Come West Along the Road

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This thesis is an exploration into certain relationships and qualities of Irish culture with its landscape, natural and constructed. Coming from an area culturally rich with traditions of music, language and farming, I intend to pursue the importance of the architecture that that is needed for the future of the space and movement between these traditions in rural areas. As, I will be talking significantly about the movement through various types of spaces, architecturally and musically, the flow and rhythm of this document will attempt to describe cultural understandings from personal experiences as narrative and factual discussions on related works.

The architectural project is formed around the unformalities of Irish traditional music, creating a string of small spaces, reinterpreting the existing 'public house' along this particular coastal condition complimenting the existing infrasturcture.

Note: Included in the text are small pieces of descriptive narratives moving through this particular landscape.

Abstract

"One is not interested in a 'new-vernacular' but in giving a higher priority to the emotional experience of buildings and developing and understanding of how fabrication can hold emotional intent.”

-Adam Caruso, The Feeling of Things
Carefully closing the boot of the old Fiesta, I made sure the case was secure inside, to prevent the fear of any damage being done. Spiralling down the car-park’s painted ramps, I exit, only to find myself crawling out onto congested narrow streets. Alone and patiently waiting to reach the coast road to the west, I become frustrated flicking through radio stations while trying to focus on the road. Traffic begins to disperse, the glare from the evening sun heightens my awareness of the frequent side roads. The street seems to remain as a street, the space between dwellings expand slightly, eventually becoming garden size to field size in places. A footpath switches from side to side, never continuous. Soon I realise I haven’t escaped the city yet, or I’m unsure of whether I have or not. Confusion strikes. A large green sign sprouting from a dry stone wall shouts “Fáilte go Conamara; Welcome to Connemara”. This sign states that I have officially entered this famously beautiful region, but it seems unclear to me yet. A constant rhythm of buildings continues to intensify and diminish at points. The sea also has a constant presence, but the hum of tires and motors mute its continual movement. This wonderfully distracting view across the bay is interrupted by the endless undulating telephone wires above while B&B signs are almost as frequent as the telephone poles themselves. Also dotted along the roadside are traces from the past, traditional ways of saving hay, some dilapidated homes and past industries. The frequency of narrow perpendicular roads occur at an incredible pace between two and maybe six per minute of driving. I arrive outside the public house, the sound of the engine is replaced by a wonderful muffle of traditional sounds. I retrieve my case and as I open the door, the muffled sound become a blast of crisp counterpoint.

Irish infrastructure is currently at an important stage in development, only in the past number of years have major road networks been completed. Considering that the M1 in the U.K. connecting London with the East Midlands at a length of two hundred miles was mostly completed in the sixties¹, Ireland’s motorways connecting its major cities have only been completed in the past three to five years. Accessing motorways is a new phenomenon for rural inhabitants which accounts for 40% of the population². The quality of the rural mesh of roads has a relationship to its new connector. I’ve chosen a specific location where a new single-carriage rural road is planned parallel with an existing road westward from Galway along the South Connemara coast, known as Cois Fharraige. I’ve been studying this area in detail through maps analysing the structures of historic and current settlements, roads, laneways and ground. Long has there been a strong relationship between Irish culture, music and the vernacular road.

From a path to a road to a motorway, traversing any surrounding landscape is an experience that is both individual and shared. John Brinckerhoff Jackson, the founder of Landscape magazine and an avid writer on landscapes shaped by human presence speaks of the true function of the road as having a purpose. That purpose being to bring us to a destination, that destination being a house, or a home. “Without a specific destination, the road hasn’t a reason to exist”³. The road allows a freedom, a sense of the unknown for the traveller to discover and connect communities, however as Jackson points out, the road also allows for intrusion, allowing unwanted outsiders to the home. Unpredictable, the road itself has had a long affiliation with a sense of danger, be it ambushes before or high speed collisions now. The landscape has become overlaid with a vast intricate web of roads that they no longer purely lead to a destination or a place, they are a place⁴. A road becomes the first public space between the homes, allowing for interaction between the users, travellers and local. Or perhaps the opposite, when the road was merely used for the separation of nobles and the lower classes. With the invention of the automobile, the road has become very much a private experience allowing for an individual to move freely through the landscape creating their own path, a long and unpredictable path of life. Jackson talks of the road giving us a new awareness of the landscape. However I feel this awareness can be altered and hidden in regards with the construction of larger road systems. Some tend to tunnel

4. Jackson, Discovering the Vernacular Landscape
through the landscape with a disregard for its surroundings, bound by high walls of trees, precast concrete sections or mounds of earth, motorways lend themselves to a sense of a nowhere place.

As architects, we often talk of circulation within the city, or within a building where it is a dense restricted type of movement where layers of transportation systems simultaneously move masses of people. In a way circulation in rural areas isn’t all that different, it’s a stretched out distorted version of the city street, perhaps more restricted but without the dense built environment. Tim Creswell talks of the entanglement of the three aspects of mobility: “the fact of physical movement getting from one place to another; the representations of movement that give it a shared meaning; and finally the experienced and embodied practice of movement”. Creswell questions how mobility is embodied, if it is an act of freedom or is it a forced. The space a road creates is dependent on the political aspects of the users. The experience of a man and woman, a business man and servant, a tourist or refugee will map differently between two points. Who moves faster, or furthest along the same route? Therefore the space that mobility creates is one that can be quite political, and translates from when roads were built separately for nobles to modern times separated by quality of mode of transport. Speed also implies a rhythm, in what rhythm does a person or thing move? Rhythms are composed of stops, starts and pauses, an interesting point when considering how we move through a particular landscape. Although points of rest and stops along a path are important among a web of infrastructure, they also create a tunnelling effect between them when taking a highway for example, you exit and enter only at major hubs. Long have roads and railways been the primary routes of travelling through a landscape, however when considering mobility, one cannot ignore the expanse of the vertical space of landscapes which airways allow us to experience, breaking boundaries down to mere security checks at airports.

As the capital city, Dublin has always retained its dominant position as a gateway from Britain and Europe into the centrifugal system of roads in Ireland, each branching off to the corners of the island from the early ages of tourism to the current day. In his account ‘A Tour in Ireland in 1775’, Richard Twiss complained that “maps of most of the counties are in general erroneous, and badly executed… merely copies from old maps”. It wasn’t until George Taylor and Andrew Skinner were provided with a grant in 1777 to produce ‘Maps of the Roads of Ireland’ that the roads were surveyed carefully and accurately. As well as roads, the maps would show rivers, lakes, canals, bogs, bridges, hills, flour mills, woods and objects of natural or historic interest, along with the geography of important gentry who provided the authors with most of their subscriptions4. Finola O’Kane talks extensively about the design of the eighteenth century roads in Ireland, in particular the development and improvement of roads by the Anglo-Irish. According to Charles Smith in 1756, the Irish nation lacked a want of improvement or the know-how to develop the prospect of connecting and improving the island. Not only did the new roads improve the connectivity of rural Ireland, they also helped improve the adjacent land. O’Kane talks about the road from Abbeyfeale to Killarney as an example, carrying ‘direct lines over mountains, bogs and morasses’ but also made with ‘ditches either side’ leaving the land ‘considerably drier than before’. Observing the importance of the appearance of the Irish Landscape to tourists in the eighteenth century, O’Kane focuses on the ‘picturesque roadscape’, noting that roads in particular around Killarney were designed to capture specific viewpoints and vistas of the landscape represented through landscape painters. The ‘Maps of the Roads of Ireland’ were created from “the gentleman’s viewpoint”, editing the tourist’s viewpoint, ensuring that the between the estate houses, the land was “apparently empty with people”. Successfully improved, Irish roads became desirable places for landowners and nineteenth-century British tourists, thus improving the architecture of the roadside.

Through O’Kane’s account, we can see that a vast amount of energy was immersed in the promotion of the road to Kerry. This focused the tourist away from the impoverished landscape west of the Shannon which was beginning to see an increasing population at an alarming rate. Small family farms dominated the Western fringe which was spurred on from Ireland’s population increase of 3.5 to 8 million between 1700 and 1845. However, the infrastructure remained undeveloped along this western fringe. The extreme level of deterioration of the roads in Connemara led to the transportation of goods and people by sea rather than by road. According to Alexander Nimmo, a pioneering Scottish engineer who was commissioned to survey in depth he bogs and coastline of western Galway and Mayo found

6. Tim Creswell, Towards a Politics of Mobility, 166
7. Taylor and Skinner, Maps of the Roads of Ireland
8. Taylor and Skinner, Maps of the Roads of Ireland
10. O’Kane, ‘To Lead the Curious to Points of View’, 46
just one road ‘scarcely passible for carriages’ in 1812 Connemara, that being the
coast road westward from Galway city. Feeling that conditions in Connemara justi-
ified considerable expenditure works on infrastructural works, he concentrated on
the neglected coastal roads where little or no roads existed13.

Leaving behind the animated narrow streets, I make my way west along the coast
road, slowly leaving buildings. The sea remains a pleasant distraction as the contin-
ual sound of the tide is interrupted only by the chatter of farmers and the turning
of cart wheels on the stony path. Worn out donkeys are forced onwards dragging
over-flowing loads of turf, the owner hoping to make a few pennies in the town
market. I pass a village or two, a landlord’s house enclosed by a small wood in
each centre. The villages are the only sign of habitat along this coast apart from
the odd dwelling and small wall-clinging outbuilding, sometimes the local smithy.
I decide to change direction, turn my back to the shore and make my way along
a rough stone path bound by shoulder high granite walls, meandering between
fields. The surface of the road consists of smooth shore pebbles. Passing several
hundred stacked granite walls, I arrive at a small cluster of thatched low-roofed
houses. Aside from the stench of rotting seaweed in the garden next to me, four
men finish one of these walls, making the small garden smaller. A strong sense of
kinship is felt. A child leads a bony cow into a cramped out-house, collecting the
pale of frothy milk he left at the door. I am greeted with the gaunt, hard-working
face of his mother, welcoming me inside and offering food. I stay the night, im-
mersing myself in their minute community, listening tentatively to their song and
story under the dark smoke filled room…


Left: A study on the existing state of a ruin of a small Clachán.
Imagine as it may have been, the above narrative partly stitches fragments of what remains of the clusters and stories today. As mentioned earlier, this particular landscape was an impoverished and neglected coastline, however the focus is not on the poverty but on the sense of community and tradition that once belonged to the vernacular settlements. In certain places today, the old clusters remain in ruins sadly ignored by the new smothering fabric. The relationship between new and old is distant, leaving behind the memory of a contiguous community but also emphasising the poor and simple life of its past inhabitants. The relationship between the people of the clachan and the landscape differed greatly from what is experienced now. Positioned where the shallow blanket bogs of Connemara meets the thin granite soils, the village clusters keep a distance with the shoreline and its prevailing Atlantic winds, but also allowing for easy access to turf, seaweed and fish, referred to as a human tidemark by Tim Robinson. The land would have been used economically, smaller farms ensured tidier landscape where land reclamation was ongoing. Today, many inhabitants have little or no connection to the land, except the landscape acts as a picture framed by the pvc window frame. Mac Aodha speaks of how hunger, disease and emigration that led to the abandonment of similar clachans in other parts of the country. While it affected this particular grouping of coastal settlement greatly, some clusters still survived until the nineteen-sixties because of their "unusual strength of their inhabitants respect for tradition".

Despite this rural landscape having become urbanised by the strings of endless houses, the newly built environment lacks a centre, the closest big village or dare I say the city almost becomes the centre for this community, fifteen or so miles away. In this particular case, every secondary road perpendicular to the coastline is considered a village or baile (on average, a string of about twenty houses, no defined centre). These smaller roads are no wider than a car and a half, built for a donkey and cart to haul seaweed from the nearby shore. Families might be twenty houses apart or put another way, one mile, but despite their separation are still considered as close neighbours. This dispersed arrangement of houses lessens the chances of 'neighbours' coming into contact with one another to an occasional vehicular encounter along the narrow road or an encounter by the local school. The communal quality that once belonged in the original 'baile' is now weakened and the boundary between neighbours has been strengthened. The road as a place is a diminishing here and the once slow moving pace of the seaweed lanes has almost vanished.

Something else is diminishing along with this sense of place, that is the relationship between music and its landscape. In his book Sardinian Chronicles, Bernard Lortat-Jacob wonderfully describes his journeys around the Mediterranean island of Sardinia, his encounters with odd characters and his experience of towns and villages through Sardinian music. He speaks first of the journey to the island, emphasising the separation from the mainland as an overnight ferry and the nature of his visit of course to further his learning of the accordion. "Tonara was in the midst of a fête, judging from the large number of cars and the accordion music being piped through loudspeakers." The simple convergence of extra cars gives this place an added atmosphere, yet the town's accordion maestro sat on the temporary stage which faced a still empty space, turning its back on a landscape that disappeared into the afternoon mist. The scaffolding of the little podium made up of intersecting metallic tubes became the centre of the town. Dancers and onlookers soon fill the space with noise and movement.

On the ferry to Sardinia, he talks of a conversation he had with a chicken farmer Cocco whose forte was not music, but nevertheless he understood how musical instruments worked and he knew the traditions of his village. He talks of an instrument he had made in his youth called the serragia, which was made of stretched horsehairs and whose sound box was a pig’s bladder stuck on top of a broomstick. It seems sound is what attracts people, not the music itself. Lortat-Jacob talks of his visit of course to further his learning of the accordion. "Attilio an ‘heir to a great tradition’ explained that nature had put into music things that one had only to ‘draw out’." He notes that Attilio was interested in sound not the music itself. The quality of sound is always an important key to a well-made instrument, however from experience, as two instruments may be made in the exact same way, there will always be a variation to its sonority. Form is important in this instance. Dancers, young dancers leaping around show-
ing of their “youthful vigour” and the older dancers who “elegantly strut along with the most perfect economy of movement” create the dynamic space of this town square. From the foot sole meeting the paving to the pivoting of hips, the circling couple to the twisting cog-like collective of dancers, the form is a continuous dynamic. Behind all this flowing form, or perhaps generating this form is the sole musician, the architect of the expectation to create moments of smoothness and moments of frenzy by using “formulaic cadences and accents.” In Desulo, Lortat-Jacob talks of a certain moment when Pichiaddas, the musician, changes to a waltz, a specifically Sardinian version. He illustrates beautifully the power that a change in time signature can have on the movement of a crowd of people. With all beats marked with an equal intensity, the square has slowed down, bodies are held stiff, looking at each other but never touching. Virtuosity resides in the art of covering a lot of ground. Temporary bars are set up for the occasion along the perimeter of the square, creating noisy rest stops constantly filled with people.

The motor behind all these ‘cogs’ is the musician and the music itself. The dance tunes are communal, benefiting everyone, without really an author. For as soon as they are invented by a musician, they are put into circulation from village square to village square, and new variations become common property. The music here belongs to a collective, a village system. He describes how the accordionists sketch musical phrases assembling them together with variations, creating the music to propel the dances. The musician’s relationship with his instrument is always a delicate matter. Lortat-Jacob refers several times to this relationship, one being of his encounter with Cambiadas, a musician from Oliena: “His hand travelled over the keyboard and every silence was prolonged by an ornamental gesture: his slender fingers sketched the dance, even during its silent moments.”

As Lortat-Jacob moves from village to village, he gives an adept account of his encounters during the 1980s with the accordion masters of each village, giving an in-depth portrayal of the living characters and his experience with them rather than focusing on their institutions. These masters are the drive behind these fêtes that are held around Sardinia, being invited here and there whilst still maintaining their rivalries amongst each other. The sharing of music occurs in a similar way in Irish tradition.

Irland’s landscape is dotted with a string of traditional music festivals every year. Some commemorate musical legends while others are focused on competitions, however there is always a sense of informal musical education. In Sardinia because of its Mediterranean climate and architecture, it seems the fêtes are predominately held in the town squares and are open-air. At these Irish festivals, some concerts are held also externally, however they are weather dependent. The heart of performance spaces are in corners of public houses, hotels and pop-up music shops. Fundamentally, these festivals are a conglomeration of musicians from all corners of the country/world performing, sharing and passing on their style. Traditional music styles have a particular relationship with the landscape from which they come from. However one single musician can only offer a glimpse of that style. According to fiddle virtuoso Martin Hayes, what you have is a collection of musicians who subjectively interpret the shared tradition of the region. In the same way that vernacular architecture can describe its surrounding landscape, the landscape can be heard through its traditional notation. In his article “Music and Place: Connecting the Past to the Future” he speaks of the music from East Clare (his origin) as being gentle, plaintive, intimate and earthy, suggesting that it reflects the “rolling hills, the empty bogland, the many hidden away roadways and quietly tucked away valleys.” This notion of a musical landscape is not unique to Ireland. Bruce Chatwin’s, Songlines describes wonderfully how the a song was both a map and a direction-finder to the Aborigines. Provided you knew the song, you could find your way across the country, so in theory, the whole of Australia could be read as a musical score.

21. Bernard Lortat-Jacob, Sardinian Chronicles
22. Bernard Lortat-Jacob, Sardinian Chronicles
24. Martin Hayes, Music and Place: Connecting the Past to the Future, 15
After arriving into the town, sometimes by train, but mostly by car/van, the influx of people along with their vehicles is overwhelming. A sense of chaos emerges around the outer streets, people scrambling around searching sign posts, looping around the town numerous times in hopes of locating their pre-booked house, a friend’s couch, floor or campsite. Almost every parking space is used up and kept for the duration, unless some decide to venture outside the town limits. Numerous homes that wouldn’t usually be let, transform into B&Bs while housing estates exhume an air of holiday resorts where obliging locals allow for the temporary conversion of their street and welcome the visitors. Gardaí seem to cast a blind eye to double yellow lines disappearing under long lines of parked cars and vans, the majority of the them are people’s beds for the weekend. The roadside becomes abnormally populated, generating a different use of space on a road.

An array of temporary signposts appear along the roadsides guiding visitors to venues and campsites. Outer streets sound the vibrations of the town core, a muffled tone of crowds and music builds up the excitement. Food joints have a constant flow of customers, fast food is consumed all day and into the night. Public houses take some street space and open up food stalls outside their window, taking advantage of the passing large numbers.

Ravelling my way through the constant flow of tourists, musicians and weekenders, I seek out a gathering of people by a shop front. A small semi-circle has formed around a group of young musicians, each deep in concentration of maintain their tight and fluid style of playing. Each facial expression shows different levels of comfort, one is a bit stricken with nerves as video cameras focus on his fingers, another delightfully relaxed, a bit over confident it seems while another seems to be a bit uncomfortable with his choice of seat, a shallow concrete windowsill making it difficult for him to find his balance. While being part of one of many static pockets of the crowd along the street, sounds of young and the old reverberate along the street edge. Circles of crowds form focusing on a certain group, usually a glimpse of some old and young virtuosos performing for the sheer enjoyment.

Right: Mapping the locations of all the All-Ireland Fleadh locations since the first in 1951.
However all is not contained within the main street. Main street facades become more permeable as public house owners open the backyards and access lanes which are not usually public. Traditional bars have incredibly tight spaces, making it difficult to deal with crowds. By setting up a temporary off-the-shelf gazebo type structures in a yard, the public house can manage large crowds, taking full advantage economically. This occurrence has a strong architectural consequence within a small town. Residual empty spaces between and behind buildings facing the street suddenly become fully inhabited and full of life. Not only is it the shelter that these spaces can provide that attract the crowds, but also it gives an opportunity to play music and socialise outside. The density of a small town or village overwhelmingly exceeds its perceived capacity. In 2008, 250,000 people flocked, 20,000 of them musicians to the Fleadh Cheoil in Tullamore, Co Offaly26, a town of about 12,000. This swarm phenomenon during the Fleadh would cause a huge stress on local infrastructures, however, it still moves around form town to town every year and functions.

This musical movement throughout Ireland is a large scale network of gatherings of musicians and listeners, all linked by the small collective performance spaces of traditional music that the nodes contain. These performances are known commonly as sessions. Sessions are known for their informality, and their impromptu nature27. They are less about performance but about a shared experience of the music. The choice of musical pieces that are played are not predetermined and usually are decided there and then, perhaps a musician’s particular favourite tune or a recently learned tune. A piece of music is liable to end on any piece of music, the choice of musical pieces that are played are not predetermined and usually are decided there and then, perhaps a musician’s particular favourite tune or a recently learned tune. A piece of music is liable to end on any piece of music, the music predominately took place in domestic spaces such as the kitchen and sitting-rooms, even smaller, tighter spaces than a public house. In an interview with a famous local musician Festy Conlon from Spiddal in Singing Stone/Whispering Wind, he talks about how music was shared through a small network of private kitchens. A céilí, (a name for a dancing event) was held in houses almost every night during the summertime. He also speaks of how songs and music were never written down, they were all passed down by ear29. Throughout this book, many of the people interviewed talk about their relationship with the sea, bog and the music.

With the threatening promise of this new road in South Connemara, I fear an even further separation between the once tightly-knit coastal communities. This new single carriage roadway is planned to have minimal access points, allowing for a faster, tunnelled experience of the landscape. On the contrary, the urbanising of this rural area will continue and a larger, faster infrastructure might be needed in the future. The sense of music and place might not be as strong as it used to be, however it is still alive.

As a conclusion and proposal, the project will seek to re-interpret the ‘public-house’ and to create a network of musical spaces along this suburbanised coastal road. With the majority of traffic problems sponged up by the new road, it allows for a more desirable walkable condition between these new public houses. I am basing the size and volume of this new type of space around a well-known local space where historically and currently musicians prefer to play in. This space will operate at an emotional level between the locals focusing on the music, not as a performance but as a shared experience. Along with the opening narrative, the following short narrative is of an idea of how this building might feel like while moving through its social context.

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29 Frances Morton, Performing ethnography: Irish traditional music sessions and new methodological spaces, 668
As I move westward once again, my back turned against the city of Galway, I begin to notice a string of similarly constructed, each standing with intent at the junction of the road with every small bóithrin. Many seem to be shut. It’s late evening I suppose. The silhouettes of vernacular gables sit on the horizon. After a twenty minute drive, I notice one of these seemingly ‘closed’ string of buildings open. A small crowd is formed around the folded back entrance. The sound of an energetic session spills outward to the street. I park up and approach the crowd. After managing to catch a glimpse of the musicians, an old friend catches my eye. I acknowledge and join in...


Taylor and Skinner, Maps of the Roads of Ireland, 1776.


Notes:
Come West Along the Road is the name of an Irish traditional reel.
The image on the cover is a diagram of the notes and spaces shared between two musicians within a session. Each note shared has a connection with the position of the finger on the instruments.
A beginning of a spatial study on the relationship between each note in a common piece of Irish music with the position of the musician's fingers on an instrument. e.g. a line is drawn between the position of F# on a fiddle with the first note of the piece (F#) and with every other F# in the piece.
A continuation of the spatial study showing the sharing of the notes between two musicians of different instruments.
A spatial diagram of the shared space/notes in a session of four musicians creating a complex space contained between musicians in a short space of time.
Settlement pattern of Cois Pharraige in 1841, displaying the distinct nature and position of the Clachán clusters settlements also known as bailte.
Current settlement pattern of Cois Pharraige showing the expansion of the city.
The current road pattern with the proposed new road westward and ringroad around Galway city.
Sequence of the clachán settlements or baile in their context of rundale field systems.

The current settlement 150 years after left map. The boundaries of one village have been abstracted.
Each village/townland like the one to the right will collectively own one of these buildings. With the ever continuing construction of one-off houses along this coastal condition and the threatening promise of a new by-passing road, this new interpretation of a public house will establish a centre and give each townland an identity. Our connection to our traditions and heritage is becoming less and less apparent every generation. Architecture should play an important part in the future of this connection.

Every new public house will vary in size depending on population and on economic parameters. The building is designed in different parts, beginning with the small space, the most intimate musical space, the building works outwards expanding to a dance area, kitchen area and a possible room to accommodate for a teacher.

The intimate musical space is a dark, focusing on the music that it contains within it’s thick wall, rather than what surrounds it. Inside the outer concrete wall is a hanging folded timber structure allowing for quality of sound.

This series of buildings becomes an infrastructure while having respect for the existing infrastructure creating a rhythm of new public buildings along the coastal road. A large folding door opens out, allowing the road to become part of the building when an event of some sort is being held. The materials and construction methods local similar to construction methods of local farm buildings.