

SAILING TO BYZANTIUM

Donegal is renowned for its diverse arts tradition and cultural developments have been embraced in the county for many years. The beauty of its landscape, coastline and towns has meant an enduring appeal for residents and visitors alike. In the past decade, Letterkenny, the county's largest town has burgeoned in both development and economic terms. Donegal County Council have consistently taken an active interest in the county's cultural services, and their most recent infrastructure developments in Letterkenny have both been designed by award winning Donegal practice, MacGabhann Architects. These are the Public Services Centre 2002 and now the Regional Cultural Centre (RCC) 2007. In terms of co-ordinate placement, these new buildings are set on a deliberate axis and when combined with the historic St. Eunans Cathedral, act as a triangle of administrative, cultural and ecclesiastical provision for the town.

Antoin MacGabhann Snr, was designing in Ireland since 1975, and his practice began to expand in 1997 with sons Antoin and Tarla joining (the same year as Letterkenny Arts Centre was opened in the library). MacGabhann Architects have established a considerable reputation at home and abroad, recently exhibiting at the Venice Biennale 'SubUrban to SuperRural' 2006. They have designed extensively in Donegal with their latest addition to public infrastructure being the newly opened Regional Cultural Centre. The Project team was composed of Tarla MacGabhann, Antoin MacGabhann and Nanni Grau with Niels Merschbrock as lead Project Architect. The project saw considerable conceptual design development during the three-year period; the testimony of this is a prolific range of sketch drawings and a significant number of working models. The client had a definite idea of what was needed from its established perspective of a town centre location and knowledge of the arts sector. According to Micheal Ó hÉanaigh of Donegal County Council: "The design and layout of the new centre and the range and scale of the public spaces is predicated on the continuation and development of the programmes run by Letterkenny Arts Centre during the past ten years." The philosophy remains the same but the name has changed to reflect countywide provision and remit.

THE TEAM

Client / Donegal County Council

Architect / MacGabhann Architects

Quantity Surveyor / Sammon Surveyors

Mech & Elec / Burke Morrison

Civil & Structural / Albert Fry & Associates

Main Contractor / McDermott and Treaty Construction

Photography / Dennis Gilbert

For the architects, it was crucial that the building was contextually integrated and in a process of 'becoming'. "The building can be perceived as a large organic structure, emerging from the sloping ground it sits on, not dissimilar to the way Donegal's beautiful mountains seem to grow out of the ground."

Topographically, the location of the Regional Cultural Centre is highly strategic. While placed on a somewhat discrete site

Right / View towards main entrance with gold cantilevered gallery

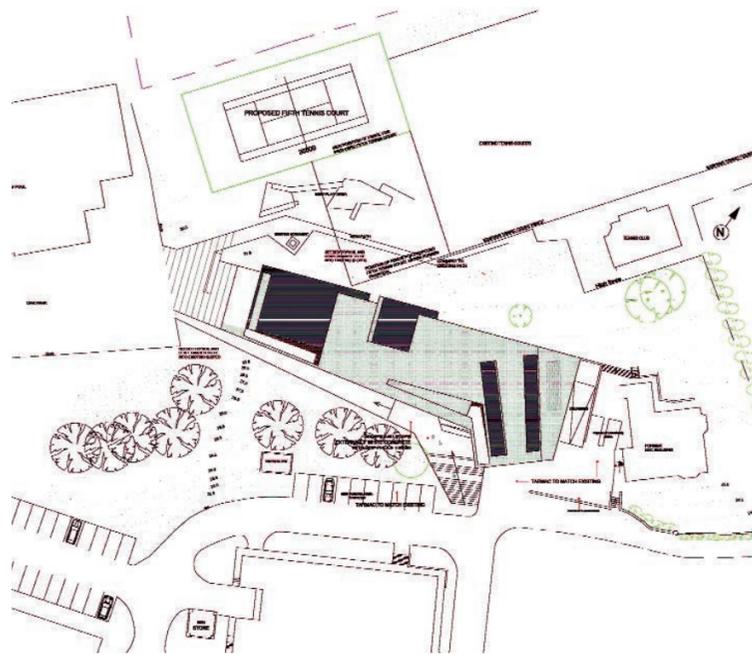


CASE STUDY REGIONAL CULTURAL CENTRE



Above / View from North East

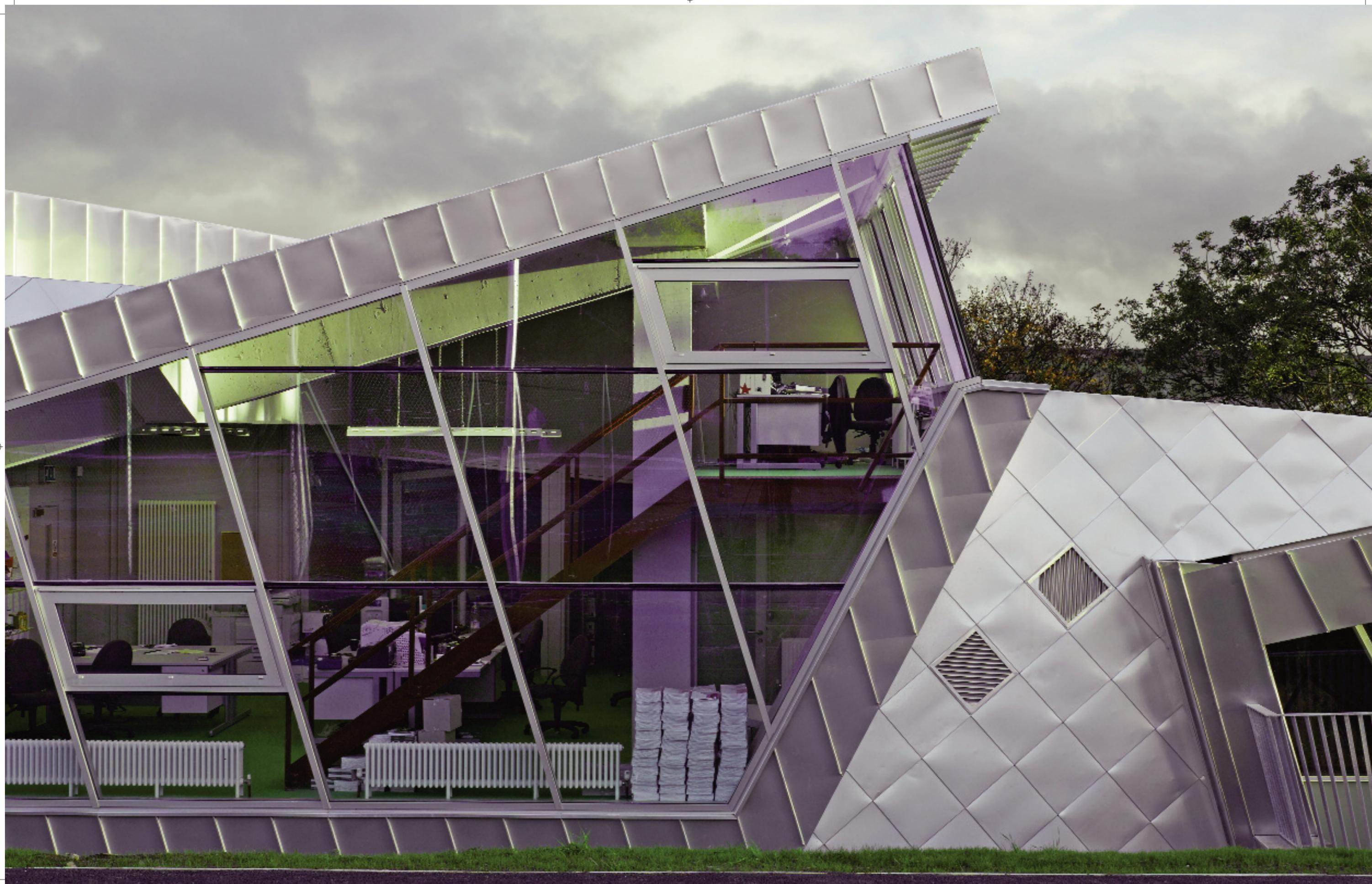
Right / Gallery window

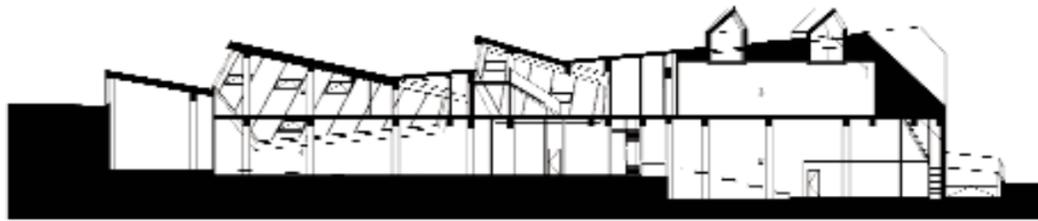


that is set back from two main streets, it is afforded obtuse views from various angles and levels, lending the distinctive structure an enigmatic quality. Functioning on two principle planes, the centre is accessed from the High Road, by descending the external ramp, or via the Port Road, ascending the steep road adjacent to the existing An Grianán Theatre. On both approaches there is a sense of anticipation, and the structure's gold and silver aluminium panels glisten during daylight. A contemporary and innovative edifice, the design centres on the presence of the cantilevered golden box, which contains the RGC's exhibition gallery. This acts as a means of reinforcing the pedestrian link between the Port Road and High Road and acts as a navigational device to lead visitors to the entrance from either approach. The architects

Right / Gallery
Overleaf / Office



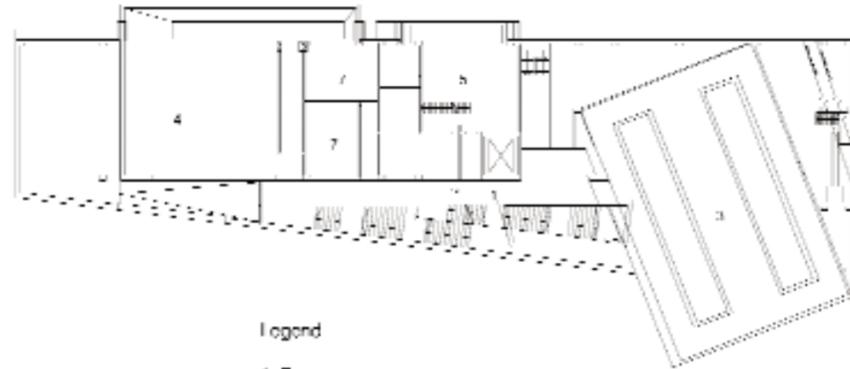




Section x - x



Section y - y

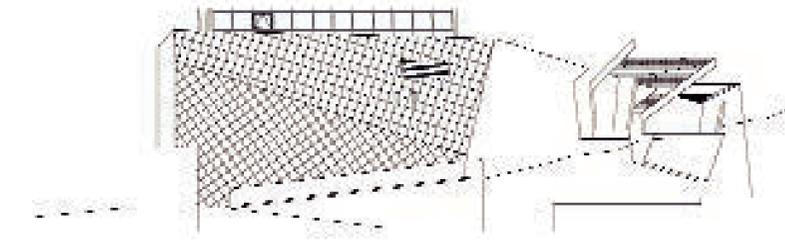
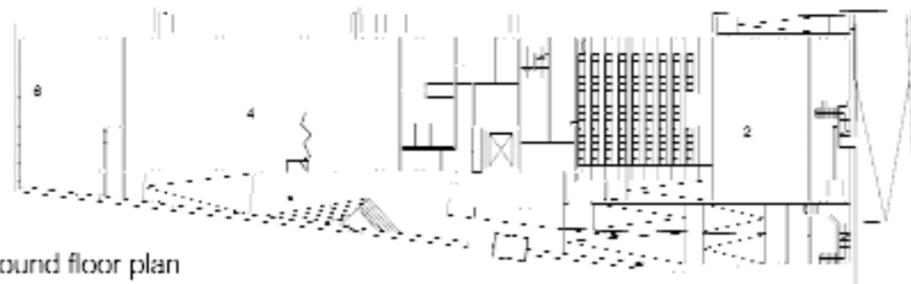


First floor plan

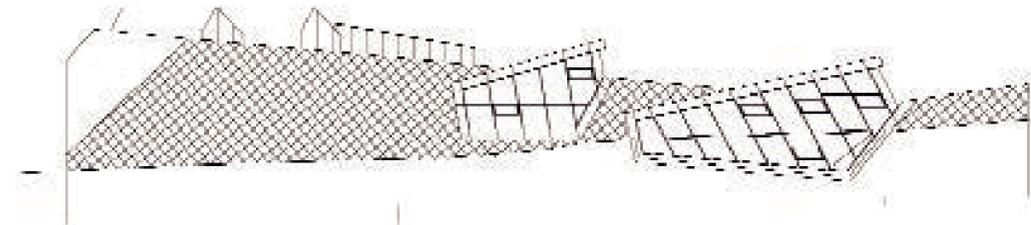
Legend

- 1. Foyer
- 2. Theatre
- 3. Gallery
- 4. Workshop
- 5. Office
- 6. Multimedia suite
- 7. Music room

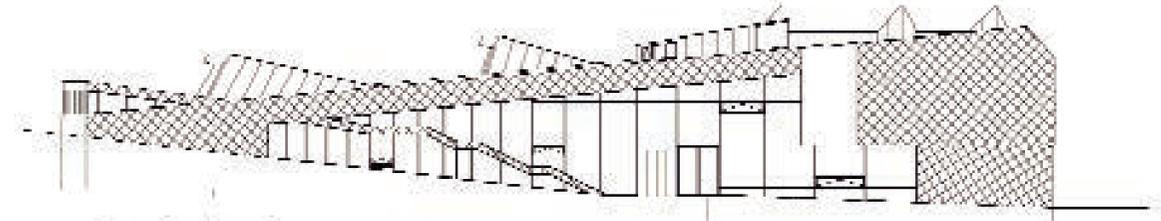
Ground floor plan



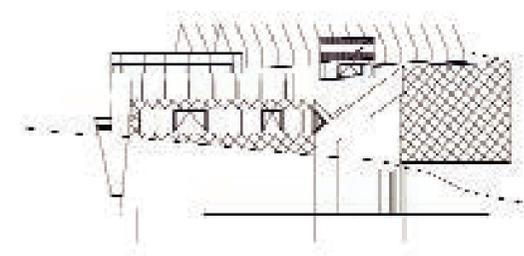
East elevation



North elevation



South elevation



West elevation

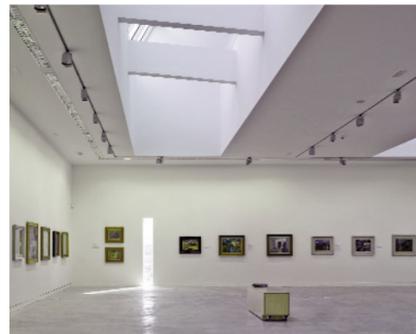


Above / Entrance from Port Road



Above / Foyer, ground floor

Below / Gallery



Far left / View towards top of sky stairs

Left / View from top of sky stairs

Left / Entrance Foyer



contended that; "It had to be muscular from an urban design perspective and hence this cantilevered signature. Also the 'golden container' gallery was at once both a navigational tool and a means of affording the most important room in the building architectural primacy." The client wanted a defined self-contained space for art from a curatorial perspective.

Donegal has a strong Irish literary tradition dating back to Colmcille, that includes greats such as Frank McGuinness, Cathal O'Searcaigh, Seamus O'Grianna and William Allingham. According to MacGabhann Architects, the very compositional structure of the cultural centre's gold beacon box metaphorically references 'Caislean Oir,' / 'The Golden Castle,' by Seamus O'Grianna. This gold box is incorporated

into the building and intended to act as a modern day obelisk or contemporary 'round' tower, a marking device signalling the presence of the building. Another literary connection might be the frequent references to gold in W.B. Yeat's classic poem 'Sailing to Byzantium,' the perfect lines to describe a modern day arts centre acting as a temple to the majesty of the arts: 'As in the gold mosaic of a wall...Of hammered gold and gold enamelling...Or set upon a golden bough to sing....' Such lines describe architecture, craft and performance, all represented within the new building in Letterkenny.

The building includes some experimental elements. The roof scape for instance has a considerable presence in the skyline and a semi-sculptural quality. It was intended to act as a

park environment, for visual rather than pedestrian perusal. The domestic scale and form of the skylights is designed to echo the façade of a series of terraced houses. Scale is playfully challenged where gallery skylights take on the proportions of miniature houses. As much of the building is constructed below ground level of the upper plane, the architects have placed structure-wide eyelid dormer windows in the sloping roof to allow injection of light into the core of the building and key workshop spaces.

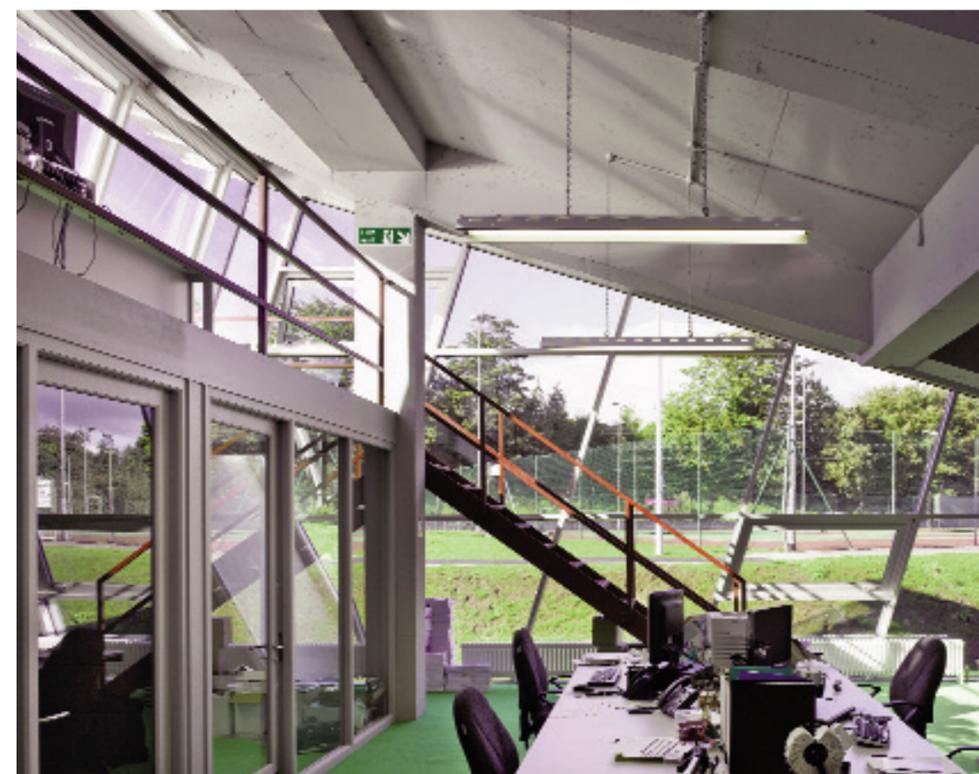
On approaching the entrance, the architects believe that: "The building is communicating to its surrounding in many ways. The proscenium stage-like two storey foyer with its fully glazed front, acts as an intermediate space between art and public. With its back wall designed to facilitate changing exhibitions, the contact of the passing public and the institution of art becomes literally unavoidable, thus breaking down an often existing invisible barrier between the two." The accessibility and transparency of the centre acts as a catalyst for removal of elitist barriers to the arts.

Internally the building accommodates a spacious gallery, 150 seater cinema/theatre, multi-purpose workshop spaces (which also double as additional gallery space), digital media studios and music rehearsal rooms. These are largely arranged over

two storeys. There is also a contemporary 'crows nest' space accessed via a second staircase. Titled the 'Sky Box,' this is the only access point to elevated views over Letterkenny town. It accommodates 2-3 people viewing at any given time and windows at this level overlook two main prospects in line with the external approaches. The interior is highly utilitarian, echoing the durable finishes of a school environment. The spaces for exhibition are OSB painted white, while otherwise studios, rehearsal rooms, toilets and the open plan office provision for a staff of thirteen are concrete blocks painted either white or grey. Distinctive multi-coloured handrails made from recycled plastic are incorporated into the staircases, which were manufactured in Germany and installed by the German team. It is the first time that this material has ever been used for this particular purpose. The overall triumph of this internal arrangement is the adaptability of the various spaces for multiple uses.

The Regional Cultural Centre is a welcome innovative addition to Letterkenny's skyline. As a semi-'conceptual' structure its design roots appear to lie in both art and architecture. Similar to an art installation, the building invites explanation, interpretation and further discovery for a full appreciation. ●

Marianne O'Kane Boal



Above / Office