It's strange that something so coherently physical as the Lyric Theatre should be so fluid, so variable. From across the river, it's all graphics and landscape; a plain walled profile underlines the skyline hills; its Lyric sign appears just above the trees, drawing you to the floor parts of an unassuming site. From the busy river road, the facade seems to be a finely varnished Scandinavian form set in 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 (OOT), the Lyric is a ground-up building, in the context of its site and in light of the last century's great auditoria (consider Aivar Aalto and Hans Schröder 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 160 feet as the forest, that which now feels like a proper forest.

Its distinctive shape is, as Sheila O'Donnell explains, simply the site perimeter. Even so, it has won extra plot of land around the site - a sloped garden, a timber children's sculpture and a fragment of perfectly Norse woods. But then, it's closely attuned; chamfered cut (for air draw-in, say), but also providing subtle steps into the river views. The Lyric is a 'modular' 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 site plan shows clearly the right, with lovely fenestration, elegant massing and an intelligently integrated landscape. However, the handsome brickwork is a pity 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 were back. The street frontages incorporate the animation of backstage life: the open gate to yard for trucks, overlooked by the wardrobe, 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 an intimacy which the new building aimed to preserve. OOT called the project the Lyric's 'house'. Backstage activities, naturally, need 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 auditoriums are fitted into the sloping site, complete with public areas flowing around them like a river 'as you don't mind you have to go up and 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 overhauling the wooded meadows in a grace ricochet from the bridge office to the programme seller and through to the bar and the auditorium.
THE OLD LYRIC STARTED IN A BAY WINDOW AND RETAINED AN INTIMACY WHICH THE NEW BUILDING AIMED TO PRESERVE

Or you could simply enjoy hanging around the theatre. It's also here that the sheer quality of the building hits you: the immature brick, stone and concrete; the slightly comic handfuls with their 'walking' balusters. Insulating in various increments down the elegant stairs are perfectly chosen furniture. Astonishingly, this was a design-and-build contract, but somehow O'DT performed its usual Franciscan miracles. The firm told the contract 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, O'DT noticed the concrete framework was being skillfully executed, and asked whether the workers could also panel a complex space. Using all the DEY tricks that it could get its hands on, the team lined the main auditorium in a sort of dark, lacquered `masquerade', 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 palms of a hand,

so that the actors, mid-scene, are not addressing a gap in the audience, but two rows of small balconies heightens that sense of intimacy in the building. It's very much a Sehekan auditorium, yet also somewhat modest. Astonishingly, you don't want to leave.

There's also an austere, adaptable brick box studio for theatre heightened by a retractable window over the street. The top floor rehearsal/performance room is different again: an archetypal garage, with one vast loft window projecting toward the street, and another looking down into the ever-changing foyer. These auditoriums are accessed via winding stairs - a Typically Shakespearean and balconied above; concrete, cave-like lower down. They house en-suite offices overlooking the park, education spaces, facing the river; and a boardroom with a beautiful, two-part serpentine (of bow ties) table.

Amazingly, this exquisite building comes in at $11.8 million. Everywhere there are extras: generous seats to sit or perform. As the Lyric is realising, and its performers and audience alike, the Lyric is realising. On my visit, the VIP area of the bar were another project; a bar that can be semi-screamed – was being used as a performance space by local schools. It's accumulating art. It's a place for people to use. As they kept stopping me to say so.

The theatre was built for the Lyric to "raise its game", as Tueyrne 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 turn-of-century historical drama about the Salem witch trials. A shrewed choice, but it's interesting to note that the production was a little overcooked, heavy on the hysteries throughout. Lied to performing a worse building, the actors were almost shooting. Designed to a whisper, this building could have taken a production more finely exploring the play's terrifying alienation from domesticity in Unfortunately, however, the thriller Lyric will surely learn to play its wonderful new home for all its worth.
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 breeching light fittings.

Above. A top 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.

For right. The main auditorium recalls the auditoria of Hans Schreier in miniature and features a complex interio lathing.

ARCHITECT
O'Donnell + Tuomey, Dublin

STRUCTURAL ENGINEER
McLear Lynch

MECHANICAL ENGINEER
Beckett Engineering

ACOUSTICS
Sound Space Design

THEATRE CONSULTANTS
Ishoo Nolan