

# The Lives of Spaces

Ireland's participation in the 11th Venice International Architecture Biennale is a Culture Ireland initiative, in partnership with the Arts Council

Architecture has a raw deal. While other art forms have almost complete freedom of expression in their exploration of the human condition – are, indeed, encouraged in this exploration – the art of building remains fundamentally attached to its civic and societal function, just as the artist who works with architecture – the architect – remains constrained by considerations of the client, by the purpose and ethicality of their work. The dual nature of architecture, the marriage of form and function, has meant that architects have been consistently steered in directions demanding of clarity – clarity of form so that the building be easily negotiable, clarity of function so that its identity be easily legible. The latter is perhaps the most constraining, and, at the same time, the most important and individual aspect of architecture's identity as an art form. On the one hand, architects are the people who construct our built environment. They decide where, and in what atmospheres, we conduct our daily lives. The power to create communities – civic, social and individual – is, quite literally, in their hands. Yet this power, which is at once the basis of architecture's integral attachment to humanity, is also the art of building's primary limitation when it comes to the complete range of expression constituting that humanity. The responsibility to construct a better world, mould communities and represent national identities is one that demands a positivistic and, often, utopian language. Of course, if our world was a perfect place in which to live this might not pose any dilemma, but where literature, music, dance and the visual arts have all been able to harness the 'presentness' and the darkness of life, architecture runs the risk (albeit with a few notable exceptions) of being locked within a future-based schema, a programme of idealistic projections that threaten to dislocate it from the reality – the complex, intriguing and yet, beautiful reality – of human existence.

It is perhaps fitting, therefore, that this year's Irish exhibition at the 11th Venice International Architecture Biennale, 'The Lives of Spaces', came into being through a series of conversations. The Biennale, as the largest showcase for architecture in the world, runs from 14 September – 23 November this year and it is expected that over 100,000 people will visit Venice where, whether by design or default, they will engage with the world's foremost innovators in architectural design and display. The importance of the Venice Biennale can be understood in these terms – terms which emphasise its grandeur and spectacle – and yet, consistently, the Venetian showcase has sought to problematise as much as to promote architecture and this art form's relationship to society. In November 2007, the commissioners met to discuss how they might formulate a proposal for the Biennale and found that their critical interests promised to lead them, and subsequently the field,

The theme of Ireland's exhibition at the 11th Venice International Architecture Biennale is an exploration of architecture as a container for the narratives that bind us together as a society

in exciting new directions. The collaboration saw the coming together of two distinct yet interlinked interests; Nathalie Weadick's background in the visual arts has led her to question the representation of architecture and informed a dynamic approach to its curation; co-commissioner and co-curator, Hugh Campbell, a former practitioner, is one of Ireland's most radical thinkers with regard to the significance of architecture and its role in the spatial framing and formation of society. Through their collaborative re-thinking of space and architecture's role in framing that space, they invited architects to consider proposals for a biennale that would concentrate in both subject and form upon the lives of spaces. This theme reflected a desire to move beyond notions of architecture as the presentation of a glass-and-steel utopian vision for a better future and shifted the focus to architecture's

significance for the present – how buildings interact with the 'now' to encourage certain patterns of movement through space, but also how buildings engage on an intimate level with us as their users. This shift in focus acknowledges the immediate presence of the building, but it also leads to an understanding of architecture as an intimate, conversational art form – one that enters into dialogue with history, politics, culture and the individual on a deeper level.

The result of these conversations is an exhibition showcasing nine leading artists of building whose projects range from the civic to the domestic, from the sacred to the cinematic. The exhibition demonstrates the willingness of Irish architects to re-think and re-engage with their medium. This re-engagement takes place through the exhibition's chosen means of representation, which is film. The choice of film as a medium has obvious merit for the way in which it explores space frame by frame – in a manner analogous to the way we experience space as a piecemeal series of rooms – rather than as a static, immediately comprehensible whole. However, the moving image has consequences beyond this analogy, and asking an architect to re-engage with their creation in a medium foreign to them has created its own dilemmas. For this transition from the architectural medium to that of film demands a re-imagining of the original work, while it also necessitates that the architect relinquish the simultaneity of their original design and allow their spaces to become mobile, or, to enter a dialogue with time. The curators of the exhibition have taken a certain amount of risk in challenging the architects in such a way, asking them to move their conception of architecture beyond their buildings to consider the relationships between architecture, society and individual experience. At another level too, the Irish exhibition moves the representation of architecture into unfamiliar territory. The choice of venue for the Irish pavilion is the 17th-century Palazzo Giustinian-Lolin, a venue which signals a refusal of white cube

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museum space. The latter's blankness has often been seen as a way to allow an exhibition to exist in isolation, abstracted from the complexities of everyday life. In contrast, the Palazzo Giustinian-Lolin is a functioning building in its own right, and, furthermore, it is a building that speaks the architectural language of a time whose immediate realities are lost to us today. Within this space, the Irish architects' projects are represented using installations of LCD screens set into variously shaped armatures that effectively act to furnish the rooms of the Palazzo. In this way, the projects converse with the exhibition space, multiplying the levels upon which the viewer might engage with 'The Lives of Spaces', and ultimately, it is the viewer who completes this exhibition.

All of these choices and collaborations are significant and emerge from a re-framing of Ireland's architectural heritage that insists on the importance of the role played by architectural spaces in the everyday cultural life of Ireland in the 21st century. For considerations of the 'now', of the everyday and the ordinary, inevitably lead to a dialogue with where we have come from – as an indication, perhaps, to where we are headed. In terms of the exhibition's specific identity as a showcase for Ireland, there is certainly a strong sense of national heritage within the projects, but the 'Irishness' of these architects' works emerges in ways that take architecture beyond its role as an expression of national identity. Rather than 'stand for' an – inevitably – abstract vision of what it means to be Irish, these projects acknowledge Ireland's architectural inheritance, not through blatant imitation or nationalistic ornamentation but via the realisation of intimate and inherently dense spaces, spaces where the 'now' acknowledges its inseparability from the past so as to present us with new ways of thinking about the future of architecture. In a similar manner to memory, then, these architectural artists unfold and refold their buildings in film so that the past is permitted to resonate with, rather than set a standard for, the present.

While each of the architects submitted their work independently, there are strong thematic connections between the projects. The re-negotiation of civic space is one such theme. Gerry Cahill Architects' (GCA) focus on Mercy Convent in Cork Street, Dublin, to explore how sacred space in Ireland has been re-negotiated in relation to the increasing secularisation of Irish culture. While this building's original life gained meaning through the medieval rites and universal values of Christianity, the importance of congregation, human gathering and sanctuary – a space for contemplation and quietude – are still very much part of this building's secular identity. GCA's film illustrates the stillness of the convent garden and points to the consistency of this space's sanctity by highlighting the presence of a mature copper beech that has persevered amidst the assaults of the construction

processes. A space for community and gathering is also the central tenet of Gráinne Hassett's Brookfield Youth and Community Centre. Situated in Tallaght, Dublin, the Centre brings to light the communal desire for beauty, expressed in the building's colour, light

and spatial organisation, but more than this, the architect Gráinne Hassett has said that the process of making a film of the building in use has made it 'clear to us that this building is, for us and without apology, the expression and the result of a series of processes; constructional, economic and social.' The tenuousness of the project's position within a difficult economic and infrastructural milieu has meant that the realisation of this building and its entrance into the everyday life of the community consists in the triumphant creation of new possibilities for thinking wider social inclusion and communal integration. Re-imagining a community's position in tension and transition within a wider social framework is the subject of O'Donnell + Tuomey's An Gaeláras building. The building, currently under construction, is a cultural centre for the Irish Language in Derry. The significance of this building's position on a street that bears the stamp of imperialism – evident in the neighbouring baroque temple whose architecture retreats from the street – lies in An Gaeláras' potential to subvert, and yet subsist with this building by proposing an alternative architectural language based on openness and ambiguity. In the exhibition, O'Donnell + Tuomey express the plurality of their building through an installation that requires the viewer's physical engagement with it in order that a visual and auditory sequence be instigated. Layers of life are thus allowed to exist within this representational space where the viewer, An Gaeláras and the object of exhibition combine to create a myriad of possible interpretations for this complex building. While the political is implicitly present in each of the above projects, it is in Dara McGrath's photographs of the deconstruction of the Maze/Long Kesh Prison that the reality and consequence of architecture's symbolic potential is most poignant. Firstly, McGrath's project is important for its demonstration of how demolition can be a significant construction in the life of a community. The particularity of the Maze's identity – as architectural symbol of the Troubles' intransigence and extremities – has meant that its subsequent deconstruction can be seen as a significant step in the healing process begun in Northern Ireland. McGrath's photographs show the prison's cells, sites of so much conflict and suffering, emptied of their inhabitants – silent ruins containing echoes of what has once been. At the same time, the photos imply that these vacated spaces might act as potential harbingers of a new phase in Irish cultural and political life. McGrath's is the only project that employs projection to re-present his photography. The effect of this is to highlight the still and haunting quality of the artist's photographs, and these images perform as reflections on the erasure of carceral memory through the anti-architecture of the ruin, at the same time as they invite contemplation on the aftermath of that ruined space.

Along with reflections on communal life in social and political terms, architecture's integral link to culture is a theme that runs through some of the other projects on display at the Biennale. DePaor architects' project 'delay' is a research piece into the nature of how cinema, both as



- 1 Gerry Cahill Architects
- 2 dePaor architects (exhibition installation)
- 3 Grafton Architects
- 4 Hassett Ducatez Architects
- 5 Patrick Lynch and Simon Walker
- 6 McCullough-Mulvin Architects
- 7 Dara McGrath in association with Robinson Mclwaine
- 8 O'Donnell + Tuomey (exhibition installation)
- 9 TAKA

architectural 'enclosure' and as escapist experience, creates a peculiar relationship between the viewer and time. DePaor Architects take the proposed Galway Picture Palace for their subject to explore how cinematic space consists in the bringing-together of strangers within the close environment of the salle, and how cinematic time permits alternate temporalities to enter into communication with each other. Real time is effectively suspended through the cinematic act, while film's representation of reality necessarily consists in a distortion of the outside world so that it might be framed within the range of the camera lens. The camera obscura – dePaor's installation at the Biennale – once again necessitates the direct participation of the viewer so that the play between cutting and continuity, the real and the artificial be enacted. Uniting cities and buildings through animated effect is the subject of Grafton Architects' film for the Biennale. In 'Anchor and Animation' the architects explore the transition from building space to city space and the integral relationship between the two. Two buildings and two cities are explored here – the new Department of Finance beside the Huguenot Cemetery on Merrion Row, Dublin, and the Bocconi University in Milan. Both of these buildings are invested in their respective landscapes – materially, through the use of local stone, and structurally, through the re-interpretation of the traditional architectural characteristics of each city. Similarly, both play with the notion of the building as a threshold in the way that the definition of their geometric exteriors gives way to a more fluid, friendly interior. Furthermore, although separated by space the buildings constitute a pair in the way they allow for mutually oppositional perspectives on their cities. In Dublin, the windows of the Department of Finance building project outwards into the urban arena, allowing the person inside the building to be drawn outward into the city space. In Milan, the opposite effect is achieved whereby the windows of the Bocconi University are framed by the building's structural mass, drawing the outsider inwards, compelling entry to find what lies behind the exterior. The film-making process was an act of translation for Grafton Architects and they compared the process of making a film of the lives of their buildings to the process of making architecture. The precise and the random co-exist in film, just as they do when space is inhabited, the coincidence of one city with another evokes the imaginative processes we go through when one building in the present recalls another that is absent; memory is awakened by a shared architectural rhythm or atmosphere. Public space is once again explored in McCullough-Mulvin's project 'Real-Unreal', which documents the life of their Waterford Library two years after its construction. Here, the tension between ideal space and space as it is used is brought to the fore. At the architectural level, this tension is present in the way that McCullough-Mulvin's building intervenes in a pre-existing structure – a stone courtyard – and in so doing creates a new coherency, modelled on that of an urban plan. However, this architectural sense, once entered into by the public allows for new 'routes and niches' to emerge within the library's framework.

McCullough-Mulvin's film, therefore, constitutes a play between the ideal and the real, emptiness and engagement, the utter silence of the ideal library and the soft hush of the library in use.

Domestic space also features in this exhibition, as that most intimate of all spaces and perhaps the one that is increasingly at risk in today's world. The life of a particular domestic space is documented by Simon Walker and Patrick Lynch in their project on Bótharbuí, the home of Robin and Dorothy Walker. Robin Walker, Simon's father, has left a considerable mark on the country architecturally, while his wife Dorothy was a woman of great innovation (she was a founder member of the Irish Museum of Modern Art). Walker and Lynch explore the encounters that this house has had with many of the significant figures of Irish and international cultural life since the 1970s. Bótharbuí, as former salon, presents us with a structure filled with memories awaiting narrative, with traces of the intimate lives of public figures who spent time there. The domestic is also the subject of TAKA's project 'Mnemonic Tectonics: Constructing Space through Memory and Ritual'. TAKA's work explores how the family home is inevitably invested with memory and how the connection between space and its inhabitants relies on this mnemonic investment in order that a house become a home. This memory is first of all threatened with disruption as the architects trace the journey of a Dublin family moving from their family home of generations into two new homes – one for the parents and another for the recently married daughter. TAKA's project explores how building a new home can in itself be a step into memory, allowing the newly inhabited spaces to resonate with the former home through processes of joint construction, of crafted surfaces that speak the layers of previous encounters, investing the new space with a depth denied to so many newly constructed houses. TAKA's project invokes the importance of the personal and the potential of memory as a tool in the construction of space.

All of these architects, then, engage with space in a way that, rather than seeking to stabilise the meaning of architecture, allows room for ambiguity and irresolution. 'The Lives of Spaces' is a project that seeks to question architecture's representation as a utopian or elitist art form. In the way that it allows architects the space to re-frame their work this showcase encourages us to reconsider how our daily lives are intimately informed by the spaces and buildings where we find ourselves. Thinking of the lives of spaces reveals the importance of architecture to human society in a manner beyond its infrastructural and technocratic necessity. It allows for an exploration of architecture as a container for the narratives that bind us together as a society and reveals the outer space of the building to be inseparable from the inner, emotional space of that society. ■

Nathalie Weadick, Director of the Irish Architecture Foundation and Hugh Campbell, Professor of Architecture, University College Dublin are co-commissioners and co-curators of Ireland's exhibition at the 11th Venice International Architecture Biennale. This essay was written by Gillian Jain PhD, production assistant on 'The Lives of Spaces' exhibition, in collaboration with Nathalie Weadick and Hugh Campbell.

# An Gaeláras

John Tuomey of O'Donnell + Tuomey Architects, in conversation with Shane O'Toole



**A**n Gaeláras in Derry is a cultural body that encourages access to the Irish language and culture without having to put on a *Fáinne Nua*. It's a cluster of activities within the one house. There's a café, shop, performance space, and enterprise centre for start-up businesses, arts and crafts workshops. The site is like a long, skinny pocket, 55 metres deep by 15 metres wide. To make it more complicated, there was a Northern Ireland Electricity Board substation at the front. Because the performance venue is at the back of the site, we had to carve out a fire escape, so our street frontage is no more than ten metres. We imposed a courtyard for circulation and to provide all of the light. We were leaning on the Irish Film Institute precedent, really. You try to play off the restrictions, to use the bind to give it its form. The zigzag diagonal structure tightens the whole thing like a corkscrew. It's a jack-in-the-box scheme, forced into its sleeve. The fractured, crimped façade is the outcome of that pressure, the energy of the spring inside. The analogy is a pinball machine. You can understand it as incident and reflection: you see the poster, glance off the receptionist and head diagonally to the café. The flipping creates a momentum of its own, which is translated into the vertical. The ball comes out in the fire escape! The circulation is fragmented, with

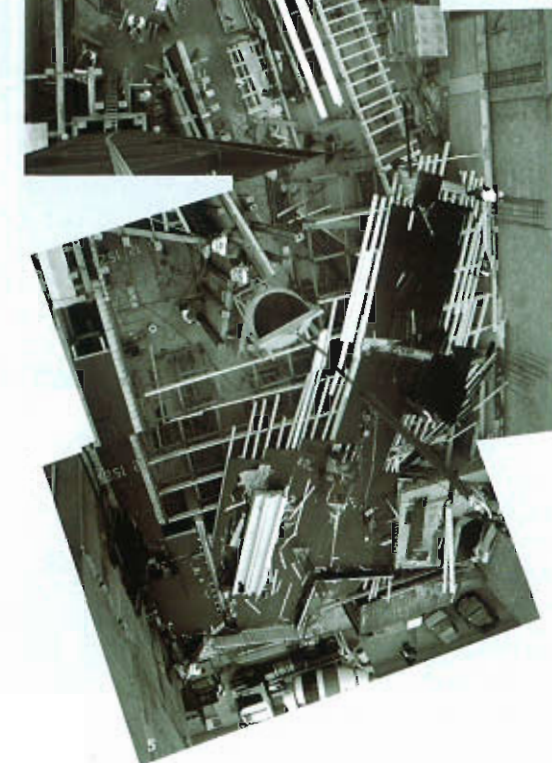
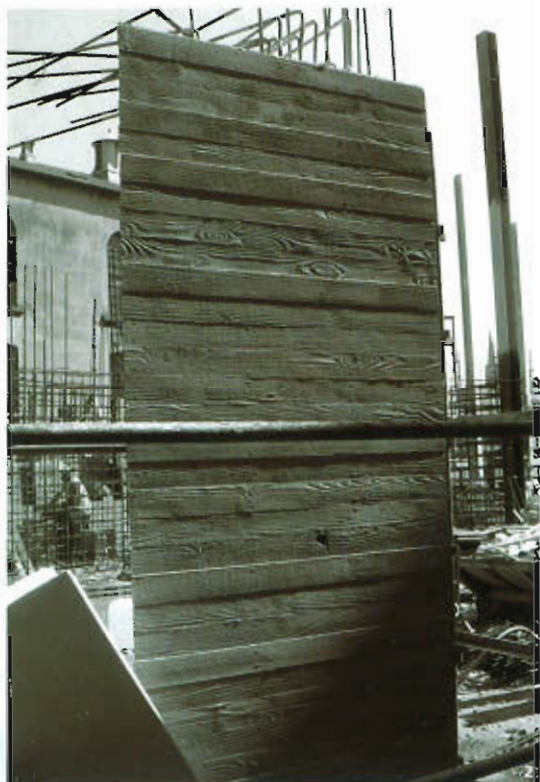
crisscrossing routes, to try to make the upper floors part of the life of this public building. So it's a journey and hopefully you can pick up some Irish along the way. The roof light is a glacial-like object, like in Aalto's bookshop. You can see it as a funny hat from the walls. The whole building is of board-marked concrete. It feels like the sides of a boat. The medieval house is the key to everything, like Rothe House in Kilkenny, a stone house with timber walkways. Here the stairs are steel, slung in provisionally, like a ship's gantries.

We were captivated by the theme for Venice. We'd thought we'd had our day out at the 2004 Biennale and would never match that again. It was a defining moment in our lives. We're very attached to the emphasis on space and life, its call to use, which is exactly what we believe in. We were all invited to participate through film, but our building is uncompleted. What is film except moving, flickering light and sound and space? So why not try and animate the installation using light and sound? Why not use the armature as a casing to reveal an architectural model that is activated by the viewer's presence? We first thought we'd cast the model in plaster but we were afraid it would break. We're now making it in cardboard at 1:15 to show the grain on the board-marked concrete.

Venice lets you take your head out of the bucket. It's a chance to think, to pull up. We've got a series of lights following the pattern of the 24-hour cycle at high summer. It lasts three minutes. During the hours of darkness, lights come on inside. There is a soundtrack, a hubbub of murmurs, of activity, snatches of conversation, *sean nós*. We're working with two whiz kids – Nicky Ward from Queen's University Belfast is our maestro for the lighting scheme and Jürgen Simpson from the University of Limerick is the musical composer. We had been listening to Iarla Leonard and would have worked with him but he's in Australia. It's collaborative but it's like they're scoring a film we have directed.

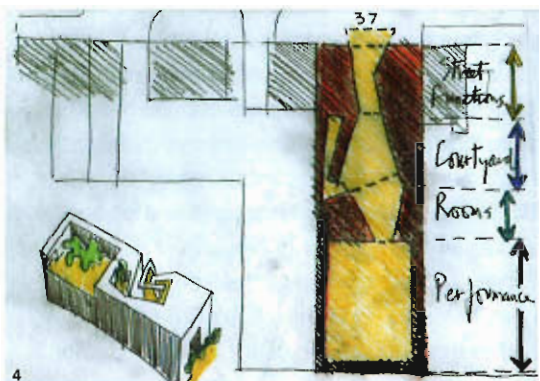
News of the Biennale has had a warm effect. What really matters is that buildings are loved in use, so that they survive. People are helped by seeing it in a wider international context. ■

Collaborators and contributors: City Models, Kevin Donovan, Jérôme Glairoux, Jack Hogan, Jürgen Simpson, Nicholas Ward



- 1 Photomontage of the armature's viewing apertures, revealing moving paths of light and shadow in the central volume of An Gaeláras
- 2 An Gaeláras: board-marked concrete on site  
Photo Willie Carey
- 3 An Gaeláras: Sketch of courtyard Sheila O'Donnell
- 4 An Gaeláras: Concept sketch  
John Tuomey
- 5 An Gaeláras: view of the site  
Photo Willie Carey
- 6 Rendering of the installation for Venice. Cuts in this armature provide views into the life of the courtyard space

Sheila O'Donnell (b 1953) and John Tuomey (b 1954) established O'Donnell + Tuomey Architects in 1988. They represented Ireland at the 2004 Venice Biennale with an installation based on their transformation of the former industrial school at Letterrack, Co Galway. An Gaeláras, Derry, is due for completion in May 2009.



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