

paradigms

The Icelandic landscape can not properly be described as landscape in any strict definition of the term. Apart from its coastal conurbation the island shows few signs of shaping by man. It is, on the contrary, overwhelmingly and spectacularly configured by nature. It is like a ground before time began, legible as evidence of the primal forces involved in the formation of the planet. A fresh and fragile terrain still in process, without fence or field, without definition of territory or place. Geography without history.

Icelanders believe the locus of origin of parliamentary democracy is situated at Thingvellir. A dramatic valley, delineated by a geological fault on the one side and the crescent of a river meander on the other, the population is said to have congregated annually on the site. A new form of societal governance was developed against an acoustic background of natural formation. Thingvellir can be described to be 'like an amphitheatre' and the legend informs us that it was once used as such. But we need to know the story before we can interpret any sense of its former significance. History may have taken place in geography but no place was made. No physical imprint remains to record the glory days of the founding of democracy or to act as evidence of the moment of co-operative endeavour.

The Dutch landscape can only be understood as landscape in strictly definitional terms. Land shaped by man, pure and simple. A hugely uncomplicated functional platform for production and consumption held in place by the most complex technological procedures. An even surface area, formed by the same lines that are used to describe it in maps. A superimposed cartography

of canals and dykes. A walker in this landscape has two points of reference, the ground underfoot and the distant horizon, vertical and horizontal co-ordinates in a two-dimensional environment. A train traveller in Holland navigates his journey by the train timetable. In the absence of topographical landmarks such as valleys or mountains, distance is measured in time. History without geography.

The Dutch farm represents a compelling example of the place making instincts of an organised society. Clustered tightly in casually orthogonal relationships the house and outbuildings hold their own against the open horizon. Outlined by trees and sheltered from the elements these places make poignant enclosures for everyday life in an economic layout both emotional and practical in their internal arrangements. Viewed from the air the self contained settlements punctuate the non-hierarchical land division system in a disconnected overlay pattern. No boundaries emerge and no roads converge, the houses and land read like pins in a map, marking not making, like two separate ordinances independent and adrift from each other except for the phenomenon of their superimposed matrices. Habitation is comfortably accommodated, the land is efficiently cultivated but neither builds into the other. The houses are not rooted to the site, the field pattern does not bear the imprint of any physical engagement between building and landscape. Adjacent not interdependent, parallel not embedded, buildings are placed on the land like household crockery on a giant draining board. No archaic resonance grounds the culture in place.

The traditional Chinese sunken courtcave houses, still functioning

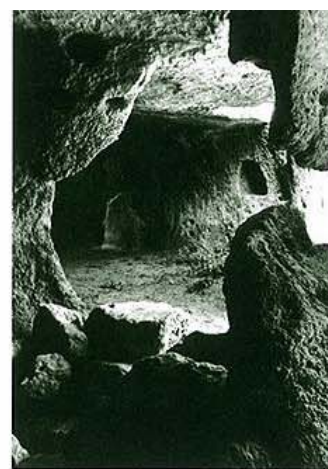
in Quian Ling are an extreme expression of the merging of architecture and situation. These carved out dwellings are like houses seen in reverse, organisms that have been turned inside out and made to eat themselves. Cell-like apartments present miniature elevations to the hollowed-out room of the central court. A variety of small spaces for sleeping and storage are burrowed behind the sheer surface of the excavated earth walls. The introverted roofless salon is the focus for communal life of the household. Thinking about these strange cavity constructions in sculptural terms suggests another kind of space making, the result of some imaginary casting process, a subtractive heaviness, solid space. Was this the sensation that Moretti recorded when he made plaster casts of the spatial volumes of Italian churches ?

The cave dwellings in the Basilicata Region of Southern Italy fuel further reflections on the engagement of construction with context. From the twelfth century, troglodytic inhabitants opportunistically occupied existing caves in the limestone escarpments. Byzantine refugees established the strategy but the Sassi become architecturally interesting precisely at the point where the line is blurred between finding and making, between cave and construction. In the defining examples of the type throughout the derelict town of Matera, existing caverns have been further hollowed out to make interconnected chambers and hierarchically distinctive house plans. Material excavated from the interior has been used to build cut-stone threshold spaces, kitchens and chimneys. Stairways are half-carved, half-cantilevered out of the rock face. Internal walls of the caves have

been pocketed with cupboards and bed platforms remain as solid benches hewn out only to the point of functional necessity. The cave dwellings are clustered in close-knit social groupings (vicinati) and the party walls between chambers have been quarried to minimal thicknesses with the economic precision of mineshaft technology. Walking through Matera demands a development of the language of our spatial experience in terms of landscape to building relationships. Simultaneously above and below, without and within, with a sometimes seamless continuity between geological formation and architectural form.

teaching

In our teaching we have laid emphasis on the interpretation of the phenomena of place as an extension of the more routine methods of urban analysis. The UCD Thesis year programme developed with Shelley McNamara and Tom de Paor has focussed the studio on a number of different European cities. The students have been invited to curb their inclination to proposed early design responses and instead to concentrate their architectural energies on making manifest some particular characteristic of the place. This slowing-down process of observation, documentation and interpretation has allowed students to define and deepen their own understanding of architecture and to work as architects in a different way and without designing. We encourage students to notice, to seek and find and then to extend their techniques of drawing and model-making to produce a piece of work that balances between an objective record and a subjective expression of their reading of the site. Some students have emerged



from the process with a sharper recognition of what motivates them to make architecture, and with insights gained through the creative value of the careful gaze.

practice

The conceptual origins of some of our recent buildings have been derived directly from our understanding of the characteristics of their sites. We begin by thinking like archaeologists might do, metaphorically prodding the ground, searching for traces of what made it the way it is and sifting to unearth clues to inspire its further transformation. Our ambition is to build something completely new that feels like it was already there before we started, as if we had discovered the scheme rather than designed it.



Ranelagh Multi-Denominational school

Ranelagh school

The slow process of development of the Ranelagh Multi Denominational School project allowed a simple design to evolve by gradual degrees and to adapt to the physical and social complications of its context. Individual classrooms were partitioned within the dilapidated structure of a corrugated iron church. Initially intended as a temporary chapel of ease, the tin church had come to be accepted as an unlisted landmark, held in affectionate disregard by the local population. The site was purchased for a pound by the Multi Denominational School from the Church of Ireland and each year as the school population grew another classroom took over another corner of the transept, nave or verandah. When the old church could no longer be stretched to take the growing numbers the decision was made to stay on the site and to build a new school. Ranelagh residents did not want to see the old jumble of buildings obliterated and every conservation group in the locality was united in opposition to the prospect of a modern building so prominently located within the listed Georgian environment of Mountpleasant Square.

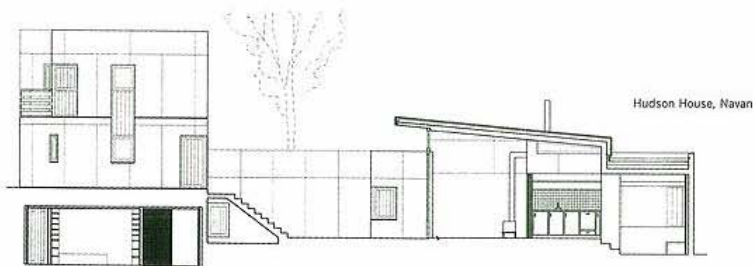
We started our work against this tide of opinion with an analysis of the existing context, which we already knew and liked, and with a series of meetings with the different residents associations, conservation societies, planning officers and the school community who each felt different rights of ownership to the past, present and future of the site. It was an interesting and gradual method of work.

In order to participate in any meaningful discussion with non-architect interest groups we had to be able to describe the building before it was designed. In order to relate the new school to the character of the old we had to work within the sometimes self-imposed parameters of the existing buildings.

The scale and material of the new structure was established out of a process of negotiation and analysis and the long game was guided by the principles of street and garden which make the urban form of this part of Dublin.

The plan of the completed building includes all of the ground of the site and is made up of internal and external spaces which interlock to make one block of interdependent components. The section cuts into the slope of the site to fix the building between street and garden. The exterior brickwork shell is hollowed out to form playgrounds, classrooms and assembly hall. Rhythmic volumes are linked together inside to outside under a long cantilevered canopy.

On one side the building holds to the street line of Ranelagh village and on the other the playground makes a landscape connection with the adjacent square and gardens. The site plan splices two urban conditions into a new form at the point of intersection of the commercial shopping street with the residential terraces. The new school contains memories within its morphology of the characteristics of the pre-existing cluster of church buildings and the original landscape pattern of street and square.



HUDSON HOUSE

When we first visited the long back garden in Navan it did not seem to be a very likely site for a house.

Inaccessible in the extreme and half notched out of the upper ground of surrounding gardens it would not have been an obvious place to build. The clients had been living over the shop and their restaurant business was expanding. Moving out into the garden would allow the restaurant to move upstairs. They had taken over the roofless concrete shell of a backyard workshop as a sheltered garden to escape the heat of the kitchen. As we started sketching to look for a response to this unusual problem we realised that the solution was implicit in the situation and that we could build the house by building the site. The house is organised in plan and section around three courtyards placed between the existing house and its back garden.

Casting the structure in concrete allowed us to make three kinds of space out of a single monolithic material. The cave, the courtyard and the tower are the constituent elements of the house excavated from the existing conditions of the site.

CONNEMARA WEST

Letterfrack village has been the locus of three distinct phases of rural development.

In the mid-nineteenth century a Quaker couple, John and Mary Ellis, made their way from England to this remote location and initiated a short-lived programme of planting and construction. A concerted campaign of building and cultivation contributed a new shape to the landscape which is still clearly visible as an overlay on the natural formation. A number of cut stone buildings and extensive areas of woodland survive as physical evidence of their ethical ambitions for the economic regeneration of a dejected post-famine community.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century the Christian Brothers built an Industrial School between the Quaker buildings and the village crossroads. The new institution was part of a nationwide programme of penal reform to provide skills-training and disciplinary control for large numbers of juvenile offenders from the urban slums.

The Letterfrack Reformatory closed down its operations in the 1970s. The harshness and cruelty that had become endemic in this system of incarceration is one of the social scandals of modern Irish society. However the industrial schools also brought infrastructural development to Letterfrack in the form of trade workshops and hydro-electricity and the Christian Brothers capitalised on the earlier investment of the Quakers to continue the urbanisation of an otherwise isolated settlement.

When the Connemara West community development group acquired the redundant structure from the departing religious institution a new phase of development began. The educational and community development activities of Connemara West now encompass a wide range of projects and the architectural brief was to draw up a framework plan which would incorporate the existing buildings,

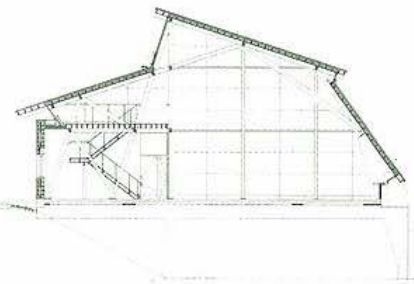
integrate new purpose-designed structures and provide form further future phases of development.

We looked at the history of site to provide a basis for the next move. We were interested in the strategy of cut-and-fill that grounds the older buildings into the hillside. We were determined to transform the institutional self-containment of the former industrial school. We wanted to hold the sound structural shell of the old building but to loosen its bonds by shifting the symmetry, clearing out the corridors and lowering the windows to allow people to see out. The axis of approach is changed into a curved line in the landscape and a new entry forecourt opens up the closed form of the courtyard plan like a folded out chain of different forms.

Different building structures have been designed in relation to the site conditions of inconsistent rock and boggy ground. Structural timber frames make the furniture workshops feel like places where joinery details should matter. The bench room sawtooth roof provides a clear span toplit studio space. The library is raised like a box of books over concrete piers that open the café out to the garden. The exercise yard of the former institution is changed into an academic garden and will function as the central social space of the furniture college.

At each stage of our work on the project we have been engaged in a creative exchange with founder members, shareholders and directors of Connemara West. Our observations of the relationship of building to landscape, of the resonance between structure and site has been a constant touchstone in our discussions on the form and detail of the project.

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Furniture college, Letterfrack