O'Donnell + Tuomey's Sean O'Casey Community Centre building in Dublin is both simple and shocking, direct and subtle. Its unexpected tower sits up above the little coloured houses of the old dockland community of East Wall with animal alacrity - a gyroscope, perhaps, with its mass held out towards the river. These consume 'Irish nationalism' at O'Donnell + Tuomey often produce buildings with a powerful, elusive character of their own, but this one seems unusually floaty. You might think that building is about self-expression. But in many ways, it's entirely the opposite.

East Wall is three-quarters cut off by railway lines, with one big church and a school. Now, of course, it's the neighbour in the business district of the Docklands Development Authority, which has funded the replacement for the school which once occupied the site. As members of children本领, the previous building was gradually converted to community use and regularly staged performances of the tragic-comic plays of Sean O'Casey. East Wall's most famous son, explains John Tuomey. They said, "Everyone else has gone out?" That was, maybe, the first of the paradoxes which make this community building what it is. The residents wanted that tower to be right there (to work), but all the usual calls for a ground-floor clubs, the care, the social, sports and theatre. As the architects made the building a single-storey square, but with its square edge flipped up to make the tower. The bits that are usually the dullest - offices, meeting rooms - get to go in it. But there's a more fundamental paradox. The brief had the ingredients of a wonderful, open, social community building: a mix of new-old people and young, day and night. But in the reigniting sensibility, there were two strict categories of use - separate.

Old people are one, in the present culture, allowed to mix with pre-school children, or even remain them being cared for. People going to the theatre and people playing sports are thought of as different. This whole substance of O'Donnell + Tuomey's building, while sublimating these concerns as a working necessity, utterly oversteps them both in how the building feels now, and in how it might come to work in the future. So while obeying all the current rules, the building promotes, and in some visual ways works, as though it was already in a more cooperative, less probabilistic world. A 'city of all before places,' says Tuomey. It is further designed so that with the slightest of changes - the old wall to come down or be glazed - that idea might come fully into being, perhaps even by accident.

It's a brilliant, ingenious architectural idealism, whose guerrilla tactics can only really be spotted in that beautiful plan. It is square, but only if you include the penthouse as part of the building. It is divided into four, but those divisions - transparent, casual and arbitrary - are far less important than the geometry that binds them together and opening spaces across them. The square shapes are dropped, slanted and out of line with their lines. Gardens. Views - the things you actually look for - making visual and spatial gradations between now supposed to be segregated. Meanwhile the building elements that express divisions or structure the plan out architecture seems to be more potentially do all they can to utterly disappear.

But as someone using it, the building is just dead simple. The old people happen to be sitting by the entrance, rather than tucked away out of sight. Although the building is very deep, you are always looking through gardens and out the other side. You might be old (and so banned from getting near young children), but you can still see kids playing in their garden, or coming in and out. Or you yourself come to play five-a-side football. Or somebody's rehearsing a play. There's no problems with this: it's clear, simple, very human - and (almost) all of it is the...
THE BUILDING PROMOTES, AND IN SOME VISUAL WAYS WORKS, AS THOUGH IT WAS ALREADY IN A MORE COOPERATIVE, LESS PARANOID WORLD

plan. A very good place to foment a little invisible social revolution.

The tower (which formally opens the front up like a drawbridge) is an innovation in the sense that it is a new kind of residential architecture. It is a kind of ambiguous billboard in a community garden, a strange new friend for its terraced neighbours, a sign for the city beyond the towers. As one rises, it is poetic and partly wild, an echo of the concrete slabs in the deck where many of the people who live here used to work. In another, it is as part as a fifty-year-old street kid, it's made of stamped, corrugated-concrete, the provisioned language of the community-building era, permanent with (sustainable) care. And it's punched with holes, which Tunney refuses to call windows ("It's a tower without windows," he insists). It looks incredibly simple, but it's really hard to do. The holes come in 300mm (bed-sized), 600mm and 1500mm (room-sized) modules.

It's surprisingly hard, says Tunney, to stop them forming lines that bubble freedom is carefully achieved. That's combined with corrugated cladding, giving a strong sense of balance. The work of Peter Zumthor (winner of the Pritzker Prize-winner) that wonderful, frail window edge. The contrar, naturally, wanted to use rough, but the architects refused - they wanted something more substantial. Real corrugated cladding (daywork joints at corrugated sheet-length) we did.

Some of the holes were harder than others, throwing the concrete vibrator through the reinforcement in areas near an edge was a nightmare, and an attempt to get round the problem via hole expansion disrupted the casual pattern and had to be taken down and re-done. Then, the pressure-washer used to achieve a velvety finish on the concrete would have ruined the corrugated profile, so the contractors very carefully hand-plastered it. Elsewhere in the building, there's a pigeon loft, whose requirement for non-tank water caused almost as many problems. This is clearly a wonderful building for obsessive bubble artists and reconnoitres.

There's a lot more architectural significance in the way the building manages to feel in scale. You use that design once in this like it's a door standing open, without thinking about the geometry. You wouldn't know the garden you're crossing belongs to the theatre, but presumably, all your guests will. And the gate screening the perimeter can open all the way to its full extent. This last isn't happening yet, but the building, generous now, is also lying in wait for a more open-minded future. The security desk, as you come in, is just on the right side of the four squares. Your view has already slipped beyond it, official (there is one office) through the children's garden and one other side. The security boundaries are there, but you're looking straight through them, moving casually past; instead noticing things belonging to better cultures. That central axis in glass joining the two, the most component of all architectural divisions. And there's a cafe waiting casually, at the side of the foyer between the old and the new, for those paranoid boundaries to come down.

Yet each quadrant has its own character. The volumes, geometry, materials, orientation, aspect, prospect, are all varied. The theatre, lined in plywood, opens out towards the foyer with a deep wall housing technical and other systems, and big south-east windows. The sports hall, lined in Bakeroad, runs across the building with a clerestory windows to north-east, west to south-west. The day room is a long, to the side of the theatre, with a lobby (day room). The north, hidden behind it, is a miniature school corridor, neatly tiled, ready for a whole new cycle.
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