Towards a Utopian Reality:
Architecture as Method

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Abstract.

Through my engagement in the imaginary reconstitution of society, I have gained knowledge on our current societal establishment. Within that study I have begun to make tentative steps towards a suggestion for a possible future strategy, utilising architecture as my method. I will summarise it here, the creation of the utopian ideal will be through the realisation of a functioning micro economy within the post industrial landscape. This micro economy must be a long term plan or allow for change to prevent stagnation and redundancy. The collective power of men shall be recognised by the integration of public space to the private sphere of the house and the public realm of the work place, this will be a live work initiative. The construction and upkeep of the project shall rely on the skills of the homo faber, to be, manufactured and assembled. Perhaps most importantly of all however is the manner in which this project shall meet the ground and redefine the use of the landfill, the intention to be conscious about all interventions with the land and the public sphere will be embodied within the architectural concepts driving the project. This then leads me to the final stage of my thesis, architecture as method, the realisation of these goals through a charged construction project, aimed at producing new spaces to revolutionise and move away from accepted norms.
Assimilating Ideas Into Architecture

Architecture as a practicing field has a unique position to consider and assimilate many ideas of culture and society within a single vision or project. I am reminded of Rene Descartes, a seventeenth century French philosopher, who theorized on metaphysical doubt and the existence of man. Descartes is proclaimed as the father of Western philosophy as he believed that in doubting, we proved our existence, and that thinking was the sole faculty of the human that could be trusted to perceive the world correctly. I feel that this bares a similarity to architecture, that is to say we can question a vast array of topics and arrive at a finite or somewhat finite solution. Architecture has the scope to encompass many of society’s activities, politics, economics, environmentalism, industry and the public/private realms of daily life. This should place architecture at the forefront of discussion and debate as to the planning, development and eventual realization of our new society. I feel more and more strongly that a new world is what is needed to replace our current societal framework, to accept the death and passing of our previous civilisation and to learn from our predecessors’ mistakes. This will require changing our political theatre, our public realm, institutions of education and industry and most importantly our own engagement with societal and civic activities. I believe that architecture has the means to design for and towards this new civilisation, one which is based on principals of morality and inclusive social discourse.

I have titled this thesis ‘Towards a Utopian Reality: Architecture as Method’, as a means of conveying broadly, what I am hoping to achieve within this essay. By examining a broad spectrum of ideas including philosophy, political theology and architectural concepts I wish to look at how it is possible for our society to move beyond our current dystopic setting and step into a utopian reality. In what follows I will be looking to the work of Hannah Arendt and Kenneth Frampton to establish a view on our current societal make up. Moving on from their critiques I shall establish my own opinion on our society and the role architecture plays within it by describing a post industrial landscape situated within the midlands of Ireland, as well as examining the writing of Ruth Levitas and Ernst Bloch to define for myself what I believe utopia to be and how if at all utopia can be achieved. Using the experimental and theoretical works of architects such as Lebbeus Woods and Raimund Abraham I will explore the possibilities of using imagined futures and alternative architectural imagery to work towards a seemingly unrealizable society (by our current social standards). In doing this I hope to free the mind of the observer to bring them to a place of daydreaming or wishful thinking and from here allowing them the opportunity to realise this vision of our world, to render it real through the medium of architecture. This will lead me to the final stage of my essay where by I will investigate architecture as the method to creating a new society. From here I then ask myself how do I use architecture to respond critically to our current way of life and propose an alternative version within the remains of a post industrial landscape? How do I create new spaces which serve and influence their occupants and finally how do I create a new society solely through architecture whilst maintaining an attitude of social inclusion, morality and environmentality?
In an attempt to answer some of these questions, I will first return to the definition of Architecture for architecture as a term is slightly ambiguous in its meaning. By definition it has two meanings, which are, first “the art or science of constructing edifices for human use,” and the second which is wholly different, “the action and process of building.” It is here that I draw a parallel to the work of Hannah Arendt, a German-American political theorist of the twentieth century, and the fundamental activities (vita activea) of modern man that she describes in her book *The Human Condition* as being labour, work and action. The first definition of Architecture, “edifices for human use” contains a very human essence, giving rise to the notion of a world created specifically for humans within the public realm. This then I relate to Arendt’s idea of work:

> "Work is the activity which corresponds to the unnaturalness of human existence... Work provides an ‘artificial’ world of things, distinctly different from all natural surroundings. Within its borders each individual life is housed, while this world itself is meant to transcend and outlast them all. The human condition of work is worldliness."  

Although Arendt implies here that all edifices constructed by humans fall under the remit of work, it is the construction of buildings with a charged architectural purpose that concern, me for these buildings are intended to go beyond mere instrumentality and serve the public sphere of human habitation, however, I must now ask myself why not all buildings are constructed with an architectural purpose, a question I hope to answer later in this essay.

The second definition of architecture, “the action and process of building”, implies the act of continual production, much in the same way as the biological process of labour such as eating, sleeping, cooking and cleaning are all necessary to support our existence. It is for this reason that the realm of labour occurs within the private sphere, the household:

> "Labour is the activity which corresponds to the biological process of the human body, whose spontaneous growth, metabolism, and eventual decay are bound to the vital necessities produced and fed into the life process by labour. The human condition of labour is life itself."  

Arendt’s work also designates two subjects within the categories of labour and work respectively. They are the animal laboran and the homo faber. The animal laboran, representing labour, works with his or her body to produce goods yet leaves nothing of permanence behind, while the homo faber, representing work, produces human edifices of temporary existence. Within her writing Arendt notes that with the arrival of modernity the industrial process of production and consumption of goods became the fundamental goal of our society and because of this the line between work and labour is dissolved. Before the rise of modernity the homo faber acted as an artisan producer having a connection to his or her work from start to finish. He or she obtained a sense of achievement in completing the product as well as developing craft, skills and knowledge of their profession; essentially they were developing culture. Due to the escalating nature of organised and managed work to raise productivity, labour has become increasingly divided into specialised activities with no possibility of controlling or interacting with a finished product. Through this generic process of industry we see the
craft of the homo faber reduced to an act of labour devoid of culture or lasting substance. Arendt attributes this condition to the rise of the social; "the organisational framework in which people's lives were systematically linked with the imperative of production."

The rise of the social created a society built on the ideals of the labour force. Increasing productivity implies increased consumption, most of the products made are designed not to last. This planned obsolescence is meant to fulfill the needs of the labour force whilst continuing the cycle of consumption, all the while further blurring the line between work and labour.

The consequences of the rise of the social can also be seen within architecture. With the rise of the social, architecture has lost its connection with public space. Arendt describes to us that 'public' is "the world in itself, in so far as it is common to all of us and distinguished from our privately owned place within it." Public space for Arendt is the sphere in which the human condition of action occurs. Arendt writes that action is politics and it is both existential and aesthetic, that is, it is relevant to the existence of our society and it has form, for it is the place where people collectively gather and engage in civic activity, an act Arendt believes to be vital for the healthy continuation and growth of society. I will discuss the importance of this space to our lives and our cities healthy functioning later in this essay. For now, I wish to introduce to you some of the ideas that formed the origin of this essay.

I have taken this time to explain architecture as term and as a role within man's world, both physically and theoretically, to clarify and understand better what architecture is, in so doing I can begin to see architecture as a tool for improving society, perhaps even constructing and entirely new one. That is to say, architecture can be used as the tool to create the spaces for the new society to inhabit. To establish or display the moral attributes of this new society in a built form.

First however I must define some of the terms used as to avoid confusion later. The term 'Utopian' stems from a reading of Ruth Levitas's 'Imaginary Reconstitution of Society'. Levitas here through lengthy discussion attempts to pin point an apt definition of the word 'utopia'. Following a study of Ernest Bloch, a German philosopher of the early twentieth century who brings into relevance the idea of wishful thinking, Levitas settles on, "the expression of desire for a better way of living". By freeing the word 'Utopia' from the connotation of a fully imagined and almost perfect society, it allows utopia to stand for something more, "fragmentary, partial, elusive and episodic". In this regard the function of 'Utopia' can be, as Levitas sees it, about critique, redress or change.

A 'Utopian Reality' therefore is an enlightened society that can be led by an architectural discourse of change, education and proposition. It is the beginning of a process of examining what is, what can be and how it can be achieved. For the term 'edifice', a construct of architectural intelligence, means not just to build but also to educate, instruct and strengthen. These are all terms which exist within the public realm; the place of work, action and the homo faber, the realm in which architecture is most often experienced. Levitas herself expresses a desire for the capabilities of architecture to be recognized;

"Architecture could construct at least one alternative vision of what an inclusive society could look like: free from the constraints of contemporary social policy..."
This statement for me is my architectural brief, it is my starting point. By engaging in the imaginary reconstitution of society I allow myself the opportunity to gaze into the future to a point where the issues of labour in contemporary society are no more, that they are resolved through a series of architectural projects, that the resolution of these issues itself is a direct criticism of our contemporary society while not restrained by the possibilities of our own reality.


Sketch Depicting Dystopian View of the Homo Fabers removal from the land.

Sketch Depicting Dystopian View of the Homo Fabers transformation into the animal laboran.

Sketch Depicting Dystopian View of the animal Laboran engaging in the industrial production method.
Image 1: Derryclare Bogland. Photo Patrick Mooney.
Redundant Landscapes.
A Discussion on our Dystopia.

I have mentioned the process by which a ‘Utopian Reality’ can be brought about. This involves a critique of what is, a suggestion of what can be and how that can be achieved. I begin this process of imaginary reconstitution here, by describing a post industrial landscape, it’s origins and how it came to be a redundant landscape and what I hope to achieve by imagining a future proposition for this region.

Within the midlands of Ireland there exists large area’s of bog formed due to the low lying and flat nature of the ground there. Sometime during the late Mesolithic period man discovered the ability to cut, dry and harvest peat from the bog to be used as a fuel source. Ever since this discovery the bogs of the midlands have been exploited as obtainable above ground natural resources. With the formation of the free state of Ireland in 1937 and the subsequent establishment of various government bodies Bord na Mona was formed in 1946, to take over the management and harvesting of peat from Irish bogs for the production of electricity and peat briquettes (home fire fuel source). With the industrialisation of our bogs came about not the end of a craft tradition but its expansion. People local to the midlands who’s lives were spent toiling on the bogs were brought into the employment of Bord na Mona, long standing knowledge and tools used to cut turf were brought to a larger manufacturing scale increasing the skills of a labouring workforce with a mechanical proficiency.

During this time the midlands experienced good economic fortunes, Bord na Mona displaying excellent foresight realised the importance of a strong, happy and skilled workforce, towns local to the bogs were developed to house and educate the workers and their families. Irish architects such as Frank Gibney were brought on board to design and implement new town layouts equipped with contemporary modern housing, schools, churches and town halls. All of which were centred around places of public gathering to enhance the sense of collective work and involvement by each individual worker.

Tullamore a central town to the Midlands became a place of economic power. Having begun as an agricultural settlement during the plantations of 1570, Tullamore grew in size and importance with the arrival of the Grand Canal from Dublin, the capital of Ireland, in 1798. The canals primary function was to increase trade and supply to Dublin, to serve the needs of the ever growing capital, in turf and agricultural produce. With the onset of the World War Two in 1945 and the establishment of Bord na Mona a year later reliance on our native fuel was imperative to our survival as a small independent nation. Towns such as Ferbane, Rhode, Kilcormac and Tullamore owe their development at such a turbulent time in world history to the presence of Bord na Mona and the harvesting of peat from the bogs.

Extraction of peat from the bog is a long and arduous process, the bog must first be drained of water to allow the access of people and machinery. Peat is cut from turf banks that have spent thousands of years forming from the build up of partially decayed organic matter. Once cut form the bank the peat is spread on the flat to dry in the summer months, then stockpiled to be transferred by specially designed trains to power stations and briquette factories in towns such as Shannonbridge and Derinlough. As with all fossil fuels however, peat is a finite resource and increasingly across the midlands we are left with
a man made phenomenon in the landscape, the cut away bog. This is a term given to the large stretches of land left behind by the peat extraction process, having taken such extraordinary amounts of time for the peat deposits to form and the high natural acidity of the soil rendering agricultural possibilities slim. These flat expansive sites are left barren, they have become redundant landscapes. Alongside this problem of the post industrial landscape comes the issue of employment, with no more peat to harvest labourers skilled in the use, construction and maintenance of the peat harvesting machines are now facing into an uncertain future, with the high possibility of being made as redundant as the land they worked upon.

One such cut away bog sits on the edge of Tullamore and presents a unique set of conditions. Not only is it a redundant landscape due to its exhausted peat reserves but also because of its proximity to a recently capped landfill. For the last forty years as peat was removed from the bog to fuel societies growth, the produce of our throw away culture was returned to the adjacent site to be buried. Now standing as a monument to our society the tip head of the landfill is the highest land point in the surrounding area, looking out over the vast reaches of empty bog land.

The essence of my thesis lies within this site and the town of Tullamore. They are products of our previous society, currently lacking function, form, strategy or a future. Understanding how they have come about I can now engage with the second stage of Levitas’s imaginary reconstitution of society. To look at and suggest possible future scenarios for this redundant landscape. Within these scenarios I will instil the very idea of utopia in the architecture. I will address the issues of labour, the loss of the homo faber and public man. To do this I will need to re-imagine the site as a productive region once more, removed from the idea of western industrialism and capitalism, but focused on a sustainable constructive future which incorporates the ideas of living, working and public gathering into a single architectural endeavour. It will be a project charged with the realization of utopia.

First however I find myself looking beyond the examination of just one town and one site. What follows is a study into the works of political/social theorists and architectural practitioners as I piece together a coherent image of our society at present to justify a future based proposal that is both critical of and removed from current social trends.

With the advent of industrialisation towns and cities all across the developed and developing world experienced a major influx of a mostly rural population. Separated from the land and their existing cultural rituals and identities these semi skilled workers were absorbed into the mass of industrial production. Struggling for an identity they accepted the throw away culture of our society and became the eventual consumer of their own labour. This phenomenon of the uprooted rural population for the purpose of industry became so prevalent by the mid-nineteen hundreds that Hannah Arendt coined a phrase to describe these workers, the ‘animal laborans’. This term I explained earlier in this essay as being labourers who feed the never ending cycle of production and consumption, yet creating nothing of permanence and therefore must perpetually be renewed, in this aspect of humanity we are closest to the animal world, in that we exist for the sake of our own reproduction. The act of labour is born of necessity not choice; this then makes the human as labourer a slave to their base needs, a slave to their need to consume. Arendt herself...
describes the labourers as, "objects of industrial production". And through the process of industry Kenneth Frampton, a British Architect, historian and critic, points out, in agreement with Arendt that the modern age has;

"Sacrificed the ideas of permanence and durability to the abundance ideal of the ‘Animal Laboran’, and that we live in a society of labourers in as much as the labour-power has been divided in order to eliminate from the thrust of its natural metabolism the ‘unnatural’ and conscious obstacle of the human artefact.”

With the rise of the social, the disconnect of architecture from public space along with the blurring of lines between labour and work Frampton criticises architecture for falling prey to the Worldliness of the animal laboran and following Arendt, Frampton writes;

“Increasingly buildings come to be designed in response to the mechanics of their erection or, alternatively, processal elements such as tower cranes, elevators, escalators, stairs, refuse chutes, gangways, service cores and automobiles determine the configuration of built form to a far greater extent than the hierarchic and more public criteria of place. And while the space of public appearance comes to be over-run by circulation or inundated at the urban scale by restricted high- speed access, the freestanding, high rise megaliths of the modern city maintain their potential status of “consumer goods”.

So it is, when we consider architecture as an edifice, it is not to be considered just an object, but that its manifestation in the physical world is to be something beyond mere instrumentality. It is to serve and enhance the public criteria of place’ by rejecting the human labourer as slave and instead considering the power of the collective man engaged in public activity. It is here that I refer you to the writing of Richard Sennett a sociologist who’s book ‘The Fall of Public Man’, 1986, deals with the state of man’s public engagement in cities. He writes,

“a res publica stands in general for those bonds of association and mutual commitment which exist between people who are not joined together by ties of family or intimate association; it is the bond of a crowd, of a “people”, of a polity, rather than the bonds of family or friends. As in Roman times, participation in the res publica today is most often a matter of going along, and the forums for this public life, like the city, are in a state of decay.”

It is no surprise to see a correlation between the writing of Sennett and Arendt on this subject as Arendt also believed in the power of collective men,

“The only indispensable material factor in the generation of power is the living together of people. Only where men live so close together that the possibilities of action are always present can power remain with them”

Both Arendt and Sennett display a belief in the need for public space to allow men to gather together to display a collective identity and exercise their political power. In other words we need this space as a platform to effect change upon our politics and our culture. Sennett refers to the Roman forum as
an example of the first democracies place for public gathering. Camillo Sitte, an Austrian architect of the nineteenth century, conducted studies of Rome’s cities and proposed that public space for cities originated here, quoting Aristotle, Sitte wrote, “one cannot use the term ‘city’ for something lacking public buildings and plazas”. If we hold this to be true and except the instrumentality through which our current cities have been constructed can we then call them cities at all? And if not then we must address the issue of the human labourer through architecture.

That the human labourers can be compared to slaves suggest their inability to establish cultural and individual identities within the collective mass of semi-skilled workers. Their very exposure to the mass production and consumption of goods by industry undermines any possibility of establishing a permanent place or sense of self within our ever changing world.

This lack of place, self identity and public space for expression of civic interests are just some of the problems at work in our dystopian society at present. Others that have followed in the wake of Western industrialisation and the creation of the animal labouran include sub-urbanisation, dependance on the car as a result of unreliable/over expensive public transport systems, destruction of the environment along with poorly planned towns and cities leading to urban sprawl and wasteful use of agrarian land. Frampton raises these questions and more in his essay on Architecture at the Turn of the Century, in fact he challenges the very role of architecture in society at present by writing:

“That these issues are ecological and political in nature rather than architectural tends to be supported by the fact that only a very small proportion of the built environment is subject to the intervention of an architect. It is the real estate and home-building industries - aided by banks, bureaucracies and our laissez-faire planning policies - that are jointly responsible for the dispersed and totally chaotic disaggregation of the environment. This sobering fact returns us to the importance of education, because until society becomes more enlightened, little in this regard will fundamentally change.”

Here Frampton displays discontent towards how little influence the architect has over the built environment. He suggests, similarly to Levitas, that through an architectural endeavour a more enlightened society can be brought about. Where Levitas however wants architecture to construct an alternate vision free from ‘the constraints of social policy’, Frampton suggests working within our current social strictures and seeking to reform or revolutionise them. Producing what Ernst Bloch refers to as a “concrete utopia”, a utopia that seeks to resolve and move forward to a historical transformation, as opposed to Levitas’ “abstract utopia”, which is detached from historical and social process, it is perfect in plan yet individualistic and lacking in substance. I feel that the direction of my project lies in the overlap of these ideas, to be both abstract and concrete, based within an imagined future but as a direct response to our current social problems, that in working with Frampton and Levitas’s writings I can justify to myself the path which my design work will now embark upon.

Although this depiction of our society may seem bleak it does contain within itself a sense of hope. For in many forms of utopian cultures witnessed (novel, fiction, movie) their point
How then can we view our own society and create the non-event to begin the change? In this regard I look to hypothetical architectural projects to provide the spark of change. One such example is the work of Raimund Abraham. To me Abraham’s drawings are always visually compelling in their originality, they are deeply personal and don’t try to fit within an excepted professional norm (this being why he is considered an Avant-gardist). At the same time as being personal they are also universal in their representation of idea, place, time and world. Abraham’s drawings cannot be translated into buildings but I feel that is not their intended purpose. They are in fact about a process or method of thinking and working, they challenge others to find their own personal response to universal topics while also showing that these ideas can be expressed in architectural terms. This can then act as a precedent, as a way to engage people within an act of free thinking and personal expression, much like Bloch and Levitas’s depiction of utopia, and with the ability to be rendered physical and real within an architecturally devised space. That the construction of a human edifice can itself elicit a sense of worldliness.

Through my engagement in the second stage of the imaginary reconstitution of society, I have gained a knowledge on our current societal establishment. Within that study I have begun to make tentative steps towards a suggestion for a possible future strategy, utilising architecture as my method. I will summarise it here, the creation of the utopian ideal will be through the realisation of a functioning micro economy within the post industrial landscape. This micro economy must be a long term plan or allow for change to prevent stagnation and redundancy. The collective power of men shall be recognised by the integration of public space to the private sphere of the
house and the public realm of the work place, this will be a live work initiative. The construction and upkeep of the project shall rely on the skills of the homo faber, be locally sourced, manufactured and assembled. Perhaps most importantly of all however is the manner in which this project shall meet the ground and redefine the use of the landfill, the intention to be conscious about all interventions with the land and the public sphere will be embodied within the architectural concepts driving the project. This then leads me to the final stage of my thesis, architecture as method, the realisation of these goals through a charged construction project, aimed at producing new spaces to revolutionise and move away from accepted norms.

15. Camillo Sitte, The Birth of Modern City Planning (Published Mineola, NY: Dover 2006)
Image 1: Derryclare Bogland, Photo Patrick mooney.
Image 1: Polis, Seat of democratic origins, Greece. Sketch, Patrick Mooney.
Architecture as Method

Architecture is something most experience within the public realm. The very act of being in a public place, and therefore presenting your public self within that space, is an act of social participation. The definition of architecture mentions the creation of “edifices for human use”, this to me carries with it a sense of large public spaces, churches or state buildings, something within the public realm but related to the power and authority of our current political system. This worries me as the utopian ideal is already plagued with connotations of patriarchal or authoritarian societies. Therefore I do not wish to overlook the importance of the private realm, and the private self, as a place of reflection and study, to develop, discover or preserve the act of questioning our place in society and how to improve upon it (the utopian method).

The real question now is how do I achieve this idea, of architecture as method? I have identified issues within current society that need reform, that need change. How then do I go about creating that change? To consider the issue of the animal laborans and the monotony of everyday life they experience, unknowing of the world around them that culture and social interest can bring to life.

I have through my reading and writing previous to this become more aware of the need for functioning public space close to areas of collective human gatherings. As Arendt herself states, “Only where men live so close together that ‘the possibilities of action are always present can power remain with them’.” The purpose of the public space would be to encourage self expression and engagement in civic life that lends political power back to the masses, but also to expose political thinkers and decision makers to an architecturally devised space removed from the presence of labour that induces the process of free thinking. This will be linked inextricably to the homo faber as an act of construction in that the building itself becomes the representation of the ideologies of the new society for I cannot create this society myself only the places the people of this society will inhabit and hopefully become influenced by.

I refer here again to the work of Camillo Sitte, whom I mentioned earlier in this essay as an architectural historian of Roman cities, in his work Sitte notes the importance of public space to the functioning of a city and attempts to view the city from the personal experience of individuals within the spaces of the city, not of the city as a machine. What I find interesting about his humanist approach to the study of the Roman forum as a strategic plan is the impact everything existing beyond the forum had and still has on its functional viability for the city. Surrounded on all sides the forum has no direct line of access from the city, only by side streets, this creates a sense of enclosure and presents to the forum on all sides the facades of public buildings reinforcing the authority of the government. Ingrained into the daily life of inhabiting this city is the act...
of civic activity, people are presented with public buildings, libraries, offices of municipal authorities, places of worship, trade sport and living. Every aspect of city life is condensed into this single and central portion of the city, all the while keeping the central plaza empty to prevent disruption of circulation, in so doing the forum is then guaranteed to have large volumes of people gather and traverse through it daily. This central space then assumes the role of public space, created with this architectural intent in mind. Sitte noting this argued that modern city planning should learn from Roman design, he writes, “that the centre of plazas be kept free of impediments to people and their daily movement”. 

I now wish to make the argument that if well placed public space in proximity to collective housing can generate a sense of community and camaraderie as seen in the Bord na Mona worker housing schemes, mentioned earlier, and a public who willingly engage in civic activity due to a well designed city, as seen in Rome, then could we not assume that a new society created to deal with the issue of the animal laboran, their struggle for an identity in society and their disconnect from civic life would benefit from the use of well designed public spaces incorporated into the everyday facets of their lives.

I believe that it falls to the architect and architecture to assume the responsibility of how we engage with public space within our town’s and cities, however, if as architects we currently have very limited involvement in what is constructed around us how then do we proceed to change this? I look to the writings of Paulo Freire, a Portuguese philosophical educator, who’s book ‘Pedagogy of the Oppressed’, proposes a pedagogy (the science and art of education) with a new relationship between teacher, student, and society. This new system he proposes is in fact a revolution, a revolution of a system which he feels is linked to political stances and therefore benefits from keeping a hold on power, controlling elements of society. The first chapter of his book explores how oppression has been justified and how it is overcome through a mutual process between the “oppressor” and the “oppressed”. Examining how the balance of power between the oppressor and the oppressed remains relatively stable, Freire admits that the powerless in society can be frightened of freedom. He writes, 

“Freedom is acquired by conquest, not by gift. It must be pursued constantly and responsibly. Freedom is not an ideal located outside of man; nor is it an idea which becomes myth. It is rather the indispensable condition for the quest for human completion”.

According to Freire, freedom will be the result of praxis (informed action) when a balance between theory and practice is achieved. As architects we bridge the gap between theory and practice, architecture as method for me is that bridge, I can look to a future utopia and design the spaces for it to exist but I can also realise it. Placing the project in a future context removes it from current societal restraints however by engaging with the homo faber, and eliminating the issues of labour from our society a utopian reality can exist, if designed within accepted or newly proven construction methods. That is to say architecture must act to revolutionize society.

One such architect who has embraced the idea of architecture as a social educator and a tool for revolutionizing society was Cedric Price. His works focused on an idea of architecture that would change in time according to its use. An important aspect of Price’s work was his concern with the possibility of enabling human creativity, the homo faber, through an environment
devoid of the usual spatial constraints of traditional architecture. Price sought to alter the way in which architecture engaged with society and how people engaged with society through architecture.

In 1966 Price published his plans for a new regional education network called the Potteries Thinkbelt. The project’s name was derived from the site itself: an industrial landscape of North Staffordshire, England, which during the economic crisis of the fifties and sixties that devastated England’s manufacturing sector, the pottery industry collapsed. Leaving behind desolation, unemployment and an entropic landscape of pollution and redundant, under used infrastructure.

The Potteries Thinkbelt was more than an idea to reuse an industrial site and its surrounding infrastructure. Price wanted to convert the old railways and facilities into an educational network for twenty thousand students. By recycling an industrial landscape as the basis for an educational system in order to advance a postindustrial region, Price highlighted the productive status of knowledge and education removing from play the issue of the labourer from a labour driven society. The Potteries, poetically, would no longer produce material goods for society, but rather science, innovation and information in the form of applied research.

Through the Potteries Thinkbelt Price sought to alter the perception of value in production and increase the capacity for human experience and interaction with production. The irony of the project lies in the fact it was considered to be a social utopia. However now the values and ideologies driving the Potteries Thinkbelt offers a remarkable critique upon the way capitalism today has subsumed all human subjectivity within its productive cycle, the project therefore is the manifestation of Arendt’s writing of labour in society.

“At the very core of this architectural and urban space was life itself, not programmes or function”, said Price, “and to design was to condition life by means of devices that went beyond the realm of architectural space and form”.

For Price the presence of life within his project meant developing an architectural space capable of expressing life’s indeterminacy. To reflect the unpredictability of human actions and reactions, the architecture of the Thinkbelt assumes a modular design to retain “a calculated uncertainty” of use and occupancy. Learning from his earlier theoretical work of the Fun Palace, Price adopted the language of industrial architecture, in which the visual representation of a container is blank so as to be indifferent to its contents or shifting programme. This radical new form of architectural expression lends weight and depth to a theoretical project. Despite its utopian goals it was and still is a realisable project. Price developed an aesthetic for expressing this blank architecture, as a series of drawings juxtaposed over images of the post industrial landscape.

The potential of the Potteries Thinkbelt is its fundamental political value, to make visible the issues of labour in contemporary society and the ability to see a university and even a city as places of play, change and political activity. The Thinkbelt shows us the value of public space and social integration because of the economic value of the public sphere. Therefore projects like the Thinkbelt help us to question the production driven society that is capitalism. At this time of worldwide economic crisis when capitalism cannot sustain itself or its
labour force a radical revision of this society is needed.

The idea of revolutionising or radicalizing space brings to mind the work of Henri Lefebvre and his writing, ‘The Production of Space’, 1974. Here Lefebvre asserts that,

“a revolution that does not produce a new space has not realised its full potential. When a society revolutionises itself, a new spatial paradigm is created.”

Contained within this statement there is much freedom to design for a new society, as before, removed from the social strictures of our society at present. In fact Lefebvre and Levitas share a common belief on the topic of envisioning new realities. Lefebvre writes,

“seeking a way towards a different space of different mode of life and of a new mode of production. This straddles the breach between science and utopia, reality and identity, conceived and lived. It aspires to surmount these oppositions by exploring the dialectic relationship between ‘possible’ and ‘impossible’ and this both objectively and subjectively.”

This statement leads me full circle, from the beginning of my thesis with the imaginary reconstitution of society and the application of architecture as a means of revolutionizing this society, or creating an entirely new one. By justifying my ability to use architecture as a means of envisioning a better world, through drawing, theory and concept, but to also realise it by careful planning and understanding of construction methods. I have begun to lay down the path that I wish to follow as an architect. That the consideration of all men and how we interact with the world both physically, through constructed edifices, and subjectively, through the fundamental activities of modern man, is of the utmost importance to our continued existence in the world and that architecture can play a large role in defining this existence.
Image 1: Derryclare Bogland, Photo Patrick mooney.
Primer Testing

Utopian Landscapes:

Radicallizing form,
Radicallizing society.
Constant Nieuwenhuys New Babylon provided inspiration in the questioning and rationale of form.

Initially known as Dériville “drift city”, it was later renamed as New Babylon.

Henri Lefebvre explained: “a New Babylon -- a provocative name, since in the Protestant tradition Babylon is a figure of evil. New Babylon was to be the figure of good that took the name of the cursed city and transformed itself into the city of the future.”
Site

Identifying a Landscape:

A short study of Irish Boglands.
Galway:
Ferbane Briquette Factory: 1957-2001
Shannonbridge Power Station: 2004 - Present

Tullamore:
Rhode Power Station: 1963-2003

Grand Canal:
1759-Present

Image 1: Ireland peat deposit sites.
Sketch, Patrick Mooney.

Image 2: Part Map Ireland, Area of Bogs in the Midlands.
Photo Montage, Patrick Mooney.
An Industrial Process.

Drains are cut into the virgin bog to begin the slow process of draining the bog, during this process up to 70% of the bogs total water content can be siphoned off into a large network of ditches constructed at the perimeter of the bog. Virgin bogs consist of 90% water and 10% organic matter, some partly decayed others as whole tree trunks or objects of former societies e.g. bog bodies. The machines, known as ditch diggers, sent onto the virgin bog must have an extremely low Psi (roughly 7-9 Psi) to prevent their submersion in the swap like ground conditions of the bog. This low Psi is achieved through intelligent engineering and light weight construction of the machines, carried out in workshops found locally to the bogs they operate on.

The draining of a virgin bog can take up to 20 years in that time the drains need to be re-dug several times, as the shear weight of the bog itself closes the cuts in the earth. From start to finish the draining of a virgin bog can cause the bogs density to almost half, dropping the height of the raised bog by upwards of a metre.
A Locomotive Industry.

Establishing a large and efficient rail network allowed Bord Na Móna to efficiently mill peat and extract it safely from the bogs. An extensive 3 ft (914 mm) narrow gauge network is operated by the company in the midlands. Bord na Móna has an extensive network, which has carried up to 5 million tonnes annually, and is larger than the main network (passenger and freight) operated by Iarnród Éireann. Bord na Móna has one of the largest industrial railways in Europe. Permanent railways run from a hundred peat bogs, each covering hundreds of acres, to power stations, briquette factories, moss peat factories and roadside tipplers. On most of the bogs, temporary tracks are laid along the piles of peat the full length of most bogs. Before a pile has been cleared, another temporary line will have been laid a few hundred feet farther along. More than 200 miles (over 300 km) of temporary track are laid each year and the Bord have specialist track fabrication workshops, tracklaying machines, and a fleet of dedicated locomotives and rolling stock on hand.
Ferbane Power Station and Briquette factory.

Ferbane (Irish: Féar Bán, meaning “white grass”) is a small town on the north bank of the River Brosna in County Offaly, Ireland, between Birr and Athlone. The name of the town is said to come from the white bog cotton which grows abundantly in the surrounding Bog Of Allen. Ireland’s first milled-peat fired power station was commissioned by the Electricity Supply Board and Bord Na Móna at Ferbane in 1957. Due to an over harvesting of peat the company decided in 1958 to begin the production of peat briquettes from the milled peat surplus. Additional drying plants, seen as the large silver silos in the photo above, were constructed to dry the peat in order for it to be compressed into briquettes. Most of the construction work and design for the project was carried out in the nearby Borra workshop and drawing offices. The peat industry in Ireland was becoming a self sufficient entity, providing jobs and security for people along with, energy, heat and revenue for the country. Due to a shrinking supply of peat in the area and the need to improve production capacities Ferbane power station was closed in 2001.
Ferbane Housing Billet Scheme.

By 1960 the amount of annual peat required at harvesting had become quite extensive, supply was needed for three power stations as well as two separate briquette factories and moss peat for the horticulture industry. A large amount of man power was needed to harvest the peat and operate machinery on and off the bogs. These men were expected to work long hours, starting early and finishing late, during the summer months at the height of the harvesting season. Due to the difficulty in traveling to and from the work sites on the bogs Bord Na Mona constructed temporary workers houses, or billets, to accommodate the staff harvesting the peat. Built during the sixties these buildings were long portal frame structures, composed of steel, concrete, timber and corrugated metal, they would have housed twenty four to thirty men at a time served their purpose extremely well. The Construction of the billets would later be realised as the pre-cursor for the Bord Na Móna worker housing schemes designed by Frank Gibney.
Image 1: Boora Workshops, 2014  
Photo Patrick Mooney.

Image 2: Locomotive engine, decommissioned, 2014  
Photo Patrick Mooney.

Image 3+4: Railway lines serving Boora workshops, 2014  
Photo Patrick Mooney.

Image 5: 2012, Ferbane Briquette Factory  
Photo, Patrick Mooney.

Image 6: Ferbane Briquette Factory  
Photo, Patrick Mooney.
“The new study of architecture is a discovery of knowledge about existence. As design teaching, it is the song of songs of harmony. As a social teaching, it is a strategy of balance. This study of building is not a study of style, it is not a constructivist system, nor is it the study of technological miracles. It clarifies equally the concerns of the physical, the psychological, the material and the economic. It explores, demarcates and orders the force fields of the individual, the family and society. Finally, all architectural design is subject to fate in the form of the landscape: as designers we fulfil the destiny of the landscape.”

Hannes Meyer, Bauhaus and Society 1929.

“Architecture could construct at least one alternative vision of what an inclusive society could look like: free from the constraints of contemporary social policy and politics demonstrating the potential of Utopia as method to change the way we think about our society”.

Ruth Levitas, Utopia as Method The Imaginary Reconstitution of society 2013.
Site Aerial View, Site Plan 1:5000, Site Section. Early site investigation drawings, tracking changing ground levels over time.
Concept and Design.
Located behind the landfill facing onto the bogland and away from the main roadway my project sought to use the monumentality of the landfill itself to establish its presence.

The landfill and the boglands edges are all re-worked to further enhance the function of the boglands site and to announce a human presence or manipulation of the landscape, they are not naturally occurring phenomenon.
Work - Drawing offices for mechanical and civil engineers.

Work - Machine Workshops

Action - Public route through building, main atrium space to connect between levels.

Action - Public recreation area, pools, baths and changing areas, viewing platform of landscape.

Education - Lecture and Lab spaces for students and apprentices.

Labour - Water treatment facility for landfills, leachate and waste water.

Work - Study areas for students and apprentices

Action - Public route through building, main atrium space to connect between levels.

Labour - Temporary accommodation for students, staff and public.

Private rooms, shared communal areas and kitchens.
The organisation of the plan was to be an experiment in the human condition, by crossing, interlocking and weaving different disciplines throughout the building I sought to generate public spaces activated by people engaged in the thought processes of work, labour and action.

The projects construction is driven by new CLT (cross laminated timber) building methods, achieving long spans braced and cantilevered from the landfill.
Cross Section, 1:100. Shows core structures supporting live/work areas above public spaces, along with connection to landfill.
External perspective, phenomenological connection to landscape.
Internal perspective, open bright work spaces, connected to larger public areas.
Internal perspective, public baths with connection to work spaces.
The cantilevering cores supported a building which sought to establish a liminal connection between the boglands and public baths with the work and education spaces suspended above, these spaces were linked through large voids in the main structure.
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