



Set the stage

O'Donnell & Tuomey's joyful new building for the Lyric Theatre in Belfast is the stuff of theatrical legends, writes Oliver Wainwright

Pictures by Dennis Gilbert

buildings. From the Theatre Royal on Drury Lane, which has proudly occupied the same plot for almost 350 years, to the Young Vic in Waterloo which had its "temporary" 1970s auditorium recently enshrined, relic-like, in a permanent casing there is a thespian habit of maintaining an aura of significance around the sites of the beloved boards.

The story of the Lyric Theatre in Belfast is rather different. It started life 60 years ago in the window like a home – an recess of the consulting room of Dr Pearse O'Malley and his wife Mary's house, at 117 Lisburn Road. houses along As the Lyric Players' ambition grew, and the O'Malleys moved house, performances took place in their narrow, converted stable loft. Sixteen years later - the theatre having swelled to incorporate a the venue's domestic origins and vibrant programme of recitals, lec-tures, exhibitions and a children's "Everyone who works here is the control of a control of a moved to its the current site at the end of a sloping current breath of a sloping cu to occupy a purpose-built, 300-seat auditorium. It became much looking up at the red-brick cliff loved and continued operating as a neutral base throughout the the Lyric's new £18 million home. Troubles, but lack of funds meant "It should feel like a home - an conceived as objects, pushed to the that dressing rooms, wardrobe extension of the houses along the edges of the plot, leaving a stream and toilets had always remained street."

outside, housed in flimsy portable tivate a foundation buildings across a service yard. By race, the building cleverly medi-myth around their 2003, the theatre was suffering ates between the grid of brick from a leaky roof and was no longer fit for purpose.

An international design compo tition was launched, attracting 56 entries, and was won by O'Don-nell & Tuomey Architects. The Dublin-based practice proposed a dramatic concoction of luminous crystalline forms, embedded in the

'It should feel extension of the the street'

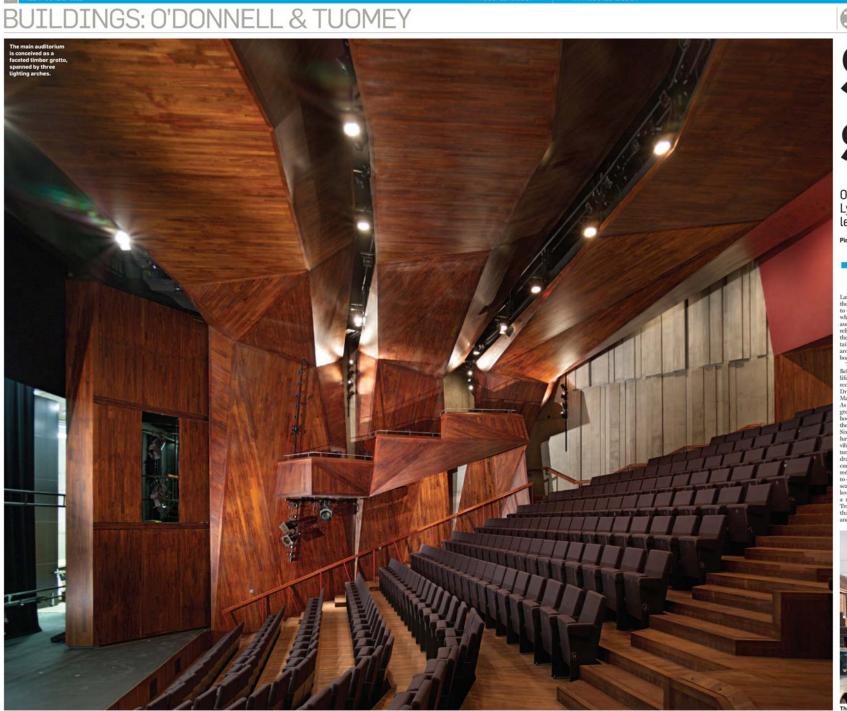
"House for Theatre" - a play on

ates between the grid of brick streets that rises to the north west and the serpentine swathe of green that drops down to the River Lagan below. An aggregation of angular forms, it changes aspect as it descends the hill, initially continuing the datum of the neigh bouring houses along the street edge, before rapidly growing into sloping site, in a scheme titled something much more bulky and industrial as it climbs down the road. By the time you reach the corner and turn along the embankment, you are confronted with the sheer geological mass of the main auditorium. If this is a house, it is one with big ambitions.

"It was a very restrictive site, squeezed from all directions," says John Tuomey. "Yet we were work ing with big volumes of fixed dimensions that barely fit within the boundary in plan." The challenge was deftly overcome in section by the counter-intuitive move of flipping the auditorium so the rehearsal room to provide space beneath it for the bar. The three primary volumes, of theatre, stuof public circulation space to



The building reflects the materials of its context, sited at the end of a street of red-brick houses.



LDINGS: O'DONNELL & TUOMEY



wind under, around and between throughout the building, making

"They are like rocks in a river," says Tuomey. There is something elemental about these fixed

seen through a coppice of tall, wil-niches, crannics and perches, lowy trees, the composition has undeniable echoes of Alvar Aalto's while stairs narrow and swell, kicking out to lead you up around 1950s Säynätsalo Town Hall, all nested brick planes and canted rooflines. At the eastern corner of the site, the hat is further tipped to the Finn, with angled grass-covered steps carved into the slope, retained with timber sleepers – only here they serve as an outdoor auditorium. As you approach the main entrance, off Ridgeway Street, it becomes clear that it is not just the aesthetic of this period that is employed, but its attitude towards expressing, and catering up into the rehearsal room. "It's for, human inhabitation: the like a whittling process," the archi-facade is slightly cranked inwards, tects explains. "It is quite a rigid providing shelter under a project-ing canopy, while a stepped stone plan, but every chance we get, we're cutting away to release the plinth forms a series of seats by the doorway — both inside and out, people through in the directions providing somewhere to wait.

Moments like this continue

it a genuine pleasure to use and explore. Tuomey talks of "tailoring spaces", and there is a sense that the public routes have been masses anchored on the sloping carved out and modelled by hand, site with their carved, faceted with an awareness of how the inwith their carvo, factered with all avarieties of now me in-forms – folded expanses of blank between spaces will be occupied wall punctured with glazed, tim-ber-framed lanterns.

From down by the river road, inflected to create nooks and

Stairs narrow lead you up around corners

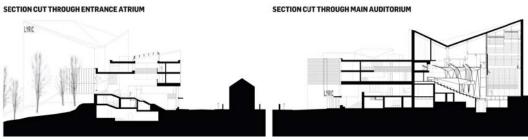
we want them to go."

At the entrance to the light- SITE PLAN



flooded atrium, a cascading sandstone stairway tumbles down from a generous open landing with views through to the glazed upper foyer that looks out over the river. A "walking handrail" with red oxide-finished steel balusters — angled like legs and folded where they hit the ground to form little feet marches up the treads, separat-ing the "slow stair" from the narrower "fast stair", which is distin-

guished by one fewer landing. The upper foyer acts as a kind of fulcrum space, with different functions pinwheeling off it. To the left, the wall folds into the cafébar - kitted out with Jean Prouvé furniture in dark timber and the same red steel - where the sandstone floor gives way to tough variegated brick, a treatment used throughout to signal slower spaces for meeting and loitering. To the right, a kinked stair winds down into a cave-like sandstone world of loos (with more than twice as many provided for women as for men to solve that age-old conundrum), whose floors and fittings are cast in solid terrazzo. Close inspection reveals the concrete ceiling seams are set on a diagonal to mirrorthose in





UBCONTRACTORS AND SUPPLIERS Mechanical and electrical Vaughan Engineering Group, Concrete and internal joinery Mastercraft, Primary and secondary steel Metaltech. Brick lbstock (Gilbert Ash), Windows Hynds / JC Ramsay, Fitted furniture JC Ramsay, Stone McConnells Terrazzo Fegan Terrazzo, Lifts Kone, Ironmongery MB Architectural, Flooring Owen James Flooring. Theatre specialists Multistage, Oxford Sound



DINGS: O'DONNELL & TUOMEY

LEVEL ONE

- 1 Entrance/lower foyer 2 Box office



LEVEL TWO







LEVEL THREE

- Rehearsal room
 Office
 Foyer
 Void
 Auditorium





the floor — the kind of meticulous it's a collective gathering." A when seen from below attention to detail that makes it diminutive baleony on either It is hard to believe the

Returning to the foyer, the studio theatre entrance is framed in nally, they were unnecessary," an iroko timber-panelled box – dmits Tuomey, as they only add a tregular details. Although, from the language used for key thresh-few extra places and are sold at the the outside, the expanses of brick unde unggang deset on reck y driekti-we exam paites afroaresordat unter our outsteer, consideration of the state of the s ing out on to the street, allowing the room to open up and connect back to the town. From the upper foyer, conceived here is that the quality of finish

as a long, hall-like extension of the bar, a broader staircase — again chamfered out to a generous sweep -- brings you up to the main auditorium, truly the masterpiece of this crafted concerto. Three timber arches rise up from this folded turning to the wooden grotto's walls, creasing into faceted ribbons as they span the chamber, carefully inflected to provide the right lighting angles, while flat enough to retain the

atre should be a social experience, ing lofty Shakespearean balconies own creation myths.

accessed by a secret stair. "Ratio-

One would expect the audito-rium to be the showpiece of such a building, but what is so evident

The seats curve 'as if the room is in its seat'

reareight ross.—the result of hav-ing only two places to locate the singinstripe lining of acoustic bat-exits. Homey, however, has a nally as a lighter, woody counter-

It is hard to believe that a buildhard to believe this was a design-and-build contract. side of the room provides two ing of this scale and ambition was single-file strips of seats, one side completed for a construction budget of £13.8 million, particularly given the level of finishes and

with 150 retractable seats and a tension wire lighting grid. Unusu100 more than before, but it helped to make the product better," chisdra wire ughina giane. Crussos of the allay, for such a black-box space, a shutter slides back to reveal a big the design means that it will never picture window in the wall look-feel may be compared to the control of the contr pride.

It was also down to some canny moves on the architect's part: noticing the quality of the joinery produced by the shuttering con-tractor, Mastercraft, they also had it fit out the auditorium panelling

— a job it has executed with the precision of boat builders. A further reason for the quality is down to the fact that every last inch was designed. "We drew every single brick," says Grehan, surprisingly unfazed at this mammoth under-taking. Given the protracted nature of the project, from winwhile that enough to retarn the proper a coustic. Beneath this twisted ribcage, the seating is gen-thy curved in a parabolic section, as though cupped in the palm of a canal Square Theatre in Dublin. hand, with an asymmetrical aisle Crossing the threshold, timber done before the contractual cutting at an angle through the flooring leads to the rehearsal process even began.

much more poetic justification, describing the seating angled "as airy offices — expressed externally contracts. And while parts of the if the room is turning towards the action, twisting in its seat," argushare the opposite aspect, looking former idiom — much of it is pure ing that a theatre auditorium should be "abit alive – not neutral" out over the university gardens. This upper level is treated interior its old-fashioned approach to design and construction that the "Going to the cinema is anonymous, you keep your coat on, don't beneath, the iroko balustrades a joyful building that will endure talk to anyone," he says. "The the-





The top-lit rehearsal room is lined in pin-striped acoustic battens.







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