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LEINSTER HOUSE PRESS RECEPTION ROOM

O’DONNELL + TUOMEY ARCHITECTS

The site is within the precinct of the Dáil in a flanking wing of 18th-century Leinster House – the seat of the Irish parliament. An existing stairhall to the former College of Art – landlocked within other developments in the northern corner of Leinster House – is converted for the press reception room.

The existing space (a nine metre cube, approx), with a central oval rooflight and a single Georgian door to a covered arcade in the forecourt of Leinster House, had become a leftover space between recent rebuilding works for parliamentary offices and the National Library. The strategy was to insert an auditorium for audio-visual presentations, and to locate technical services and a recording studio in its undercroft. The auditorium is a democratic space. Groups of schoolchildren are introduced to the workings of parliament by educational videos and discussions with their local politicians in the auditorium.

A ramped floor leads to stair and lift-access to the studio suite for television interviews. Complex technical requirements have been incorporated into a simple form, the detailed precision of which gives expression to the crafts of stone masonry, steelwork and joinery. A fragmentary amphitheatre is carved out of Portland stone, standing slightly skewed within the existing shell, its symmetry distorted by the differently fixed positions of rooflight, door, lectern and projection screen.

Area – 100m². Stage – completed 2002.
PRESS RECEPTION ROOM

Cutaway model

Views of auditorium
Section and internal elevation
Lower-ground and ground-floor plans
ASSESSORS' COMMENTS

HUTTON – This is nice.
SUDJIC – It's beautiful.
TURPIN – It's a designer press room, or also a place where a class of schoolchildren come in, and they sit there, and somebody says, 'Welcome to Leinster House.'
BRADY – ... 'and you are now sitting on the hardest bench in the world.'
TURPIN – I find that a little bit unforgiving.
HUTTON – There is perhaps too much reverence for Donald Judd and not for the human anatomy. But I think it's very good. The timber looks beautiful, and all the details.
WALKER – I like the hard-edged Donald Judd-style seats. Surely you would have to sit up and listen to what's going on. I think it has a very chapel-like feel to it, or a meditation room, and I like that about it.
BRADY – They seem like very hard, reflective surfaces, and I wonder about the acoustics. That has to work. But I do see these louvres on the back wall. And also you can't leave your rubbish behind too easily. Those steps look very steep.
HUTTON – I'm sure that they have got the acoustics right. I think the detailing of the ventilation outlets is a bit unfortunate. I admit, though, it is very difficult to deal with all the servicing in small spaces, but the outlets undermine the massiveness and the solidity of the stone.
TURPIN – I find it curious that the colour of the side wall should be different to the back wall.
HUTTON – I quite like this difference. I think it begins to subtly undermine the space in a successful way.
WALKER – The use of the different colours pushes the space right back as well, which is kind of nice.

TURPIN – And the same colour wraps around behind the pulpit or rostrum there.

SUDJIC – I would love to see it photographed during a press conference, with the assembled press corps inside it.

TURPIN – I think, in a way, it’s a pretty straightforward brief. No-one lives here, no-one works here. It’s a wonderful set of steps.

HUTTON – I would see this project as an award because I think it has been done excellently. I like the informality of the planning, the way it’s not axial, etc. I think it has been thought out very cleverly in three-dimensions.

SUDJIC – Yes, I think it’s a very sophisticated project.

TURPIN – If you were to take away the wooden element, it would be very much the form of the Roman senate, with people in togas sitting on stone benches and Cicero laying down the law!

SUDJIC – The press centre looks a little less ambitious compared to the other award-winning projects.

HUTTON – Do you mean because the task wasn’t difficult or complex enough in itself? I think it’s justifiable to award one small scheme that’s been done excellently. This is much more sophisticated than the Special Mentions. It’s much better.

SUDJIC – This is much better, yes.

BRADY – I do like this. I think it should get an award.

WALKER – Absolutely.

O’DONNELL + TUOMEY – Sheila O’Donnell and John Tuomey established their partnership in 1988. The practice has developed an international reputation for cultural and educational buildings, including the Irish Film Centre, Ranelagh Multi-Denominational School, and the Furniture College, Letterfrack. 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 University College Dublin. The work of the practice has been widely published and exhibited, and has received many national and international awards.

O’DONNELL + TUOMEY ARCHITECTS
20a Camden Row, Dublin 8
T 01-4752500 / F 01-4751479
E info@odonnell-tuomey.ie
W www.odonnell-tuomey.ie