

## Interview: O'Donnell and Tuomey (part 2)

People | Words Tania Davidge



Sean O'Casey Community Centre in East Wall, Dublin. Image: O'Donnell and Tuomey

In the second part of our interview with Sheilla O'Donnell and John Tuomey, the Irish architects talk about their approach to design and their desire for their work to offer both "consolation and surprise."

**Tania Davidge:** When you present your work you come across as very grounded in your practice, very comfortable with what you do. You understand what you want to achieve – what the goal is. In some ways this goes to the fact that, in architecture, it takes so long to build a body of work. A younger or emerging architect has a very different approach.

**Sheila O'Donnell:** On the other hand every project is a new beginning. There are lots of things we know, we know how we approach work but there still is a huge challenge to identify or define what it is, what the



Architects John Tuomey and Sheilla O'Donnell. Image: Amelia Stein

question being asked is. But maybe what you say is true. We have just been through a period of reflection. We have just written a book, *Space for Architecture*, published last year, and when we were awarded the RIBA Gold Medal we gave a lecture on our work. It gave us a moment to stop and think about what we have done. So maybe now we can see it more as a joined up picture than the mess that it feels like as you go through it.

**JT:** In our book we are trying to make an argument to allow the reading public, not the architects but the wider reading public, to open up their minds a little bit to make space for architecture. People go to the theatre, they read novels, they join book clubs and go to art exhibitions but they don't make space for architecture. We're trying to say, as part of culture, consider it, why wouldn't you think about it?

**SO:** People are very prepared to make quick judgements about architecture on the basis of 'I like it' or 'I don't like it' whereas you will find someone writing a very complex review of a play or a piece of theatre or a novel. It does seem strange that the art form that most deeply affects people's everyday life – because everybody is always in a building or at least living in a building – is one that they are not prepared to treat seriously as a subject.

**JT:** We have had the good fortune of having very alert clients who live it and get it.

**SO:** You couldn't do it without the clients. Good buildings come out of good conversations between architects and clients. Once you get to the point where you have a good relationship people are prepared to trust you.

**TD:** The jury citation for the RIBA Gold Medal addresses your London School of Economics Student House stating that its "formal brilliance is enhanced by the skilful use of brick which sets up a dialogue between the calm, almost reassuring surface and the exhilarating dynamic of the volume that it encloses."

There is wonderful tension in your work between the sculptural form of the building and its materiality – a kind of subtle 'not-of-the-existing-fabric' quality that displaces the people who are using and experiencing the building from the reality of the expected rectilinear city made up of typical post and beam or load-bearing construction. I was struck by the way the building is of the city but is ephemeral to it. I was interested in this quality because I think this makes people look at architecture. It jolts someone out of the everyday although in many senses the building is very much of the everyday. Is this effect something you consciously seek to achieve or is it a by-product of the process you go through when you design?

**JT:** In the book that I wrote called *Architecture, Craft and Culture*, my last chapter was called "Strangely Familiar". There I was trying to set out one aspiration that we have for our work – that it will have both the consolation and the surprise. That people will feel that it is something that they knew already, or even if they haven't seen it before, that it has some familiarity to them and yet they should also feel that it is completely new or that it's strange and weird. Even the fact that it is familiar is weird. I guess we are hoping that the building is speaking or making people feel engaged. It's not that the people are over here and the building is over there but the building is affecting the way people feel. It's welcoming them or making them feel more alert or simply cheering them up a bit. Our community centre in the docklands [the Sean O'Casey Community Centre in East Wall, Dublin] makes a lot of people feel quite cheerful.



Sean O'Casey Community Centre in East Wall, Dublin. Image: O'Donnell and Tuomey

**SO:** It's probably all the circular windows.

**JT:** Like bubbles rising. It has an effect.

**TD:** This project really interested me. I felt that the iconic or playful nature of the

building was incredibly restrained. Of all the projects you showed, in some ways this was, particularly in terms of the façade, the odd one out. When you presented it, and you can see on the plans, this façade treatment is just a very small part of the program used to create visibility.

**SO:** We were designing this building at the same time that we were doing the Timbryard Social Housing which is a brick building in the Liberties, and these are two traditional working class districts in the city of Dublin. The Docklands building has a very different context and a very different kind of brief than the Liberties building. Its context is not 'bricky' – it is early 20th century, rendered painted houses. The building is in an area that was turning into a huge financial district, with big flashy buildings along the quays in Dublin and just behind is this community centre funded by the Docklands Authority, who were building all the flash stuff. The clients were a fantastic community group and the brief was for the young and the old with child care, day care, sport and theatre. So we said, "OK, this is a single story courtyard building".



Sketch for Sean O'Casey Community Centre in East Wall, Dublin. Image: O'Donnell and Tuomey

We had never done a courtyard building before and we thought about it almost like a monastery, an inward looking building. And the client said, "that's great, we love that, but we want a big building, well maybe not big but we want it tall, we want something that is visible – when people come down here and see all these banks we want our community building to be up there too." We said, "Guys, it's child care, it's old people's day care – we need to be on the ground". So we came up with the idea that we would put the classrooms and meeting rooms in this little tower, so it is a symbol but it is still collected around the gardens.

**JT:** The tower has the lot dimensions of one of the typical houses in the area. East Wall is made of 1,800 terraced houses and all of the people who use the community centre are already in these two storey houses that have a six-metre or a five-metre cross-wall down it. So we said, "Alright, let's just pretend that one of your houses has been shot up in the sky and everything else is a carpet on the ground. We'll put the committee room at the top so you can see everything that is going on around and people can see you at work." And that was very much pushed by them for the visibility. Up until that moment though, because it was a single storey building, it didn't have to have any representation. It was turned inwards on the light from its own courtyards. Then it had to have a representation because it was going up in the air but we didn't want to do anything that had any windows, we wanted it to be introverted and not be thinking about elevations.

So we had a problem because now we had a building that was six storeys up in the sky and it's going to need those windows. So we just pretended that it didn't have any, it didn't have any before – so let's just leave it alone. Don't think about it having windows, look away, look back and just shoot it full of holes. They are on the roof and on the walls – as many holes as you can make as fast as you can make them. And oddly enough these community centre clients, who had never worked with architects before, had no difficulty understanding that concept. The clients suffered with us. They got a building that we have never done before and probably will never do again. It's so specific to them and what it does for them is that it reminds them of docks and ships but for us it was a solution to the fact that we wanted a building that didn't have any windows in it.





Timberyard Social Housing, the Liberties, Dublin. Image: O'Donnell and Tuomey

**SO:** We didn't want to make a tower with vertical windows but to make it look random was really difficult. Random is incredibly un-random – it was a huge effort to not make patterns, to keep a sense of no order. I don't think we are ever going to use circular windows again.

**TD:** It's a test of your architectural resolve to deal with something that you don't typically deal with. It struck me that it was dealt with in a restrained and elegant way that works simply.

**JT:** Restrained is actually quite a good word. I'm always thinking we are trying to hone it - trying to cut off everything extraneous to make it more like itself. I'm always thinking that it is like a honing process, a reduction process, but restraining – the feeling that you are on a leash slightly I think that's quite a good definition.

**TD:** It gives it a tension.

**JT:** Yes, like it's not at ease, it's not casual. Restrained will do.

**TD:** When you started your talk you presented it as a conversation – an *Agallamh Beirte*<sup>1</sup>, in Irish – which you described as an argument or a conversation between two people.

**JT:** *Agallamh Beirte* is to-ing and fro-ing between two people. It is a kind of a poetic argumentation in Irish folklore.

**TD:** What strikes me is that you are both obviously very much in partnership and to present in conversation is a wonderful way to articulate this. There is a history of neglecting partners in the bestowing of architectural awards and I was wondering if you could comment on the notion of partnership and what it brings to your practice.



Timberyard Social Housing, the Liberties, Dublin. Image: O'Donnell and Tuomey

**JT:** The RIBA Gold Medal has been going for over 160 years and has only been given three times to a husband and wife and six times to partnerships. Mostly it's won by one individual. In the times it has been given to partnerships they have obviously had to think about it. In our case there couldn't be possibly any question of Sheila or I

receiving it individually. It's John and Sheila. We're not one person divided. There is different parts that we have become together into something which is a third thing. We operate with a feeling of independence while relying on each other for support. We don't argue about things really but we have very different angles on things.

**SO:** Our work is always a conversation between the two of us and develops out of conversation. That's one of the reasons we need words so much. Lots of architectural partnerships work more on the basis that one partner does one project and the other does another. We are both involved in every project. That is the grounding of our work. We go away to a Greek island on our holidays and John writes a lot and I am collecting stones and shells and painting them or painting mountains and those two parallel activities are both a really important part of our work. Whatever meaning I take out of looking at a set of stones or a wall or a mountain we then discuss that and gradually it builds up. For a couple that are partners, all the things that we do that aren't evidently part of our work, that aren't occurring in the space of our office are still part of the work. You realise, when you stop and look back, that so many aspects of our life are inherent in and essential to our work.

**JT:** You know the double meaning of the word draw. We both draw and share drawings, I draw and Sheila might draw on top of that, we share drawings and we communicate by drawing. But drawing also means drawing water from a well, drawing out an argument or that drawing or pulling feeling. In that sense we draw our projects together. Often we discuss, or often we put off drawing while we draw it in our minds. We draw from the situation. A lot of that is preliminary and a lot of that happens through the chemistry of our conversation. A lot of time is spent saying we're not going to do this or we're not going to do that. We do a lot of ruling out and that's quite coded now.

**SO:** We have probably developed a kind of private language. The work that we make very definitely comes out of this shared experience. And it's often true that we put off drawing because we are trying to intuit what it is. We're just starting a project now at the University College Cork and we've been to meetings with users and clients. It involves an existing building and an open site. We're both exploring what it might be but we haven't drawn it yet on paper, we're drawing on our thoughts. Sometimes if you draw something too soon you fix it in a way you don't want to fix it. It's a complex context and we're still circumnavigating it, walking around it and kicking the tyres. We're always trying to avoid coming at it with a preordained solution. Instead we try and grow the answer out of the different strains of influence that are there and the different needs of the site. The site has needs, the old building has needs, the users, the university... We're letting it settle. Which is what we do.

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#### Footnotes

*1The best explanation of this that I found of this term is from the Irish National Teachers' Organisation website which has a discussion document and proceedings of the Consultative Conference on Education 2009 entitled "Creativity and the Arts in the Primary School". It describes the Irish tradition of Agallamh Beirte "literally meaning 'Dialogue for Two'" as a "poetic battle of wits in which the fluency of the language, usually humorous or satirical, and the rhythm and rhyming structures are paramount."*

<http://www.into.ie/ROI/Publications/CreativityArtsinthePS.pdf> P.7

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