



The Saw Swee Hock Student Centre at the LSE



Exterior of the centre at the London School of Economics



The gorgeously intricate Lyric Theatre in Belfast



Interior of the Lyric Theatre

Pictures: Dennis Gilbert

‘In this time of crisis, why are our talented young architects not being asked to design public housing?’

Renowned Irish architect Sheila O'Donnell talks about her career, the influence of Venice on her work and how architecture can help solve the housing crisis



Hannah O'Brien

No discussion on Irish architecture would be complete without mentioning Sheila O'Donnell. From the beginning of her storied career, she set a standard and work ethic for architects to aspire to.

Upon graduating from UCD, O'Donnell and her husband John Tuomey established O'Donnell and Tuomey Architects in Dublin. In the 1980s, she was part of an elite team of architects involved in the development of Dublin's city centre and in 1991, went on to develop Dublin's Temple Bar.

Numerous accolades followed, such as the Architectural Association of Ireland's Downes Medal, the RIAI Gold Medal and countless others. Most recently, she won Woman Architect of the Year at the Royal Institute of British Architects awards and was the first Irish architect to become an honorary member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, joining luminaries such as Henry James, Mark Twain and more recently John Banville, Edna O'Brien and Colm Tóibín.

On meeting her, I can tell that she is itching to talk about her work. O'Donnell and Tuomey's projects have always blended old and new buildings.

"Our first big project was the Irish Film Centre," she says. "It was a very important build for us. We learned a lot from having to make a new building in the middle of an old building. It set up the way we work. Now, even when we're doing completely new buildings, we always look for marks on the ground, the remnants of things, the history of a place, as a way of just thinking about how you might add to it. There are a lot of



Sheila O'Donnell: 'Even when we're doing completely new buildings, we always look for marks on the ground, the remnants of things, the history of a place' Al Higgins



Library at the Central European University, Budapest

Tamas Bujnovszky



The Ranelagh Multi-Denominational School

Alice Clancy

O'Donnell's style weaves angles, brick and wood

social aspects to architecture as well, the importance of memory and honouring what you're replacing."

Other notable projects include the Ranelagh Multi-Denominational School (RMDS), the Irish Language Centre in Derry, the Saw Swee Hock Student Centre at the London School of Economics, the revamped campus of the Central European University in Budapest, and of course the gorgeously intricate Lyric Theatre in Belfast.

Like a proud mother, O'Donnell pos-

itively beams when discussing sketches of the Lyric. "The Lyric was a really interesting build for us because the site was lovely and theatre is such an interesting building type. We changed the shape, made it more angular and did a lot of work on the shape of the interior of the auditorium for acoustic."

Wanting to build a theatre that served its performers as well as its audience, O'Donnell spoke with theatre practitioners such as Garry Hynes and Stephen Rea. "Stephen Rea advised us once that

an issue with the old Abbey was the aisle up the middle: standing on the stage, you're looking into the aisle where there are no people, and the actor wants to look at the audience."

Their style, which brings a warmth to buildings by weaving angles, brick and wood, has been heavily influenced by Venice, said O'Donnell. "We have been going to Venice a lot since the year we graduated, and while we were looking at its amazing form, the shapes of bridges and the way things shift, we realised a

lot of our work has been informed by it."

When asked about potential projects O'Donnell disappears for a moment, then returns excitedly with models of current projects in London, a new section for the Victoria & Albert Museum and a new dance theatre for Sadler's Wells. With this new build, O'Donnell is determined to reduce the carbon footprint and create a building that ages gracefully.

"We are inspired by materials such as brick that weather and change after time. We don't want to make something shiny that looks the same for 20 years. We always want to make our buildings look strangely familiar, so we're always trying to find new ways of using old materials, and pushing them to their limits."

O'Donnell also wishes that Irish architecture today would be pushed to its limits. She says a strong and impressive culture of architectural design has developed in Ireland over the last 20 years.

"There are so many talented young architects. They should be given the opportunity to contribute to the making of our cities and towns. In this time of crisis, why are these architects, who have demonstrated their commitment and ability, not being asked to design public housing?"

"The current procurement system is so restrictive that they have no chance of qualifying for larger work. I feel that the system needs radical revision, so that it rewards ability and capacity rather than just commercial success. The Dublin skyline is full of cranes, Dublin is full of talented and committed architects and there is almost no connection between the two, which is a great shame."

"In London, the culture is completely different. Private developers and local authorities there are building really interesting models of housing: high density, low to mid rise, working with good and often younger architects."

With the current housing crisis still running unchecked, O'Donnell believes the government needs to develop the city in urban neighbourhoods which are sustainable, rather than extending the edges of the city further.

"By going to a height of four to six storeys in the city and inner suburbs, we could greatly increase the density while maintaining the street-based character of a typical European city," she says. "But then we must ensure that these apartments are liveable in by people of all ages, with decent space standards and access to private and public open space."

"We have to move away from the housing model of semi-detached houses with front and back gardens and acres of access roads. This uses too much land, leads to car dependency – adding to the carbon footprint – and doesn't make for focused community life."

The state should be building social housing on publicly owned land, she says. "We could do it in the 1950s, when this country was much poorer than it is now. It's a matter of strategy and priorities."

Rathfarnham turnkey family home guiding €495,000

On Dublin's southside, 15 St Enda's Drive in Rathfarnham is a ready-to-go modern family home of 88 square metres, plus a generous attic. It is on the market with a guide price of €495,000.

The property is arranged as entrance hall with guest WC, sitting room with feature fireplace and double doors to the ultra modern kitchen and dining area.

Here, floor-to-ceiling patio doors open out onto the garden. Over 20 metres long, the garden is mainly laid in

lawn with a paved patio.

Upstairs, there are three bedrooms – two double, one single – and a family bathroom. Services include gas fired central heating and broadband. The house has a BER rating of C3. The tarmac driveway provides ample room for off-street parking.

The house is within walking distance of the amenities and transport links of Rathfarnham village and 4km from Dundrum Town Centre.

For more information, contact Ciara Clarke of Sherry Fitzgerald Templeogue at 01-4951111.



15 St Enda's Drive in Rathfarnham; below: its 20 metre-long back garden



Ceiling-high patio doors in the dining area open out onto the garden. Below: the living room

