

O'Donnell champions retrofit and the joy of working with old buildings

The Irish architect and RIBA Gold medallist told a packed crowd about her experience of reuse during three decades in architecture

Sheila O'Donnell has championed the retrofit of buildings, saying they can be as rewarding as new build, and said architects had a 'huge responsibility' to reduce their carbon impact.

The Irish architect was speaking at a packed 'In conversation with ...' AJ event, supported by Roca, at the Roca London Gallery last month (22 October) about her experiences of redevelopment and reuse during more than three decades in architecture.

But the co-founder of O'Donnell + Tuomey and winner of the RIBA Royal Gold Medal in 2015 warned against demonising concrete completely in the drive to reduce carbon emissions from construction.

She said her practice, which is backing the AJ's RetroFirst campaign, was looking at reducing the proportion of cement in the concrete it uses, and added that, in terms of whole-life carbon cost, concrete's powerful passive cooling effect

should be taken into account.

'We have to keep studying the relationship between whole-of-life costs and energy expended,' she said.

Speaking about her early work, O'Donnell said she was 'deeply influenced' by one of her first projects: the retrofit of an existing building in Dublin into the Irish Film Centre in the late 1980s.

She and business partner and husband John Tuomey spent a lot of time trying to understand the site's specific geometry. 'Our project was working out what we needed to remove for new purposes and what we needed to add,' she said.

The aim was not to blur the distinction between the old and new but to make them work together. 'The new parts should never make the old parts feel embarrassed,' she explained.

Over the next 30 years, her practice worked on many major rebuilds and retrofits, including at University College Cork, St Angela's College in Cork and Central European University in

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THEO WOOD

Budapest (pictured below left). The firm is currently working on a £23 million extension to Liverpool University's School of Architecture, which includes the revamp of a Georgian terrace and a 1930s block.

'One thing I really like about working with old buildings is before you even start the project there's a huge complexity,' O'Donnell said. 'Immersing yourselves in an understanding of every aspect of it is very important.'

Convincing clients and other parties to retrofit is not always easy though. 'A lot of times, people are concerned that they won't get something as good,' she said. 'Funding agencies are quite reluctant as well. It may just be a prejudice people have.'

She believes architects have to make it clear that the final product of a retrofit may not be as 'impressively new' or even that much cheaper than a new build, but that it can still be worthwhile.

O'Donnell supported the idea, promoted in the AJ's RetroFirst campaign, of using taxation to level the playing field. 'People respond to strong messages,' she remarked. 'It seems incomprehensible that VAT is higher on retrofit than new build.'

She said that, where possible,

O'Donnell + Tuomey designs existing materials into its projects. The redevelopment of the Central European University, for example, involved the reuse of old bricks.

But when it came to the construction of Saw Swee Hock Student Centre at the London School of Economics, this proved impossible because of the way the bricks had been laid. 'I think that's a pity,' she said, 'the idea that a building that's being demolished is not having another life.'

On a more personal note, O'Donnell spoke about her 'longest ever project': the home she shares with Tuomey in Dublin. The house has been remodelled many times over the years to suit the different stages of their shared life.

'It will always be a work in progress,' said O'Donnell. 'You can keep talking to an old building and it gives you more ideas about what to do. I sometimes think how much richer the world would be if we were to take into account the lives buildings have had before.'

Isabella Kaminski



TAMÁS BILJNOVSKY

RetroFirst