Architecture in the West of Ireland: The Art, the Land, and the People

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E-1: Can articulate the connections between the arts and ethnic or national identity.

E-2: Can articulate the impact of land and natural resources on economics and the arts.

Introduction

At first thought, Ireland may not be at the top of the list when one thinks of the great architectural wonders of the world, but the buildings in the west of Ireland have a powerful and unique story to tell nonetheless. Most people are familiar with the vision of the quaint thatched roof cottage sitting in peaceful solitude amongst the rolling hills of the rural landscape. However, there is much more to this than just a pretty picture. Studying what people build can tell us about their needs for shelter, security, livelihood, and spiritual development, among other important necessities.

I selected the topic of architecture in Ireland as a means to observe the culture and history of this country. The Irish are a people who have a strong devotion and connection to their land; the kind of structures they build on it can tell us much about who they were in the past and who they are today. Since it is not possible to address all of Ireland's architecture in this one paper, I have elected to narrow my focus to a discussion of the area known as Connemara on the west coast of the country. It is not an official district or a strictly defined region. Consequently, various definitions of what areas comprise Connemara exist, but a general description would be that it covers the western portion of County Galway in the southwest of Connacht Province (Aalen, Whelan & Stout, 1997). This land almost seems to be a world unto itself, with its unique physical landscape and rich history.

This paper will attempt to showcase architecture in the west of Ireland through three different perspectives. First to be addressed is how the geology and environment of the rural landscape has affected the architecture that has been

produced throughout time. The field of vernacular architecture looks at how local resources are used to build structures in order to address the needs of the local people. The materials used, the construction methods, and the actual form the structures take, reflects the traditions and lifestyle of the inhabitants. In this case, this paper will look at how the people of Connemara have shaped the world around them by using what was available.

Secondly, many types of construction contribute to the success of human settlements. This area of architecture also includes structures that are part of town planning and urban development. In addition to housing for residents, commercial buildings, churches, and schools, other construction such as roads, piers, and bridges are vitally important to the development of a town. Having these elements in place contributes to an infrastructure that brings progress to the people living in these areas. Improved communications, improved transportation, the ability to import and export goods, and the consequence of opening up previously unused territories are just some of the benefits these physical structures can help bring about. This facet of architecture will be viewed through the contributions of two people who were instrumental in the development of the Connemara region, John D'Arcy and Alexander Nimmo.

Lastly, the artistic perspective of some Irish architectural structures will be discussed. By looking closely at the aesthetics of buildings we can see some of the character of those that built them. Regional diversity is prominent but we can see that what has been produced is a connection to the collective national identity. Frank Lloyd Wright, the American architect, said that "architecture is that great

living creative spirit which from generation to generation, from age to age, proceeds, persists, creates, according to the nature of man, and his circumstances as they change. That is really architecture".

The Impact of Land and Natural Resources

The landscape in the west of Ireland is made up of several different geological elements. In some areas, the land is quite flat, characterized by bogs and peat-filled lakes. In others, there are several prominent mountain ranges, with the Twelve Pins dominating in Connemara. In general, there is very little soil and ancient glacial action has made exposed rock surfaces barren and rough (Aalen et al., 1997, p. 329). Near the coastline the land can be very rocky with separate patches of sand dunes and sandy beaches (Knight, 2000, p. 150). Also in the coastal area the high rate of rainfall and the harsh Atlantic winds has limited tree growth (Aalen et al., 1997, p. 329). However, in the pre-Christian era, vast forests abounded. Many of the areas that are now bogs used to be covered in trees. In fact, while harvesting peat from the bogs, great trunks of trees long gone are sometimes found (Joyce, 1908, p.2). The landscape as a whole shows the combined effects of glacial erosion and deposits, giving the land its distinct character (Knight, p.151).

Vernacular architecture is a field that studies the methods of construction which use local materials to build needed local structures. This type of architecture evolves over time to reflect the environmental, cultural, and historical context in which it exists. The west of Ireland is a rich example of this as the inhabitants have a strong physical connection to the land in which they live. The styles in which they

build, and the materials they use, are directly influenced by the landscape around them.

In a reflection of the environment in ancient Ireland, the earliest of buildings were made of stone, without mortar (Joyce, 1908, p.290). These stones were not chiseled or carved but were skillfully fit together in their natural state to create a solid structure (Joyce, p291). These were generally beehive shaped, built upwards towards a conical top. There would usually have been a hole left in the roof as an outlet for smoke and one strong pole used in the center to support the structure (Joyce, p. 293). These stone structures were created not only for domestic purposes, but also military, utility, and religious. Some of these can still be seen today but most are in ruins (Joyce, p.290).

A curious type of stone structure found in many parts of Ireland, as well as in the west, is the round tower. Most have been dated between the 5th and 13th centuries with a majority thinking they were built by Christians (Fergusson, 1885, p. 232). The buildings themselves are towers from 60 to 150 feet high and from 12 to 20 feet in diameter, with the top being conical. The inside contained 6 or 7 floors and they were most often wooden or masonry that had ladders enabling access to each level. Each of the stories had one small window with the top floor usually having four. Interestingly, the door was placed about 10 feet from the ground and a ladder was used to reach it (Joyce, 1908, p. 160).

The mystery of the round towers is that no one is exactly sure what their purpose was. Whenever they have been found, they always seem to be in connection to a religious site. Joyce speculates that they were used as safe places to keep

church valuables in case of attack as books, shrines, and relics were precious and generally not replaceable (1908). He also suggests another use for these structures as watch towers. When enemies approached, the people inside the tower may have used its height to drop heavy rocks, enabling them to hold off a short attack fairly well.

For a period of time, when there were still standing forests, there were some structures also made of wicker work. For a round house, many long poles would be placed in a circle. Then branches and twigs would be collected and then woven tightly in between the poles. The entire outer surface was then plastered over and then whitewashed with lime (Joyce, 1908, p. 291). Limestone has had many uses throughout the ages, but one that continues even to today is as a whitener for buildings. The limestone is burned to ash in kilns, and then mixed with water to create the whitewash. It enables dwellings to have a neat and clean appearance.

As time went on, square and rectangular buildings came into use as well. In the western coastal areas, the walls of the house would have been made of stones (limestone and granite was common) and would have been built quite low, with the roof within arm's reach (Aalen et al., 1997, p. 149). As a binding agent, mortar of clay and lime became popular for durability and insulation (Aalen et al., p.154). Since the time in which timber had become scarce, it was only used in the construction of the roof (Aalen et al., p.155). The roof would then have been thatched, made of different materials depending on the area. Straw was used for roofing from very early on. Rye or wheat was found to be more durable than oat straw, but reeds were used if no other straw was available (Mayo-Ireland, 2007). In

the west, cottages had stone gables that were built up to the apex of the roof. A sod layer or "scraw" was laid down on the roof first to improve heat insulation, with the thatch then being carefully and neatly placed on top. This thatch was then tied down by ropes that were weighted with rocks or pegged to the cottage walls (Mullane, 2006, p.10). Roped thatching helped keep the material in place, especially in high wind areas.

In rural areas, houses were generally very small and consisted of just one room. Aalen, et al., suggests that this type of home evolved from the older circular or oval plans, beginning with the stone beehive structures (1997, p.150). In some areas of the west, cows, pigs and poultry were brought into these one room houses at night (Mayo-Ireland, 2007). Later, these homes developed into the traditional cottage. They were one-storey, rectangular structures, that were only one room in width, but usually three rooms total. Each room would open into the next without a common hallway, with the kitchen in the center room. The animals were not forgotten in these larger homes and often times one of the end rooms would have been used as a cow shed or byre (Aalen et al., 1997, p. 148). This end of the house was called the bottom end, and it had a sloping floor which often had an outlet to the outside, for obvious reasons. If it is hard to imagine humans sharing their living space directly with farm animals, a bit of Irish folklore holds that sharing a house with a cow would keep the house warmer and in addition, make the cow give more milk (Mayo-Ireland, 2007).

For protection, the house itself would have been situated where the small windows would be opposite the strong winds (Mayo-Ireland, 2007) and the

entrances placed only on the side walls, not the ends, in order to hold off the elements. Another safeguard used against the wind was to build the stone gables on the ends of the house slightly up above the thatch so the roof wouldn't be torn off. Sometimes the thatch was even secured to the walls by strips of mud and plaster (Aalen et al., 1997, p. 152).

Not surprisingly, these small homes had very little furniture. Generally, there would be one large table or a few small ones and a few movable seats. Pallets used for beds would be placed around the room, as near to the hearth as possible (Joyce, 1908, p. 297). Some of these older homes had alcoves or "bed-outshots" that could be seen from the outside. They were customarily used to accommodate a bed and would have been near the hearth (Aalen et al., 1997).

By the 19th and 20th centuries, people were looking to enlarge and improve their housing. Instead of tearing down and building completely new structures, it was more economical to add new rooms to the existing ones. Although, this brought the problem of heating the extended living space and so additional hearths and chimneys had to be constructed as well. Another way to add more living area to a house was to build a second floor. This could be done over the whole length of the building or only over some rooms. However, most homes would remain only one room in width. By looking at many farmhouses today in the west, the original one story structure can be identified amongst the added portions (Aalen et al., 1997, p.156).

Around this time period, the use of thatched roofs started to go on the decline. What had once been an economical and efficient method for sheltering

buildings gave way to slated roofs made out of thinly shaped rock. Slated roofs were seen as more modern and more worthy of a progressive town. Later into the 20th century the type of grasses that were used for thatching became scarce and harder to replace (Mullane, 2006, p.9). Some have even resorted to covering over a thatched roof with corrugated iron sheeting (Mayo-Ireland, 2007).

The Impact of Town Planning and Urban Development

When John D'Arcy first came to the area he would eventually call Newtown Clifden, he said it was inhabited by "wild people" and that the mountains were a haven for "smugglers, deserters, and outlaws (Villiers-Tuthill, 1992, p.13)". In reality, these people would have been living in much the same conditions as others in the west. They would have had little land and their thatched cottages would have been one room. Often, couples with five or six children would live together; sometimes this even included grandparents. Their clothing would be spare and many had no shoes (Villiars-Tuthill, p. 15). When D'Arcy inherited a sizable amount of land in Connemara, he felt it would be a logical and profitable place to create a town, as well as provide relief to the people.

He began his endeavor around 1812, but by 1821 the new town had only one building with a slated roof, one two storey house, and a small amount of thatched cabins. Clifden's isolation from the rest of Ireland was severely hindering its development. Adding to this misfortune was a devastating famine as the potato crop had failed again. These were the conditions in all of Ireland, especially the west. In response, the government set up a Relief Committee to aid the people. D'Arcy aimed to take advantage of this committee and any other government organization that

was available in order to help the people and propel Clifden into a new era (Villiers-Tuthill, 1992, p.13).

Even though Clifden was situated on an ideal spot at the top of Ardbear Bay, it could not fully take advantage of this position or of any of the natural resources in the area. Valuable fishing was right off the coast, but there were no boats big enough to harvest them as the lack of a suitable pier prevented larger boats from docking. Without a pier, no boats that could carry sizable loads could navigate the inlet and dock in order to import or export goods. Additionally, there was no road that could connect Clifden with any other town to facilitate trade or even efficient communication by land. Establishing good quality roads would also allow the people to take advantage of more previously inaccessible land for farming. These shortcomings seriously stunted the growth of the town. So in 1821 John D'Arcy wrote to the Fishery Board, which was established in 1819 to promote the Irish fishing industry, in order to obtain a grant to build a pier. His request was granted, and the job was referred to an engineer by the name of Alexander Nimmo.

Nimmo, who came to Ireland from Scotland in 1811, had already mapped out much of the area in great detail when working for the Bog Commission. He also had a remarkable reputation as an engineer and possessed many valuable skills for his position such as bridge building, carpentry, drainage and civil engineering (Villiers-Tuthill, 2006, p.3). Unfortunately, the roads in Connemara at the time left much to be desired. They were very narrow and rough, and only suitable for travel by horseback or on foot. To complicate matters, in order to avoid building bridges, roads were originally created in a wandering manner, having no regard for the

shortest route (Villiers-Tuthill, p.18). Nimmo understood the necessity of having good quality roads and piers and he set about the construction of these amenities for Clifden.

In the year 1815, Clifden was so secluded from the rest of the west that it had not contributed any revenue to the state, and "its agriculture was so imperfect that scarcely a stone [14 U.S. pounds] of oats could be got (White, 1849, p. 17)". However, by 1830, ships were coming from as far away as London and Liverpool with imports such as salt, iron, pitch, tar, hemp, groceries, and manufactured goods. Large amounts of grain were exported from Clifden to other parts of Ireland and England (Villiers-Tuthill, 1992, p.17). Many important goods had become available at the market. Up until 1825, Nimmo had to import oats for his horses from Galway. But in 1826, a mill, brewery, and distillery were built near each other and provided a ready market for grain. Storehouses were being built along the pier that held herring and grains for export (Villiers-Tuthill, 2006, p.126). Clifden was heading for a new chapter in its story.

Alexander Nimmo was also responsible for laying a road that ran from Clifden to Galway. Not only did the construction help to employ many men, but the road opened up many areas that were claimed for farming (Villiers-Tuthill, 2006, p. 19). The road was so badly needed that the workers were continuously inconvenienced by horses and carts full of goods and produce trying to get to the next town, all the way up to the very place the men were trying to clear (White, 1849, p. 18).

Before long, the original population of under 100 had risen to two thousand (Villiers-Tuthill, 1992, p.22). It was noted that in 1826, Clifden boasted 30 shops, around 100 two storey homes roofed with Bangor slates, and 2 hotels of two and three stories high. And as a growing town has need for law enforcement, a bridewell (jail) was built that had two rooms, eight cells, and two yards (Villiers-Tuthill, 2006, p.126). Religious needs were not neglected either, and the first church in Clifden was built in 1812 by the Church of Ireland. A Roman Catholic Church followed in 1824, as did the first school which was a proper two storey stone building. It was the only public school anywhere in the area at this time (Villiers-Tuthill, p.29). John D'Arcy was proud of this new community and wanted it to follow certain standards. He even imposed a rule that every house in the town had to be painted and whitewashed every year. If a tenet did not comply, it was in his power to have it done and then charge him for the expense (Villiers-Tuthill, p.16).

D'Arcy continued to be in control of and to care for his community until his death in 1839. Soon after, a monument was erected on a hill overlooking Clifden, but lack of money shut down the project. The effort was renewed in 1870, but this too had to be abandoned (Villiers-Tuthill, 1992, p. 34). Not until the 1990s was the monument to John D'Arcy completed and a plaque installed to his memory as the founder of Clifden.

Alexander Nimmo went on to improve other towns in Connemara and even to found one as John D'Arcy had done. Not far from Clifden, was where the town of Roundstone would develop. He leased an area along the coast from a local tenet to build a pier, but during construction the farmer complained of damage to his land.

Nimmo came to believe that a town on this spot would be very beneficial, so instead of paying the damages, he decided to buy out the tenet and take over his lease for 99 years. He had high plans for Roundstone and required that all houses there would be built from high quality materials, be at least two stories high and have slated roofs. In addition, he built a large store on the pier, along with an office and various workshops (Villiers-Tuthill, 2006, p.127). Fifteen years after the development of Roundstone, 250 people were employed in trading and fishing, and sailboats were delivering grain, kelp and turf to Galway (Villiers-Tuthill, 2006, p.129). Nimmo erected a home on the pier which his brother John later occupied. John managed the town until Nimmo's death in 1832 (Villiers-Tuthill, 2006, p.127).

The efforts of Alexander Nimmo helped to create a previously non-existent infrastructure in the west of Ireland. As an engineer with the Fishery Board he oversaw construction of over 40 piers between 1822 and 1824. As designated engineer of the western district from 1822 to 1831, he oversaw construction of 243 miles of road (Villiers-Tuthill, 2006, p.1, 2). The structures he engineered were so vital that the choices that he made determined where villages would develop, and which towns would prosper and which ones would not.

Architecture as National Identity

Throughout history, Ireland has produced architecture that is quite distinct in character than anywhere else in the world. What they have created over time is a direct reflection of their unique culture and past. James Fergusson felt that in the years before the English conquest, the Irish had little time to devote to refining their architecture, mostly owing to the fact that they were usually busy with war

(1885). However, during this time, they still managed to create some beautiful examples of building in the form of churches, the previously mentioned round towers, and other graceful and detailed structures.

In the west of Ireland, each parish generally has a Catholic Church and an Anglican Church. But looking back in time, there are few ancient churches that are still in continuous use today, mainly because of Ireland's fractured religious history. Also, because of the historical lack of villages in rural areas, long-term central meeting places for worship are not plentiful. However, many church structures are built on or near the site of a previous ancient holy locale. In addition to churches, there are holy wells, beehive huts (that monastics were thought to have lived in), oratories, and graveyards. Even though many of these sites have deteriorated, pilgrims still venture from place to place, paying homage to saints of long ago (Aalen et al., 1997, p.174).

Churches of any faith started out as very simple structures and small in size, but by the middle of the 19th century, the most favored style was Gothic Revival, brought to Ireland by the British. The most prominent churches of either denomination in the west are usually of this tradition. Gothic Revival, considered to be a revisiting of medieval themes, was the style that was considered most proper for a church. With each group wishing to appear the most and refined and respectable, neither would dare deviate. As examples, Clifden's two churches are both of this style.

Christ Church, Church of Ireland, is a gothic revival structure designed in 1850 by Joseph Welland. It has 4 bays (the internal divisions of the building

marked by principal roof elements), 8 paired lancet windows and a tower with spire. It's constructed of coursed rubble limestone that is decorated with cut stone dressings. This church is not of the extreme decorative variation, but instead seems quite appropriate for its surroundings as a village church. Located very close is St. Joseph's Catholic Church. This gothic revival church is overall a good bit larger than Christ Church, and is built on the cruciform plan, with side chapels, apse, tower and spire. It was designed in 1875 by J.J. O'Callaghan. It too is constructed of coursed rubble limestone and has cut stone dressings (Galway City Council, 2007). While still being of the gothic style, this church gives a more modern appearance. In later years, while there have been a few churches that have gone on to follow new architectural styles, it is these stone gothic buildings that typify rural ecclesiastical structures in the west.

One might ask what makes traditional Irish domestic architecture so appealing. It may be reasoned that it's because the cottages and other buildings dotting the countryside blend in so well with the landscape that they look almost organic in nature. Rural buildings are simple and unassuming in character; however, they do have definite regional differences. In general, the north and west of the country had a higher proportion of inhabitants with lower incomes and their dwellings reflected a more elementary style. But with the advent of more prosperous occupants came architectural styles that began to deviate from the strictly vernacular.

Architectural styles began to reflect the social status of the owners. In the late 18th and 19th centuries, those in the upper middle class started to build homes

that were of a more formal architectural tradition. The symmetry of doors and windows in the façade became much more important and these houses had two, and sometimes three, stories. They all had slated and hipped roofs (a roof with two adjacent sloping sides, rather than the high gable-ended roofs of the cottages). Another typical element of this particular style called Georgian is the segmented fanlight opening that is placed over the front door (Aalen et al., 1997, p.160). These homes do not have much in the way of vernacular flavor, but they do conform to national principles of taste and composition.

A relatively new architectural design to visit the rural scene is that of bungalows. They originated as modern, affordable housing for the new workers. They can often be seen in very visible areas in towns that otherwise have a very traditional appearance. They are a solid architectural style of their own, but in the wrong hands they can clash with nearby, more customary, homes. If these new dwellings do not attempt to integrate or compliment the older ones in the way of style, materials, and construction techniques, these villages run the risk of watering down their architectural heritage.

Paradoxically, commercialism and urbanization, the very things that the populace has been progressing towards, are slowly robbing the Irish society of their customs and traditions. Regional examples of vernacular architecture are beginning to diminish in the wave of modernism. As an example, Fidelma Mullane bemoans the disappearance of thatched roofs in Ireland (2006). As mentioned earlier, when one thinks of the countryside, the first thing that comes to mind is a picture of a

quaint thatched roof cottage. Paintings, stories, and movies all feature this quintessential rural icon.

However, Mullane finds that "the thatched roof in Ireland has been vilified, treated as the cultural culprit that provides evidence of our sorry past and lack of progress, [and] an embarrassing reminder of hard times (2006, p.8)." Instead, she offers the idea that modern Ireland should embrace thatching as an ecologically sound building method. Thatch itself is a renewable material and it has been used for millennia as an efficient way to insulate a building against the sun and the cold (Mullane, p.9). If nothing else, the preservation of thatching will ensure the continuation of the traditions and crafting methods that have been passed down through the generations. Each region can be proud of its own distinctive thatched roofs and the unique skills developed in their area.

Conclusion

The bogs, lakes, rolling hills, and mountains of Connemara will continue to be an integral part of this land for ages to come. As has been proven, many of the structures that have been created here have survived for millennia, giving us a view into the hearts and minds of the Irish people. While this countryside is steeped in tradition and history, its inhabitants are nevertheless moving towards a new generation.

The people that call this land home, now and in the years to come, will be responsible for continuing to take Ireland into a future of success and happiness. The question that remains is if it will be possible for them to continue to value and preserve what they and their ancestors have created, while leaving their own mark.

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