

PRACTICE AND PROFESSION

CITATION BY LAST YEAR'S WINNER, ARCHITECTURE CRITIC JOSEPH RYKWERT

In presenting the Royal Gold Medal to Sheila O'Donnell and John Tuomey, I am conscious they are among the youngest recipients of the medal, and that it is 40 years since it has been awarded to an Irish practice. In the meanwhile Irish architecture has flourished, with a commitment to the art and the craft of building.

What marks Sheila O'Donnell and John Tuomey's achievement is that commitment. They are builders first, but they are writers and teachers as well as professionals, active through the Architectural Association of Ireland in whose revival they were instrumental. Their presence on the Irish scene is a powerful one.

Their connection to the London scene began when they worked for Stirling and Wilford Associates and Colquhoun & Miller; but their first contribution in their own right was the modest but brilliant Photographers' Gallery in Soho, later asserted much more visibly by the Saw Swee Hock Student Centre for the London School of Economics.

This is a very public building indeed. Its formal brilliance is enhanced by the skilful use of brick, which sets up a dialogue between the calm, almost reassuring surface and the exhilarating dynamic of the volume it encloses.

Despite this formal brilliance, the architects' commitment to ecological parsimony is a constant. In shortlisting the building for the RIBA Stirling Prize, the judges said: "This remarkable project is an object lesson in mobilising the limitations of a site into a startlingly original building."

Brilliance marks their Lyric Theatre in Belfast as well; again the almost commonplace brick surface links it to its surroundings, and is in dialogue with the inviting intricacy of a complex but easily accessible public building.

They are vitally concerned with the public realm, something so neglected today. The other important element is the dialogic character of their activities. The conversation is first between the two of them, but asserts itself in their work from the outset, so that the interpretation of their clients' needs becomes the dominant and directing motif of the design.

They have at no point rested on their laurels, nor are they likely to. I look forward to many buildings of equally, even ever greater challenging excellence.

O'Donnell & Tuomey wins 2015 Royal Gold Medal

Irish architects Sheila O'Donnell and John Tuomey are the 2015 recipients of the Royal Gold Medal.

The pair founded their Dublin-based practice O'Donnell & Tuomey in 1988, having worked together

for Stirling Wilford Associates and Colquhoun & Miller in London.

The practice has been shortlisted for this year's Stirling Prize with its Saw Swee Hock Student Centre for the London School of Economics

and is the bookies' favourite.

The firm has never picked up the prize despite four nominations, with the LSE scheme its third in four years. Previous nominations include the Lyric Theatre in Belfast and the An Gaeláras Irish Language Arts and Cultural Centre in Derry.

Receiving the award, they said: "We're delighted to have been chosen for this unexpected honour. We're humbled to find ourselves in such a company of heroes, architects whose work we've studied and from whose example we continue to learn."

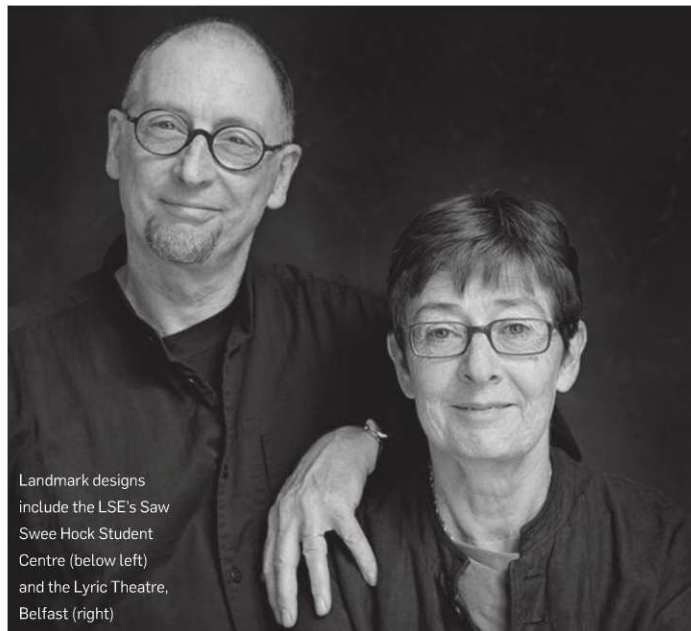
"We believe in the social value and the poetic purpose of architecture and the gold medal encourages us to prevail in this most privileged and complicated career."

Previous winners of the medal, awarded since 1848, have included Frank Lloyd Wright, Norman Foster and, last year, Joseph Rykwert.

RIBA president Stephen Hodder said: "O'Donnell & Tuomey's work is always inventive – striking yet so well considered, particular to its place and brief, beautifully crafted – and ever developing."

"It is an absolute joy and inspiration to hear them describe their work, and always a delight to experience one of their buildings."

They have exhibited three times at the Venice Architecture Biennale and are both alumni of the School of Architecture at University College Dublin, where they continue to teach and inspire the next generation of architects. The pair will be presented with the medal at the RIBA in London next February.



Landmark designs include the LSE's Saw Swee Hock Student Centre (below left) and the Lyric Theatre, Belfast (right)



Niall McLaughlin writes:

When Ronnie Tallon died in June, he was Ireland's last surviving contact with the Royal Gold Medal. The period since the award to Michael Scott in 1975 has been very productive for Irish architecture and one can think of many distinguished practices during the boom in construction between 1995 and 2008. But the Irish practice with the most significant influence has been O'Donnell & Tuomey.

As a student, I remember their intention to forge a new Irish identity through publications, teaching and their involvement in initiatives such as Group '91. The combination of Sheila's quiet, studied rationalism and John's rhetorical constructivism quickly made its mark. Their work developed

from mannered neo-classicism to a boisterous constructivism, and is still evolving, with the best projects quieter reflections on noisier ideas.

The Irish Film Centre, the Dublin Photography School, the Irish Pavilion at IMMA, Furniture College at Letterfrack, Dalkey House, the Irish Language Cultural Centre, Timberridge Housing and the LSE are excellent projects; the Lyric and the Glucksman Galley in Cork exceptional.

Throughout their work we see a restless invention and a desire to develop. Sheila's mind always returns to Terragni and the underlying order; John's mercurial heart goes with Stirling, to mannerisms, paradoxes, collisions and irresolvable positions.

The Royal Gold Medal recognises

influence as well as skill. Remember the contribution of Group '91 when it won the competition for the renewal of the Temple Bar quarter of Dublin – an extraordinary collaboration between smaller practices to create an urban realm from dilapidated building stock.

O'Donnell & Tuomey have taught throughout their careers. I remember them coming to University College Dublin in 1982 like firebrands. They inspired us. They have the same impact on graduates now. That is a powerful influence over 30 years.

They give witness to architecture as a lifetime's pursuit. In their buildings, teaching, writing, drawing and rhetoric, they tell us all how to be architects. Everything they do speaks to the best of us.