

## Don't iron out the creases

The revamped Lyric theatre in Belfast is a lesson in how buildings should be built, with plenty of unexpected kinks and odd angles

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I didn't think buildings were made like this any more. Some architects win a competition with a design that responds to purpose and place and makes of them a thing of three dimensions, worked out in its planning and details. Following due adaptation to budget and function, the thing is then built. Builders put together materials in the ways proposed and drawn by the architects, even when these ways are a little more challenging than the plainest, bluntest methods of construction. The builders use their heads and hands to realise what is important about the design and sometimes lend their knowledge to improve it.

This is a description of architecture, traditionally considered. More often, it now goes like this: an architect has a "vision" or a "design concept" whose essential details are then ground down until they suit the most efficient processes of construction. Oblique lines and irregular angles get straightened out and conjunctions of different materials, which might require a little thought to realise, are avoided. The building becomes an assembly of "packages" – glass, concrete, steel, cladding – rather than a coherent whole. The architect's signature flourishes will remain, but deep down the building will be very like all the others built in the same way.

The Lyric theatre in Belfast, however, does things the old-fashioned way. It started life 60 years ago in the window recess of the consulting room of a neurologist, Dr Pearse O'Malley, and his wife, Mary, who held verse plays there. It then occupied a converted stable loft and, from 1968, a new building which, through shortage of funds, lacked such things as rehearsal rooms and offices and whose dressing rooms and toilets were in portable buildings.

It kept going through the Troubles, when other performance spaces closed, and served as a neutral, non-aligned space in a divided city. The Lyric is now Northern Ireland's only full-time producing theatre. Its



'Wholesome': the Lyric in Belfast, designed by O'Donnell and Tuomey. Dennis Gilbert

building was loved, but when water started cascading through gaps in the roof, the need for a replacement became pressing. A design competition was held and won by Dublin architects O'Donnell and Tuomey.

The theatre stands on the edge of Belfast's centre. The site is sloping and irregular, with small redbrick houses on one side, and a lush, green sweep of the river Lagan on the other. The new building includes an

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enlarged auditorium of 390 seats, an experimental studio space and a large rehearsal room.

What the architects have created is a three-dimensional wander between these three main spaces, across several different levels, compressed into an angular brick shape that echoes both the little houses and the craggy geology that surrounds the city. John Tuomey romantically describes this arrangement as "rocks in a river", while saying that "Belfast is a pointy

kind of place, not rounded", to which his angular design also responds.

From time to time views are presented of trees and river and back to the city of Belfast. The building has many of what Tuomey calls "creases": kinks and angles that encourage unexpected connections between people, that make, he says, "a space between ourselves" and "make people aware of one another".

It culminates in the auditorium, an asymmetric arrangement of banks of seating whose purpose is to present actors with the audience, rather than axial lines of aisles. Boxes are added to the walls not for the sake of capacity – they add a grand total of 12 seats – but to "populate" the walls, to "make them feel lived in". Tuomey compares the terraced interior to "vineyards", which is how architect Hans Scharoun described the magnificent interior of his Philharmonie concert hall in Berlin.

There is much brick and daylight and views of trees, which gives the theatre a 1960s Scandinavian feel. As theatre is a thing of darkness and artifice, the building risks being too wholesome for its own good, yet it still feels convincingly theatrical. The multiple views from one level to another have something to do with this, as does the interior of the auditorium which, lined with dark, faceted wood, is more intense and otherworldly than the rest of the building. All this is combined into what Tuomey calls "one house" – in other words a place where barriers between front and back, and between actors, audience and support staff, are kept to a minimum.

Architects love to spiel, and Tuomey has a greater gift for the poetic turn of phrase than most, but he is almost entirely believable. This really does feel like a place that will bring together the multiple lives of the people who work in it and visit it. The things he says about "making people aware of one another" are more than just talk.

He is believable because the words are not an applique of verbiage to a standard product, but are translated into the space and stuff of building. And the building is a thing made, rather than assembled. It is a work of craft rather than process; joinery, not flatpack. The Lyric has one or two awkwardnesses, and there may be more spectacular or adventurous buildings finished this year, but it is a job very well done.