

## Building Material 20

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# Built and Living Fabric

## The Workhouse Mapestry

Deirdre McMenamin and Dougal Sheridan

### Medium

Linen Union fabric on timber frame, rewound wool and reclaimed end-of-spool yarn.

### Size

2m x 3m x 75mm.

The Workhouse Mapestry was developed as a participatory research methodology to explore the past, present, and future evolution of the Workhouse in Callan, Co. Kilkenny. Mapping and stitching processes were the methodological techniques utilised in the creation of a 6m<sup>2</sup> textile artefact; the Workhouse and its walled enclosure was the physical object of investigation; and the broader field of enquiry was the investigation of landscape readings to explore the relationship between architecture, history, and memory in rural Ireland.

### Object of Investigation

Between 1834 and the Famine, 150 workhouses were built across the island of Ireland, to a generic design of three different sizes devised by George Wilkinson, Architect

to the Poor Law Commissioners. Wilkinson's standard design comprised a H-shape plan with the larger limbs placed parallel to the road and the entire complex surrounded by high stone walls. Callan Workhouse is typical of the medium size workhouse built in the first phase of the Workhouse Program in 1841-42.<sup>1</sup> The construction of workhouses stemmed from the social reform movement of the end of the 18th century in which architecture was hailed as the 'instrument of cure' for society's ails; the workhouse system was 'the space of social order, classified and subdivided into units that were geometrically identified and architecturally reified.'<sup>2</sup> The Irish workhouses proved hopelessly inadequate to cater for the impoverished population in Ireland, and by the end of the Famine had become synonymous with desperation and death.<sup>3</sup>

Subsequent institutional use of the building included its use as a district hospital and school from 1880 until 1922, and its use as barracks during the War of Independence and the Civil War. Then, under ownership split between a local entrepreneur and Kilkenny County Council, the buildings were used for a diversity of functions including rearing rabbits, residential flats, a knitting factory, and a depot for building materials. The varying uses and levels of maintenance resulted in non-uniform patterns of dereliction, demolition, and renovation.

New construction within the workhouse enclosure in the 1990s was to include County Council social and sheltered housing, with renovation and extension to the front reception building for use as the Area Offices for Kilkenny County Council. The north wing is now largely residentially, occupied by the Camphill Community; the middle block is in use as artists' studios on one side and a cow shed on the other; the dining hall wing is used as a joinery workshop, a community workspace, and occasional exhibition/gathering space. The yards and gardens are occupied variously as vehicle-parking;

public recycling bins enclosure; spaces for the Camphill community's agricultural activities, comprising extensive vegetable gardens, an orchard, green-houses, and holdings for pigs. Some areas have been used as fairgrounds and for circus events while many are semi-wild with self-seeded shrubs and trees, forming habitats for wildlife.

As part of the Workhouse Assembly/Commonage Summer School 2013, we were commissioned to run a workshop project examining potential directions for the development of the workhouse enclosure.

## Methodological Technique

As a methodology to explore the tensions between the architectural determinism and historical gravity of the workhouse's original purpose and the subsequent layers of appropriation and patterns of everyday life, we decided to create a large-scale embroidered drawing of the layers of built fabric, habitation and vegetation of the Callan Workhouse building and original walled enclosure.

This took the format of a collective process of making, through an intensive participatory workshop over a period of 10 days. An evolving drawing was projected onto the canvas surface and layers of mapping and intervention were interpreted through stitching. The medium of stitch was selected exactly because it allowed the temporal dimension of landscape to be incorporated, with past present and future layers being worked into the depth of the structure of the textile, and simultaneously evident in the finished artefact. Also the time consuming and detailed working and reworking of the fabric by many participants over a period of time gave the fabric the presence of a metaphorical landscape by allegorically incorporating and registering the processes of its making by many hands.

Methods of representation were developed, including reworking the threads of the base fabric into the piece to

indicate the 'ghosts' of former buildings; couching-down unraveled yarns to represent the varied vegetation; as well as the use of curved quilting needles and reverse stitching from the rear of the piece which allowed this scale of embroidered image to be worked on by up to ten people at a time.

Detailed observations were made of the patterns of life and appropriation of the Workhouse Enclosure. From these observations, a number of proposals were developed for subtle interventions and incisions designed to increase potential for the overlaying and enhancement of the current appropriations, as well as the possibility for broader connections and cohesions with the town of Callan itself.

## Field of Inquiry

The process of making the Mapestry revealed a reading of the Workhouse, which we have observed in other research on the occupation of semi-deserted derelict buildings, as 'a landscape that is settled rather than a structure where the rules of occupancy are pervasive.'<sup>4</sup> The structures and external spaces have been occupied and utilised according to the potentials they offer, in complete contrast to the original institutionalised and deterministic use of space. In this sense, a freedom is suggested from the historical weight of human suffering that once occurred here.

Such a relationship between landscape and history has been interpreted as one in which '... the historical element decomposes. Over time the enduring element is displaced from both the agency and the scene of its creation, and with this displacement it loses the taint of intention and assumes the purity of nature.'<sup>5</sup> This process has been critiqued in cultural geography as serving to conceal harsh social history by an aestheticising approach to landscape. However, this reading refers to landscape in the scenic sense. The Mapestry attempts to address this by representing the Workhouse not as a picturesque scene but in plan form,

registering its appropriation by vegetation and incremental subtractions and additions to the spatial configuration. Through the stitching of the Mapestry, a landscape emerged not as a mechanism for romanticising or immolating a brutal and tragic social history, but one that revealed a site of multiple layers of appropriation and human agency, which can be encountered in an unmediated, experiential manner.

This reading lends itself to be interpreted within the discourse of 'Urban Wildscapes', which seeks to understand the qualities of semi-derelict building and sites where the growth of vegetation through natural succession has taken hold. These 'wildscapes' have a set of social processes and dynamics, which metaphorically parallel the environmental processes occurring there, of organic and opportunist appropriation of space.<sup>6</sup> Two of the qualities associated with wildscapes that emerged through the Mapestry research included the 'Registration of Change' and the 'Quality of Incompleteness'. Urban Wildscapes allow an unmediated experience of the physical traces of the past that they contain because they are not maintained in a fixed condition, either physically or representationally, or to be interpreted from a fixed perspective. A subsequent quality of such spaces is the perception that they have not reached a final state of completion. This open-ended approach allows projects and spaces to grow and evolve over time. It also implies that there is space for further participation and contribution.

In this respect the Mapestry closely reflected the spatial and social qualities of the appropriation of the Workhouse buildings in its evolving forms. The process of making the Mapestry involved local participation, and does not represent a fixed condition or proposition. Rather it will be used as the focus of ongoing discussions and workshops and continue to be added to, reflecting changes and proposals as both a register and a method of gaining consensus.

The contrast that the Mapestry revealed between the

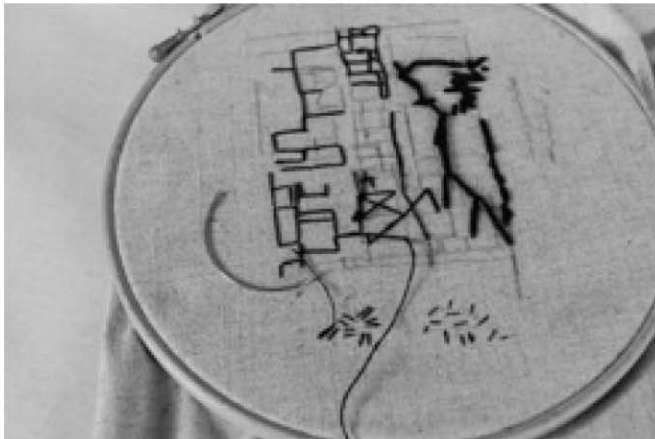
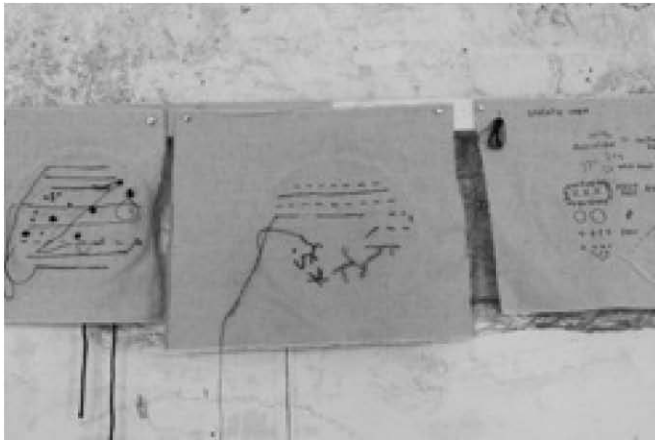
historical, physical, and ideological constructs of the Workhouse and the modesty of its subsequent everyday appropriation, parallel J.B. Jackson's seminal descriptions of the tension between that inhabited or vernacular landscape and the political landscape.<sup>7</sup>

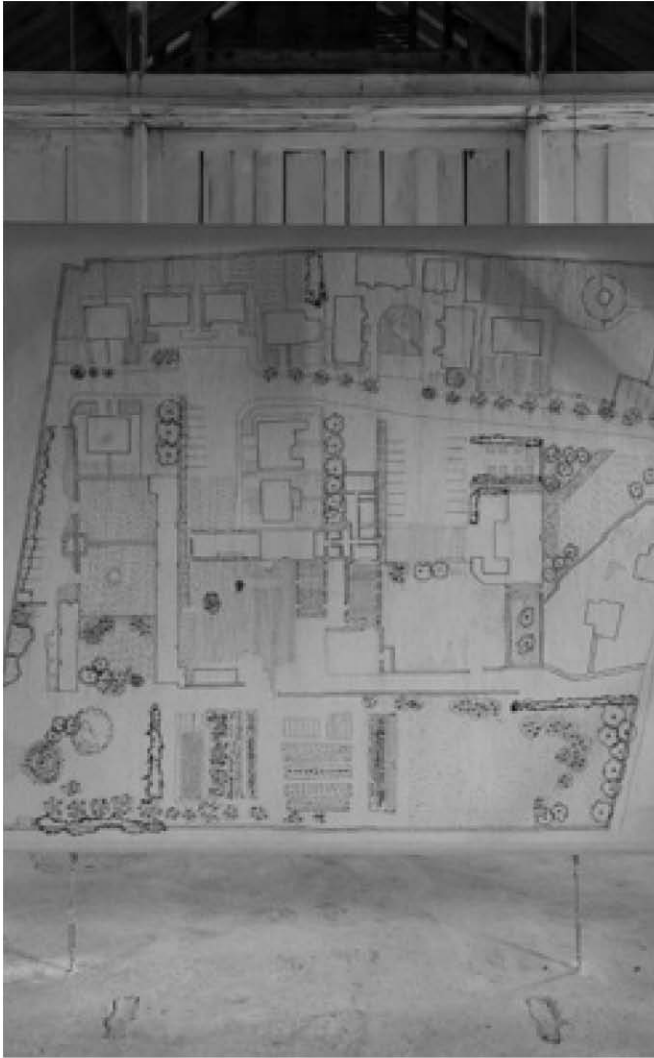
The Workhouse embodies the diabolical paradigm of the political landscape where centralised political ideological policies are imposed uniformly across vast areas of geographic justification. However, the absolute architectural determinism of the universal plan form and functional spatial enclosure has been eroded by waves of human and horticultural appropriation generated out of the specific vernacular condition.

Aesthetic interpretations of vernacular structures in other contexts have drawn on the discourse of the 'everyday', primarily stemming from the work of Lefebvre, interpreting them as a poetic register of the blurring of boundaries between creator and environment.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, the vernacular appropriation documented in the Mapestry could be interpreted as a symbiosis and convergence of the inhabitants' everyday physical subjectivity with the pre-existing structures themselves. The 'everyday' has been applied in re-readings of vernacular architectural-landscape configurations in Ireland, based not on its usual typological interpretation but rather in terms of the processual, and highly specific, adaptive interaction of human agency with immediate context.<sup>9</sup> It could equally be argued that the 'everyday' could provide an interpretation of one of the most rigid typologies seen in the history of rural Ireland — the workhouse — thus illustrating the transformative effect of vernacular processes on the historical institutional artefacts of the political landscape.

The Callan Workhouse Mapestry is a workshop project devised and led by Deirdre McMenamin and Dougal Sheridan of LiD Architecture, with textile artist Dee Harte and participants of the Workhouse Assembly, Callan 2013.

## Images





## Notes

- 1 Howley Harrington Architects, *The Workhouse, Callan, Co. Kilkenny. Conservation Plan*, 2005, p. 5.
- 2 A. Vidler, *The Writing of the Walls*, New York, Princeton Architectural Press, 1987.
- 3 K. McLaughlin and L. Millar, *From Control to Collaboration - Evolving Concepts of Social Services in the Redevelopment of Workhouses*, Masters edn, New York, Columbia University, 2006, p. 17.
- 4 D. Sheridan, 'The space of subculture in the city: getting specific about Berlin's indeterminate territories', *Field: a free journal for architecture*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2007, pp. 97-119. <http://www.fieldjournal.org/index.php?page=2007-volume-1>
- 5 J. Smith, 'The Lie That Blinds: Destabilizing the text of landscape', in J. Duncan and D. Ley (eds.), *Place/Culture/Representation*, London, Routledge, 1993, p. 80.
- 6 D. Sheridan and D. McMenamin, 'The utility and aesthetics of landscape: a case study of Irish vernacular architecture', *Journal of Landscape Architecture*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2012, pp. 46-53.
- 7 J.B. Jackson, *Discovering the vernacular landscape*, New Haven/London, Yale University Press, 1984.
- 8 R. Tiwari, 'Embedded poetics and surrounding politics of a coastal squatter settlement', *Journal of Landscape Architecture*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2009, p. 66.
- 9 Sheridan and McMenamin, *op. cite.*, pp. 46-53.