

## ABOUT: TACTILITY FACTORY FOR DERRY PLAYHOUSE

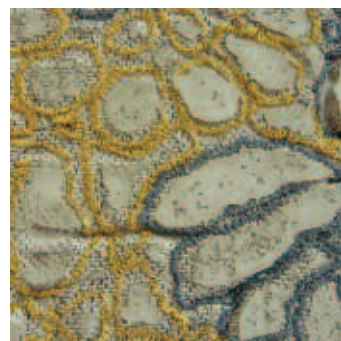


Above / Ruth Morrow and Trish Belford in front of Playhouse Panel

A first for Derry has been installed in the form of the 7.5m long 'Tactility Factory' folded frieze at the newly refurbished Derry Playhouse opposite the city's walls. The design piece is the brainchild and creative outcome of a highly fruitful collaboration 'Tactility Factory' between Ruth Morrow, newly appointed Professor of Architecture at QUB and Trish Belford, textile designer and Senior Research Fellow at UU.

Drawing on their established expertise in architecture, textile design and academia the output of their successful working relationship has also been influenced by family roots in day-to-day construction. Trish's great uncle and father were architects. Ruth's early years took her from Strathfoyle into the countryside near New Buildings and then to Armagh where her father ran a limestone quarry and manufactured concrete products.

Three and a half years in the making this innovative work is the first



Above / Detail of stitched concrete. Photo by David Pauley -The Studio

Right / Detail of stitched linen daisy. Photo by David Pauley -The Studio

outcome of the Morrow - Belford collaborative process. The frieze stretches almost the full length of the Playhouse's new entrance. Apparently



"Modernist design at large has housed the intellect and the eye, but it has left the body and the other senses, as well as our memories, imagination and dreams, homeless."

Juhani Pallasmaa 'Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and The Senses'

made of cast concrete its surface bends in and out along its length, not unlike the city's famous walls - a consequence of their defensive ►



► lozenge shaped plan. This adds enormously to its three dimensional quality, resulting in alternating planes of light and shadow. Viewed obliquely the presence or absence of reflected light impacts dramatically on the appearance of the textured surfaces and colours.

There is much more to this piece than meets the eye – always a good sign. Initially the sinuous frieze appears to be a delightful composition of stylised leafy and floral motifs of varying textures and colours superimposed and arranged to decorative effect. Closer inspection reveals motifs embedded



within, rather than imposed onto, the concrete.

Vermillion red, deep crimson, gold leaf, silver, beige, off-white, and tones of grey motifs are layered onto the continuous piece of loosely woven linen that runs through the piece, within the concrete. 'Flock' like motifs are reminiscent of heavy Victorian wallpapers in homes and theatres. The big surprise is that most motifs are much more than cut out shapes. Many are comprised of gold, crimson and silver yarns that seem stitched onto the concrete, like appliqué or embroidery, but instead have been cast integrally. ►



Above / Work in progress for the Playhouse

Far left / Stitched evergreen inspired by photographs of grasses. Photo by David Pauley -The Studio

Left / Curved linen in concrete. Photo by David Pauley -The Studio

Pure concrete penetrates through the linen to form others shapes.

Often revealed completely the linen weave seems almost metallic as light catches its threads. Ripples in the fabric, now rigid, belie their solidified state. Even the exposed concrete surfaces bring their own texture - a result of the casting process. The choice of linen as the core fabric brings excellent textural qualities in tandem with memories of a sturdy material whose creation and manufacture was interwoven through the lives of urban and rural men and women across 19th century Ulster.

One of their biggest technical challenges was the production of a fully integrated concrete product that allowed the fabric to remain permanently on the concrete surface without risk of being subsumed or peeled off. This, they have achieved with incredible aplomb designing and selecting fabrics whose properties restrain the concrete allowing them to control the surfaces to create different patterns and degrees of tactility. ►



**Above** / Playhouse panel

**Below** / Section of Playhouse panel. Photo by Martin McKeown



**Above** / Detail of stitch in the Playhouse panel

► Inspired by craft and decoration in architecture Morrow and Belford have drawn on imagery in the original fabric of these two Victorian former Mercy Convent School buildings – leaves and flowers in door fanlights, and stars from a fireplace in the studio used by the late Sr Aloysius McVeigh - a familiar figure around The Playhouse, where she worked as iconographer and artist-in-residence,

until shortly before her death last Christmas Day at the age of 85.

Testing ideas about concrete as textile and textile as structure the collaborators have engaged with the thinking of contemporary architectural theorists and educators on the role of the body and its senses in experiencing architecture. Pallasmaa's preoccupation with touch as the sense of 'nearness, intimacy and affection' identifies its enormous importance as part of a multi-sensory experience. This work undoubtedly highlights that.

Positioned almost midway up the wall its highly tactile surfaces cry out to be touched but - well protected from sticky fingers - are tantalisingly out of reach along most of its length. Poor quality artificial lighting lets it down. A focused, horizontal band of continuous light would free the frieze to really sing within the space.

'Tactility Factory' pushes the early use of cast concrete through the glass ceiling. At Burt Chapel, Co Donegal (1967) sculptor Oisín Kelly had to rely

on the mould to create his symbolic shapes whereas the 'Tactility Factory' imagery and fabrics are created beforehand and cast-in. The ground breaking hybrid offers great potential for construction products as well as design. Currently involved in setting up the spin out company 'Tactility Factory' Morrow and Belford are exploring its use in various applications and have received promising test results from The University of Sheffield on its use for acoustic panels. Ultimately the two would like to see it used on a larger scale and externally.

The Playhouse is to be commended on its thoughtful, well judged selection of the frieze as one of its Integrated Art and Design Awards. It is the recipient of a highly significant, accomplished work – in craft, design and technology– that can be placed centrally within current architectural theory and philosophy. At the forefront of innovative material development it highlights the positive role that cross-disciplinary collaborative processes can play in the research, development and potential use of new hybrid materials. Its presence in the city adds immediately to Derry's distinctiveness. ●

### Mary Kerrigan

More information is available at [www.tactilityfactory.com](http://www.tactilityfactory.com)



**Above** / Inspiration for some of the motifs taken from the original fireplace in the Playhouse. Photo by Martin McKeown

**Below** / Detail from cast concrete sculptural piece by Oisín Kelly at Burt Chapel (1967)

