Title | Extended Territory: a review of housing at Kilmeena Village by Cox Power Architects
Authors(s) | Murphy, Orla
Publication date | 2012-03
Publication information | Irish Architectural Review, 3 (2012/2013):
Publisher | The Royal Institute of the Architects of Ireland
Item record/more information | http://hdl.handle.net/10197/7101
Extended territory: a review of housing at Kilmeena Village by Cox Power Architects

Orla Murphy

According to geographer Kevin Whelan the late-emerging Irish chapel village was made up of a loose collection of buildings including a Roman Catholic church (usually situated at a cross-roads) and other public functions such a school, public house, post office and GAA club. According to Whelan, ‘the urban experience of many Irish people was limited to these unpretentious village structures.’ The character of rural villages like these was explored by fourth year students in the School of Architecture in UCD last autumn. Students made a study of five villages arranged around the Slieve Bloom Mountains in Counties Laois and Offaly. Over the course of the semester, students and tutors alike discovered that the villages are as much a part of their surrounding landscape as a gathering point for the people who inhabit their extended territory.

Whereas the urban structure of the town or city can be clearly understood to have a dense form and a periphery that can at least be somewhat defined, neither of these characteristics may apply to the village. In some ways, the rural village is both urban and rural at the one time. This distinction between the town and village is not one of scale but of essence; the village is not of the landscape, it is the landscape and conversely those who live in the landscape have an extended but particular connection to the village. Architect David Power gives an example of this intermeshed rural/urban structure in his description of the use of the word ‘street’ in a rural context to connote the farmyard, as opposed to a public connecting space.\(^{1}\)

This reading puts paid to an urban tendency to believe that a communal settlement must always be evidenced by a dense built fabric. As can be seen in the work of their practice over the last twenty years, Jim Cox and David Power have thought long and hard about the subtle shades of urban and rural; about what makes a village and what constitutes a community in the contemporary rural context.

The design of fourteen houses and a community hall in the chapel village of Kilmeena is a built outcome of this slow and careful research. Commissioned by Mayo County Council in 2006 to design a ‘village centre’ the architects initial proposal to build a formal street edge of terraced housed seemed too rigid to fit into the more open and fluid model of the rural village as part of the extended landscape of West Mayo. Like a tide, the footprints of several distinct clachan settlements – evidence of a stressed community at the edge of the world and at the edge of starvation – appeared and vanished from the six inch Ordnance Survey maps of the parish of Kilmeena in the late nineteenth century. This clustered settlement pattern informed Cox Power’s concept for a new rural multi-dwelling pattern – one that connects with and reinforces the implied gathering of existing buildings; that uses proximity, shelter and enclosure to moderate the effects of a severe Atlantic seaboard climate; one that is open enough to allow for future extension and growth, both to its loose street side and to its clustered hard surfaced rear.

Further evidence of the architects’ understanding of the built cultural landscape can be seen in their consistent attitude to material and detailing that applies equally to the buildings, walls, ground, threshold and enclosure. The scheme is a loose arrangement of five different house types. Their shallow plans maximise light in a harsh climate but their compact proportion is also the right fit for the place. Houses (with the exception of four to the
street side) are not terraced but instead hold hands, connected by rendered walls, which are extensions of the buildings. This detail in particular recalls an architectural language common to traditional rural settlement. Existing trees knit the new houses into the place. Eaves and ridges are tightly detailed, entrance doors simply articulated. A simple border of gravel denotes a zone of privacy between the public and the private realm. A willow plantation to the south west of the site processes all drainage on site, while also providing amenity, timber for coppicing and shelter from the prevailing south-westerly wind.

As yet only ten of the fourteen houses have been completed and the community centre fit-out is yet to be finished, but the open structure of the village design allows for this future adaption without a significant impact on the first completed phase.

The apparent simplicity of this project belies a sophisticated attitude to the countryside; one that has refreshingly moved on from a polarised view of rural or urban and proposes a way of dwelling that is perhaps the best of both.

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2 David Power, in conversation with the author, February 2012.