

WORKING BLIND

THE SKAINOS PROJECT

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PHOTO DONNELLY O'NEILL ARCHITECTS AND DJA PHOTOGRAPHY

East Belfast has an image problem. Even after the Province emerged from the darkness of the 'Troubles,' the Lower Newtownards Road and Short Strand have seen significant social problems and unrest in the past decade; and that's all before we even mention that four letter word 'flag.' Despite this, the East Belfast Mission has worked tirelessly in the community from its previously beleaguered base of operations in the heart of the 'Lower Newton.' It is this base which has recently seen a massive overhaul and rebranding as 'The Skainos Project' causing a stir in the east of the city and across the Province.

"We're pushing the notion of 'shared space' as far as we can,"

This striking addition to the troubled district of the Inner-East, designed by architects Donnelly O'Neill, creates a destination along a thoroughfare previously viewed by many as merely a route into city centre. The project's primary aspiration was to create a 'shared space,' a place where anyone can express themselves, as opposed to a 'neutral space' which is normally achieved through the denial of ownership. This is possibly what led to the building's chaotic brief; consisting of self-contained offices, rentable meeting rooms, retail units, a cafe, homeless hostel, sports hall, classrooms, seminar spaces and a fully

operating church, complimented by a series of environmentally friendly add-ons such as bird boxes and the famous 'green wall' all tied together with a new civic square. "We're pushing the notion of 'shared space' as far as we can," the centre's director Glenn Jordan explained during our conversation in the cafe, "politically, socially and environmentally."

The potentially chaotic nature of the building's functions is not evident in the design, however.

While the exterior of the building feels almost corporate, falling victim to some of the 'trends' of contemporary architecture (I don't think I ever will warm to arbitrarily coloured window frames), the materiality of the interior makes it feel warm and appealing, and there is a genuinely welcoming atmosphere. I'm not sure if this is created by the architecture or the people, perhaps the two being mutually supportive.

The building's dramatic

glass and enameled panel facade mimics the overcast skies of east Belfast with splashes of yellow referencing the cranes looming nearby. The 'sky panels' were created using a unique and experimental process, as explained by Mr Jordan. "The artist works with jars of powdered glass labeled, 'blue', 'green', 'yellow'; all appearing white in colour. The powder is applied to the panels, which are then passed through a kiln which melts the glass returning it to its original colour. The artist is effectively working blind."

While described as one of the largest pieces of public art in the city, I must confess I had not noticed the subtleties of the facade until they were pointed out.

"Skainos" is a Greek word translated as 'tent' or 'dwelling'

After our chat I had a closer look, and there is an imposing view from the side streets facing the building. Unfortunately, I'm not sure how many people will see the building from this angle to appreciate this.

Skainos' myriad of tenants, and the activities that go with them, is impressive. From Tear Fund and AgeNI, to the Replay Theatre Company and Irish language classes (on the Newton!); the range of activities ensures not

only that local people get access to the services they need within their own area, but also gives people who previously would not have ventured near a reason to come. This is not a random scattering of activities however. "Tenants need to 'buy-in' to Skainos: not just as a building and a landlord, but as an idea," explains the director. "They need to deliver value to the Inner East."

The word 'Skainos' is a Greek word translated as 'tent' or 'dwelling' which initially suggested to me an attempt to order the world in order to live 'better.' Glenn, however, explains a more profound theological meaning behind the name, referring to a verse taken from John's Gospel. "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling (Skainos) among us." Glenn explains "If you want me to know who you are don't just speak to me, come and live with me; don't talk about your values, demonstrate them. The name represents hospitality, shelter and presence in the community."

The Skainos Project deploys familiar cross-community tools, but never before has such an arsenal been assembled under one roof, and certainly not in such a troubled part of the city. For Skainos, there is no precedent: much like the powdered glass artists, there is a sense of 'working blind.'

