

Lyric theatre wins pair highest Irish architectural award

RIAI 'exceptional merit' award given for project 20 years in the making

Sloping triangular site just one of the challenges thrown up by project

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Accidentally stepping into an unnoticed tray of paint may have secured the prestigious Royal Institute of the Architects of Ireland (RIAI) gold medal award for Sheila O'Donnell and John Tuomey of O'Donnell + Tuomey.

The medal, the highest honour in Irish architecture, has been awarded since 1934. Unlike other architectural prizes it is not presented annually but only every several years for designs of "exceptional merit".

O'Donnell and Tuomey, with studios in Dublin, Cork and London, will this week receive the award for the Lyric Theatre in Belfast, a building they began to develop designs for almost 20 years ago.

Their current projects include an Academic Hub and Library for TU Dublin at Grangegorman campus, the Swords Cultural Quarter, and a new school of architecture for the University of Liverpool.

"There was an open competition in 2003, we were shortlisted and went up to visit the site - Lyric were already there in a 'temporary' building built in 1960s. We wanted to visit the stage, they were in rehearsal and it was very dark and I stood into a paint tray full of black paint. I was wearing beige trou-



■ The award-winning Lyric Theatre in Belfast designed by Sheila O'Donnell and John Tuomey (inset)

sers," O'Donnell says.

Theatre staff immediately sprang into action.

"Their reaction was amazing, the wardrobe woman brought a pair of purple velvet stretchy trousers, the person from the laundry came and said I'll wash them and you come up to me later... It meant we were poking about and really engaging with the people and something about that day and that moment gave me an understanding of these people as integral part of the theatre."

This inspired the pair to design the new theatre as a wholly integrated "house", Tuomey explains.

"From a technical point of view an architect's impression of a theatre building is of a back of house and front of house. What we discovered through Sheila's trouser episode is the whole theatre is one house and everybody is in the house."

"We have nooks and crannies actors can find in the front to rehearse and we put some public rooms in what you might think of back of house. Everybody loves the thought of exploring backstage and when you mix it up you get a much more dynamic building."

On a sloping triangular site between Belfast's brick backstreets and the river Lagan, the project was already challenging and made all the more so when the brief meant it would be almost entirely windowless, he says.

"The auditorium of course is windowless, but then there was the rehearsal room. It used to be in a prefab in the yard and the actors were fed up of people

coming and looking in the windows when they were parking cars. So they wanted a rehearsal room with no windows."

They decided to introduce windows by stealth.

"First of all I said I'd put windows in the roof, only the birds would see them, then I got them to agree to another window high up so they could look at the trees. The last window that went in looks from the rehearsal room down into the foyer so the actors can overlook the audience rather than vice-versa and all the actors love that."

Open and welcoming

The gold medal is only awarded several years after completion, for buildings that have stood the test of time.

"It makes it very special that it's for a building that has proven itself in use, the Lyric is about 10 years old now and it's a really nice feeling that it's not just the building it's the activity in the building that's part of it.

We're always consciously trying to design buildings that feel open and welcoming and easy to use, the nice thing about this award is it suggests that is people's experience," O'Donnell says.

"There is a problem of architects talking up things before they're tested and people are maybe fed up with that," says Tuomey.

"The brilliant British architect Denys Lasdun, who designed National Theatre in London, said if a building has anything to say, it will speak for itself. And I think there's a lot to be said for a building that gets better if it gets older."

"It's why we value the gold medal. People aren't coming along and looking at a new shiny thing. They're seeing how it operated in the world. Like a book that's still read years later."

RIAI president Ciarán O'Connor will present the medal on Wednesday.