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Three projects, three cities

Emma Scallon explores the brick architecture of award-winning Irish practice O’Donnell & Tuomey.

On a former timberyard in a historic part of Dublin, where road development has torn the built fabric apart, 47 homes form a red, dense and solid-seeming brick mass. The influential Irish architects O’Donnell & Tuomey have employed a remarkable, radical and relevant piece of urban nostalgia as people are literally put before profit in an effort to avoid the dominant ‘living over the shop’ model, which continues to fall in Dublin. Instead, the housing gathers around a new public space, shared rooms connect to the street and actual front doors with doorbells and flowerpots are once again put at street level.

In the Timberyard project the architects look back in order to look forward, not least in their use of brick. Dublin is a city of brick houses, mostly two to five storeys high, so to make brick homes in a city of brick homes seems appropriate, a way of fitting in. O’Donnell & Tuomey, having asked the oldest neighbours how best to make a street, they looked around the city and to the brick-built Georgian terraced houses.

The architects describe their approach to the form and facade as a search for a twenty-first century Georgian hole-in-the-wall building. Housing requires a large number of windows, but the architects wanted the building to appear urban, solid and robust. To this end, the windows are staggered or slid away from each other on each floor, with a quiet rhythm and order that is apparent if you look for it. Deep double-height cuts made in the brick walls and formed into recesses for outdoor living give a depth and scale that allow the individual homes to add up to more than the sum of their parts – the building feels urban and of its city.

The architects admit that they never considered using any material other than brick with the Timberyard in Dublin, and so too in their Lyric Theatre in Belfast. Something ‘a bit sharp and a bit brick’ was just what the city ordered.

Described as a ‘rocks in a stream plan’, the project has three main rooms organised as formally distinct, acoustically isolated volumes, with those working and visiting here invited to flow in and around the circulation spaces between them.

‘The theatre is built on a slope and responds To make brick homes in a city of brick homes seems appropriate, a way of fitting in.’
formally both to this stepped condition and to its location between the grid of Belfast streets and the sinuous River Lagan. The brick forms bend and move to adjust itself, as if to bed down for the night, opening or otherwise. A red brick heritage brick is used to make what the architects call a ‘house for the Lyric’. It quietly
buries its harmony with the neighbouring brick terraces and streets, with brick specials made to ensure a continuity of surface at points of formal change.

Inside, the rooms are carefully placed to heighten the spatial tension of moving in and around, over and under the main auditoria, rehearsal and workshop spaces. Brick is used internally too; it builds up and encloses those three main rooms and brick ‘rugs’ on the floor mark out key destination points on the route. As you climb up through the building, you look outside to brick streets and walls while moving along and between brick streets and walls on the inside. This is a new kind of brick-based social engineering, albeit a gentle kind, as this house of theatre seeks a sustainable social and psychological connection with the city in which it now so firmly resides.

An interior and exterior exchange is also part of the concept behind the Students’ Centre at the London School of Economics, which is

Abbeville The Lyric Theatre (2011) stands on a sloping triangular site situated between Belfast’s brick terraces and the River Lagan section.

Cicada Brickwork unifies the interior spaces with a sense of new materiality and architectural construction. (photo: Devin Gibbey)
neering completion. Here, the surrounding streets and lanes are gathered up and into a building that nests into a challenging densely built site. This integration occurs both on plan and in section. The form of the building tilts forward and back and steps in and out to dodge established right-angle light, and to let light and air into its fantastic array of rooms.

Commissioned via competition, once again the architects interpreted the urban context as a city of bricks from the off, here making a solid, tilting and folding brick surface, cut or stretched thin to pour or sear light into the building as required. The Student's Centre is a product of its place.

To realise this building in brick was an architectural, structural and technical challenge requiring O'Donnell & Tuomey to fully and utterly commit to the drawing, making and assembling of brick. Hundreds of drawings were made for the hundred or so special bricks alone. These were handmade and hand-kiln with reference to a highly specific, almost step-by-step set of assembly drawings. After much research, pegging bricks were used in colours matched to the original competition paintings—bricks that would allow and then resist the standing water that would linger on the ledges formed from the stepping in and out of the bricks on this remarkable facade.

It is rare now in architecture that material is so inherently part of the built idea, beyond what it may sensationnally deliver in and of itself. In the work of O'Donnell & Tuomey, bricks are indeed sensational in and of themselves, but they add up to something more than just surface or shape, more than the sum of their parts. The material is used to make buildings belong to where they come from, an idea that some would perhaps argue is old-fashioned, nostalgic or irrelevant in our global, all-access world. In O'Donnell & Tuomey's hands, bricks, and the rooms formed from and within them, have made minerals matter.