a recuperation of that space back into the main University arena. Your building is a very considered response to these issues and the natural setting of the lower grounds.

John Tuomey: There are two aspects here. One is the process by which a building comes about, and the other is more internal to the discipline of architecture itself. In the case of process, that site had been earmarked for cultural use within the University since 1972. A previous masterplan indicated that the building should be low level, low profile and spreading over the ground of the site but we kind of reacted against that. For two reasons. One is that if you build horizontally across the site, you extinguish the very site that you have chosen to protect, so the sensitive approach isn't sensitive in that regard. And the other

All images: O'Donnell + Tuomey, Lewis Glucksman Gallery, 2004, all photos, Dennis Gilbert/VIEW



is that you would be left with the issue of always looking down on a building from above. The only way to resolve that would be to bury the building in landscape and we felt that symbolically that was the wrong way to represent the project. To fold it into the ground would be a self-cancelling move. So we decided to do absolutely the opposite and build as high as possible in order to minimize the footprint on the site and protect more trees. We did this without an architectural design; it was simply an environmental idea that minimal footprint means minimal damage: let's have it that the top of the tree is the absolute datum and nothing will be higher than a tree.

On the other point about site: one of the things that is very important to us in our practice, in our sense of critical practice, is the relationship of architecture to site. This is to say a landscape is not necessarily a site, but if the landscape is the site, somehow or other the building should reveal the site rather than remove it. An example that really appeals to me are the piers that are all around Ireland from the 19th century – like the pier in Roundstone. People walk on those piers without thinking that they are buildings, they walk out, they go out on the water and come back, and there is no hierarchical difference between the form of the pier and the form of the land. In my mind that is what architecture should be like. It is not that architecture should vanish into nature, but architecture should have that sense of belonging to place. When you walk onto the podium of the Glucksman you are meant to feel that you are on ground; to feel that the ground is the limestone escarpment that the whole University is based on, and that this ground will take you down to the river as if there is no building. Then elevated above that ground is the celestial world of the gallery, and carved out of that ground is the café below. So before you start looking for the door or thinking about it as a building, it's meant to register in your inner mind as form which belongs to the place. You don't think this is a lovely site, pity there is a building in the middle of it; you walk on and you see the place with the building as your frame.

I wonder if one of the ways the building is achieving this is through the very careful use of materials. There is a sense in which the craft of every single person working on the building was valued throughout. I think one of the great pleasures for me in being involved and on site for the last year has been to see the sense of pride that people have in their work, and this has come from the way in which the use of materials and craft have been valued.

First on the materials: the materials are fundamental to the building. I talk about it in terms of form, because our primary task is the responsibility for form, but that is a kind of abstract concept because nothing exists except in the physical world, and you have to use material and use material with meaning. So in the building there is a line above which there is no stone and below which there is no timber. That is highly selective and goes right down to the tiniest detail: the handrails change once you hit the gallery level and you are on the timber floor, they change from metal to wood. But in the basement they are metal, and they are the same handrails that are outdoors. Once you are indoors in the foyer or down on your way to the café, conceptually you are still outdoors. You are still in the normal world of campus life and you are in the actual stuff of the University itself, the limestone of the University, the landscape of the University. What we are hoping is that the moment you come to the top of this massive stone stair and there is just one stone threshold to deliver you on to the wooden floor, that the acoustic changes, the light changes, the open space

goes away and enclosure comes in and you have stepped up into a cloud, into a different environment. Use of material is crucial to creating that.

On the second part of the question: part of our training as architects, our college training and our professional training is to think of the building process as a contractual process, and to think of it as a hierarchical contractual process. Architects are trained and it is instilled in us not to talk to people on site. Every architect certainly of my generation, was given this attitude. And I completely reject that attitude. I rebel against that. Sheila and I talk to everyone on site, we compliment their work and we correct their work and we try to let them into the mystery and let them understand how their work is part of the larger picture. Our ambition, if it is possible, is to avoid all jargon and avoid all distance and to talk the same language to everyone we meet. They trust the trust I put in them, and if we have to change something, they know we are not changing it to be bloody-minded. I grew up on building sites. My father was a site engineer for John Paul building company. Maybe that schooldays experience is the thing that gives me the feeling of community that can exist on a building site.

I would like to come back to this idea of change and not changing things for the sake of it. Over the last couple of months of the process, we have made some changes to the building and I think the changes that we have made have been about trying to create the most flexible use of the space. One of the things that I admire about O'Donnell + Tuomey has been the willingness to see change as an opportunity, to discuss why we might need to alter a space. I'm thinking for instance of the very simple change we made on the upper floor where a bench became a desk. That was an important change for me because it meant respecting the scholarly reflective aspect of being a University gallery.

The thing about simplicity is that the building has to read utterly simply so that people will concentrate on the experience of the work, or even their own sense of a day out in the gallery, this the kind of space that galleries should provide in the mind. And perhaps some galleries don't do that because they surround you with clutter. On the other hand, if it were built simply as an empty white box, and if we then locked on that in our own minds as designers, that nothing touches the white box, then it would be a failure because it wouldn't be simple. It would be simple-minded. I think we worked hard, spending lots of time to make it look as if there is no effort in it at all. And the real content is how the complexities of new and rising requirements can be absorbed within the simplicity of a concept. And that is a test. It is probably a test of maturity, a test of the form, a test of the design. So when you say to me I need to change this, I have two reactions. One is 'oh fuck it, I don't want to change anything else ever again' and the other is 'oh good, another shake up' and there is a great feeling of what (and where) will this upset bring us. Usually if the atmosphere is right, and if the cooperation is right, it brings you to a better place.

I think the change I suggested, to get rid of a small office space to create a larger public area for the shop, is a fairly good example of that.

Yes, it improves the building.

So as well as creating a better retail and social environment, the introduction of light into that part of the building affects the experience of the space in a positive manner.

Also, from the podium there is only one peeled back bit of the timber that shows anything of the interior and that would have only shown an office. Now, standing on the podium, if



you see someone in the shop, you can say 'that could be me' or 'there I am'. You can actually move in before you go in. Or from the shop, you can look down to the podium and say 'that is where I came from'. Now, unless you had intervened, that wouldn't have happened. People would never have had that look back, look out. I really enjoy that now. I also enjoy the creative interaction between us.

Galleries are public spaces of social interaction and encounter, but also places of internal personal experience. They are both communal and private. One of the reasons the white cube has been so dominant is that it is seen to offer the perfect contemplative arena for the work of art. I think the hegemony of the white box in the 20th century has meant that architects have been reluctant to challenge this space other than radically, for instance in the brash statement of the Bilbao Guggenheim which only allows a particular kind of art to speak. I'm going to suggest that the Glucksman is proposing a very different kind of architecture. There are two white cube type galleries, the closed control areas at the heart of the building, but it is the curve that defines the building. One of the most fascinating things for me will be to see how people respond to those curves. It seems to me that these long curved walls offer a new kind of viewing, a viewing which is moving you rather than stopping you, which is less confrontational and more a movement back and forth, more an open conversation between the works, offering a greater number of viewing points within the space.

If the space is an arena for difference, that would be an achievement. There is definitely a gentle rotation in the form of the building that is meant to encourage both movement and pause. Both a sense of being located and being in a reserved contemplative space. I think we are greatly helped by the site. I think a lot of galleries concentrate completely on removal from place. And we took a step in this gallery, which you might remember was the subject of huge debate all the way through, which is to keep contact with the outside world. We are screened by the trees, we have views to the river, it is not a very distracting outside world but we were determined that the building would not close itself from the outside world. I suppose the building lets you know that its primary containment is internal, but it is as if it just burst out a little bit of its boundaries to allow the outside world in. I think that is really important to the character of it. I also think it is really important in galleries that you are not locked in a capsule of abstraction. That white cube space which is meant to be the most neutral, is actually intimidating. I think it is possible, and I hope it is going to be the experience of the gallery, that you can have both contemplative space, and a sense of contact. The emphasis is on the artwork but the real world is in the side of your eye. And we have tried to treat the windows not as aligned vista points but as kind of leakages. You know that the real world is there, it is not your primary attention, it is kind of placing you as you move to the next part of the gallery. A lot of galleries have valves to release gallery fatigue, so that you walk into a room that has a bay window. Or in Tate Modern, you walk, for example, out of the gallery and into a glass capsule that overhangs the public space. We wanted not to have that separation. We wanted the two worlds in one world. I hope that succeeds. It means you can have daylight in the galleries, it means you can see trees out the window, see the world outside and still be in the reserved atmosphere of the gallery space. That is the aspiration for it.

There are a number of spaces beyond the dedicated gallery areas that offer opportunities to artists. Buildings are now made with the knowledge of the different ways in which artists work, taking account of the history of art and the development of site-specific and installation practice. There are several areas in the Glucksman that beckon to artists in this way. How concerned were you to think of the whole building as a gallery?

It is not that this is a building, part of which is reserved for display. You don't enter the display zone at a certain point. We have tried all through the design development of the project to remind ourselves that this is an art gallery through and through, top to bottom. We worked very hard to keep that sense of free-flow because we think it is possible to imagine installations at every point in the building, on the half landing, round the corner in the showcase, hanging from the ceiling, halfway up the stairs. You don't have to put your gallery-going hat on the moment you hit the wooden floor; you should be able to feel you are in the gallery all the time. From a technical point, it hasn't been easy to keep that sense of openness. But it is crucial to the character of the project. It is the conceptual corkscrew that allows a vertical building to work, like a tree that you keep clambering up. It will be interesting to see how artists respond to that.

In privileging that concept of flow, you echo the natural site and the river that runs by the gallery, but also the intellectual currency and free-flow of ideas in the University. Perhaps, this is what distinguishes a University gallery from any other kind of visual arts institution, that it generates a flow between art and other academic disciplines. It is almost as if you have set the ethos of the building in that open movement. All too often the University is seen as an ivory tower, a closed haven of scholarly thought, and one of the intentions of the Glucksman is to act as a portal between UCC and the wider community. So the gallery has to cater for a very diverse range of audiences. How do you envision that plurality of viewers when you are working?

If the building doesn't work in more than one way, it doesn't work. There are different ways through the building and I think those kinds of complexities are the outcome of more than one mind at work. I think they are the outcome of an exchange. One of the advantages I have is that I have a partner. Sheila and I talk everything through. We are soulmates while being quite different. We think differently. You were talking about difference between users so I guess I'm thinking that there is an advantage to difference at the beginning too.

If now at the end of the process I close my eyes and think: what do I want? I probably want this building to make people feel optimistic. Maybe that is a ridiculously ambitious thing to say, but we are not lost in a gloom. The world is very unattractive in the current preoccupation with materialism and consumerism, and architecture is not helping if all it is doing is mirroring. So in my view, a garden still restores the mind, a cloister still slows down your heartbeat – and architecture still has a human purpose.

