

BUILDINGS

# 50 Wonders | John Tuomey: The Aran Islands, Ireland

25 October 2021



The O'Donnell & Tuomey co-founder and RIBA Gold Medal winner (with Sheila O'Donnell) explains his love for the structures and geology of the islands at the mouth of Galway Bay, for our 50th birthday series, #BD50Wonders



The 12th-century chapel of Cill Ceannanach

ADVERTISEMENT

Most popular Most commented



'Imminent risk' of steel production shutdown amid critical magnesium shortage 3



Architects unveil 'game-changing' housing retrofit handbook



New owner of £1bn South Bank site replaces Wilkinson Eyre with Fosters



What you need to know about the Heat and Buildings Strategy 4



'Faithful rebuild' announced as favoured option for burnt-out shell of Mac



Peter Cook celebrates 85th birthday by unveiling second building at alma mater



Khan targets diverse architects with new four-year framework 5



AHMM director hits back at critics of Holloway and St Thomas's schemes 6



Fosters, Adjaye and Brooks on Toronto Quayside shortlist



City approves conversion of listed police station into five-star hotel



**Wonder: The Aran Islands, Ireland**

**Architect: Anonymous individuals**

**Nominator: John Tuomey**

Every year at about this time we go back to the Aran Islands, and each time we wonder again at its singular complexity, how its natural formation has been combined with manmade construction, at the ingenuity of human response to a unique geology.

Every structure on the island landscape, from fortress to field wall, from water tank to pier, from holy well to chapel, from cowshed to cottage – everything is built from the same grey matter: stone.



Source: Al Higgins

John Tuomey

There are no excavated quarries: every part of the island surface is available as a source of stone, painstakingly peeled or simply picked from the crust of its skin. Thin slabs of limestone scraped off the horizontally layered surface, broken rocks gathered together in stacks and piled up to make a web of small fields, dry stone walls that withstand the wind, shafts of stone prised into verticality for gateposts, blocks of stone cut or split into usable sizes – some so heavy that it now seems impractical or practically impossible.



A typical example of the endless drystone field walls on the islands

And the wonder of this timeless labour of hands is that clock time doesn't seem to matter, or calendar time doesn't seem to have made much difference to the island form across the two thousand years of continuous building.

We are told that the massive forts might date from the first century, the tiny chapels were put up in the early stages of the next millennium, and the field walls are a never-ending network, constantly maintained up to the present day, with new merging into old in a slow-time conglomeration of stone.

We marvel at how it all holds together, how the whole thing works as one.