A Diary of Discovery

Investigating Place; Rediscovering Landscape;
Rediscovering Self.
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SINÉAD LONG
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“When we look at objects or buildings that seem to be at peace within themselves, our perception becomes calmed and dulled.”\textsuperscript{1} Peter Zumthor

Landscape can be perceived as ‘the soul’ of a country. It is a lyrical composition of many elements, inclusive of both man and nature. It is the ultimate capsule of time, memory and culture. One of our deepest needs is for a sense of identity and belonging, and as humans we revert to the landscape in search of that physical and psychological connection. Nature, monument and the collision of cultural and historical layers evoke memories and heighten sensual awareness. There is a landscape that corresponds to us all individually; intensities of landscape to meet the complexities of the mind. Landscape is not simply what one sees, but a way of seeing. We rely greatly on our sense of sight, but often disallow ourselves the time to, or become incapable of, truly perceiving and comprehending our surroundings, stunting our sensual and emotional engagement.

In this essay it is my ambition to show that landscape has the capacity to restore human perception, but that the monumentality of the landscape alone is often inaccessible to the human consciousness, necessitating a medium, a man-made forum, to aid in unlocking the mind and senses to their surroundings so that one can truly experience.

I believe that we have forgotten how to build effectively in our natural landscapes. We have lost the art of coupling structure with landscape to create a united architecture. For so long now the focus of architecture has been concentrated within the city context. The collision of structure and nature has dwindled within this framework; nature must adhere to gridded lines, or to the confinement of a ‘park prison’ - every aspect of its uncontrollable nature regulated. Man has, and will always be bound to nature. It is within nature that we find ourselves alive. We become detached from nature in the city; we become detached from ourselves. In times of despair or great sorrow, or simply after the turmoil of a hectic week in the office, we are drawn to the landscape, to the natural world, in search of internal peace. We rely on the healing powers of nature to restore balance within our lives. We visit the countryside at the weekends, leaving the constraints of city behind to walk in nature. Cleansing our minds in the lakes and rivers that mesh our landscapes together; we allow the bite of crisp air to re-awaken our senses. When allowed time to meditate in the landscape, we experience the ecstasy of being alone in nature.

“The lover of nature is he who’s inward and outward senses are still truly adjusted to each other... his intercourse with heaven and earth becomes part of his daily food, in the presence of nature a wild delight runs through the man in spite of real sorrows.” R.W Emerson
THE CONCEPT OF LANDSCAPE

"Any landscape is a condition of the spirit"²
Henri Frédéric Amiel

In his search for a bespoke definition of the term 'landscape', D.W Meinig proposed that 'landscape is an attractive, important and ambiguous term... used to encompass an ensemble of ordinary features which constitute an extraordinarily rich exhibit of the course and character of any society'.³

I too am in search for a profound definition of landscape. I have come to believe however that no two descriptions of the meaning of the word 'landscape' are the same. Meinig writes that 'Landscape is defined by our vision and interpreted by our minds', therefore making it unique; the concept of landscape resonates deeply within an individual.

The word landscape has been divided into sub categories and has been altered throughout history, diluting its etymon. Landscape is a technical term used in many professional fields by the geologist, the artist, the historian, the architect, the planner, the scientist – each profession adapting the term to best suit their line of work, which can result in 'problems of translation between fields and often uncertainties of exact meaning even within any one'.⁴ As it resonates differently within the individual it too employs different meaning within a professional context. It is, however, from the individuals point of view that I am concerned with landscape and throughout this text I aim to examine the psychological relationship humans have with their surroundings and the contribution that architecture can make to one's experience of landscape.

Landscape is ultimately man's creation. It is a term derived by man, applied to man's creation of ground. The term originates from the Dutch language "landschap", coined by a people who reclaimed land from the sea, recreating surface.⁵ It was achieved by human design and according to human perception. Land and landscape are on their own accord, separate entities. They are so tightly woven together that their individual meanings becomes blurred to such an extent that one becomes unrecognisable without the other. In his book Invisible Among The Ruins, John Moss writes that the intricacies of the human mind and our reliance on visual perception disallow us to envision land 'independent of human awareness... [as] it is a projection of our absence'.⁶ We immediately infiltrate land with memory and perception. Land, the physical, is constructed of atoms, molecules and raw matter; Landscape is our shaping of this surface through perception, knowledge and the cultural philosophies that are engrained within our subconscious and our memory.

"If you think yourself a creation of the world, the land is the context that precedes you. But if you think your monoliths, whether of rock or theology, centre the world and empower your dominion over its destiny, then the notion of 'land is beyond you. You are stuck in landscape'.⁷

At Noorderleeg, on the border between solid ground and the Wadden Sea, land reclamation and coastal protection is being undertaken in polder and salt marsh areas outside the sea dikes. The 'salt marsh works' consist of rectangles bordered by wooden stakes between which brushwood is woven. Photo: Siebe Swart, Huis Marseille
As depicted in the art of painting, landscape is not to be confused with, or merely taken as, a scene of beauty and aesthetics. We cannot imply regulation to nature, however so altered by man. To reference the word ‘scene’, implies limitations and rigidity. A scene depicts a too-perfect perspective, of the ‘right’ or ‘correct’ kind of features, both of which are stuck in a time lapse. Landscape is all inclusive; it doesn’t stand still. It embraces time, its agenda altering to coincide with history. Perhaps depiction of landscape through this static medium and by other forms of representation such as photography and literature, (however considered in conjunction with independent thought), can help broaden one’s understanding and perspective of landscape. In her book ‘Where Land Meets Sea’ Dr. Anna Ryan expresses her view on the role of representation in relation to that of understanding space, which allowed me an appreciation of representation, not as a negative, but as a tool to ‘knowledge’ and aid in ones understanding of their surroundings and of the world. Ryan echoes Vesley’s stand on challenging representation as a dominant form for the ‘the production and understanding of space’ and adds that

“there are other, deeper forms of knowledge of and about the world that need to be assessed in order to progress toward a much more widespread creation of space that embraces the wholeness of embodied experience and all modes of its (un)consciousness.”

Representation, therefore, should not directly inform our perception of landscape. Notably it has the capacity to broaden our minds and both challenge and enlighten our understanding and interpretation of landscape, allowing for a broader spectrum of experience.
"As a poet of historic consciousness I suppose I am bound to see landscape as a field dominated by the human wish – tortured into farms and hamlets, ploughed into cities."10
Lawrence Durrell

The Irish landscape, or parts thereof, is monumental in its own right. For a small nation we find the remains of castles and keeps in such extraordinary numbers, but least we forget that we, too, are a country of outstanding and overwhelming natural beauty. As so romantically described in Beauties and Antiquities of Ireland ‘it would seem as if nature intended Ireland for a continent, and not for an island, by giving it lakes so entirely disproportioned to its size’.11 There are landmarks, natural occurring phenomena and moments of natural finesse that trigger sensual and emotional awareness, and nostalgic memories of youthful experience that is disconnected from cultural and political memory. ‘To know a place is to know its stories’- if so, can we not know, love and appreciate a place or building without knowing its history or background? There are two types of memory associated with the Landscape. Firstly, there is subconscious memory, fuelled by underlying cultural, political and religious background. Secondly, there is nostalgic memory, (memories from our own past), driven by sensual and emotional experience. Psychology’s understanding of perception is based on the organization, identification, and interpretation of sensory information in order to represent and understand the environment.12

As defined in the Oxford Dictionary, “perception is the neuro-physiological process, including memory, by which an organism becomes aware of and interprets external stimuli.”13
In each case interpretation is a key element. Perception is not merely a dialogue of neurons and sensory systems that construct exact replicas of what we see, hear or touch. It is very much shaped by learning, memory, expectation and cultural philosophies. This allows for alteration of objects in the real world, or indeed landscapes, which enables physical and emotional engagement with our surroundings on a more personal level, contradicting John Moss’ writing in which he argues that cultural and political philosophies restrict and reduce an individual’s perception.

We need to find the connecting piece that joins heaven and earth. A lone oak tree on the flat of a paddock, a grumbling mountain in the misty distance, a crumbling castle dominating its motte, or the bulging belly of a burial mound protruding from earth’s crust. We should search for the great pyramids of our land, an element, old or new, that can restore substance to life, re-calibrate our psyche and help us reconnect with the landscapes of our imagination. Mind exists in Body, Body in Landscape.

“Before it can ever be a repose for the senses, landscape is a work of the mind”

Rural place, as well as that of the city, is made up of rooms, pockets of open space—clearing in a crowded wood, a valley in the rocky outcrop of a mountain. I used to go in search of nooks and crannies in the dense undergrowth that suffocated some of the forlorn, forgotten patches of land near my house. I bashed and beat my way through blistering thistles and thorn bushes; briars lunging at me like a gate man protecting his fortress. I tunnelled through the foliage. I made my own little pockets; a kitchen, a bedroom, a living room. Nature had conformed to my earliest perception of spatial arrangement— the house. I was beginning to organise and configure space in my mind. I was experiencing architecture despite not knowing what architecture was.

“So let’s go for a walk. I know just the spot. You’ll love it.” We twisted along the staggering country lane, sluggish, in no particular hurry. I was childishly excited. A new adventure! I craned my neck to try and see beyond each bend, unable to appreciate the journey when the anticipation of a new destination was so close. I was surprised by an awkward wall, the dark, damp of the limestone standing stark at the side of the road. And then, again, by an adjoining building. An old granary store, honest in its form and materiality. It was odd to find such a building so remote in the countryside. It was as if it had been literally cut from the fabric of the industrial city, and transported to this foreign secret place. We slowed as we approached a dead end. I had been caught off guard. My mind had remained buried in fantastic imagined stories of the store building. I stepped out of the car. My breath caught in the chill of the air. I pulled my coat tighter. The glimmering of water caught my eye and I pushed my way through branches and overgrowth in search of it. I was cautious of my step. The ground was soft, threatening to swallow my foot. I could hear the moan and grumble of water; a river. There was a river in all its natural glory, tumbling sluggishly, awakened from its night time slumber. I needed a better viewpoint. I found a retired boulder a couple of paces down a trodden path, clambered up, all arms and legs, and let out a tremendous sigh. Such beauty! Walled and bounded by a thicket of trees, the river pushed toward me, sweeping past, disappearing behind a fudged bend in the distance. I couldn’t peel my eyes away. I jumped in fright as an arm was thrown around my waist and I was lifted from my pedestal.

“To know a place is to know its stories”
The land should be measured. Landscape isn't just topography and nature, it is an aged artefact of human existence. It is the layering of place, time, history, culture, memory, ritual, story; all of which are interlinked. Landscape is altered and influenced by man's interference and to gain an accurate measure of the land we must measure and connect the patterns of rural life. For centuries there has been a curiosity to explore the past. First, it was pastime; man's inquisitive nature sought to explore what history left behind, soon to become studied art, and so began the development of archaeology as a profession. Defined by the Oxford English Dictionary: 

"Archaeology is the study of human history and prehistory through the excavation of sites and the analysis of artefacts and other physical remains."

If one could have a conversation with nature and with landscape what stories would it recall. Consider the archaeologist translator of this unique language. By recording this conversation through the analysis of the historical layering of ground we begin to understand how and why we build upon the earth.
‘Come on, there’s more to see-’, we picked our way over stepping stones, a make-shift bridge, allowing us to pass over a hurried stream, in a rush to join the mother river. I felt alive. The copse wood is full of animation and spirit: a charming and vivacious host for a Sunday morning encounter. I continued to sense the river among the trees. The air was succulently rich in water. We were greeted by a crumbling facade, set on fire by the sun. A thick, orange glow seeped out of its crevices, the windows, the doors, as if a dying fire smouldered within the ruin itself.

We, as humans, often feel more comfortable in the ‘organisation’ of modern life. The constraints of western civilization dictate our lives. We are ceasing to identify with the wanderer or ‘wayfarer’, as Tim Ingold describes in his book ‘Lines’; we have forgotten how to walk. There are few today who embark on a journey that has no beginning or end. We are consumed by money, the need for security and familiarity. Modern society has cut off its feet, and by doing so has wilted emotional engagement with their surroundings. It has created the ‘static line’, an assembly line of fixed points, which we move between as if on a conveyor belt. Movement is often considered the engaging act. American artist James Turrell’s creative response to landscape acknowledges that perception changes ‘as you move to or within a particular space’. Landscape produces varying intensities of experience as we move through it; as we near the water’s edge, move parallel to the cacophony of falling rapids, move toward the dense refuge of the wood, move through pockets of dazzling sunshine under a canopy of towering trees. In the city or town, or due to the routine of everyday life, we can lose the ability to see. It is moments like these when our senses become fully aware and our perception of space is formulated.
"A rich and beautiful book [that] is always open before us. We have but to learn to read it."

As mentioned previously, landscape is not just simply what we see; it is informed by a unique language. There is a range of landscape diversity categorised by associative words and vocabulary. The place names and narratives that we associate with our surroundings construct images and give our landscapes depth and meaning. I am undeniably in love with the land, with both its ordinariness and unreasonable beauty. In the landscape I find myself literally beyond words. My senses, tingling, are on high alert, as they automatically tune in with the frequency of nature. I long for the ability to produce a poetry of nature; to put into beautiful and powerful language my feelings when I am enveloped in it. I long for the ability to verbalise the sensual coma that possesses me in nature's grandeur.

Having read an article by John Moss, I was displeased by his critique that 'there is no respect for place in Ireland'. Having been born to an island of boundaries and the inherent need for ownership (and definition of this ownership), indeed we struggle as a nation to 'see beyond the wall' but I have always sought, and seek, to roam farther, delve deeper into the landscape creating adventure in the elusive topography. Sadly I am hastily reminded that I, perhaps, am one of few that hold such a deep sentimental regard for the beauty and monumentality of the Irish landscape. I am continuously reminded as I walk with my dog in our countryside, a frequent and favoured pastime, of the reality of treatment of place.

"If you are born into a world where untamed nature is regarded as reproach, untrammelled wilderness as moral approbation, and the walls of your garrison, your farm, your civil community, or the walls of your mind, form the boundaries of your replica of Eden, then you might not comprehend that outside Eden there are others quite unlike yourself, except by the superficialities of primordial genetic design, who are content to be there and appalled at the acquiescence to such arbitrary limitations on vision and experience as your philosophies engender."

Moss struggled as a youth to find a place, a landscape, which befit him as a person. In Canada, where history has not yet proclaimed itself, he feels that people lack a sense of identity. Moss sees landscape as the essence, the 'soul', of a country or place, not just a multitude of cultural layering and political misdemeanours. For Moss, the extremities of the harsh Canadian arctic plains allowed him to free his mind and see landscape just as it was, free of historical and cultural stigmas. To survive in such a place as the Canadian Arctic, one has to abandon the learned philosophies of the western world and begin to 'think like a stone'. Western thought does not suffice in the arctic.

"The edifice of Western thought collapses in the winter gale that seals the igloo warm."
It was here that he could experience the true language of the Canadian landscape - and found himself in it. By learning the language of the landscape, he not only became in tune with it but he became in tune with himself.

"Imagine wilderness. What is it you are imagining? ...Is the wilderness you imagine sanctuary, or the certitude of Eden gone awry? ... Is it the utter absence of familiarity, a profound emptiness, where your language cannot grasp anything but your own indeterminacy?"

Wilderness, like landscape, is of human creation. It is both created and undermined by language. Moss and Schama write that wilderness is a 'non-place'. From the moment one sets foot in it, recounts the discovery in writing, by photograph, or even in the language of thought alone, it is no longer wild, as the wilderness cannot "locate itself, does not name itself, nor could the wilderness venerate itself." It is another walled garden of our imagination. Subconsciously it represents fear of the unknown, or an area we crave to find or discover but fear to seek out. There will always be human trace on the land, however minute. In a country composed of myth and ancient origins such as Ireland, it is rare to venture places that have not succumbed to the weight of the stone wall or human inhabitation; the Irish wilderness is better depicted as a forlorn garden of dishevelment and disrepair, an abandoned or forgotten territory. Like a building, the landscape, too, can become redundant. Function, necessity or circumstance can change and an area becomes obsolete. People leave. Buildings are abandoned. Nature thrives, reclaiming its territory. Timber rots. Roofs collapse. Windows blow out. Organisms seek crevices in stone walls in which they can sink their roots and terrorise.

In modern society place has become dislocated. In contradiction with modern technology we are not gaining better oversight of the world, of landscape or of place with the rapidity and precision of geographical location but in fact losing sight of the defining characteristics and notable features that have created place. Digital systems, social networking and connectivity mobility are hindering our ability to translate spatial experience of the everyday into physical and psychological gain. In Ireland, a town-land or hillock often has more than one name, and behind each name a ‘Scéal’ that resonates with the storyteller.

The fear is that the integrity of place is being forgotten due to the modernisation and digitalisation of mapping. Tim Robinson, who holds an outsiders perspective on Irish Landscape, is consumed by the language of the landscape, by the native Irish tongue and its marriage to the geography and stories of place, particularly in Connemara. He references a language and 'place-lore' that uniquely fits the land, a place-name being "the interlock of landscape and language". The aural traditions of the native tongue are dwindling and with it the old 'logainmeacha' of the country. There is a growing conflict between 'true place' and 'location', Robinson writes, and we are not only losing a part of our language, but also the ability to see the landscape through words which capture its true essence. "The intrusion of the regime of location on that of place" is smothering human perspective of local terrain. The landscape is being stripped of its language by the static rigidity of the map, of numerical location and digital representation.
The Architecture of Landscape

“The shape of architecture is the shape of the earth as it is modified by the structures of mankind.”26

It is my ambition to seek out the elements of architecture that make it possible to create memorable structures within the Irish countryside without needing historical and cultural circumstance to provoke an emotional response. Can a building alone ignite our senses and provoke curiosity and engagement through intelligent manipulation of form and materials, and by its juxtaposition within landscape?

The earth has accommodated man’s desire to build, if not directly inspired it. The ancients built mountains out of stone echoing the topography of the earth, creating contrasting forms on the flat of the ground. As a building belongs to the landscape, the landscape, too, belongs to the building. The monuments of our cultural landscape evoke an emotional curiosity. They are vessels of time, place and memory. They are a stimulant of the mind. From time to time they catch one off guard, surprise with their simplicity and nude form, numb, paralyse, then, they overwhelm with a calmness and reverence.

Dún Aonghasa, an ancient stone ringfort located on the cliffs edge of Inishmore Island. It reinstates the importance of setting and building.
The Irish burial tombs, which predated the Greek temples, were similarly conceived with their setting in mind, altering design to accommodate the landscape. There is a science attributed to the way the ancients buried the dead. Tombs, burial chambers, and passage graves were built after thorough astronomical observation. They measured not only seasonal change but the passing of time. They were concerned with light and shadow, orientation, axiality and location. They were built in direct response to topography; to echo shapes of the landscape or contrast with them. The ancient burial mound, a bulging, swollen belly protruding from the ground returns the body to mother earth (life having completed full circle) while simultaneously reaching to the heavens, using the language of the sun and the stars to form a cosmic relationship with earth.

In Ireland some of the greatest examples of our monumental heritage are the ancient passage graves of the Boyne Valley, Co. Meath. Located here are three main ceremonial mounds which dominate in scale and complexity and which are orbited by scores of smaller satellite mounds. In studying these tumuli, patterns of form and landscape begin to appear. Three scales come to mind that concerns the geometry and alignment of these tumuli. At the largest scale they form an east/west alignment across the breadth of the country adjoining many other burial tombs through to County Mayo, forming a procession of ceremonial mounds. One could speculate that it may have acted as a route of pilgrimage for worshippers, a pathway to which they gravitated, drawing them through the country side; shaping their perception of landscape as they moved through it. At an intermediate scale the three tumuli form an alignment with one another to create a triangular band on the northern bank of the River Boyne. The influence of the topography is evident in the positioning of each mound within the landscape. As each is situated on top of a hillock surrounded by low lying plains, each acts as a viewing platform from which it is possible to interpret the burial sites in the landscape. It is possible to view all three sites at the one time from any of the mounds and it is at this scale one can begin to relate the mounds to one another. At a personal scale one encounters the circular geometry and the physical materiality of the ceremonial mound. At this scale it is possible to study the orientation of the individual mounds, and their alliance with the rising sun; to experience the exterior band of ornate boulders which outline the mounds; to digest the genius of the entry portal.

Upon further examination it is possible to begin to decipher the architecture of the tomb, dividing it into sequential spaces consisting of the forecourt, portal, passage, main chamber and three adjoining chambers (specifically describing the passage grave at Newgrange). Large orthostats and kerbstones form the portal and the main passage, and act as the support structure for the intricately corbelled roof in the main chamber. Earth and stones are layered in between the external band and the skeletal frame of the passage to form the mound in which the passage is situated. The order of the build at Newgrange began with the careful erection of the portal and lightbox, the most thought-out and dominating feature of this passage grave. On the 21st of December each year- the mid winter solstice- the rising sun penetrates the lightbox, slowly creeps up and along the passage, and finally, floods the main chamber with an energy and glow that bounces off the corbelled roof creating flickering shadows reminiscent of old souls protecting the mound. In essence, these people captured the sun, if only for a couple of minutes. They built a device that not only encapsulated the dead but framed the sun and gave it a human scale. The Neolithic people
had a deeper understanding of the ground on which they stood and therefore the buildings they placed on the earth carried a greater weight and connected with the landscape on another level.

Through analysis of ancient monument, and in correspondence with the life work of James Turrell, it is both possible and necessary to 'physically' construct an environment in which we can gain emotional access to our natural surroundings. I have argued that the landscape alone (devoid of built monument) can provide sufficient stimuli for the human mind to re-sync. Having said this I also believe that the majority of people today have lost the ability to engage with their surroundings on a personal and cultural level. For this reason we necessitate a built forum to direct our line of vision or to encourage us to pause and listen, and in doing so, re-train our imagination in the art of perception. Architecture, like modern society, has become 'fast'. It no longer resonates permanence; it is difficult to find comfort in the weightless materiality and the translucent character of a building. Structures are often built abruptly and with poor understanding of the landscape in which they are built. James Turrell is concerned with the impact that light alone has on human perception, and his work with light has been deemed capable of producing human reaction. He constructs simple geometric spaces in which the main focus is not the room or the materials, but the qualities of atmosphere that are created by the various 'textures of light'. Turrell writes in his book 'Occluded Front' that it is possible to see spaces within spaces, "[that are] not delineated by form but by visual perception". Turrell is concerned with finding the right kind of site (site being all-important) in which to create this 'space for sensing'. When an opening allows light to enter from one space to another, the light acts as common denominator and we immediately become aware of that other space; we become aware of ourselves seeing this other space. The work of James Turrell arouses consciousness of oneself and of one's environment.
“In making a piece, the first objective is not to look at the possibilities of architectural form and the possibilities of space but to work... with the manner in which space yields to vision... It is like looking at someone looking. Objectivity is gained by being once removed. As you plumb a space with vision, it is possible to ‘see yourself see’.”

Turrell’s use of coloured light in his work is of particular importance. He references the colours of the sky, colours we often omit from our sight. We forget about cloud scenery; we look at the sky and see only 'blue', when in fact there is a whole multitude of colour and shapes awaiting our perception. Unlike classical paintings of landscape, which I discussed in *The Concept of Landscape*, the genre of Neo-Impressionism painting begins to capture the atmosphere of light in landscape breaking it down into small brushstrokes of pure contrasting colour. The main focus of these paintings is not the content, but the way in which we see in terms of light and colour.
In his book Turrell emphasises that the ‘right kind of site’ is often the driving force behind his art. He searches for sites that are both complex and unique in character. The Neolithic people were site-conscious, be it for different reasons such as defence, sustenance or ritual. This importance of site is echoed in Vincent Scully’s writing on Greek Architecture in his book ‘The Earth, The Temples and The Gods’

“To the Greek architect the setting of his temple was all-important. He planned it seeing it in clear outline against see our sky, determining its size by its situation on plain or hilltop or the wide plateau of an acropolis... he did not think of it in and for itself, as just the building he was making; he conceived of it in relation to the hills and the seas and the arch of the sky... so the Greek temple, conceived as a part of its setting, was simplified, the simplest of all the great buildings of the world.”

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The repetition of the known elements of these early mounds was common across the Irish countryside. Perhaps it was the simple geometry of the circle or perhaps it was because of the circles association with ritual and worship. Up until the Iron Age there was a separation of ceremonial mound and inhabitation. With the arrival of the Celts and an adaption in social order these ritualistic monuments were up-cycled into re-functioning sites. The intrigue of the archaeologist with the Irish monumental landscape can be easily understood regarding the fascinating intricacy of the varying layers of settlement on one site. The burial mounds appealed to new settlers for strategic purposes; shelter, vantage points, defense, access to water, good agricultural land. I will take the Mound at Knowth as example. Foremost, Knowth is a passage grave located on a hillock in the Boyne Valley. In the late Iron Age the burial mound was adapted, encircling ditches were added, and an area of settlement was established on the top of the grassy mound. Souterrains were built for security and storage of food and other valuables. This cultural shift transformed a redundant ritual site into one of habitation, restoring ethos and integrity to the place. The site became the new capitol and political power of the Kingdom of (North) Brega, a petty Kingdom so named after the ‘Plains of Brega’ which spanned parts of counties Dublin, Meath and Louth. The Kingdom eventually succumbed to Norman invasion. Ráth Dubh in Teltown, a short drive from Knowth, was an inhabited Celtic ringfort composed of three banks and ditches and a circular enclosure. With the arrival of the Normans this ringfort was adapted and fortified to accommodate the invaders and a motte was built within the ditches which may have supported a timber keep. After the Norman invasions the Monks at Mellifont reclaimed the site at Knowth and with another shift in culture, erected a stone enclosure on top of the mound, built new forms within the walls and erected new stone dwellings at the foot of the mound. The site adorned a new secular culture.

"Changes in the traditional way of building are only permitted if they are an improvement. Otherwise stay with what is traditional, for truth, even if it be hundreds of years old, has a stronger inner bond with us than the lie that walks by our side."  Adolf Loos
FOOTNOTES

1 Peter Zumthor, Thinking Architecture (Basel: Birkhauser 2010).
8 Anna Ryan, Where land meets sea: coastal explorations of landscape, representation and spatial experience (Farnham: Ashgate 2012) 63.
11 T. O’Neill Russell, Beauties and antiquities of Ireland (London: Rendall and Trench Trübner, 1897) 231.
16 Tim Ingold, Lines: A Brief History (Oxon: Routledge, 2007).
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27 Niall McCullough and Valerie Mulvin, A Lost Tradition (Dublin: Gandon Editions 1987).
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1979 Atlas of Ireland RIAI
For me, nature has always been a place of sanctuary and meditating solitude. It is here that I find it easiest to forget about the complications of life and instead can immerse myself in the colours, sounds, smells and views that the countryside has on offer. I have always been in love with and curious about the old – old buildings, old objects, old machines. I’m unsure whether it is the stories that intrigue me, or the rustic browns and oranges of a weathered material, or the fact that such beautiful objects and buildings could be (and were) built without the need for modern technology – every piece and member of a building was shaped and moulded by human hands. When I see an old ruin, or a rusted device it envelopes me in a strange sort of comfort. I believe there is a joy in the way that one can walk through walls and areas of a building that were never meant for walking. I find a redundant building’s transition back to nature fascinating – it is no longer about the finished product but the weight of the materials that are left behind to imprint upon the ground. Aside from historical reasons ruins and land monuments are an important part of our natural landscapes as they provide a platform to view and experience nature. They encourage us to pause and take in our surroundings. They allow us to construct frames and windows through which we can perceive nature in all its glory.
The site I chose brings to attention the magnitude of cultural and historical layering of a now redundant piece of landscape. Castle Connell is situated to the north of Limerick City and lies to the east of the River Shannon. The river provided suitable setting for a large number of demesnes and villas and in the 18th and 19th centuries Castle Connell became a retreat for the wealthy, a holiday resort for those wanting to spend time away from the city, and for those wishing to avail of the healing properties of the water. The town and river side were also popular for industry and trade. The force and volume of water allowed for easy transportation of goods and ensured that local mills had sufficient power to drive the turbines. Castle Connell was formerly world famous for salmon angling. Each villa that was situated along the river’s edge in turn owned and controlled a portion of the river, and charged a levy to the anglers that wished to fish off their land. The early 20th century oversaw the construction of the headrace for Ard na Crusha power station. The opening of the headrace caused major disruption to the River Shannon and greatly reduced the volume of water escaping down the old part of the river destroying the natural habitat of the salmon. Parallel to this, the people of Ireland were becoming restless with the onset of the civil war and during a period of the 1920’s many of the demesnes, which were Anglican owned, were attacked and set alight by the Irish.
As part of a field trip to the Boyne Valley we partook in a detailed survey of Teltown House and Farmstead.
A Study of an old Lime mill and its adjoining head race.

This ruin was of particular interest to me for the way in which it sat into the ground and adjusted itself to the function of the mill and to nature.
As a primer project in semester one, I played on the idea of framing particular views. By altering and adding to the existing mill building structure I created a platform that allowed access to particular openings in the building, giving a broader view of the river and niches beyond.
Following on from this, the focus became about movement (through a particular space) and pathways - both natural and manmade. I wanted to move beyond the purely visual element of experience and introduce sound and texture. One of the primary ideas behind my thesis is that I believe that people have lost the ability to truly see what's around them. For example, a person sees only a tree. They overlook the depth and magnitude of the colour of the leaves, it doesn't occur to them to touch the wrinkled bark that tells of character and age. They fail to look past the object (the tree) and therefore fail to experience it in terms of light as it filters through the foliage.
I proposed a series of pavilions along a routeway on the edge of the river. On the left is a shelter designed to trap the sound of the rushing water and multiply it, reverberating off the walls, to create a thundering noise within - a space so loud but oddly silent. The shelter, constructed out of brass, makes you more conscious of temperature as it will always be either more hot or cold than the outside and in turn makes you become more bodily aware. The golden green hues of the brass are a reminder of the colour of the surrounding trees and its reflection echoes that of the water.
Similarly, based on the principle of the tuning fork, this riverside pavilion aims to capture people's attention by creating audio from the moving water. The force of the water moves the metal poles which create reverberations in the air and bounce off the steel wall forcing passersby to train their ears to the sounds of the river.
The area I am concerned with for my project lies just below the town of Castle Connell, and lies within the boundaries of Doonass House and Demesne (on the right of the River Shannon) and Hermitage Demesne (on the left of the River Shannon). The layout of the demesnes follow typical Victorian format locating the houses on the high points above the river, and constructing walls and gardens which complement the natural fall of the ground. Each house subtly creates visual links across the river. This is an important factor in my project as I too use the direction of the contours and the natural bends in the river to manipulate and manoeuvre through the site and aim to construct buildings which frame and capture nature.
Concerned with the healing properties of nature I choose to design a rural rehabilitation complex which caters for people recovering from physical injury. The project is about journey – one's journey of recovery, both physical and mental, and the actual journey through the site. The rehabilitation complex caters for two stages of recovery. Firstly for those whose movement has been seriously impaired, denying them the ability to move from bed, forcing them into solitude. And secondly for those who have advanced on their journey of recovery and strive for purpose and responsibility. Stage two realises the idea of health, work and nature. I specifically chose this site with farming in mind as a method of healing through participation and work with plants and animals.
Atmospheric drawing of site in charcoal.
For my site strategy it was important to take into consideration the natural fall of the ground, the contours, the river, and existing monuments within the site boundary. My aim is to use a series of buildings to initially guide you through the site and connect one side of the river to the other. However, the main focus of the rehabilitation centre lies at the steep incline on the river's edge where the focus is on the immobile person. Positioned within the dense foliage of trees a number of single story buildings play off one another to create a series of indoor courtyards. As a rule it is important that each area of the building is accessible by hospital bed, necessitating wide doorways and hallways. As opposed to spending ones day confined to a bedroom I want to eliminate the confinements of solitary and allow for patients to interact within the courtyards. I am interested in thermal zoning, a factor which can significantly affect comfort and recovery. All the hallways are open air pressing on the importance of clean air and natural ventilation. Each block within the building then has a different temperature; a temperature for dining, a temperature for concentration, a temperature for sleeping.
By immersing oneself in nature we can reconnect with our bodies and minds. I put a lot of emphasis on the bedroom of the immobile person. I want the building to become the instrument for healing by allowing patients feel completely surrounded by nature and allowing them access to the river. I aim to reintroduce the human aspect into medical treatment. From each bed the patient has a view of the sky above them and also a view through the window to the river beyond.
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