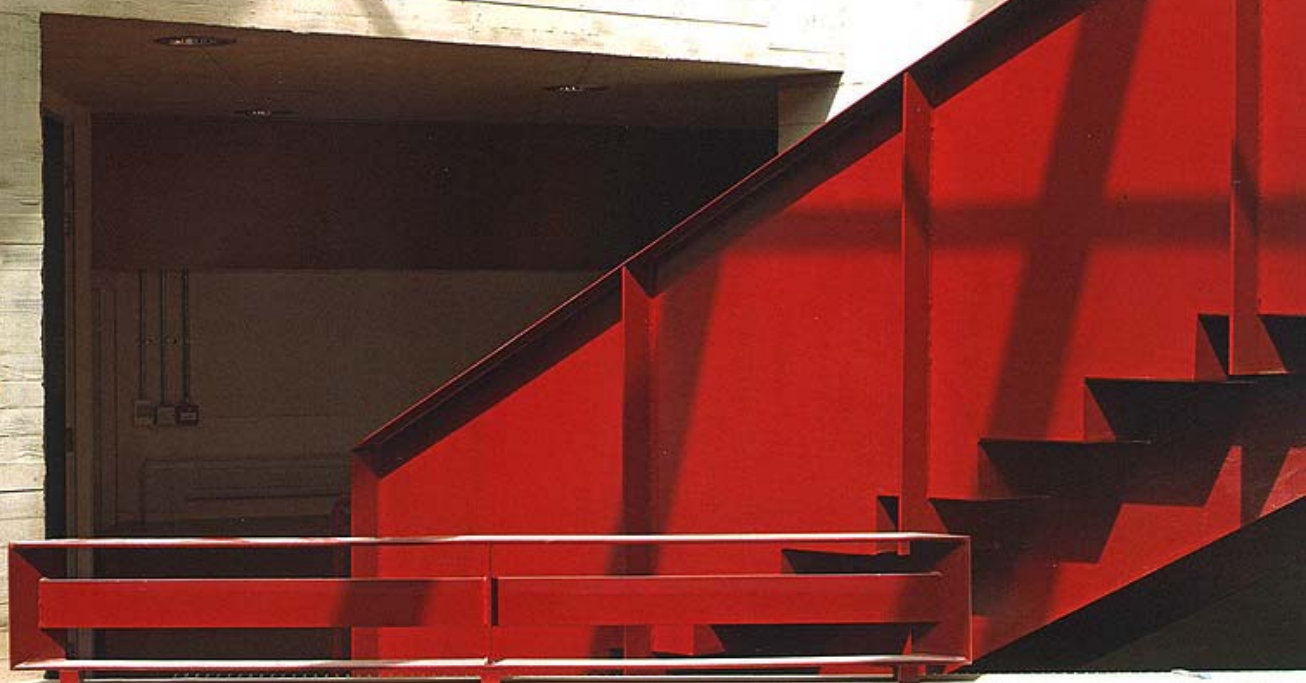


PERSPECTIVE

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IRISH LANGUAGE
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Royal Society of
Urban Architects

THE TIMES THEY ARE A CHANGING ...

The official opening of the eagerly anticipated Cultúrlann Uí Chánáin in Derry's Great James Street was a spectacular, razzamatazz affair. Stiltwalkers graced the ground floor of its dramatic central space, immediately changing its scale, and the angular rooflight came into its own in a way unimagined by the architects or structural engineers. Gymnasts suspended on twisted sheets slung from its steel structure unfurled themselves through three storeys onto the terrazzo floor below in sync to the rhythm of Derry saxophonist Gerard McCrystal. Those embarking on a voyage of discovery caught McCrystal's resonant notes soaring skywards as they emerged onto gantries and balconies.

Politicians, funders, staff, builders, architects, and client representatives mingled with others for whom Cultúrlann will be a welcoming place for all to eat, dance, sing and chat in Irish. The celebration, a mix of traditional and contemporary Irish cultural expression - organised by visionaries Eileen O'Doherty and her late husband Kevin (who was, sadly, too ill to attend on the night) - was the culmination of a long, and no doubt at times, tortuous process that has resulted in a unique building, easily the most innovative built in the city for many decades.

The site, previously the premises of McDaid's Bakery, lies just inside the Clarendon Street Conservation Area. It has one 15m public street frontage roughly equivalent in width to 2-2½ townhouses.

Very little remains of the original Georgian and Victorian terrace that ran between Lower Road and Little James Street. Mostly rebuilt over the last twenty to thirty years a former Georgian Manse stands as a historic bookend to the upper section of the terrace, now a motley collection of unremarkable infill development. With all this redevelopment activity it is amazing that the other side of the street managed to survive largely unscathed.

From the late '60s until the early '90s inner city Derry was caught up in the unrest caused by the Troubles. The mantra 'Business as Usual' drove an imperative to achieve the hasty repair and reconstruction of devastated commercial properties. The enormous difficulties presented by the political and social instability as well as the city's weak economy cannot be overstated and impacted negatively on its development culture for decades.

Forty years on, with the advent of peace, the time and head space needed to initiate a more considered renewal of the most damaged parts of this unique, and once intact, historic city have just become available. It is within this changing context that Cultúrlann Uí Chánáin has emerged like a phoenix from the ashes.

This fascinating building reveals itself in snippets. Walkers heading through Brooke Park from Marlborough Street can just about pick out its triangular roof light above the chimney pots of Sydney Terrace. The next sighting from the corner of ►

THE TEAM

Client / An Gaelaras

Architects / O'Donnell + Tuomey Architects,
John Tuomey (Partner) Sheila O'Donnell (Partner)
Willie Carey (Associate)
Anne-Louise Duignan (Project architect)

Structural / Albert Fry Associates

Mech & Elec / IN2 Engineering

Quantity Surveyor / Sammon Chartered Surveyors

Main Contractor / JPM Contracts

Photography / Alice Clancy and Dennis Gilbert

Right / View from courtyard towards entrance.
Photo by Dennis Gilbert





Above / View from Queen Street. Photo by Dennis Gilbert

► Princes Street and Sydney Terrace reveals what appear to be two very blank, plain, grey, narrow fronted town house facades sandwiched between their neighbours. Their parapet lines step uphill to align with the adjoining neighbours' eaves. These respect and maintain a distinctive character pattern, evident in so many of the city's hilly terraces. Vibrant yellow frames - inspired by the mustard of the builder's scaffolding poles - the only thing that might provoke a double take.

Wandering on down the street the eye's view is arrested by the kaleidoscopic stepped streetscape opposite, mirrored in the first floor windows. The two simple concrete facades take their place in the unfolding eclectic streetscape as layer after layer of projecting gable and frontage reveal themselves beyond.

A look uphill from Lower Great James Street reveals the opposite sides of what turn out to be vertical pleats like a cast concrete concertina. A giant purpley-blue L painted on one section of the Cultúrlann's concrete façade echoes the painted plaster base across the street and provides a contrasting backdrop to the hand painted signage - a clever reinterpretation of this common element in traditional shop fronts.

The most dramatic view is from Queen Street. Propped up by its Georgian bookend and framed by No1 Queen Street only half of Cultúrlann's wide frontage is revealed. All three storeys crowned by the asymmetrical yellow framed roof light combine to present a funky composition that adds a great visual energy and dynamism to the surrounding, stately and intact, Georgian context. Completely of its time Cultúrlann has an architectural quality, integrity and inventiveness that holds its own positively. Thanks to the skill with which its size, scale, massing and colour have been handled it respects and integrates extremely well into the streetscape.



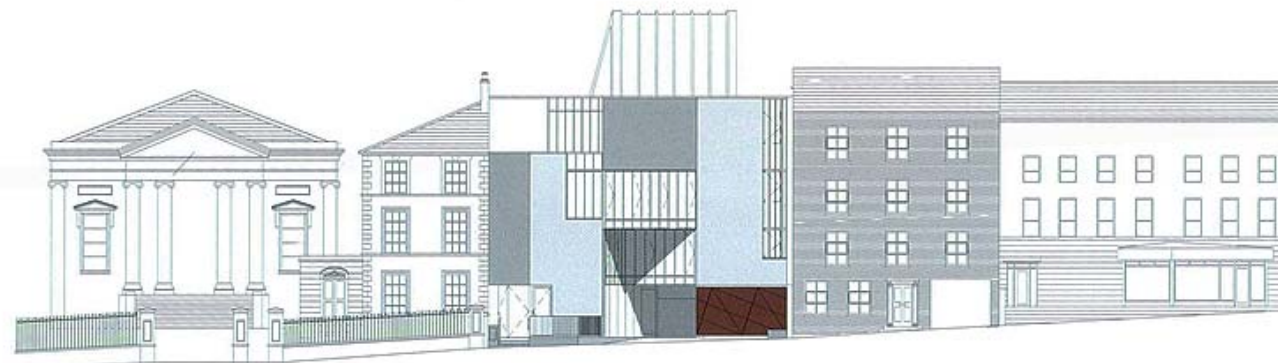
Above / Second floor teaching space. Photo by Dennis Gilbert

Left / Inner courtyard. Photo by Alice Clancy

Right / Internal detail. Photo by Alice Clancy



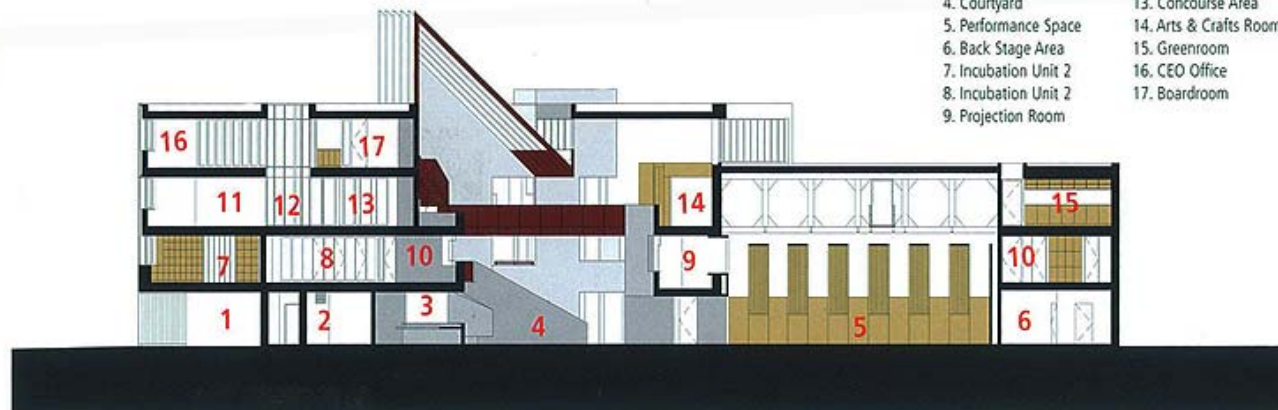
Above / Site Plan



Above / Great James Street elevation

Section A-A

- | | |
|----------------------|------------------------|
| 1. NIE Substation | 10. Changing / Lockers |
| 2. Kitchen | 11. Teaching Room 2 |
| 3. Cafe Servery | 12. External Courtyard |
| 4. Courtyard | 13. Concourse Area |
| 5. Performance Space | 14. Arts & Crafts Room |
| 6. Back Stage Area | 15. Greenroom |
| 7. Incubation Unit 2 | 16. CEO Office |
| 8. Incubation Unit 2 | 17. Boardroom |
| 9. Projection Room | |

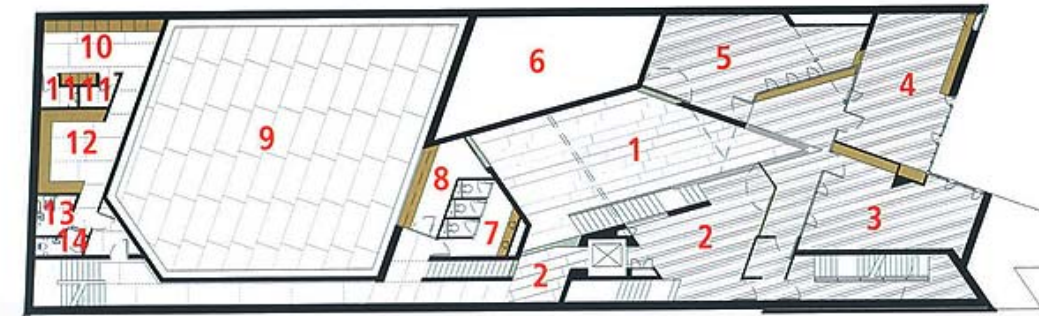


Above / Section A-A



Ground Floor Plan

- | | |
|-------------------|-----------------------|
| 1. Entrance | 8. Courtyard |
| 2. Shop | 9. Disabled WC |
| 3. Failteoir | 10. Female WC |
| 4. Kitchen | 11. Performance space |
| 5. NIE Substation | 12. Backstage |
| 6. Servery | 13. External Terrace |
| 7. Cafe | |



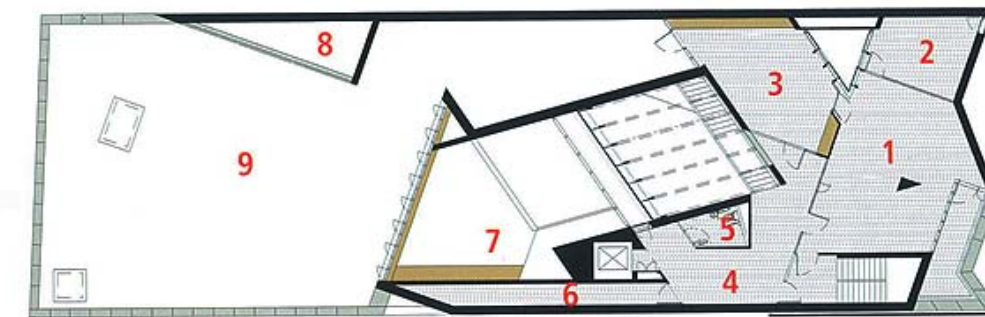
First Floor Plan

- | | |
|----------------------|----------------------|
| 1. Courtyard | 8. Projection Room |
| 2. Lobby | 9. Performance Space |
| 3. Incubation Unit 1 | 10. Changing/Lockers |
| 4. Incubation Unit 2 | 11. Shower |
| 5. Incubation Unit 3 | 12. Make-up room |
| 6. Void over cafe | 13. Disabled WC |
| 7. Male W.C | 14. WC |



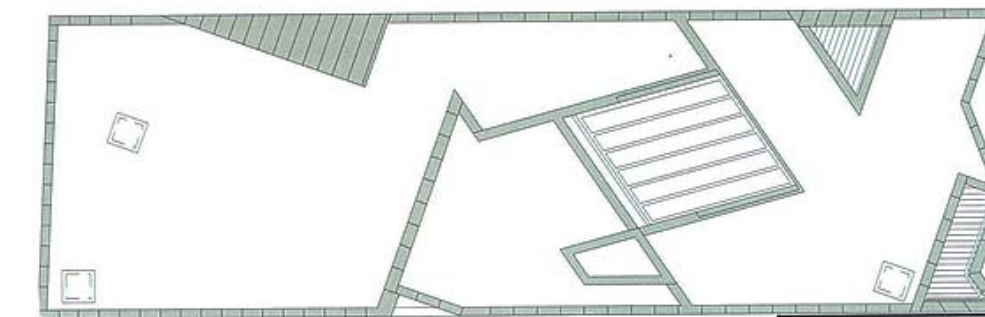
Second Floor Plan

- | | |
|-----------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1. Teaching Room 1 | 8. Performance Space ceiling void |
| 2. Teaching Room 2 | 9. Plant room |
| 3. Teaching Room 3 | 10. Green room |
| 4. External Courtyard | 11. Dimming room |
| 5. Arts & Crafts Room | 12. Cleaners store |
| 6. External Terrace | 13. W.C |
| 7. Staff room | |

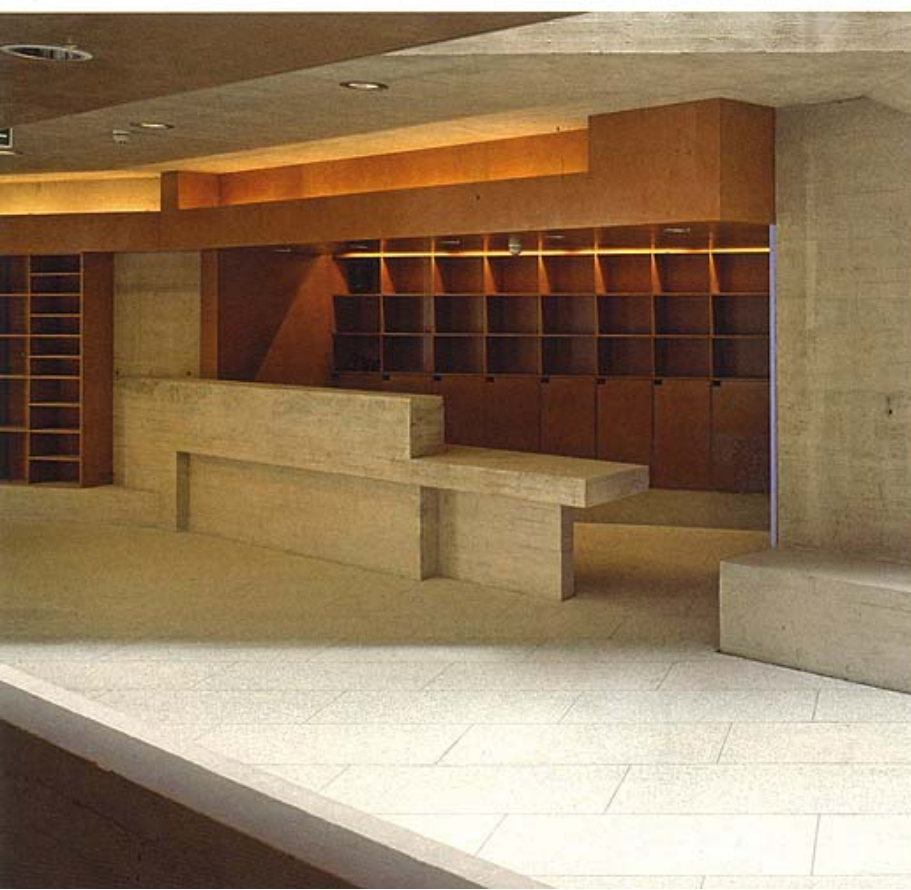


Third Floor Plan

- | | |
|-----------------|------------------------------|
| 1. Office space | 6. Store |
| 2. CEO Office | 7. Void Over Arts and Crafts |
| 3. Boardroom | 8. Plant Room |
| 4. Lobby | 9. Roof |
| 5. Disabled W.C | |



Roof Plan



► The architects trace the origins of their concept back to their work at the Irish Film Institute in Temple Bar where measured surveys revealed an irregularly shaped inner courtyard whose nooks and crannies offered all kinds of possibilities for achieving subtle and successful circulation.

Interested in the spatial qualities of ruined Irish tower houses the architects pulled and hauled at the extremities of the vertical funnel created to flood the internalised ground floor space with natural light. Their distortions take the form of angled walls that draw people through subconsciously - likened by the architects to a ball in a pinball machine. Steel stairs and balconies, painted in the practice's trademark red oxide, are slotted into and between the concrete's sharp angles and chamfers. Sometimes visible, sometimes concealed these invite exploration, coaxing people to climb higher and higher until eventually the full spatial climax is revealed.

The de-constructivist concrete forms, predominant materials and colour palette of the interior are expressed in the building's masterstroke - the folded façade. This allowed the architects to recreate - on a wide frontage - the essence of the vertical proportions established by the facades of the historic town houses, without resorting to a pastiche. In addition their innovation gives the facade a unique presence and character all its own. The 75mm horizontal unplanned timber boards used to make the shuttering boards refer to the dimensions of traditional brick coursing visible across the street and introduce a human scale and pleasing textural quality.

Beloved of many architects exposed concrete is often associated with 1970s Brutalism in the mind of the wider public. This can conjure up negative associations. But concrete and sand:cement render are kissing cousins. Both contain sand and grey Portland cement. Unpainted sand:cement render is common on front facades, back returns and gables throughout historic Derry. The use of this monochromatic grey concrete derived from Portland cement is entirely in keeping with this established character pattern.

There is no denying that exposed concrete in a wet climate can become unsightly. John Tuomey explains that an additive has been incorporated to make the concrete impervious. He is confident this will avoid the dreary water stains and algae that have, in the past, blighted exposed concrete.

Poorly built buildings can undermine the best architectural concepts and details. Derry contractor JPM have stepped up to the plate and hand crafted what has to be among the finest board marked concrete on this island. Rising to the challenge of attaining the concrete quality sought was a matter of personal interest for the late Brendan McNicholl whose untimely death ►

Top / Inner courtyard. Photo by Dennis Gilbert

Bottom / View to faillteoir area from servery. Photo by Dennis Gilbert



Above / Performance space

Right / Boardmarked concrete
Photos by Dennis Gilbert

► meant he did not live to see the full fruits of his labours. His efforts have left a standard of construction craftsmanship all too rare in the 21st century.

Cultúrlann Uí Chánáin has confidence stamped all over it. It reflects a client clear about where it wants to position itself and its work in widening accessibility to Irish language and culture in a positive, open and welcoming way. O'Donnell and Tuomey's skill, inventiveness and thoughtfulness is evident throughout and they have more than risen to the challenges presented by their brief. It takes considerable judgement and courage to recognise and approve high calibre, innovative architectural planning applications especially in historic areas. Tribute is due to the important role of the Derry Planning Office for its insightful response. Finally building radical architecture is impossible without a confident, skilful contractor willing to build outside the norm.

This is a highly significant piece of authentic 21st century architecture. Mary Maguire, a stalwart of the Cultúrlann dancing classes, commented "This is a real 'city' building - the most progressive in Derry". Cultúrlann Uí Chánáin substantially raises the architectural and cultural bar in Derry's inner city. Its extremely high architectural and townscape quality demonstrates admirably - arguably for the first time since WWII - the enormous potential that exists to reinforce the city's historic distinctiveness and tourist offer by replacing mediocre pieces of the city's architectural jigsaw with innovative, high calibre interventions.

In its completion this community/voluntary sector organisation has punched well above its weight in making a major contribution to high quality regeneration in Derry. Its leadership throws down the gauntlet to others involved in the task of regenerating other parts of the city to match the courage, vision, confidence, creativity and workmanship demonstrated by this client body, its architects and builders. ●

Mary Kerrigan

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