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An Equivocal Presence
Elizabeth Shotton


Littered in the tens of thousands across the Irish landscape, seemingly abandoned at random in farmer’s fields, are overgrown partially built figures of widely varying dimension known as faerie forts, or raths as the Irish would have it, which are compelling despite their ubiquity and obvious state of neglect. Now understood as defensive fortifications dating from 400-1000 AD, at least by academics, this very ordinary construction acquired an affiliation with the faeries, more properly referred to in Irish as the Tuatha dé Danaan, the people of the other world, in the medieval period. An association so enduring that it survives in contemporary Irish culture and compelling enough to ensure the continued presence of these artifacts. For though a handful of these structures have been excavated, rebuilt and preserved to be re-presented to the public, most tellingly the tourist population, the vast majority remain irrevocably entangled in the fabric of the common landscape pushing aside field boundaries, cultivation patterns and even road systems with their defiant presence [Fig. 1].

These curious structures survive due to the mythology attached to them as equally the mythology survives because of their resolute yet equivocal presence. Their equivocal nature seems key here as the tidied, re-presented versions of ring fort, though offered up comprehensively with fully developed and possibly more authoritative histories attached, have generally expunged any associations with the faerie myths. Only their less valued, less accessible kindred, neglected and overgrown, remain rooted in this mythological association. The faerie myths are in truth a mutation of the much older Celtic lore of the dead, more properly associated with cairns, translated to the neglected and overgrown rath when their former use had fallen from common memory. A forgetfulness that enabled their presence to become sufficiently equivocal to precipitate unlikely associations, to enable a more active imaginative engagement through conjecture. A process that likely saved both rath and historic religious beliefs from complete extinction and transformed the ordinary into the extraordinary.

Fig. 1: Monachee Fort (Colfer)
The interest of these forts is the capacity of ordinary artifacts to inspire such imaginative leaps of imagination through the process of association and, equally, the fluidity of connective tissue created between things past and things present. Complex constructions indeed to achieve such feats, yet truly ordinary in both material and contextual terms. The contemporary interest in the ‘complexity of the ordinary, a term coined by the Smithsons many years ago, is rife with contradictions as the ‘ordinary’ by its very nature is something we are deeply familiar with, part of a perceptual field firmly established, which enables us to overlook its particularity and poignancy. But these humble and neglected artifacts manage to achieve presence through a form of equivocation which demands resolution in our minds, leading to associations and speculations no matter how seemingly fanciful.

Thus to speak of the ‘ordinary’ or the everyday, is to embroil oneself in a discussion of the nature of perception and understanding. For what we, as designers, contend with is not simply the physical reality of a place but equally the contextual field of associations and memories which can be evoked. The complex web of associations contained within our mental landscape influences how the physical world is experienced and the varied meanings this experience will have for each of us. How then to reveal the complexity of the place, or the ‘ordinary’ and familiar, to imbue particularity into the not very particular? One means is to extend its imaginative context, which is the range of associations one intuitively experiences when engaging with the object. But to achieve this one must forgo the desire for clarity or intelligibility that work against the expansion of the imaginative context.

Of similar interest to this discussion is the Doherty House of Co. Derry, Northern Ireland [Fig. 2] which sits uneasily in its situation, being neither a companion to the typical Irish suburban development surrounding it nor strictly authoritative regarding a definite past by which to justify it. Like the artist William Doherty’s own photographic works, for whom the house was built, where the ubiquitous is rendered visible through partial imagery or unnatural over-saturation of colour or contrast, this place demands our attention in an effort to clarify this troubling uncertainty. Merleau Ponty describes attention as being part of the perceptual process, a focusing to achieve knowledge, or as he describes; to give rise to the knowledge-bringing event [Merleau Ponty, 18]. And thus it is that the ubiquitous and ordinary is rendered present to us, by virtue of the uncertainty of the equivocal which demands reconciliation with prior knowledge through an imaginative engagement.

The critical interest in this work is how such a state is achieved not through overgrown neglect and forgetfulness, as was the case of our faerie forts, but through conscious design on the part of the architect, Tomas de Paor. Earlier thoughts on the subject by Venturi would suggest that the overt, or even covert, use of symbols latent with prior associations in an unconventional manner would achieve such a condition. Yet the work that resulted on the heels of *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, most especially the post-modern work, was less equivocal than it was contradictory, more didactic or even ironic rather than evasive in the manner of the Doherty House. It is the quality of evasiveness that makes this work stand apart from associations to either this outdated architectural theory or any clear reference that could provide stability of meaning.

The question then becomes what precisely is it that makes this project so visually troubling as to demand engagement and reconciliation. References could be drawn, and likely are present in ones perceptual
If one happens to be native born Irish, regarding the historic lineage of the work. Standing defiantly apart from its suburban neighbours, askew from the rigour of road systems and plot lines, choosing instead land-form as its guiding geometry, the Doherty House establishes its prior presence, its prior right to this landscape eliciting associations with the mid-sized Irish country houses of the 17th and 18th century. These historic constructions, established under the influence of the Palladian ideal villa as perfectly rendered object within a field, remain coherent within the now denser contemporary developments precisely because of their anomalous positioning. Yet the Doherty House in County Derry is only now being completed by de Paor Architects, the newest addition to a developing suburb. One might be tempted to accuse de Paor of direct reference, a la Venturi, yet the truth has more interest. The design consciously made use of the landscape itself, for both view to and from the house, rather than the road system prior to the development of any of the surrounding buildings. The introduction of these new houses prior to the completion of design forced the geometry of the Doherty House to shift subtly in its siting to reconstitute a clear view of landscape rather than allow the compromise of this initial governing principle. And this is the first and most critical conclusion one can draw about this work. That despite its apparent reference of the traditional country house it was not the adoption of form, as in Venturi’s work, that establishes the association but rather a similarity in the underlying principles which give rise to half recalled memories.

In a like manner the design is predicated on a sincere faith of the pre-eminence of form over function, again a reference more closely aligned with Palladio, that of the singular and perfectly rendered object within a landscape, rather than the 18th century Irish country houses it evokes. Though these historic houses also drew on much the same ideology, resulting in constructions such as the striking Woodlands House, Co. Dublin with its perfect 42-foot square cubic form [Craig, 90-92] which is undoubtedly the reason for the apparent equivalence. Yet de Paor extends the thinking to a more extreme position beyond the obvious steadfast foursquare form with its Georgian scale apertures, which aptly recall these stately houses, overlaying this with the replication of an identical façade in every orientation [Fig. 3] thus denying the complexity of the plan within [Fig. 4]. Even Ledwithstown House, Co. Longford [Craig, 98-100] which notionally adopts a similar façade strategy ultimately allows both the functionality of the plan and stylistic concerns to undermine the extremity of the logic, resulting in false apertures and an articulation of entrance condition. But de Paor succumbs to neither conceit and instead creates an object which both drives the organization of the plan into a subservient position and, in its disposition of façade elements and constancy of elevation which denies even the articulation of a common door, creates a figure which is irresolute in terms of both its frontality and its function. The object thus created develops an equivocal presence with its immediate context, revealing little of its logic to passersby and deflecting any simple interpretation.
Similarities to the traditional country house multiple as one looks closer, from the thickness of corners to the suppression of cornice detail, a particularly Irish trait, and to the improbable central location of the chimney stack and Georgian scaled windows. All could find reference to any number of fine old houses to be found in Ireland. And yet not as there seems a simultaneous denial of all reference through the precise and explicitly contemporary detailing at each turn. The tautness of aluminum framed glazing to the plain grey render [Fig. 5] in combination with windows operating as doors seem, in their lack of articulation, to deny even occupation, eliciting instead more ruinous states and vacancy. Equally the overtly shallow roof profile which all but disappears as one approaches, and only achievable through modern roofing materials, contradicts any historic associations. All of which achieves a seemingly explicit and intentional undermining of direct association through modern construction methods.

Fig. 5: Window detail, Doherty House (de Paor)

The Doherty House is neither a mimicry of old traditions, nor is it original if this word is understood to mean without a frame of reference. Hence its troubling character as it stands as a newly authoritative object within a contemporary field of the suburban condition. The architect de Paor, currently residing in Dublin but more native to the west counties of Ireland, states that his intentions were to ‘build a memory’,
something recalled from his own youth of the ubiquitous Irish country house. Recognizing that each was built with extraordinary specificity and character his intention was to spurn any actual reference by looking at none and thus to achieve the inherent truth of them all through the medium of half recalled memory. His only specific reference comes not from Ireland but from America, through the image entitled ‘Christina’ painted by Andrew Wyeth, which sets a house in the background as a positioning or reference point in the landscape. An intention translated, in the case of the Doherty House, to a reference point in a landscape of memory and association.

Two apparently disparate examples yet both linked through their power to evoke unlikely associations, which inspire and engage the imagination of the viewer, to reveal truths regarding a wider context, both physical and imaginative. A context described by a landscape of memory, aided by a certain amount of forgetfulness, of associations and imaginative conjectures which are critical to an active engagement with the inherent complexity of the ordinary.

References


