

# 037

## SEAN O'CASEY COMMUNITY CENTRE

LOCATION  
DUBLIN, IRELAND

ARCHITECT  
O'DONNELL + TUOMEY

WRITER  
KESTER RATTENBURY

PHOTOGRAPHY  
MICHAEL MORAN

O'Donnell + Tuomey's Sean O'Casey Community Centre building in Dublin is both simple and elusive, direct and subtle. Its unexpected tower sits up above the little coloured houses of the old docking community of East Wall with animal alertness – a gopher, perhaps, with its own holes to vanish down. Those consummate 'Irish rationalists' at O'Donnell + Tuomey often produce buildings with a powerful, elusive character of their own, but this one seems unusually cheeky. You might think this building is about self-expression. But in many ways, it's entirely the opposite.

East Wall is three-quarters cut off by railway lines, with one big church and a school. Now, of course, it's neighbour is the business district of the Docklands Development Authority, which has funded the replacement for the school which once occupied the site. As numbers of children dwindled, the previous building was gradually converted to community use, and regularly staged

performances of the tragic-comic plays of Sean O'Casey, East Wall's most famous son. The residents wanted a very high building, explains John Tuomey. "They said: "Everyone else has got one."

That was, maybe, the first of the paradoxes which make this consummate building what it is. The residents wanted that tower (how right they were), but all the uses called for a ground floor: crèche, day care, sports and theatre. So the architects made the building a single-storey square, but with its fourth edge flipped up to make the tower. The bits that are usually the duller – offices, meeting rooms – get to go in it.

But there's a more fundamental paradox. The brief had the ingredients of a wonderful, open, social community building: a mix of uses; old people and young, day and night. But in the reigning sensibility, those uses have to remain strictly separate. Old people are not, in the present culture, allowed to mix with pre-school children, or even watch them

being cared for. People going to the theatre and people playing sports are thought of as different. The whole substance of O'Donnell + Tuomey's building, while admitting those constraints as a working necessity, utterly overturns them both in how the building feels now, and in how it might come to work in the future.

So while obeying all the current rules, the building promotes, and in some visual ways works, as though it was already in a more cooperative, less paranoid world. 'It's all about plan,' says Tuomey. It is further designed so that with the slightest of changes – the odd wall to come down or be glazed – that ideal might come fully into being, perhaps even by accident.

It's a brilliant, disingenuous architectural idealism, whose guerrilla tactics can only really be spotted in that beautiful plan. It is square, but only if you include the pavement as part of the building. It is divided into four, but those divisions – transparent, casual and arbitrary – are far less important than the geometry that hooks them together, opening spaces across them. The square shapes are dented, slanted and cut by desire lines, gardens, openings, views – the things you actually look for – making visual and spatial groupings between uses supposed to be segregated. Meanwhile the building elements that express divisions or structure (the places architecture expects to be most polemical) do all they can to utterly disappear.

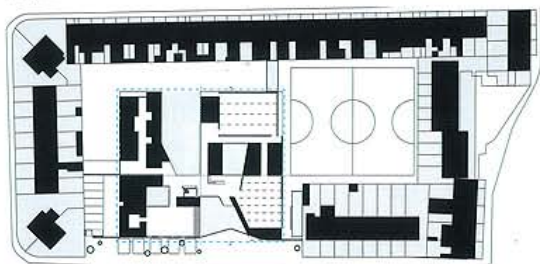
But as someone using it, the building is just dead simple. The old people happen to be sitting by the entrance, rather than tucked away out of sight. Although the building is very deep, you are always looking through gardens and out the other side. You might be old (and so banned from getting near young children), but you can still see kids playing in their garden, or coming in and out. Or youngsters come to play five-a-side football. Or people rehearsing a play. There's no problem with this; it's clear, simple, very human – and (almost) all in the —





## THE BUILDING PROMOTES, AND IN SOME VISUAL WAYS WORKS, AS THOUGH IT WAS ALREADY IN A MORE COOPERATIVE, LESS PARANOID WORLD

site plan



Previous page\_  
The new building's randomly perforated tower pops up above the rooftops like an architectural gopher  
Below\_ Model showing courtyard arrangement



plan. A very good place to foment a little invisible social revolution.

The tower (which formally opens the front up like a drawbridge) is in some ways distinct from the rest of the building: a plan cul-de-sac lifted into conversation with the wider city. It acts as a kind of ambiguous billboard or monument: a strange new friend for its terraced neighbours; a sign for the city beyond the tracks. In one light, it's poetic and partly sad, an echo of the concrete silos in the dock where many of the people who live here used to work. In another, it's as pert as a five-year-old street kid. It's made of beautiful, corrugate-shuttered concrete, the provisional language of the community building made permanent with (enormous) care. And it's punched with holes, which Tuomey refuses to call windows ('It's a tower without windows,' he insists).

It looks incredibly simple, but it's really hard to do. The holes come in 300mm (head-sized), 600mm and 1,800 mm (person-sized) modules.

It's surprisingly hard, says Tuomey, to stop them forming lines: that bubble freedom is carefully achieved. That's combined with corrugated shuttering, giving a strong sense of sadness (like the work of Turner Prize-winning sculptor Rachel Whiteread) and that wonderful, frilly window edge. The contractor, naturally, wanted to use moulds, but the architects refused – they wanted formwork lapping. Real corrugated shuttering (daywork joints at corrugated sheet-lengths) it was.

Some of the holes were harder than others: threading the concrete vibrator through the reinforcement in areas near an edge was a nightmare, and an attempt to get round the problem via hole relocation disrupted the casual pattern and had to be taken down and re-done. Then, the pressure-washer used to achieve a velvety finish on the concrete would have ruined the corrugated profile, so the contractor obligingly hand-sanded it. Elsewhere in the building, there's a pigeon loft, whose requirement for

non-tank water caused almost as many problems. This is clearly a wonderful building for obsessive hobbies: pigeons or concrete.

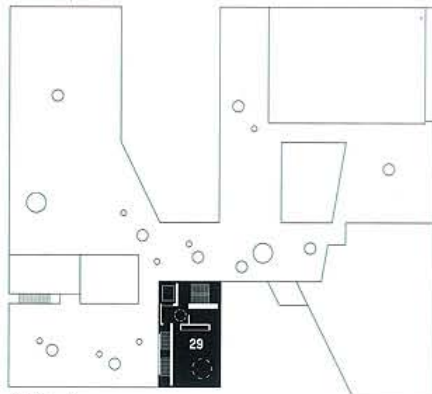
There's a lot more architectural pigeon fancying in how the building manages to feel so casual. You use that dented entrance like it's a door standing ajar, without thinking about the geometry. You wouldn't know the garden you're crossing belongs to the theatre, but presumably, drinks on summer evenings will be technically off-street. The old people across the garden can see what's happening in the street. And the gate screening the perimeter can open it all to the pavement. This last isn't happening yet, but the building, generous now, is also lying in wait for a more open-minded future.

The security desk, as you come in, is just *not* on axis of the four squares. Your view has already slipped beyond it, off-grid (there is no grid) through the children's garden and out the other side. The security boundaries are there, but you're looking straight through them, turning casually past; instead noticing things belonging to better cultures. That central axis is glass joining glass, the most evaporated of all architectural divisions. And there's a café waiting casually, at the side of the foyer between the old and young, for those paranoid boundaries to come down.

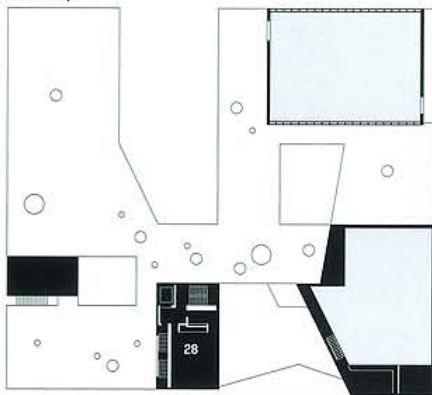
Yet each quadrant has its own character. The volumes, geometry, materials, orientation, aspect, prospect, are all varied. The theatre, lined in plywood, opens out towards the foyer, with a deep wall housing technical and usher amenities, and big south-east windows. The sports hall, lined in flakeboard, runs across the building, with a clerestory (windows to north-east, vents to south-west). The day care is grouped in squares varying from the secret (bathroom, hairdressing) to the outward-looking (day room). The crèche, hidden behind it, is a miniature school corridor: neatly ordered, playful rooms with low-level windows from which kids can —

- 1 crèche quadrant
- 2 sports quadrant
- 3 drama quadrant
- 4 daycare quadrant
- 5 main entrance
- 6 reception
- 7 theatre
- 8 stage
- 9 plant
- 10 sports hall
- 11 gym
- 12 showers
- 13 office
- 14 store
- 15 buggy store
- 16 pre-school
- 17 babies
- 18 wobblers
- 19 sleeping area
- 20 toddlers
- 21 age care
- 22 kitchen
- 23 nurse
- 24 haircare
- 25 servery
- 26 coffee
- 27 courtyard
- 28 education room
- 29 committee room

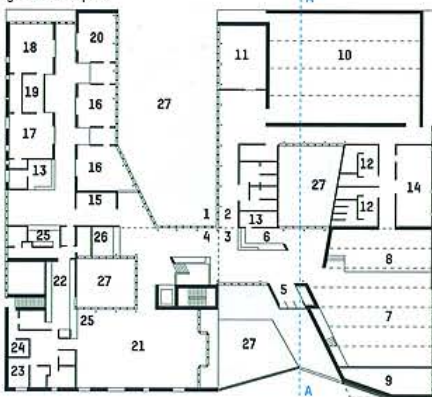
fifth-floor plan



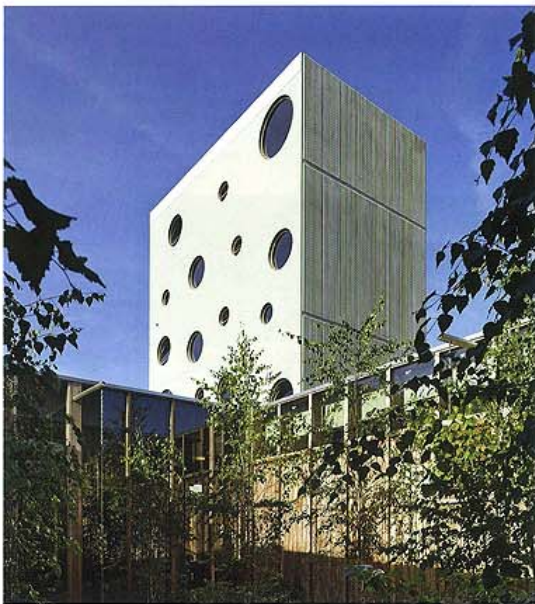
first-floor plan



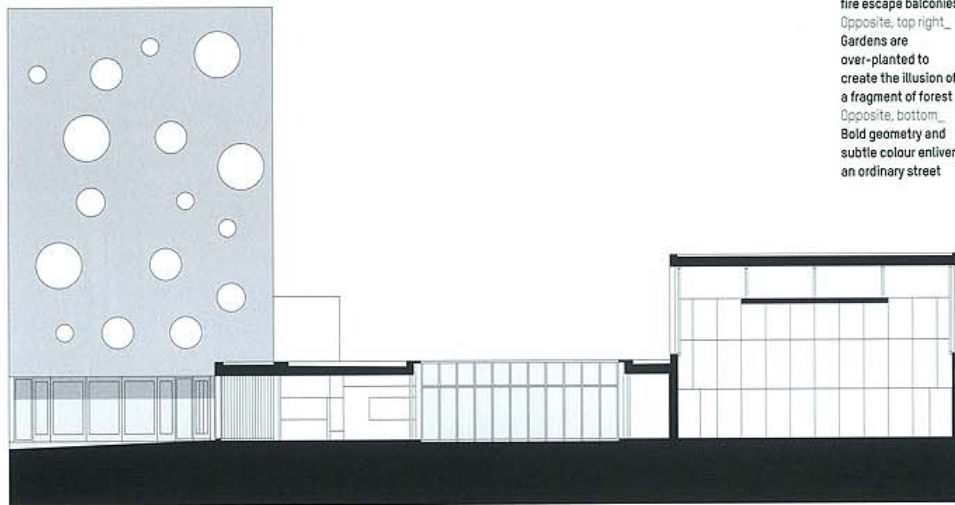
ground-floor plan







cross section AA



Opposite, top left\_  
The tower's  
character changes  
on the north-west  
side with stacks of  
fire escape balconies  
Opposite, top right\_  
Gardens are  
over-planted to  
create the illusion of  
a fragment of forest  
Opposite, bottom\_  
Bold geometry and  
subtle colour enliven  
an ordinary street

peek out, but adults scarcely see in. The gardens, over-planted to suggest fragments of native forest, are different too. The kids' one wrinkles up to form a play hill. Theatregoers look through the sports garden to art on the (sports) wall beyond – another bit of covert cross-programming.

Though the tower is essentially a stack of rooms, it too loosens up and eludes you. Facing the street (and the city), the south-west wall is concrete and punctured. So is the south-east wall, the one notionally lifting off plan. But this is also painted a pale blue to join its next-door-neighbours. The north-west is blank, but for fire-escape stairs which act as a huge stack of balconies (smoking lobby, perhaps?). The north-east is completely blank, and the top room – designated for the committee – will now be used for things like yoga: a little crumbling of separatism, maybe. Perhaps it's just fluke that that single room, in the grey-floored tower, has the yellow sports floor.

And where did the structure go?

There are heavy, exquisite concrete ceilings; there's a tower above you somewhere, but only a couple of columns. Much work has gone into creating this structure-free feeling, but so underplayed is it, that the architects insisted (poor structural engineer!) on putting lighting columns beside the two elegant columns. So it's not just that there's scarcely any structure – any chance to shout 'Look, no hands!' is firmly quashed. Lightweight trusses appear when needed; secondary structure/glass slips down the sides of the courtyards like waterfalls. Those glazed corners just disappear. Rainwater pours into the courtyards on drainage chains. It's particularly nice, says Tuomey, when it's raining; a good thing in Dublin.

Those circles, too, do something far from obvious. We're all programmed to see things through square frames. From this building, you see circles everywhere. The planters on that pavement out front, like planometric stoppers for the

windows, are of course deliberate. But the five-a-side football pitch (the best in the city) also looks fabulous. Best of all is the view from the top, across to the dock and the big silo.

If this building is saying anything, it's that architecture is not the main event. It's pronouncing it, paradoxically, in the most architecturally refined, sophisticated, witty way, one that will keep architectural pigeon-fanciers absolutely enthralled. It uses extraordinary skills to set up possibilities, in a clampdown culture, for activities and interaction – and then it steps out of the way to let those activities happen. It's a fantastic place from which to see the world. To look at the city; get your bearings; remember. To obsess over concrete, birds or Sean O'Casey plays. To play chase, or five-a-side, to have a bath, a cup of tea, get your hair done. To go to when you don't know what else to do. Tuomey says it's simple: 'There is such a thing as place.' This must be it. **2110**



ALTHOUGH THE BUILDING IS  
VERY DEEP, YOU ARE ALWAYS  
LOOKING THROUGH GARDENS  
AND OUT THE OTHER SIDE



Left\_ Courtyards engender a sense of permeability and openness, despite the proscriptions on mixing uses  
Above\_ Entrance hall and reception illuminated by playful (shades of Stirling?) circular rooflights  
Right\_ A superscale porthole addresses the street  
Far right\_ The building is an intelligently considered dialogue between strong horizontal and vertical elements

