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The utility and aesthetics of landscape: a case study of Irish vernacular architecture

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Abstract
This paper investigates the utilitarian or everyday relationships to landscape evident in the interlocking of land use practices, spatial strategies and built structures in the context of rural Ireland. Primary research in the form of spatial documentation of landscape strategies deployed in farm buildings, marine structures, mill buildings and limekilns are presented and analysed, revealing landscape’s role as an instrumental element in these configurations, not merely a setting. Generally, aesthetic interpretations of these structures and configurations are concerned with the qualities of their vernacular form as typology and their scenic relationship to landscape. A performative reading of vernacular architecture/landscape configurations presents a counterpoint to this discourse, and informs a re-articulation of their aesthetic/ethical interpretation.

rural Irish landscape / vernacular structures

Over many years of travelling through diverse areas of rural Ireland, our curiosity has frequently been stirred by configurations of structures, landscape artefacts and layers of human habitation and action that appeared richly woven into the texture of the landscape. The decision to pull over and shift our view from the scene framed by the car window to closer investigation and sketchbook documentation began to reveal how the apparent visual integration of these structures in their landscape context was manifestly generated by an economic and resourceful use of landscape elements including topography, geology, landform, vegetation and watercourses to create spatial definition, shelter, containment, access and agricultural function. We wish to contribute to a parallel shift from the aesthetic view of these structures as vernacular typologies, sitting scenically in a landscape, to an understanding of them as sites of human ingenuity that reveal the agency, resourcefulness and adaptability of their creators.

The case studies described here reveal that this agency is situated not so much in the broadly generic construction techniques, materials, forms and typologies generally used to describe vernacular architecture but in the highly specific liaison between structure and landscape that utilizes landscape as an instrumental device in a design strategy. This offers the potential for an aesthetic reading of these structures based on the ethos of this intellectual input and agency rather than solely their value as sites of scenic consumption.

Vernacular structures and landscape: typology or specificity
Although the structures we examine in the case studies tend to fall into the category of vernacular architecture, the aspect that drew our interest to these configurations (i.e. a highly specific relationship to landscape) is often neglected in any discourse on the vernacular architecture of Ireland and the British Isles, with studies concentrating on style, typology and broad regional variations.

Although the scope of vernacular architecture studies is the subject of debate, ‘vernacular’ originally referred to ‘traditional rural buildings of the preindustrial era [...]
that seemed not to have been “consciously” designed or affected by the intellectual and artistic currents of the Renaissance’ (Upton quoted in Hunt 1995: 3). As John Dixon Hunt observed in his book on the vernacular garden, questions of authorship, patronage, iconography and the international traffic in design theory and practice that are applied to the ‘high’ culture of architectural or landscape design do not apply. Although this understanding broadly applies to the case studies documented, such a definition implies that the intellectual content of these structures and the agency of their unknown creators is limited.

Such definitions of the vernacular have been criticized for limiting it to ‘the persistent stereotypes that represent vernacular architecture as picturesque and charming, yet out of date and irrelevant’ (Vellinga 2006: 83) and that furthermore: ‘A major shortcoming of much of the current vernacular discourse (especially that dealing with western traditions) [...] is that it does not really acknowledge the processual, heterogeneous, and adaptive character of cultural traditions’, which has resulted in its treatment as a study of ‘passive and rather static entities that can be classified into bounded geographical, chronological and typological categories’ (2006: 86). In our investigation it is precisely the heterogeneity and adaptability of these structures’ responses to their specific contexts rather than generic typological categories that is of interest.

Although there has been some limited commentary on the influence of topography at the larger scale of settlement types in Ireland including the indigenous rural (and now virtually extinct) settlement pattern of the Clachan, individual structures have not been specifically analysed in these terms. Generally, the relationship between vernacular discourse and landscape is referred to merely in visual terms. For example, in Shaffrey’s Irish Countryside Buildings: Everyday Architecture in the Rural Landscape vernacular structures are described as relating to the landscape by creating a ‘pleasant contrast to the natural features around [...] the entire composition contributes much to the visual attractiveness of the Irish countryside’ (Shaffrey 1985: 41).

There is considerable critical discourse, particularly in cultural geography, of such scenic aestheticizing approaches to landscape—an approach that we would interpret as paralleling the typology-image-focused strand of vernacular architecture discourse. Jonathan Smith argues that ‘misrepresentation is inherent to landscape, a term used here in the sense of scenery’ and goes on to explain, ‘It rewards the spectator with the pleasures of distance and detachment and the personal inconsequence of all they survey. Thus in regarding the landscape as scenery the spectator is transformed into a species of voyeur’ (Smith 1993: 78). This critique of the ethical positioning of the spectator in relation to the aestheticization of landscape extends back to Ruskin’s struggle with what he described as the heartlessness of the lower picturesque; ‘for him, the inhabitants of the picturesque scene are unconscious of their “untaught waste of soul”’. But for such distress to go unnoticed by the heartless aesthete in a search for tone and shadow is another kind of waste: ‘the affliction of art with a cankerous failure of sympathy’ (Macarthur 1997: 127).

In our analysis of the case studies we wish to avoid over-romanticizing the ‘ignorance, drudgery, and exile’, which would have characterized much poor rural survival (Jackson 1984). By interpreting these structures in terms of their utilitarian approach to landscape and site conditions, our intention is to avoid diminishing the often harsh social history and circumstances of their making and to argue that closer study reveals the agency and intellectual content behind these structures rather than an ‘untaught waste of soul’.

Figure 1 Photograph of Lazy Bed, County Galway 2010, and drawing showing stages in making spade ridges in Drumkeeran, County Fermanagh. Source: Drawing in Bell, J. and Watson, M. (2008), A History of Irish Farming 1750-1950 (Dublin: Four Courts Press).
The landscape of the west of Ireland: the intimacy of necessity

The case studies presented are in the north and the west of Ireland (Fig. 2). These areas are characterized by both poorly drained soils and more rainfall days in comparison to the rest of the country. As a result these areas have generally been the most sparsely settled and farmed. Equally, these poor areas have required of their inhabitants a most resourceful approach to their harsh environment, the desperate intimacy of a relationship determined by survival. The inhabitants often had to make the soil themselves through generations of intensive spade labour and continuous applications of sod, seaweed, sand, soot, turf, farm refuse and decayed thatch (Aalen et al. 1997).

Throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, farmers enriched the soil with lime from a local lime-kiln. These kilns are a characteristic feature of the Irish landscape, with as many as a quarter of a million of them positioned strategically to best utilize the topography. This required a sloping site allowing layers of peat and limestone to be loaded in from the top, with the furnace at the bottom of the slope from where lime would be extracted (Mitchell & Ryan, 2007: 335) (Fig. 1, p. 47). The careful creation of these micro-topographies is perhaps analogous to the intimate relation between landform, productivity and utility that we will examine in the case studies.
Figure 3a Platform House, County Donegal. Located at the base of Aghla Mountain in a wide valley typical of the Caledonian folds of northwest Ireland.

Figure 4a Stepped House, County Mayo. On the northern shore of Clew Bay, shallow tidal bay of sunken drumlins forming an archipelago.

Figure 5a Courtyard House, County Donegal. Located on Cummirk River Plateau.

Figures 6a & 7a Slipways/Piers, County Donegal. Located on a rocky and precipitous headland of Moinean and Dalradian geology.

Figure 8a Mill and Hydraulic Fieldscape, County Mayo. Located on the limestone shores of Lough Corrib.

Figure 9a Monks Fishing Pavilion, County Mayo. Cong village and abbey were built on an island in the river Cong, a tributary of the river Corrib.
Case studies

Platform House (Figs. 3a, p. 49; 3b)
A south-facing grassed platform has been created overlooking the surrounding site, formed between the domestic cottages enclosing its northern side and by a retaining wall, pavilion and greenhouse that define its southern edge and articulate the change in level. The two-storey pavilion, which is integrated into the terrace retaining wall, was originally a small shop, accessed from the platform terrace.

The lower level of the pavilion, accessed from the lower farmyard level, stabled a stallion. The stallion was kept as a business for breeding and used the adjacent enclosed paddock for exercise. Horses, carts, bicycles and later, cars, were parked at this lower level, and customers to the shop would ascend the steps to the terrace platform, which became a semi-public space between the house and the shop. The greenhouse utilizes the terrace retaining wall and the pavilion wall to provide enclosure and thermal mass, without blocking light or aspect to the terrace above.

The open western end of the platform allows low-angle western sun onto the terrace and graded access down to the surrounding fields. The platform’s cross-axis is aligned with the entrance lane, terrace stairs and front door of the cottage, utilizing the change in level to give a clear view of anyone arriving from the road.

Stepped House (Figs. 4a, p. 49; 4b)
This structure negotiates and articulates the sloping topography, utilizing the change in level to separate domestic and farmyard functions. The domestic address and front-of-house are at the upper road level while the farmyard entrance is at a lower level, where the road drops down to the level of the field. This overlapping of functions allows a compact and resourceful use of space. The domestic living spaces are located above farm storage spaces, separating them from the activities of the lower farmyard. The road has been widened to form a small entry court to the domestic quarters by way of a bridgelike structure, which also created a small covered outdoor working space beneath for fishing net repairs and storage.

This entry court acts like a balcony into the landscape, visually connecting the domestic quarters with the concentric spheres of work it overlooks: first the farmyard directly below, then the fields beyond that, then the greater landscape of the bay, which was fished by the inhabitants of the farm, and finally the horizon formed by the mountains beyond the bay, which provides a visual register of incoming weather conditions.

The long axis of house and adjacent agricultural building traverses this expanding sequence of spaces, connecting them visually and functionally with a cobbled surface extending to the field beyond. This arrangement thus connects and establishes a hierarchy between these concentric spheres of living and working, setting the occupant in a visible, resourceful and meaningful relationship to this landscape.
Courtyard House (Figs. 5a, p. 49; 5b)

This simple arrangement of dwelling and agricultural buildings utilizes trees and vegetation, and a change in level, to form a protected enclosure within the barren, exposed landscape of the Derryveagh Mountains.

This courtyard acts both as part of the working space of the farm but also as the forecourt and address to the house from the road, which is included in the spatial enclosure of the courtyard. In this way the courtyard is experienced as a moment of enclosure as one moves through this otherwise exposed landscape, and allows the road to be utilized as a continuation of the hard surface of the courtyard for manoeuvring vehicles.

The courtyard has been cut into the slope, so that wind coming down the hillside is deflected over the roof from this side. The scale of the enclosure is defined by the high conifers on all sides, except where lower level vegetation to the southwest side allows afternoon and evening sun penetration.

Slipway/Piers (Figs. 6a & 7a, p. 49; 6b & 7b)

These structures articulate and formalize a complex negotiation with the steep and intricate topography to create a fusion of natural and constructed coastal landform. They facilitate and delineate a number of overlapping requirements including the movement of boats to the water from the considerable height of the road above, offering protection against waves and wind for launching and mooring and providing platforms for offloading vessels and the storage of boats and equipment.

The varied angular platforms, legible as a geometric refinement of the jagged coastline, allow different mooring options for varying tidal heights, wave directions and wind conditions. The surrounding rock platforms are adapted and appropriated as working and storage spaces. Two scales of access are legible: one relating to the movement of boats (defined by ramp, boat platforms and geometry of pier), and the second registering the movement patterns of people, defined by the steps and minimal railings connecting the different levels. These spaces of shared public utility and amenity articulate an intimate connection between people and landscape, human industry and a challenging oceanic environment.
Monks Fishing Pavilion  (Figs. 9a, p. 49; 9b)
This pavilion, which provided shelter for monks while fishing in the river Cong, sits on two structural piers in the river with a small arch below the floor that allows the river to flow through unimpeded. A trapdoor in the floor allowed a net to be lowered from the sheltered interior of the pavilion, made even more comfortable by a fireplace and chimney. The pavilion is located out from the bank, so the monks did not have to cast so far, and is half outdoor platform, half interior space, allowing both summer and winter fishing.

Conclusion
It is evident that highly specific strategic design decisions have been made that give these supposedly generic typologies a carefully considered connection with their landscape context. In these specifically tailored relationships with landscape the intellectual content becomes evident, and the agency of those who created these environments is revealed. The environments documented in the case studies have a uniqueness born not out of stylistic devices, self-conscious aesthetic considerations, or the need to express individualism (often evident in the work of the architect or patron as protagonist), but from innovative methods of maximizing the potential of the immediate landscape to facilitate everyday patterns of work and life.

Mill and Hydraulic Fieldscape  (Figs. 8a, p. 49; 8b)
This tectonic landscape is formed by the overlaying and adaption of watercourses; field and retaining walls; and mill, barn, farmhouse and ablutions buildings. Watercourses and large walls of stone from field clearing have been aligned in a negotiation between field geometry and water flow gradients. In places watercourses are concealed inside the wall structures, so as not to interrupt the enclosure of the tightly defined yards. These walls are also used to structure the topography into a series of terraces more manageable for agriculture and livestock.

This fusion of enclosure, topographic management and hydraulic function is further evident in the mill structure itself. The walls of the mill extend beyond the mill to create a sheltered yard at the lower level. These walls form part of the retaining walls to the field above allowing access to the top storey of the mill to facilitate the gravity feeding of crops for milling. The change in level also allows the mill building to connect with the adjacent road and jetty. Other elements can be found along these hybrid wall/watercourse structures including water troughs, seats and an outhouse WC that occurs as a small room within the wall.

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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 (Tiwari 2009). Similarly, the structures documented here could be interpreted as a symbiosis and convergence of the inhabitants’ everyday physical...
subjectivity with the objects themselves. Such intent to find a poetic order could be extended to interpret the structures as embodiments of their creators’ intellect, being fused with the surrounding landscape, a synthesis of subject and place. In this way they are registers of active participation with their environments rather than the passivity of the spectator and consumer which Lefebvre identified as a pervasive contemporary condition, manifest for example in the form of suburban homogenization, which he described spreading across hillsides like ‘hundreds of dead chickens in an immense shop window’ [Lefebvre 1991: 41].

This evokes an image of the dramatic changes that Ireland’s rural landscape has undergone in recent years of extensive ribbon development. Attempts to mediate the impact of this development have all too often been characterized by the formal concerns of a pictorial relationship between structures and landscape. New structures attempt to replicate the vernacular as image and form rather than understanding it as a process of symbiosis, participation and making, without understanding the specific and strategic relationships between vernacular structures and their landscape contexts. Lefebvre (1997: 35) asks: ‘Why wouldn’t the concept of everydayness include the extra-ordinary in the ordinary?’ Could this include finding the specific and the unique in the vernacular?

The on-going disappearance of or threat to many of these structures and landscape conditions lends an imperative to further documentation and study, because generally such vernacular structures are not included in either the Inventory of National Monuments or the Lists of Protected Structures. This raises obvious questions of whether these structures/landscape configurations should be retained and what forms this would take, considering that the methods and scales of landscape utilization have shifted since they were constructed. Beyond questions of protecting the artefacts themselves, the preservation of the spatial thinking that shaped their relationship to landscape has considerable potential to inform contemporary approaches to the rural landscape, ranging from specific pragmatic strategies to a broader ethos and sensibility of utility, economy and resourcefulness.

REFERENCES


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Deirdre McMenamin graduated in 1998 from Trinity College, Dublin, and Dublin Institute of Technology, Belfont Street. She co-founded LiD Architecture in 2002. The practice focuses on the use of landscape strategies in architecture and work includes the development of participatory design methodologies, temporary architectural strategies [including The Parlour, a competition-winning proposal for a temporary urban square in the Dublin Docklands, 2010], mobile installations and private houses. She is a tutor and invited reviewer at Queens University, Belfast; University of Ulster, Belfast; Limerick University and Waterford Institute of Technology School of Architecture, a member of the Building Initiative Research Group [www.buildinginitiative.org] and visiting fellow at Queensland University, Australia.

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