

Irish couple cement place with Saw Swee Hock

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The completion of the Saw Swee Hock student centre at the London School of Economics raised eyebrows in the capital this year. This powerful, characterful building expressed the complexity of its site in its faceted, oddly angled, cliff-like brick walls.

Today, O'Donnell + Tuomey, the architectural practice behind the design, was awarded the Royal Institute of British Architects' Gold Medal, an honour that has, in the past, been bestowed on most of the profession's international greats, from Le Corbusier and Frank Lloyd Wright to Lord Foster and Frank Gehry.

Although the Irish husband and wife pairing, Sheila O'Donnell and John Tuomey, are among the least starry names to have received the award, their committed, carefully crafted architecture and thoughtful approach has won them many admirers inside the profession and their recent buildings beyond their native Dublin have impressed and delighted.

The Photographers' Gallery just off London's Oxford Street (2012) is an impressive urban intervention that has turned a dingy Soho alley into a public place, while their Lyric Theatre in Belfast (2011) is a powerful civic landmark in the terrace streets of a once fractured city.

It was in their native Dublin, however, that the architects made their name and established their reputation for designs that were both urban and urbane. They were among a generation of architects

who, in the early 1990s, began considering and master-planning a newly reinvigorated Dublin and were instrumental in reviving the once-neglected Temple Bar district, beginning with their Irish Film Institute of 1991.

Throughout the boom in the Irish economy, O'Donnell + Tuomey eschewed the brash, commercial opportunities in their home country, electing instead to plough on with public and civic commissions, schools, institutions, cultural buildings and social housing. Their commitment to the public realm has won them international and domestic respect and has ensured that, even as the Irish economy continues to suffer, they have managed to maintain a steady and consistently interesting workload.

Their architecture embodies a strange and occasionally beguiling paradox of a search for rational order and an apparent desire to pull architecture apart, to fragment and to reflect the chaos of urban life and the unexpected collisions of streets, people and incessant construction.

It is an approach embodied in the LSE student centre, which seems to amplify the dynamic streetscape of a medieval plan rammed up against a modern business district and inhabited by the urgent activity of everyday student life.

Riba's Gold Medal reflects lifetime achievement, its Stirling Prize is awarded for a particular building and O'Donnell + Tuomey's LSE design is also shortlisted for this year's gong, the winner of which will be announced next month. They are the third husband and wife team to have won the medal.



Urban and urbane: O'Donnell + Tuomey's Saw Swee Hock student centre in London, left; Seán O'Casey community centre in Dublin, top; and Gaeláras language centre, Derry