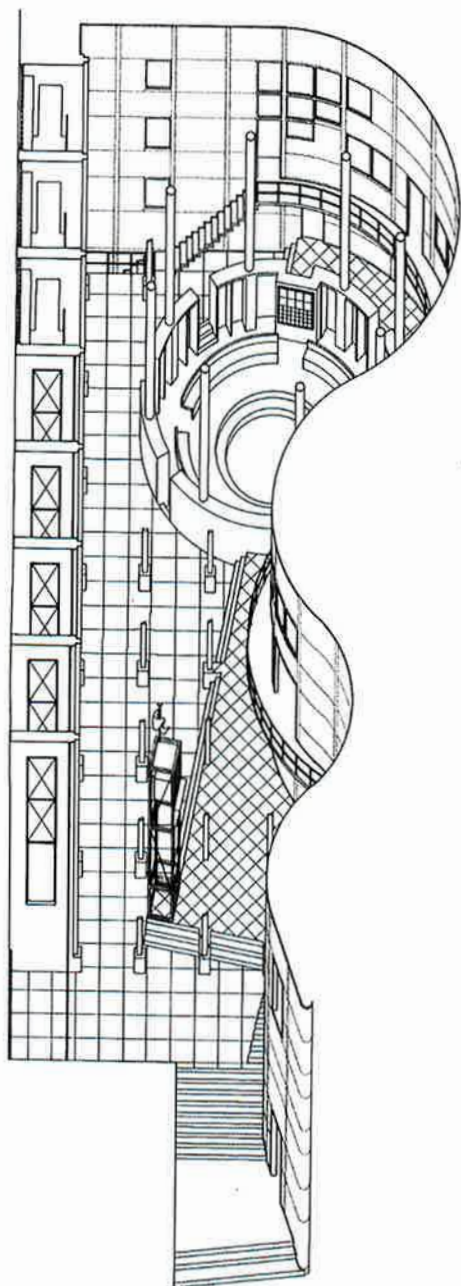


RIAI Women in Architecture 2019

An interview with
Sheila O'Donnell FRIAI

CP Carole Pollard
SO Sheila O'Donnell



CP
Starting at the beginning, could you tell us about why you chose to study architecture and the, so to speak, educational journey that you had?

SO
When I was in school I really loved art and I liked English; I liked maths too but maybe not quite as much. I thought about what sort of career would combine the things I enjoyed about those subjects. I knew that I didn't want to be a fine artist, I didn't think that that was a path I could follow. But I didn't know that much about architecture, so it was really a hunch. I had this idea that architecture was like a responsive art, that you were answering a question, and I think that appealed to me. My father was an engineer and put a lot of pressure on me to do engineering, so maybe it was partly in compensation to him. And so I went into architecture not really knowing exactly what an architect did; I'd probably never met an architect before I studied. But the amazing thing was, within days of starting in first year at Earlsfort Terrace, I felt that I had found my world. I remember thinking, 'I'm never going to see the world in the eyes I saw them before'.

My experience of that first year of study was fantastic. Our tutors included Shane de Blacam, Cathal O'Neill, Pat Hickey, and a couple of other people I'm probably not mentioning. It was a brilliant combination. Shane had just returned from working and studying with Louis Kahn, and we didn't realise this at the time, but he brought the spirit of Kahn into the studio. He encouraged us to talk to bricks and ask them what they wanted. Because we knew nothing about architecture, we thought that was coming from him, which it was, but it was being channelled from Louis Kahn. Then, interestingly, when we were in second year, Kahn did a lecture in Dublin, in the Carroll's Building along the canal, and we managed to all get in and scrum up to the front and sit on the floor. When he started about talking to bricks

and asking them what they wanted, we thought, 'Oh, he really learned a lot from Shane didn't he ...' So we had a really great first year. Unfortunately, things went downhill after.

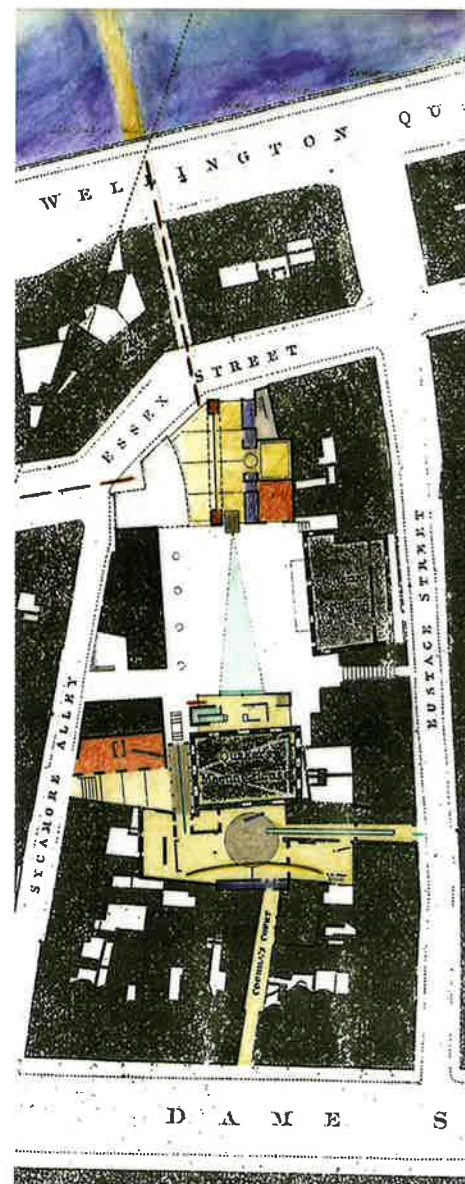
The very first meeting in second year, the tutors said to us, 'We're going to do everything we can to make you unlearn any of that stuff you got in first year, all that rubbish about bricks. We don't do that'. Immediately it seemed that a shutter had come down and we thought, 'We're not on their side. We're on the other side'. And actually, we experienced a subsequent four years during which we were trying to hold on to something that we had discovered, and believed in, but was not what most of the people who were teaching us believed in. As a result, a group of us became each other's tutors and the library was our education. We rifled through books; for six months we were Russian Constructivists, then we moved on to being New Brutalists, and all the time there was Le Corbusier. One outcome of this experience was learning to decide that, if you believe in something, then you've got to hold on to it, even as people tell you it's wrong. All of that, I think, strengthened us.

After five years in UCD, John and I left together to travel around Europe looking at Palladio's buildings. That was a real revelation. We realised that pre-modernist architecture could also be relevant; you could talk about Palladio and Le Corbusier in the same conversation and understand the connections.

We ended up that autumn in London and had an amazing five years there. It was like a second education. The city was really buzzing at that time. It was '76 when we arrived. There was always symposia, lectures, the AA seemed to have something on every night of the week, and Peter Cook had this thing called ArtNet where people went into some room off Bedford Square and sat on deckchairs and shouted at each other about architecture. It was an amazing period of discussion and we felt like this was the centre of the world for architecture.

(previous page)
 1. Design for a London Metal Exchange, final project at the Royal College of Art, by Sheila O'Donnell (1980)

(this page) 2. Plan of three buildings in Temple Bar, including the Irish Film Institute. Collage drawing over 1847 map, by O'Donnell + Tuomey



I was working for a small practice in Covent Gardens, Spence and Webster. John was working for Stirling. There was a gang of people that went to all these events and it seemed as if nobody was building, there was no work, but architecture was being made through conversation and publication.

After two years working for Spence and Webster, I got offered a place in the RCA to do a masters. It's title was 'environmental design', but really was a masters in architecture. I wonder if one of the reasons for wanting to do it was partly to compensate for feeling that, while we had enjoyed our time in UCD, there had been a lack of discussion and direction from tutors. As it happened, a number of people who were teaching in the Royal College at that time were the people who had been part of the 'Flying Circus' in UCD. We had arrived in just after that period so we never had them as tutors. At the RCA, then, Ed Jones and Chris Cross were teaching, while Ken Frampton presented the history course and also taught studio. It was a great opportunity, and having worked for two years, I really appreciated the freedom of being a student again, having that time to think about projects.

While I was at the Royal College, I worked during the summers and part-time with John Miller, who was the Head of School. He was in practice with Alan Colquhoun, who's a very well-known, respected critic and writer. I spent a summer drawing plans – in ink, on tracing paper, at 1:50 – of ten great houses of the twentieth century for an exhibition that they were preparing. And I remember having great discussions with Alan about architectural theory and history; the relationship between Aalto and Corb, or who was better, or what about Eliel Saarinen. It was a real privilege to have that summer, making those drawings and listening to them talk about architecture and their experiences.

CP

So was it hard to leave London?

SO

Very hard to leave. On the other hand, I think when I went to London I always believed I would leave. I went there thinking it would be great to have these experiences and discover a different way of making architecture. I would say that one huge value was seeing people like Colquhoun and Miller. They had hardly any work and yet they were famous all over the world. They were somehow managing to live a life in architecture by doing exhibitions, writing, teaching, and entering competitions. They had chosen to live the life that they wanted to do. Whereas when I left Dublin, there was nobody working like that. So finding there was a whole community of people who were living this way – I mean they probably weren't very well-off and were probably struggling a lot of the time – but that was the way they had chosen to live. It meant a lot to them and they believed in it. That was one of the things that, when we came back, we brought with us.

But also towards the end of that time, the postmodern era was really beginning to take over and I felt a lot of architects whose architecture I had respected and admired were beginning to do slightly thoughtless work, tacking bits of historic motifs on to projects. I just thought, I want to get out of here, I want to get back to something more real. And maybe it's something Irish people always have, people do tend to go away to come back. We wanted to be part of whatever was happening in Ireland.

CP

It was somewhere that you could really make your mark; did you recognise that at that stage?

SO

It's hard to know. I remember at one of the many 'Goodbye to London' parties that happened over the years, a German friend said to us (very late after a bottle of Paddy), 'Go back and change the face of Irish architecture'. And we thought, that was a good joke Walter. But also, in a funny way, we thought, well ... maybe that's not a bad idea.

I came back at the end of 1981. There was absolutely no work, of course, but Dublin was interesting. It was beautiful but almost half-derelict; almost nothing new had been built for fifty years. Plus nobody had put a new motorway through Dublin like had happened in many provincial British cities. So we had this idea that in Dublin, the bad things hadn't happened yet. Nothing had happened. Georgian houses were crumbling. But things were waiting to happen.

We all started doing these speculative projects, how you could turn a house on the quays into an apartment for three people when the very idea that people would live in apartments was really shocking.

Shane de Blacam invited me to join his team in fourth year in UCD, and so I came back in October 1981 just in time to start the academic year. And really, I lived on teaching for a number of years. I was teaching twenty hours a week in UCD and it gave me an outlet to talk about all I picked up during those years in London, as well as time to think about what it was I wanted to do.

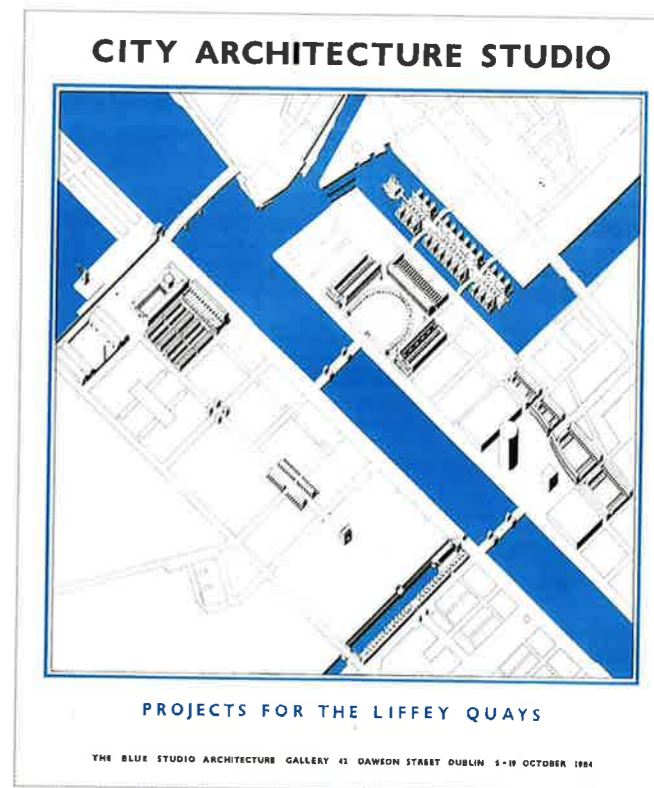
In those years when none of us had any work, we kept busy doing our own thing. We'd redesign the whole city or put on exhibitions. It was an important time for consolidating, getting to grips with what we thought needed to happen. Alongside teaching, I was doing small work; I designed a house for some friends in Sligo. Then, in the mid-eighties, another friend in the Irish Film Institute asked me to start working on feasibility studies for different sites, which would eventually become the film centre.

CP

The film centre is one project I wanted to mention this evening. I picked up this quotation that, I think, is very pertinent; you said, 'Working slowly on this project, through the processes of research, survey, design, demolition, repair, reuse, building, and re-building set us on a course on which we still steer today'. Would you still see a truth in that statement?

SO

Yes, I would very much agree with that. It was, for us, an absolutely amazing project to have. It was a slow process, which was probably very helpful. We, for example, surveyed the building ourselves; nine separate buildings built at different times, all different geometries and different shapes. Measuring them, just spending time in them, was a really important part of the immersion required to understand their character. Because the project did take so long, we had a lot of time to consider all the moves we were making. We realised that working with old buildings is really interesting because there's something physically there to start with, so in your work you're thinking about detail as well as concept from the very beginning. One of the things that came out of the work was a realisation that no context is completely new – it's almost just a question of extent.



In a sense, it also helped to free us up. We probably returned from London with a strong rationalist sense, influenced by Rossi and Le Corbusier. Then we found ourselves working on a set of old buildings where the geometries were out of your control, where nothing was a

"I think it's important that young men are being taught by women who are also working in practice and who are in positions of importance in practice"

right angle. I think the experience encouraged us to think about space and about building experientially, as much as abstract drawings on a page. Throughout the project, we tried to keep that sense of discovery, and maintain a conversation between the old and the new, allowing both to continue to grow.

CP

At an event like this, a 'Women in Architecture' event, the elephant in the room is the fact that we need to have 'Women in Architecture' events. Having recently won Architect of the Year at the 2019 Women in Architecture Awards, what are your thoughts regarding the current status of women in the profession?

SO

I do have mixed feelings about things like 'Women in Architecture' awards. You would hope that, ideally, special awards for women wouldn't be necessary, that there should just be architecture awards.

I did find the event in London around this year's award very interesting, however. I liked that it felt like a festival, a celebration. There was a forum in the RIBA, the evening before the awards, where each nominee presented her work. For me, that was the highlight of the whole three days because of the interest in listening to architects I hadn't previously heard of. There was a fantastic atmosphere.

I suppose the other element to consider is that it's part of an AR/AJ campaign which also involves surveys and research into contemporary working conditions. Amazingly, it's found that a large number of women architects are paid less than men doing the same job, and that women aren't rising through the profession.

So I think that having these events and focusing on these issues is overall positive, as it raises the question of why is this happening? As someone working in a smaller practice, it's inconceivable to me how women could be paid less for the same work as men, but it obviously

is happening because that's what the statistics describe. And so, having that said, and repeatedly said, is important. There is a power in repetition.

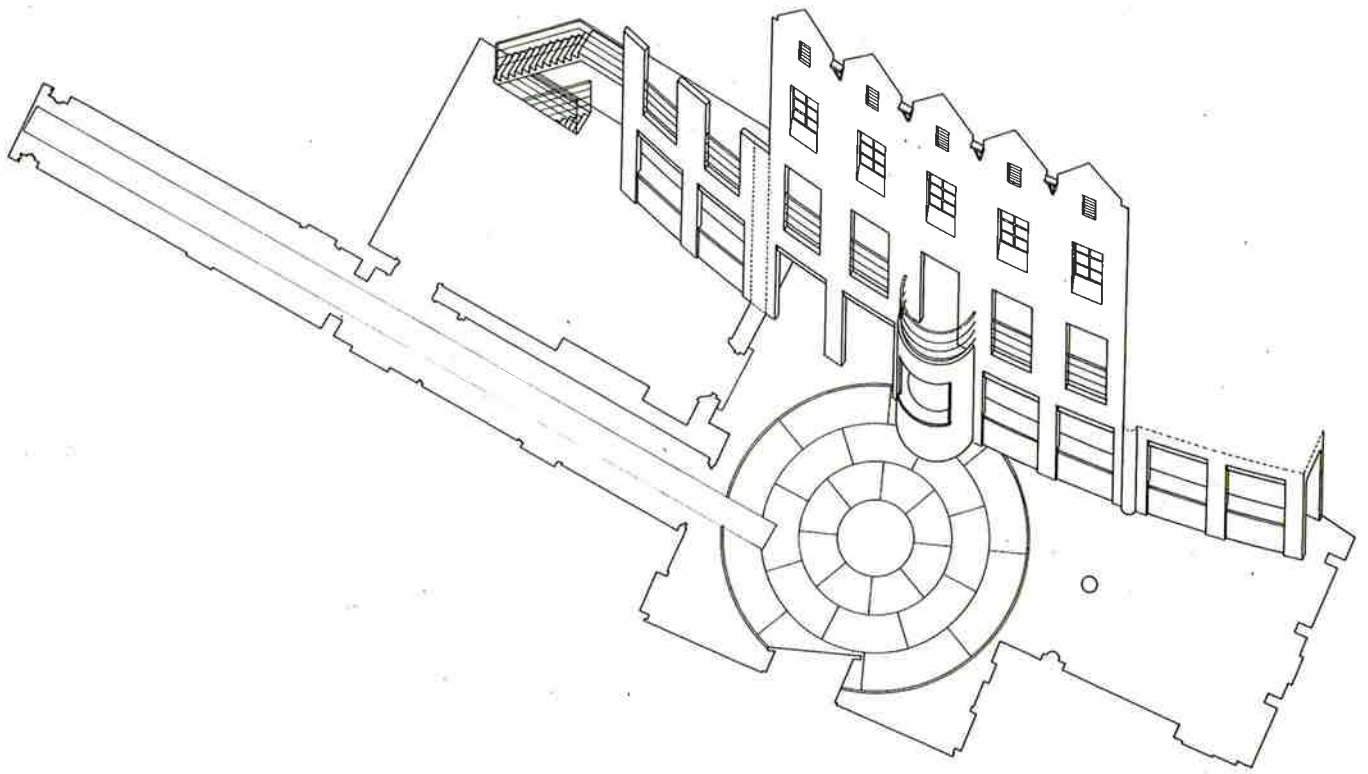
In order to address some of these inequalities, it requires men to realise that a woman, who may well indeed wish to have a family, can be a responsible committed senior member of a practice. In our own practice, we have plenty of mothers working for us, and I would never doubt their commitment to the work they're doing, no more than I would doubt their commitment to their families, both of which are present in their work and in their lives.

CP

Aside from your work in practice, you've also given a huge amount as a teacher. What would be your thoughts on the position of women in the schools of architecture?

SO

When we were students, there were very few women teaching. In fact, in first year, I think there was one woman and she was an interior designer, which was the way it was. She was there for that purpose. But when I came back from London and began teaching in UCD, there were many more women teaching; my impression is that it was around fifty-fifty. I think that was so important. It's not just important that these women might act as role models for female students, but for the male students as well. Even now, many new students will enter university after years spent in single-sex schools at secondary level. When I taught in first year, I think some boys were quite shocked to find that there were women teaching them, were taken aback and thought, 'I wonder what's she here for'. Well, actually she's running the year. I think it's important that young men are being taught by women who are also working in practice and who are in positions of importance in practice.



CP

It's true that some of those imbalances can be quite persistent. With regard to the RIAI, the number of women who are registered members is now over thirty percent for the first time. However, in terms of the number of fellows, this figure drops to sixteen percent. That distorts the statistic to twenty-six or twenty-seven percent female overall, which is fairly in line with figures across Europe. I think the fact that nine percent of the retired membership is composed of women, while women make up fifty-nine percent of the graduate membership is a really telling story. It's about keeping as many of those fifty-nine percent in the profession as possible.

SO

I think so. There needs to be a solidarity and support among women, but also between men and women. I was thinking about that event in the RIBA where these emerging women presented their work, and that it might be interesting to ask not just young women, but women at different stages of their career. Because obviously people having children is a big part of the issues being discussed. I would say that women are depending on the men to get involved in that situation. In my case, when I was in my twenties in London, I thought that I never would have children because

I just didn't see how that was possible. I didn't see how it would be possible to have children and still have a committed life as an architect; I had that fear of losing something.

It's important when you're young to have some aspirations towards an idealised idea of how life will be. Because John would be one of the people that I most talked to about this, when it came to us thinking of having children, the bargain had already been made; that if we did, it was not going to be my job. I can say that I'm really lucky because, first of all, since we were working together, we had the flexibility between us to decide how to arrange our childcare, and secondly, because we had already agreed in advance that we were going to be absolutely equal in terms of our family commitments. Apart from the actual bearing of the children and the breastfeeding, every other aspect was shared equally between us, and I realise that's actually not that common. I'm really lucky in that respect.

So we need men to make that commitment and to realise all the positive aspects that it entails; the more involved they become with their kids, the much more fulfilling and rich are their lives. The other thing is that you learn so much from being around children, about how to be a person; you realise all kinds of things you never knew until there's a small child in your life.

(previous page) **3.** Exhibition poster for *Projects for the Liffey Quays* at City Architecture Studio (1984) (this page) **4.** Axonometric of the central courtyard space in the Irish Film Institute, by O'Donnell + Tuomey (1992)