Irish duo driving design on a world stage

O’Donnell + Tuomey Architects are partners in life as well as by trade. This week they were awarded the RIBA Royal Gold Medal, the UK’s highest architectural accolade.

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Sheila O’Donnell and John Tuomey are having a moment. They have just been awarded the RIBA Royal Gold Medal – one of world architecture’s top prizes. This year they are driving the design world with the Stirling Prize shortlist. In five years, they are among the leading architects of the UK.

As Sheila O’Donnell and John Tuomey describe the tools of their trade – clamps, pencils, rulers, Skizzen – in the opening chapter of the book, along with a description of their studio, in a former shop and restaurant they built in Dublin’s Camden Row, they get a sense of how the couple hold the ground for designing well-considered, dignified buildings with clamps.

The book is called Space for Architecture. "We didn’t want to write a monograph," John says. The internet and magazines are too comprehensive. Plans, sections and elevations are everywhere. "It felt like a time to set out for ourselves, what journey we’ve taken."

"And to maybe be useful in describing the different strands that influence how we make the work," Sheila adds. "There aren’t simply the technical aspects of designing a building; there are so many things we feel integral to the way we work. It was an opportunity to describe those.

"Why do certain things seem important, that might not seem obviously obvious, like why do I pick up stones and shells and how do I think that’s part of our work?"

Space for Architecture chronicles the journey of design, the evolution from ideas to buildings, from testing out in small projects to expansion in others. The couple’s own home in Rathmines has been a lab for 21 years. John is standing in a deep doorway between the original house and an extension, touching the edges. "We talk to each other a lot about thresholds," he says. "How to get to the threshold and how to make the threshold.

Sheila is standing in the garden, through a glass wall with strong strips of timber. And here it is again in the Sez O’Carroll Community Centre in Baldoyle, in Dublin’s Docklands, and Cherry Orchard Primary School, both in the courtyard chapter.

Collaborating ideas

The couple alternate chapters; there was a holiday in Greece in which John sat at a window and wrote while Sheila turned over ideas, with stones, on the beach. The days they spent there are mapped in the design of their student centre for the London School of Economics (LSE). The Saw Swee Hock Student Centre has a range of rooms in Daley, where the client returns from home in London, the building. Sheila and John and let them at it. They used to imagine the site being the London School of Economics (LSE). The Saw Swee Hock Student Centre has a range of rooms in Daley, where the client returns from home in London, the building.

The Stirling Prize

This is O’Donnell + Tuomey Architects’ fifth time on the Stirling Prize shortlist; the others were Ranelagh School (1989); the Glucksman Gallery, Cork (2002); An Gualainn in Derry (2003); and Belfast’s Lyric Theatre (2012).

Others on the shortlist this year are the Shard by Renzo Piano; the Olympic Aquatic Centre by Zaha Hadid; Library of Birmingham by Mecanoo; Manchester School of Art extension by Folds; and Liverpool’s Everyman Theatre by Haworth Tompkins.

In recognition of a lifetime’s work, the RIBA Royal Gold Medal is given to a person or group of people who have had a significant influence on the advancement of architecture. The 2015 medalist was awarded next February to O’Donnell + Tuomey.

It all comes together

In many ways the London project has seen aspects of their work and life come full circle – context, journey, welcoming; addressing of suspensions with brick, while challenging them with its angles, and embracing the cit of being cut by the street into it and spilling onto the pavement.

The common spaces spiralled upwards with nary a door interrupting the flow. "We made the stairs very wide and very nar rowed with lots of landings and platforms," Sheila says. 

"We are very interested in the idea that buildings have an explicit brief – the list of things that have to be accommodated – and an implicit brief; what else does it do? A lot of things want to do can’t be put on a list. A lot of interaction isn’t programmed.

"So, with the circulation space, we were thinking: where does life happen? Maybe life happens in spaces in between... the kind of place in which you meet somebody and later say, that was the most important moment in my life."

Sheila and John met on the stairs at a UCD disco. They knew each other from the course, but this was where they began their life together.

"Buildings rigidly dictate who goes where," says John. "The buildings we’ve done from Glucksman and on have allowed more sympathetic occupation."

In the Lyric Theatre in Belfast, they took down the standard barrier of having the flytower between audience and actors. And, says Sheila, the encouraging of interaction had its roots in their first film; the film centre in Temple Bar. "We want buildings to be welcoming and open and for people not to feel intimidated."

So the LSE building represents a full circle in life-changing meetings on stairs. Circling back to the time they worked in London, and worked with Jim Stirling, who died in 1992, and who the prize is named after.

"What is radical in the early buildings of Stirling," says John, "is that thinking that you can take the elements of a building and break them apart from each other and make them more like themselves; like a pure version of themselves.

The LSE student centre has 15 different functions – library, gym, etc. "crammed in one building."

The builder’s blocks

"Stirling thinks parts of a building should change the way of life of their occupants," says John. "He doesn’t want to cover it up and make it appear to be a single view of society. He wants to show body parts and then make bodies. It’s all about pulling it apart and putting it together. I think our building in LSE is as far as pulling apart and putting together as we can do it.

"It does feel like a circle," he says. "It was a really important part of our life, the whole London thing. If there was once a person I would like to show around the LSE, it is Jim Stirling.

"They would make him up and bring him round because I think that so much of what we have done in the student centre is based on what we learned from Jim. I’d like to give it to him."

Space for Architecture – the work of O’Donnell and Tuomey is published by Lund Humphries.