Cities and towns have become crowded places in Northern Ireland. The previous intensity of their form and social relations could not overlook the impact of citizens during the conflict of the last 40 years. By choice or by coercion, people moved to suburbs and segregated communities and now almost 80% of the population lives in such areas according to their religious affiliation. Indeed, the manifestation in cities was a conscious urban strategy for government agencies to deal with social conflict. O’Donnell + Tuomey’s intensification of form in Cultúrlann Úi Chanáin, a new centre for Irish language arts and culture, can be seen along with a number of other projects that now seek to reclaim the norms of civic life in Northern Ireland.

One beginning of the Troubles – for there were many – can be traced to a former marketplace out of which the same infilled Georgian terrace streets (Cultúrlann Úi Chanáin stands among these terraces). The Battle of the Bogside – a citizens’ revolt against what they saw as illegitimate authority – raged nearby for three days in 1969. Three years later, from the year of the building that originally occupied O’Donnell + Tuomey’s site, the first shots were fired by the British army on what became known as Bloody Sunday.

Above this marketplace are the 17th-century walls of the colonial city, set on an inclined plateau. The city walls follow older ramparts and the contours of the land, while inside, a rectilinear grid of streets holds a series of tight urban blocks with some significant buildings emerging over the walls. The city saw a concerted firebomb campaign by the IRA in the 1970s in which much urban grain was lost, but as ever tragic urban road decisions, bleak suburban estates, the destruction of local clothes mills, neglect and incessant rain shriveled away at what was once a coherent townscape leading down to the quays and docks. Gradually it is being rebuilt, unfortunately with little skillfulness.

At the centre of this deeply infilled and mid-terrace site, Dublin-based practice O’Donnell + Tuomey has created a building that evokes the idea of the ruined Irish tower house. The void space is a necessity and, like in an inverted ruin, the building’s columns and timbers are exposed. The architects cite the influence of coal and fuel movement through mechanical structures, a time when architecture and circulation were less as a controlling system. The arrangement suits the openness nature of the institution. Rooms seem non-specific and connected, and you get the strong sense of a non-hierarchical space, conceived as a place for people to gather and converse.

Yet in seeking lost certainties in form, the image of the ruined tower house perhaps runs the danger of romanticism that could reflect on a perception of the building’s core function of Irish language renewal. In many respects, Irish was a dying language until the events of recent decades redefined it as a method of gaining cohesion in the often soulless environments of housing estates and lower city neglect. The commitment involved in the formation of Irish language schools has enabled an authentic rebirth of language as a social movement. The schools inspire a social cohesion that is otherwise lacking and children are often trilingual before the age of two. Irish also became a code language and form of resistance during the Republican prison protests of the late 1970s, adding a new inflexion of language activism. Knowing this background, it is possible to perceive the authenticity of the building stemming from an urban and social context.

The insistence on a strong form is manifest in horizontally...
AT THE CENTRE OF THIS DEEPLY LANDLOCKED SITE IS A BUILDING THAT EVOCKS THE IDEA OF THE RUINED IRISH TOWER HOUSE
shattered concrete. The boards are thin, relating perhaps to terraced brickwork elsewhere. In previous projects, O'Donnell + Tuomey have referenced the handrail alleys of mid-20th-century Ireland - vernacular angular forms in course, horizontal battened concrete - which situate at the edge of many villages following the sport's decline. Cultivating U's Chantilly the folded elevation evokes two town houses when viewed obliquely. Setting up the back windows in a street which has none. As with Cooper's use of quarry tiles, you notice the diagonal timber flooring on the upper floors and these spaces appear more drawn out, seeking diminution where it is constrained.

The constraints of the site are indeed immense. It's a narrow, landlocked plot and the already compressed formage must accommodate an existing electrical substation and fire exits. The idea of a sunken, open court came to the architect almost immediately, as did the idea of a central arcade-like passage to shepherd people through to the civic performance space at the rear. The entrance has an inherent depth of threshold that draws the public inwards - but you yearn for a greater extension of this threshold, for a sense of space. Dusty like the terrazzo floor in the courtyard space.

Architecturally, it inevitably struggles to achieve the atmosphere of an urban atrium of old. The client may not agree, but a pinch in the air temperature would make this urban space all the more remarkable.