



Sheila O'Donnell and John Tuomey

Stories

Built to last: “We should look for a feeling of belonging but also a feeling of continuity”

Multi-award winning Dublin architect practice O'Donnell + Tuomey recently scooped top honours with an RIAI Gold prize for the Lyric Theatre in Belfast. Co-founder John Tuomey speaks to The Currency about design, collaboration and how architecture can foster community.

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The first shot in the film is the sacred heart statue on Gray Street in The Liberties. It's morning time on the snow-covered street. The camera loiters a moment on the domed canopy, closes in on Jesus's face and cuts to nearby Cork Street and the Timberyard, a 2009 social housing complex designed by Dublin architects O'Donnell + Twomey. In the courtyard, children take turns skidding on a track of black ice in thin winter light while their parents talk about the building fostering community and bringing them together.

A statue of the Virgin Mary salvaged from a 1980s grotto on the former factory site fills a ground floor window connecting the past with the present. It is what the residents wanted.

“Although the complex has won awards and it’s beautiful, it’s the people living in it that brings the beauty into it,” one resident says. The ten minute film *Timberyard – My Home* was made by architect Luis Pedro.

Over 30 plus years, O’Donnell + Tuomey have made an indelible impression on the city of Dublin and far beyond. Their portfolio stretches from the Irish Film Centre in Dublin (IFI) and Gallery of Photography in Temple Bar to the multi-award winning Saw Swee Hock Student Centre at the London School of Economics. Works in progress include the V&A East museum in London.

But the low key, low density red brick apartment complex with recessed hardwood windows on Cork Street still feels special, like a testament to what is achievable and what has since slipped from grasp in the era of build to rent homes, the successful provision of social and affordable housing in Dublin.

“I think when we finished the *Timberyard* we really wanted to carry on making work like that,” John Tuomey tells me from his home office over Zoom. “It just didn’t come to us. We just for some reason didn’t get it.”

Not immediately anyway. At least not in Ireland. Not until long after the last recession receded.



Tuomey, however, is in celebratory mode when we speak having a day earlier scooped the highest honour in Irish architecture. O'Donnell + Tuomey, the practice he has led with Sheila O'Donnell since the 1980s, was presented with the RIAI Gold Medal (2010 – 2012) for the Lyric Theatre in Belfast which the judges described as “*a deeply considered and exquisitely crafted building*”.

The desirability of the award is partly due to its retrospectivity. The success of a building is judged by the passage of time, when the gloss of the new has worn off. “The jury need to see that the building is thriving in its use. And they seem to have come to the view that they found the Lyric buzzing when they got there,” Tuomey says. Notwithstanding the coronavirus.

It is clear that despite enjoying huge success and multiple awards and nominations, including a previous RIAI gold medal win for the firm's Ranelagh multi denominational school and the internationally prestigious RIBA royal gold medal, recognition from a nine-strong jury of his peers still means a lot to Tuomey.

Among the shortlisted structures were the Giant's Causeway Visitors' Centre, the Gas Networks Services Centre and the Aviva Stadium.

For *The Currency*, the award presents a welcome opportunity to explore with one of Ireland's finest architects his views on design, procurement, housing, community, the future of Dublin and the meaning of social architecture.

We start our conversation with the award winning Lyric theatre in what proved to be an unusually collaborative £17.8 million revamp that took nine years to come to fruition.



The Lyric Theatre. Pic: O'Donnell + Tuomey

A convergence of forces

The initial design competition for the Lyric was won by O'Donnell + Tuomey in 2003. Back then the brief was skeletal – to turn a 300 seater theatre into a 400 seater theatre. “I don't think they really knew what they wanted. They just wanted better facilities,” says Tuomey. It was in essence a business plan, a route to future economic survival.

“We had the Lyric’s own brief for the theatre, a functional brief, and then we had our idea that it should reach out to the landscape and reach back into the city. So our first design was what I might call a cat’s cradle, like all the strings pulled together, to try to reach out to the river and reach back to the city landscape.”

This involved opening up the view by turning the building to face the Lagan and convincing Belfast City Council to hand over control to the Lyric of a strip of land between the theatre and the river.

Then there was the issue of securing funding from the Arts Council and tailoring the brief to match the money available – although the project did run over budget.

Working relationships became close with people like Richard Wakely who now runs the Belfast International Arts Festival – although there were moments in the process when O’Donnell + Tuomey were left as custodians of the vision as Lyric board members and advisors changed.

Tuomey recalls a joint trip to visit 10 theatres in London with Lyric personnel while theatre experts were brought in to advise on sightlines in the auditorium. Personalities like actor Liam Neeson helped to raise funds. “Within a couple of years, we had a great team in place. We had really good structural engineers because the site was very complicated. And we had engineers from Cork, who had done the Glucksman gallery with us in Cork. So I think by the time we got the go ahead and by the time they got the money we were pretty well briefed.”



Pic: O'Donnell + Tuomey

“What I would say is that for a good project, you need this convergence of forces, energy, and it doesn’t always happen, but when it happens, you get something special,” he adds.

The conversation then turns to broader topics.

FC: Before speaking with you today, I was looking at your work and I noticed when people talk about it, they refer to a precision in the style and the use of natural materials. Do you accept those phrases when spoken about your work? Is there a guiding ethos or philosophy?

“We’re working to millimetre tolerances. If I’ve learned one thing out of that it is that if it’s a little bit more difficult to do, people do a bit better.”

JT: I actually think that’s true. It is an intellectual pursuit. It is ideas driven. We’re looking for things to come together in an authoritative composition. You’re trying all the time to make it better. But the reality of

a building is that the building isn't any good unless it's well built because buildings have to last, they have to endure, they're not just thoughts made manifest. So we are in the end craftsmen. We have to be. I'm in it for the ideas but it doesn't make any sense unless it is exactly executed.

We are very demanding that everything's done perfectly. If you imagine that you are on a wet and windy building site, things are moving around. We're working to millimetre tolerances. If I've learned one thing out of that it is that if it's a little bit more difficult to do, people do a bit better. If you try to make it easy to do, which you'd imagine is the logical thing to do, that doesn't mean it gets done to its best. What happens when it's a bit tricky to do is they put their best people on to it, or they step up, the builders and the engineers and so on. On a good day, you get this spirit that people are trying their best to do something just a little over the ordinary. And the kind of work we're doing is built to last. We are trying to see to it that that theatre is still there in 200 years time. And so it's got to be properly made.

FC: You're talking about the structure but that is reflected I suppose in the aesthetic as well. This kind of refinement.

JT: You're wondering what role aesthetics have? I think it's internal to the discipline. When you're doing something you want to do it well, but I think aesthetics have a communicative effect. I think people treat space better if it's better designed and I think they get a better at home feeling; there's more of a house proud feeling if they get something beautiful.

I'll give you an example which has nothing to do with the Lyric. We were doing a community centre in East Wall a few years ago, the Sean O'Casey centre. And those are people who because Sean O'Casey came from that area, they have a repertory theatre that puts on his plays every year. They have a childcare centre, they have an age care centre. They have a sports place for youth; you know football and activities. And they wanted a building to be their community house, if you like. They had never worked

with an architect before and they probably will never work with an architect again. We all got to know each other, and they were looking for something that they could hold on to, that would be the heart and soul of what they were after.

We suggested that the building would be designed around gardens, that every room would open onto a garden. And when you offer a thought like that to people, you take a chance. Then it turns out that a lot of people there have a real interest in gardening. So the discussion which has been happening about sport, theatre, old aged care, cooking dinners for old people – everyone meets in the garden. And the old people will sit in the garden and meet the younger kids and they'll play outside. The garden becomes a kind of metaphor. And then the East Wall people said we could set up a gardening club that could run those gardens.

If you ever went down to the Sean O' Casey centre, as you might do because they have performances, you would walk into that and you would notice the gardens before you think about the architecture. But the gardens are the architectural idea. And the gardens are a fraction of the cost of the building. But they make a big, big impact. That wasn't in the brief. The site was just a tarmac yard when we got there. But I think in that sense, the thought gives shape to the aesthetic and therefore the whole building, its inside, is transparent to the garden. It is closed to the street and open to the gardens.

FC: I want to get on to social housing and the big debates about development that are happening now. But before I do I'm curious if you ever get bored of what you do and say 'oh, I would like to do something different' or is it one of those things where each project must be fulfilled on its own brief. Is there a kind of rhythm to it?

JT: Great question. You're talking about restlessness.



Sean O'Casey Community Centre. Pic O'Donnell + Tuomey

FC: And risk or any of those things.

JT: Adventure. From our point of view, I guess, you like to think that every day is a fresh start. But the problem in architecture is the projects take a long time to get achieved. You're trying to think about them from first principles. But you've got to put that thought on a track, and then you need to be tenacious to that thought because it's so easy to fritter things. You have to get one track in your head, not one thought only, but your sets of priorities. And you have to hold them for five years. It takes five years to realise it from design through planning through construction through realisation. I think in that sense, it's a bit like making a film, the whole collaboration of people and in the end the outcome comes. It's done. And then you move on to the next one, which might be different, completely different. But within the work itself, it has to be completely consistent.

So you don't have room to change your mind halfway along. You can't make the baddy into the goody and the goody into a baddy. But there is the possibility once the thing is set, there is a possibility for an introduction of variation in the detail, design or in the furnishing or in the shaping or something that keeps you curious. In the best projects certainly in the Lyric, there was a lot of development in the material and in the finishes.

Beginnings: Group 91

FC: I want to take you back to Group 91 where different architects came together to propose a vision for Temple Bar. You started practice in the late 80s and, in my recollection, even as a child, Dublin was a fairly bleak place. A lot of shuttered up streets. And the city centre felt very small. And then it was European city of culture. There's a lot going on suddenly in '91. And there is this coming together of architects. I'm interested in that time and whether you think such a thing could even happen now?

JT: I hear it said a lot about how bad the eighties were because of the economic situation, employment and all the things that were wrong. But the eighties was an absolutely great time to be in Dublin. It was amazing. Because theatre was incredible in the eighties. There was a series of things happening with Brian Friel's plays and Tom McIntyre's plays. There was a sense of burgeoning voice. Ireland had become a place that had such a strong sense of its identity that it seemed to be rising. And the city as you say, was small and derelict but that gave a sense of potentiality, optimistic potentiality – if things are like this, you could combine these two things together and make a new street. There was a great feeling of possibility. Once a site gets developed, its potentiality is extinguished.

We were in our twenties, and that was the feeling; so much to do, and so much that could get done. It brought out those energies I think, brought a group of like minded contemporaries together across the arts, not only in architecture. We weren't locked in our discipline. We knew artists and filmmakers and writers. I think it was a very strong sense of common purpose. And we started to get involved in what we were calling counter projects, against the development of the time and publishing those projects in *In Dublin* magazine, which was a kind of critical magazine, or trying to get them shown on television. Trying to promote urban ideas against the grain. That's our formation. And this idea that we had a purpose, we had a mission, we had to do this. And I think I came out of the eighties with the feeling 'now's the time to do it, and we should be doing it'. It gave a great energy. I think we're still living off that energy.

FC: And I suppose it turned into a reality then in the nineties in Temple Bar. People may not love how it turned out, but not necessarily because of the architecture.

JT: Well, it was intended to be a living part of the city, a demonstration of a living, integrated city with housing and artists' activities and cultural activities. I actually don't think there was any single person in the whole thing who foresaw that overwhelming wave of weekend tourism and the kind of inflation that pushed out marginal activities. Every pub that had a ground floor became eight storeys of pubbery.

FC: I'm curious because Temple Bar was meant to be a big bus depot but that was stopped because people came together and proposed an alternative vision. We see a lot now of debate with the Cobblestone pub and Merchants Arch; there's a huge tension there, particularly when it comes to the development of hotels, about what the future Dublin should be like. Do you think there is an argument for an alternative vision to be presented? And do you think it's happening now?



Irish Film Centre (IFI). Pic: O'Donnell + Tuomey

JT: Those events that you're talking about, the one around the Cobblestone in Smithfield or events around the passageway through to Merchants Arch – it's those kinds of hotspots or primers that ignite a

larger scale awareness. And absolutely, I think that's great. I mean, that's what has to happen. Definitely. Ground up, that's where it has to come from.

FC: I might be wrong, but in the debate we tend to hear a lot from economists and even developers, business interests, politicians etc on the need for housing and whether certain models of funding or housing will I suppose, satisfy or go some way towards satisfying the huge demand. We don't really hear that much from architects in the debate. I mean, is there more room for that?

JT: I think the problem if you view it from an economic point of view is that you have to view it from an expenditure and return analysis. And that's probably because people use very short terms to calculate the market. Return on investment in construction: it might be nine years it might be 18 years it might be 12 years. Buildings last for hundreds of years. People talk even about the lifespan of buildings as if they were expendable. But you walk through the city and every street you're going down there's more than 200 years old structures. Structures survive. So what's really important, I think, is to build homes almost independent of who builds or why it's built. What's important is what's built has adaptability to be able to still be valuable and architects are expected, are supposed to or should have that kind of vision, that appreciation.

When I'm thinking about designing housing, it shouldn't matter if it's social or private. Because what matters is the journey home, the feeling of neighbourhood, the feeling of parts, parts making a whole, a larger whole. Because you know, standards will say what size a living room is and what size a bathroom is. Standards will determine how things are made. But you won't make a town and you won't make a place by just adding together sets of standards and then rolling out the product. I think the thing that's missing is this space inbetween or the space

between your own apartment and the larger world. When you step out your door, what do you step out onto or into. And from there, where does that connect you into the city at large.

The public sphere

FC: Were you lucky in getting a social housing project like the Timberyard. You obviously do work on social housing in the UK but I didn't see any other examples in Ireland. I was wondering would a project like that be viable today? The residents there seemed to be hand picked for starters, which probably makes it easier for you in some ways because you get to maybe have more interaction. But even the materials used, the hard wood and brick. I know in your practice you favour natural materials but is that something that's going to become more complex?

JT: I think when we finished the Timberyard we really wanted to carry on making work like that. It just didn't come to us. We just for some reason didn't get it. And I regret that. But at the minute, right now, 10 years later we have three pretty serious housing projects on our drawing boards, social housing projects in Dublin at a greater density, which I think is really interesting because if you try and think how do you bring that feeling of groundedness to projects which have greater density, which is what we're trying to do, and including some elements of prefabrication or efficiencies that come from production.

The proposed social housing developments are in the new Guinness quarter, near the south Georgian core and up by Mountjoy Square. Separately Tuomey mentions that the practice has designed a residential tower in Clonliffe College in Drumcondra for Hines, as part of a Strategic Housing Development for 1614 build to rent apartments over 12 blocks ranging in height from two to 18 stories. The plan has got the go ahead from An Bord Pleanála despite concerns from Dublin City Council that 71 per cent of the scheme is to be made up of studio and one

bed units. The executive architects on the project are Henry J Lyons. O'Donnell + Tuomey designed what is described in the plans as the "landmark" wedge-shaped tower at the heart of the development containing 151 residential units. Tuomey says they designed the building with a series of hanging gardens so that the people who live there won't feel trapped.

JT: The problem with access to housing is people are in dark corridors with no contact with the outside and they love their apartments, but they've got no in-between space. So in that tall design, we tried to change it with roof gardens and terraced gardens and amenity rooms and community rooms within the tower and a cafe on the ground floor and thought of the whole thing as a sort of a live structure. So that's at planning and if that happens, I think that will be exciting. But I'm saying our purpose if you like, our vocation, is to try to make social architecture. But this social architecture doesn't only have to be in the public realm. It could be private too.



FC: And that whole question of materials...

JT: The problem with plastics and panels is that they have a very limited lifespan. They are essentially disposable. Whereas a brick will last 500 years. I think it's a question of maintenance free longevity. And if you put the carbon problem, the crisis into that then you're looking for buildings that offset their footprint by being valuable so you don't get involved in this cycle of demolition and needless waste like the fashion industry – throwaway culture. We're the opposite of that or trying to be the opposite of that. So it's not saying natural for natural, it's saying durability, and that includes that you can use industrialised materials, but they have to be long lasting and they have to be low maintenance because nobody maintains things properly. Buildings have to stand on their own. So I don't want to get attached to natural materials as if that is some kind of religion, it's more to do with their value, and long lasting value.

There's plenty of room in Dublin for dense development and for adaptation of existing structures, which I'd say is probably the new topic, the new urgency.

FC: I suppose they come with an upfront cost. And I'm just wondering, is there latitude for that? It's not necessarily that people say 'oh, we don't want that' but do budgets allow for it?

JT: That's absolutely right. But what you have to do there is you just have to prioritise and say 'this is what matters and this can change in time or this can be improved in time, but this will last a long time'. You have to become the agent of that argument. You don't always win it.

FT: Frank McDonald wrote an article recently about French architects Lacaton and Vassal. I watched them speak about their work on YouTube. He's obviously quite into their notion of repurposing and only building when necessary. What do you make of that philosophy?



Inside the Timberyard. Pic: O'Donnell + Tuomey

JT: I know their work very well. I mean, I know them individually, and I've seen their work and it's a formula. I heard Anne Lacaton recently say it was a global solution. I think it's very unreliable and dodgy, because the excellent aspect of it is that they take an existing structure and they add space, and that is really good. That's a great strategy. And I'm all for it. But what is sacrificed in that scheme is the quality of anything that's made. It's extremely flimsy. So it has a very short life in my terms. And it's all plastic or glass. What happens is people close their curtains and live inside because not everyone is an extrovert all the time. And they don't all want to live in a goldfish bowl or whatever you call it behind the window. For me, it's just too simple. I want to make places where people can feel inside and outside and in-between, I want more complexity. And this is too singular and too much of a global formula. So not for me, but that's okay. The world is full of different kinds of people and they're great

at what they do. But what we're trying to do is thicken things up a bit, so that you can stand on a porch or go out into a bay window or have a bit of depth in the world, something to lean on. In-between space.

Why public procurement in Ireland has to change

It's very difficult for architects to get public work or substantial work, if they haven't proved already that they can do that work. And if that's the case, then actually you can never get it if you have to have done it before. You eventually get to the point that no one can get the work except the people who have all the work and so the big companies take over. And that's a real problem. And that is actually the reality of what's going on in Ireland...there's no room for breakthrough, there's no room for invention.

Cookie cutters

FC: Certain developers, even when looking at their work in London, in the public spaces where there are meant to be shops and stuff, they don't ever create, well, a vibe. They are a sort of dead space with noodle bars and the like. Is there a way of building these massive modern developments to avoid that? What do you think is going on in those spaces?

JT: I think it was a problem here in Dublin with a lot of those new apartment buildings that they all had the same formula that they would come down to a higher ground floor, which might become a shop or something like that. And in fact, if you walk down those streets, a lot of those places are empty or so fast changing or shut up half the time. In the Timbryard that was our brief to do that and we said ‘no, no, no, no, people will just live on the ground like they do in the Liberties like they do around the corner’. You’d be surprised how hard it was to argue for that because in a way the cultural memory that people live on the street had been lost and people thought the formula was to put flats upstairs and put these units downstairs.

I think it’s a bad formula, maybe a corner shop here and there. It’s much more important to have something like a swimming pool or a library or art studios. We’ve been involved in work in the Netherlands where a percentage of every scheme is given over to artists. I don’t mean to make a piece of artwork, lobby art, I mean studios for artists to work in studios for artists to live in. So kind of a mixed formula. You’re talking about the bland, either the abandoned or the bland. We should try and make neighbourhoods good places for all classes of society. And we should try to avoid enclaves. We should look for a feeling of belonging but also a feeling of continuity. We should all live in the same city. I think that’s what I prefer as you walk around the streets, it’s all one city.

FC: I’m struck walking around Dublin that it’s still a very spacious city in many ways. When you go to bigger cities, there are just buildings everywhere for better or worse. Do you think Dublin’s underdeveloped?

JT: Dublin has got incredible natural gifts and natural graces, because it was planned at one time with wide streets and squares and a river. It has the park at one end and the sea at the other. Dublin is one of the most beautiful cities in the world. Combined it has a lot of sky and a lot of

nature. You can go walking out by the sea, you can be in the mountains in 20 minutes, it's an amazing city to live in. So I think you were asking about the character of Dublin, I think, is that what you're asking?

FC: Would you believe there's a lot of room within the boundaries of the city for a lot more development?

JT: There's plenty of room in Dublin for dense development and for adaptation of existing structures, which I'd say is probably the new topic, the new urgency and I think that's a very interesting question. Dublin has lots of room .. what we have to do is stop sprawling out into the outlying suburbs because we have to have urban containment. There should be landscape and there should be urban farm. There shouldn't just be a spread across the whole countryside. So I'd say contain it and build in density but hold spatial character. It's got beautiful assets.

FC: Are we building the wrong things in the city centre? Everyone thinks we are building loads of hotels. Do you think that's a correct assessment?

JT: I think we should be building a livable city. There's plenty of room to improve in that sector.