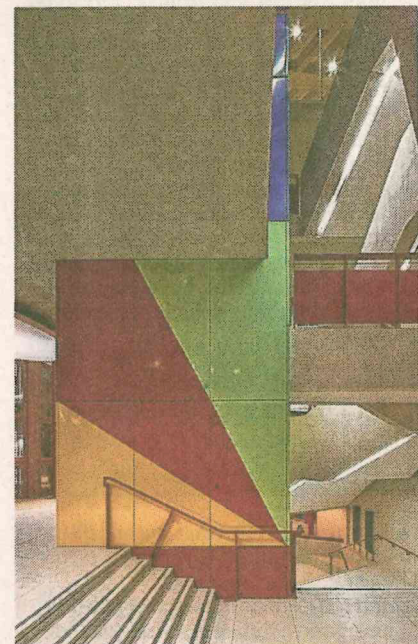


# Modern Ireland in 100 Artworks 2014

## Saw Swee Hock By O'Donnell + Tuomey



Sheila O'Donnell and John Tuomey have won award after award for their student centre at the London School of Economics

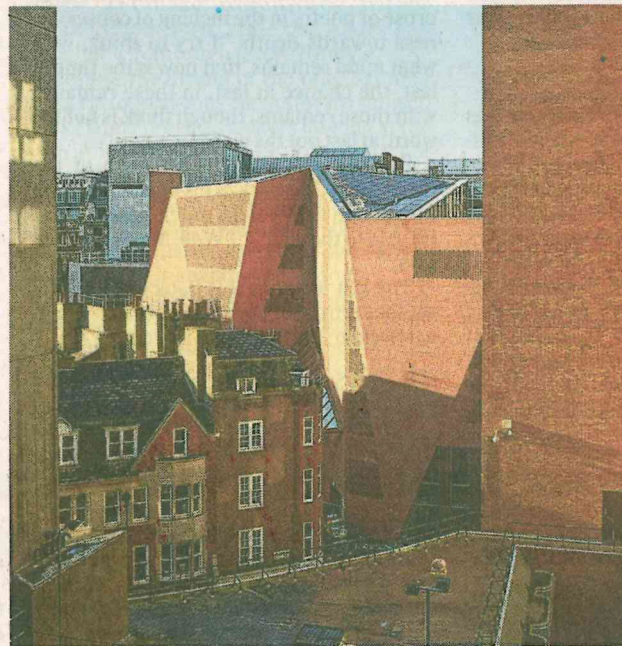
The design for the Saw Swee Hock Student Centre, at the London School of Economics, was the catalyst for O'Donnell + Tuomey's highest accolade to date: the Royal Gold Medal from the Royal Institute of British Architects – aka Riba – generally deemed the world's most prestigious architecture award.

The small Dublin practice was awarded the medal in 2015, joining just two other Irish firms – that of Michael Scott (1975) and the engineer Peter Rice (1992) – in the process. O'Donnell + Tuomey were also awarded the Brunner Prize by the American Academy of Arts and Letters; the LSE building received 11 awards in 2014 alone; and the practice's work was shortlisted, for the fifth time, for the Riba Stirling Prize.

This recognition arose from the combined effect of more than 20 years of O'Donnell + Tuomey's beautiful and careful architecture, mostly built on the Irish landscape, and of more than 30 years of the partners' sustained influence on Irish architectural education and culture.

While the practice may be internationally acclaimed for its gentle, considered, rigorous and intellectual way of making buildings, Sheila O'Donnell and John Tuomey are also brilliant teachers who write and make exhibitions. Through their ongoing inventiveness and development of architecture as art they bring Irish modernism to new places and definitions in the 21st century.

All of this comes together in the realisation of the LSE student centre, which is in Holborn. Feeling like the firm's tallest and most public building, the Saw Swee Hock – named after the statistician and population expert Prof Saw Swee Hock, who endowed the building – spikes and contorts, bursting up, out and through its medieval-London streetscape. The building's dramatic exterior of English paving brick and jagged form comes primarily from the neighbourhood's “right to light” restrictions: all new development must occupy only a certain amount of sky, taking limited light from existing structures. The architects talk about the twisted



body of St Sebastian as he ducks and dodges arrows; similarly, this brick body moves in and out of neighbouring voids, fiercely respectful of the older buildings but restless and territorial too.

Brick comes next. Full of texture and perforation, this “permeable blanket” folds back, showing glass and timber framing.

It is this collision of materials that welcomes students into the building, under a sharply overhanging canopy. Inside, the energy unfolds and the visitor is almost shooed up the stairs, to begin a vertical journey.

Making no apology for the dominance of the twisting stair, the architects explain how 15 functions – from gym to radio station; student-counselling offices to cafes – had to be accommodated. Student life is the stuff of frenzied overlap, and in a campusless university such as the LSE, this

■ **Dramatic: the Saw Swee Hock centre bursts up, out and through its medieval-London streetscape.**

PHOTOGRAPHS  
COURTESY OF  
DENNIS GILBERT/VIEW

“Inside, the energy unfolds and the visitor is almost shooed up the stairs, to begin a vertical journey.”

new building had to do a lot.

The resultant architecture coped with the multifunction by turning stairs and landings into living and meeting areas; and by switching floor surfaces to indicate shifts in mood and being. The constant presence of a colourful enamelled lift shaft, like an immovable trunk around which the poured-concrete stair marches, steadies this most dynamic and busy interior.

Clearly the student centre's site and brief were beyond challenging. But this type of megatricky commission is not new for O'Donnell + Tuomey; their An Gaeláras, in Derry, is a painfully narrow place, kitted out with an assortment of theatre and studio spaces and hinged around a medieval tower-type void.

Indeed, much of the DNA of their glorious museum at University College Cork, the Lewis Glucksman Gallery, as a spiral experience, is found in the Saw Swee Hock's movement. With all of it, as with the partners' ongoing tendency to encourage students and to collaborate with builders, we encounter what Niall McLaughlin calls O'Donnell + Tuomey's “restless invention” and their desire to develop beyond what they know.

ELLEN ROWLEY

You can read more about this week's artwork in the Royal Irish Academy's *Art and Architecture of Ireland*; [ria.ie](http://ria.ie)

Online  
Read the full series so far at [irishtimes.com/100artworks](http://irishtimes.com/100artworks)