



*John Tuomey of O'Donnell & Tuomey on the Lyric Theatre, Belfast, supreme winner of the 2011 Brick Awards.*



Building the Lyric in Belfast brick (Brick Bulletin, Summer 2011) was a first principle of our design. We hoped that the design might be seen as emerging out of the continuity of its context – Belfast is an angular brick city. We chose a red brick to match the colour and texture of the typical Belfast brick. The site for the new theatre is located at the intersection of the red brick street grid with the serpentine sweep of the River Lagan. Each angle of the plan, and the resultant number of brick specials for its many corner conditions, are related to the peculiar restrictions of the site. The geometry is a little complicated but the brickwork simplifies the visual complexity.

Theatre buildings are by their nature

internalised, and by necessity, mostly windowless. We set out to play with these restrictions, making a cluster of solid sculptural forms, with profiled edges clearly visible on the city skyline. The brick skin wraps each of the three functional elements: the auditorium, studio, and rehearsal room. This outer crust runs uninterrupted from outside to inside, enhancing the acoustic separation of parts. The brickwork brings a feeling of raw material and archaic construction into the interior civic space of stair halls and circulation areas. Thick-sliced sandstone and solid hardwood add to the feeling of robust permanence given by natural materials. The concrete structure reveals itself at slab edges, sometimes cutting through the

brick skin to show how the loads are carried. The auditorium has its own special timber lining, an acoustic instrument in a concrete case. Despite the weight and density of its construction the building still feels lively, light and airy inside and out. It feels great to see it full of people and it seems to have been adopted already as a popular meeting place in Belfast. We hope it continues to thrive with theatrical and social activity.

This building is one of a series of urban projects that we have built out of brick. The Timbryard (Brick Bulletin, Summer 2009) is a social housing scheme that builds back into the architectural character of our home town of Dublin. We are currently on site in London with a site-specific design for a new student centre for the London School of Economics. In these buildings we have enjoyed working with brick, stretching out areas of the elevation to increase the sense of surface, and cutting into the skin to create depth and shadow. We like the imprecise texture and the variety given by clay pigmentation in contrast to very precise setting out lines and crafted construction. We find that builders and bricklayers like to be asked to pay attention to the visual refinement of their work. In the end everything depends on the quality of workmanship and materials. With brickwork you can make radical buildings that feel both new and old, and strange and familiar at the same time.

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**Top** The Lyric Theatre in Belfast was named supreme winner of the 2011 Brick Awards. It also won the best public building category (brickwork contractor: Gilbert Ash NI; brick: Ibstock Brick – Leicester Red).

**Above** The student centre at the London School of Economics will include a media centre, learning cafe, pub, exercise studio, activities space, and roof terrace.

**Left** Timbryard social housing scheme in Dublin (ph: Dennis Gilbert).