

We both knew the place slightly, having driven through the village on our separate childhood holidays; the grey institution behind high gated railings, holding boys our own age, cast a temporary gloom over the occupants of the family car and left an indelible impression on the mind's eye. Arriving back in 1994 to meet the board of directors of Connemara West, much had changed; the railings were gone, a path led across the grass to the local pub, the building was open and in use by local people and staff and students of the furniture college. It was in a transitional stage. They were in occupation but they had not yet appropriated the buildings.

The coat of cream paint, with determinedly cheerful red details, only served to emphasise the forbidding character of the structure . . . Upperfloor drawing studios held memories of former use, dormitories with brown-stained boarding behind beamy trusses. The high ceilings of the ground-floor rooms seemed to have pulled the windows up with them so that they hung in the walls above eye-level, preventing views in or out, containing and enclosing the occupants.

The two architects spent much time getting to know the landscape's forms, textures and colours, and the community's needs, both practical and emotional. Demolition was an option soon ruled out; the fearful building had to be drawn into the village and go through the trauma of reconciliation, so that its clear and simple spaces could be cured of melancholy and adapted to house a productive future. And so, as well as designing the dramatic new buildings - machine hall, furniture restoration hall, library and cafeteria - that are now completed and in use, they formulated a second phase of development, a redemptive programme of subtraction for the old building. The secretive staircases and gloomy wainscoting were to be stripped out, the mean little central porch and the finial crosses removed and, in a profoundly symbolic deconstruction, the high windowsills cut down to floor level so that the building would be as open to its new forecourt and garden and the village green as what went on inside it should be to the local community.

The first-phase constructions have been well received - in fact

O'Donnell + Tuomey was chosen to represent Ireland at the Venice Architecture Biennale in 2004, and showed there an installation based on the project - but the second phase has never been implemented. My opportunity to find out why arose in 2007, when the two architects participated in a small conference in Folding Landscapes' studio in Roundstone and gave a public presentation of their Letterfrack work. Sheila and John are a well-matched couple, both being slim, dark and elegant, as well as being passionately dedicated to the creation of buildings not merely practical but beautiful and of metaphoric depth. Their presentation was in itself a work of art, almost dance-like as they alternated seamlessly between speaking and operating the projector; it had something of the traditional Irish form, the agallamh beirte, a dialogue, often between man and wife. That the project is unfinished was clearly a source of sadness to them as the symbolic power of the whole has not been fully revealed. When, some months later, I asked them to revisit Letterfrack with me and show me what had and what had not been done, they felt some reluctance, which I overrode in the interest of my book - and in fact I believe the experience was helpful to them as well as being indispensable to me in trying to decipher this palimpsest of a site. The new machine hall and restoration laboratory are quite simply the most dramatic buildings Connemara has seen since Kylemore Castle, and - but let me begin at the beginning, the approach from the village centre.

The old drive leading to the porch in the centre of the façade of the main building, which marched up to it as if under arrest with a constable on either side, is gone, replaced by a broad curve separating two levels of a lawn and opening into an informal space serving both the old building and the new ones to the right of it. Here the ground level steps down southwards by the height of a storey; the floors of the machine hall and restoration laboratory do not touch the ground but rest at one end on beams lying on the upper level and at the other on concrete pillars rising from the lower level. These pillars are like great haunches on which the buildings rise out of the ground below, and curve over to present a bowed back, in profile like the wind-shaped thorn trees of

Connemara, to the open land to the south, and come down, in a strikingly protective gesture, in stages, with intervals for ranges of north-facing windows, onto the level of the main building. Both are mainly of wood, as befits a woodworking college, with emphatic triangular geometries of trusses visible inside, and claddings of oak planks that give the exteriors slightly undulant and natural-looking skins. Sheila and John pointed out some subtleties of design: a tall rectangular-sectioned chimney rises from boiler houses on the lower level between the two new buildings, to exactly the height of the small chimneys on either end of the old building, and at exactly the same spacing as them, thus gently decentring the formidable symmetry of the old and subliminally attuning it to the new buildings. The original intention had been to let the boggy ground to the south, and indeed the woodland just beyond it, to continue in under the two new buildings, but instead a playing field has come into existence there, and the undercrofts behind the concrete pillars have found new uses: a range of small classrooms or offices has been inserted like a drawer into one of these spaces, and John and Sheila were surprised and pleased to find part of their Venice installation stored in the other.

The new library, with a cafeteria below it, looks onto the courtyard behind the main building; and here the departure from the O'Donnell + Tuomey design has been less acceptable. Their scheme was to detoxify this grim marshalling yard by laying it out, right up to the glass frontages of the cafeteria, as an 'academic garden'. However, temporary buildings have been installed in it, and concrete pavements have been laid down around it. Inside the main building too, I gather, ad hoc solutions to access and storage problems have been imposed, and since they work 'well enough' stand as obstacles to a deeper reformation of the interior spaces. I think what has happened, as the Galway Regional Technical College matured into the Galway Mayo Institute of Technology over the years, is that it has turned to its own resources in architecture and engineering, and so the final realization and perfecting of the O'Donnell + Tuomey scheme languishes in a financial and planning limbo.

Having examined these and other aspects of what could well be termed a complex, being so densely self-intricated in space and time, we climbed steps behind the main building, between a row of cottages dating from the Quaker times and the former Industrial School workshops, leading to the former monastery and the church, which was opened in 1925 and largely financed by the Brothers. The front garden of the hostel was full of tents, and its little courtyard had been given a temporary-looking roof and seemed to be crammed with armchairs and sofas on which international youth was resting momentarily from its worldwide drift; the atmosphere was drowsy, oriental - one expected opium pipes and hookahs - and wonderfully carefree. Not so the church: near the altar was a highly realistic bronze memorial showing three small lads scrambling happily on a climbing frame, entitled 'To the memory of the boys - if only', while the visitors' book was full of entries about the Industrial School, some of them long and deeply felt, some from former victims of the Brothers, some forgiving, or at least trusting in God to forgive.

Finally we visited the little cemetery in a clearing reached by a rocky path through the damp woodland over the road from the church, where there used to be just a cross with a large square pedestal bearing a long list of the names of the children who died while under the Christian Brothers' care. Now two lawns have been laid out in front of the cross, and an array of some eighty little heart-shaped inscribed stones at least give each child his own memorial space. But these are the ones that no process of reconciliation can touch. These are the dead.