

Interview: O'Donnell and Tuomey (part 1)

People | Words Tania Davidge



John Tuomey and Sheila O'Donnell. Image: Amelia Stein

Recently the New Zealand Institute of Architects held its annual conference. This year the conference was framed around the term “in situ” and focussed on the many contexts that influence the project of architecture. One of the highlights of the conference was, undoubtedly, the presentation by Sheila O'Donnell and John Tuomey. This year's RIBA Gold Medal winners, their architecture is deeply layered and generous. It gives back to its context in texture, experience and thoughtful attention.

Tania Davidge: The conference is framed around the theme of ‘in situ’. I am interested in the contexts within which you position your work and the contexts that inspire you.

John Tuomey: We are very attached to the concept of context. One of the reasons we were attracted to this conference was on account of its title, but we use the word context in the widest possible interpretation of its definition because the context might be theoretical as much as it is material. Our work belongs to its context – we never see any of our work free or abstracted from context.

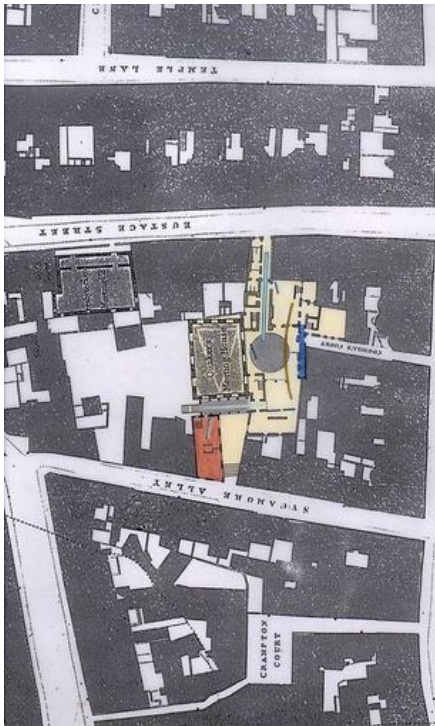
I remember once we were trying to build a house for ourselves and we went to see some sites that were available. We were able to eliminate sites because there was nothing in them to provoke a response, nothing to work against. What provokes us to work is something existing or pre-existent, something that you have to draw up. But it isn't about the roofs of the neighbouring houses or the proportion of their windows or the stringcourse of an adjoining building. It's not that kind of context.

When we were living in London, Robert Venturi was doing the extension to the National Gallery at Trafalgar Square. He said it was a contextual project because he carried the stringcourses around and he made it in white stone and he added some kind of pilaster expression. I read that as a parody. It is anti-context. Context is a complicated term.

Sheila O'Donnell: I think we enjoy working in all contexts. We start projects with what we call a process of immersion, where we try to immerse ourselves in all aspects of the question being asked. One of those aspects, of course, is the place and every place is interesting because you are trying to imagine what makes a place a site, rather than just a place. In what way is this a place where a building could be, what is

the relationship with its use – because that is really part of the context as well. What is the function that the building must achieve and also embody? What is the physical context, what is the shape of the ground, the neighbouring buildings and also the history and the culture, who has been there before? What marks are there on the ground?

Because our first public commission [the Irish Film Institute, Dublin, 1992] was a project deeply embedded among a set of existing buildings, we found that close discussion with an existing context really interesting. Our attempt to understand the nature of what was there already and how we could intervene has become our way of working. In a way it comes out of not thinking that there is a difference between history and the present, that old buildings are in one territory and that we are in another, but that everything exists in the continuous present.



Plan of the surrounds of the Irish Film Institute (1992) in Temple Bar, Dublin, and its interior. Image: O'Donnell and Tuomey

So the idea that a site has some other building on it is not a problem and instead is interesting. How can you adapt something for contemporary use but also how can a new building work alongside and converse with it in a way that both the old and the new can coexist with mutual respect? There is a tendency, when working with old buildings, to simply add a glass box to the old building. That idea of contrast where you have something obviously modern sitting beside something old is a conversation but we don't think that it is a very interesting conversation. Sometimes this contrast just makes the old thing look sort of shabby and the new thing look shiny and new. We'd like to think there is a more subtle conversation to be had. Once your work is finished and you've gone away both these things coexist in the same time.

In a sense you are reinterpreting and making sense of the old building for new use and things have to change for the new uses. The fact that the buildings we were working on for our first project were so geometrically varied and complex, coupled with the fact that we did the measured survey ourselves and then made the drawings ourselves, made us interested in the recording of a place and its physical nature before we start to intervene in it.

TD: You spoke in your talk about being physically grounded, in terms of your buildings not hovering above the landscape but rather being connected, physically, to the ground and you also spoke of being grounded in the everyday and inspired by the everyday. This is a very

beautiful doubling of the use of the word ‘ground’.

SO: We really like words. We like using words, playing with words, testing their meaning, thinking about the number of meanings that a word might have and the way that all those meanings might then be used. So certainly ground and grounded and grounding is something we think about a lot. We are talking about our projects literally digging into the ground and making a mark which is why we are not interested in hovering, which implies that the building is extending beyond its physical enclosure. We like the physical enclosure to have a permeable feeling of breathing, that it's not a clean sealed shiny edge where outside is the world beyond and inside is the object. So digging, digging slightly into the ground, continuing the floor of a room out into the site is really important – that sense that the building and its context become one, that there is an exchange between outside and inside.

The grounding in the ordinary and the everyday has to do with the building not being sealed and separate and other. A lot of contemporary buildings are like objects that have arrived fully formed and hover or sit or stand in a place but don't therefore belong to it. They are other and different and are not of the everyday or in continuity with it. The discussion of the ordinary and the everyday is important to us which is why we can spend a long time thinking about a seat or a step.

A building should create an opportunity for people to have a moment, a moment for quietness between inside and outside or a moment of connecting with the world beyond.

JT: Generally, as we travel around together, I think the things that we both respond to are things that are set on the ground like benches or thresholds or that in-between type terrace, landscape feeling. We don't generally go around talking about domes or spires. Some people think architects are fascinated by that sort of stuff. But a good solid bench is very satisfying to us.

TD: You draw on Ruskin and Venice, on ancient Greece with the Epidauros and ancient Rome with the Pantheon. In the Antipodes we have a sense of architectural history but we don't have that sense of closeness to architectural history. We understand it and yet often feel removed from it. This idea of the 'continuous present' seems to quite beautifully draw history and the present together.

SO: We have developed a feeling over time that we have a right to own all of architectural history. After all, the Pantheon is in Rome, it's not on our doorstep. And when we went to Peru we enjoyed the amazing earthworks and places built into the landscape and felt a connection, an empathy with that. Our context would be everything.

JT: Robert Frost says in order to write a poem all you have to be aware of is all the poems that have ever been written. It's not meant to be intimidating; it's to give you possession.

SO: This is where we moved away from originally thinking we had to fit into our Irish context – our Irish history and our heritage. Now I think we feel if an architect is working with context and place and the making of place and an adjustment of the environment which, as humans, we are all living in, then our context includes something in Peru or anything that has a relevance.



Model for The London School of Economics Student Centre. Image: O'Donnell and Tuomey

JT: Rilke was Rodin's assistant for a period and Rilke wrote a very interesting book on Rodin. In some way Rilke was trying to understand what Rodin was doing in his work, inside his sculpture and in the external relationships of Rodin's sculpture – the experience of a Rodin sculpture is often the space between you and the sculpture – it's not the object itself. It's the resonance that comes off the sculpture because it is not static, because it extends outside of itself. And Rilke writes very beautifully about that. All this goes to the fact that Rilke expects us to understand that ideas reside in things. I think that's a beautiful analogy about what an architect expects when an architect makes a building. The architect is actually transferring their thoughts into the thing that they are making. And there it sits – the thought is in the thing. And there it will stay until someone comes along and interprets it again.



The London School of Economics Student Centre, 2014. Image: O'Donnell and Tuomey

You can stand awed in front of the Pantheon but you haven't met the architect, you don't know what the ritual was and who knows why it's facing north, but somehow some truth or some thing is in it, in the vessel. A vessel contains something but a vessel also carries something. That is why it's such a beautiful word. That is why we called our Venice Biennale project "Vessel", because it is a vessel of our thought. It is a container but it is also in motion. In that sense the thought being transferred is living in the thing.

SO: The thing takes on a sort of difference over time. If you think about the Pantheon, its formal presence is its stone and portico and when it was built there were other buildings embedded around it. It is a grand thing but now we go there and just spend the whole time being fascinated by the brick, and the amazing relieving arches and the scale of the brick and the little remains of the parts of whatever other buildings were built around it. This is real. It's there and present and available for us to draw from. But it was probably never intended to be seen like that. So the object is, in a way, immutable. It exists in its own right and you can engage with it in whatever way you see fit.

I imagine that in different periods in history you could read objects in different ways. We have the freedom to relate to or talk to buildings from different periods even

when we do not understand what the person who put them there intended or if the state in which we are now seeing them is the state they were not originally in.

JT: In this sense there may be a slight gap between us and other members of our profession because we are trying to work directly with the presence of the building itself. Therefore we are not that interested in the contrast of the new and the old or an assertion of a statement of the new. We would probably be quite happy to have our buildings be, so to speak, invisible. We're living in a world that is governed by images and those images are the last things that we are thinking about. We're thinking about how it feels to be sitting with your back against the wall and your eye on the distant horizon.

[Continued in "[Interview: O'Donnell and Tuomey \(part 2\)](#)"]

Words	Tania Davidge
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