

THE RISE AND FALL OF CONTEXT IN RECENT IRISH ARCHITECTURE

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The Irish Pavilion at the 2004 Venice Biennale was designed by O'Donnell and Tuomey as a kind of extended meditation upon their scheme for the Letterfrack Furniture College in Connemara, the main phases of which were completed in 2001. Responding to the Biennale's theme of metamorphosis, the pavilion demonstrated how the old industrial school at the centre of the village had been transformed into a vibrant new institution. Despite the completeness of this transformation, the repressive social context of which the industrial school was a product retained a strong presence in the pavilion, particularly in the so-called 'Scary House' installation and in an impassioned opening-night monologue by the actor Mannix Flynn, himself a former inmate of Letterfrack. Meanwhile the building's physical setting at the edge of the Connemara National Park was represented by a vast panoramic photo which loomed over the entire exhibition. What the pavilion set forth was an architecture generated through a precise, attentive response to its particular social and physical context. And although evidently dedicated to housing new functions, the Letterfrack project seemed equally motivated by a desire to deal with the demons of the past.

By contrast, the Irish pavilion for this year's Biennale has its sights set unequivocally on the future. The Irish Architecture Foundation and its appointed curators, FKL architects, have invited nine emerging practices to speculate on the shape of Irish society twenty-five years hence. The resulting exhibition, entitled *SubUrban to SuperRural*, is intended, according to the Foundation director, Shane O'Toole, to 'fill the visionary vacuum', conjuring scenarios for future living in a kind of middle landscape between city and country. The openly utopian stance and the strategic scale of many of the proposals are in marked contrast to the carefully contextual work presented two years previously. Both pavilions are equally concerned with the re-shaping of contemporary Ireland, but where O'Donnell and Tuomey prefer a course of considered reaction and deliberate reflection, FKL and their contemporaries perceive a need for radical speculation and projection.

Without further caricaturing the many obvious differences between the two pavilions, it is nonetheless possible to read the shift between the two as symptomatic of a broader change in attitudes within Irish architecture. In recent years, the deliberate contextualism which shaped so much of the architecture of the late eighties and nineties - to the extent that it often had the feel of an orthodoxy - has given way to a more diverse set of influences and concerns. The nine practices included in the 2006 pavilion are as strikingly different from each other as they are from any of the previous generation. And whereas context still seems to be a potent source for some of them - as for instance in Dominic Stevens' reinventions of rural domesticity, or in Martin Henchion's engagement with the social landscape of the city, or in Tom de Paor's formal play with historical and geographical conditions - for other, it appears of little importance. The cool, mute abstraction of Boyd Cody's domestic work owes far less to its surroundings than it does to an interest in the serial forms of minimalism and in the sculpting and refining of space. Meanwhile, Bucholz McEvoy and Heneghan Peng have introduced an ambitious American-derived ethos to the Irish context, producing competitions and large-scale buildings with a rapidity, technological inventiveness and corporate polish which have little, if anything, to do with their immediate context. (At the 2004 Biennale, a few rooms away from O'Donnell and Tuomey's resolutely Irish work, Heneghan Peng's scheme for the development of Carlisle Pier blended effortlessly into a room full of similar, slick urban projects from around the globe.)

On the face of it, this self-consciously 'global' character could be taken as merely the latest symbol of Ireland's newfound prosperity and self-confidence. Certainly, the nation has undergone a radical transformation over the past decade or so, in which economic stagnation has given way to rampant and seemingly unstoppable growth; in which social legislation has been considerably liberalised and the influence of the Catholic Church on public and private mores has dwindled rapidly; and in which the unemployment, poverty and emigration which were pervasive at the beginning of the eighties have been replaced by widespread prosperity and a new influx of immigrants from Eastern Europe and Africa. From being the EU's poorest member on its entry in 1973, Ireland is now among its richest. The effects of this transformation have been profound and far-reaching, producing, among other things, a construction boom which have given architects much greater opportunities to build and to produce significant work.

But the rise in prosperity has also engendered worries about the abandonment of strong social bonds in favour of an unquestioning materialism; the liberalisation of social policy has been accompanied by concerns about a perceived decline of public morality; the rapid pace of development has raised worries about the fate of Ireland's urban and rural environment. In every arena, the urge to move forward is accompanied by a concern about what is being left behind. Neither is this simply a matter of nostalgia or conservatism. The wish to assert and hold onto a particular Irish identity in the context of rapid modernisation is more often expressed as a progressive, rather than a conservative, impulse.

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The anthropologist Clifford Geertz has argued that any newly independent nation must negotiate a path between what he terms 'essentialism' and 'epochalism', the former denoting a strict adherence to some shared culture and the latter the conscious embrace of the spirit of the age.ⁱ Certainly these two forces were pervasively at work in the early years of the independent Ireland, informing every aspect of political and cultural life but, in fact, the same dialectic seems to have been at work at every stage in the nation's development.ⁱⁱ Even before independence was gained, the need was keenly felt to invent and disseminate some kind of coherent Irish identity which could convincingly fuse past traditions and future aspirations. 'A nation' wrote W.B Yeats, 'cannot exist without a model of it in the minds of the people', and his was only the most prominent of countless cultural projects of self-analysis and self-description. Declan Kiberd's survey of modern Irish literature is tellingly titled *Inventing Ireland*. The book was published in 1991, capturing perfectly the mood of that era just before the beginning of the current boom. This was a period during which discussions of identity held sway in every cultural arena from literature and drama to politics and economics. Issues of social, sexual, religious and, above all, of national identity were endlessly and heatedly debated. While various minorities and interest groups sought simply to have their identities accepted and valued, the nation as a whole also seemed to be obsessed by the same questions posed by Paul Gauguin's painting of 1897: *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* And the questions, it seemed, had to be dealt with in that order, with the understanding of origins a necessary precursor to self-definition, and self-definition a prerequisite for future development.

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It is easy to see O'Donnell and Tuomey's Letterfrack project as an embodiment of this kind of cultural process in the architectural form. The legacy of religious repression and

social deprivation with which it dealt had been brought to public consciousness through a series of public scandals during the 1990s. But this project was not just acknowledging this dark past, it was reshaping it as a bright future. In itself, this marks Letterfrack out as a flag-bearer of the new Ireland. At the same time, the project was rooted in its landscape setting, enjoying the remoteness and grandeur of its setting. It seemed defiantly, proudly regional.

Now, if there is a single idea which can be used to bind together the culture of Irish architecture during this period, it is surely Kenneth Frampton's notion of 'critical regionalism', which he first introduced in an essay published in 1983. Frampton's identification of an architecture which sought to remain true to its native setting, while still embracing modernity, derived from the ideas of Paul Ricoeur, whom he quotes at the outset of his essay. Ricoeur describes the dilemma whereby 'in order to take part in modern civilisation, it is necessary at the same time to take part in scientific, technical, and political rationality, something which very often requires the pure and simple abandonment of a whole cultural past.'ⁱⁱⁱ It need scarcely be mentioned that this dilemma is, of course, strikingly similar to Geertz's dialectical play between essentialism and the epochalism. Frampton extended Ricoeur's thinking into the realm of architecture, discovering in figures as diverse as Alvaro Siza and Tadao Ando a capacity simultaneously 'to become modern and to return to sources', in Ricoeur's telling phrase. He identified an architectural approach that strove to reconcile the essential and the epochal: an architecture which both derived from and communicated the specifics of place, of environment and tradition: an architecture which was both responsive to and expressive of its context.

This last point is important: what Frampton proposed was an architecture which not only belonged but which could be seen to belong. It must speak, somehow, of its own context. It must declare its identity. Hence in much of O'Donnell and Tuomey's work from the nineties, we find a tendency to articulate each element of the programme and beyond this, to generate an expressive constructional order. The formal logic of a building like the Blackwood Golf Centre, for instance, is writ large, as are the materials and methods of its making.

When O'Donnell and Tuomey invoke the importance of continuity and renewal, they do so in precisely this spirit. ¶ Frampton's propounding of critical regionalism

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In contrast to the tectonic exuberance of Blackwood and Letterfrack, O'Donnell and Tuomey's earlier rural work – like that of many of their contemporaries - had tended towards the reinterpretation of prismatic traditional forms, the kind of forms lovingly catalogued by Niall McCullough and Valerie Mulvin in their 1987 publication *A Lost Tradition*. This important book presented a repertoire of building types - tower houses and round towers, the cottages and grand houses, the farm-buildings and hay-barns – whose formal language might be reinvented to potent effect.^{iv} This reclamation of formal models from the past was, in many ways, the rural equivalent to the engagement with the historic city which preoccupied this generation of Irish architects.

In the early eighties, large areas of Dublin languished in various states of decay and disuse. Although touched relatively lightly by the excesses of sixties development, Ireland's capital had nonetheless become a site of widespread neglect and dereliction. Its future seemed uncertain, subject to the whim of politicians and road engineers more than to any considered planning strategy. A number of young architects, among them O'Donnell and Tuomey, Grafton Architects began to argue for the validity of a living city – a place where people could live and work, a place whose historic grain and pattern should be respected and which could in turn sponsor a new kind of urban architecture. It was the role of architecture to repair, revive and extend the urban realm by respecting its underlying rules and its existing form. Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter's *Collage City* provided a theoretical primer for understanding of the urban fabric as consisting equally of figure and ground. Leon Krier's extolling of the virtues of the quartier made the argument for the importance of continuity in urban culture, while Aldo Rossi's typological investigations provided both an intellectual armature for this emerging contextualism and a further repertoire of historically-rooted forms.

These influences are all clearly evident in O'Donnell and Tuomey's first major project: the Irish Film Centre in Temple Bar (completed 1992). The centre knits seamlessly into its urban context, adapting the two main rooms of an eighteenth-century Quaker meeting house as cinemas, and establishing a new central space and route through the urban block. Existing and new architectural elements are brought together into a single ensemble. In Aldo Rossi's terms, the old meeting-house becomes a 'propelling' element in the city by being pressed into new formal relationships and used for new purposes. 'Instead of considering time as divided in linear chronological art-historical categories,

with old buildings suspended in a petrified past and new buildings projected in a volatile future, we prefer to think of all buildings co-existing in the context of the living present^v, writes John Tuomey. Accordingly, the Film Centre has no independent presence or object status: it is completely woven into the continuous weft and woof of the urban fabric. This brand of urban contextualism really began to bear fruit with the adoption of the Group 91 masterplan for Temple Bar which, instead of the large-scale demolition and redevelopment previously proposed, envisioned a new urban quarter where existing patterns of gathering and movement would be affirmed and intensified.^{vi}

The historic fabric would be retained, repaired and reinforced by the creation of a series of new buildings and spaces. The Temple Bar project represents a turning point in Ireland's cultural history: it inaugurated an era of urban regeneration (of varying quality), by demonstrating the potential of the ordinary, existing built fabric to sponsor new activity and to generate new spaces and forms. As such, the project can be seen as the high point of contextualism on Ireland.

In the projects of the 2006 Irish Pavilion, the value of the historic urban fabric is no longer an issue. If there is a context for these projects, then it is that created by the generalities of a global economy, an expanding population and shrinking resources, rather than by the particularities of place.. As the pavilion opens in Venice, the work of Group 91 was the subject of an exhibition in Belfast, entitled Group 91 – Fifteen Years On. One interpretation of this coincidence is that the work has now become part of the context itself, absorbed into the canon of Irish culture, even as the concerns and motivations driving architecture have changed. The members of Group 91 themselves have certainly moved beyond the Irish context, with Grafton Architects completing a major building in Milan and O'Donnell and Tuomey working in Holland and Britain. For Ireland as a whole, the imperatives of identity, the careful mining of the collective past for clues about the shape of the future no longer seems as compelling or necessary as it did ten years ago. We have become more comfortable in our skin. To the architects of a younger generation, working in what has been characterised as 'the most globalised nation on earth', it no longer seems possible only to be local. Nonetheless even among the necessarily sketchy propositions seen in the pavilion, the most potent are those which derive from an understanding of their historic and geographic setting. As long as architecture proceeds from the given, there will always be context.

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ⁱ [Clifford Geertz](#), After the Revolution: The Fate of Nationalism in the New States in *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York: Basic Books, 1973, p234

ⁱⁱ [for a discussion of the](#) interplay on essentialism and epochalism in the architecture in the new state, [see for instance](#) Hugh Campbell, Irish Identity and the Architecture of the New State in John Olley, Wilfred Wang and Annete Becker eds, *Ireland: 20th Century Architecture*, Munich, New York: Prestel Verlag, 1997, pp82-88

ⁱⁱⁱ [from Paul Ricoeur, Universal Civilisation and National Cultures, 1961, quoted in Kenneth Frampton, Modern Architecture: A Critical History, London: Thames and Hudson, 1988, p313. Included as a chapter in the revised edition of Modern Architecture, the essay on critical regionalism first appeared as 'Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance' in The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Post-Modern Culture, Hal Foster ed, Port Townsend, Oregon, 1983, pp16-30.](#)

^{iv} Niall McCullough, *A Lost Tradition: The Nature of Architecture in Ireland*, Cork: Gandon Editions, 1987

^v John Tuomey, *Architecture, Craft and Culture - Reflections on the work of O'Donnell and Tuomey*, Cork: Gandon Editions, 2004

^{vi} [The other members of Group 91 were](#) Shay Cleary, [Grafton Architects](#), [Paul Keogh](#), [McCullough Mulvin](#), [McGarry NiEanaigh](#), [Shane O'Toole](#) and [Michael Kelly](#), [Derek Tynan](#). [For many of these architects, the Temple Bar project represented the culmination of a long engagement with the revitalisation of the city. Most went on to build individual projects in the area.](#)