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IRELAND'S PAVILION AT THE VENICE BIENNALE, Arsenale, Venice

O'DONNELL + TUOMEY ARCHITECTS

In response to the theme of 'Metamorph' for the 2004 Venice Biennale, Ireland's pavilion is itself transformative of an ongoing project for the phased redevelopment of the former industrial school at Letterfrack, and its eventual incorporation within a community-generated campus – the transformation of an institution. The new buildings at Letterfrack represent a rethinking of the relationship of the former penal institution with its place.

The installation in the Arsenale is intended to tell the story of the past, present and projected future of the site. The exhibition focuses on the architecture of the new Furniture College, and pulls out to provide an overview of the history, culture and landscape of west Connemara.

Ireland's pavilion recasts elements of the architectural project to suggest characteristics of confinement and release, closed institutions and frameworks for change. Under the roof trusses of the abandoned Artiglierie munitions factory, separate structures confront one another in an analogous composition. Principles of form and construction, abstracted from the built reality of a contemporary college, evoke memories of chapels and shrines, lobster pots, and the skeletal carcasses of upturned boats.

Open Frame – The timber-framed structure of the machine hall workshops was an important first principle of building construction in Letterfrack. The Open Frame utilises similar structural principles – an elegant economy, a leaning lattice. In this case the frame is put to work to support three levels of exhibition information – a high-level colour panorama, an eye-level black and white frieze, and seven window-boxes describing culture, design, metamorph, matter, structure, form and time.
IRELAND'S PAVILION

Model of installation

Open Frame display

opposite - Scary House

Installation plan
Scary House
Scary House – A different kind of structure stands in counterbalance to the Open Frame, more intimate, more complex in its resonance – an island chapel, an inverted currach, a twisted house, an open-ended lobster pot with a sea-shell sandy floor.

Standing Panel – In Letterfrack, the bench room roof structure is angled towards the north to maximise daylight for handcraft joinery work. Its sawtooth geometry has been adapted for the Biennale to provide a structure for the display of large-scale architectural drawings.

Settle Bench – A distinctive element of Irish country furniture, the traditional settle bench allowed the traveller to sit at the focal point of the room – the hearth – with a clear view of the front door, front window, and the activities of the kitchen. Some benches incorporated a falling table, some provided boxed-in storage under a lifting seat, and some had a shelf at the top of the boarded backrest. A hybrid adaptation for the Biennale allowed visitors to sit and read at the focal point of the exhibition. The bench was built using craft techniques at the Conservation and Restoration Centre in Letterfrack.

The pavilion was an attempt to address the question of how to exhibit architecture in a different way than by simply showing drawings and models. The ambition was to communicate architectural character and presence through real-scale structure, construction and materials.

exhibition space floor area – 400m² / exhibition – 12th September – 7 November 2004
photography – Denis Gilbert / VIEW (Scary House photo by Amelia Stein)
ASSESSORS' COMMENTS

MATEUS – I feel that I should not talk about this project. I know the sponsor behind it.
RILEY – I’ve actually seen this at the Venice Biennale. It was very well done.
MURPHY – It certainly beats the usual type of national entry. This is about Letterfrack. There was a huge amount of child abuse in this joint when it was run as an orphan-age. They’re using elements from their Furniture College building – like the ribbing and the wooden armatures – to hold the various exhibition objects and panels.
BYRNE – The distorted house is an evocation of the trauma of Letterfrack, I guess. It looks a very powerful presence.
RILEY – It’s not the kind of exhibition I usually try to imagine, but I found myself looking at every single thing. I found myself fascinated with this house that sucks you in.
BYRNE – Yes, it is scary.
RILEY – It’s collapsing. On the interior it’s collapsing inward, in the opposite direction... And actually it looked quite good in the Arsenale.
MURPHY – It’s exhibition design.
BYRNE – It’s theatre as well really. It’s mood, atmosphere. It’s quite a rich thing. When you talk about atmosphere and how it can be conveyed, I think this does do what it set out to do.
MURPHY – And the architecture of it?
BYRNE – It is poetry.
KAAN – The photo on the right shows the Arsenale space before their intervention. I wasn’t in there but I can imagine the transformation.
RILEY – This, by the way, is not the architectural project itself. This is not the presentation of the project itself. They had a rather conventional way of showing the models and drawings, but it was to convey the sense of the site, its history and future.
BYRNE – It seems to me that certain buildings do try to evoke the sense of the past, whether it’s a Jewish museum or some other thing, and this seems to be successful in that.

O’DONNELL + TUOMEY ARCHITECTS – founded in 1988 by Sheila O’Donnell and John Tuomey. The practice has developed an international reputation for cultural and educational buildings, including the Irish Film Centre, the National Photography Centre, and Ranelagh School. Currently engaged in the design of university buildings, schools, housing and mixed-use buildings in Ireland and the Netherlands. Urban design projects include the Temple Bar regeneration in Dublin and the Zuid Poort master plan in Delft. Both partners are studio lecturers at UCD, and have taught at schools of architecture in the UK and USA. The work of the practice has been widely published (including an Architecture Profile from Gandon Editions) and widely exhibited, and has received many national and international awards, including the AAI Downes Medal in 1988/90/92/97/99 and 2002. 

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