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CULTÚRLANN UÍ CHANÁIN IRISH LANGUAGE ARTS AND CULTURAL CENTRE

LOCATION
DERRY, NORTHERN IRELAND

ARCHITECT
O'DONNELL + TUOMEY

WRITER
MARK HACKETT

PHOTOGRAPHY
DENNIS GILBERT

Cities and towns have become rarified places in Northern Ireland. The previous intensity of their form and social relations could not survive the inward retreat of citizens during the conflict of the last 40 years. By choice or by coercion, people moved to suburban and segregated communities and now almost 80 per cent of the population lives in areas according to their religious affiliation. Indeed, rarefaction in cities was a conscious urban strategy for government agencies to deal with social conflict. O'Donnell + Tuomey's intensification of form in Cultúrlann Uí 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 marshland out of which rise some inclined Georgian terrace streets (Cultúrlann Uí 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 rear 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 marshland 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 decline of local clothes mills, neglect and incessant rain chiselled 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 landlocked 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 ruined tower house, you climb and clamber through hidden or temporary stairways, exploring along its thick walls, nooks and remaining ledges that once adjoined long-gone timber floor and roof structures. The architects cite the influence of casual enfilade movement through medieval structures, a time when architecture viewed circulation less as a

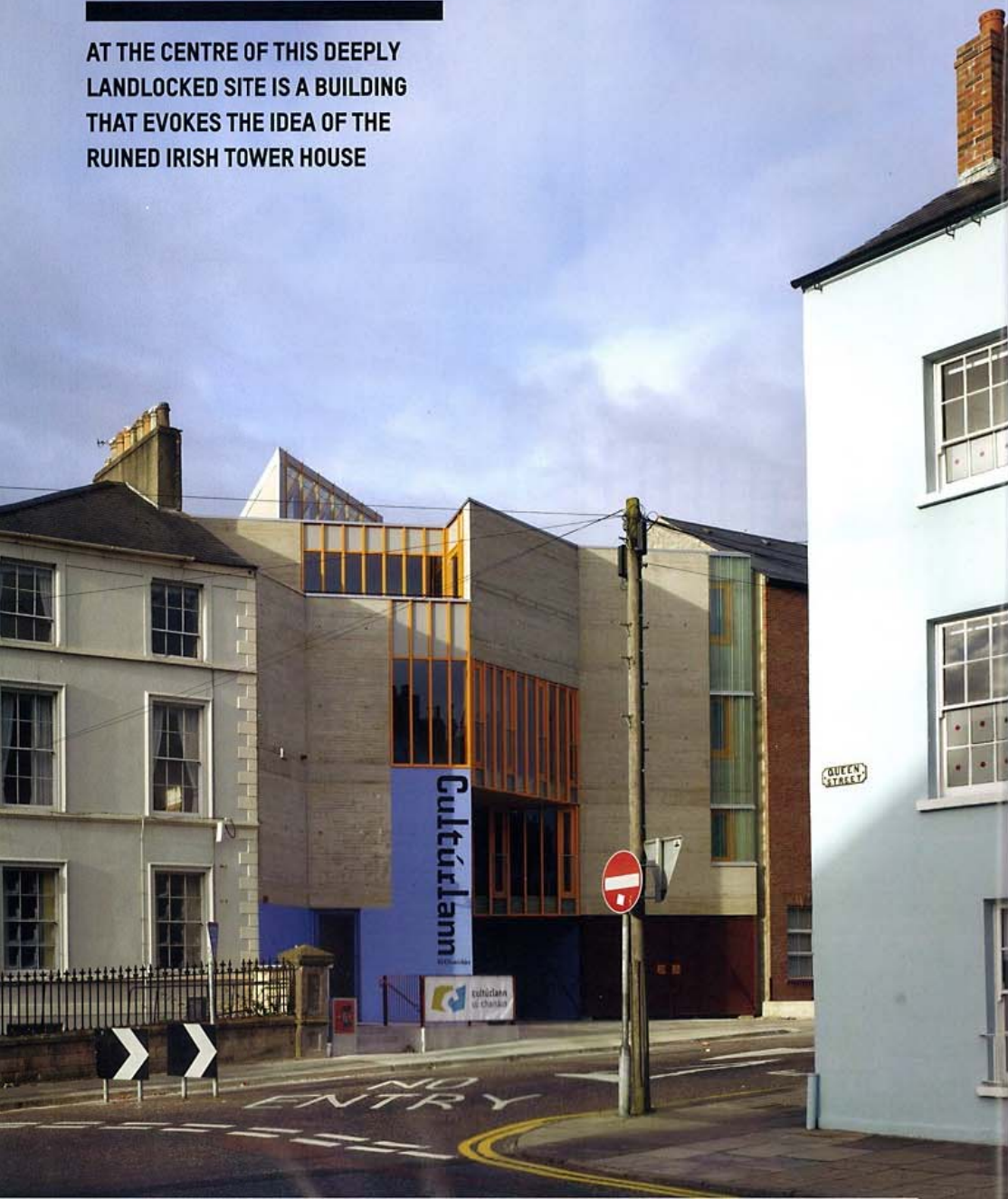
controlling system. The arrangement suits the open nature of the institution. Rooms seem non-specific and connected, and you get the strong sense of a non-hierarchical space, conceived as a place for people to gather and converse.

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 inner 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 ten. Irish also became a code language and form of resistance during the Republican prison protests of the late 1970s, adding a new influx of language activists. 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 EVOKES THE IDEA OF THE
RUINED IRISH TOWER HOUSE

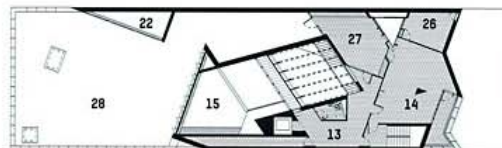


- Previous page_
- 1 entrance
 - 2 shop
 - 3 reception
 - 4 kitchen
 - 5 substation
 - 6 servery
 - 7 café
 - 8 courtyard
 - 9 WC
 - 10 performance space
 - 11 backstage
 - 12 external terrace
 - 13 lobby
 - 14 office
 - 15 void
 - 16 projection room
 - 17 changing room
 - 18 make-up room
 - 19 teaching room
 - 20 arts & crafts room
 - 21 staff room
 - 22 plant room
 - 23 green room
 - 24 dimming room
 - 25 external courtyard
 - 26 CEO office
 - 27 boardroom
 - 28 roof
- Left_ The folded street elevation sets up angular bay windows in the flat fronted Georgian terrace
- Right, middle_ Derry context
- Right, bottom_ The central arcade resembles a ruined tower

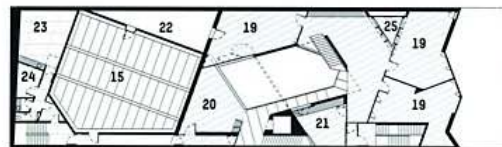


site plan

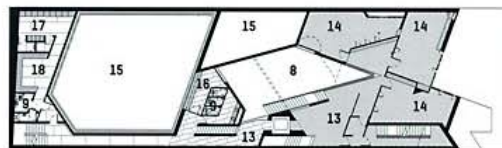
third-floor plan



second-floor plan



first-floor plan



ground-floor plan



**YOU GET THE STRONG SENSE
OF A NON-HIERARCHICAL
SPACE, A PLACE FOR PEOPLE
TO GATHER AND CONVERSE**

shuttered concrete. The boards are thin, relating perhaps to petrified brickwork coursing. In previous projects, O'Donnell + Tuomey has referenced the handball alleys of mid 20th-century Ireland – vernacular angular forms in coarse, horizontal boardmarked concrete – which sit mute at the edge of many villages following the sport's decline.

Cultúrlann Uí Chanáin's formwork, however, has been sandblasted to expose the grain in fine detail, and the horizontal boards and lack of joints clearly sever the allusion to brutalist architecture, in which vertical boards and the articulation of day joints and floors express a constructive tectonic.

In José Antonio Coderch's La Barceloneta apartments of 1951, geometry is employed to lengthen the relationship of the hallway and living space, by using quarry tile floors to trace the diagonal to the corner window. The angular wave of Coderch's plan appears in part to derive from an interpretation of the building lines of adjacent blocks and their bay windows – the taut cranked elevation works into the compact plans of the apartment, so each room and door benefit in this easing. Coderch's black-and-white photographs accentuate the abstract nature of the elevation. But while it is a radical proposition, the

vertical folded forms also relate to neighbouring vertical window bays. Something similar is going on in Cultúrlann Uí Chanáin: the folded elevation evokes two town houses when viewed obliquely, setting up unexpected bay windows in a street which has none. As with Coderch's use of quarry tiles, you notice the diagonal timber flooring on the upper floors and these spaces appear more drawn out, seeking dimension where it is constrained.

The constraints of the site are indeed immense. It's a narrow, landlocked plot and the already compressed frontage must accommodate an existing electrical substation and fire exits. The idea of a taut, 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 informality and depth of threshold that draws the public realm inwards – but you yearn for a greater extension of this threshold, for a sense of rain hitting the terrazzo floor in the courtyard space. Architecturally, it inevitably struggles to achieve the atmosphere of an unheated atrium of old. The client may not agree, but a pinch in the air temperature would make this urban space all the more remarkable. **BT**

Below... The performance space at the heart of the building
Far right, middle... Glazed external walls and internal partitions capture light in the deep plan
Far right, bottom... Entrance hall and reception

ARCHITECT
O'Donnell + Tuomey,
Dublin, Ireland
PROJECT TEAM
John Tuomey, Sheila O'Donnell, Willie Carey, Anne-Louise Duignan
STRUCTURAL ENGINEER
Albert Fry Associates
SERVICES ENGINEER
IN2 Engineering

long section

