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# 226

LYRIC THEATRE

LOCATION

BELFAST,  
NORTHERN IRELAND, UK

ARCHITECT

O'DONNELL + TUOMEY

WRITER

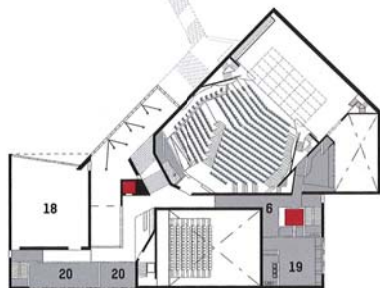
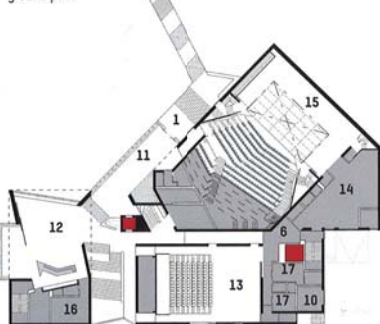
KESTER RATTENBURY

PHOTOGRAPHY

DENNIS GILBERT





level three  
upper floor planlevel two upper  
ground planlevel one lower  
ground plan

It's strange that something so coherently physical as Belfast's Lyric Theatre should be so fluid, so variable. From across the river, it's all graphics and landscape: a plain winged profile underlines the skyline hills; its Lyric sign appears just above the trees, drawing you to the finer parts of an unpromising site. From the busy river road, the facade seems to be a finely varied Scandinavian form in the sloping woodland. From the steep brick terraces running up the hill, it's an open, contemporary neighbour. And when you step inside, it's a plain, old-fashioned 'wow'.

Designed by O'Donnell + Tuomey (ODT), the Lyric is a grounded building, in the context of its site and in light of the last century's great auditoria (consider Alvar Aalto and Hans Scharoun for a moment). The theatre intensifies the possibilities of a site once thought compromised by an arterial road, its proximity to the edge of town and an undistinguished park. The structure transforms it into an exhilarating balcony, rising over the bend of the River Lagan, at the tip of what now feels like a proper forest.

Its distinctive subtle shape is, as Sheila O'Donnell explains, simply the site perimeter. Even so, it has won extra plots of land around the site – a sloped garden, a timber children's auditorium and a fragment of

perfectly Norse woods. But then, it's cheekily attenuated; chamfered out (for air draw-in, say), but also providing subtle steps into the river views. The Lyric is a 'models' building, where the simplicity of the three interlocking volumes on the sloping site suddenly becomes clear, but really you have to see it in person.

The river facade is fine indeed, with lovely fenestration, elegant massing and an intelligently integrated landscape. However, the handsome brickwork is plainly a match (although the brick must be sourced elsewhere) for the steep, raw Belfast terraces running up the hill behind. This side has a more casual, domestic/industrial aspect, with big windows and shutters looking toward the street. Actors like to rehearse in private, so the competition 'glassy' design was ruled out, but some windows crept back. The street frontages incorporate the animation of backstage life: the open 'get-in' yard for trucks, overlooked by the wardrobe room, is much used for smoking, as is the seat dented into the main entrance.

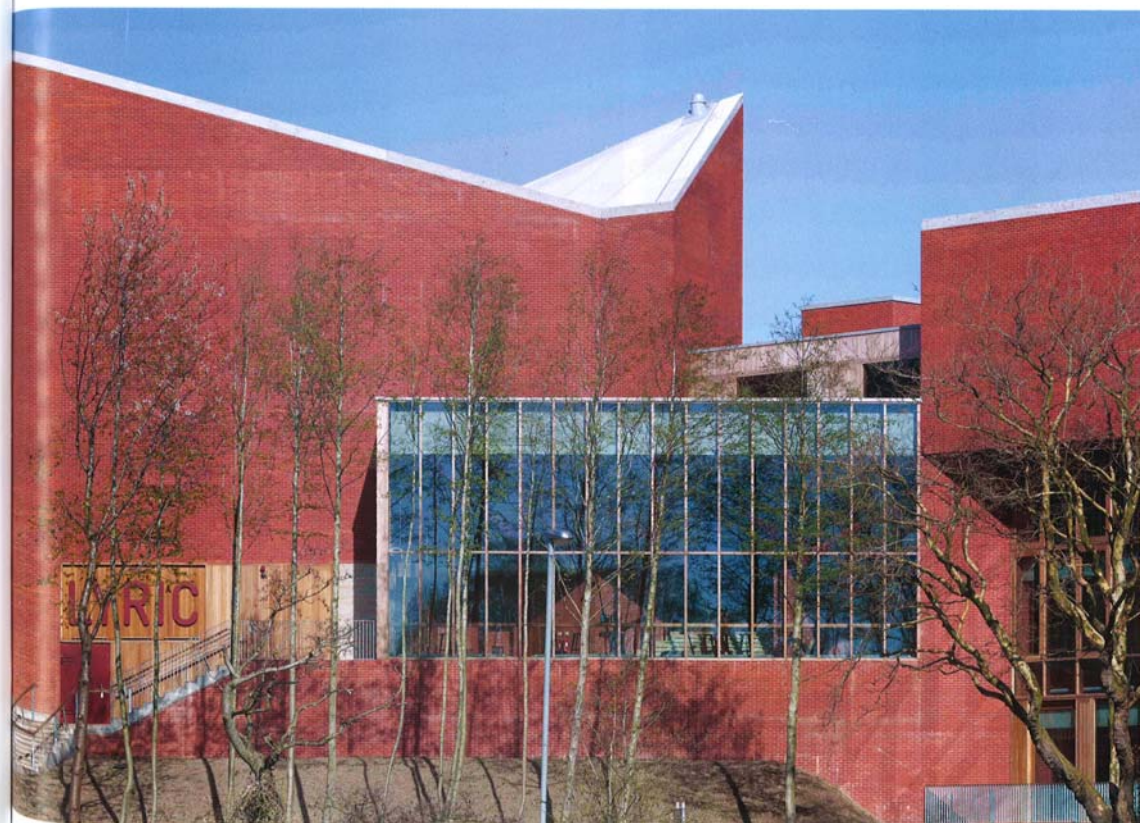
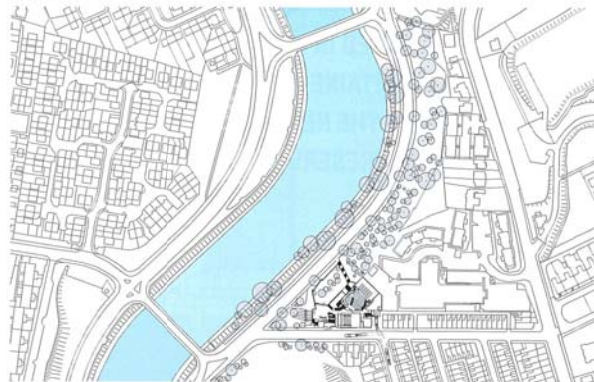
The architects refused to divide the front from the back of house. The old Lyric started in a domestic bay window and retained an intimacy which the new building aimed to preserve. ODT called the project the Lyric's 'house'. Backstage activities, naturally, tend to occur in lofts or basements, so while you may be inclined to stay central, you will always be passed by the life of the theatre. Three brick-lined auditoria are fitted into the sloping site, complete with public areas flowing around them like a river 'so you don't mind you have to go up and then down', says Tuomey.

All this fabulous circulation starts in that exhilarating foyer, with its soaring spaces, where the stairs – a river of concrete – draw you up to the glazed areas overhanging the wooded riversides in a gentle ricochet from booking office up to programme seller and through to the bar and the auditorium. —

- 1 entrance
- 2 lower foyer
- 3 box office
- 4 education room
- 5 boardroom
- 6 backstage
- 7 store
- 8 classroom
- 9 loading bay
- 10 plant
- 11 upper foyer
- 12 café
- 13 studio
- 14 scenery dock
- 15 stage
- 16 kitchen
- 17 dressing
- 18 rehearsal
- 19 wardrobe
- 20 office

Previous page\_  
Situating a bend  
in the River Lagan,  
the Lyric Theatre  
rises from behind  
the wooded  
embankments  
Below\_ The upper  
level riverside  
entrance leads  
visitors onto a brick  
plinth and into a  
glazed upper foyer

site plan





THE OLD LYRIC STARTED IN A BAY WINDOW AND RETAINED AN INTIMACY WHICH THE NEW BUILDING AIMED TO PRESERVE

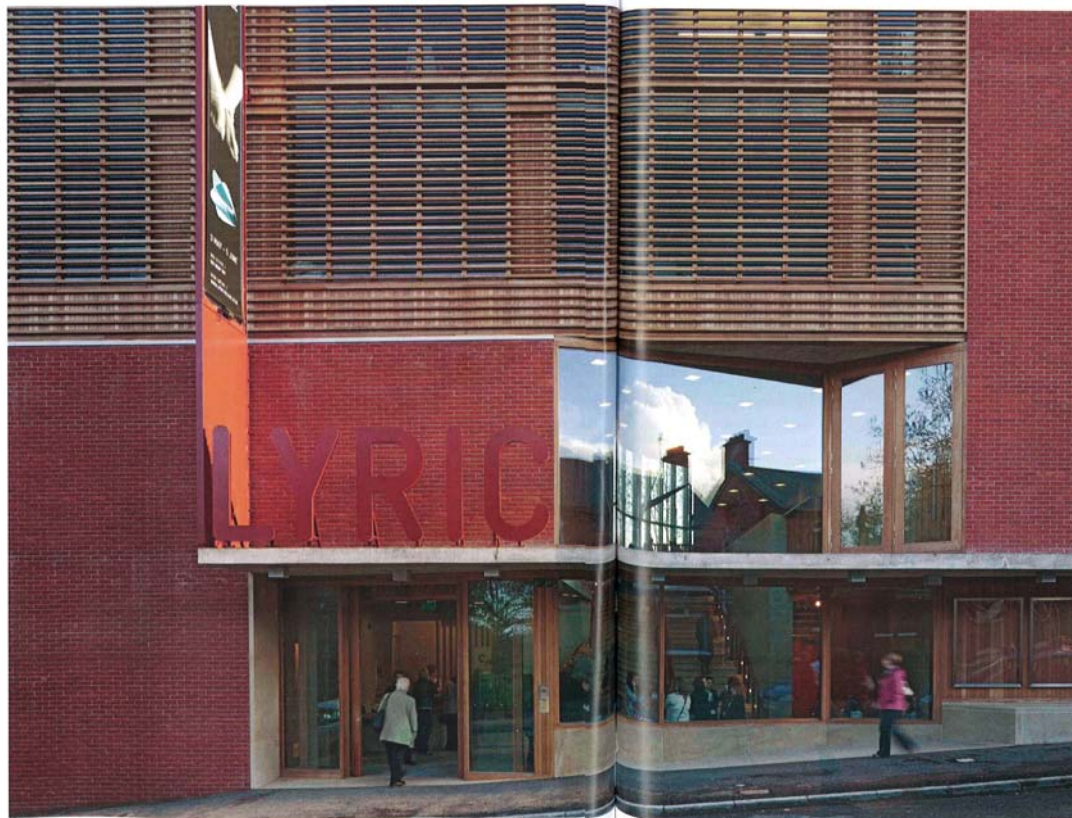
cross section through grand stair



long section through main auditorium



Above\_Seen from the neighbouring terraces, the Lyric extends the use of brick and employs its multi-sided form to mediate between the scale of the street and the main auditorium roof. Right\_The lower foyer addresses the street and leads directly up to the central foyer with a large concrete stair



Or you could simply enjoy hanging around the theatre.

It's also here that the sheer quality of the building hits you: the immaculate brick, stone and concrete; the slightly comic handrails with their 'walking' balusters flowing in cartoon increments down the elegant stairs; the perfectly chosen furniture. Astonishingly, this was a design-and-build contract, but somehow ODT performed its usual Franciscan miracles. The firm told the contractors that it 'just wanted them to make the best building they could'. At the same time, it overwhelmed them with highly resolved design solutions that they had years to prepare between competition and fundraising.

For instance, ODT noticed the concrete formwork was being deftly executed, and asked whether the workers could also panel a complex space. Using all the DIY iroko that it could get its hands on, the team lined the main auditorium in a sort of dark, luscious 'marquetry', a cheap yet brilliant coup. With that odd sense of being complex but entirely naturally formed (which, in a way, it is), the panelled auditorium is absolutely stunning. Its modelled, attenuated, faceted design took a year to develop in response to acoustics, sightlines and lighting. Its seating mass is split irregularly, 'like the palm of a hand',

so that the actors, mid-stage, are not addressing a gangway. Two runs of small balconies heighten that sense of intimacy in the building. It's very like a Scharoun auditorium, yet also somehow ancient. Astonishing. You don't want to leave.

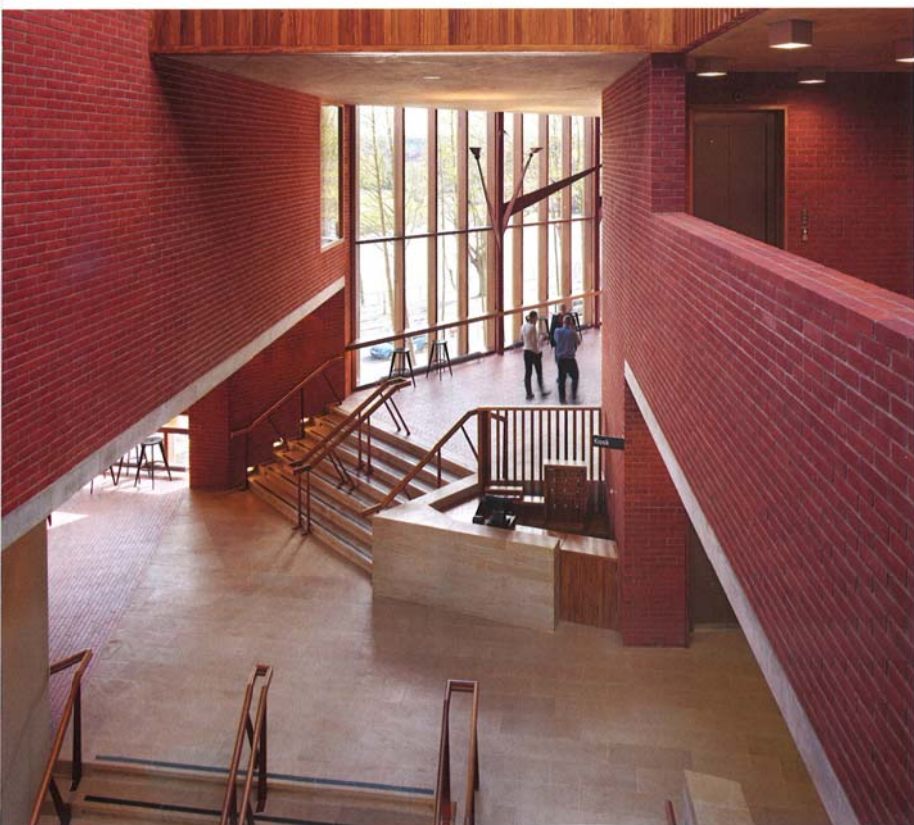
There's also an austere, adaptable brick box studio theatre lightened by a shutterable window over the street. The top floor rehearsal/performance room is different again: an archetypal garret, with one vast loft window projecting toward the woods, and another looking down into the ever-changing foyer. These auditoria are accessed via winding routes – faintly Shakespearean and balconied above; concrete, cave-like lower down. They house enviable offices overlooking the park; education spaces, facing the river; and a boardroom with a beautiful, two-part aeroplane-wing (or bow-tie) table.

Amazingly, this exquisite building comes in at £13.8 million. Everywhere there are extras: generous places to sit or to perform, as the Lyric is realising. On my visit, the VIP area of the bar – another projecting bay that can be semi-screened – was being used as a performance space by local school choirs. It's accumulating art. It's a place people love to use. As they kept stopping me to say so.

The theatre was built for the Lyric to 'raise its game', as Tuomey explains, and it seems to be working. It has had rave reviews for its architecture and a very good one for its first performance, *The Crucible* – Arthur Miller's brilliant tense historical drama about the Salem witch trials. A shrewd choice, but it's interesting to note the production was a little overcooked, heavy on the hysterics throughout. Used to performing in a worse building, the actors were almost shouting. Designed to a whisper, this building could have taken a production more finely exploring the play's terrifying slide from domesticity to hysteria. However, the thrilled Lyric will surely learn to play its wonderful new house for all its worth. **U+U**



A RIVER OF CONCRETE, THE STAIRS DRAW YOU UP TO THE GLAZED AREAS OVERHANGING THE WOODED RIVERSIDE



Left\_ On the uppermost public balcony, views look back into the central foyer, featuring walking balustrades and branching light fittings  
Above\_ A VIP pop-out area can be screened off from the café on the central foyer level  
Right\_ Above the grand stair, upper-level timber galleries are almost Shakespearean in character  
Far right\_ The main auditorium recalls the auditoria of Hans Scharoun in miniature and features a complex iroko lining

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O'Donnell + Tuomey,  
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**SERVICES ENGINEER**  
IN2 Engineering  
**ACOUSTICS**  
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**THEATRE CONSULTANTS**  
Theatreplan

