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 1985, 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 bookie’s favourite.

The firm has never picked up the prize despite four nominations, with the LSE scheme third in four years. Previous nominations include the Lyric Theatre in Belfast and the An Gaeldrais 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.

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 1875 has been very productive for Irish architecture and one can think of many distinguished practices during the boom in construction between 1985 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, Timberyard Housing and the LSE are excellent projects; the Lyric and the Guinnessman Gallery 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 dislocated 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 meetings they tell us all how to be architects. Everything they do speaks to the best of us.