

ARCHITECTURE IRELAND

Civic and Culture

The Lyric Theatre, Belfast

Wexford CoCo Headquarters

Rathmines Square

2011 Irish Architecture Awards

NAMALab

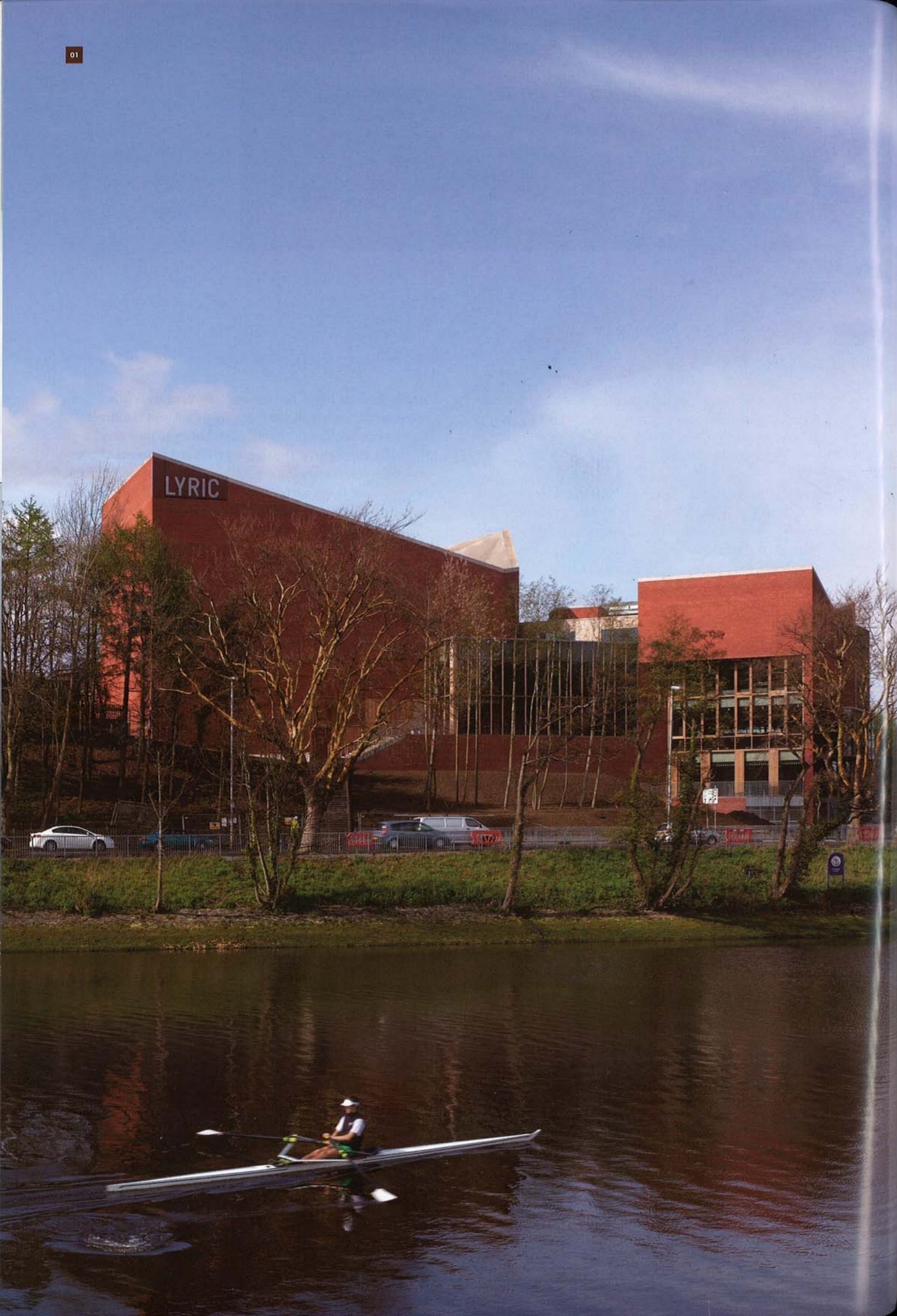
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The Journal of the Royal Institute
of the Architects of Ireland

RIAI





LYRIC THEATRE BELFAST

ARCHITECTS - O'Donnell + Tuomey
John Tuomey (Director in Charge), Mark Grehan (Project Architect)

CLIENT - Lyric Theatre

STRUCTURAL ENGINEERS - Horgan Lynch Consulting Engineers

COST CONSULTANT - Rider Levett Bucknall

SERVICES ENGINEERS - IN2 Engineering

THEATRE CONSULTANTS - Theatreplan

ACOUSTICS - Sound Space Design

ACCESS / CDM - Ken Ewart Associates

TRAFFIC ENGINEERING - RPS Consulting Engineers

PROJECT DIRECTOR - Richard Wakely

PROJECT MANAGER - EC Harris

GRAPHIC DESIGN - Red Dog

MAIN CONTRACTOR - Gilbert Ash NI

PHOTOGRAPHY - Dennis Gilbert/VIEW

Project size - 5,026²

Value - 15.7m

Duration - 26 months

Location - 55 Ridgeway Street, Belfast

REPORT *By John Tuomey*

In 2003, the Lyric held an international architectural competition and selected O'Donnell + Tuomey as architects to design a new theatre. In May 2008, Belfast City Council granted planning approval, which included the demolition of the existing theatre and the construction of a new building for use by the Lyric providing auditorium, rehearsal and studio theatre together with related technical facilities. Further accommodation includes reception, bar and foyer, offices and an education room. With demolition of the existing theatre completed in 2008, construction started on site in March 2009. O'Donnell + Tuomey were novated to the Main Contractor Gilbert Ash and excellent working relationships were quickly established between the various members of the building team. The new Lyric Theatre opened on 1 May 2011.

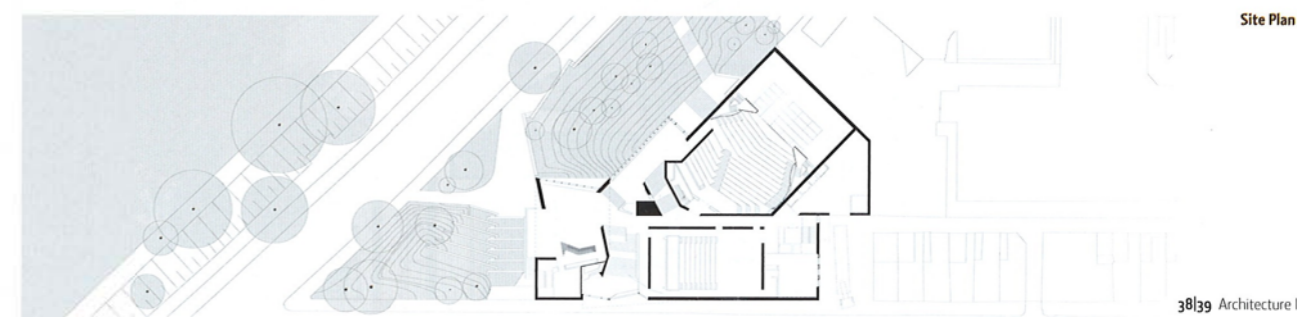
The American novelist Willa Cather described one of her early works as having been written before "(...) the time in a writer's development when his life line and the line of his personal endeavour meet". It seems to us that our work for the Lyric has emerged from just such a moment of intersection, when external circumstances and private purposes coincide. Experiments in overlapping geometry and three dimensional

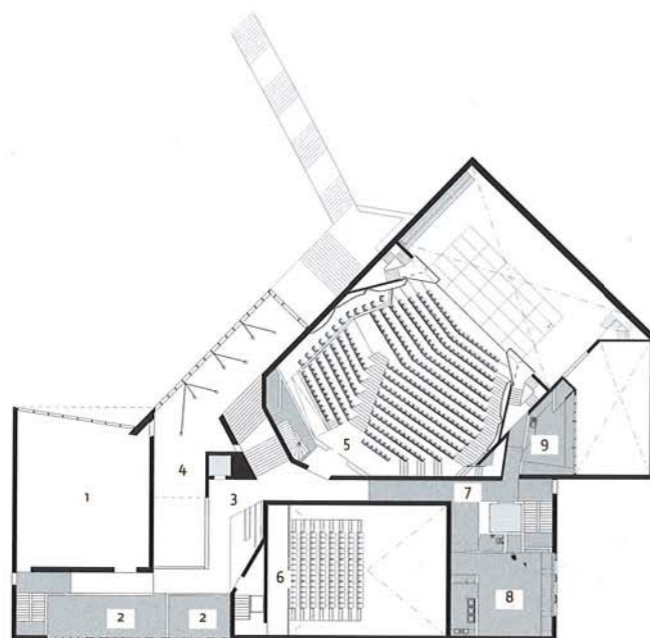
expression that were initiated several years ago in other projects and tested out at further stages in between have prepared us for this special public commission, a theatre in the city. After eight years of immersion in architectural design, technical details, study models, working drawings, through the long drawn out processes of planning and construction, it is a strange sensation to walk through the new theatre, to see our first thoughts made real.

We set out to design a House for Lyric, specific to the spirit of a producing theatre. Three brick-walled purpose-made spaces for

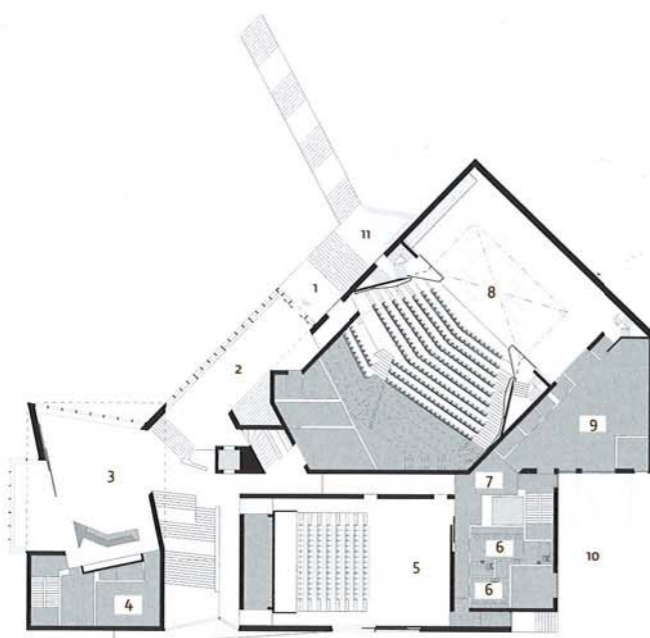
performance and rehearsal are tightly wrapped around a flowing social space. The in-between spaces are designed to have an intimate character, providing for impromptu theatrical occasions. Now that our work is done, the newly finished building passes out of our hands to fend for itself in the world. We hope that it will soon feel not so new, rather that it will be recognised as continuing the cultural ambition of the Lyric, as if this crystalline cluster has always been there on the city skyline, rising out of the deep background of Belfast's urban architecture, between brick streets and tall trees, reflected in the river, belonging to its place.

Volumetric spaces are produced as a direct consequence of the plan itself and the spatial scheme for the Lyric exploits the topographical aspects of its urban landscape setting. Our design found its form in reaction to the different pressures of its surroundings, from the constraints of the site. The impact of site vectors worked their way inwards from the world outside to influence the configuration of the plan. The Lyric plan is composed out of three constituent elements, the auditorium, the studio and the rehearsal room. Each element had to be acoustically separated from the other and each is identifiably outlined in its own shell of Belfast brick. There are three different points of entry, one for trucks and two for people, all tied to existing street levels. The rehearsal room is raised up to provide social space in its undercroft. The dismembered unity of the plan is a direct response to functional requirements and the complexity of the section results from our efforts to resolve the sometimes conflicting demands imposed by a tightly restricted and steeply sloping site. But there is more to design than problem solving, there is a parallel purpose that keeps us going, and that is the pursuit of architectural form.

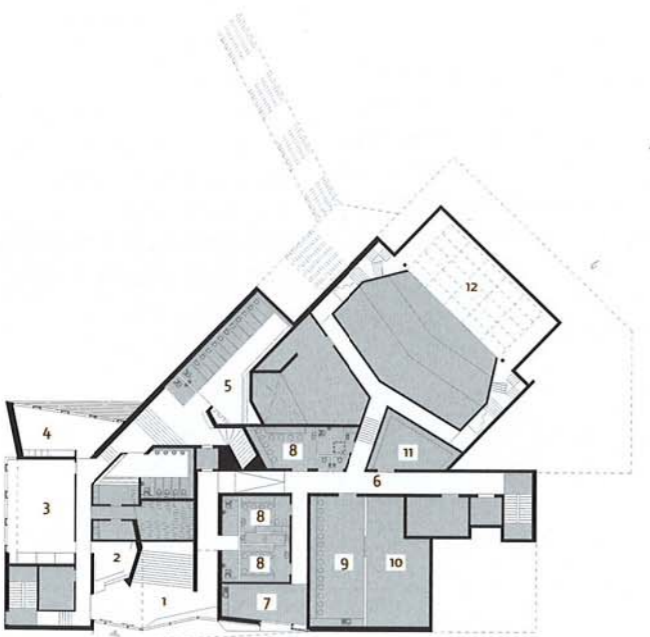




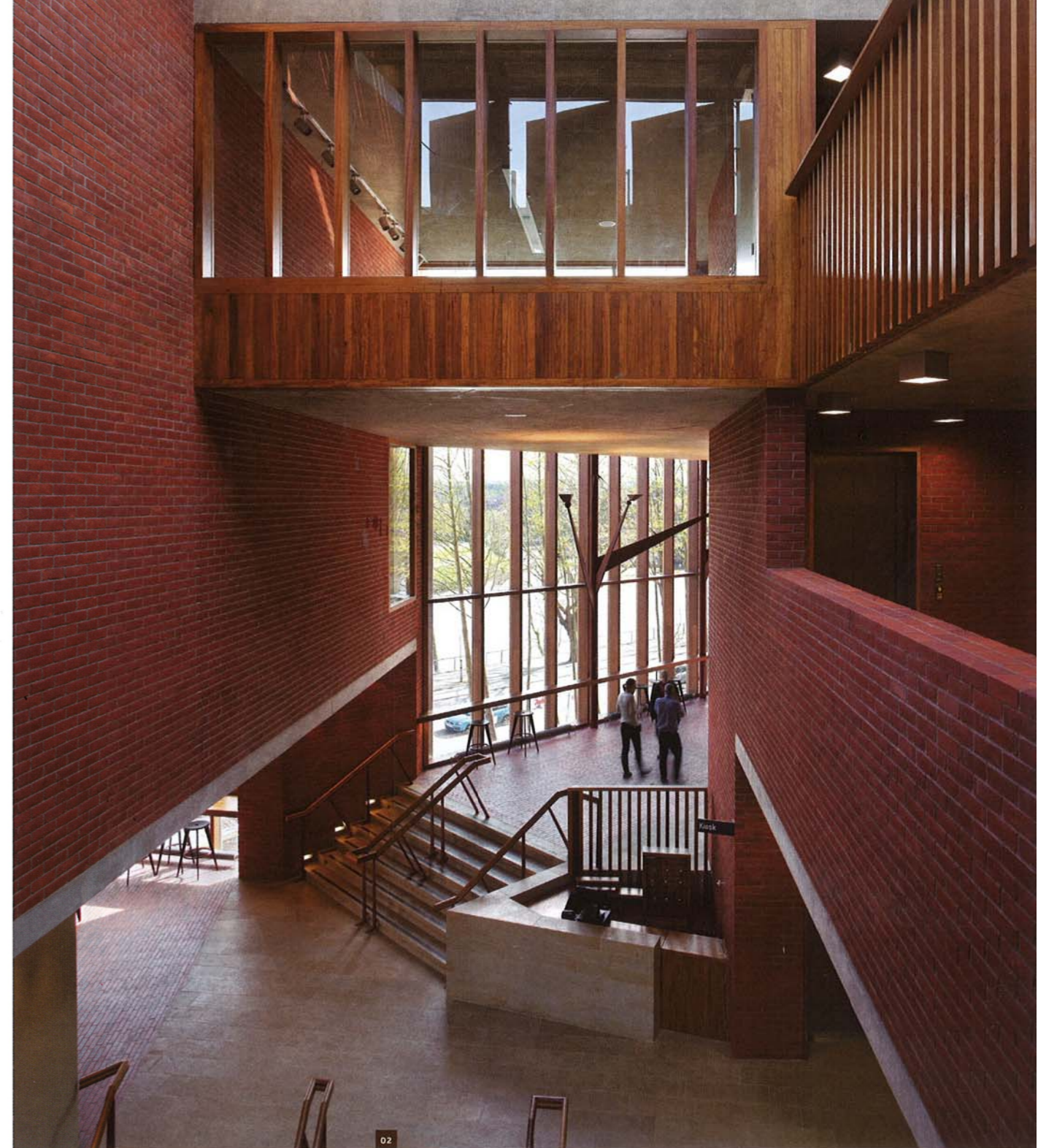
- Level 3**
- 1 Rehearsal
 - 2 Office
 - 3 Foyer
 - 4 Void
 - 5 Auditorium
 - 6 Studio Gallery
 - 7 Backstage
 - 8 Wardrobe
 - 9 Prop Workshop
 - 10 Storage
 - 11 Prop Store
 - 12 Understage



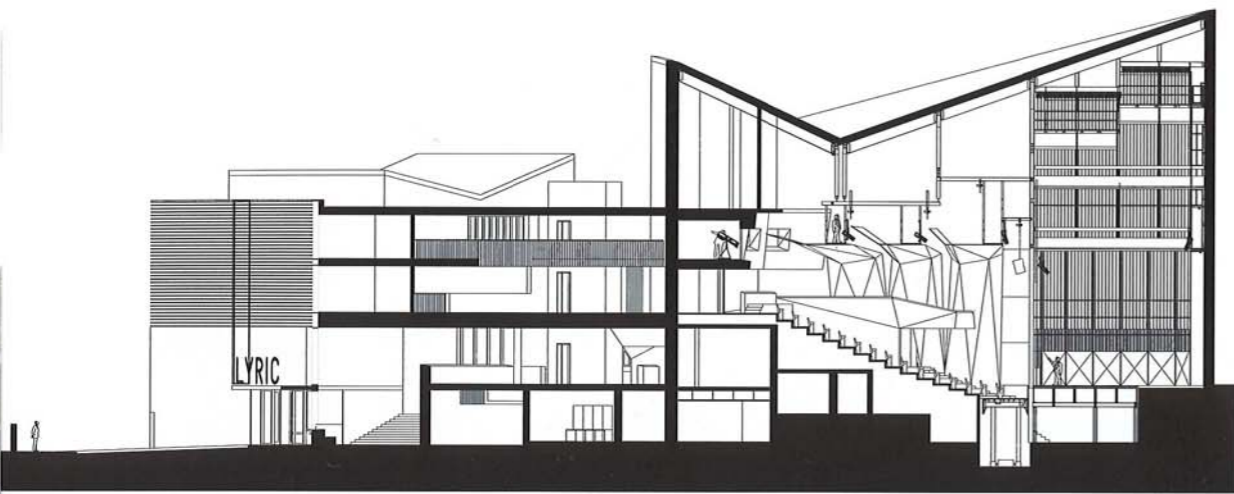
- Level 2**
- 1 Upper Entrance
 - 2 Upper Foyer
 - 3 Bar / Café
 - 4 Kitchen
 - 5 Studio
 - 6 Dressing Room
 - 7 Backstage
 - 8 Stage
 - 9 Scene Dock
 - 10 Loading Bay
 - 11 Terrace



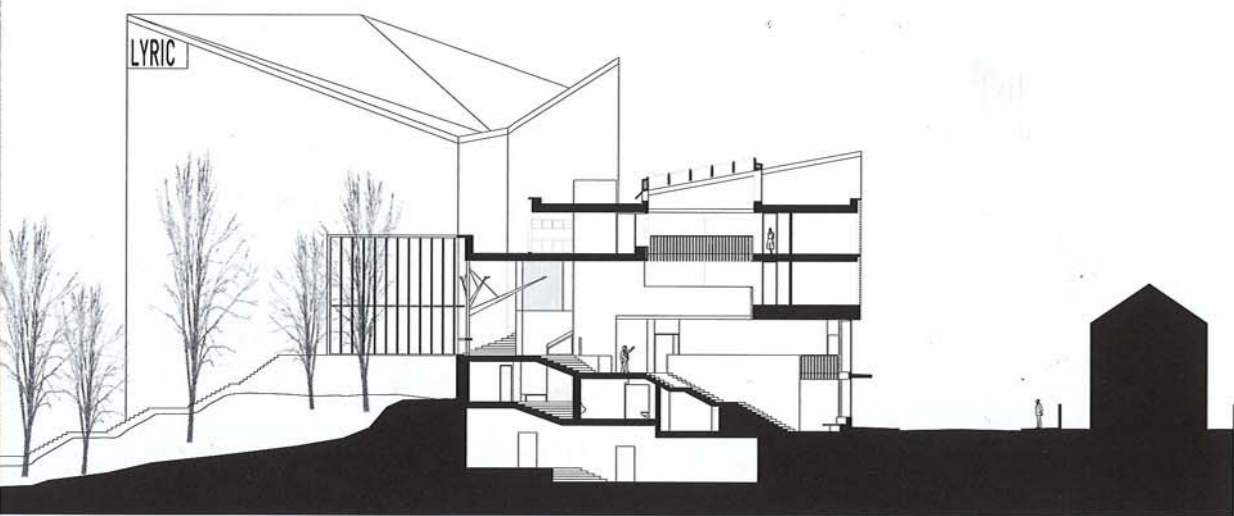
- Level 1**
- 1 Entrance lower Foyer
 - 2 Box Office
 - 3 Education Room
 - 4 Boardroom
 - 4 Toilets
 - 4 Backstage
 - 4 Green Room
 - 4 Dressing Room
 - 4 Classroom
 - 4 Storage
 - 4 Prop Store
 - 4 Understage



1. Reflected in the river, the Lyric rises out of the landscape
- 2/4. The impact of site vectors worked their way inwards to influence the plan
3. The Café addresses the river landscape
5. There are different points of entry
6. The rehearsal room is raised up to provide a social space in its undercroft
7. The front entrance at Ridgeway Street
8. The Lyric in its urban context
9. The cantilevered box offers views
10. The auditorium and stage are acoustically separated from the other spaces



Section A



Section B





THE LYRIC THEATRE: AN EXERCISE IN VERGING SPACE

Review by David Leatherbarrow

The originality and significance of the new Lyric Theatre becomes obvious when one recalls the long-standing dialogue between the theatre and the town. Before the construction of theatres, staged action took place in temporary settings. After the Renaissance, theatrical settings were made to last. The most well known case is transitional: Palladio's Teatro Olimpico in Vicenza (1585) was installed into pre-existing buildings at the edge of town and built out of timber. The really decisive breakthrough towards the modern enclosed and free-standing type was the Olympic Theatre in Sabbioneta (1590). Designed by Vincenzo Scamozzi, the interior ensemble internalised key aspects of its surrounds. The patron's loggia above the auditorium and stage, for example, was built to resemble a palace balcony overlooking the town's central square, making the theatre's interior the epitome of the landscape.

The same dialogue between theatre and town exists in O'Donnell + Tuomey's Lyric, but is articulated with entirely different means, which is why it writes a new chapter in the story. Not one but many rooms are involved in the relationship and the mode of experience is non-perspectival. Risking the introduction of a new term, I'll refer to the result as 'verging space', by which I simply mean the sort of configuration that allows one setting to edge its way into another. For this to occur, each must first have its own character and definition. Next, it must be willing to open itself into another or others without, however, compromising its own definition, which would result in fragmentation and render the entire exercise pointless. Lateralism such as this aims at involvement. That's not the same as acquisition; verging space articulates common interest.

In the Lyric Theatre walls open in order to ease and structure views into adjoining rooms or places outside. Comparable breaks accept insertions of identifiably distinct elements, which are themselves often porous. In the construction of verging space all manner of apertures are drawn into service, extra-wide doors too, and screen walls. Once a break has been opened and the request of one setting been answered by another, convergences appear. Movement of the eye or foot is the next step, accepting the invitation, increasing spatial knowledge. We tend to forget that architecture is a way of knowing one's place in the world. Verging space fosters orientation.

Consider the Lyric's main entry. The acute triangle of its canopy and its shadow annex a stretch of the sidewalk into its holdings. The 'purchase' or 'investment' is gradual, beginning with a slight divergence from the lines of the wall and walk. Under the canopy's half enclosure, lateral settings appear in sequence: waiting rooms, posters, the first step of the main stair, the Heaney poem-stone, and the entry – after the stone says 'turn here'. Although they all have their place in the newly thickened sidewalk, their non-parallelism keeps each opening individual. Above all this, before the cut gets very deep, a corresponding dent opens the façade's mid-level, framing a view that penetrates all the way through the building to the giant window facing the river. This is seen best from the other side of the road, suggesting that the aim is to get the street's entire width involved. Of course the borrowing works in reverse too, putting the houses on stage. Marginal play of this kind is not only geometric or spatial, for the breaks often introduce different materials into the building's physical body, warming or cooling it. But the main objective is to increase one's awareness

of practical possibilities: from the sidewalk vantage one can see the possibility of observing, attending, entering, ascending, or having a drink. In short, verging space invites involvement. Perhaps the main auditorium is the most articulate display of side-pocket settings, given its folds, complex planarity, spread seating, and varied lighting, all together approximating a totality of reciprocal involvements. Bay windows are another version of the divergence/convergence structure, for they extend marginal inflection into separate rooms. A case in point is the cantilevered bar that extends the bar area.

The consequence of this kind of order for the building's exterior and urban presence is the transformation of its volumetric bulk into planar surfaces, shadows, and settings that are more in scale with the surrounds, at least on the city side, with respect to the terraced houses nearby. The yield of such convergence is not exactly knowledge. Nor is it full experience of the settings exposed by the openings. Certainly one cannot be in two places at the same time. On the balcony one is plainly not in the foyer. Yet, it is precisely this sort of convergence (meeting, junction, union) that the building proposes. Settings seen at the margins are not 'grasped' or known fully but sensed or apprehended, and not because of focus but awareness. Here, then, is the crucial point: this building structures a truly spatial, which is to say non-pictorial mode of experience; it makes us aware of where we are in the building and in the world.

Thus, it is both ironic and fitting that this restatement of architecture's spatial essence also sets the stage for theatrical performance, for it was the theatre, more than any other building type that led to the step by step transformation of architecture into a pictorial or scenographic art form, an accomplishment with which we struggle still today. But theatre has always had more tricks up its sleeve: off-stage sound, temporal structure, inconspicuous arrivals and departures, and so on, none of which are perspectival. In theatre what is seen is never more than part of the story, no more important than what is recalled or anticipated, seen no longer or not yet. It is the no longer and not yet of theatrical sense that the spatiality proper to architecture brings into visibility. Looking from the second to the first storey of the Lyric stair hall several spaces promise more than they show: the stools of the bar, the trees along the river, entry into private offices, and so on. Because they propose more than they portray, prospects such as this enrich individual settings with ties to others, as in a family, with its typical rivalries, affections, rebellions, and memories that shape identity. Because kinship exists here too, settings that appear and diverge recall one another through resemblance. But continuity also requires difference.

Finally, verging space such as this is uncommonly generous. This building always gives more than it shows. Is that because it contains great richness? Yes and no. A great variety of characters and moods can be found here. But I believe its real richness results from its involvement in the world around it: the fabric of the town, the flow of the river, the history of the place, and the tradition of theatre. The building's openings provide access points to the urban and cultural depth it finds itself within. But these connections always emerge laterally and without much fuss because the building is concerned less with what it shows than what it allows to appear.

PRODUCTS & TECHNOLOGY

Brick in Architecture

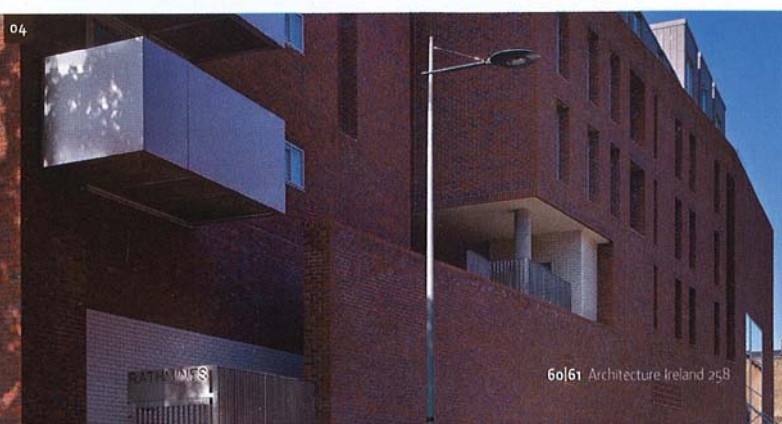
By Michael Hayes

Two recently completed Irish projects reaffirm the value of brick in architecture – the Lyric Theatre in Belfast and Rathmines Leisure Centre. While each have been inspired by unique conditions, the architects' choice of brick expresses qualities associated with one of the world's oldest building materials. In a modern context, the semantics of brick speak of a long tradition and humane craft and scale that is backed up by its practical properties of durability and reliability. *Architecture Ireland* has discussed these issues with architects John Tuomey (The Lyric) and John Winslow (Rathmines Square)

The Lyric Theatre(1+2) is built to match the sloping Belfast brick streetscape. Ibstock's 'Heritage Red Blend' has been chosen to sculpt the three principal volumes housing theatre, studio and rehearsal space. This external brick cladding extends internally, reinforcing the massing of forms through a series of permeable public spaces. Simultaneously providing a functional role, the material itself forms an integral layer in the assembly of a high performance acoustic and thermal mass. For example, within the studio space brick has been chosen to internally clad a 6-metre high warehouse performance space, creating a dynamic, robust and vibrant theatre environment. The possibilities of brick as an individually crafted object are exploited to the full in the Lyric Theatre. Brick specials that have been hand-cast are used throughout the building in response to the carved angles and spatially complex spaces created by the site specific design solution. 'Terre de Rose Pavers' manufactured by Wienerberger are used as flooring to define the main areas of public congregation in the foyer and bar spaces, extending the colour, texture and intimate brick character beyond the walls.

For Rathmines Square (3+4) the context of 19th century brick terraces, Carnegie Town Hall and the Library building made brick seem an obvious and respectful choice. Two brick types are used: Firstly, the predominantly red 'West Hoathly' stock brick from Ibstock was used generally, including as a paver to the roof of the swimming pool. Its mottled multicoloured texture finish is sympathetic to the diversity of the local bricks, particularly the traditional 'Dolphins Barn' brick, which was often 'made' on site. The 'West Hoathly' brick, which originates south of London, is formed in a similar labour intensive manor, practically using the same method and machinery today as it did 100 years ago. The second brick is a smooth cream glazed brick by Ibstock. Selected to contrast with the former, it is predominately used where the building meets the ground, helping to deal with any unwelcome graffiti and recalling the way the Victorians used glazed bricks as decoration around door openings.

Rathmines Square also provides a lesson in approaching this material. While considering emerging technical developments, the architects stress the importance of traditional design methods such as large-scale sample panels and mortar experiments. In practical terms, good brick layers have been appreciated as key, but how many and where they are deployed on the site warranted serious thought, critical for obtaining a consistent appearance. In Rathmines Square the majority of the public elevations were completed by just three or four men.



THE PROW OF SHIP ON RIDGEWAY STREET

By Gerald Dawe

My connection to the Lyric goes back to the mid 1960s when, along with other friends at Orangefield School, I was involved in the Lyric Youth Theatre. In those days the group met in a church hall in Cromwell Road, a Judith-Hearne-like street just off Belfast's Botanic Avenue. In that hall we were instructed to dance by the wonderful Helen Lewis, author of the Holocaust memoir, *A Time to Speak*, and in theatre practise by Sam McCready, a powerhouse of dramatic proportions. With the O'Malley family, the Lyric's founders, and many other local theatre people, Sam bridged the generations and linked the upcoming younger generation with the established Lyric in its 'then' new home on Ridgeway Street in south Belfast. Nestled inside the rising redbrick streetscape above the Lagan River, and under the busy suburban thoroughfare of Stranmillis, the theatre found a home for itself nearby the College of Education, the Ulster Museum, the University and the Botanic Gardens.

The Lyric in the sixties was a little out of Belfast city centre's self-consciousness but it was to become a great beacon of hope and perseverance during the very dark days when Belfast plummeted into the Troubles. As bombing and gunfire and curfews and mayhem swirled around the inner city, the theatre refused to close its doors. In a sense the theatre, stage, foyer and surroundings seemed to be somewhat like a secular church, no matter what play there was in performance. The Lyric had a battle to survive not just the local violence of the times but also the struggle that all theatres experience working through difficult contemporary commercial challenges and cultural changes.

When my mother and step-father moved in retirement to south Belfast in the mid seventies, my returns home often included a walk along the neighbouring Lagan via Annadale and the allotments. The Lyric sat across the river bank looking increasingly more isolated and bruised as the houses around Ridgeway Street lost their residents and turned increasingly into rented accommodation. Almost a sense of foreboding descended. Despite all the pleasure and tribulation overcome in the theatre's past, the Lyric looked isolated.

For a city not greatly given to civic understanding of its literary cultural legacy, never mind making much effort to promote the diverse success of its artistic community over several generations, the new Lyric that has stepped out from behind the scaffolding is a brave and defiant statement of belief in the future of the dramatic arts in Belfast. Hopefully the theatre will be able to integrate itself much more dynamically with the Belfast that is now also emerging out of the heavy industrial past. It would be great too if the new Lyric could re-establish itself firmly and coherently in its rich cultural roots in Irish theatre as well as welcoming the best of work from Britain and further afield. The Lyric, now re-imagined as a prominent light-filled outward-looking auditorium, is no longer metaphorically hidden within the rocky hillside of Ridgeway Street, but rather stands out, like the prow of a ship, with at long last a fair wind behind it.

Belfast-born poet Gerald Dawe is the author of the highly regarded portrait of Belfast, *My Mother-City* (Lagan Press 2007). He is a Fellow of Trinity College Dublin.

Gerald Dawe

"Laughter and Forgetting"

The wine store has gone lilac
and where the Jaffe Memorial
stands in a forlorn green
the Lagan glides by.
A set of girl rowers scull
in and out of the winter sun.
It's cold enough, making your way
up Ridgeway Street.
The houses on both sides
change hands each year –
broken banisters, the ancient
sky light, Ireland Saturday Nights'
at the back of the water tank.
Newspaper shops, home bakeries,
a restaurant in what
was some body's front room,
and the attic that's a store
has initials carved on
the window's leaded flashing
that no one knows anything about,
except maybe you walking down-
town as the school kids
head out to the traffic lights.

Old folk sit in the Gardens
among the deepening shades
and over at the Bookshop
set texts for the first years
are piled high. Indie music
blasts out from the Students' Union
while those unwelcome stand
at the low wall waiting admission.
There's Riesling bottles down
the back of the Lombard Café
and there's empty cans of Harp
and flagons of scrumpy
dumped in King William's Park.
Do you remember? Do you remember?
Do you remember, what?
The hillsides are glorious
and that's as good as it gets.

© Gerald Dawe Lake Geneva (The Gallery Press 2003)

Brian Friel, 2011

A new theatre can be the most exciting building in any city. It can be the home of miracles and epiphanies and revelations and renovations. And building a new theatre – especially in times like these – is both an act of fortitude and a gesture of faith in your community. This is your playhouse – come and play with us here.

Seamus Heaney

I dedicate to speech, to pomp and show,
This playhouse be erected for the players.
I set my saw and chisel in the wood
To joint and panel solid metaphors:
The walls a circle, the stage under a hood –
Here all the world's an act, a word, an echo.

From "Peter Street at Bankside", written by Seamus Heaney in 1965 for the first Lyric Theatre on this site. Peter Street, a carpenter, built the Globe in London where many of Shakespeare's plays were first performed.

