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GRACE LA: From Harvard University's Graduate School of Design, this is talking practice, a series asking renowned designers to provide an inside glimpse into what they do, why, and how they do it. Exposing the ways in which their design imagination is articulated through practice. I'm Grace La professor of architecture and chair of the Department of Architecture at the Harvard GSD. Thank you for listening.

We're delighted to have with us today Sheila O'Donnell, who is an architect and an educator. Sheila established O'Donnell and Tuomey with John Tuomey in 1988. Their work is developed in the spirit of architectural, social, and cultural investigation. The practice has been commissioned to make an enormous variety of work, including renowned projects such as the Photographers Gallery and LSE Student Center, a New Museum for the V&A and a Dance Theater and Academy for Sadler's Wells.

She is an honorary fellow of the American Institute of architects, and in 2009 she was elected a member of Aosdána, an affiliation of Irish artists. In 2015, she was joint recipient with John Tuomey of the Riba Royal Gold Medal, and the Americas Academy of Arts and Letters Brunner Prize, both awarded in recognition of a lifetime's work.

Sheila has been a lecturer in architectural design in UCD since 1981 and a professor since 2016. Sheila has taught and lectured at schools of architecture in Europe, Japan, and the USA, including Harvard GSD, Princeton, Yale, Columbia, among others. Sheila will present a public lecture at the GSD, and we're really thrilled to have her with us. Welcome, Sheila.

SHEILA O'DONNELL: Thank you. Grace, I'm delighted to be here.

GRACE LA: I often like to start our talks with just a bit of an understanding of how you began. Why did you establish O'Donnell and Toomey? What was that beginning like?

SHEILA O'DONNELL: Well, John and I met as students in Dublin, in University College Dublin, where we both subsequently taught for many years. And it was really as we finished our five-year degree that we got together both as a couple and also, in a way, thinking about a shared sense of how we wanted to move forward in architecture. And we went and lived in London for about five years where we worked with various practices. I did a master's degree in the Royal College of Art.

London was very exciting at that time in the late 70s. Nobody was building anything, but there was a lot of discussion, a lot of discourse, very many events in the AA or in Art Net, which was around the time of delirious New York. So that was an amazing grounding. Those five years in London, we often referred to it as our second education, five years in University, five years in London.

But towards the end of that time, postmodernism was taking hold very largely among many of the architects who we respected to an extent, including Jim Sterling, who at that point John was finishing working with-- I was starting to work with. And we felt that things were moving in a direction that we didn't feel comfortable or sympathetic towards.

And anyway, when Irish people go abroad and meet for a drink at night on a Friday, eventually the conversation comes around to, will you ever go back? And I think in a way we had always planned that we would go back. But when things began to change in London, it felt like the time was coming for us to move out and move back to Ireland.

And in the five years in London, we hadn't been sure if we would work together. But then we started doing competitions and found that we did want to work together, that we felt we had a very strong sense of a shared values, aspirations, but also a sense about what we thought was the character of architecture and how we should think about building in the environment that we came from, but which we were now moving back to.

GRACE LA: That's fascinating because I think that when your voices together came onto the scene-- you and I were actually just discussing the fact that we have a mutual shared acquaintance in Kevin Kieran. And so he was my faculty member at the time at Harvard GSD when I was a graduate student and introduced us to all sorts of works.

And of course, at that moment, the other interesting thing that was happening was the formation of group 91. Tell us a little bit about that time because it seems like it was at the very beginning. And maybe part of your practice story.

SHEILA O'DONNELL: Absolutely. So we moved back to Ireland in 1980 and 81, at a time when there was possibly even less building going on, particularly in Ireland, than there had been in the '70s. It was a time of recession, but also a time of great cultural and intellectual creativity, I think, in all the arts in Ireland and elsewhere.

And because Dublin was a backwater city and had never had big motorways driven through it, as many English cities had had. Had never had huge developments done. It felt like a place of opportunity. It felt that it was a crumbling city, but the bad things hadn't happened that might happen to a city. So we felt even though there was no opportunities to build, that there would be, or that the city itself was waiting for something to happen.

And with a group likeminded people who had all maybe been in other countries and come back from also London, from America, from Italy. We started talking about so what should we do? A German friend of ours in London had said, are you going to go back to change the face of Irish architecture. And we thought, well, maybe that's a bit much walter.

But in a sense we all felt the profession was quite business oriented at that point. There wasn't anything interesting going on. The kind of architects in practice just thought they were in a business. And we thought, wow, this is such an opportunity being missed. So we came together in a number of different groups. We started doing small projects for sites in the city as exemplars for how the city might develop, of course, uncommissioned and unpaid projects.

But other young people running magazines and stuff would ask us about that and ask us to do work that they would publish. So there was a conversation going on. Theater was incredibly lively. Ireland was changing from a very Catholic Church-dominated country to a country that was beginning to see itself as having a bit more sense of freedom and social rights and engagement were women's movement was very strong.

In fact, I recently was doing a podcast with a woman who set up a theater company around the same time. And she and people from her art world, so feeling that sense that the city was an opportunity. So we did a number of projects before we set up group 91. We had a group called the City Architecture Studio, and we made a modest project for the whole of the Dublin City quays to say that you could have 10,000 people living in the city and those five architects, and we each took a site. We did a master plan, and we took a site and did an exemplar project.

And then we thought, well, how was this going to be disseminated? We better open a gallery. So Shane de Blacam, who was an architect already in practice, who was the person who had invited me to come and teach, had an empty room above his office. And they said, well, can use this room as a gallery. And it was called the Blue Studio Gallery.

And we had an exhibition of this project, we had made with the city keys, but we also did an exhibition of Aldo Rossi's work, and we published a book about Rossi as part of that exhibition, and we had exhibitions of other work. We put on exhibitions of student drawings of Adolf Lohse.

And so it was a time when you felt you could say, let's open a gallery and you did, or let's publish some books, and we did. And somehow out of that, then we were invited to contribute to Dublin City of Culture in 1991. And a bigger group got together, which then called ourselves group 91 and did first of all, a small project for housing in a street in Dublin. And then we got invited to enter the Temple Bar competition, which was a big urban design competition for the city.

GRACE LA: For our listeners, Temple Bar is a district in Dublin. And it was slated for demolition just before Group 91 came in with a competition idea that really paved the way for a new way of dealing with urban renewal. Maybe you could describe Temple Bar.

SHEILA O'DONNELL: Temple Bar is a small area between the river and Thames Street, which is a busy commercial street, a lot developed in the 19th century. And Temple Bar was a traditional business neighborhood with buildings from the 18th and 19th centuries which were of very good buildings but neglected. And as you say, there was a plan to demolish huge part of Temple Bar to build a new bus station.

And in a way, at the time it was planned, I think many cities were already beginning to say we shouldn't demolish our central city. And the Group 91, the collective of young architects. We had all been very influenced by the writings of people like Aldo Rossi about the European city, the historical city, the importance of continuity in the city.

So we were absolutely determined that this part of our city was not just going to be destroyed on our watch, you might say, without stopping to think about it. So we did a lot of counter projects to bring up an interest. And then there was a competition set up to Temple Bar properties, which was to secure this area of the city and to look at how it should be correctly developed.

GRACE LA: And this district of the city is dense. It has beautiful narrow streets in some sections of it, but it's a bustling area, of course, now. And at that moment, it was being divested in a sense.

SHEILA
O'DONNELL: It was. And in a way, properties were being rented at low rents to young cultural groups, theater groups, people setting up music recording studios, film center, a lot of artist artists studios. So those people were the people who, in a way, were part of the campaign to say can't knock this down. This is a wonderful look. It's a thriving part of the city. It's full of cultural activity.

And out of the competition-- I mean, there were a number there's a children's theater was built, there's artists studios. It is very lively. It's very bustling. It's become a kind of tourist center of Dublin, which has maybe not been positive. And that's also interesting about how you have to manage and control uses in an area because you can physically preserve it. What happened there was that they did physically preserve it. And I think if planning control was more carefully applied, it'll settle back down. And just being a livable part of town.

GRACE LA: Your Group 91, again it was 13 architects that came together. Later to form 8 very well renowned practices.

SHEILA
O'DONNELL: 13 architects in eight practices.

GRACE LA: In eight practices, yes. And you came together to make a pitch for how you would interlace public buildings into this existing neighborhood so that it wouldn't need to be demolished.

SHEILA
O'DONNELL: Exactly. By the time that happened, John and I had been commissioned to make a project for the Irish Film center in the area that was Temple Bar. And you're right, they were going to demolish almost all of that area and build a big bus station.

But the film center, they had bought the old Quaker headquarters, which was a really interesting set of nine old buildings, and we'd been commissioned to make this project, which was re-use of these old buildings, plus some new stuff. And that was already happening. And they had this idea that when they built the film center, they would run programs, including short afternoon movies so the people waiting for buses could come. And so we were already assuming that they would knock everything down into the buses.

But what happened was lots of young people who wanted to set up different kinds of artist studios or recording studios or people who didn't have much money, rented accommodation because the bus people setting up the bus company were gradually accumulating their properties to get a full site. And they rather foolishly thought that they maybe be safer if they had tenants in the buildings. So they gave very short leases to these creative young people on very low rents.

Well, once everybody had moved in, they said, well, there's no way you're going to knock all this down and build a bus station. And so a movement started to say no to the bus station. And then luckily, a very important politician in late 20th century Ireland was in opposition at that point. And then about two months later, he won the general election and became our Taoiseach prime minister. And everybody came knocking at his door and said, well, I hear you're not going to let that bus station happen. And that was how the competition then to regenerate Temple Bar was started.

So the other people in the competition were all established practices. And then our group was a weird Maverick. We were like poacher turned gamekeeper. It was amazing feeling that we thought, in a way, we just absolutely had to win this competition. And in a way, it was ours to lose. Although it wasn't because everybody else was a big practice with lots of experience of other buildings in the city. And we just really went for it. There's a lot of energy you can get from 13 architects as principals.

GRACE LA: Absolutely. And I think that the world was watching at that moment because we fast forward Group 91 did win that competition and really launched a way of thinking about the city, about urban renewal. Many conversations were born from that.

But I am curious to understand the inner workings of that a bit more. How did you decide who would get what? And a large group can come together, but it can be very scary if you actually win, which you did. So tell us how that worked out?

SHEILA O'DONNELL: Well, during the design process in the competition, we did an overall master plan. And then we divided up and each practice took on parts of that. And maybe that was why we won because we did quite a lot of even those three A1 pages was the submission.

We did a lot of sample projects for different sites around the area of Temple Bar. Then we won the prize for the competition had been rather vaguely stated as an important commission within the master plan. When we won, a couple of our representatives. I think it was possibly my partner, John Tuomey, and Shelley McNamara of Grafton, went to see the organizers and said, OK, well, of course, there are eight of us. We propose three public spaces as part of our project with buildings around them.

We said, so obviously the prize must be the three public spaces with the building for everybody. So everybody in the group got to design a building. That's also, I mean could say arrogance, or you could also say just the kind of confidence of youth and the belief that well-- first of all believe you'd never get any work in the city. And then once we won this competition, we thought, we've got to absolutely hang on for whatever we can get here.

GRACE LA: And so after that, then tell me about the transition between, let's say, completing that type of a project. Again the origin of it was collaborative in nature, but then, of course, everybody had their own building. But then your trajectory, where did it lead you? With that particular project, it seems as though you were on a path to work with cultural buildings, buildings that are affiliated with the arts. Was that the seed of that?

SHEILA O'DONNELL: I think I would say for our practice, that experience of working with these amazing historic buildings as our first public project was a really important educational experience because just learning how to work with old buildings, learning how to think about them, we made all the measured surveys and drawings ourselves because we wanted to really understand these weirdly shifting, different-shaped buildings making up this kind of complex urban space.

And I think one thing that you learn from that is that when you're working with an old building simultaneously from the very beginning, you're thinking about material and detail as well as about strategy. And sometimes, if your first buildings as a young architect is a totally new building, you tend to move from strategy and eventually get to detail and material. But I think the fact that the physical character and presence of those old brick buildings was there from the beginning, maybe gave us a sense of how to work with form and space and material as a starting point.

GRACE LA: Yes. And this is an interesting way to look at it. Because you were working with existing context as you're describing existing buildings, it seems that-- when I think about your practice and the relationship to let's say, understanding of vernacular or historical condition of a building, its status in the community, your practice is very well regarded for somehow finding the marriage between the understanding of that vernacular condition and yet still awarding a kind of identity to a project.

And so I wanted you to talk a little bit about how you achieved that balance, because it is very unique. And I think it's very much shaped by your own education and these experiences, and particularly these experiences with existing buildings.

SHEILA

O'DONNELL:

Yes, I think that's true. Our education back to the early days in UCD our most influential teacher was Shane de Blacam, who had just returned from spending a few years, first doing his master's and then working in the Office of Louis Kahn.

And so he arrived in Dublin into our first year, fresh from that experience. And he embodied Louis Kahn's ideas. We were first year students. We knew nothing about architecture. He didn't even say his name. He just spoke about talking to bricks, about materials. What does the brick want to do? The whole sense of material, the presence of materials, was always really important. Came from that early teaching from Shane.

At that time when we moved to London, young architects, we met, didn't really about Louis Kahn or they weren't interested in him, but we had all been grounded in this and were very committed to a sort of sense of material but also about weight and construction. That is very much in Kahn's work.

So then, as you say, when we came to work with existing buildings, that's really interesting about the tension between the old and the new and to what extent a new thing sits with or talks to an old building. And I think we were trying to find a ground where we were, in no way, imitating or using details that were referred to the historical constructions. But yet we wanted the new buildings that we made to feel comfortable with the old buildings that they were sitting beside or sometimes attaching to.

And I think that continued to be a theme in our practice. In a way I would say that certainly in an urban project and maybe even in most rural projects, although it might seem like it's a completely new building on an empty site, it's never really an empty site because any urban context has got so many existing-- even it has a past history, but it also has relationships with neighboring buildings that it's touching against, or that it's looking at across the street.

One of the things we talked about, the film center, we're looking at a lot of work people were doing where if you're adding to an old building. You put a glass box beside it and it's a contrast. They're two different things. But we felt that was not a very good approach, because in a way, a shiny glass box can make it kind of slightly worn old building just look sad and old. Whereas we wanted somehow that the two could coexist.

And I think that's a really important thing we learnt out of that is that you're always building in the continuous present. And an old building exists in the present as much as it does in the time that it was first built. So when you build something new beside it, you're building and that building are living in the same time, and they have to feel comfortable.

And in a way, it's like you just don't want the old building to feel embarrassed by the New building or vice versa. That's personifying buildings, but I think we often do personify buildings.

So I think we have always thought that place and context are really important. And yet we're trying, as you say, to use contemporary ideas about form and expression, because we might be building a new building, and it's put together as one thing in an area where most of the context was a series of separate old buildings. So it won't be the same as the old buildings, but yet the materials and the form are in a conversation with it.

I think time is really important that architectures have slow business. Almost all of the projects we've ever done have been slow because the client is fundraising, or there's delays. That time to think and the time to talk to the client, as well as to talk to the context, are really important part of the work.

GRACE LA:

Speaking of time, it does seem that the projects of your practice, they're so carefully studied. And so I am curious again, because I'm very interested in the nuts and bolts of how this work is being produced. How many people are working on these projects? How many people are in your practice right now? How many projects are you doing a year?

Again, I think the authorship of your projects is very distinctive, and there's something to that. I'm very aware when I'm looking at and studying one of your projects that this is a project that has been very carefully conceived. There is a general thought in the world that oh, the bigger the practice you are, the bigger the projects you can take on.

And I think we know in the inside those in who architectural practice, it actually isn't quantity. A lot of clients are very bedazzled by the 400 or 500-person firm. But in fact, we know internally that that's not necessarily how it works. So tell us a little bit about your practice in that way.

SHEILA

O'DONNELL:

That's very interesting, and we have that experience too. And you're in a competition and you're up against those big practices. And feel like saying to the client, well, the person who came to that interview with you probably won't see him again until the day the building opens. Whereas if you employ us, the people designing the building will be me and John and the other people who are here at the interview with us. We will be engaged from day one to the end.

So our practice now is somewhere around 30, 30-ish 30 plus. Most of us are based in Dublin, but we have a small office in Cork in the South of Ireland, which has been there for almost 20 years, I think, which is four people. And we have a small kind of satellite in London, which when we won the competition for the Olympic Opolis, which is a Culture Center on the Olympic site, we had set up a small practice there. We won that competition in collaboration with the big practice Allies and Morrison. Very good practice with now 400 people. So we were able to take a corner of their office and set up our own little kind of satellite in there.

But I would say most projects probably have, in the beginning, three or four people. We might eventually have six to eight people maybe working on the team of working together on working drawings and pulling it together. We would aim to have those people working right through from the beginning to the end. And I think that's really important also for young architects who come into the practice to get experience of seeing buildings through on site.

So sometimes we might even have the person who's running the project on site, but one of the younger architects is shadowing them in a way to get that experience. But I say you would probably almost never have more than eight people working on one project. So as you say, having 400 people in your practice is a huge advantage.

We set up practice in Cork. We opened a small office there. It has succeeded very well. We were in different places. And I suppose the introduction of computer technology has had a big impact. I mean, I think sometimes to some extent a negative impact on how practice works, but we couldn't have done those things unless we had that kind of connectivity, which has continued to improve the sense of connection. And amazingly, by the time the whole world locked down, we all had by then very sophisticated ways of exchanging information.

But yes, so we have about 30, the number of projects we're doing. I mean always try to work it up that you have a sequence of projects at different stages and maybe a major project at every stage, but life doesn't always deliver that. So sometimes you're finishing three projects and you're really need to get something else. And then you can't get work under the current procurement laws because to get a project have to have done three buildings of that type in the last five years, or five in the last three years, and sometimes you're waiting for things to finish.

So actually, even though our practice is very established and we have been probably between 20 and 30 people for 10 or more years, it still always feels a little bit like it's quite precarious. And no matter how successful you are, unless you really do become a big commercial practice, you're always in the same kind of race through competitions and through other means to get new work.

GRACE LA: Can we talk a little bit about that because there is a myth in America that everyone overseas is so lucky because they get to win their work through competitions. In America, of course, we don't really have a culture of competitions at the same let's say frequency or scale.

But tell us about that, do you pursue that in your practice? I'd be curious to hear your thoughts on what it means for a practice in your scale and size to take on competitions.

SHEILA O'DONNELL: Well, there's a kind of love-hate relationship with competitions. I mean, we do competitions because actually the only way we can get a decent scale of work is in that manner because almost every building we do, if it's educational or cultural, is publicly funded in some way. And once the building is publicly funded, a client cannot appoint an architect without going through a competition process.

So we go through that all the time. And usually, it's a two-stage thing where you have to do a kind of submission to get on a shortlist to prove all those things. I've done five of these in the last three years, my turnover is this and whatever. And then you get on a short list of maybe six, and then you really put so much time and energy into things.

And you usually come second or sometimes you win. But is quite important because a lot of your best ideas and the kind of energy of work sometimes comes out of the intensity of working to a deadline and having to take a brief and quickly come up with a concept and push it through.

But I think we find it increasingly frustrating because, for example I mean, this may sound like the American experience, like we've done a number of competitions in recent years for British universities, very high-level universities who feel they're doing you a big favor by shortlisting you. And then you find that on their selection panel, they don't have any architects. So they're all academics who believe that they everything.

And it's very tedious because you do a lot of work. And then the decisions they make are you don't understand what's based on and very often might be that your practice is smaller than the others or other things. So I think you go through phases. Like I think a few years ago we did three competitions in Hamburg and we came second.

And sometimes they introduce another stage to the competition, so you start already. It's two stage. You've got to pre-qualify. Then you do a design, then they say, oh, we can't make up between two people, so you've got to do more work. We've been through that quite a few times. And sometimes you win them, sometimes you don't. We didn't win any of the ones in Hamburg, but yet that the work you do, because you have to bring it to a level of completion is important.

And sometimes something you design for a competition comes back in a different form. I mean, you're never going to use the same thing again because every site and every brief is different. But things you've been thinking about, about material or construction or servicing a building will come back and be used in another project, but you don't ever get those projects back completely.

And in the book, we published a few years ago called more space for architecture. We have one whole chapter, and in lectures we talk about this theme as lost in competition because we hear architects saying, oh, I win all my work in competition.

My partner John said recently, oh, that's funny because we lose most of our work in competitions. And often the things you feel the most emotionally stuck to are the projects that you lose in competition. But then sometimes in the competition for the London School of Economics, which we were lucky enough to win in, I think 2009, and we later heard that we were the kind of wild card on the shortlist of six. Maybe the people in the buildings office hadn't been going to shortlist us, and then an architect who worked in one of their departments said, no should just put these guys on too.

And we did, in a way, a kind of an extreme building, which we're trying out, things we hadn't tried before, responding to peculiar aspects of the site and the brief. And our building has kind of tilting walls, canted walls of brick, which in six weeks of the competition, we worked out to quite a detailed level and then we won.

And then it turned out they just absolutely wanted to build exactly what we had submitted for the competition. So we felt lucky that we actually had mostly worked everything out, although there were a few geometrical issues that were still quite challenging as we moved along. That's probably very unusual that you win a competition and the client wants to build exactly what they saw. That was a really important project for us.

GRACE LA: I'm aware that you're actually in the process of building a studio for yourself that is adjacent to your own home. Tell me a little bit about what you plan to do there. Why are you doing that, and what will happen there?

SHEILA O'DONNELL: Well, that is a good question, because one reason we're doing it is that we bought the house we now live in a little over 30 years ago because it had a long garden and access to a lane. And we thought, oh, we'll buy this house and build a studio. And then years went by without us building a studio.

And then in the lockdown, we were working from home, and John was up on a landing of our stairs and looking out the window at the site and said, OK, look, we've got to build that studio so we pushed ahead. And one of the reasons we built it was because we said we would.

Another is we said, if we don't do it now, we'll never do it. Another was that it's an opportunity to explore ideas about material and space in a way that doesn't involve have another client or think about it, and about place and how it sits in the particular landscape of the garden. So it's a chance to really make a personal project.

GRACE LA: Is it a folly? Would you characterize it as a folly?

SHEILA No, I don't think it's a folly. It's been finished for a few months now. We've moved in, although we're still settling exactly how it's going to be used. It's got what we think of as a studio section. It's a big sloping roof, but there's a mezzanine overlooking the lower areas. In a way, it's of buildings we looked at when we were young. Corbusier's studios.

We have started holding small events in the studio, which are actually being recorded as podcasts. Just about to finish the first set of 6 with an interview this coming Friday that John is having with Pat Collins, a really interesting film director. And I interviewed the woman who I who's been running a theater company for 40 years, who interviewed a painter, the man we've been doing the furniture collaborations with.

So none of the people we've interviewed are architects, and we invite a small audience of people from different aspects of the arts and some architects. So we're trying to have a culture of discussion and to make sure that architecture is integrated into the other arts and cultures.

GRACE LA: It's very unusual. And also to carve an actual space, a physical space for your activities that are running adjacent to your creative processes and architecture. It's such an interesting idea. I'm jealous that you're doing this for yourself because, in a way, you're bringing all of that cultural conversation into this studio and allowing it to be a place that gives you a chance to do that, which is, I think, wonderful.

SHEILA Well, it's an interesting idea to just say, we'll do this and then say, OK, make a list of people and invite them and
O'DONNELL: then realize, OK, well, now we have to do it. Whereas somehow it's easy to let time slip by because you're so busy doing competitions. So if you make the commitment that on every second Thursday, we're going to have that conversation, then you do it and it happens, and it does expand your life. It expands the sense of connection that you have.

In a way, it brings back some of the spirit that we felt was there in the city when we started working first in the 1980s. So it's the kind of full circle thing. And even when your life is very busy, sometimes you're not even meeting regularly the other architects who you think of as your compatriots, your peers. And so they come to these events and you have a chance to catch up with them too.

GRACE LA: That's wonderful. We should all take a lesson from that. So I am curious, when we look at the trajectory of large corporate practices, there is already a structure by which there's an assumed transition of leadership. It sort of built into the way in which large corporate structures imagine their longevity. There's a ladder track and you move from associate principal to a principal role, et cetera, et cetera. And then there's an assumption of partnership that is always rotational and/or moves through structurally, through many people.

In a closely-held practice, how do you envision that to work for you and John, especially when you've been so at the center of the work that you produce. What do you think about when you think about the future? Of course, that's a long time from now. But I'm just curious-- because practices of your size have this particular question, because it's always assumed that you might have this kind of transition structure in place, or that you even want it for quite frankly.

SHEILA Yeah. It's a conversation that we've been having a lot recently and with people in the practice, but also with
O'DONNELL: people in other practices as to how do you manage that. Because it is very much our practice and our two names are on it. And the way we work is still that both of us are involved in every project.

So at the early stages, we're always both involved in the design and in the conversation going backwards and forwards between us passing a pencil. Obviously people who work with us in the office are involved also, and we're working with the younger people and directors on quick study models made whatever. But we are identified with the practice, and that's certainly true.

But we do also have three directors, all of whom have been with us for at least 20 years. And in a way, we are trying to have it that those people take on some of the roles and are also associated with the practice by clients. I mean maybe a disadvantage of calling your practice your own names is that clients are always going to associate everything with the two named people.

But we did that, and here we are almost 40 years later. I think we haven't fully resolved it because neither of us feels inclined to retire just yet. We do feel that the work is ours. But, I mean, there's so many roles in every project. And I look back over all the buildings we've done and realized that I can see the input of individual other people in the buildings, either in the early concepts, but maybe particularly also in how they're made and how they're seen through.

So the people who've been working with us and seeing through projects for 20 years, I think we assume that they will begin to take over some of those roles. I think it is a really difficult conversation for all smallish practices that are led by named people. And maybe because we're partners in work and also we're a couple, which is also very common in architecture more than in most professions. I think that possibly also give an even closer sense lock in between the two partners. And it's probably difficult for the other people to begin to take that over.

But I think we probably are coming to the stage where we need to be more specific about it and the legal side that other people are directors and have shares and so their own belongs to not just us.

But it's probably hard as an architect to let go. And I would say that we are at the moment very consciously working on how to manage that, and we're very lucky with the people we have working with us who we really trust, and we hope that is going to happen.

And I think it's interesting for people of my generation who grew up pre-computer. Also, we depend on people of all ages who are beyond us to deal with a lot of the technical aspects of the work because, at the time, computers were being used in our practice, we were not ready to take that on. So John and I sketch on paper still, and that's how we work.

And actually, in a way, it's quite a good it makes you work very closely with people, even some very young people in the practice because you're doing sketches and saying, OK, will you try this. And in a time when I was really conscious of this was in the lockdown when you couldn't be physically present with people.

So in a way, it's drawing and sketching had to be even more part of communications. We were doing a number of competitions for new housing projects in Dublin as social housing. So I was making drawings and sketches and sending them through, and they would draw up something for two hours and we'd meet again by Zoom and I'd say, no, no, I didn't mean that. And then I'd sketch over their drawings and hold them up, sometimes holding them up to the screen.

I love that sense of high tech, low tech that went on then. And obviously it's better in the studio environment because you can sketch something and someone starts to draw it, and half an hour later you're standing there saying, no, I didn't really try it like this.

But it means that the younger architects are living the design with you. They're living and they're saying, oh yes. So why did you think that wasn't right? Or why did you change that? So it is a kind of partnership that you have with people. They're like your hands and it's passing backwards and forwards.

And even I find because I use a lot of watercolor images, maybe in competitions and sometimes they're just very simple sketches, but sometimes it might be trying to make an image of an interior of a space. And someone will set it up from a 3D model we're making in the computer model. And they'll set up a view, and I'll sit with them and say, no, more like this. And so they'll eventually print something out, and I'll either trace over it or just use it as the basis for making a watercolor drawing from.

So in a way, I think they're mixed media images really. I couldn't do exactly that kind of image without the input of another person who maybe more junior on my team who puts life on the drawing for me, or else they put shape on it and I put life in it. And that's one of the joys of studio life, that you are constantly in discussion with different people at different stages of work. Sometimes it's about how to manage issues with clients, and sometimes it's about exactly the shape of something that you're making in a drawing.

GRACE LA:

And I love the way that one could imagine that it's the divergence of skills that actually bring together the different people in the office in collaboration with you. I think that's very interesting. So Sheila, you've been working in different countries, of course, outside of Ireland, China, other places, and it would be great to understand how the design process that you've really honed over many years, how it works when you are dealing with a completely different context, for example, like in China or other countries.

SHEILA

O'DONNELL:

I think we would say that by looking very closely at one place, the place where you're based and which we understand very well, I suppose at this stage, you learn how to look at any place. We always talk about immersing ourselves in the context of a project, which would be physical context, but also historical, social, and also the brief mixed in with that.

Now we have only ever won one competition in China, but otherwise we haven't worked there. And I would say, I found that very difficult to understand that context and to feel comfortable with it. But we have done quite a lot of work in Europe and in England.

And for example, one of the competitions we did win was in Budapest in Hungary for Central European University. And that was really interesting because it's a completely different form of city than Dublin or London, which are the ones we know. I mean, it's similar in the sense that it's a street-based European city, but the building elements in Budapest are big, 25-meter wide courtyard buildings, which are usually six or seven stories high. We're used to working in the scale of a Georgian city, where a house might be six meters wide in Dublin or in London, and it is a house, a singular thing.

So we were very excited, actually, to do this competition in Budapest, because it's a city of courtyards. And it's a city of courtyards where all the buildings are based around at least one, often several courtyards. And it's a very exuberant a lot of it's 19th century. We were working in Pest in the more neoclassical part, and there's a lot of very exuberant, quite three-dimensional buildings with balconies and projecting bay windows.

And we just really enjoyed the three-dimensional character of the streets of that city, and that was something we wanted to employ. We wanted it to be a very Budapest building. We didn't want to bring a kind of Irish building to Hungarian context. And it was in a World Heritage site. So there was a lot of conservation aspects to it.

And we had some really good conversations with using an interpreter with the conservation people in the planning offices, et cetera. And we made a partnership with the local practice whose role was to support us in the early stages, and then at the more went on site that they were much more involved. So we had to Yin-Yang diagram that in the early pre-planning permission stage, it was kind of 70% 30% them. And then it reversed to some extent when we were on site.

We would always start a project in a different place by trying to understand that place. I mean, I think we have never tried to bring our building and put it in another context. I mean, there are lots of architects where you can recognize the building no matter where it is because what they're known for is a particular look of their projects.

We're always trying to make our projects feel like they grew out of the place they're in which means you often find yourself having to use different kinds of materials and details because you're responding to that place. So you don't get so much chance to another one of those or repeat the details, et cetera.

GRACE LA: So I have a question about brick in particular, because it is something that so well. Brick is one of the materials that has a very high embodied carbon. And so the question about its use and the future of that as a material, what are you thinking about? Are you thinking about any substitutions? Stone bricks have been fascinating and other kinds of materials. But again, your oeuvre has been so much about the palette of bricks.

SHEILA O'DONNELL: Sure, we have used brick a lot, and it's usually in the places we've used it. It's the indigenous material that's made there, and obviously that is a big issue. It's really interesting about sustainability. I mean, we were just discussing it recently in the office that but even when most of the projects we're finishing now were designed probably around between 2015, 2018

And even then, the conversation about climate and sustainability was mostly about managing the energy load in a building, because energy was considered the thing you had to minimize.

GRACE LA: So the operational load.

SHEILA O'DONNELL: Operational load over the lifetime of a building. So we were consciously using, for example, a lot of concrete because of its thermal mass exposed, using natural ventilation, trying to cool buildings without using equipment and plant. And also using naturally finished buildings that didn't need to have other layers of finishes put on them or didn't need much maintenance. And a lot of that was brick and concrete. And we used a lot of timber as well.

But yes, I think it's something that we're having to look at and talk about a lot. I think there's a lot of experiments being done making bricks out of different kinds of material about recycled things, about hemp bricks and other things. But we haven't yet designed a building using those. Although some of the competitions that we lost or came second in, we were very interested in the idea that you might use stone as the outer leaf. We're doing a second just finishing a University library in Dublin. And now we're doing a second project for the same university, which is a sports building, a building for indoor sports.

And we're just discussing how in a way the whole approach to that is completely different, because what's happened is the focus has moved from the energy load in the building because, first of all, there are more and more renewable sources of energy being energy has totally changed and it's cheaper. So the focus is on the embodied carbon in the materials.

So in the sports building that we're doing, we were going to clad in brick and now we're not. We're looking at different kinds of cladding. It's designed for a CLT structure. But I must say I just have some doubts still in our world where we don't have a timber industry in Ireland. There's no construction grade timber grown. Where we have big issues with fire regulations that.

There's a kind of feeling out there that the answer is timber built, everything in the world would be fine. But we've done some studies with very good engineers from London. We're working with on some of the buildings we're doing. We're coming out. When you analyze the embodied carbon, that it's pretty well the same between some concrete structure and timber structure because of the other things that get carried along with the timber. Normally what we're trying to do, I suppose, is hybrid structures. So we often have, say, a concrete base because of things to do with ground conditions and stability and then timber above that.

But I think it's a conversation we all have to keep having because I don't think the answer is yet totally clear. And I also still think that buildings that last a long time have an advantage over buildings that don't last a long time. But I think what's happening is we're in a kind of crisis. It's urgent. And so therefore the focus on embodied carbon makes sense.

I don't where we're going to go in place of the bricks. But we've used lots of other materials, and we can use other materials and we're flexible. And we want what we do to be responsible. So the concrete industry is really working hard, I think, to try to find alternative ways of making some forms of concrete.

I don't know if the brick industry has yet been able to think about that because the kind of bricks we're talking about are made out of clay, and the way they're made is that they're fired at very high temperatures. So I don't where the future of that is and whether there are ways of air drying or doing experiments on compressed Earth. And that's interesting too. But in our climate, there's still a lot of suspicion about constant rain on buildings made of Earth.

So I don't think there's yet an answer, but I think we're very happy to be involved in the experimentation. And part of the work we've been doing in these experimental structures in the South of Ireland is thinking about using very locally-sourced materials, in that case mostly stone from the ground or reeds reads from a nearby river for thatch and Irish wood. But we're now also doing some experiments with rammed Earth to think about whether our next project there might be built out of the ground.

GRACE LA: That would be very exciting. Yes, and of course, the technologies around all of these materials are quite interesting. Thank you. Sheila, we're very lucky to have you. And so grateful that you'd speak in our public lecture series here at the GSD.

SHEILA O'DONNELL: Thank you, Grace. It's been a pleasure yet again to visit GSD.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

GRACE LA:

I'm Grace La, and you've been listening to talking practice from the practice forum of Harvard University's Graduate School of design. Today's episode was produced and edited by Maggie Janek. Platform support and research was provided by Victor o'Heaney. To find out more about programs and events at the Harvard Graduate School of design, visit us online at gsd.harvard.edu. Thanks for listening.