

PERSPECTIVE

JULY / AUGUST 2011



LYRIC
THEATRE

THE
OBEL

SMALL
LIBRARIES
PROJECT

£4.00



Journal of the
Royal Society of
Ulster Architects

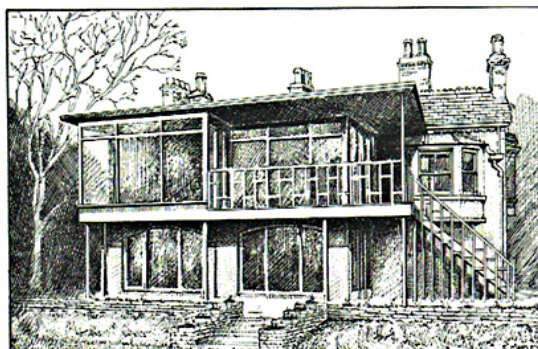
A SORT OF HOMECOMING



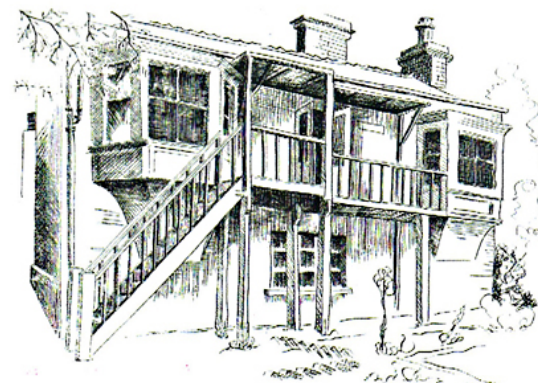
The Lyric was literally my home. I was born in it and grew up with it. I watched the shows unfold, "acted" on its stage and built forts with empty cigarette packets at the end of rehearsals. For me, normality was watching sets being built and panels painted at the back of the house in Derryvolgie Avenue. I chatted with Michael Biggs as he sculpted the foundation stone for the first "new theatre" in our back garden. I was there when my mother cut the curtain cord on the last night of the "old" Lyric in 1968 and laid the third last brick on the construction of the new "old" Lyric in Ridgeway Street later that year. My brothers Donal and Kieran laid the second last and final ones. I knew every corner of the new "old" theatre; entering under the foundation stone, walking up the steps to the auditorium, at the turn, noticing a plaque with John F. Kennedy's address "poetry teaches us the basic human truths that must serve as the touchstone of our judgement" - I had learned the words by heart; then passing George Mooney's photographs of the Yeats productions. I worked in the bar, stage managed, operated the lights and directed plays on that stage; I put the case for the relocating the lighting box, knew the people. This Lyric was my home extension. When I left Belfast, each visit back was to a place both familiar and comfortable.

In January, 2007 as I left Ridgeway Street on the last night for friends of the theatre, I decided not to watch the building being demolished. I am glad to have held that resolve. I had seen the plans for the new theatre and I had been persuaded that it would be a huge improvement - but I was wary of the gulf that exists between a plan and an outcome.

April, 2011. I walk down Ridgeway Street, still enter by the side of the building, this time flanked by Heaney's poem *Bankside* to the left, and words from Friel on the right. Up the stairs to an upper foyer, but this time to a panoramic, unimpeded view of the Lagan. Turning around, startled by the walls signalling a rebirth for the New Gallery. Up more steps - spotting the original foundation stone reassuringly nearby - and then into the auditorium at the middle aisle - like the previous theatre - but what an auditorium! The effect is electric. Insufficient time to absorb the impact. Seated. A welcome from the Artistic Director. Lights down. Joan McCready, one of the Lyric's finest actresses - alone on the stage with a chair, speaking words from Helen Lewis, the Lyric's first choreographer. Her memoir. *A Time to Speak*. Every idea beautifully articulated and clearly heard. This is the new Lyric but echoing the old - intimate, respectful of the spoken word, splendid sightlines, drawing people together, excellent acoustics, potential for epic scale. Still home.



Above / Studio Theatre new extension 1956. Drawing by Edward Marley



Above / Studio Theatre Exterior 1952-1956. Drawing by George Morrow

What have the Architects achieved? Not only a superb building fit for the performing arts or an iconic one representing a confident, newly minted Ulster. They have identified the essence within the concept of the poets' theatre and distilled it, reconfigured it in contemporary mode and then re-situated it more advantageously within the same enlarged site: so that the poets' theatre can more readily realise its mission and demonstrate the importance of place. They took on board the vision of my parents and, this time - backed by the necessary financial resources - gave it comprehensive physical shape and form. In so doing, they have crafted a theatre building for the drama of poetry and, for all those who love the art-form of theatre, a permanent home. ●

Conor O'Malley

Director of Strategy and Operations, Culture Ireland and son of Lyric founder Mary O'Malley
See Lyric Theatre Supplement on page 17

HIGH DRAMA

Words: Michael McGarry Professor of Architecture QUB



Ridgeway Street sounds like something out of an Ealing comedy - all charm, Englishness and deft touch. The Street is a constant surprise - a sudden fall from Stranmillis Road in a city that one images as a flat apron laid out under Black Mountain and Divis. The houses have enough in common to establish a loose coherence but odd dormers and narrow stepping plots give a whimsical twist. The surprise continues with the line of folded roof planes dropping precariously towards the Lagan, their angles spiking the skyline. The Lyric accounts for the last set of these spiky roofs at the end of the terrace at the bottom of Ridgeway Street.

The entrance is on the footpath - no rhetorical set-back or set-down but the immediacy of a domestic front door. Inside there is no letup - ticket office, bench, floor pattern, and the edgy pull to rise up the stone stairs towards the light and view. En

route the stairs elbows sideways eroding the box of the overhead rehearsal room. A pause at top of stairs, but the clues continue as the upper foyer folds left and right aligning with the River and wrapping around the theatre. If the access is intense then the upper foyer is relatively calm; a chance to take a breath and compose before the intensity of the theatre space itself.

Serendipity has much to do with Belfast's character - not a set piece but a maze of idiosyncratic occasions and locations. The more bombastic Victorian pieces are well know, but much of Belfast and its charm is this delicate carpet of houses patterned across a subtle landscape. Across this carpet the Lagan winds; generally ignored but yet a singular thread through Belfast. The Lagan's meander and width force an episodic reading of its length; vistas are lateral and oblique. ►

THE TEAM

Client / Lyric Theatre

Architect / O'Donnell + Tuomey, Dublin

Main Contractor / Gilbert Ash NI

Project Manager / E C Harris

Structural / Horgan Lynch Consulting Engineers

Services Engineer / IN2 Engineering

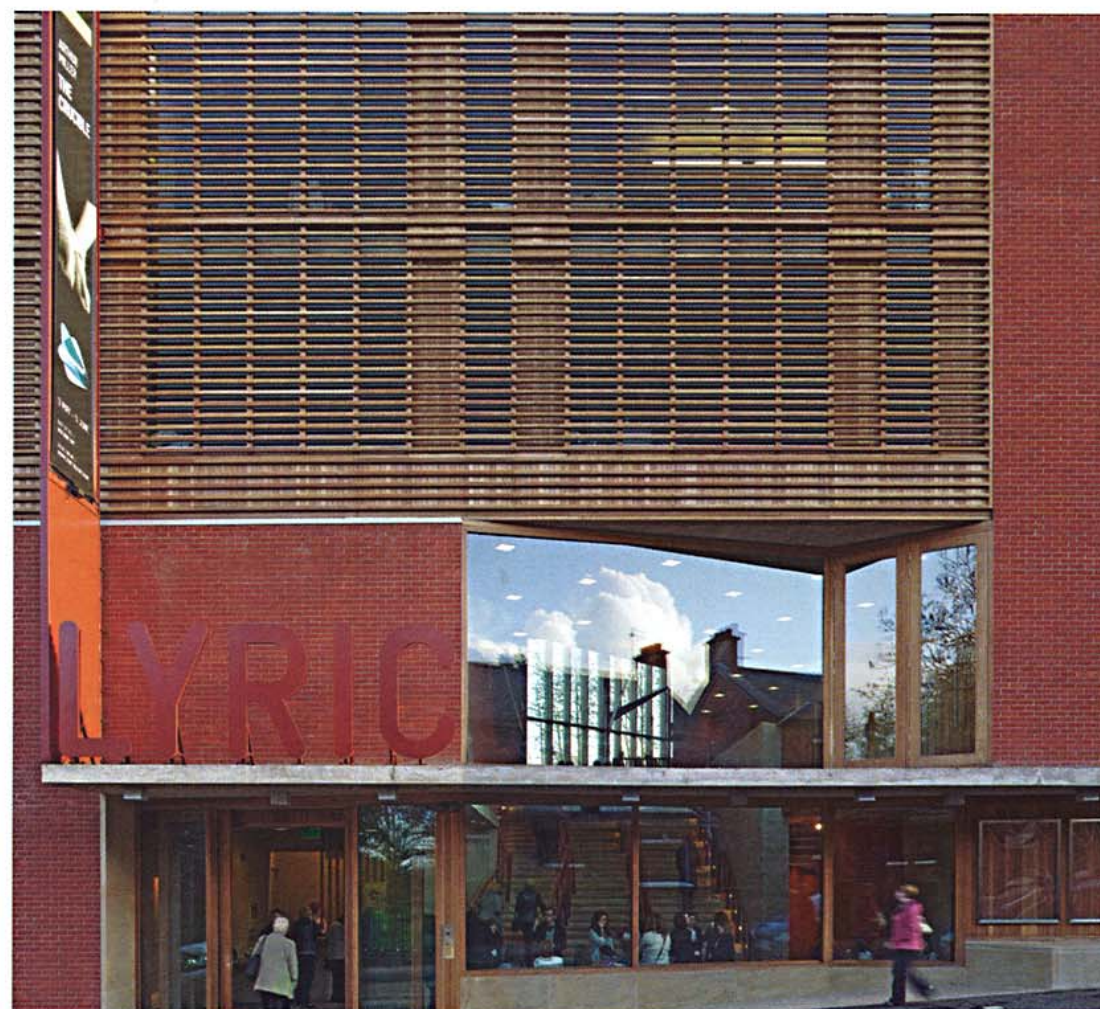
Acoustics / Sound Space Design

Theatre Consultant / Theatreplan

Access / CDM / Ken Ewart Associates

Q Surveyor / Rider Levett Bucknall

Photography / Dennis Gilbert/VIEW





► The Lyric sits as fulcrum on one of these leafy bends, an elevated massing seen through the trees - the long diagonal from the high roof point arcing down to the corner of Ridgeway Street. Access from this side is leisurely, grand steps to a terrace, then terrace becoming the upper foyer - all quite genteel.

Angled from the foyer through the lobbies into a vessel of a space without a middle aisle, the theatre is dark and intense. The folded timber side arches hold the space laterally, the side galleries squeezing like a bellows, the audience and actor confronted. The absence of a central axis maintains the space as indivisible: a scene of anticipation of a shared occasion. For The Crucible the proscenium arch disappears and audience and actors share the cavern.

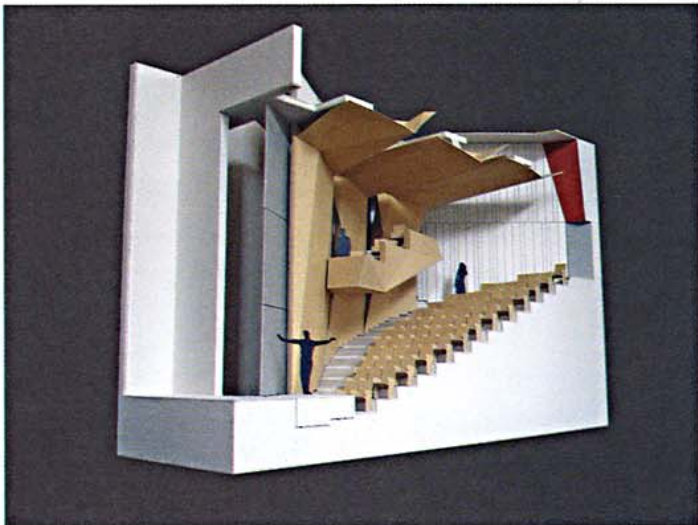
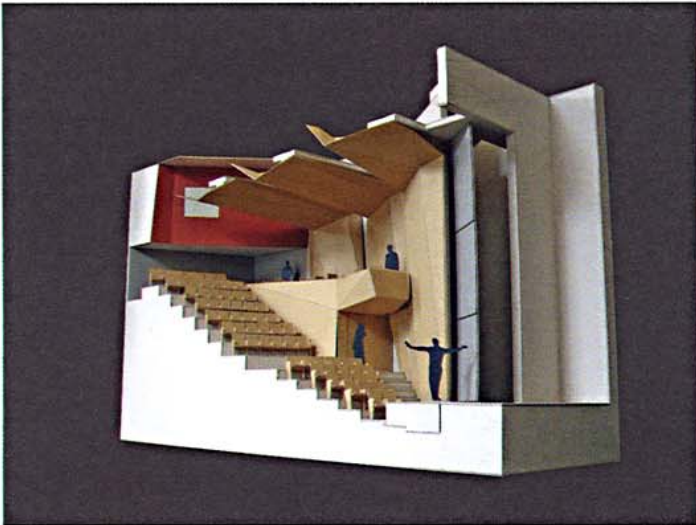
The essential strength and value of this architecture is neither its narrative nor its aesthetic, but its presence or more accurately its multiple built presences. This building is not a diagram, its complexity and juxtapositions balanced but ►



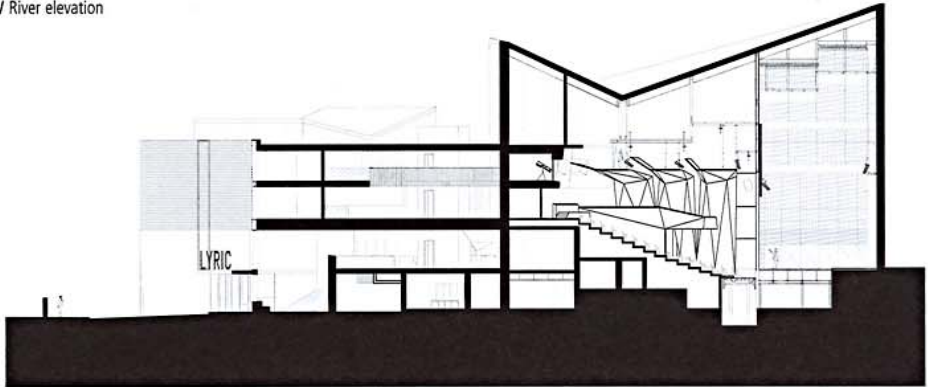
unconsidered, every element clearly pronounced like good diction. A meeting room on the third floor has a timber floor and one wall acting together, counterpoised against another wall and ceiling of timber lathes, and yet another wall of brick: the room hums if not buzzes. Relief if needed comes from the views out - to the river, the roofscapes, and to the street. ►

► never fully revealing itself in any one move. The entry sequence is episodic, a sequence of particularised spaces. The volume over the stairs provides light and scale, but neither simplifies nor centralises; with its brick parapet on one side, timber balustrades on another, and layered and offset circulation, the reading remains complex. The effect is to confront the user with a tectonic reading of the building; brick wall, brick fold, timber screen, concrete soffit, confront each other like actors in a drama with the same characters reappearing in different scenes throughout the building. This physicality is at the core of the building's success and is carried right through all moments. No space or surface is left

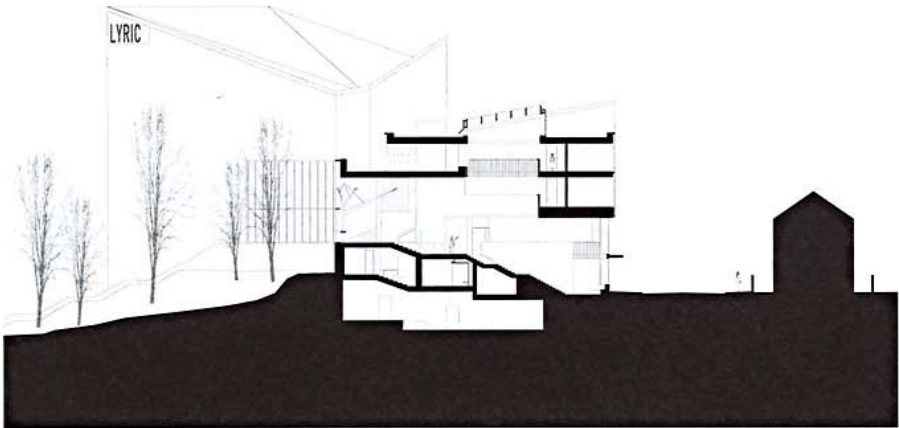




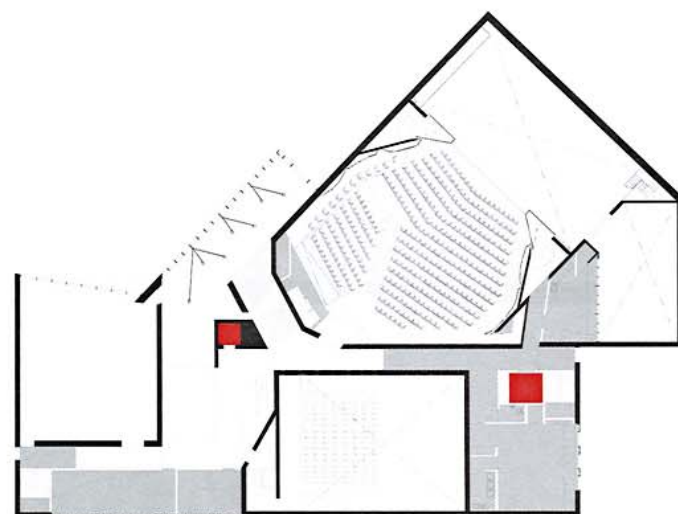
Above / River elevation



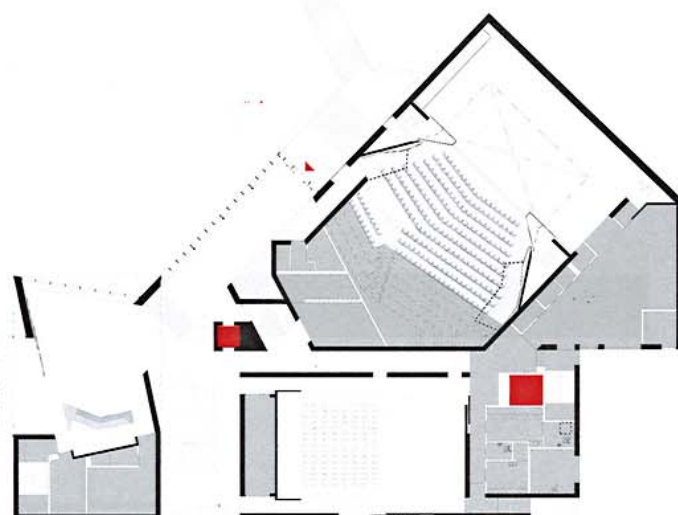
Above / Section A-A



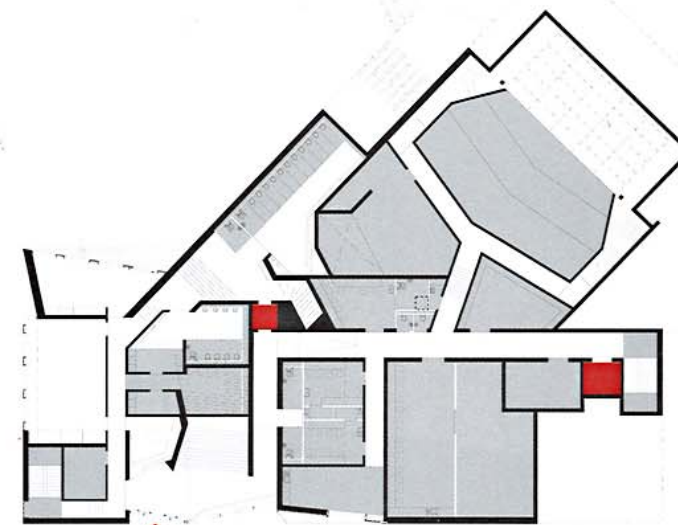
Above / Section B-B



Above / Level 3 plan



Above / Level 2 plan



Above / Level 1 plan

Right /
Key for plans

- | | |
|------------------|-----------------|
| 1 Entrance | 11 Upper Foyer |
| 2 Lower Foyer | 12 Café |
| 3 Box Office | 13 Studio |
| 4 Education Room | 14 Scenery Dock |
| 5 Boardroom | 15 Stage |
| 6 Backstage | 16 Kitchen |
| 7 Store | 17 Dressing |
| 8 Classroom | 18 Rehearsal |
| 9 Loading Bay | 19 Wardrobe |
| 10 Plant | 20 Office |





► window to the street from the studio room, the hall bench missing its phone, the modesty onto Ridgeway Street, and the leafy grandeur to the Lagan; the list is long.

The detailing is at the scale of the building; brick as taut skin or lining, concrete as soffit and shelf, stone as carved, timber as sheet, screen, or solid lathe. There are no cover slips, no cut bricks, no compromises of assembly, everything conceived in a drawing. The cast concrete copings precisely cap the brick volumes; its roof planes finished in concrete exposed to view. There is nothing ephemeral - all is explicit, directed, and resolved like the text of a play. The level of control and the quality of building is extraordinary; much more than the simple out-working of a building contract.

Its genesis and its role as venue for theatre marvellously matched - personality, occasion, and place counterpoised. An inspired and brave choice to remain on the site and not succumb to a diagram of Belfast with its gems hoarded in a notional centre.

This is a wonderful and beautifully crafted building rooted in this place, in Belfast, and for this theatre company; it is neither generic nor rhetorical but insistent on that significance of particular place and occasion; such is architecture, such is theatre. ●

Michael McGarry

Professor of Architecture QUB

**SITU: Lyric Theatre, 55 Ridgeway St, Belfast,
County Antrim BT9 5FB, UK**

The Lyric opened and lived at the end of Mary O'Malley's back garden - hardly a consequence of design or logic, but one to do with the cocktail of personality and place.



► The site is difficult, a circumstantial collision of plan geometries on a topography more like a quarry. The location of

the entrance on grade on Ridgeway Street is the key move locking the Lyric to Ridgeway Street and avoiding the obvious exclusive orientation to the River. Planning is exceedingly complex with levels interwoven and a lift magically linking what it must. Other than the central move of passing between the three volumes, the plan is a consequence of the two geometries of Ridgeway Street and the Embankment. But there are multiple other moves; the accordion-like crush of the ground level facade caught between the Studio and the Rehearsal volumes, the edgy inflections of the stairs, the corporal distortion of the theatre plan, the rotation of the bar foyer pushed by its collision with the upper foyer. The volumetric moves are paralleled in the floor, soffit and wall surfaces.

Tectonic is the appropriate word for this jostling of volumes in plan and section, stacked like human innards.

There are many wonderful moments; the window between the rehearsal room and the upper foyer delivered by the fold and intersection of the two forms, the offset of the main stairs landings, the foyer light fittings and stairs balustrade reaching and stepping like longlimbed creatures, the relationship of upper and bar foyers, the soffit to the bar foyer, the top floor room looking over roofs to the north and east, the terrazzo boulder of a bar, the picture ►

