

## Unfinished Homes

On reaching the top of the hill, we saw the skeleton of the abandoned village on the slope ahead of us. ... Grey, uniform, sloping stone gables, which we saw first with no depth of perspective, like an amateurish set for a ghost film; incredulous, we tried to count them, we gave up at forty, there must have been a hundred. The next curve of the road gave us a different perspective, and now we saw them from the side: half-finished buildings that seemed to be waiting for the carpenter: grey stone walls, dark window sockets, not a stick of wood, not a shred of material, no colour anywhere, like a body without hair, without eyes, without flesh and blood - the skeleton of a village, cruelly distinct in its structure. There was the main street, at the bend, by the little square, there must have been a pub. A side street, another one. Everything not made of stone gnawed away by rain, sun, and wind ... this skeleton of a human habitation where a hundred years ago five hundred people may have lived ... but here there is no trace of violence; in limitless patience time and the elements have eaten away everything not made of stone, and from the earth have sprouted cushions on which these bones lie like relics, cushions of moss and grass. ... No one could tell us exactly when and why the village had been abandoned; there are so many deserted houses in Ireland, you can count them on any two-hour walk ...

Heinrich Böll from 'Skeleton of a Human Habitation' in his *Das Irische Tagebuch* (1957), 31-5.

I first came across the writing of Heinrich Böll eight years ago as I was researching the image and memory of famine cottages in the Irish landscape. In the 1950s Böll traveled to Achill Island, Co. Mayo and stayed for some time in a cottage. There compiled a series of meditations on the Irish landscape and Irish culture and heritage known today as his *Irish Journal* (*Das Irische Tagebuch*). Making something of a home in his Achill cottage (which now coincidentally is a home for artist residencies: <http://heinrichboellcottage.com/>), he was struck by the vast network of abandoned houses and skeleton villages embedded in the landscape. One in particular was the village of Slievemore on Achill Island about which the above quotation is assumed to be written.

Rereading these words today, I am struck not by their evocation of the trauma of depopulation but rather the abject, omnipresent sense of absence and emptiness – of homes unmade. Despite the rich connection of Böll's text to the Irish past, considering it today, I find it hard not to read an eerie similarity between his encounter with Slievemore and what anyone in Ireland might come across today on a short drive through any county – the network of unfinished houses and estates that stand as monuments to the unrealized ambitions and unfulfilled expectations of the Celtic Tiger. A recent distribution map produced by the National Institute for Regional and Spatial Analysis illustrates the dominant presence on our landscape of these ghost estates – a distribution not dissimilar to the wide distribution of derelict cottages from two centuries before.

The derelict famine cottage has become an icon of the trauma of depopulation and tragedy of famine in 19th century Ireland. Perhaps through the unrealisation of development ambitions recorded in the shells or the skeleton of unfinished estates, we are forging another icon of trauma – though perhaps a trauma more sinister as it is self-inflicted. By comparing these two topographies of loss, a tremendous insight becomes evident and unavoidable, one which was immediately apprehended by Böll during his time on Achill. The dereliction of the houses and entire villages such as Slievemore declare through their dilapidation the presence required to make a home. Though brick and mortar may make a house, it is the lived human relationships that make a home – a lesson which perhaps would have been valuable as foundations were laid for our contemporary ghost estates.

At this moment of similarity between the topographies of derelict housing from the 21st and 19th centuries, it is important to reflect on our expectations and desires in the construction of these estates. The built environment though not constituting a home itself radically impacts the possibilities for how humans interact and make their homes. In this light, the group of contemporary Irish photographers brought together in 'Home' are an urgent response to our current societal trauma in Irish housing. The photographers assembled here bring diverse and fresh insights

into the constitution of homes and evocations of the human resilience to reconnect and renegotiate the strange landscapes we have created.

Many of the photographers in the exhibition probe the residue and traces of memory. Almost as archaeologists, their images excavate fragments of place and memory to reconstruct an image of the senses of home and place. Lorraine Tuck's 'A Lost Railway' is a psycho-geographic interrogation of the present absence of the short-lived Connemara Railway Line. Tuck's photographs testify to the ability of the image to simultaneously evoke the past and radically transform contemporary understandings of landscape and place. Christine Redmond's 'Instant Memories' picks up on this theme of fragmentary traces of memory that constitute the lived relationships of home. Using polaroids to render visible those things and places which seep into an invisible fabric of 'home', Redmond creates an exercise in personal mnemonic preservation and activation. Her photographs reveal those qualities and moments of place that can become dormant in our mental geographies, causing them to percolate through the film of oblivion and create powerful images which are simultaneously ambiguous and intensely specific and personal.

Beyond the image and memory, 'Home' also highlights the powerful impact of documentation to render visible the macro-economic and political structures under which people struggle to articulate and manifest their homes. Noel Bowler's powerful documentation of internally displaced peoples in Africa's East Congo region documents through personal moments the economic, social and political tragedies governing the ability of many people to make a home. Bowler's delicate negotiation of the encampments of families reveals human resilience in the construction of intimate spaces and home life despite the temporary status of housing. In 'Interim', we see both the plight but also the triumph of people living in adverse conditions to make homes through lived presence and meaningful human relationships even without the often taken-for-granted materiality of housing. As an uncomfortable parallel to the absence of permanent, material housing, Lorna O'Brien's 'Site Unseen' is a fierce documentation of the over-

development of housing in Ireland. Recording the material evidence of greed, over-stretched resources and failed ambitions, O'Brien's photographs are somber reminders of the monumental infrastructural collapse and its impact on the Irish landscape. Capturing the shells of unfinished housing estates throughout Ireland, O'Brien's current work evokes the tragedy and trauma of the unfulfilled expectations, ambitions and ill-founded promises of Celtic Tiger Ireland. 'Site Unseen' is a humbling reminder that though bricks and mortar may build a house, they do not build homes.

Echoing some of the concerns of O'Brien's work, Eoin O Connail's series 'Common Place' is a broader meditation on the meta-transformation of senses of home and place in Ireland through the period of rapid change and development of the last decade. Capturing the replacement of vernacular landmarks and monuments throughout Ireland with iconic edifices of contemporary, global capitalism, O Connail's work is an homage to the banality of uniform architecture and planning which is increasingly a hallmark of a homogenizing European economy. Within his imagery though, the traces of human agency and lived engagement with place points to a potential resilience with humanity – the ability to make anywhere home through adaptation and use.

Picking up on this redemptive possibility in our negotiation of place, Richard Gilligan's series 'Ritual' explores Dublin's suburbs for evidence of the extraordinary found in the everyday, banal and vernacular. Utilising landscapes, portraits and still-lives, Gilligan's meditation on the ritualisation of space ephasises the power of repetitive human action and habitual use to transform alien architectures imposed on communities into known, understood, felt and meaningful places for the making of homes.

Homes are not so much material places as they are places we make through performance, and nothing states this more clearly than the bravely reflexive and fiercely honest series of photographs by Joe Sterling 'Acting Normal'. Documenting the efforts of his three young children to understand and articulate self-

understandings while constantly adapting to two different cultural identities in two different homes, Sterling's photographs highlight the experimentation and performativity children struggle with in the development of lived meaningful relationships to people and places to construct a sense of home.

The show is not merely a meditation on the materiality of housing or the family relationships that make homes. Photographs by Johnny Savage in his 'Strangers' series reveal the unknown or unacknowledged relationships that constitute place and home. Using a method of decontextualised portrait photography, Savage's images record 'strangers' upon which he happened through his own curiosity about those near whom you make your home. By abstracting the subjects from their surroundings using a white backdrop, Savage's 'strangers' become simultaneously more intimate and known but also more ambiguous and universal as documents of the human landscape of strangers and neighbours that constitute communities within which we make our homes.

At this moment of great questioning of our ambitions in Ireland and our future plans for the shared-making of this island as our home, this group exhibition is very timely. Offering powerful statements of problematics but also possibilities for thinking about how we personally and socially constitute places, charge them with meaning and manifest an intimate space that we call 'home', the photographers here provide mature reminders that homes are not merely architectural artifices. They are weaved entanglements of lived relationships that we continually renew and remake not though stone but through presence.

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