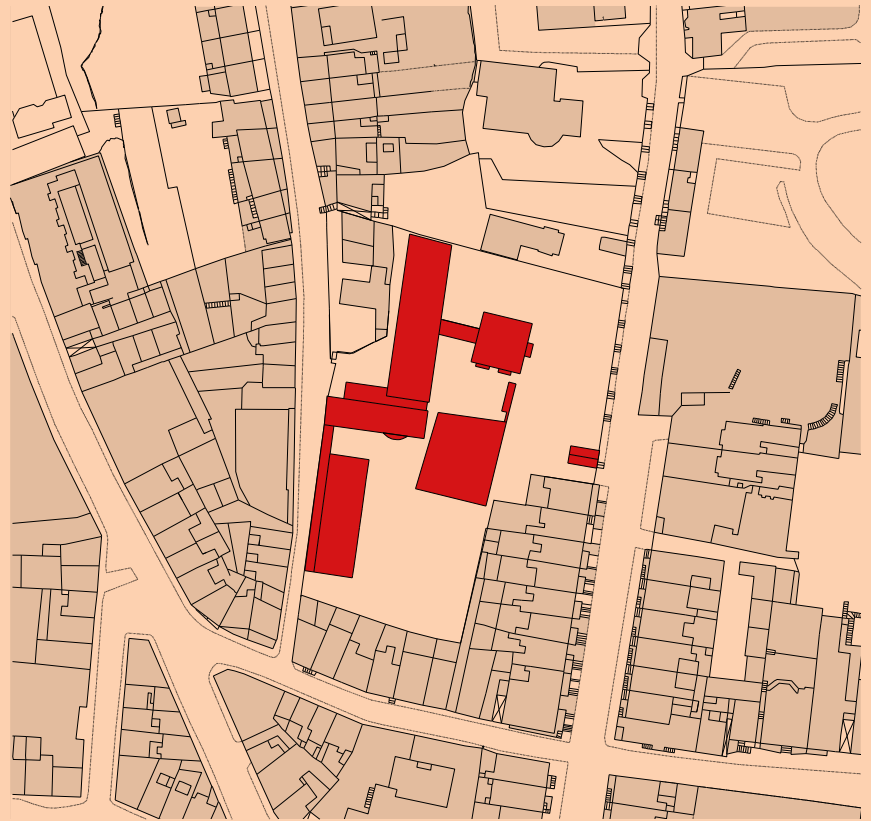


THE ELEVATED ORDINARY

Feeling more like a village than a school, St Angela's College is liberating and uplifting, writes *Shane O'Toole*



location plan

Every once in a while a project comes along that just socks you in the jaw. A real surprise, even when you know it is from a heavyweight puncher who has been winding this one up for a decade and a half. You scramble momentarily to recover your senses, your thoughts. Because at first glance there is nothing much to see here. No conventional take-away image, no cover shot. To a large extent the school is invisible. It has no face. It poses the hardest question of all in today's image-saturated architectural world: what is architecture?

When I ask John Tuomey to describe the longest-evolving project in his career, he replies gnomically, sounding like an ancient mariner exercising an old hobby, 'It's like Cork in a bottle.' Hidden from view and approached through a narrow gap between tall houses and high walls halfway up St Patrick's Hill, St Angela's College is a big and complex city-centre school for 530 girls. But before that it is a secret miniature hill town, miraculously assembled against the odds behind the steepest street in Ireland. That is Tuomey's message in a bottle: his metaphorical vitrine captures the essence of this hilly, maritime, voluptuous city.

The analogy is confirmed later, looking towards the site from the opera house

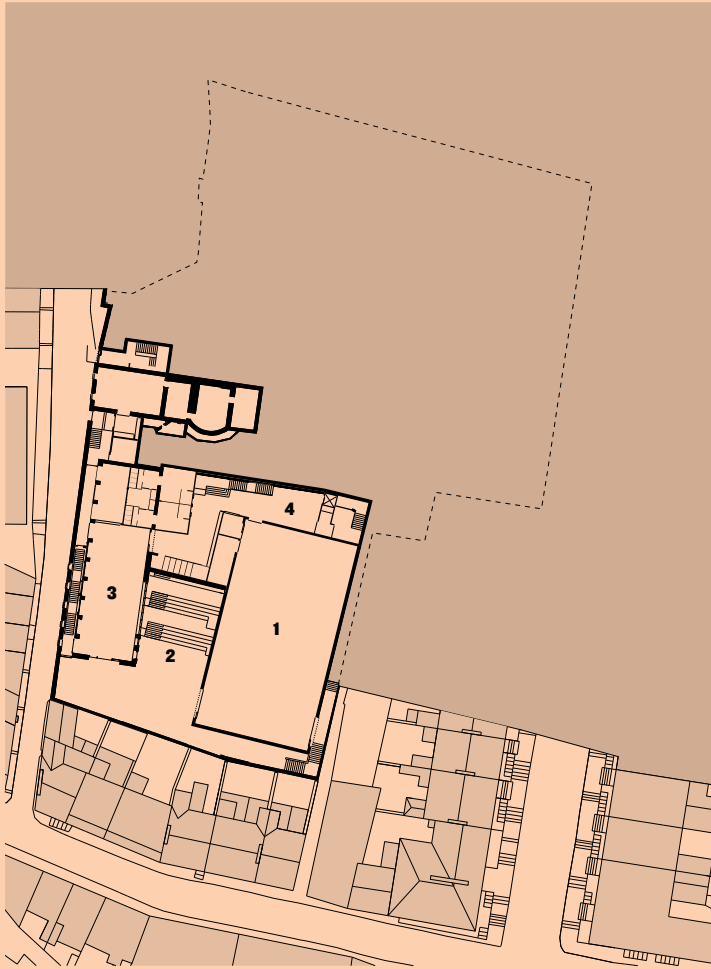
down by the river. The school fits seamlessly into the urban panorama, identifiable only if you know what you're looking for. Occupying the fourth of five stacked-up, broad-sided terraces, this new line on the horizon is a citadel in camouflage, comprising three protected Victorian buildings and three new elements that manoeuvre their way down the hill past the historic structures.

St Angela's was founded in 1887 by the Ursuline Order of nuns in a former police station on St Patrick's Hill. The first student to cross the threshold was Mary Ryan, who went on to become the first female university professor in the British Isles. Within a few days of opening, the school was full and there was a waiting list for places. Building began immediately on the High School, which was opened in 1888.

When O'Donnell + Tuomey were commissioned 111 years later, the school buildings comprised two long, tall, narrow Victorian blocks arranged at right angles, with almost half the students occupying prefabricated classrooms set within a sea of tarmac that covered the rest of the site. There was neither a school hall nor a sports ground, but superb *esprit de corps* proved that was no barrier to sporting success as St

Angela's became serial national champions at table tennis, having improvised fold-away ping-pong tables in the classrooms. The plan was to redevelop the lower part of the restricted site and provide a sports hall with a schoolyard on the roof. Various schemes faltered until 2009, when the nuns decided to sell their convent and orchard garden on the adjoining site, unlocking a much bigger project on the south-facing slope that drops 18 metres, or five storeys, across its 100m length. Crucially, the school authorities and their architects had held their collective nerve throughout all the years when there was anxiety about the constricted site being too small for the brief – the provision of open space, in particular – and the always-easy option of moving the school out of the city to a green-field site was mooted by the Department of Education, but resisted.

Protected structures that had to be retained included the five-bay, two-storey convent, formerly Richmond House, dating from 1820, and the High School and Main House, built in the 1880s and 1890s. Existing floor levels in the Main House set the levels of the teaching floors in the new buildings. Fortunately, the lower floor of the convent approximates in level to the top floor of



lower level floor plan



first level



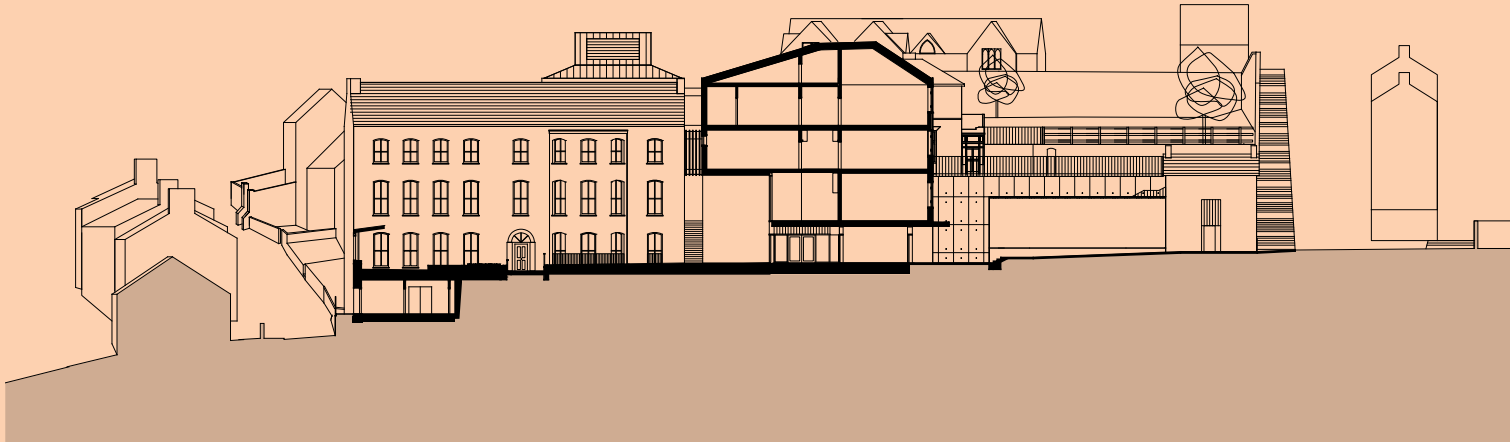
second level



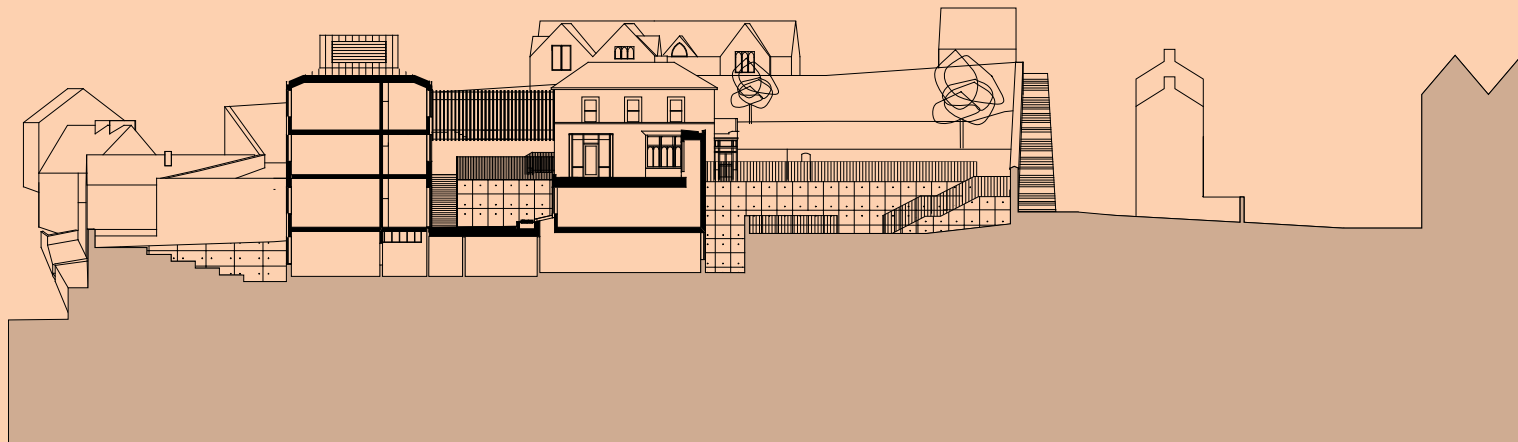
fourth level



- 1 sports hall
- 2 forum
- 3 canteen
- 4 foyer
- 5 classroom
- 6 principal's office
- 7 garden
- 8 art room
- 9 courtyard
- 10 science lab
- 11 library



section AA



section BB

the Main House, permitting floors to run through. At the bottom of the site the architects set the floor of the sports hall to match the lowest level of the High School, which now houses the school canteen. Two new buildings – a science wing that extends from the sports hall and an arts wing – both running north-south, connect to the Main House, completing an internal circuit that links all parts of the school. Two lifts, one in each wing, provide access to all five levels.

Publicly funded Irish schools are tightly prescribed, with standardised classroom layouts and strict controls over floor area. Yet St Angela’s, although it complies with the usual rules, feels totally different – liberating and uplifting – because it was conceived as a village, not a building. Sheila O’Donnell explains: ‘Architects can enrich the spatial catalogue by including the world outside within the orbit of the building. External spaces that are part of the architecture but not sealed from the elements don’t count in the calculation of floor area. So covered verandas, porches, steps and platforms allow for some ambiguity about the state of being either inside or outside. They extend the architecture beyond the door.’

‘Threshold is the big topic in our work,’ says Tuomey. ‘We would aspire towards an architecture of useful beauty grounded in the everyday – the elevated ordinary – or as Seamus Heaney advised: make your study the unregarded floor.’ Even the Per Cent for Art commission at St Angela’s, won by Mollie Anna King in a competition run by the National Sculpture Factory and selected by a jury that included the architects, takes thresholds as its theme. Six vitrines celebrating women who had associations with the school’s history – starting with Nano Nagle, who introduced the Ursulines to Ireland – are set underfoot into key thresholds, intended as touchstones for the students. So it’s time to look down. Here the threshold begins at the gate on St Patrick’s Hill, where a new concrete surface has been pressure-hosed to expose the aggregate of Cork red sandstone, matching the footpath that climbs the hill. The surface crosses an intimate, built-garden courtyard before running right through the entrance lobby, creating the sense of a partially outdoor space, and out into the forum that is the hub of the school and a network of lanes, courts and steps within the interior of the block.

Here the school is revealed as a series of buildings, existing and new, arranged around accessible courts, gardens, terraces and play areas cascading the length of the site. Stairwells, corridors and bridges generally overlook courts, while teaching rooms look to quieter areas, often with spectacular city views. The external spaces are all linked, so students can promenade by twists and turns from the orchard garden (off the art room

and library) down a series of stairs and stepped alleys, through passageways and across courts to the performance and play area at the bottom of the site, without entering a building.

‘It has to be a place where you can never get lost but could imagine getting lost,’ says Tuomey. Wandering the labyrinthine sequence of spaces is a rich and magical experience, full of atmosphere, like a Venetian *campo* and *calle* crossed with the topography of an Italian hill-town (think something along the lines of Castel del Monte in Anton Corbijn’s 2010 film, *The American*, but smaller and safer). The whole cannot be taken in at once but is slowly revealed by navigating your way along a journey of discovery, which is as good a metaphor for education as exists, and remembered not through the eyes but through your feet, becoming a physical rather than visual memory.

The biggest challenge was to incorporate a full-sized sports hall that can also seat 600 on the site. Usually the largest form, here it is almost troglodytic, set at the bottom of the site across from the High School. Perched on its roof is a gleaming green ball court overlooking the city below, where the school’s new sports teams have been elevated on a pedestal, the world literally at their feet.

This happy impression of rare privilege, conferred not by size of budget but by thoughtful, slow architecture, recurs in many parts of the school, from the library in the old convent whose reading rooms would be the envy of an Ivy League college, to the orchard garden with its antique gazebo and outdoor teaching spaces, to the majestic, framed city views from classrooms, bubbly stairwells and, believe it or not, washroom porthole windows. Even the iconic bell tower of Shandon, symbol of the city, feels somewhat reduced from up here. It is a school of urbanity, where students are subliminally reminded of the world they are growing into.

The forum, the heart of the school, is a wedge-shaped external space between the sports hall and the High School that slopes almost 6 metres from the school entrance to the play area at the southern end of the site. To overcome the drop, stepped seating has been formed down the centre with cascading stairs to either side, recalling the theatrical courtyard arrangement of Aldo Rossi’s elementary school in Fagnano Olona, Italy.

This comes as no surprise, because O’Donnell and Tuomey co-edited a little book on Rossi in 1983 [disclosure: I was also a co-editor], for which Tuomey selected a caption quote from Rossi’s *A Scientific Autobiography*: ‘There is no photograph of Fagnano Olona that I love so much as the one of the children standing on the stair under the huge clock which is indicating

both a particular time and also the time of childhood, the time of group photos, with all the joking that such photos usually entail. The building has become pure theatre, but it is the theatre of life, even if every event is already anticipated.’ There is no clock – none needed any more – in the Cork school but, that detail aside, this forum is bound to provide the same happy collegiate stage for the girls of St Angela’s. The new school opened on the last day of the holidays, on Nollaig na mBan, known in Ireland as Women’s Christmas, and generally elsewhere as the Feast of the Epiphany.

The slow gestation of this project – over more than 15 years – and the condensed thought that was its consequence must have played almost as significant a role as the topography of the site in generating the extraordinary urban and educational qualities so evident here. Not to mention the symbolism embedded within the scheme: from action to thought, from body to mind. Sport, play, eating and raucous congregation at the bottom of the hill; art, literature, nature and space to reflect alone or in polite company in the more rarefied spaces up top. And slap-bang in the middle, an umbilical cord, connecting the school to the city.

It obviously helped, too, that O’Donnell + Tuomey are no strangers to designing buildings without a face, and willingly accepted a precondition of the brief that would have deflated the ego of many another architect. Their first major work, the Irish Film Institute in Dublin, had no facade. Moreover, it was on that project that they first developed their strategy of focused subtraction and addition, and demonstrated an aptitude for grounding urban buildings in a supportive network of alleys, routes and squares – an architectural attitude they have raised to new heights at St Angela’s.

‘This is the pay-off for working on old buildings,’ says Tuomey. ‘You should be able to do it in new work but you can’t, because you’ve got no excuse. All my working life, I’ve been trying to get the site to reveal itself, as if it invented its own context,’ he continues. ‘That was the ambition. Now I understand. The school reveals the city. Remember Adalberto Libera’s answer when he was questioned about the Villa Malaparte: “So you designed a house?” “No,” he replied. “I designed a landscape.”’

Architect
O’Donnell + Tuomey
Structural & civil engineer
Malachy Walsh and Partners
Services engineer
Arup Consulting Engineers
Photographs
Dennis Gilbert, 1-3, 5-6, 8, 12
O’Donnell + Tuomey, 4, 7, 9-11





