The Burren
An Embodied Understanding of a Place

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There are particular moments that can be quite powerful in the way that they can affect us personally, and how we read a place or a landscape. There is a possibility that these can go by unnoticed, even though we may come face to face with them or we may be completely enveloped by them day after day; that is they have become the background, and are not fully understood. In order to bring these to the foreground of our consciousness, we need to experience them in a new way.

Through my thesis study, I have tried to identify what these moments are and why they are important to how we perceive a place. My thoughts and research were initially concerned with the idea of a person having a stronger engagement with their environment, and subsequently developed into thoughts about how by a person can have a more memorable and personal engagement if they have a more sensory experience of a place.

I have sought to challenge the idea that architecture is necessarily a barrier between us and the natural world, and that it could become a mediator between the two. I want to create an architecture which can enhance a person’s experience of a place and heighten their awareness of what is particular about that place.
In ‘Mountains of the Mind’, Robert MacFarlane describes the development of the field of geology in the late 1700s, when people first became interested in how the earth had become shaped and sculpted into mountains, valleys and lakes. Suddenly, “To look at mountains, was also to look into them: to imagine their past.” An increased amount of knowledge had changed people’s way of looking at these masses of rock. No longer were they seen as divine sculptures. People were now looking at the landscape for clues of how it had been before, and what had caused the changes to occur. Geologists understood that “the history of the earth could be inferred from the careful observation of present processes at work on its surfaces.”

To look into something is to gain an understanding of it. In order to look into something, it is not enough to just look with the eyes, we must ‘look’ with all our senses. Therefore, to be able to understand what is around us, we must not only be able to see with our eyes, for if we see only with the eyes we are kept at a distance. As Pallasmaa writes in ‘The Eyes of the Skin’, “The dominance of the eye and suppression of other senses tends to push us into detachment, isolation and exteriority.” It is important then, that we can smell, taste, touch and hear these ‘moments’, for that is the only way in which we can bring them to the fore of our consciousness and for them to remain in our memory.

In ‘In Praise of Shadows’, Tanazaki writes of how a heightened awareness of the senses can make a situation more memorable. As an example he writes about the experience of drinking soup from a Japanese bowl as opposed to a western bowl, which is much lighter in colour and shallower than a Japanese bowl. Because of the depth, the contents of the bowl are not immediately visible, and one must rely on their other senses to understand what is happening the liquid inside the bowl.

“What lies within the darkness one cannot distinguish, but the palm senses the gentle movements of the liquid, vapor rises from within forming droplets on the rim, and the fragrance carried upon the vapor brings a delicate anticipation. What a world of difference there is between this moment and the moment when soup is served Western style, in a pale, shallow bowl. A moment of mystery, it may almost be called, a moment of trance.”

In this case, due to the darkness of both the room and the soup bowl, the author is much more aware of his sense of touch than if his vision had been the predominant sense. As Pallasmaa states “Deep shadows and darkness are essential, because they dim the sharpness of vision, make depth and distance ambiguous, and invite unconscious peripheral vision and tactile fantasy.” Pallasmaa contends that for something to be truly memorable, we need to experience it with more than one sense. “To at least some extent every place can be remembered, partly because it is unique, but partly because it has affected our bodies and generated enough associations to hold it in our personal worlds.” It is what Bachelard referred to as the ‘polyphony of our senses’.

Juhani Pallasmaa argues that we cannot trust vision alone, that “vision needs the help of touch”, that “Sight detached from touch could not have any idea of distance, outness or profundity, nor consequently of space or body”. This is something that Andy Goldsworthy talks about in his work. He believes that “spectators react to a sculpture with the whole body.” An understanding of
the material he is working with is very important to him. “I want an intimate physical involvement with the earth. I must touch. Only touching gives the artist the deep understanding of his material and nature.” He works with natural materials that are found on-site, and constructs works that will change and decay over time. The surroundings are very important to Goldsworthy’s work. “Sculptures are as much about the surrounding in which they are situated as the sculptures themselves.”

As an experiment to illustrate the importance of touch in understanding the materiality of an object, I made two cubes of identical dimension. One was a block of solid cedar (Fig. 1), the other was a plaster cast that was cast in cedar formwork (Fig. 2). Whilst the plaster cast took on some of the visual characteristics of the timber, when the two cubes were held in the hand it one could tell more about them because of the difference in weight, temperature, and texture.

The work of James Turrell is interesting in that he wants to heighten a person’s experience of a place using a piece of sculpture. “My desire is to set up a situation to which I can take you and let you see. It’s not taking from nature as much as placing you in contact with it.” He says that “an experience is not framed, so much as a situation is made in which experience can be created.” In Turrell’s work the ‘experience’ is created primarily by light and vision. “The physical structure is used to accept and contain light, and to define a situation.” He says that “the structure is not the predominant maker of the work. How the light enters the space, and how the structure is formed to allow that, creates the work.”

This is where the difference between art and architecture becomes apparent. Turrell is concerned almost solely on how he can create different light conditions so as to change a perception of a space. Whereas light is a very important part
of architecture, it alone is not enough to ‘create architecture’. Architecture is to be inhabited, used, lived in, sat upon, slept in. Stein Eiler Rasmussen says that:

“Architecture is a very special functional art; it confines space so we can dwell in it, created the framework around our lives. In other words, the difference between sculpture and architecture is not that the former is concerned with more organic forms, the latter with more abstract. Even the most abstract piece of sculpture, limited to purely geometric shapes, does not become architecture. It lacks a decisive factor: utility.”

Pallasmaa states that “It is this possibility of action that separates architecture from other forms of art.” When Turrell says of his work that “The sites I like to use are the ones that, in general, have no function, spaces that are really only inhabited by the consciousness”, he is confirming that it is art as opposed to architecture.

It is the tendency of modern architecture to become overly visual that Juhani Pallasmaa is advocating against in ‘The Eyes of the Skin’. He warned that:

“Modern Architectural Theory and critique have had a strong tendency to regard space as an immaterial object delineated by material surfaces, instead of understanding space in terms of dynamic interactions and interrelations.”

Pallasmaa wanted “to challenge the hegemony of vision – the ocularcentrism of our culture.” The inhumanity of contemporary architecture and cities can be understood as the consequence of the negligence of the body and the senses, and an imbalance of our sensory system.” Pallasmaa says that we have become so over powered by imagery in the modern era that our other senses have been neglected. “The cancerous spread of superficial architectural imagery today, devoid of tectonic logic and a sense of materiality and empathy, is clearly part of this process.” He is of the opinion that architecture should be experienced with all the senses. He quotes Merleau-Ponty when talking of the importance of the senses.

“My perception is therefore not a sum of visual, tactile, and audible givens: I perceive in a total way with my whole being. I grasp a unique structure of the thing, a unique way of being which speaks to all my senses at once.”

Peter Zumthor describes the importance of sound in defining the atmosphere of a space. In ‘Atmospheres’ he talks of how a slight difference in the application of the same material can have an effect on the feeling of a space. Even though the room may look the same, the subtle change in the way a material is used can change the sound of a space.

“Take a wonderful spruce floor like the top of a violin and lay it across wood. Or again; stick it to a concrete slab. Do you notice the difference in sound? Of course. But unfortunately many people are not aware of the sound a room makes.”

In addition to the sounds created by the occupation of a space, Zumthor also wants us to be aware of the sounds of the buildings themselves.

“Imagine extracting all foreign sound from a building, and if we try to imagine what that would be like; with nothing left, nothing there to touch anything else. The question arises; does the building still have a sound?”

The composer Alvin Lucier was also interested in the sounds of different spaces, in particular the resonant frequency of a room, as this would be different for each room. In the piece of work entitled “I am sitting in a room”, he made a recording of himself reading a piece of text, and then played back the
recording and re-recorded it. He repeated this process until the sound of his voice was indiscernable and all that was audible was the resonance of his voice within the room.

It is not only within the discourse of art and architecture that an awareness of the senses can influence someone’s experience of something. In ‘The Wild Places’, MacFarlane’s descriptions of the places he visits are vivid and real in the detail that he gives.

“The rocks of the Cauldron’s side changes colour frequently, depending upon the weather’s accent. It can be grey in cloud, toffee coloured at noon, liverish at evenings, and metallic in sunshine.”

He shows an awareness of what is around him, and how it might change depending on the weather or time of day. His writing is not a description of a static object, more a description of his experience of a place. It is not limited to visual descriptions, however. He describes how physical things affect his body; quite often these are things that are taken for granted and are not usually articulated, but nonetheless have an immediate impact on our experience of a place.

“Nearing the cliffs, I moved through different ribbons and bands of temperature, warm, then suddenly cold again. A large lustrous wave surged me between two big rocks, and as I put a hand out to stop myself from being barged against them, I felt barnacles tear at my fingers.”

MacFarlane not only describes nature, but he also brings it back to how it affects people. It is not a description of the wild, but is a description of people in the wild. “I stood, walked to the start of the Pinnacle’s incline, and laid a hand against its rock. It was so cold that it sucked the warmth from my skin.”

Pallasmaa said that Merleau-Ponty saw an “osmotic relationship between the self and the world – they interpenetrate and mutually define each other”. In “The Wild Places”, Macfarlane writes about a trip in which he spends a few days in the remote uninhabited valley of Coruisk on the Isle of Skye. It is a valley which is surrounded on three sides by mountains and by the Atlantic Ocean on its fourth. The only way to enter the valley, or ‘basin’ as Macfarlane sometimes refers to it as, is by foot, thereby safeguarding its remoteness. The following passage from describes how MacFarlane very quickly became a product of a place.

“To be in the Basin, even briefly, is to be reminded of the narrow limits of human perception, of the provisionality of your assumptions about the world. In such a place, your conventional units of chronology (the century, the life-span, the decade, the year, the day, the heartbeat) become all but imperceptible, and your individual gestures and impulses (the lift of a hand, the swimming stroke taken within water, the flash of anger, a turn of speech or thought) acquired an eerie quickness. The larger impulses of the human world - its wars, civilisations, eras - seem remote. Time in the Basin moves both too fast and too slowly for you to comprehend, and it has no interest in conforming to any human schedules. The Basin keeps wild time.”

Very quickly his focus of attention shifts from things that are happening in the world to things that are affecting his body directly. By living in close contact with nature Macfarlane becomes aware of its forces and how they are acting upon him. In his writing, it is clear that Macfarlane does not regard nature as an object or a place that is to be looked at, but more as a force or a system that is to be engaged with.
The Burren is a unique rocky landscape on the west coast of Clare that is famous for its geology, ecology and wildlife. Its limestone cliffs are also renowned as one of the best places in the country to practice the sport of rockclimbing. I chose the Burren as a place to examine in order to identify elements that affect our reading of a place.

While studying the Burren, I began to realise that a person’s reading of a place is a product of their activity in that place. That is to say that a geologist or a fisherman would have a different view of the Burren than I would have as a rock climber. It became apparent that some elements hold more importance for some people than they do for others.

I began to make drawings and models to identify the elements of this place that were important to a reading of a place for me as a climber. (Fig. 3 and 4) What was important was not only things on a large scale such the height of the cliff, the views, or the sound of the ocean, which all undoubtedly contribute to the overall atmosphere, but also things on a smaller scale such as the texture of the rock, whether it is rough, smooth, or even shiny, the temperature of the rock, the size and depth, and position of cracks relative to yourself. It is a very tactile experience of a place; all other senses fade into the background. Sight is used only to look, but any real investigation or understanding comes from touching. As Rene Descartes said touch is “more certain and less vulnerable to error than vision.”

Climbing results in a close understanding of a place in its present condition and how a person locates themselves in this place. This contrasts with that of a geologist, who might be looking at the same things (type of rock, cracks), but they would be investigating them to gain an understanding of how the landscape developed and of what forces might have been at play over the course of millions of years.

As a result of a having this close connection with a place, a person can recall certain details about a place even after a length of time. For example, the location or shape of a certain hand grip, your body position at a certain point, or even points where the rock is rougher or smoother. The eyes may have forgotten these details, but your body holds on to these memories. This kind of experience of a place leaves one with a visceral knowledge of a place; an intuitive epistemology, rather than a learned one.
I chose to examine Sigurd Lewerentz’s St. Peters Church in Klippan as an example of a piece of architecture that has a strong impact on a person who experiences the space. This is due in part to the choice of materials and the limited amount of daylight which is allowed to enter the church. The church is constructed with banal materials; dark bricks of a standard size and unpainted steel. The same dark brown brick is used for the floor, walls, ceilings and even the altar. The same bond is used throughout, varied slightly only because of Lewerentz’s resolution never to cut a brick, which resulted in the need to vary the mortar joints at times. The result of the minimal use of material and overall clarity of construction is that the fabric of the building does not distract the person, rather it allows that a person’s focus is on the space itself, on the feeling of being inside it, of becoming accustomed to the darkness. As Adam Caruso wrote:

“The severely reduced palette of materials has the same effect as a silent space, and we gain an enhanced awareness of the physical prescence of the church, a prescence onto which we can project meanings. By adopting a phenomenological approach, Lewerentz recognises prayer as an individual, medative activity. St. Peter’s is a church to humanism.” 34

There is very limited natural light entering the church. There are just four small windows to the outside, plus an additional two skylights which illuminate the priest’s path from the sacristy to the altar, which is a recognition of the ceremonious nature of a church service. Much like Tanazaki’s experience of drinking soup from a dark bowl, all is not revealed at once as one’s eyes must adjust to the semi-darkness.

Lewerentz wanted the construction details of the church to be simple yet legible. This is most obvious in the detailing of the windows, where Lewerentz expresses the window openings as mere gaps in the brick wall. From the inside it seems as if there is no pane of glass. Nicola Flora observes:

“The placing of the window panes on the external surface of the walls and the absence of frames surrounding the openings make the view towards the exterior from within immediate, eliminating any obstacle between the built space and the natural world.”35

This different attitude towards an opening is interesting because it reduces the elements needed to create a window to an absolute minimum. There are no lintel details or window frames to distract from the primary function of the opening; that of a source of natural light.

The steel structure which supports the vaulted ceilings is expressed so that it is legible as to how the roof is supported (Fig. 5). Lewerentz wanted that the process of construction was still expressed in the finished building. This honesty and clarity of construction is carried through to the weld beads on the steel which have not been smoothed away, an acknowledgement by Lewerentz of the craft and skill of the welder.

Fig. 5
In tandem with precedent studies and reading, a series of three short primer projects were undertaken in order to develop my thesis idea and point of view. The projects were one to two weeks in length, and were used to test an idea of the thesis with a piece of architecture.

The primer project at Shannon was an attempt to make a connection between the constructed world and the natural. It was an exploration into how the introduction of a constructed element, in this case a cold storage warehouse, could increase a person’s interaction with the surrounding environment. The project situated the warehouse on the edge of the harbour in Shannon Airport (Fig. 7). The building was permeable at points to the tides. In this way, the building changed as the tides changed. The aim of the project was to be a reminder of nature’s cycles and that nature is not “generic, unalterable and fixed order”\(^3\), but rather it is a force that is in constant flux. In this way the building, and consequently the inhabitants, would have a stronger tie to the landscape, becoming aware of how it changed at different times of day at different times of the year.

The aim of the project in UL was to identify what was interesting and engaging about the site in UL, and to try to make a space that would reinforce the importance and value of these aspects by making them a focal point when one would inhabit the space. The site chosen was the riverbank as it has very strong natural characteristics of the river and woodland at its edge.

The project consisted of one main volume that was intersected by two smaller volumes (Fig. 8). The volumes were left open at each end and were positioned in such a way that these openings framed a certain view. This project was important in developing my thinking on how one might identify and engage with certain aspects of a site condition. In retrospect, it was an oversimplification of the problem in thinking that framed views alone could capture the essence of a place without taking into consider sounds, smells etc., particularly having read more on the importance of appealing to all the senses, but I still feel that this distillation of an idea helped to clarify the core before a more complexity could be added.
The site of the project in Berlin, a dis-used airport, was a large flat site that was surrounded by the city on all sides. The intervention was a series of grassy berms which was to interrupt the flatness of the site. It was an attempt to construct a ‘natural’ landscape, to have someone experience nature in a landscape that is almost completely constructed.

Whilst in Berlin I visited the ‘Sanssouci Royal Park’ in Potsdam. A notable feature of the park is the constructed terraced gardens. As you enter the park, a tree lined avenue leads you towards the palace and as you turn a corner, you are faced with a view of the palace sitting on top of constructed terraced gardens (Fig. 9). Although an interesting place, Sanssouci Park is very obviously a constructed landscape. The visit helped me to clarify the focus of my thesis interest and to come to realise that what I wished to do was not to construct a landscape or construct nature, but rather identify with what is already existing and to engage with this in some way.
The most striking image of the Burren or ‘An Boireann’ in Irish, meaning rocky place, is that of bare rocky terraced slopes which rise from the Atlantic Coast on the west and north, and stretch to the boggy lowlands to the south and east.

The image of the Burren as we see it today, however, is not the landscape the first settlers encountered, c. 2000 B.C. This ‘natural’ landscape has changed dramatically over the course of the past 4000 years, thanks largely in part to man’s actions. This karst landscape was once covered with forests of mixed deciduous, pine, and yew woodland. That the Burren is now considered by most to be a natural or ‘wild’ landscape brings to mind Raymond Williams’ definition of natural as “what man has not made, though if he made it long enough ago – a desert or a hedgerow – it will usually be included as ‘natural’.” The change in the landscape was due to overgrazing and deforestation by early farmers. This led to soil erosion, and the karst landscape had become prominent by early Christian times. Today at least 60% of the area is bare rock or rocky pasture.

The exposed limestone that is now prevalent was first laid down c. 340 million years ago. Limestone is a sedimentary rock which was formed in warm shallow oceans where lime-rich debris such as the skeletons of plants and animals gathered and were slowly formed into limestone over the course of hundreds of millions of years. The limestone was not laid down in one continuous layer. Changes in sea level caused the ocean floor to be exposed for periods, causing a break in the formation of the rock before being re-submerged. The bedding layers and terraces which are now so characteristic of the area are representative of these changes of sea-level. The limestone is up to 800m thick in places, and sits on a base of Galway granite, the bedrock that is predominant to the north of the Burren. It is this stable base which has allowed the bedding planes of the limestone to remain horizontal.

Glaciers have had a large impact on shaping this rocky landscape. The massive erosive powers of the glaciers carved out large valleys, but it was also the glacial deposits which laid down a layer of soil in these valleys that had a large impact on the development of the landscape. Commenting on the effect these natural forces had on subsequent human settlement, Tim Robinson wrote:

“Passes are impressed upon the physical landscape by great forces of nature - in this case the glaciers of the Ice Ages. Subsequently, history follows these ways of least resistance and scores them into the cultural landscape of lore and placename.”

Despite having an annual rainfall in excess of 1500mm, the Burren can be characterised by its lack of surface water. The rain does not gather to form streams and rivers in the valleys, rather it soaks through the permeable limestone and forms a complex underground system of caves. The only river in the region is the Caher river, which flows through a valley with deep soil due to glacial settlement.
The upper layers of limestone, having a slightly different composition, have eroded more quickly than the lower layers. This has allowed for a thin layer of soil to develop. This limestone is interbedded with layers of chert, an impervious stone similar to flint. Water cannot pass through chert as it can limestone, and several small springs occur at these bands of chert. These upper slopes are used for grazing cattle in the winter time. The limestone slabs contain a system of eroded cracks called grikes, where acidic rain has eroded lines of weakness in the rock. These cracks, by providing protection from the harsh Atlantic winds and by holding small pockets of soil, are havens for a unique combination of plantlife, with flowers native of Arctic, alpine and Mediterranean regions present. Their existence is aided by the limestone which acts like a heat sink and soaks up heat from the sun during summer, and slowly releases it over the winter. As a result, hard ground frosts are less common.

Although never densely populated, marks of human inhabitation on the landscape are evident (Figure 12). Remains of prehistoric burial tombs from the Neolithic and Bronze Ages remain, as do many ringforts or cahers from medieval times. More recent are the network of dry stone wall which traverse the slopes of the region. The main mode of survival was traditional farming, mostly cattle and sheep and these stone field enclosures are testament to that.

The population of the Burren diminished greatly since the famine, and although still populated, the current state of the Burren uplands is summarised TJ Westropp, an archaeologist from the early 1900s:

“Burren is never named as very populous, and one may now walk for several miles across the crags and meet at most some solitary herdsman, but we find a caher in every few fields, or several very massive ones lying together.”\(^43\)

Fig. 12
Agriculture has been the main activity in the region since it was first settled around four thousand years ago, but recently it has gained a reputation as an area for tourism. The extraordinary scenery and unique landscape have attracted a large number of visitors to the area. These include people who are drawn to the scenery, but also those who come here for specific activities. The area is popular with hillwalkers, cyclists, fishermen, rock climbers, cavers and surfers amongst others. It also attracts interest from geologists and botanists.

Unfortunately, the infrastructure of the region has yet to react to the new pressures being exerted by these activities. The roads in the area are unsuitably narrow, and have not been designed for the large volumes of traffic which they now carry. Areas for cars or buses to stop so that people can enjoy the view are quite limited. Accommodation in the area is limited to guest houses and hostels in the villages in the area. These shortcomings in infrastructure have led to damage to the landscape, as people park, walk and camp in sensitive areas of the region. For the most part, the damage that is done is not malicious, and could be avoided if a proper infrastructure was in place to support these activities.

The program for my intervention is a reaction to this lack of infrastructure. It is located in Fanore, a small village on the coast between Doolin and Ballyvaughan. The hills rise up quite steeply behind the village, with the result that the village has stretched along the narrow stretch of farmable land along the coast.

The beach at Fanore is one of only two sandy beaches in the region and it attracts a large amount of people, particularly in the summer months. The intervention stretches from the roadway, at a point where there is an existing school, across the land towards the beach. I chose to locate my project here because I felt a number of issues could be addressed, from the roadside condition, where a parking and sheltered viewing area is provided, to the necessity of providing better facilities closer to the beach.

I felt it was important that it is not seen solely as a piece of infrastructure for tourists, but that it would have a link and hold some value for the local people also. For this reason it stretches across the road to the school, where a sheltered drop off and waiting area is provided. By integrating the scheme with the existing school I hope to create a stronger tie between the school and the surrounding landscape.
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Endnotes

2. MacFarlane, Mountains of the Mind, 33.
5. Pallasmaa, Eyes of the Skin, 46.
6. Pallasmaa, Eyes of the Skin, 41.
7. Gaston Bachelard, as quoted by Pallasmaa, Eyes of the Skin, 41.
8. Pallasmaa, Eyes of the Skin, 42.
9. Pallasmaa, Eyes of the Skin, 42.
15. Turrell, Occluded Front, 15.
18. Pallasmaa, Eyes of the Skin, 126.
20. Pallasmaa, Eyes of the Skin, 15.
21. Pallasmaa, Eyes of the Skin, 16.
22. Pallasmaa, Eyes of the Skin, 17.
23. Pallasmaa, Eyes of the Skin, 17.
29. MacFarlane, The Wild Places, 14
30. MacFarlane, The Wild Places, 38
33. Pallasmaa, Eyes of the Skin, 54
37. Coates, Nature:Western Attitudes, 16.
40. Feehan, Book of the Burren, 16.
41. Tim Robinson, Setting Foot on the Shores of Connemara and Other

42. Aalen, Atlas of the Irish Rural Landscape, 290.
43. Thomas J. Westropp, Archaeology of the Burren: prehistoric forts and dolmens in North Clare (Ennis: Clasp Press, 1999), 36.


