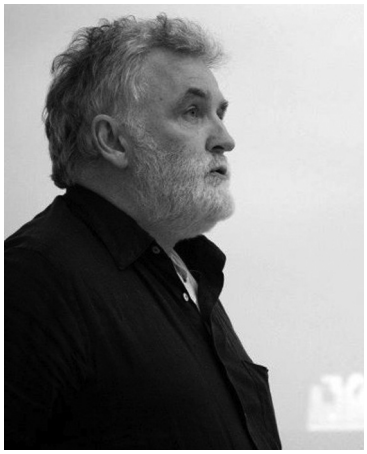
Elbows, bends and lyrical space

Michael McGarry



'neither generic nor rhetorical but insistent on the significance of place and occasion'

Ridgeway Street sounds like something out of an Ealing comedy – all charm, Englishness and deft touch. This Belfast street is a continuing surprise – a sudden fall from Stranmillis Road in a city that one images as a flat apron laid out under Black Mountain and Divis; houses that have enough in common to establish a loose coherence, but with odd dormers and narrow stepping plots that give a whimsical twist; a line of folded roof planes dropping precariously towards the Lagan, their angles spiking the skyline. The Lyric accounts for the last set of these spiky roofs at the end of the terrace at the bottom of Ridgeway Street.

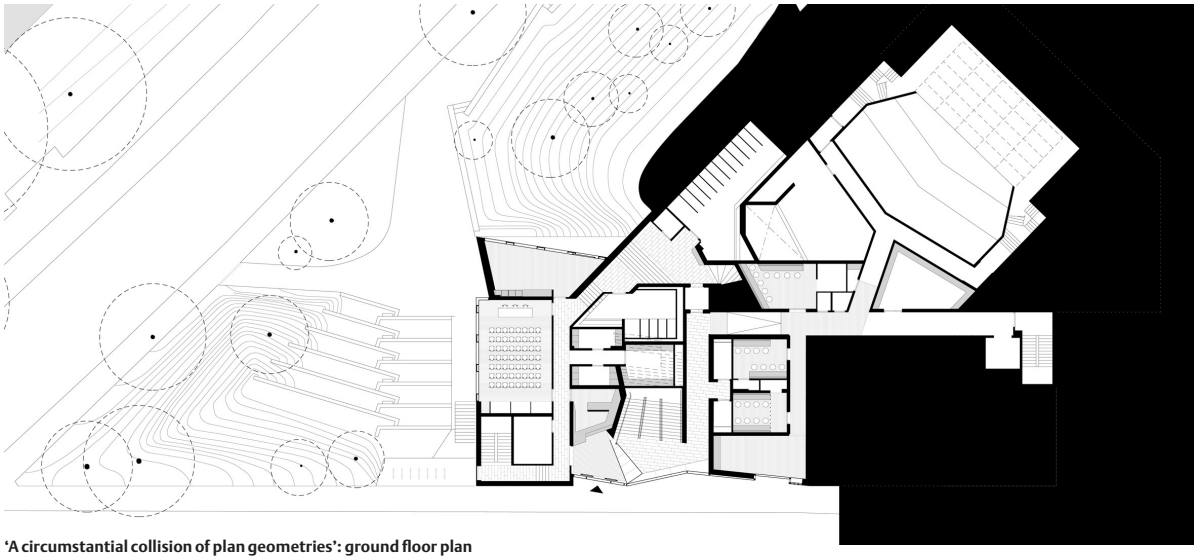
The entrance is on the footpath – no rhetorical setback or set-down but the immediacy of a domestic front door. Inside there is no let-up – ticket office, bench, floor pattern and the edgy pull to rise up the stone stairs towards the light and view. En route the stairs elbow sideways, eroding the box of the overhead rehearsal room; a pause at the top, but the clues continue as the upper foyer folds left and right aligning with the river and wrapping around the theatre. If the access is intense then the upper foyer is relatively calm, a chance to take a breath and compose oneself before the concentration of the theatre space.

Serendipity has much to do with Belfast's character – it is not a set piece but a maze of idiosyncratic occasions and locations. The more bombastic Victorian pieces are well known, but much of Belfast and its charm is this delicate carpet of houses patterned across a subtle landscape. Across this carpet the Lagan winds, generally ignored and yet a singular thread through the city. Its meander and width force an episodic reading of its length; vistas are oblique. The Lyric sits as a fulcrum on one of these leafy bends, an elevated massing seen through the trees, the long diagonal from the high roof point arcing down to the corner of Ridgeway Street. Access from this side is leisurely: grand steps to a terrace then terrace becoming the upper foyer – all quite genteel.

Angled from the foyer through the lobbies into a vessel of a space without a middle aisle, the theatre seems dark and intense. The folded timber side-arches hold the space laterally, the side galleries squeezing like a bellows, the audience and actor confronted. The absence of a central axis maintains the space as indivisible, a scene of anticipation of a shared occasion. For some productions the proscenium arch disappears and audience and actors share the cavern.

The essential strength and value of this architecture is neither its narrative nor its aesthetic but its presence – or, more accurately, its multiple built presences. This building is not a diagram: its complexity and juxtapositions are balanced but never fully reveal themselves in any one move. The entry sequence is one of particularised spaces. The volume over the stairs provides light and scale, but neither simplifies nor centralises; with its brick parapet on one side, timber balustrades on another, and layered and offset circulation, the reading remains complex. The effect is to confront the user with a tectonic reading of the building: brick wall, brick fold, timber screen

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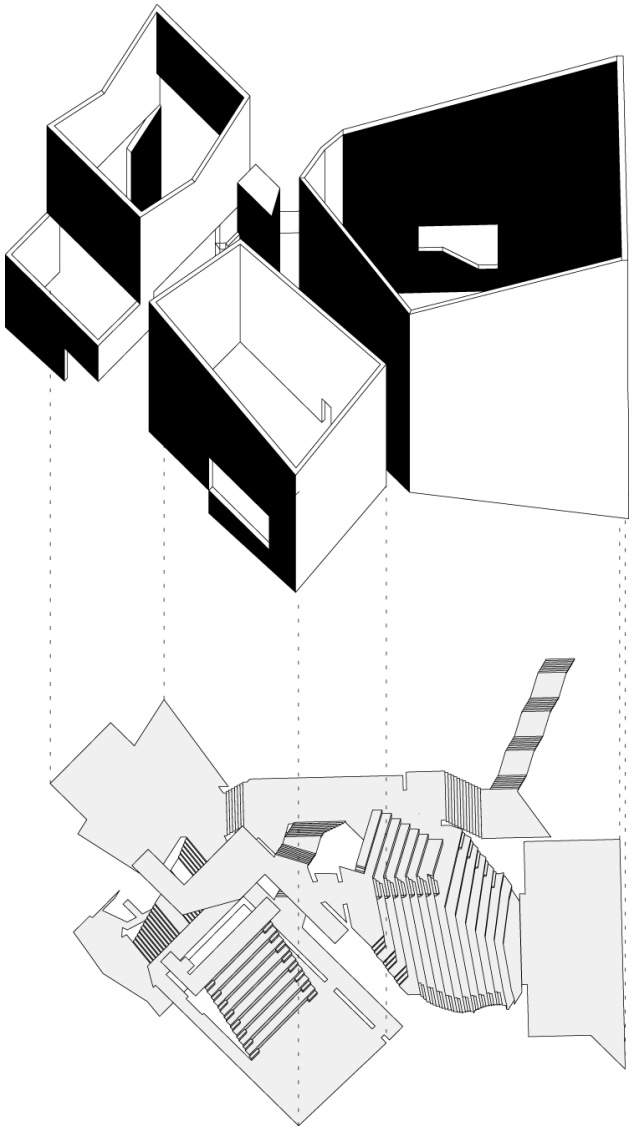


'A circumstantial collision of plan geometries': ground floor plan

and concrete soffit confront each other like actors in a drama with the same characters reappearing in different scenes throughout the building. This physicality is at the core of the building's success and is carried right through all moments. No space or surface is left unconsidered; every element is clearly pronounced like good diction. A meeting room on the third floor has a timber floor and one wall acting together, counterpoised against another wall and ceiling of timber laths, and yet another wall of brick: the room hums, if not buzzes. Relief if needed comes from the views out – to the river, the roofscapes, the street.

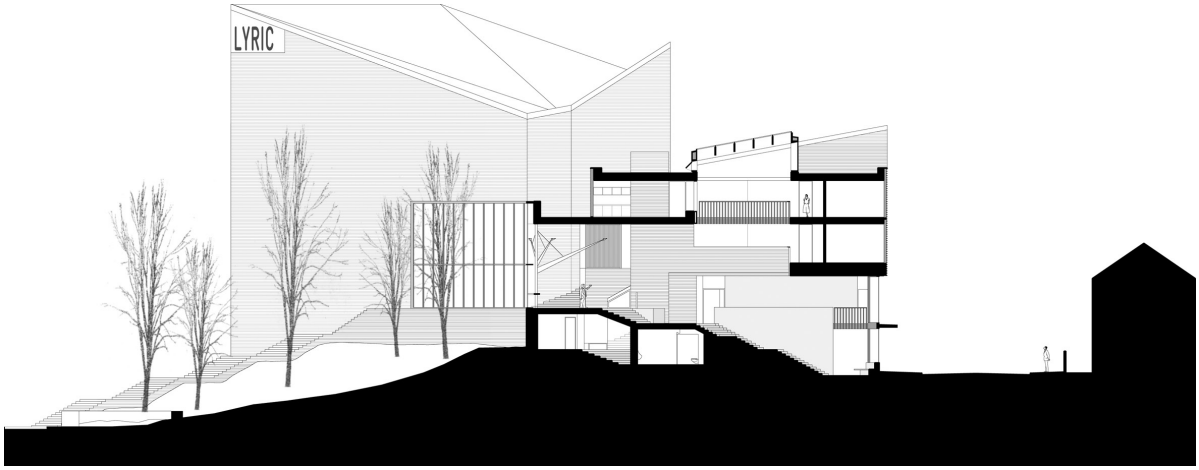
The site is difficult, a circumstantial collision of plan geometries on topography like a quarry. The location of the entrance on grade on Ridgeway Street is the key move locking the Lyric to the street and avoiding the obvious exclusive orientation to the river. Planning is exceedingly complex with levels interwoven and a lift magically linking what it must. Other than the central move of passing between the three volumes, the plan is a consequence of the two geometries of Ridgeway Street and the Embankment. But there are multiple other moves: the accordion-like crush of the ground level facade caught between the studio and the rehearsal volumes, the edgy inflections of the stairs, the corporal distortion of the theatre plan, the rotation of the bar foyer pushed by its collision with the upper foyer. The volumetric moves are paralleled in the floor, ceiling, and wall surfaces. Tectonic is the appropriate word for this jostling

'every element is clearly pronounced like good diction'



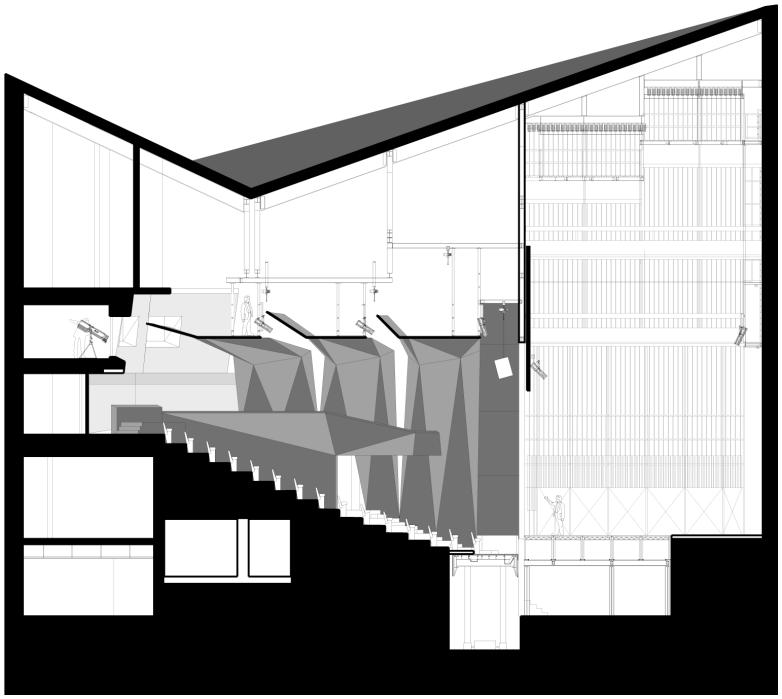
'A jostling of volumes': the spaces for the studio, rehearsal room and theatre

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Section showing the entry sequence and the terraced site

'brick fold, timber screen and concrete soffit confront each other like actors in a drama'



Auditorium cross section

of volumes in plan and section, stacked like innards.

There are many wonderful moments: the window between the rehearsal room and the upper foyer delivered by the fold and intersection of the two forms, the offset of the main stairs landings, the foyer light fittings and stairs balustrade reaching and stepping like long-limbed creatures, the relationship of upper and bar foyers, the ceiling to the bar foyer, the top floor room looking over roofs to the north and east, the terrazzo boulder of a bar, the picture window to the street from the studio room, the hall bench missing its phone, the modesty onto Ridgeway Street, and the leafy grandeur to the Lagan; the list is long.

The detailing is at the scale of the building: brick as taut skin or lining, concrete as ceiling and shelf, stone as carved, timber as sheet, screen or solid lath. There are no cover slips, no cut bricks, no compromises of assembly; everything conceived in a drawing. The cast concrete copings precisely cap the brick volumes; inside, their roof planes, finished in concrete, are exposed to view. There is nothing ephemeral – all is explicit, directed and resolved like the text of a play. The level of control and the quality of building is extraordinary, much more than the simple out-working of a building contract.

The Lyric opened and lived at the end of its founder Mary O'Malley's back garden – hardly a consequence of design or logic, but one to do with the cocktail of personality and place. Its genesis and its role as a venue for theatre were marvellously matched, with personality, occasion and place counterpoised. It was an inspired and brave choice to remain on the site and not succumb to a diagram of Belfast with its gems hoarded in a notional centre. And so this wonderful and beautifully crafted building – rooted in this place, in Belfast, and this theatre company – is neither generic nor rhetorical but insistent on that same significance of particular place and occasion. Such is architecture, such is theatre.

Michael McGarry is a partner in McGarry Ní Éanaigh Architects, which has figured regularly in both the Royal Institute of Architects of Ireland's and Architectural Association of Ireland's awards schemes, and as Irish nominations to the Mies van der Rohe Award. The practice won joint first place in the CCCB European Prize for Urban Public Space. Michael McGarry is Professor of Architecture at Queen's University Belfast

Drawings by the architects, O'Donnell + Tuomey, author photograph by Alan Jones. A version of this essay was first published in Perspective*, the journal of the Royal Society of Ulster Architects (volume 20, 2011)*

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