

CULTURE



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A new star has risen in the east of Dublin, says Shane O'Toole

O'Donnell + Tuomey, Ireland's most celebrated architecture studio, is also its most cerebral. John Tuomey, recently appointed professor of architectural design at University College Dublin, has shared the practice for the past 20 years with Sheila O'Donnell. The buildings they design will, they hope, feel strangely familiar to their inhabitants: strange since the structures are not conventional; familiar since they belong where they are built.

"They recast existing conditions in a new light," says Tuomey. "We want our work to reveal, not obliterate, the possibilities that were latent on the site before we started."

They are currently completing the Sean O'Casey community centre in Dublin's East Wall. It's far from conventional and all the better for it. The centre fizzles with originality, relying on simple materials carefully combined in novel arrangements to give dramatic expression to the ambitions of the docklands community.

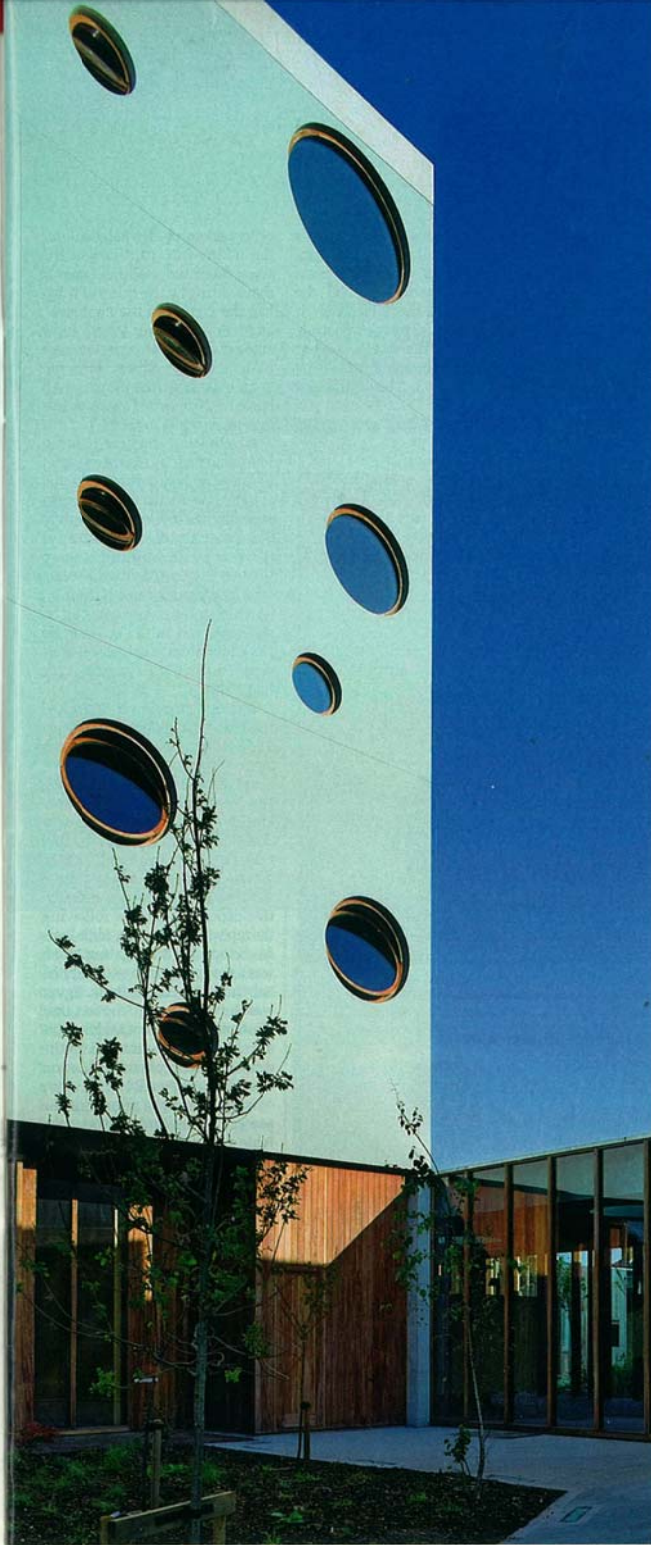
East Wall is a tightly knit residential area of almost 1,800 terraced houses, bounded by the port, the Royal Canal and the sweep of industrial train tracks laid down in the 19th century. Densely developed, without green areas (Fairview Park is the nearest open space), East Wall is a sort of urban cul-de-sac, largely cut off from the surrounding city, so the community wanted the new building to be both a resource and a representation of its identity.

Five years ago the old building, used by the 23 different groups that make up the East Wall community council, was falling down. Dublin city council funded a feasibility study into the future of the community centre, which had been operating since 1983 in a former boys' school. The report recommended a fresh start on the site. Bertie Ahern, the then taoiseach, whose constituency includes East Wall, took a personal interest in the project, which the community rebranded, naming it after the playwright who lived in the area for 31 years.

The key to progress, however, lay in the 2003 Dublin Docklands Development Authority (DDDA) masterplan, which made the provision of new community facilities one of its central objectives.

"The Docklands as a whole needs to invest in social capital to attract and hold onto families," says Susan Cogan, an architect with DDDA, who acted as client advisor for the new development. "We need to slow down the current population churn," she adds, citing the new centre as a benchmark for the sort of "community gain" that future docklands developments must deliver.

There are four main elements to the new centre: daycare facilities for the elderly; a creche; a theatre for the local drama group and young dancers; and a sports hall and a small all-weather soccer pitch. When the architects were appointed early in 2006, they realised that most of the requirements called for a single-storey solution.



The hole picture: known locally as 'the Swiss Cheese', the Sean O'Casey community centre is another design hit for O'Donnell + Tuomey

"But we wanted a big building; we wanted to be seen," says Willie Dwyer, local youth worker and chairman of the community centre. "We also wanted an open building where people would mix, not a series of corridors with rooms off them. We didn't want the place to feel institutional."

Community centres tend to be blank, introverted buildings by nature, often set behind railings. "We didn't want to create that sort of barrier to the community," says Tuomey. "We thought the building could be more/generous, with windows and a small garden onto the street. Behind, in private, the large spaces could be simple wooden boxes and the brick-floored interior could open up to nature, like a monastery cloister."

The architects surrounded the centre on three sides with a moat of grass and created a series of courtyards dotted throughout the building, giving identity to each of the activities and unifying, diagonal views throughout the complex. Designed in association with Tig Mays, these miniature woodlands of oak, birch and hazel, encased in minimalist vitrines, must be the most beautiful of any public building in Ireland. "The planting, dense and dark like a forest floor, is such a luxury," says Tuomey, "and yet it was done with less than 1% of the overall budget."

The gardens, which heighten the relationship of indoor to outdoor space, are something new in O'Donnell + Tuomey's work, inspired, in particular, by Luis Barragan, the Mexican architect, whose mysterious non-linear arrangements of silent rooms and secret gardens reward the senses with their intimate serenity. "They are a way of seeing through to the secret life of architecture," says Tuomey.

All art adapts and transforms. O'Donnell + Tuomey has a long interest in Irish tower-houses — simple, primal objects that are more complex than they at first appear. Perhaps this inspired the extraordinary, five-storey tower that is now East Wall's landmark. The tower, its height matching the campanile of the local church, contains offices and classrooms for adult education. Views over the city, never previously possible from East Wall, are spectacular.

Of course, the simple form and material of the tower, if not its playful perforations, is also reminiscent of the silo buildings that are so familiar in docklands. Individually, the porthole openings, which come in three sizes, may be ship-like, but they have already, even before the building opens, given rise locally to an affectionate and irreverent nickname: the Swiss Cheese.

An alternative analogy might be to a clam shell: robust on the outside, rich on the inside. Concrete is a monolithic material, a fluid substance with which to build strong forms, but unforgiving in its finish. Nobody in Ireland is expanding the boundaries of architectural concrete more than O'Donnell + Tuomey, as shown in recent years at their Lewis Glucksmann Gallery in Cork and Sleeping Giant house in Killiney.

"Concrete fixes the fundamentals of a building like no other material we have worked with," says Tuomey. "Craft-based construction, using local materials and skills, may be a thing of the past but we are always on the lookout for contemporary ways to revisit that tradition."

Unlike most contemporary architects, who are happy to assemble machine-buildings from standardised industrial components, ODT's architectural desire is for a sort of everyday ordinariness elevated through the careful marks of its making.

Poured-in-place concrete reveals the conditions of the construction site in the finished building, in the same way that locally quarried stones connect a medieval tower-house to its surrounding field pattern. The corduroy-patterned concrete facades of the Sean O'Casey community centre were cast against corrugated iron sheets, providing a simple yet elegant form of surface decoration and visual texture that sits easily into its context. PJ Hegarty, the builders, spent three weeks carefully hand-sanding smooth all of the concrete surfaces.

Most community centres look contingent, as if they are only there on a wing and a prayer. The Sean O'Casey centre feels like a permanent piece of social and cultural fabric. Only occasionally can a new construction be understood as a contribution to the public realm. The battle, as Tuomey puts it, is between identity and placelessness, between character and the bleak terrain. □

