

## An Gaeláras O'Donnell + Tuomey Architects

**'O'Donnell + Tuomey has neither made a divisive icon nor created a civic museum. It has made a home for Irish-speakers'**

*Stephen Best*

If Ireland's north-west is not the first place you would expect to go looking for the authentic soul of modern Irish architecture, perhaps you should think again. This part of Ulster is better known for its linen trade, bitter social division and wet, windswept landscapes than it is for interesting buildings. But look a little closer and you find a rich vein of world-class modern architecture, with a sense of permanence and familiarity that celebrates local craft and culture.

The most recent addition is An Gaeláras Cultúrlann Uí Chanáin, home to the Cultúrlann Uí Chanáin centre for Irish language, culture and enterprise, designed by O'Donnell + Tuomey Architects. This is the practice's third building to be selected for the Stirling Prize shortlist. Architecturally, it marks a turning point in their work and is the first in a series of public buildings that explore circulatory intrigue.

Fifty years ago, Liam McCormick set up shop in Derry and began creating a uniquely Irish interpretation of Modernism. The result, which was anchored in recognition of the importance of place, produced some of the most resolutely Irish architecture of the 20th century, including the astonishing, ring-fort inspired Burt church. Remarkably, McCormick's commissions bridged

two of the most conservative institutions on the island, the Catholic and Presbyterian churches.

An Gaeláras is also in Derry or, if you prefer, Londonderry. In a divided city with two rhetoric-laden names in the same tongue, it is easy to imagine how language has become so important here. English is bellowed by political polemicists on both sides to define and reinforce oppositional identities. Gaelic is more likely to be whispered. Sometimes this is for nefarious, clandestine reasons – a legacy of the H-Blocks – but more often it is spoken by those who seek to be whole and to dwell poetically.

Comprising the usual array of offices, meeting spaces, café, auditorium and bookshop, An Gaeláras uses the standard lexicon of contemporary cultural buildings. Where it differs, it succeeds best. O'Donnell + Tuomey has neatly side-stepped the obvious pitfalls of a building of this type. It has neither made a divisive icon nor created a civic museum, both of which would have alienated at least half the population and dulled a living language. Instead, it has made a home for Irish-speakers.

O'Donnell + Tuomey has prior knowledge of this type of building. In 1992, the practice designed a similarly internalised cultural space for the Irish Film Institute (IFI) in Dublin's Temple Bar and it is still one of the area's most popular buildings. Like the IFI, Cultúrlann is organised around a bright internal court, a social space at the centre of the building. Unlike the IFI, which shows glimpses of contemporary architectural fashion, such as the Norman Foster-designed Katharine Hamnett glass walkway, the Derry building is more responsive to its particular social and physical context.

This is most evident in the building's crumpled, cavernous court, its heart, which is designed >>

DEVINIS GILBERT/VIEW



for people and occupation rather than to impress. The circulation wraps around it, threading in and out through the building's heavy, stereotomic form. It is designed to encourage meanderings. O'Donnell + Tuomey points to a fascination with unruly circulation in pre-Renaissance houses as one root of the design, which is convincing. This is not a building for doing things quickly. It is at its best when people stop and chatter; it is a heterogeneous space, full of nooks and crannies.

The building's essence, its strength, is that the architecture is not merely there to be admired. Instead it invites occupation. Like a poem, its meaning is inseparable from the poem itself and, like poets, architects offer more than technical solutions to pragmatic necessity. O'Donnell + Tuomey, like McCormick before them, have the knack of speaking an architectural language grounded in instinctive cultural understanding of the site and brief. The practice's buildings contain those revelatory moments we call architecture – moments of recognition in spatial form – that are completely new. It is not an easy trick to conjure. It requires the designer to have an ability to forget and remember at the same time, to balance experiences with expectations.

In 2013, Derry will be crowned City of Culture, inaugurating a new annual British arts programme. It is now 13 years since the Good Friday agreement was signed and the peace dividend is paying off. For the first time in a generation, money is being spent on the urban fabric. An Gaeláras is popular, and has become a strong catalyst for reconciliation in the city. According to An Gaeláras chief executive Gerry O'Heara, the building's quality has 'elevated the status of the Irish language and helped to diminish its contested nature'. *Stephen Best, architecture critic, The Sunday Times*

**Previous page**  
Concrete, steel plate walkways and painted MDF screens combine at An Gaeláras

**Below** Front elevation and entrance to An Gaeláras  
Cultúrlann Ul Chanáin

**Bottom** The cavernous central court occupies the heart of the building



DENNIS GILBERT/VIEW

## Q + A

**John Tuomey**  
DIRECTOR, O'DONNELL + TUOMEY ARCHITECTS

*What was your design concept for An Gaeláras?*

We started with the idea of extending the public street into the building. We wanted to open up the frontage and pull people inside, to encourage public participation in the cultural activities the centre offers: Irish language, music, singing and dancing.

*What was your approach with regards to the site and the existing buildings?*

The restricted site was landlocked on three sides and even the street side had impediments imposed by an electricity substation and fire exit passageway. The project represented a radical social idea and we felt the building needed to disrupt its setting and break free of its restrictions. At the same time, it had to be designed within the urban context of a conservation area.

*What was the most challenging aspect of the project?*

The construction budget was £2.8 million for almost 2,000 m<sup>2</sup>.

*What is the main lesson you have taken away from the scheme?*

That a building can embody the

spirit of its cultural project, as long as the energies of the architect and client are in sympathy and if the builder believes in his craft.

*Were there any design precedents for an 'Irish language, cultural and enterprise centre'?*

An Gaeláras is the first purpose-designed Irish language cultural centre. It was a new and progressive brief shaped by the changing political landscape of Northern Ireland.

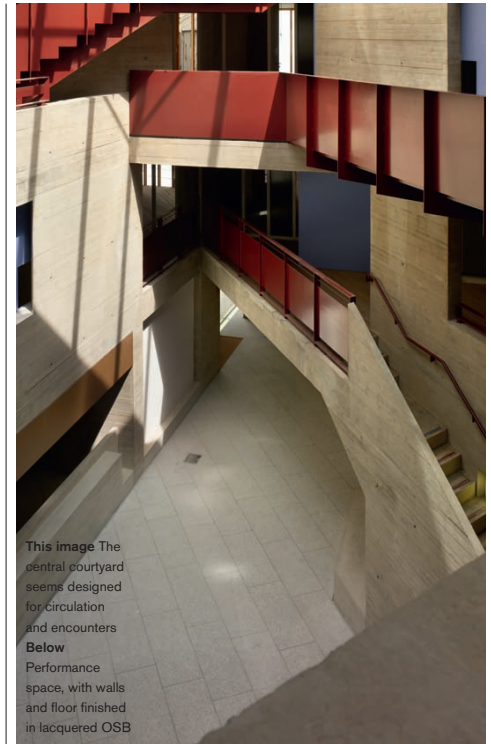
*Were you surprised to see the scheme on the Stirling Prize shortlist?*  
Yes, surprised and pleased.

*Where does this building sit in the evolution of the practice?*

We are interested in making quite complicated buildings seem as simple as possible, but no simpler.

*You have been nominated three times. What would winning the Stirling Prize mean to yourself and the practice?*

Jim Stirling was a mentor for us. Both of us learned a lot from working closely with him in the late 70s and early 80s. Winning the prize would be like winning his approval for our work.



This image The central courtyard seems designed for circulation and encounters  
**Below** Performance space, with walls and floor finished in lacquered OSB

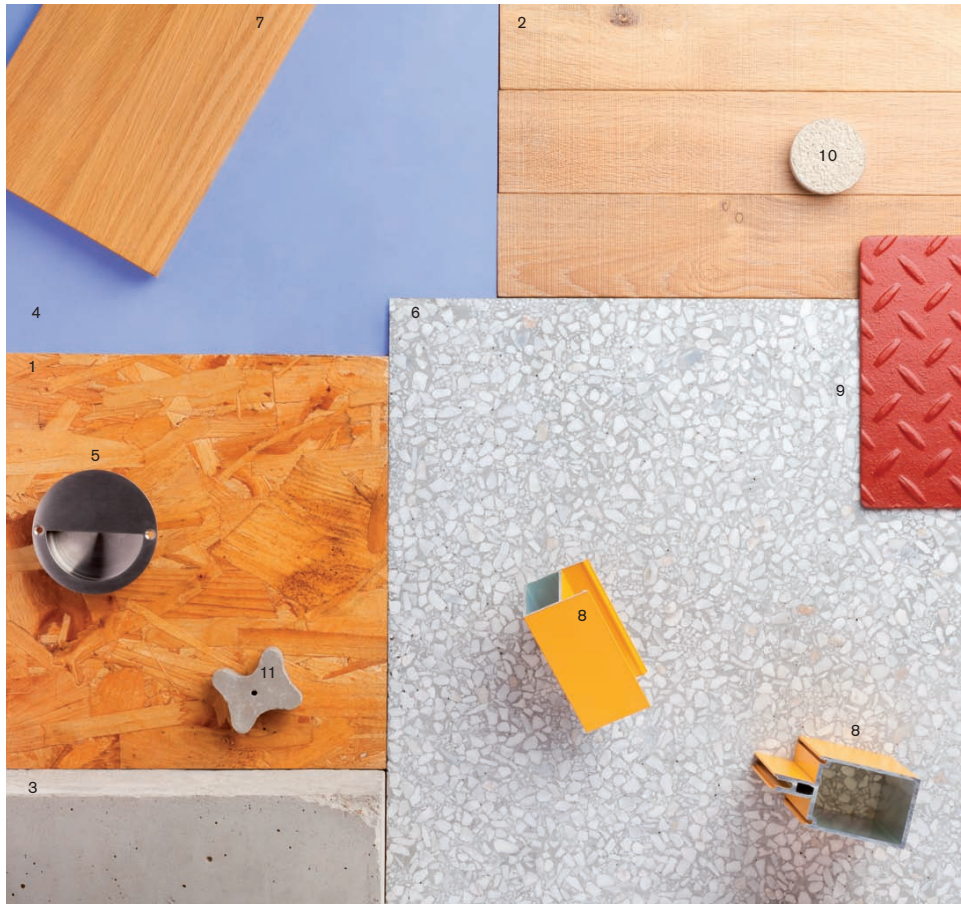


DENNIS GILBERT/VIEW



## Materials

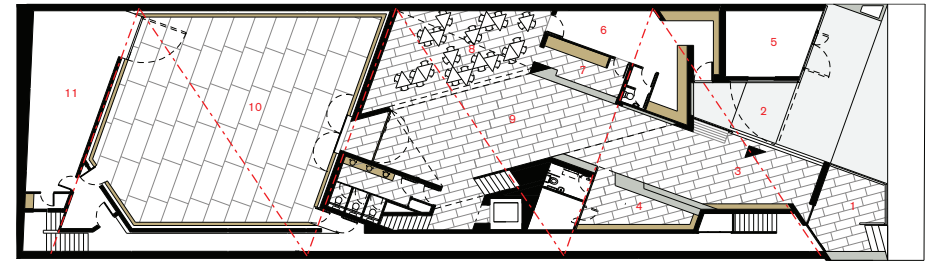
- |  |  |  |   |  |
|--|--|--|---|--|
| <p>1. Lacquered OSB used for wall and floor lining to back of house and performance spaces</p> <p>2. 75 x 19mm tongue and groove</p> | <p>3. Fairfaced concrete soffit</p> <p>4. Painted MDF finish to internal screens</p> <p>5. Brushed stainless steel</p> | <p>ironmongery</p> <p>6. Terrazzo floor finish to WCs and ground floor</p> <p>7. Oiled European oak worktops and desks</p> <p>8. Curtain walling</p> | <p>section with RAL 1006 Maize Yellow finish</p> <p>9. 10mm Durbar plate to all steel walkways and stairs, painted red</p> <p>10. External render</p> | <p>to side and rear walls. Fintry Stone finish</p> <p>11. Rebar supports cast into slabs and walls, colour to match concrete</p> |
|--|--|--|---|--|



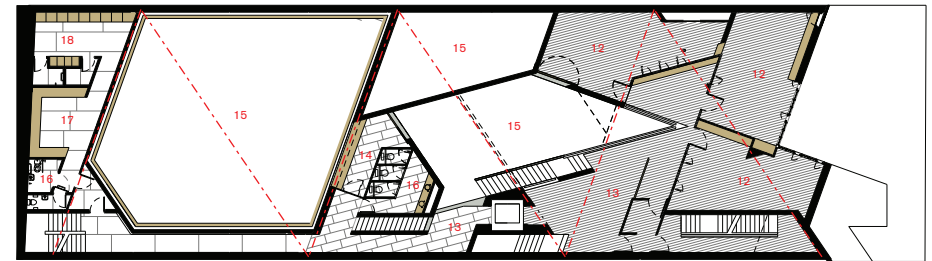
STALEBRUNSEN

## Drawings

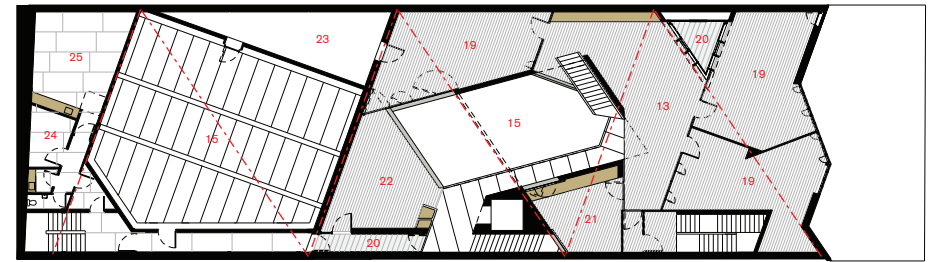
Ground-floor plan



First-floor plan

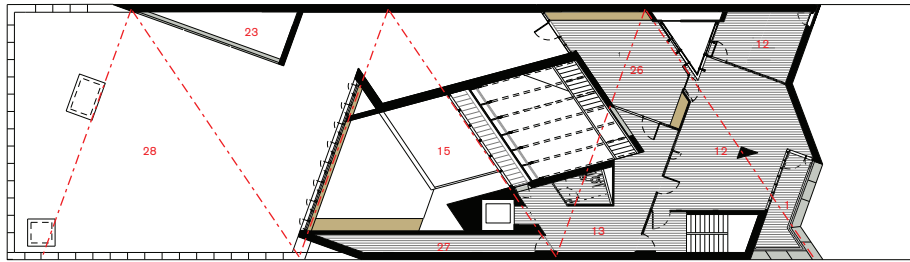


Second-floor plan

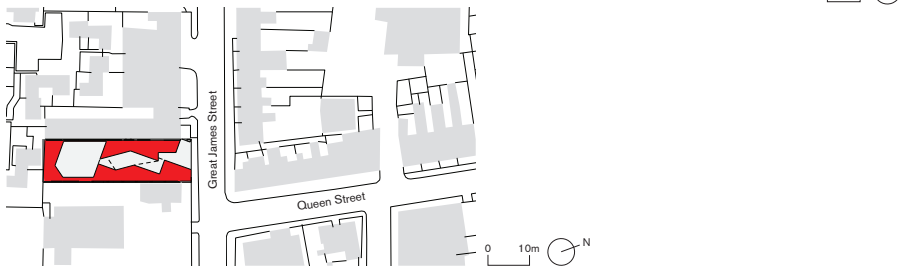


- |                     |                       |                        |                          |
|---------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. External terrace | 9. Courtyard          | 15. Void               | 22. Arts and crafts room |
| 2. Entrance         | 10. Performance space | 16. WC                 | 23. Plant room           |
| 3. Shop             | 11. Backstage         | 17. Make-up room       | 24. Dimming room         |
| 4. Reception        | 12. Office            | 18. Changing room      | 25. Green room           |
| 5. Substation       | 13. Lobby             | 19. Teaching room      | 26. Boardroom            |
| 6. Kitchen          | 14. Projection room   | 20. External courtyard | 27. Store                |
| 7. Servery          |                       | 21. Staff room         | 28. Roof                 |
| 8. Café             |                       |                        |                          |

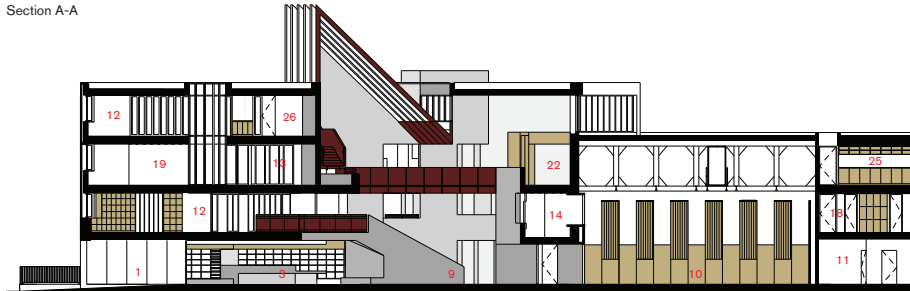
Third-floor plan



Site plan



Section A-A



## Working detail

- |  |  |   |   |   |   |
|--|--|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Reinforced concrete internal wall with board-marked finish to exposed faces, sealed with clear matt dust sealer | boards with sawn and brushed upper surface. Polythene vapour barrier, 300mm reinforced concrete slab | concrete wall   | tapered beam  | welded to beams   | screen and opening panel.                       |
| 2. 75 x 19mm tongue-and-groove oak floor   | 3. 430 x 100 x 64mm PFC bolted to  | 4. 100 x 55 x 3mm RHS welded to top of PFC                | 7. 100 x 12mm upright bolted to bracket                   | 10. 75 x 20mm stiffening plate welded to underside of floor plate near leading edge. Red oxide finish | Hardwood lippings to exposed edges              |
|  |  | 5. Pair of 485 x 12mm steel plates welded into web of PFC | 8. 6mm balustrade plate folded over and welded to upright | 11. 74mm-thick painted timber   | 12. Desk with 44mm solid European white oak top |
|  |  | 6. 485 x 12mm cantilevering                               | 9. 10mm Durbar plate floor                                |   |   |

### Cut-away section through courtyard wall

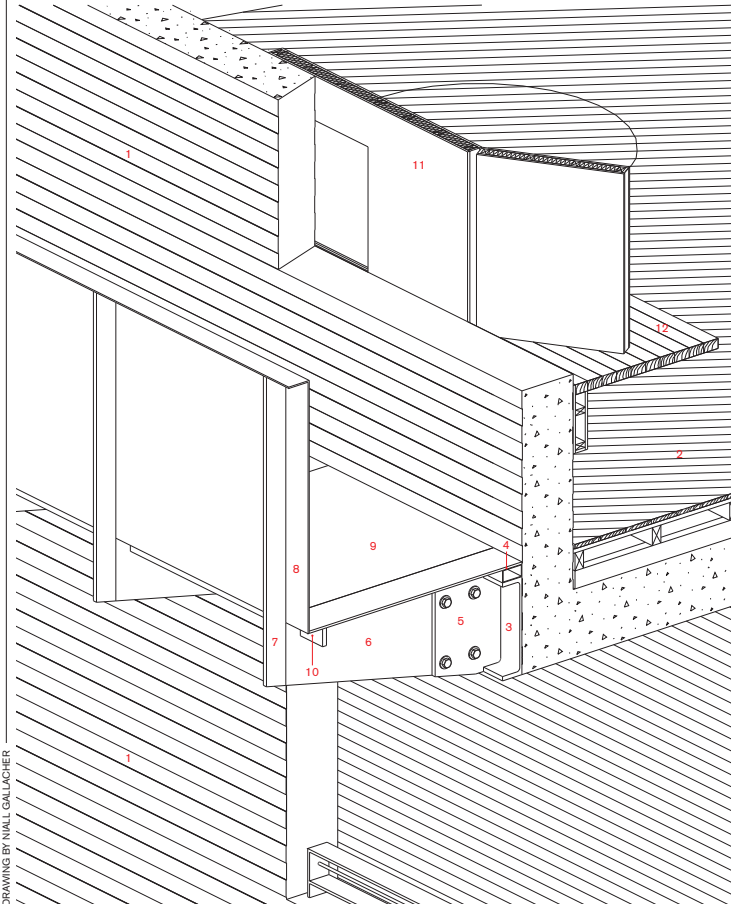
An Gacláras is designed for public life and the community. The building is thought of as an open house for Irish culture, with windows overlooking the street and courtyard and ease of access and circulation for visitors and staff.

The external street facade and internal courtyard structure are constructed from board-marked concrete, cast against a formwork of 75mm-wide horizontal timber boards, each planed to enhance the depth of pattern in the wood.

A continuous terrazzo floor connects the footpath to the interior of the building, minimising the barrier between outside and inside and maximising the potential for visual interaction with the street.

A glazed, trapezoidal courtyard is carved through the four floors of the building, with red oxide steel-plated stairs, bridges and platforms crossing and overlooking the skylit space.

The emphasis is on natural light and natural materials, with internal courtyards and roof gardens giving identity and character to the new building.  
*John Tuomey, director, O'Donnell + Tuomey Architects*



DRAWING BY NIALL GALLAGHER