

JOHN TUOMEY AND
SHEILA O'DONNELL



MAURA HICKEY

“It’s impossible for a young person to get the same start that we got”



Naomi Powell

World-renowned architects Sheila O'Donnell and John Tuomey say the key to creating great architecture is place, space and form

We can't get university work in Ireland," says Sheila O'Donnell, her hands folded on the table before her. "We would struggle to qualify."

A startling statement when it comes from one half of Ireland's most celebrated architecture practice, and more startling still when their latest work is, in fact, a university building. O'Donnell+Tuomey's internationally-acclaimed Saw Swee Hock Student Centre at the London School of Economics is packed into a knotted corner of medieval streets, itself a collection of jutting angles, sharp edges and complex brickwork. Lauded internationally for its craftsmanship and originality, it was named the London building of the year by the Royal Institute of British Architects.

Separately, O'Donnell and her husband John Tuomey, who co-founded their Dublin partnership 26 years ago, were awarded the 2015 RIBA Royal Gold Medal – placing them in the rarified company of previous winners Frank Gehry, Frank Lloyd Wright and Le Corbusier. Recognised as key figures in the establishment of a new identity for Irish architecture, they have lectured at Harvard and Princeton, published a book and taught architecture at University College Dublin for decades.

Nevertheless, procurement policies – which set out the criteria an architecture practice must meet to be shortlisted for a public building – have become so restrictive in Ireland that the couple say they would now fail to qualify for many of the civic and cultural buildings that made them famous.

The Irish Film Centre in Temple Bar? "No. Out of the question," says Tuomey.

The Lyric Theatre in Belfast? "Same problem."

The prime frustration for a boutique outfit like O'Donnell+Tuomey are requirements that architects must have completed a number of the same building types over a short period of time in order to compete for a public project. Such criteria, they say, shuts out newcomers and smaller experimental practices like their own.

"All of the works we have done that have achieved world recognition involved us doing it for the first time," says Tuomey. "Unfortunately, our society at the moment is stultified by thinking that in order to do anything you have to have done it five times before. So it's impossible for a young person to get the same start that we got. Somebody has to change that."

It is a slow day in O'Donnell and Tuomey's Dublin studio. The practice has just broken ground on a campus for the Central European University in Budapest and several staff are now on site in Hungary, leaving the principal players to work through new designs for a house in Cork.

They are a slight pair, he a good five inches taller than she, and they move quietly under the high ceilings of the old Camden Row schoolhouse that has been their studio since 1991. Architectural models and drawings are pinned or placed on every avail-

able surface, littering bookshelves, climbing walls and creeping into a second adjoining room. With the original windows too high to see in or out they were inspired to install a large pivoting window at street level – their sole alteration to the space.

"Every morning we stop and sit there at 11 o'clock and we can see the world and the world can see us," says O'Donnell. "Other than that, it's kind of inward."

They wear the sort of geometrical glasses one might expect of architects: his round and tortoiseshell, hers rectangular with a deep green tint to the frames. They admit to discussing architecture "constantly", on holiday, at home, everywhere really. And throughout this interview, they don't quite finish each other's sentences, so much as add onto them.

"You cannot go into a café without thinking about its architecture..." he says.

"... not its design, not the colour of the tables..." she continues.

"... no we never talk about design. We don't collect things or..."

"... it's more like how you look out a door or how the window catches the light..."

It is all delivered in a polite, calm manner that belies a rebellious past. They met as students at University College Dublin's School of Architecture in the early 1970s. Together, they formed debate groups and wrote manifestos about how they believed architecture should be and how it ought to be taught. As they saw it, their country's architecture was empty and the way their craft was presented – by opening a chasm between a dynamic present and a dry, static past – was fundamentally flawed.

"We were being taught that the history of architecture was art history and the practice of architecture was a business," says Tuomey. "We wanted to find common ground between us and how our predecessors worked."

After five years at UCD, they graduated and embarked on a tour of Europe, determined to reconnect with its architectural traditions.

"While we were students we had gone and looked at modern 20th century architecture," O'Donnell says. "We'd gone to Paris to look at Le Corbusier, who is a wonderful architect and a sort of hero. And then we finished college and went to look at Palladio who is 400 years earlier than that. We realised, 'Hang on, this guy is doing the same stuff that Le Corbusier is doing. He's thinking about place and space and period and form.'"

"It was a case of the scales dropped from our eyes. We realised old stuff really is the same as new stuff – it's just separated by place and time, it's not separated by subject. There is no big divide. That was a huge realisation."

They soon landed in London where they took up residence in a basement flat and where both, at different times, found work with the renowned British architect James Stirling. Tuomey worked there five years, O'Donnell for a year after finishing a masters programme at the Royal College of Art.

For Tuomey in particular, the connection felt almost fated. He had grown up reading issues of *Architectural Design* magazine, in which figures like Stirling and architect Kenneth Frampton were heavily featured. For both O'Donnell and Tuomey, Stirling became "like an uncle", adding

particular sting to the fact that they have never won the RIBA's Stirling Prize for best building, despite being shortlisted a record five times.

"We're both guilty by sentimental association of wanting to have won it, in order to have been able to offer it back as a tribute to the person from whom we learned so much," says Tuomey. "We're very, very disappointed about that."

Returning to Dublin in the early 1980s, they were determined to find an "Irish way" in architecture. After a stint in the Office of Public Works for Tuomey and a period of solo practice for O'Donnell, they joined forces and soon became instrumental figures in Group 91 Architects, whose collected efforts led to the regeneration of Dublin's dilapidated Temple Bar.

O'Donnell and Tuomey's first permanent structure, the Irish Film Centre on Eustace Street in Temple Bar, cemented a commitment to carefully crafted buildings that strive for both a sense of renewal and continuity with the past. Indeed, critics typically position the pair into the movement known as "critical regionalism", involving architecture specific to its place and surroundings and focused on craftsmanship rather than mass production.

"Some people find their work too serious," says Bob Sheil, director of the University College London's Bartlett School of Architecture. "Others would say it's fantastic that there are architects who are deadly serious about the business of putting buildings up."

"O'Donnell and Tuomey's buildings, their kind of architecture, is designed and built to look better over time. So their buildings will look better in ten years' time, not worse. And there's a lot of buildings going up today that will look terrible in ten years' time."

Their process begins with a visit to the site and an "immersion" into its social and historical contexts. In the case of the Central European University in Budapest, they found themselves wandering the capital at night to get a sense of the city.

Although the university project is 20 times the size of the Irish Film Centre it follows the same lines: new buildings worked into the existing fabric of the place, and a campus opened up to its city.

"Having come back here in the 80s thinking we were going to try to find an Irish way to make things was really important because it pushed us into really thinking you have to understand place," says Tuomey. "Not just the physical characteristics, but the cultural and historical and ethical characteristics of a place. What that turned out to be was a way of working in any place."

The Budapest project also continues O'Donnell and Tuomey's longstanding reputation as architects of educational, civic and cultural buildings, including the Stirling-shortlisted Glucksman Gallery at University College Cork, the Timbryard social housing project in Dublin's Liberties and the Sean O'Casey Community Centre in East Wall. It's a focus that likely sidelined them from the more expansive "mega" commercial projects that were completed in the capital during the property boom.

"I think we slightly missed that here," says Tuomey. "But sometimes I think we've missed the bust as well."

Not that they would turn down the opportunity to try a large commercial project, such as an office building.

CV: Sheila O'Donnell and John Tuomey

Roles: both are the principal architects at O'Donnell+Tuomey and teach at UCD's School of Architecture, where O'Donnell is a lecturer and Tuomey is a professor.

Ages: O'Donnell, 61; Tuomey, 60.

Family: two sons, aged 25 and 29.

Favourite books: too many to choose just one.

"The whole thing about work and how should you accommodate work, that's actually really interesting," says O'Donnell.

"At this point in a way, it would be nice to do a really big thing once and something that has repetition. Instead of designing your way around every corner, which we love doing, wouldn't it be nice to think at a different scale about the issues in the making of a particular building?"

They are less enthusiastic about the legacy of boom-time construction. After doubling its built area in just ten years, much of what Ireland is left with are "out-of-date, ill-considered, poorly built, poorly-planned structures, sporadically distributed around the countryside," says Tuomey.

As the construction industry comes back to life, the key now, they say, is to avoid repeating the mistakes of the

past. Developers ought to build homes close to public transit and amenities, and offer more variety.

"To that end, the three-bedroom, semi-detached house "is not the answer to the Irish housing question," Tuomey says.

Nor is the single-aspect apartment with no outside space, says O'Donnell. Indeed, she supports Dublin City Council's planning regulations for apartments, which have been criticised by some for adding too much to the cost of construction.

"What it does demand is ingenuity about how you build," she says. "There are ways of doing it and the starting point is if it's really good. Surely if we are trying to build a society and something that will last and that people will want to live in 20 or 30 or 100 years time, we've got to build to the best of our ability."