LYRIC THEATRE, Belfast

O’DONNELL + TUOMEY ARCHITECTS

A HOUSE FOR LYRIC

The Lyric Theatre stands on a sloping site at a triangular junction between the grid pattern of Belfast’s brick streetscape and the serpentine parkland of the River Lagan. The new building replaces a substandard structure built in the 1960s. The building is the result of an open architectural competition held in May 2003 and eight years immersion in the complex process of briefing, design, fundraising, demolition and construction.

The architectural design was developed in response to the urban and landscape conditions of the site. The building site was tightly restricted and irregular in shape. The budget was strictly limited. All the building materials are selected to endure, and crafted to weather with age.

The skyline displays the principal elements of a producing theatre – mainly solid volumes closed to view. Transparent social spaces flow around the fixed forms of auditorium, studio and rehearsal room. Three acoustically isolated brick boxes stand in the circulatory system like rocks in a stream. There are three different points of entry – one for trucks and two for people – all tied to existing street levels.

The auditorium is a single parabolic rake running counter to the slope of the site, with services in the undercroft. The spatial scheme maximises sightlines and generates intimacy, with the feeling that the actors are in the same room as the audience. The seating layout is creased along a line between two entrance lobbies. The timber floor folds slightly in plan and section, like an open hand, to hold the body of the audience together, focused on the stage and within sight of each other. The faceted timber lining is tailored to accommodate the sometimes conflicting requirements of stage-lighting, sightlines and audience acoustics.

The studio is a 6m-high brick-lined ‘empty’ space. Its flexible layout provides for end-stage, thrust, traverse, in-the-round, cabaret and promenade performance possibilities. The studio has a picture window with a sliding shutter to allow for occasional visual communication between street and theatre activities.

The rehearsal room dimensions are related to the main stage and studio. The room is located upstairs over the bar, roof-lit with river views through the treetops. This acoustics of this room allow for recitals and readings.

address – 55 Ridgeway Street, Belfast BT9 5FB
client – Lyric Theatre
photography – Dennis Gilbert
design to completion – 2003-2011
site area – 1,884m² / floor area – 5,500m²
budget – stg £18.1m (approx €23m)
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Location map
Site plan
A xo showing 3 acoustic volumes
( rehearsal, studio theatre, auditorium)
Elevation to river (from southeast)
Study model

opposite

Study models of auditorium
Section through entrance, stairs
Section through auditorium
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Plans
level 1 (lower foyer)
level 2 (upper foyer, auditorium, studio theatre)
level 3 (rehearsal space)
level 4 (admin)
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The theatre reflected in the river
Views down Ridgeway Street and from back streets
opposite
Woods and outdoor auditorium
Upper foyer
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Evening view of entrance from riverside
Main auditorium
McGARRY – This is a great building, extraordinarily well executed. The presentation doesn’t quite convey it, but the building is much more impressive in reality. It impinges on its occupants enormously, but there is a symmetry between that and the fact that it is a theatre. Of course, when going to the theatre, the performance is the main event. But the whole occasion is theatre – from the moment you dress up, the foyer, waiting for the performance to start, that whole eyeball contact of the audience, who’s who – all that is very intense. It’s a major component of the night out. And I find that this building has that sense of edginess, and it impacts on you in a way that’s almost uncomfortable. It’s not a relaxed building, but it’s an incredibly appropriate building as a theatre.

RYKWERT – On a point of information, I find it difficult to understand what happens above the acoustic shell. You see there’s a figure there, as if walking on the acoustic shell...

WILLIAMS – Yes. Those are the lighting bridges which span from side to side.

RYKWERT – That’s fine. But what happens above? There’s a large space between that and the roof. What happens in there?

WILLIAMS – Not much. It’s volume. You either express the flytower – like Hopkins at Glyndebourne, or Lasdun at the National Theatre – or you try and hide it, which is what happens here.

RYKWERT – I find that a weakness.

BRADY – The topography of the roof appears to be a response to the mountains nearby. The building sits at the bottom of this very, very steep hill on Ridgeway Street, and I think it has handled the local and regional context well.

RYKWERT – Yes, it has handled that aspect very well.

WILLIAMS – I think this is not an easy building, but I think it’s a very good building. But I’m going to give it a bit of a bashing to start with. The auditorium shape seems to be the result of an avoidable collision between the linear block which edges the street, and the main auditorium. And that collision produces this kind of asymmetry in plan, and you wonder why, really. However, pictorially, the auditorium that results from that, has this kind of expressionistic quality, which I find very endearing.

The decision not to celebrate the flytower is fine. Flytowers are very difficult. I’m on my fifth theatre project at the moment, and there is no right way. And here the flytower and the auditorium are encapsulated within what is like a large tick shape in section. I think that works pretty well from across the river, and from many aspects. I find it less convincing from the grid of brick streets. The foyer, with its mix of chairs, and so on and so forth, I find it slightly like a 1970s university common room. It feels more like a university building than a theatre.

Now let’s talk about the many good bits. The main auditorium is really fine. The view from across the river has echoes of Aalto, which is hard to critique. The way that the masses have been broken down allows the building to come through in a very powerful and appropriate way. I enjoy the material quality of it. I think there’s a lot to commend it. It’s very skilfully worked, formally, and a rich composition. It’s easily the strongest building we have seen today, and I would applaud it.
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Foyer and stone stairs
Upper foyer, overlooking river

Main auditorium

Upper foyer, looking towards riverside entrance
Circulation area at upper levels

overleaf

Rehearsal room (level 3), with treetop views
Studio theatre (level 1), with view of Ridgeway Street
Ó CUÍV – I think this is a stunning building. I haven’t been there myself, but I know theatre people who have reported back that it actually functions really, really well. The architects have really handled the theatre spaces and really got to know how performance works. And aesthetically, it’s just really, really beautiful. The brick fits in with the surrounding streets of Belfast. I think that its scale works really well, with the urban, and the park, and the river.

BRADY – As a theatre plan, it’s awkward, without any particular reason. There doesn’t seem to be any overly restrictive conditions on site that would require this configuration, particularly in relation to the asymmetrical back of stage. That aside, placing the transparent public spaces along the river side is well handled. There are lots of interesting aspects about an internal topography that you have to climb, look over or traverse in order to meet and talk to people. The brick pulls everything together. Even though I am not fan of no-visible-means-of-support brick – brick as scenography or as a sculptural mass – the variation and detailing has meant that a massive building has been handled well in the context. That is the strongest aspect of the project. The auditorium interior, when the lights are on, seems overbearing, but, then, theatre is about the dark. The ultimate test is as a performance space. If that works, then it’s a good building.

RYKWERT – Well, you know what is being evoked here is Säynätsalo (Town Hall by Aalto). But it hasn’t got the ease of Säynätsalo. I find what Keith called a senior common room rather unfriendly, unlike Aalto’s interiors. I also find it somewhat unwelcoming as a building. I’m puzzled by the very sharp rake of the auditorium, it seems excessive. And this way of dealing with a flytower seems to me a cop-out actually. I’m really in three minds about this building. Certain things about it are very impressive. It is a public building of an interest and complexity that invites a more detailed examination. And I’m glad it has been done.

BRADY – There’s a sense that the sort of destabilising effect that Michael referred to earlier, a theatre of arrival and of experiencing the building, is further enhanced by the architect deciding to undermine, let’s say, the Säynätsalo approach. By eroding the supports of the strongest elements, or every time you might expect the elements to be strengthened, it is eroded or removed. For example, in the upper foyer, the glazing at the corner has taken away the very thing you expect or want to be stable. Do you think that’s an actual intent to destabilise the occupant?

McGARRY – There’s something confrontational about theatre, with everything set up against something else. And that plays out in every move in this building. So I don’t think the building is about comfort or ease. I think it is about intensity. The presentation is odd, I think, because that sense isn’t represented in the drawings or the images. It’s a building where you feel you’ve to pull your shoulders in, because it’s tight, everything is tight. You’re aware of it going up the stairs, you’re aware of your neighbour, so it has that sense of jostling to it. I think it’s deliberate. It is entirely consistent with how I perceive going to the theatre to be. For me it’s the difference between going to the cinema and going to the theatre. If I go to the cinema, I can relax, but theatre is more; it’s not for the faint-hearted.

Ó CUÍV – My experience of theatres of late, certainly in Ireland, has been of a very cold pres-
ence. You walk in the door, and there's no sense of occasion, no sense of importance, no sense of an outing. But here, maybe because it challenges, because it pushes and jostles you together, there is that sense that you are part of an audience and part of a group of people going to an event.

RYKWERT – If you look at the geometry of that staircase, you see that there's a sort of deliberate tightness there.

Ó CUÍV – Yes. That's that type of comradery of being in a group.

McGARRY – As you come in the door, the lower foyer is tight onto the street, you're tight on the stairs, you're squeezed up the stairs, you're released at the window overlooking the river, so that's intensely dramatic, coming up, opening up. And then you're pushed back into this bellows of a room, and then you're waiting for the thing to start. It's quite intense.

WILLIAMS – I think what you're describing, Michael, is the kind of whole experience, what the French call la flânerie, which is to see and be seen, and this whole route from the street to the seat is actually the heightened expectation as you go from the outside to wherever you're going to be transported to. I think it's one of those buildings which is clearly difficult. I would dearly love to have the opportunity to visit it actually. I think one would learn so much more from it.

BRADY – What do you mean by difficult? Difficult in terms of the design problem or in terms of assessment?

WILLIAMS – I think it's a very tough building. Does it feel like a series of compelling spaces to go through? It does seem that the outside's tough, the inside's tough, and they just consent to a little luxury with the stripey timber for the surfaces of the walls and ceiling in the auditorium.

BRADY – I would give this an award.

McGARRY – An award easily. I would argue for more.

WILLIAMS – Yes. It's clearly the best of them.

RYKWERT – Well, it's the only possible project for the medal, and it's obviously the most important project here. But I wouldn't want to give it the medal.

BRADY – I think it certainly warrants a special award.

RYKWERT – A special award, yes.

O'DONNELL + TUOMEY ARCHITECTS – established by Sheila O'Donnell and John Tuomey in 1988 – has been involved with urban design, cultural and educational buildings, houses and housing projects in Ireland, the Netherlands and the UK. Winners of more than 60 national and international awards for their work across the past 25 years; they have been seven times winners of the AAI Downes Medal; three times finalists for the Mies van der Rohe Award for European Architecture; three times shortlisted for the Stirling Prize; and won the RIAI Gold Medal in 2009. They were selected to represent Ireland in a solo exhibition at the Venice Biennale in 2004, and a group show The Lives of Spaces in 2008. Princeton Architectural Press published a monograph, Selected Works, in 2007.

DESIGN TEAM – John Tuomey, Sheila O'Donnell, Mark Grehan (project architect)

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