

BUILDINGS: O'DONNELL & TUOMEY

The main auditorium is conceived as a faceted timber grotto, spanned by three lighting arches.



PROJECT TEAM Architect: O'Donnell & Tuomey. Client: Lyric Theatre. Structural engineer: Horgan Lynch Consulting Engineers. Services engineer: RZ Engineering. Theatre consultant: Theatreplan. Acoustics: Sound Space Design. Project manager: EC Harris. Graphic design: Red Dog. Main contractor: Gilbert Ash NI

Set the stage

O'Donnell & Tuomey's joyful new building for the Lyric Theatre in Belfast is the stuff of theatrical legends, writes **Oliver Wainwright**

Pictures by Dennis Gilbert

Theatres often like to cultivate a foundation myth around their buildings. From the Theatre Royal on Drury Lane, which has proudly occupied the same plot for almost 350 years, to the Young Vic in Waterloo – which had its “temporary” 1970s auditorium recently enshrined, relic-like, in a permanent casing – there is a thespian habit of maintaining an aura of significance around the sites of the beloved boards.

The story of the Lyric Theatre in Belfast is rather different. It started life 60 years ago in the window recess of the consulting room of Dr Pearse O'Malley and his wife Mary's house, at 117 Lisburn Road. As the Lyric Players' ambitions grew, and the O'Malleys moved house, performances took place in their narrow, converted stable loft. Sixteen years later – the theatre having swelled to incorporate a vibrant programme of recitals, lectures, exhibitions and a children's drama school – it moved to its current site at the end of a sloping red-brick terrace in south Belfast, to occupy a purpose-built, 300-seat auditorium. It became much loved and continued operating as a neutral base throughout the Troubles, but lack of funds meant that dressing rooms, wardrobe and toilets had always remained

outside, housed in flimsy portable buildings across a service yard. By 2003, the theatre was suffering from a leaky roof and was no longer fit for purpose.

An international design competition was launched, attracting 56 entries, and was won by O'Donnell & Tuomey Architects. The Dublin-based practice proposed a dramatic concoction of luminous crystalline forms, embedded in the sloping site, in a scheme titled

'It should feel like a home – an extension of the houses along the street'

“House for Theatre” – a play on the venue's domestic origins and its continuing family-run feel. “Everyone who works here is part of the theatre family, no matter what they do,” says project architect Mark Grehan, as we stand at the bottom of the hill, looking up at the red-brick cliff face, that forms one elevation of the Lyric's new £18 million home. “It should feel like a home – an extension of the houses along the street.”

Inserted at the end of the terrace, the building cleverly mediates between the grid of brick streets that rises to the north west and the serpentine swathe of green that drops down to the River Lagan below. An aggregation of angular forms, it changes aspect as it descends the hill, initially continuing the datum of the neighbouring houses along the street edge, before rapidly growing into something much more bulky and industrial as it climbs down the road. By the time you reach the corner and turn along the embankment, you are confronted with the sheer geological mass of the main auditorium. If this is a house, it is one with big ambitions.

“It was a very restrictive site, squeezed from all directions,” says John Tuomey. “Yet we were working with big volumes of fixed dimensions that barely fit within the boundary in plan.” The challenge was deftly overcome in section by the counter-intuitive move of flipping the auditorium so the rake ran against the slope, thereby opening up a usable chasm below. The architect also raised the rehearsal room to provide space beneath it for the bar. The three primary volumes, of theatre, studio and rehearsal room, are thus conceived as objects, pushed to the edges of the plot, leaving a stream of public circulation space to ▶



The building reflects the materials of its context, sited at the end of a street of red-brick houses.

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SUBCONTRACTORS AND SUPPLIERS Mechanical and electrical Vaughan Engineering Group. Concrete and internal joinery Mastercraft. Primary and secondary steel Metatech. Brick (Isstock (Gilbert Ash), Windows (Hynds / JC Ramsay), Fitted furniture JC Ramsay, Stone (McCormells, Terrazzo (Fegan Terrazzo, Lifts (Kane, Ironmongery (MB Architectural, Flooring (Owen James Flooring, Theatre specialists (Multistage, Oxford Sound.

The peak of the theatre's fly tower rises above the treetops on the bank of the River Lagan.



wind under, around and between them.

"They are like rocks in a river," says Tuomey. There is something elemental about these fixed masses anchored on the sloping site with their carved, faceted forms – folded expanses of blank wall punctured with glazed, timber-framed lanterns.

From down by the river road, seen through a copse of tall, willow trees, the composition has undeniable echoes of Alvar Aalto's 1950s Säynätsalo Town Hall, all nested brick planes and canted rooflines. At the eastern corner of the site, the hat is further tipped to the Finn, with angled grass-covered steps carved into the slope, retained with timber sleepers – only here they serve as an outdoor auditorium. As you approach the main entrance, off Ridgeway Street, it becomes clear that it is not just the aesthetic of this period that is employed, but its attitude towards expressing, and catering for, human inhabitation: the facade is slightly cranked inwards, providing shelter under a projecting canopy, while a stepped stone plinth forms a series of seats by the doorway – both inside and out, providing somewhere to wait.

Moments like this continue

throughout the building, making it a genuine pleasure to use and explore. Tuomey talks of "tailoring spaces", and there is a sense that the public routes have been carved out and modelled by hand, with an awareness of how the in-between spaces will be occupied during intervals and before and after performances. Walls are inflected to create nooks and niches, crannies and perches, while stairs narrow and swell, kicking out to lead you up around

Stairs narrow and swell, kicking out to lead you up around corners

corners. Little peep windows provide glimpses between levels and up into the rehearsal room. "It's like a whittling process," the architect explains. "It is quite a rigid plan, but every chance we get, we're cutting away to release the pressure or direct the flow, to pull people through in the directions we want them to go."

At the entrance to the light-



SITE PLAN

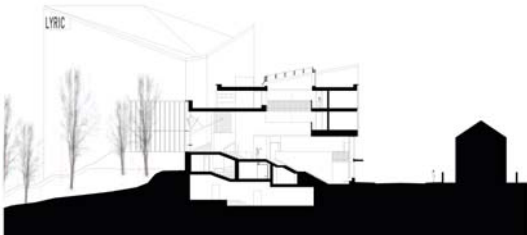
flooded atrium, a cascading sandstone stairway tumbles down from a generous open landing with views through to the glazed upper foyer that looks out over the river. A "walking handrail" with red oxide-finished steel balusters – angled like legs and folded where they hit the ground to form little feet – marches up the treads, separating the "slow stair" from the narrower "fast stair", which is distinguished by one fewer landing.

The upper foyer acts as a kind of fulcrum space, with different functions pinwheeling off it. To the left, the wall folds into the café bar – kitted out with Jean Prouvé furniture in dark timber and the same red steel – where the sandstone floor gives way to tough variegated brick, a treatment used throughout to signal slower spaces for meeting and loitering. To the right, a kinked stair winds down into a cave-like sandstone world of loos (with more than twice as many provided for women as for men to solve that age-old conundrum), whose floors and fittings are cast in solid terrazzo. Close inspection reveals the concrete ceiling seams are set on a diagonal to mirror those in ▶

The lofty entrance atrium rises through a series of stepped foyers to the private timber world above.



SECTION CUT THROUGH ENTRANCE ATRIUM



SECTION CUT THROUGH MAIN AUDITORIUM



