MAR ATÁ / THE EXISTING CONDITION
NÁDUR MAR CHOMHĪTEĀCΣ / NATURE AS CONTEXT

Piaras Ó Bolgadhrí
The reality of climate change, today, has conferred an unprecedented importance upon nature, weather and the atmosphere. Climate change is very real, perhaps not as apocalyptic as some have predicted, but nonetheless major changes are in progress. Nature has acquired a new fragility; hence architecture demands a new sensitivity. Our understanding of context is changing to include and participate in nature. How might architecture meet this existing situation? The argument for context, for redefining the architectural object as a constituent of a milieu, means rethinking the building’s engagement with its material and spatial surroundings, whether built or unbuilt. Buildings are always built somewhere. In the best cases, an architectural intervention has a critical relationship with its situation, and its construction is somehow communicative with the existing physical and social context.

The thesis project is based in Connemara, in the west of Ireland. An Iorras Aithneach (stormy peninsula), specifically the coastline from Cill Chiaráin (Kilkerrin/St. Ciarán’s church) in the East to Carna (Carna/ Cairns or heaps) in the West, becomes the focus of the project. The coastline is broken up by sea inlets and many offshore islands. The sheer complexity, the high fractal dimensionality, of the coastline provides habitat for huge tonnages of seaweed to occur naturally. Past generations of Connemara people used to gather seaweed to fertilize their potato crops, and to burn for kelp, which was the principal source of income for almost two-and-a-half centuries from the 1700s on. Each household of the coastal villages had seaweed rights on a certain stretch of shore, and harvested several tons of seaweed off it every year. Every little cranny of the shore was intimately known, by touch, to the families who worked it.

The existing seaweed infrastructure, Arramara Teoranta (located at Céibh Cill Chiaráin) and NUI Galway Ryan Institute’s Marine Research Laboratory (located at Céibh an Chrompáin, Carna), suggests an opportunity to test the potential of seaweed farming, which might become an important local industry. What architectural principles could find value in such a context? Beyond the obvious impact of legibility, a level of simplicity is crucial, combined with a new, in depth, sensitivity in architecture. Perhaps nothing may truly be regarded as simple in itself, but, rather, must achieve simplicity as a perfectly realised part of a whole. The construction strives for a more subliminal, even primitive communication. Most immediately evident may be a concern for the grounding of the construction in its circumstance. The changeability and irregularity of the existing topography is registered and respected. The impact on the ground is minimal. The project provides an opportunity to demonstrate how architecture might meet nature’s fragility. A desire to ‘register’ the project in its context – to make spaces that in some way express the environment and respond to it – becomes important.
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THE EXISTING CONDITION
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In today’s environment of excess, a globalised world of big science, new technology, big business, and the endless flow of workers and tourists, the more artistic ambitions of past architectural tradition seem more important. The reality of climate change, today, has conferred an unprecedented importance upon nature, weather and the atmosphere. Climate change is very real, perhaps not as apocalyptic as some have predicted, but nonetheless major changes are in progress. Nature has acquired a new fragility; hence architecture demands a new sensitivity. Our understanding of context (both physical and social) is changing to include and participate in nature. How might architecture meet this existing situation? How might architecture transform, enhance, improve, reconfigure existing conditions, without the need to simply wipe the slate clear? In his essay The Biosphere of the New, Adam Caruso discusses the relevance of architecture. Caruso suggests that there is no compelling evidence as to why architecture should reject more than 400 years of working within a liberal arts context. The suggestion is that, more than ever, it is architecture’s cultural history that lends it continued relevance. Caruso rightly acknowledges that, in the best cases, an architectural intervention has a critical relationship with its situation, and its construction is somehow communicative with the existing physical and social context.

Recognition of nature’s fragility, and the reality of climate change, brings a sense of guilt. We know that we have made appalling mistakes and now acknowledge that the whirr of our finite earthly nature were amplified by technology. In The Vanishing Face of Gaia: A Final Warning, James Lovelock, the independent scientist, says that “like a drunkard driving a tank we have accidentally trashed our world.” Today, the increasing abundance and destructiveness of humans threatens to do more permanent damage to Earth’s network of life than any past geological event. Guilt seems inappropriate; we seek restitution and the restoration of our lost world, not punishment. Solutions may still be available through the application of basic ecological principles. This is essential for interpreting the patterns and processes of nature, and understanding how architecture might meet the existing condition.

Ecology/Nature

The Oxford English Dictionary defines ecology as “the branch of biology that deals with the relations of organisms to one another and to their physical surroundings.” Eugene P. Odum, the American scientist, has called ecology “an integrative science,” in that it attempts to link knowledge of the physical world with the study of life, with the goal of understanding the full interrelationships of ecosystems and the whole biosphere. Today, we all use the word biosphere rarely recognising that it was Edward Weiss who in 1875 first used the term, in passing, when describing his work on the geological structure of the Alps. Vladimir I. Vernadsky, the Russian mineralogist and biogeologist, developed the concept. Vernadsky said: “The biosphere is distinguished as the domain of life, but also, and more fundamentally, as a region where changes due to radiation can occur.”

It is the Earth’s living organisms that transform the radiant energy of the sun into the active chemical energy of the biosphere. No single organism is the critical one upon which our existence hinges. Each species in our environment, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant, is part of the overall supporting structure that carries us through time. Basically man cannot be separated from the biosphere. In fact, no living organism exists on Earth in a state of freedom; all organisms are connected indissolubly and uninterruptedly. Outside it they cannot exist. This is important because, often, we picture Earth as “the stage upon which man’s activities take place,” without reflecting that the stage itself is alive. Man is just another species, and our future depends much more upon our relationship with nature and Earth than with the never-ending drama of human interest.

However, it is important to acknowledge that as a result of the evolution of the central nervous system and brain, man has gradually become the most powerful organism, as far as the ability to modify the operation of ecosystems is concerned. So important is man’s role as “a mighty geological agent” that Vernadsky has suggested that we think of the biosphere, or the world dominated by the mind of man. The biosphere, Vernadsky says, is a new geological phenomenon on our planet; the new state of the biosphere. This, without doubt, is dangerous philosophy. As Eugene P. Odum rightly acknowledges, it is based on the assumption that mankind is now wise enough to understand the results of all his actions. It seems obvious that we have yet much to learn before we can safely take over the management of everything! To live well and to live up to our responsibilities as the most powerful and intelligent organism, we must respect and maintain the other organisms upon which we depend. Increasing our awareness and familiarity with the intricate world of nature will ensure that we place higher values on our natural heritage and defend it against the forces that would destroy it.

Gaia

In his book The Ages of Gaia: A Biography of our Living Earth, James Lovelock discusses his Gaia Theory, the concept of the Earth as a planet able to regulate its climate and chemistry so as to stay comfortable for its inhabitants. The idea that the Earth is alive, in a limited sense, is probably as old as humankind. But the first public expression of it as a fact of science was by a Scotish scientist, James Hutton. In 1785 he said, at a meeting of the Royal Society of Edinburgh, that the Earth was like an animal and that its proper study should be by physiology. Lovelock’s concept, that the Earth is actually self-regulating as a consequence of the organisms upon its surface, had its origins in the search for life on Mars. In 1961, Lovelock received an invitation from NASA to be an experimenter on its first lunar instrument mission. Space is only a hundred miles away and is now a common place. Today, space, the final frontier, is so common it’s made in a Hollywood basement. However, in 1961, only four years after the Soviet Union launched the first artificial satellite, Sputnik, space was a world of
fantasy. Fairy tale dreams appeared possible, as man strove to emerge beyond the boundaries of his planet into cosmic space.

Lovelock felt intuitively that life could not exist on a planet sparsely; it could not hang on in a few oases, except at the beginning or at the end of its tenure. As Gaia Theory developed, this intuition grew; now it is viewed as fact.²¹ We now understand that our planet differs greatly from its two dead neighbours, Mars and Venus. Gaia, Lovelock says, is best thought of as a superorganism. These are bounded systems made up partly from living organisms and partly from nonliving structural material.²² Importantly, in Gaia, Lovelock acknowledges that we are just another species, neither the owners nor the stewards of this planet. Our future depends upon a right relationship with Gaia. The concept of Gaia, Lovelock states, is entirely linked with the concept of life.²³

The idea of life, the sense of being alive, is the most familiar and the most difficult to understand of the concepts we meet. We all know intuitively what life is. However, life as an object of scientific inquiry, requiring precise definition is, as Lovelock recognises, much more difficult.²⁴ It took the view of Earth from space to let us sense a planet on which living things, the air, the oceans, and the rocks all combine in one as Gaia.

So what, really, is Gaia? If the world we inhabit is self-regulating, and if the climate and the environment we enjoy and freely exploit is a consequence of an automatic, but not purposeful, goal-seeking system, then Gaia is, according to Lovelock, the largest manifestation of life.²⁵ How, though, should we live in harmony with Gaia? Does Gaia Theory prescribe a way of life? In The Ages of Gaia, Lovelock admits that after years of writing and thinking about Gaia, “it seems there is no prescription for living with Gaia, only consequences.”²⁶ This seems an inappropriate, and, indeed, a slightly disappointing conclusion. We now recognise that man has influenced the living world longer and more generally than had been supposed. In his book, Principles of Human Geography, Paul Vidal de la Blache discusses how man has been established since time immemorial in widely diverse parts of the globe, equipped with fire and fashioning tools; and however rudimentary his industries, the modifications that the face of the Earth has undergone because of them cannot be ignored.²⁷ In other words, since the beginning of history, humanity has modified and scarred the environment, sometimes by greed and destructive fury, but more often in order to survive, to stay alive.²⁸ As Tim Robinson remarks in Conomareas: Listening to the Wind, our powers of creative destruction and destructive creativity, as to our effects on the ground we stand on, are enmeshed inextricably.²⁹ The idea of landscape is essential, here, for interpreting man’s role in the world of nature.
standing of how we might link landscape and nature. Térides Tropiques records Levi-Strauss's search for a human society reduced to its most basic expression. From the Amazon basin through the dense upland jungles of Brazil, he found the basic human societies he was seeking among the most primitive tribes - chiefly the Pataxo, Bororo, Nambikwara, and Tupi-Kawahibs. "Every landscape appears first of all as a vast chaos," Levi-Strauss explains, which leaves one free to choose the meaning one wants to give it. But, over and above agricultural considerations, geographical irregularities and the various accidents of history and prehistory, the most majestic meaning of all is surely that which precedes, commands and, to a large extent, explains the others.24

The word landscape is not easily defined. In his essay, Landscape and Linearity: Two Archetypes of Landscape, John R. Stilgoe discusses the origins of the word. As far back as can be traced the word meant a defined space, one with boundaries, though not necessarily one with fences or walls, and always implied a space defined by people. In the 16th century landscape defined a compact territory comprehensively modified by permanent inhabitants, a self-sufficient, fully realised construct of fields, paths, and clustered structures.25 Landscape entered the English language as landskip, used in reference to pictures imported from Holland by 17th-century English merchants and sea captains.26 It soon defined any natural or rural view.


Oliver, introduction to Brinckerhoff Jackson, Discovering the Vernacular Landscape (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1984), p. 84. 26

The Oxford English Dictionary defines bricolage as: "construction or creation from a diverse range of available things, or something created in this way."37 Therefore, the bricolage universe of instruments is closed and the rules of his game are always to make do with 'whatsoever is at hand,' a set of tools and materials which is always finite and is also heterogeneous.38 The first practical step is retrospective. The bricolage turns back to the already existing set made up of tools and materials, to consider or reconsider what it contains and, finally and above all, to engage in a sort of dialogue with it.40 According to Lévi-Strauss, this marks a definite distinction between bricolage and engineering, in that the bricolage by inclination or necessity always remains within the constraints imposed by a particular state of civilization while the engineer is always trying to make his way out of and go beyond
them. Therefore, the characteristic feature of *bricolage*, and vernacular architecture, is that it builds up structured sets by using the remains and debris of events (odds and ends) fossilised evidence of the history of a society.41

The vernacular, in its narrow definition, describes conditions that are local (specific rural or small-town dwellings). However, in a globalised society, it is important to envisage an extended definition of the vernacular which acknowledges the stretched, extended and ever changing condition of our existence in this world. In *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape*, John Brinckerhoff Jackson discusses how the commonplace aspects of the American landscape, the streets and houses and fields and places of work, could teach us a great deal not only about American history and American society but about ourselves and how we relate to the world.42 Importantly, Jackson envisages the vernacular as the entire landscape, not as singular buildings arranged on the land. By studying the vernacular (identified with local custom, pragmatic adaptation to circumstances, and unpredictable mobility), Jackson sought to attain a comprehensive definition of landscape and of landscape beauty.43 It is important, here, to understand that landscape, for Jackson, is never simply a natural space, a feature of the natural environment; it is always artificial, always man-made, always subject to sudden or unpredictable change. According to Jackson, landscape is, thus, a space deliberately created to speed up or slow down the process of nature; it represents man taking upon himself the role of time.44

Learning from the existing landscape

Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour’s *Learning from Las Vegas: the Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form*, famously calls for architects to be more receptive to the tastes and values of “common people,” calling for an architecture which gains insight from the commonplace. According to Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour learning from the existing landscape (by questioning how we look at things) is a way of being revolutionary for an architect.45 *Learning from Las Vegas* contains a study of the Las Vegas Strip undertaken as collaboration among three instructors (Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour), nine students of architecture, and two planning and two graphic students in graduate programs at Yale in 1968. The group spent three weeks in the library, four days in Los Angeles, and ten days in Las Vegas. Ten weeks were then spent at Yale, analysing and presenting the discoveries.46

Las Vegas is analysed only as an incident of architectural communication, and the research project placed a particular interest upon finding a graphic means, more suitable than those which had been previously used by architects and planners, to describe “urban sprawl” and the commercial strip. According to Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour, the graphic sign in space has become the architecture of this landscape.47 Apparently, architecture is not enough. In this landscape it has become symbol in space rather than form in space. *Learning from Las Vegas* constituted a manifesto for the shift from substance to sign, acting as a historical marker of the shift between


2 The vernacular dwelling in Conamara/Connemara

The vernacular dwelling, designed by the craftsman, not the architect, and built with the local environment in mind – its climate, its traditions, and its economy. In this case, local materials, such as local granite, thatch and whitewash were used in the construction. Here, tradition is acknowledged as the passing on of technical know-how, and is respected as the standards and values of a society embodied in its built structures.
It seems that, in order to make sense of the stretched, extended and ever changing condition of our existence in this globalised world, architecture must deal with the immediate context of daily life rather than with abstractions and diagrams; the actual materials we touch and smell rather than our perception of phenomena seen at a great distance; the paths and detours we make to get from one storey to the next, one room to the other, the outside to the inside, rather than the hierarchical organisation of corporate power. Architects design buildings, and the majority of buildings exist in cities where things are big. According to Irénée Scallibert, in *The City of Small Things*, architects tried to make their peace with the greater powers of modern cities. Humbled but liberated, they sought, as Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour put it in the context of Las Vegas, to learn rather than to control. However, it seems the city is no longer the main context of architecture. As previously stated, the reality of climate change has conferred an unprecedented importance upon nature, weather and the atmosphere. If our understanding of context (both physical and social) is changing to include and participate in nature, how might architecture meet this existing situation? How might this idea of “adding” be modified, even changed, to meet nature’s fragility?

Opportunity

In his 1964 exhibition *Architecture without Architecture* shown at the Museum of Modern Art, Bernard Rudofsky rightly observed that there is much to learn from architecture before it became an expert’s art. The untutored builders in space and time demonstrate an admirable talent for fitting their buildings into the natural surroundings. Rather than try to “conquer” nature, they welcome vagaries of climate and the challenge of topography. Rudofsky adds that the beauty of this architecture has long been dismissed as accidental, but we should be able to recognise it as the result of rare good sense in the handling of practical problems. In the globalised climate of big science, new technology, big business and the endless flow of workers, it is important that architecture retain an interest in the detail, in the fragment, in smallness. As Simon Schama rightly acknowledges, this interest in smallness is not an invitation to make everything cute or domestic but rather to create an architecture that is vast and infinite. It is a way of imagining space as a concrete, three-dimensional, shared reality.

Recently revived together with other ideas current in the 1950s, the notion of the vernacular is undoubtedly a precarious one in the increasingly globalised world. Vernacular architecture might mean nothing more than the way buildings are put together in a green landscape. In this way architecture cultivates the approach that consists in seeing things as they are. Accordingly, there is no such thing as an uninteresting landscape/site: architecture simply adds to the condition. In this way vernacular architecture provides an opportunity to make our senses more sober, to face our real condition of life and our relations with our kind. The vernacular is not about appearance but about presence. It is a physical artefact which contains within itself the continuously evolving social and technological situation in which it was built. As Adam Caruso rightly acknowledges in *The Feeling of Things*, vernacular constructions are increasingly difficult to define. Globalisation of technology and information has made the local a more complex condition. However, the ad hoc manner in which forms are built up in the vernacular, through agglomeration and adding, the slow and steady way in which technologies are taken up into tradition, these things are still worthy of study.

As Simon Schama observes in *Landscape & Memory*, the point of vernacular architecture and landscape tradition is not to perpetuate tradition in the name of “historical continuity.” It is rather, by revealing the richness, antiquity, and complexity of tradition, to understand what we stand to lose. The strength of the links which bind architecture, culture, landscape and nature together, are often hidden beneath layers of the commonplace. Although architects cannot make vernacular structures, one can attempt to recreate the processes through which the vernacular emerges in each project. In place of invention, rhetoric and signification, one can embrace convention, awkwardness and repetition. To quote Johan Huizinga (the Dutch historian and one of the founders of modern cultural history) as Rudofsky did, “the expectation that every new discovery or refinement of existing means must contain the promise of higher values or greater happiness is an extremely naive thought... it is not in the least paradoxical to say that a culture may founder on real and tangible progress.”

The Human Gardener

As mentioned earlier guilt seems inappropriate when we recognise nature’s fragility, and the reality of climate change. We seek restitution and the restoration of our lost world, not punishment. We cannot alter our natures; we are what we are because natural selection has made us the toughest predator the world has ever seen. All that we can do is to try to temper our strength with decency and care.

In his book, *Gardens: An Essay on the Human Condition*, Robert Pogue Harrison discusses how no one embodies the care-dominated nature of
human beings more than the human gardener. The Oxford English Dictionary defines care as: “the provision of what is necessary for the health, welfare, maintenance, and protection of someone or something.”

Care, Harrison explains, is accustomed to act, to take initiative, to stake its claims, yet powerlessness and even helplessness are as intrinsic to the lived experience of care as the latter’s irressible impulse to act, enable, nurse, and promote. The human gardener is a man who cultivates the soil; he is a year-round cultivator. Even in winter months, when there is little he can do with his hands, he “cultivates the weather.” He is a creature who digs himself into the Earth. He lives buried in the ground.

While nature can be ruthlessly robust and cruel toward the solicitations of human care, its cruelty is in fact only a temporary suspension of its otherwise reliable generosity. In other words, nature by and large tends to fulfill its obligations and promises. This is important because care is constantly being thrown back upon the limitations of its powers of action, is constantly reminded of its own inefficiency and essential passivity when it comes to phenomena like nature, weather, and the atmosphere.

However, this relationship can maintain itself in time only as long as its cultivators overgive of themselves. Karel Čapek in his short book, *The Gardener’s Year*, composed in 1929, says that in gardening, “you must give more to the soil than you take away.”

This first and foremost is a principle of life – life exists where giving exceeds taking. Gardening is a form of education, a plunge into the depths of natural history; to garden is to come to understand the efforts by which life forced a foothold for itself in on Earth. The gardener’s relationship to soil begins with his own private plot, which he cultivates and comes to know in its proprieties, and from there it extends outward to the Earth as a whole. Gardening is, as Harrison says, “an opening of worlds – of worlds within worlds – beginning at one’s feet.” In order to realise soil’s potential for fostering life, the soil needs an external agent, a husbandman, as it were, to undertake the labour of domestication and fertilisation.

In relation to architecture, such thinking suggests a very different type of care and commitment to the building fabric; a different idea of its participation with life and with things in general.

Harrison, in concluding his discussion of the human gardener, says that if humankind has to entrust its future to anyone, it should entrust it to the gardener, or to those who, like the gardener, invest themselves in a future of which they will in part be the authors, though they will not be around to witness its full unfolding. The gardener accepts the intrinsic limitation of his powers of action, and rather than extract, remove, and deplete, he seeks to cultivate, enhance, and foster. He is anxious but passively open before the forces of nature. Gardeners, Čapek says, “live somehow for the future.”

What does this mean for architecture?

Thinking this way – of man as an external agent, a husbandman, as it were, who overgives of himself, tempering his strength with decency and care – how could anyone be a pessimist? Nothing in the universe can be perfect

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69 Bearna idir dhá scioból (gap between two sheds) in *An Aird Mhóir* / Ardmore/The Big Headland

Although architects cannot make vernacular structures one can attempt to recreate the processes through which the vernacular emerges in each project. In the place of invention, rhetoric and signification one can embrace convention, awkwardness and repetition.
and humans are so far from perfection that surely the future is full of promise. We are not, as the puritans would have it, some wretched species deep in sin. We could have a great and proud future; a future in communion with our living planet. However, each of us needs to take some individual action immediately.

In his essay *Traditions*, Adam Caruso boldly states that, in the practice of architecture, never has so much construction been based on so few ideas. Conflated by the state of contemporary architecture and today’s environment of excess, *Caruso St John Architects* have found themselves fascinated, not by the eternal present, nor the eternally new, but in historic processes. Caruso speaks of an interest in old buildings which have been built up over time, monasteries and cities such as Edinburgh where there is a “strong expression of cultural consensus within the built fabric” as he puts it. The architectural project is necessarily located, and inextricably or not, engages with existing patterns of inhabitation. Caruso rightly acknowledges that, in the best cases, an architectural intervention has a critical relationship with its situation and its construction is somehow communicative with the existing physical and social context. In fact, in *The Tyranny of the Now*, Caruso rejects claims for completely new forms in architecture as tautological. He is sceptical as to whether completely new forms can exist; suggesting the imperative to make forms that have no connection to the past and are the harbinger of an enhanced future is anti-critical and conservative. A more radical formal strategy is one that considers and represents the existing and the known. In such a way, Caruso proposes, artistic production can critically engage with an existing situation and contribute to an ongoing and progressive cultural discourse.

Conclusion

Architecture should not aspire to step outside the realm of globalisation and modernity. Like everyone in the industrialised countries, we are part of this economic system, but, as architects, we do not have to identify with this process. Architects can still be localised within it, and offer spaces which allow others to be localised as well. This is important, particularly as our understanding of context is changing to include and participate in the natural. The clamour for green energy seems premature, driven by a flawed ideology, and the greed of manufacturers and developers, who sense easy profits from the subsidies guaranteed by the renewable obligation. The unthinking application of a few green principles alone does not qualify architecture as natural. For example, covering a façade with greenery or planting trees on a flat roof are little more than token gestures. Rather, the fundamental principle, with regard to nature as a context for architecture, might be described as the task of enclosing and roofing spaces with as little material as possible. In other words, a level of simplicity is crucial, combined with a new, in-depth, sensitivity in architecture. Frank Lloyd Wright, in describing his *Prairie Architecture* thus called because it was designed to fit the broad expanses of middle western terrain, said: “To know what to leave out and what to put in, just where and just how – ah, that is to have been educated in knowledge of simplicity.” Necessarily simplicity. To think “in simple,” is to deal in simples, with an eye single to the altogether. Perhaps nothing may truly be regarded as simple in itself, but, rather, must achieve simplicity as a perfectly realised part of a whole. As Wright says, only as a feature or any part becomes a harmonious element in the harmonious whole does it arrive at the estate of simplicity. The argument for context, for redefining the architectural object as a constituent of a milieu, means rethinking the building’s engagement with its material and spatial surroundings, whether built or unbuilt. Buildings are always built somewhere. Thinking of Harrison’s Garden: *An Essay on the Human Condition*, and indeed Čapek’s *The Gardener’s Year*, it is interesting to acknowledge that one does not simply “add” a plant to the soil – one seeds it, plants it, waters it, etc. In relation to architecture, this suggests a very different kind of care and commitment to the building fabric, a different idea of its participation with life and with things in general. While we may be able to “add” a bulldog, like one “adds” a brush stroke to a painting, nature seems to demand something that is more in depth. Like the gardener we must continue to believe that the best is in front of us, for without such faith there would be no future, for better or worse. Nature, as Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote in his 1856 essay *Nature*, is, or should be, the circumstance which dwarfs every other circumstance, and judges like a god all men that come to her.

16 – 17
ROS AN MHL/RÓSAWÉEL/
THE PROMONTORY OF THE WHALE OR SEA
MONSTER

CONNEMARA MAP
ROS AN MHL MAP
DRAWINGS
PHOTOGRAPHS
MODEL PHOTOGRAPHS
Ros an Mhíl was the first opportunity, in Connemara, to explore in an architectural proposal certain ideas and attitudes that were being developed in the thesis writing. Foremost amongst these was the desire to create a project that had a critical relationship with its situation, and somehow acknowledged how our understanding of context is changing to include and participate in nature.

Ros an Mhíl/Rosaveel/the promontory of the whale or sea-monster is located on the eastern shore of Cuan Chaile, the eastermost of south Connemara’s four great bays. Ros an Mhíl acts as the primary fishing harbour in the west of Ireland. It is also the principal departure point for passengers to Oileán Árann.

However, the fishing industry is waning. As fish stocks have declined, so quotas are reduced. Is there an alternative future for Ros an Mhíl in connection with the oil importation and storage facilities presently located in Galway, or in servicing new energy industries? Is there an opportunity for an architectural proposal to meet this existing situation?

Will Ros an Mhíl realise in the future that Oileán Árann are no longer open to exploitation? What will replace the profitable private business of piping as many day-trippers into Oileán Árann as they can hold? Or could the whole harbour someday find that its time is up?
Ros an Mhíl harbour and its relationship to Oileáin Árann. The harbour is located on the eastern shore of Cuan Chasla, the easternmost of south Connemara's four great bays. The harbour is tucked into the inmost corner of a small inlet and sheltered by an islet. The contrast between the machinery of mass tourism deployed at Ros an Mhíl and the fragile nature of Oileáin Árann is remarkable. Will Ros an Mhíl realise in the future that Oileáin Árann are no longer open to exploitation? What will replace the profitable private business of piping as many day-trippers into Oileáin Árann as they can hold? Is there an alternative future for Ros an Mhíl?

Scale: 1:200000
Ros an Mhíl harbour, An tSeancháibh, a relic of the day’s when the port’s principal business was shipping turf to Oileáin Árann and Galway City, fell behind the times and was superseded. Over the past few years €15 million has been spent on a brand-new harbour to the east of An tSeancháibh to facilitate Island Ferries’ five big vessels in handling some 300,000 passenger journeys a year.

Scale 1:20000
The fishing industry is waning. As fish stocks have declined, so quotas are reduced. Is there an alternative future for Ros an Mhíl in connection with the oil importation and storage facilities presently located in Galway, or in servicing new energy industries?

Ros an Mhíl and Galway City are the two main harbours in County Galway. Ros an Mhíl acts as the primary fishing harbour in the west of Ireland. It is also the principal departure point for passengers to Oileáin Árann.

Ros an Mhíl / Rossaveel / the promontory of the whale or sea-monster. The harbour is located on the eastern shore of Cuan Chasla, the easternmost of south Connemara's four great bays.

The fishing industry is testimony. As fish stocks have declined, so quotas are reduced. Is there an alternative future for Ros an Mhíl in connection with the oil importation and storage facilities presently located in Galway, or in servicing new energy industries?

Island Ferries' five vessels handle some 500,000 passenger journeys a year. Will Ros an Mhíl realise in the future that Oileáin Árann are no longer open to exploitation. What will replace the profitable private business of piping as many day-trippers into Oileáin Árann as they can hold?
Ros an Mhíl harbour, tucked into the innermost corner of a small bay and sheltered by an islet, on the eastern shore of Cuan Chasla.

In the early 1820s Alexander Nimmo swept through Ros an Mhíl, leaving plans for a pier, An tSeanchéibh. An tSeanchéibh, a relic of the day's when the port's principal business was shipping turf to Oileáin Árann and Galway City, fell behind the times.

In 1989 a development project, costing £6 million, was completed. Over the past few years €15 million has been spent on a brand-new harbour to the east of An tSeanchéibh to facilitate Island Ferries' five big vessels in handling some 300,000 passenger journeys a year. There are also plans for a small-craft harbour to be built on reclaimed land in the middle of the bay, while a deep-water harbour for even-bigger fishing vessels is under discussion. What might the next addition be? How might a new architectural intervention meet the existing conditions?

Sketches exploring how an architectural intervention might add to the existing condition at Ros an Mhíl harbour.
Sketches exploring the potential of a timber trellis structure which might extend into the water at Ros an Mhíl. A layering of structure allows for a layering of activity. Similar to the way in which large stones are “planted” on the shore to increase the yield of seaweed, a timber trellis grid is “planted” in the water, becoming a seaweed farm. On the land the seaweed is dried and processed.

1) Section A – Ros an Mhíl
The alteration to the nature of the Ros an Mhíl coastline is extensive. Is there another way which is less disruptive to the nature of the place?

2) Section B – Ros an Mhíl
Another typical section through the harbour edge at Ros an Mhíl. Again, the alteration to the nature of the coastline is extensive.
Laminaria digitata, known locally as an choirleach or duilleacha; dark brown in color; grows up to 2 m in length. The laminate blade splits into finger-like segments.
ROS AN MHÍL / ROSAVEEL /
THE PROMONTORY OF THE WHALE OR SEA MONSTER

PHOTOGRAPHS
ROS AN MHÍL/ROSAWEEL/
THE PROMONTORY OF THE WHALE OR SEA
MONSTER

PHOTOGRAPHS
ROS AN MHI/ROSAWEL/
THE PROMONTORY OF THE WHALE OR SEA MONSTER

MODEL PHOTOGRAPHS
ROS AN MHTIL/ROSAEEL/
THE PROMONTORY OF THE WHALE OR SEA MONSTER
MODEL PHOTOGRAPHS
Ros an Mhíl harbour is located on the eastern shore of Cuan Chasla, the eastermost of south Connemara's four great bays. The harbour is nestled into the innermost corner of a small bay and sheltered by an islet.

Exploring potential timber joints/connections within the timber trellis structure.
Study models exploring the potential of a timber trellis structure which might extend into the water at Ros an Mhíl. A layering of structure allows for a layering of activity. Similar to the way in which large stones are "planted" on the shore to increase the yield of seaweed, a timber trellis grid is "planted" in the water, becoming a seaweed farm. On the land the seaweed is dried and processed.
Exploring the potential of a timber trellis structure which might extend into the water at Ros an Mhíl

Exploring potential timber joints/connections within the timber trellis structure
1. Exploring potential timber joints/connections
2. Study model exploring the window detail in a ruined vernacular dwelling
3. Exploring the extent to which the natural condition of the coastline has been altered at Ros an Mhíl harbour
AN ÁIRD MHÓIR / ARDMORE / THE BIG HEADLAND

DRAWINGS

PHOTOGRAPHS
The Shed Elective offered an enquiry into the nature of the shed, with a focus on use, placement, climate, structure and fabric. The aim of the elective was to examine the well known but elusive shed, overlooked from the wilderness to the backyard. The shed inhabits the margins and edges of everywhere, either self-made or mass assembled.

The shed is located on my grandfather's farm in An Aird Mhóir, in Conne-mara. The shed was built by my grandfather, with the help of a number of my uncles. The shed is constructed of hollow concrete blocks, with a rendered exterior and exposed blockwork interior. The shed sits on a concrete slab, which simply levels off a rock outcrop which exists on the site. The roof is mono-pitch, sloping from front to back. Timber joists, placed at 440mm centres, span along the short dimension, supporting a corrugated galvanised metal sheeting. A clear corrugated sheet is included to allow for some natural light in the shed. The roof drains to the back, where a PVC gutter runs, although no downpipe is provided. The shed was originally used to store animal feed. Today, it stores tools and some farm equipment.

The turf shed was added later. This shed is used to store turf, and is left open to allow for air-flow and drying. The turf shed is constructed of cast-in situ concrete, with a boardmarked finish. No steel reinforcement was included. Again, this shed sits on a concrete slab, which levels off a rock outcrop which exists on the site. A loose stone gravel is spread over the ground surface. Timber joists span along the short dimension, supporting a corrugated galvanised metal sheeting. An old telephone pole was also salvaged, and is used in the roof structure. A gap is maintained between the two sheds, allowing access to the garden behind the shed, which was planted with spruce trees at the time the house was built, to provide protection from the prevailing south-westerly wind.

An Sciobol was the next addition. The shed is constructed of concrete blockwork on the flat. Timber joists span along the short dimension. The roof is apexed, and is covered in corrugated metal sheeting. PVC gutters are provided. A number of clear corrugated sheets are included to allow for some natural light in the upper floor of the shed. A chicken and duck pen attaches itself to An Sciobol. The roof is mono-pitch, covered with corrugated metal sheeting. The outdoor pen was recently replaced. It is constructed of timber posts and joists, covered in wire mesh.

A chalet provides extra space for the original bungalow. The interior layout is simple—a bedroom with an adjoining bathroom. The chalet is constructed of concrete blocks, with timber joists spanning in the short direction. The roof covering is, once again, corrugated metal sheeting.

A simple corrugated aluminium shed is the latest addition. The shed provides extra storage—for tools, bikes, and gardening equipment. This shed was built by a local shed building company.
An Áird Mhóir – Site Plan

All shed buildings located on the farm in An Áird Mhóir are shown. Also, a proposal for a new shed, a greenhouse, is evident. The greenhouse should not be understood in isolation. Rather, it should add to the existing condition, becoming the next relevant step.
Section A – An Áird Mhóir Existing Shed Buildings

Section B – An Áird Mhóir Existing Shed Buildings with Greenhouse Proposal
An Áird Mhóir – Section/Elevation Detail
The shed is constructed of hollow concrete blocks, with a rendered exterior and exposed blockwork interior. The shed sits on a concrete slab which simply levels off a rock outcrop which exists on the site. The roof is mono-pitch, sloping from front to back. Timber joists, placed at 440mm centres, span along the short dimension, supporting the new corrugated galvanised metal sheeting.

Galvanised corrugated metal sheet
Timber roof joists (100mm x 48mm in cross section), placed at 440mm centres
Concrete block on flat. Added to give extra height to shed during recent repair to roof. Plastered on the interior to remain flush with the original hollow concrete blockwork.

EXPOSED CONCRETE BLOCK INTERIOR FINISH

CONCRETE SLAB

CAST IN SITU CONCRETE SLAB

LEVELS OFF A ROCK OUTCROP WHICH EXISTS ON THE SITE

EARTH BACKFILL

HOLLOW CONCRETE BLOCK

(440mm x 215mm x 240mm)

RENDERED EXTERIOR FINISH

PVC GUTTER. NO DOWN PIPE IS PROVIDED
AN ÁIRD MHÓIR / ARDMORE /
THE BIG HEADLAND

PHOTOGRAPHS
Iorras Aithneach (stormy peninsula), specifically the coastline from Cill Chiaráin (Kilkerrin/St. Ciarán’s church) in the East to Carna (Carn/aíros or heaps) in the West, becomes the focus of the project. This type of landscape is often referred to as Cnoc agus Lochán (hill and small lake) terrain. The coastline is broken up by sea inlets and many offshore islands. This peninsula in south Connemara encapsulates the pattern of a populated coastal fringe and empty interior. The area consists of a number of small villages scattered linearly along the R340 road.

The existing seaweed infrastructure, Arramara Teoranta and NUI Galway Ryan Institute’s Marine Research Laboratory, suggests an opportunity to test the potential of seaweed farming. Also, the sheer complexity, the high fractal dimensionality, of the coastline provides habitat for huge tonnages of seaweed to occur naturally. Seaweed farming might become an important local industry, occurring throughout south Connemara.

The site is located at Crompán na bhFiann, Cill Chiaráin. In the 1970s, the land, talamh Chuirrín, was sold to Udarás na Gaeltachta, who planned to build a fish processing factory on the site. Although a road infrastructure was created on the site, the factory was never built. Numerous planning applications have been submitted (for a fish processing factory, an industrial estate, all-weather sports facilities, a playground) but nothing has been built on the site. There is an opportunity for architecture to meet this existing situation.
Alexander Nimmo, in his report to the Parliament Commission in 1827, suggested that the Connemara population had always been concentrated on the coast, a conclusion he deduced from the fact the ancient churches and chapels were all on the shore. Tim Robinson sheds some light on this in his essay *Space, Time and Connemara*, wherein he suggests that Connemara’s radiating peninsulas and many offshore islands must have answered to the misanthropy of the 6th Century, when every hermit wanted a desert to himself. The pattern of a populated coastal fringe and empty interior largely obtains today.

Scale 1:200000
In Iorras Aithneach (stormy peninsula), a loop of road, the R340,串 together a thin, but almost continuous scattering of dwellings, from Daire Iorrais (Derryrush/the wood of the peninsula) in the East to Gabhla (Gowla/forked estuary of the two rivers) in the West. The R340 road was proposed by Alexander Nimmo as a new road and completed, under his superintendence, during the public works of 1822.

Scale 1:200000
The Connemara population has always been concentrated on the coast. A clear engagement with the coastal edge is evident through the distribution of piers/quays/harbours along the coast. The sheer complexity, the high fractal dimensionality, of the coastline means that each pier is different. Each pier reacts uniquely to the intricacy of the coastline. The seabed topography and direction of current is also indicated on the drawing.

Scale: 1:200000
Palmaria palmata – known locally as an chreathnach or an duileasc.
Chondrus crispus – known locally as *ascaraig*
Laminaria digitata – known locally as an Chéileach or Duilleach.
Ascophyllum nodosum – known locally as an fheamainn thuò—
Morphology of *Laminaria digitata*

Life history of *Laminaria digitata*

Development of *Laminaria digitata*

Deployment and development of *Laminaria digitata* on longline systems at sea

Harvest and drying of *Laminaria digitata*

Collage drawing of *Ascophyllum nodosum* – known locally as *an fheamainn bhuí*. In Connemara, *an fheamainn bhuí* is harvested sustainably by hand and transported by road to the Arramara Teoranta drying and milling factory at Céibh Cill Chiaráin

Continuous rope culture seaweed grow-out unit. Not usable with droppers or nets because of the risk of entanglement. Could be used for horizontal deployments of kelp species such as *Laminaria digitata*

Rope culture seaweed grow-out unit, with longlines set up in parallel lines, aligned with tidal current. Suitable for *Palmaria palmata*
Past generations of Connemara people used to gather seaweed to fertilise their potato-crops, and to burn for kelp, which was the principal source of income for almost two-and-a-half centuries from the 1700s on. Each household of the coastal villages had seaweed rights on a certain stretch of shore, and harvested several tons of seaweed off it every year.
Crompán na bhFiann – Detailed Coastline Pencil Study

The sheer complexity, the high fractal dimensionality, of the coastline provides habitat for huge tonnages of seaweed to occur naturally. In the past, every little crenory of the shore was intimately known, by touch, by the families who worked it. Seaweed still so important nowadays.
Iorras Aithneach – Existing Seaweed Infrastructure

1 | NUI Galway Ryan Institute’s Marine Research Laboratory, Céibín an Chomhaidh, Carna

2 | Arramara Teoranta, Céibín Cill Chiaráin

3 | Cúrsaí an Éileana

Iorras Aithneach becomes the focus of the project. The existing seaweed infrastructure, Arramara Teoranta and NUI Galway Ryan Institute’s Marine Research Laboratory, suggest an opportunity to test the potential of seaweed farming. Seaweed farming might become an important local industry occurring throughout south Connemara.
St Ciarán, who later founded the monastery of Clonmacnoise, is said to have passed through on his way to visit St. Enda in Oileáin Árann. The Arramara Teoranta factory, which dries and mills seaweed, is also shown, located at Céibh Cill Chiaráin.
Crompan na bhFiann – Site Plan

The project comprises Seaweed Hatchery, Boatbuilding Workshop/Store, Seaweed Restaurant, Seaweed Drying Racks, and Seaweed Growing Rafts.
Farming/cultivating as opposed to simply gathering seaweed requires a thorough knowledge of seaweeds and perfect manipulation of the seaweed life cycle. Seaweed aquaculture is closely connected to seaweed research. The hatchery is used to supply *Laminaria Digitata* and *Ascophyllum Nodosum* collection. *Palmaria Palmata* and *Chondrus Crispus* seeded nets are also provided.

Workshop spaces are provided for boatbuilding, with associated work benches and tool storage. *An Churach Airbheal* (The Wooden Currach) and *An Churach Canbháis* (The Canvas Currach) are closely associated with seaweed gathering in south Connemara. Exterior work benches are also provided, allowing boatbuilding/repair to take place outdoors.
The Seaweed Restaurant allows for the public to visit and engage with the activities of the seaweed farm. Seating is provided, both indoor and outdoor, where the view of Crompán na bhFiann and the seaweed farm can be enjoyed. The Drying Racks are also visible. Cast-in-situ concrete slabs simply level off rock outcrops which exist on the site.
1 | As churach canbháis being used to gather seaweed
2 | As Churach Adhama being constructed outdoors
3 | Once used to carry turf and seaweed, HÚICÉIRÍ na Gaillimhe have now evolved into racing crafts
4 | A boatbuilder from An Cheathrú Rua inserting ribs in An Churach Canbháis

1 | Section A – Seaweed Hatchery
2 | Section B – Boatbuilding Workshop/Store
3 | Section C – Seaweed Restaurant and Seaweed Drying Rack
Workshop spaces are provided for the building of individual boats. An Churach Adhmaid (The Wooden Currach) and An Churach Canbháis (The Canvas Currach) can be built indoors, while larger boats might be built outdoors. The timber structure of the Boatbuilding Workshop/Store acts as a drying rack, where seaweed from the farm might be dried.
CROMPÁN NA BHIANN/
THE INLET OF THE FIanna
PHOTOGRAphS
CROMPÁN NA BFIANN/
THE INLET OF THE FIANNA

PHOTOGRAPHS
CROMPÁN NA BHFIANN
THE INLET OF THE FIANNA
MODEL PHOTOGRAPHS
Study models of the timber structure of the Seaweed Drying Rack, where seaweed from the farm might be dried.
Full scale study models, focusing on the potential treatment of the timber structure with a creosote tar, a technique used in boatbuilding. By extending the traditions of fine craftsmanship in building, inherent physical qualities are exemplified. A desire to 'register' the project in its context becomes important.
Full-scale study models of timber structures, focusing on the grounding of the structure in its circumstances. The sole function of the foundation is to keep the wood parts clear from the usually damp ground, rather than to tie construction solidly to ground.
Full-scale study models of timber structures, focusing on the grounding of the structure in its circumstance. The changeability and irregularity of the existing topography is registered and inspected. The impact on the ground is minimal.
Past generations of Connemara people used to gather seaweed to fertilise their potato-crops, and to burn for kelp, which was the principal source of income for almost two-and-a-half centuries from the 1700s on. Generations of Connemara men racked their bodies wrenching seaweed off submerged rocks with a *cuisín* (a long timber pole) and rowing boatloads of it to shore. Each household of the coastal villages had seaweed rights on a certain stretch of shore, and harvested several tons of weed off it every year; in fact it is the sheer complexity, the high fractal dimensionality, of the shoreline that provides habitat for the huge tonnages of seaweed on which the inordinate nineteenth-century population of this otherwise unproductive coastal strip could sustain itself in life.

Every little cranny of the shore was intimately known, by touch, to the families who worked it. Today, seaweed isn’t seen to be so important. However, seaweed farming has the potential to reinstate the importance of seaweed, and to become an important local industry in south Connemara.
Seaweed harvester in north Connemara, with a stack of *slata mara* (sea rods)

The Shores of Connemara

Harvesting seaweed on an exposed shore. If the tide was ebbing, men would often walk into the sea to gather loose seaweed

The Shores of Connemara
1. Tying a clinch (seaweed raft) on the shore near Ros an Mhíl
   The Shores of Connemara

2. Towing a clinch near Ros an Mhíl
   The Shores of Connemara
1. Spreading seaweed on potato ridges in south Connemara
   Cladaí Chonamara

2. Burning seaweed in a kelp kiln on the Aran Islands
   The Shores of Connemara
An churach canbháis (the canvas currach) being used to gather seaweed
Cladaí Chonamara

1. Palmaria palmata, known locally as an chreathncah or an duileasc, being harvested on the shore
Cladaí Chonamara
1. Seaweed harvester in south Connemara, with a stack of sea rods

Cladó Cínghire

2. Húicéirí na Gaillimhe (Galway Hookers) with a cargo of seaweed tied up at Galway Harbour

Thi Sios an Chínghire
Kelp stacking in Conn
Alexander Nimmo & The Western District

Chondrus crispus, known locally as an carraigín being harvested on the shore
Galáid Connemara
Bibliography


ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank my family for their enduring support and advice during the completion of this thesis project.

I also wish to thank Prof. Merritt Buchola, Dr. Anna Ryan, and Peter Carroll from the School of Architecture University of Limerick for their guidance, support and contribution to the completion of this thesis project.