Saw Swee Hock Student Centre, London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), London

O’Donnell + Tuomey, 2014

Communities of practice in architecture and the architectural cultures that they nurture provide sustaining mental space to a practice. From their home base in Ireland, a country with a compact architectural community, architects Sheila O’Donnell and John Tuomey have developed a unique approach to healing city fabric, creating poetic continuums of space and materiality.

How do architectural cultures grow? On parabolas, we might say, following Andrei Voznesensky – architecture student turned poet and keen observer of creative processes – as we observe our protagonists crash through places and generations, taking what is, after all, the quickest way there. Where? In the case of the Irish practice O’Donnell + Tuomey, the parabola takes them from Dublin to London and the Saw Swee Hock Student Centre at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). Their first London commission was the Photographers’ Gallery in Soho (2012), a project in which they winned out of an existing building an architectural nobility reminiscent of the work of the De Stijl movement in the Netherlands (1917–1931). Evidenced here in their second major commission in London is the latest assemblage of a poetics built up through many projects in brick in Ireland, especially Timberyard Social Housing (Dublin, 2009) and the Lyric Theatre (Belfast, 2011).

London is the city in which – at the other end of their parabola – Sheila O’Donnell and John Tuomey began their post-graduating explorations under the influence of James Stirling. They have crashed back into the English capital as members of a generation of Dublin architects whose practices were forged in the architectural healing of Temple Bar, a turning point in the history of a city that up until that point – driven (not alas for the last time) by a ruthless development ethic – appeared to be spiralling into aphasic dissolution. A well-trodden path (Dublin–London–Dublin …) took them back from the glory days of Stirling’s Neue Staatsgalerie in Stuttgart (1984) to work with their peers on a series of projects in the medieval core of their own city. Here, on sites reached by small and winding lanes, they learned how to set large, initially Stirlingesque, figures to work obliquely.

Glimpsed at an angle, these suggested a large ambition, but never presented it as anything other than a fleeting possibility, fleshed out fully only on the
occasion of early or late light soaking in across luscious red brickwork. The two architects became adept at suggesting continuums of every kind: drawing streets into their foyers, and re-energising the surviving brick fabric around their projects by formally matching its motifs in their own brickwork forms. From importing a Euro-style language, they moved to an architecture that talked to and of every neighbour, to a history and to a future for each site.

Even in less charged situations, up arterial roads, and working with tightly circumscribed housing briefs, they would scoop up the full length of an existing red-brick boundary wall and a row of red-brick terraces along a lane

O’Donnell + Tuomey, 
At the exhibition, the large-scale model enticed visitors into its welcoming form.
at right angles to the thoroughfare, and wind these into the composition of a mother block and a child block of apartments that sheltered a new courtyard from the busy road and made all benefit, the old recognised as an integral part of a larger new to which it seemed the germ, the new validated by its seeming to grow out of the old. A continuum of dwelling made manifest in form and material. In Belfast, on the flanks of a river, they coiled the programme for the Lyric Theatre down the hill, so that it begins at the scale of the surrounding suburban red-brick houses and then turns slowly to present to the water’s edge the civic dignity of a major cultural institution, not looking like a transplant but seemingly grown from a graft. A carving out of city blocks is underway in Budapest, at the Central European University, where this process is at work in reverse, excavating and removing matter as spaces and faces are reawakened and brought back into the city consciousness.

The craft of doing this, the thinking and making of it, is overtly and concretely experimental. Models are made. And remade. One, Vessel (2012),
started in the office as an exploration of ways to enter a building and was scaled up to allow visitors to walk through it. Constructed out of interlocking timber, it was included in the ‘Common Ground’ exhibition at the 2012 Venice Architecture Biennale. Bricks and brick patterns are studied, tested and exhibited too. The designing is in conversation with a wide community of practice.

At the LSE, this evolution of poetic thinking reaches an apogee. The continuum thinking is there: gables and brick faces of surrounding buildings all join forces with the Vorticist swirling of a folded brick ‘blanket’ that drapes the angles of allowable development of a leftover site at the head of a tangle of narrow streets.

Earlier LSE planners were intent on destroying the medieval lanes by imposing on them large rationalist self-contained figure buildings that muscle in without so much as a by-your-leave to their neighbours. For some years around the LSE, brick buildings have lost their conversation as concrete lumps have crowded into this city area, with beetling arched skylines threatening to bury the work of centuries past. Thanks to O'Donnell + Tuomey’s new building, brick buildings all around, including Sir John Soane’s Museum on the opposite side of Lincoln’s Inn Fields to the north, have re-joined the city chatter. Talking architecture rescued in the nick of time.

How is this done? There is a complex meshing of needs-must and romantic Petra-inspired picturesque reverse-designing of vistas up narrow defiles, mapping sight lines up narrow streets, allowing the set-backs required by ‘rights to light’ and best-practice environmental design.

The angling of the faces, the pulling back from the rear edge of the site and the visual conjoining with the brick flanks of the former London Research Institute (1962) have the effect of diminishing the new building’s apparent scale, and the 16th-century Old Curiosity Shop is triumphantly set within this frame with a renewed authority, as its stepping out seems to charge the Student Centre’s stepping back.
O'Donnell + Tuomey,
Saw Swee Hock Student Centre, LSE, London, 2014
The ‘blanket’ of brickwork works to reduce the apparent scale of the mass and to frame and foreground existing brick structures around it. Note the large canopy: this creates an external room.

The site approximates to a double-square rectangle running north–south, with the southern square cut back almost to the diagonal. Fire escape stairs are tucked into the southwest corner and halfway across the angled-to-the-south northern face. It is as if huge brick curtains, lacy in areas, have been hung from these, draping down the rear northwestern face and jagging across the southeastern face. Swirling up in the middle is the lift shaft, a highly coloured totem pole around which the lanes outside, invited in, spiral upwards – a movement skewered in place below by a downward corkscrewing concrete circular stair and held up to the sky above by the sudden reappearance of the same massive concrete screw.

The brief was to bring student facilities together under one roof. The multifunctional building includes a multipurpose hall, pub, learning café, media centre, prayer room, offices, gym, careers office, dance studio and social spaces. Every part of the building’s programme argued for a face to the
street, and so it is that a terrazzo street comes in over the large basement black box – which has its connection to the street outside through a huge clerestory light, and to the rear courtyards through further such lights – and goes on up past the learning café, the media centre with its table for banner making, the multi-faith centre with its miniature Aalto-esque brick drum chapel, to the student union offices, the gym and finally to a rooftop café with an external terrace looking back into Lincoln's Inn Fields.

The conceit of a blanket or a curtain holds true because the bricks run from top to bottom, the lacy areas covering windows, while floor levels are all obscured. The curtains do not fold or wave wilfully. Perspex negative models of all the constraints were used to test the design as it evolved. The brief had the aspiration for an 'excellent' green building rating. Thanks in part to these brick screens, which help to bring daylight into every space, the design achieved the higher 'outstanding' rating. But this is also a very theatrical structure. Every sketch and model demonstrates how the angles of the curtain are being tweaked to give the maximum drama to the views into and out of
the building. These sketches and models show how the building was made to ‘talk’ to and about all of its neighbours.

So here – as ever since Temple Bar – O’Donnell + Tuomey assert the theatricality of the city, of buildings themselves. There is here a claim for the city and its buildings as the absolutely necessary setting for our fleeting lives, our pursuits of our desires and our understandings. The brief called for the best student building in the United Kingdom. It is hard to know how such a result could be judged. Maybe this is pulling a long bow, but as I watch people under the generous canopy, pausing to gather themselves before they resume their day, I do not think so: I see here how Dublin yet again is the source for our contemporary appreciation of the role of the city fabric in our lives. This is a conversational designing that comes out of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922), that stream of consciousness in Dublin.6

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Drawing showing the internal street spiralling around the upward-urging triangles of the graphic on the central ‘totem pole’ of the lift shafts.

Companion to Saw Swee Hock Student Centre: Searle x Waldron Architecture, Annexe to the Art Gallery of Ballarat, Victoria, Australia, 2011
Nick Searle and Suzannah Waldron used this opportunity to fill in an elbow and create new continuities with dislocated pieces of the historic city core.