A Space of Encounter

A dissertation submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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BOOK TWO : FIGURES
As a child, I sang in the choir of my city’s cathedral – the Palestrina Choir of the Pro-Cathedral on Marlborough Street, Dublin. Every week I would visit this leaden edifice on at least three occasions to sing: practice on Wednesday, vespers on Friday and high mass on Sunday. I never entered through the stolid imposing Doric colonnade of its main street entrance – a real Roman Catholic delight. Instead, I would scurry, always late, towards the back door. The one off the lane, Thomas’ Lane, where the serving staff of the once grand Gresham Hotel smoked rollies and a black-painted shop sold holy vestments and Pope’s silk socks. This church is a building big enough to have leftovers, bits and pieces whose purpose appear never fully ordained, bit parts to the religious body. All choral operations take place in the Cathedral attic. Your first encounter, a tall timber door embalmed by too much varnished care. Then, passing through an enfilade of lobbies that serve only to accommodate so many towers of cobwebbed and stacked chairs, you are met by a staircase. The Cathedral was completed on the 14th of November 1825, designed by a man named George Papworth, an English architect of turgid works in Dublin. In spite of its barely Georgian provenance it carries none of
that period’s elegance. Except this staircase. It’s the type that carries the misnomer of a ‘cantilevered staircase’. Whatever forces are at work, its engineering is overextended – a bloodline refined to the point of a dangerous disorder. Made in granite, with each slab dizzy and fainting towards a central void, there are four lifts to the top landing. Its precariousness demands to be taken at speed. I recall running, every time, ascending or descending by half landings to more neglected rooms, the grand house lost in seconds. Its final long landing, of the most breathtaking slump, demanded an arse to the wall. And so, out of breath, you arrive to a scrap of space. A bad room to the good room. Of course, this building’s bad rooms are its best rooms. Mysterious geometry, threadbare, a broken-armed foosball table and a makeshift kitchen patinated with a caramel of spilt tea and lost sugar, domestication at odds with rising incense. And then, from this point somehow down again, not quite a flight, to a space in recollection that could exist apparently within no logic of projection, plan or section. More leftovers, top-lit, filled with young boys and barely men, lined with scores and vestments. At its centre a grand piano (begging every time, but how?) and beside it stood Ita, a woman so thin she is best described as a length only. A bass clef poised, her extended finger, framed by roof light, drew our communal breath. I adored it,
exhaling in unison into that volume and the vast vessel beyond it, an unseen congregation gathering below us. Bach, Palestrina, Fauré, sung sight unseen. My secret? I always wore runners so as to be excluded. Thankfully, strictly, when it came time to do so, only black polished leather soles could process across the sacred mosaic ground. Consequently, my tennis shoes became the ticket to the main event, circumambulating the cathedral attic to the choir’s loft, alone, all choristers left behind, below, heads bowed and unaware of this wonder. Robed I walked, rubber soles squeaking, a line of gangplanks drawn diagonally between hip of roof and apse of dome across a field of exposed roof joists, to the underside of which was hairy lath, limed plaster and then, until the ground below, only dust suspended in air. It was no more than an inch thick, this crusty membrane that described that vast vessel of devotion. Breathtaking, its inflated force, pressed against a meagre ad hoc falsework, barely contained within the weight of its granite and slate enclosure.

ills 2.3 Insertion into church of St Thoma, Dublin
Much later, I would read Irénée Scalbert’s essay on Bricolage,¹ which quotes John Ruskin’s wonderful insight, from The Bible of Amiens (1881), that ‘the outside of a French Cathedral, except for its sculpture, is always to be thought of as the wrong side of the stuff, in which you find how the threads go that produce the inside or right side of the pattern’. In that case, this space I so enjoyed passing through was turned inside out, with the nesting pigeons and dart lines of light a testament to many a slipped stitch.

Our first commission as Clancy Moore Architects was a renovation to the adjacent Church of St George and St Thomas. Coincidently, the primary strategy adopted in making our intervention was one of form and poché² deployed to theatrical effect.

St Mary’s Pro-Cathedral,
58-72 Marlborough Street,
Dublin 1 D01 DK83
53.350790N, -6.259211E
Constructed 1825.
Visited on various occasions between 1986 and 1999.

² Poché, from old French ‘Puche’ meaning purse or small bag, and from Proto-Indo-European, Buk, Beu, Bu, to blow or swell.

ills 2.4 Insertion into church of St George and St Thomas, Dublin
GO FIGURE

The drawing represents a piece of the facade from our Quarry project. It was drawn post-completion of the construction and is intended as a reflection on the various conversations that took place over the course of its making. Often these conversations, which occurred on-site between ourselves and the timber frame contractor, Mattie O’Malley, Andrew’s cousin, were attempts to understand two different orders of thought. These conversations that, for the most part, were grounded in a craftsman’s understanding of materiality, tolerance, movement and weathering were deeply influential on our practice. They would resonate through all of our work that followed. As such, the drawing is the culmination of a lengthy conversation and intended as the provocation for further conversations within the practice.

It was one of a number of ‘Conversation Pieces’ that I presented as part of our PRS2 presentation in an attempt to explicate the underlying urges and fascinations of the practice. In most cases, these drawings were intuitively made, in that their intention or meaning, other than seeming somehow important, was not completely understood at the time they were drawn. The majority of them are adaptations or

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3 This can be seen most directly in the proposal for a house in Belfast (see Practice Chronology) or the detailed design studies for the cladding of a large warehouse for BOAN (see Practice Chronology).

ills 2.5 Elevation Study for Two houses in a Disused Quarry, Slievebaunogue, Co Dublin.
editorials of drawn studies made during the process of the projects. When I look back on my notes, many of the words used in an attempt to describe their essence remain the same definitions used here – words such as ad hoc, autonomy, awkward, conglomerate, contingency, calibration, character, economy, empathy, figure, fragment, fiction, ruin, etc.

Our presentation for PRS4 took place in the studio. It involved a detailed and exhaustive account of the two most current projects on the boards. In the development of the presentation, it became apparent in the project’s evolution that a series of figures were set in motion through the design process. These figures came to rest as a final design only upon the completion of construction. In fact, many of the figures, embodied in modelled fragments, sit in the studio and often walk through other projects.

In this essay, I return to the same ‘Conversation Pieces’ with a new understanding of these definitions, their embodied meanings. I will attempt to use each figure to describe a different aspect of our practice. In this sense, the figures are somewhat interchangeable.

4 This process is captured in an accompanying video essay documenting the design process of our works to a house at Albany Road, Dublin. Andrew has completed a partner video essay documenting the design process of a house at Bunarrinver, Co. Donegal.

ills 2.6 Facade Study, House on Middle Braniel Road, Belfast.
FIGURE 1: A DIFFICULT UNITY

This figure describes the collision of two doors of different scale. The drawing describes the meeting of two scales of inhabitation within the project: the inhabitation at the scale of the landscape in the large double doors opening to a shared room in the landscape; and the lower door at the scale of domestic inhabitation opening to the living space of one of two houses.

This project involves the construction of a multi-generational dwelling, capable of being used as a single house, two semi-detached houses or four apartments. Situated in a disused quarry with uncertain ground conditions of discarded spoil, the houses act as an inhabited bridge, spanning between natural and man-made outcrops of service structures and a shared entrance staircase. The houses’ language derives from the structure necessary to achieve these spans.

Constrained by the shadow cast by the quarry wall to the south and a planning line that restricts construction to the north (due to proximity to a potable water reservoir), the project is paradoxically urban or
‘infill’ in this otherwise rural condition.⁵ Within the given form between these two lines, living spaces and bedrooms are arranged to give well-proportioned spaces, deep views and contained rooms. This exercise in poché extends to the section that is modelled to present a variety of scales of spaces. More intimate living spaces and bedrooms occur in a lower, north-east facing wing. Taller living spaces address the south-west. The form of the two dwellings closes the quarry to create a shared communal garden room overlooked by a long veranda and the tall living rooms.⁶

This figure’s somewhat awkward character was a result of a decision to remove all ‘shadow gap’ plasterboard detailing from the project. This decision was prompted by a growing interest in the making of interiors and a more pragmatic attitude to building simply (and expressively) was made while the project was on-site – a significant change that could be managed within the cost of the project but one that we felt was necessary at the time. The resultant formal

⁵ A primary reference for the project was the Hôtel Particulier in Paris, as documented in Michel Dennis’ book Court and Garden: From French Hotel to the City of Modern Architecture. This idea of a poché plan where an ideal order or sequence of spaces was arranged against an ‘uneven’ or ‘ragged’ site condition was being explored both in this project and the insertion to the Church of St George and St Thomas, the first two projects undertaken by the practice. I suppose, fundamentally, it is an architecture of figure and ground. With regard to the Quarry houses, we were particularly fascinated by the first-floor plan arrangement of the Hôtel de Beauvais, built by Antoine Lepautre for Catherine Beauvais in 1657 on Rue François Miron. Interestingly, ‘hotels’ were defined by Atherinot as ‘houses less beautiful than palaces and more beautiful than lodgings’ in his Traité d’Architecture, published in 1688.

⁶ The other primary reference for the project was Edwin Lutyens’ restoration and extension of a castle on Lambay Island, Co. Dublin, which draws a distinct rampart-like figure in the landscape.

arrangement was compromised by the existing set-out. With resigned reluctance, this compromise was accepted and in the detailed development understood as a benefit. A significant discovery for us at the time.

We visited this project with the critic Ellis Woodman and the Belgian architecture Dirk Summers. When Dirk entered Elsa’s house, one of the pair, he pointed at this junction of these two doors between the hall, living room and external veranda overlooking the quarry room and said, ‘This – this is the project’. Such a succinct critique was a surprise to me at the time. However, I realise now that in this figure lies the physical project, the story of the project’s development, and perhaps the story of a significant development in understanding the process that forms our practice.
This leads me to Ellis Woodman’s review and another two figures – this beautiful cross-sectional drawing of a handrail and the architect who made it, Alejandro de la Sota. Ellis compares the house to de la Sota’s Maravillas gymnasium in Madrid.\(^7\) When describing this project, de la Sota recalled, ‘this building arose almost out of the air. Our preoccupation with the problems of the urban context, the difficult site and the budget left no leeway for making decisions about the architecture, which is perhaps why there is no architecture at all.’\(^8\)

We were impressed by the idea of a project born of air, which resonated with our understanding of a design process that deployed the ambiguity found in conversation (ideas born on the breath) and a certain lightness or stealth in design.\(^9\) It was also a very astute observation by Ellis as it was a building we had visited together in Madrid while working on the project – a building we had referenced for its nonchalance and its exploitation of structure as an enabling device.\(^10\) A building we found to be not only structurally

\(^7\) Ellis Woodman, ‘Houdrd on Slievebawnogue’, Building Design Magazine (2013).
\(^8\) Ibid
\(^9\) Iñaki Ábalos notes: ‘What de la Sota advocates is not so much cleanliness as simplicity, a conservation of effort, a further easing of the process as a whole.’
\(^10\) It was also a building raised as a common reference in our studies at UCD.

ills 2.10 Handrail Section, Government Building Tarragona, Alejandro de la Sota, 1957.
but programmatically and spatially delightful. An architecture that approached infrastructure.

In writing on De La Sota, the Spanish Architect Iñaki Ábalos quotes him:

‘I chanced upon a book of the work Gropius and Breuer had built after they reached the United States. I saw clearly how they arrived at an architecture which I would call physical, by which I mean that it has the quality of uniting opposing elements as to create a third element, which, without losing any of the properties of its constituents, contains some absolutely new ones of its own.’

In his text Ábalos proceeds to note that,

‘The Maravillas, Miraflores and Tarragona projects are exemplars of the technique of 1+1=3, de la Sota’s interest in joining things and making them speak both individually and together.’

This idea of joining things and making them speak both individually and together resonates sincerely with both our ambition for how we

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12 Ibid
ills 2.11 Ground floor plan, Two houses in a Disused Quarry, Slievebawnogue
think about the making of our work and how we structure the thinking about our work. During PRS3 we discussed a working methodology of bricolage. However, it was suggested that what was actually occurring was in fact a process of montage.

Montage refers to a predominantly filmic technique whereby a new composite is formed by fragments. The technique was introduced to cinema by Sergei Eisenstein, who describes it as a sort of conflict or collision of neighbouring fragments or, more simply, as the combination of two hieroglyphs with the result regarded not as their sum total but their product. A case of 1+1=3. Interestingly, Eisenstein suggests it as process that produces a ‘unique ‘figurative’ transformation of the dialectic.’

So we might see the figure of our door as a product of montage, a product of conversation embodying the various contingencies that act to form the project.

Following PRS5, on reflection, it became clear that these figures occur at all scales of the project. So, in its strategic conception we made the figure of a shared living room in the landscape between the found form of the quarry bowl and the new houses.


14 This could perhaps be referred to as a regional figure (see Figure 4: Conglomerate Order) that makes an analysis of our proposal for a house on a salt marsh at Tinakilly.

ills 2.12 Two Doors, Living Room, Slievebaunogue Project.
arrangement we made the figure of the large concrete staircase which acts as primary support to the timber bridge of accommodation. Its primary architectural expression, the inflection of facade to the city side of the houses, a negotiation of the planning restrictions and the structural requirements produces a further figure. The introduction of each figure creates a further spatial charge in its relationship to the previous.

Similar to de la Sota, in our first presentation at PRS 1 we suggested that the restrictions placed on the site, the legislative site, the physical site and the budget produced the project. We were rightly challenged by the panel to define our agency in the production of the work. Clearly, the process of figuration already identified enabled us to form the work within this landscape of constraints. Importantly, this attitude enabled a resolution of sorts, which did not resort to any unified order but instead remained satisfied with a constructed ambiguity. In a sense, our critical role in the process involved identifying and arranging a productive society of restrictions by which to forge the project.
Ellis closed his review with a challenge of sorts to our practice. He writes:

‘Commissions rarely come so productively predefined and it is telling that the rigour of Clancy Moore’s past work has derived from an adherence to a self-imposed structural and spatial order rather than, as here, the commanding resolution of multiple contingencies. As such it may yet prove an anomaly within the practice’s body of work but it deserves to be judged as a highly compelling one.’

Indeed, the process by which to develop a commanding resolution of multiple contingencies as opposed to the imposing of a unifying order has defined many if not all of our projects since.
FIGURE 3 : GESTURE

This figure sits at the junction between the old house and its extension. It is a tree-like structure with beams spanning off the central steel column in three directions – propping the existing back wall of the house along its length, catching the ends of the existing suspended timber first floor and reaching out to make a new edge to the warm roof of the new construction. It stands centrally in the large open-plan living space, serving to divide the space into three distinct areas. In conversation, our initial reference for this character is the steel cruciform structure that stands at the centre of Sigurd Lewerentz’s St Peter’s Church – its emotional resonance considerably overblown for this domestic world.

Although I would suggest it is pragmatic, our structure is not a logical one. We place the beams at various levels in order to leave gaps between. The beam supporting the first floor is a metre below the level of the floor, with a prop reaching from it to meet the level required. We offset the edge of the new roof to make another gap, a roof light, running the length of the joint between the old and new structure, a lazy solution to a deep plan. So, our cruciform becomes more a
sort of crutch, its ad hoc formal arrangement, we hope, expressing a non-emphatic empathetic relationship with the existing house. It is a structure more concerned with emotional effect than economy, its engineering ambition being primarily gestural.

The resultant formal character, although more complex, is not dissimilar to our first figure of the quarry doors, its multiple elements composed in an ambiguous relationship that is structurally contingent with one element resting upon the next. Indeed, sitting as it does between the logic of construction and sculpture, it also bears some resemblance to van Eyck’s Ahoy. It is clear in this recurrent arrangement that we are seeking something formally expressive, which I am eager to understand.

To use a sculptural term, the figure is ‘contraposto’. An Italian term meaning ‘counterpoise,’ contraposto refers to a stance in which a figure stands with their entire body weight supported over one straight leg, letting their arms fall in opposite directions to create a natural twist in the torso. Mastering the technical feat meant conjuring a sense of movement in stone. Our dynamic is one of tension and compression in steel yet it would appear to be an appropriate pose in another

ills 2.16 Axonometric study of structural steel elements, addition to house on Albany Road, Dublin
sense. As in these figures, we are attempting to bring into form the various forces acting on the project, physical or otherwise. And while we are drawing into space the various conversations that make each proposal, it is done with an ambition for a consistent formal character that places transition over rest and becoming over completeness.

In 1942, Ludwig Wittgenstein noted ‘Architecture is a gesture. Not all purposeful movements of the human body are gestures, any more than all purposeful buildings are architecture.’ And some time before this he noted, ‘remember the impression one gets from good architecture, that it expresses a thought. It makes one want to respond with a gesture.’

I have already suggested that the figures embody the negotiation that is the project. In that regard, they can be considered as communicative. The Latin origin of the word gesture is gerere, meaning to comport or to show oneself. In each of the figures discussed here, something is revealed. These figures speak silently and in doing so they provide the moments when we find the project, where, returning to Wittgenstein, construction becomes architecture.

16 I am suggesting both about the project in which it sits and, more generally, the practice as in the figure of the two doors from the Quarry House.
ills 2.17 Ground floor plan, tender stage, addition to house on Albany Road, Dublin
Finally, we can also think of gesture simply as the language of the body, a silent speech made by a chain of movements. In this manner, our figures not only describe the choreography of the design but also open up a space for encounter, an anticipated choreography between the space and its occupation. I will expand on this idea of a choreography in the following figure.

17 Figuration at whatever scale re-centres the work of architecture upon the human inhabitant. We take hold of the figure, register our own presence against it, and so locate ourselves.

ills 2.18 Cross & long sections, addition to house on Albany Road, Dublin
FIGURE 4: LAISSEZ-FAIRE

The exploded axonometric drawing describes a series of figures, with each layer of the drawing describing a figure set within the figure below. The site for this project is a walled kitchen garden belonging to a previously destroyed country house constructed in the 18th Century. The walled garden has two outdoor rooms and is built on a salt marsh adjacent to the Irish Sea at Tinakilly, County Wicklow, on the eastern coast of the island. Once defined, the garden rooms were both drained and laid with an imported rug of good quality soil as an inset between the enclosing brick walls. This found structure presents the first figure in the process of developing the project. This is a figure at the scale of the landscape; one could perhaps describe it as a regional figure.

The second figure is the enabling structure for our proposed dwelling, which is overlaid upon the wall, a structuring figure. This structure is a concrete frame with asymmetrical supporting columns cast over the walls of the existing garden. It is positioned at an existing break in the wall, which situates the living spaces of the dwelling between three landscapes, the two enclosed gardens and the surrounding marsh.
In the development of this project we were clearly thinking of the figure ground arrangement of walled gardens of country houses in Ireland of which we had made drawn studies. In particular, the acutely pragmatic positioning of structures along their walls and the resulting figure ground arrangements. Also unavoidably present in our minds was the Upper Lawn or Solar Pavilion by Alison and Peter Smithson, with its ambiguous conversation of found structures with interventions and the direct simplicity of its structural solution. While the references present productive restrictions and a rational logic for how we may develop a proposal, ultimately, the project is found in our decision to step from one side of the wall to the other. That is, to nestle the accommodation inside the wall but to step the primary structure supporting it across to the outside of the wall. Increasingly, in our work, we find that each project develops its own logic system, which oscillates between the pragmatic and the abstract. Once these rules are agreed they are seldom deviated from. Often the critical constraints are ones invented by us.

18 While we knew the project well, Andrew and I only had the pleasure of visiting the pavilion recently.
19 Somewhat paradoxically, given the context, in our heads at the outset of the project was another house we had visited at the time of the commission, the O’Flaherty House by Scott Talon and Walker Architects, a leggy pavilion-like structure on the south coast of Ireland at Cobh, Co. Cork. This reference, I think, is responsible for this decision that deviates from the Solar Pavilion’s more complex structural relationship with the found structure.

ills 2.20 Figure ground study of walled garden structures in Ireland.
The fourth character in the drawing is the timber-framed structure of the house, sitting to one side of the wall, which spans from a central supporting structure, the staircase (a further figure nested in the plan), to the concrete figure sitting across the wall.

Essentially, the primary structural concrete frame acts as a figure with respect to the building as a whole, providing its unifying structure and image. Yet, it becomes the ground for subordinate figures, the timber frame, the staircase, bay windows, winter gardens and so on. In this sense, these figures do not sit within each other fortuitously but instead depend upon each other for their realisation.

To return to the primary structural concrete frame that steps over the wall – binding the found figure of the walled gardens to the second figure, our intervention – in its proposed detailed construction, the brick wall of the garden is considered as the outer leaf to the wall of the house while the first-floor concrete ring beam becomes the coping to the existing wall. This mutual interdependence of figure and ground apparent at all scales introduces an extensive pattern of interconnectedness; scale is nested within scale and figure within figure at varying degrees of resolution. In this instance, the

ills 2.21 South elevation study of house on a Salt Marsh at Tinakilly
understanding of the whole takes precedence over the reading of individual elements. Yet, in other parts of the ensemble the priority of the whole over the parts is intentionally not so sure.

This nesting of structure within structure creates a layered architecture of inhabitation, perhaps initially a response to contemporary technical requirements that thermally demand a necessary difference between the inside and outside leaf. The figuration at various scales creates a relationship between the structure and the viewer, allowing a person to register and locate themselves as they move towards and through the house. Spatially, this stratification delivers a sort of shallow depth space or forced perspective alongside a richness of inhabitation.

Perhaps there is a deeper understanding of this working process of superimposed layers. It represents a sort of archaeology that de Solà-Morales describes as the understanding of a tectonic reality that can no longer be regarded as unitary. Instead, he suggests that what confronts us is an archaeology that describes a reality of interweaving languages, not a closed sphere – a ground formed by the decomposition and superimposition of systems that move independently according to their own logic.20

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ils 2.22 Layered spatial study of house on a Salt Marsh at Tinakilly
Dwelling on this idea of an architecture composed of a number of different and distinct parts or structures that are grouped together brings us back to the Smithsons, who spoke of attempting to find a conglomerate order in their work; a tantalising if somewhat elusive idea by their own definition. They described it as ‘for the experience we have of being “ordered” when we do not understand the place at a glance or do not know the building’. Or stated, perhaps more simply, by Peter Smithson in conversation with students as ‘conglomerate ordering is to build it like a farmer when he’s making a decision – “Well, if I have to do all that work, I also want it to do that and that and that. Everything should have multiple uses.”’ I enjoy the first description in that it describes an order that is centred on experience and an incomplete understanding. In either description, it describes a non-reductive complex derivation where the solution is complex, even perhaps contradictory. It is an architecture of ‘both-and’, not ‘either-or’. I would liken this to a laissez-faire attitude in that it accepts all of the mess and simply attempts to arrange it with some sensibility.

Mention of the farmyard suggests the resulting condition as one

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21 Alison Smithson and Peter Smithson, Italian Thoughts (London: AA Publications, 1993)
24 Laissez-faire literally translating as to let, to do – or let do.

ills 2.23 Layered spatial study of house on a Salt Marsh at Tinakilly
that is ad hoc. The term describes something formed, arranged, or done for a particular purpose only and comes from the Latin, which means literally ‘for this’ or ‘for this purpose’. However, in something of a contradiction, it also refers to making do – makeshift solutions apparently requiring little or no planning. The term ‘ad hoc’ describes a general and loose approach to a problem rather than a tight and systematic one.\footnote{Charles Jencks and Nathan Silver, Adhocism: The Case for Improvisation (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013).} In his essay on bricolage, Irénée Scalbert suggests that ‘the ad hoc establishes a working process of collaboration and conversation that embraces contingency, risk, chance and intuition. In its rejection of certainty there is promise of a sort of freedom.’\footnote{Irénée Scalbert, “The Architect as Bricoleur,” Candide: Journal for Architectural Knowledge 4 (July 2011).}

And, of course, the conglomerate order contains more than just the ‘as found’ conditions of the physical site and brief. As David Leatherbarrow suggests, ‘The orders of contemporary architecture are not types of column, but purchase agreements for the production of shop-made elements’.\footnote{David Leatherbarrow, Uncommon Ground: Architecture, Technology and Topography (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 120} In our work, this conglomerate language has developed such that we might oscillate with ease between the various ‘orders’ of the project. It allows us to blend interrelated emergent concerns, both determinate and indeterminate, while keeping the

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project open to further additions at any stage in its development. It is a methodology that rejects the inevitable frustration of the pure idea and seeks to develop the project by addition rather than reduction. In its essence, it describes a laissez-faire or ‘anything goes’ attitude.
Dear A&C

Very thought-provoking study of your practice. I thought of this tool that I think Tony Fretton showed me once, of a handrail detail of where it changes levels and meets a balustrade at the same time. The European is about determined resolution and completion, the avoidance of doubt, versus a Japanese response to the same situation, where the gap between things allows a lacuna of potential, a charge. I use it mentally when I am seeking resolution but tension in my work, and it reminded me of how you generate this space between. Also, I wanted to ask, on the house with the wall, who suggests or how does it happen that the column is asked to cross to the ‘other side’ of the wall? How does tension get generated?

Warm regards,
D.

In PRS 28 we talked about this project and the idea of creating a spatial tension in our work. In response, we received this email from a member of the audience, a candidate in this PhD programme at the time, Deborah Saunt of DSDHA.

28 Barcelona, November, 2013
29 Figure 4: Laissez Faire - Describing the development of the house on a slate marsh at Tinakilly.
ills 2.26 Sketch by Deborah Saunt, Barcelona, November, 2013
The note was accompanied by a sketch describing the two propositions for the handrail, reproduced here as figure 5. How does the column cross to the other side of the wall? A very good question.

The opposing figure describes a fragment of a plan from a project that was developed at the same time as the salt marsh house. It is a corner detail. It describes the meeting of two characters. To one side is a composite character, an oak window frame throwing shapes in order to turn a corner with integrity. To the other side is a solid character, a rectangular concrete column cut on a 45° angle so as to give him a bias.

Almost all of our constructed work engages with existing structures. In Ireland, these are colloquially referred to as extensions or renovations even when in many cases the extension completely subsumes the existing structure. These are polite terms implying a delicate, respectful and, in some sense, subservient engagement with the anomaly in this statement is the Quarry Houses. Nevertheless, I maintain that, in this case, we considered this structure as an addition to the architecture of the existing Quarry. Likewise, the salt marsh house arrived as a proposed extension to a ruined structure on the site, with our final strategy and project proposal considered as an addition to the existing rooms of the walled gardens on the site, their brick structure integral to our construction.

This work is the bread and butter of the young practitioner, with few open competitions and a public procurement system that is primarily restrictive in its focus on financial issues and previous experience as opposed to quality of design.

ills 2.27  Corner detail, tender package, addition to a house at Ballycrous, Co. Dublin
the existing structure. On reflection, I realise we have never completed an extension.\textsuperscript{32} We make additions – an important distinction in understanding how the column steps to the other side of the wall.

This small project is a case in point. The work consists of a nine-metre squared addition to an existing granite-clad house. The client, an elderly retired widow, wanted a place to sit and observe the landscape, which could occasionally be used to entertain a small number of people. The existing house was poorly built and the budget meagre, so our initial strategy was to make a two-storey pavilion structure adjoining the house. This strategy of ‘extending’ by means of adding autonomous ideal structures is a recurrent one.\textsuperscript{33}

The primary spatial device of this pavilion is the grid, an ideal form, a fragment of a potentially infinite whole. This structure supports a ring beam to which a timber-framed roof can span back to the existing house. A pragmatic and cheap construction. The position of the glazed screen allows the concrete to be exposed while avoiding any issues of thermal transmittance, the cold bridge.

\textsuperscript{32} In fact, our first extension is probably our most recently completed project, works to No.5 Albany Road (see Practice Chronology). This project is very much a result of the PRS process. To be precise, I view this work as a transformation. I will return to this idea of transformation in the following essay on the fragment.

\textsuperscript{33} The same strategy is repeated with different consequences in the Lake House, Belgrave Square, Inchicore and here at Ballynasorney. It might be best described as extension by collision.

\textsuperscript{ills 2.28} General arrangement plan, addition to a house at Ballycrous, Co. Dublin
The first figure of the project arrives as a result from at once acquiescing to and weakly resisting the client’s desire for a glass box. All concrete columns in the overly structured grid of concrete are cut at a 45° angle, each cut in turn made in the opposing direction to the previous one. In doing so, we hoped that the columns would act as reveals, framing the view. Immediately the abstraction of the grid is undone, its order is compromised. Each column becomes a figure in conversation with the next.

Yet, for us, the project emerges at the point of greatest ambiguity between the existing house and the grid. The collision of the concrete structural frame and the existing building introduces two columns to the interior of the house. One is immediately amputated by the client, which we suffer silently. The other column sits alone in the sitting room. The ring beam, no longer structurally required, here becomes a lintel to a new door. The door sits at a level drop within the house, with a passage of new steps constructed as part of the remade adjacent fireplace and hearth. The column now sitting on this extended hearth acts as both the support to the lintel and a buttress to the adjacent fireplace. This column has been fused to the fireplace such that it now forms a new conglomerate figure. Its relationship to the new structure,
explicit on plan, becomes ambiguous when experienced in the space of the family room. This combination of column, beam and fireplace belongs now to the old house. In fact, its rawness of material in concrete and granite suggest a fiction – that the old house may have been built around this lost column.

To return to Deborah’s question, ‘How is tension generated?’ On consideration, perhaps, it is the emergence and identification of these figures throughout the design process, acting at various scales, that produce an ensemble, a cast or a society of elements. Each is a separate character yet dependent on the other to construct the whole. The tension is generated in both their emergence within the design process and the experience of the space generated between them. Each figure is considered in some sense autonomous, independent, characterful. Carlo Scarpa writes, ‘To achieve anything we have to invent relationships’. In this regard, what I suggest we are seeking out in this process is a relational aesthetic.

34 I use this term ‘autonomous’ in the original architectural terminology first introduced into architectural discourse by Emil Kaufmann in his 1933 book, Von Ledoux bis Le Corbusier. Having meticulously studied Claude-Nicolas Ledoux’s work during and after the revolutionary period in France, he used his architectural system in order to conclude that it constituted a departure point from the classical tradition of the 18th century. This tradition, which he described as the Baroque system, would have buildings designed as a whole, with each part subordinated to the sum and indispensable to its totality. Kaufmann noted that Ledoux broke with this principle, designing clearly separated volumes that would be placed together in a way of mutual dependency. This idea of a mutual dependency implies an empathetic relationship within the physical structure which we seek out.

35 A set of artistic practices that take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space.

ills 2.30 Axonometric, various figures, House on Belgrave Square, Dublin.
Thus far, the discussion is related to a spatial tension only. However, the figure chosen in answer to Deborah’s question could also hint at a greater tension, one that sits at the heart of our practice. This is the tension between a determined ‘will to order’, the magical attraction of ideal conceptions, and a growing embrace of the indeterminate and ambiguous contingencies that shape each proposal. The result is a non-totalising order capable of accepting multiple ordering systems within a single work – a sort of dialectic between the ideal and lived space.


ills 2.31 Corner plan, House on Belgrave Square, Dublin
FIGURE 6 : EARLY ONE MORNING

I have been drawn to *Early One Morning* ever since encountering it as a teenager at the Tate Galleries in London. Against the classical backdrop of the gallery the red figure stood vivid, its commandeering of the floor still perceptible as a radical affront to the classical context.\(^{37}\) It left a burning afterimage on my retina and mind in time. One feels it is an encounter for both viewer and object, an emergent dialogue with both striving for the measure of each other. Complex relationships unfold as you circle the corpus; its totality is always ambiguous, its form intentionally evasive. It is not at rest; this figure is live, animated by tension, torsion and compression – abstract art in an engineer’s hands.\(^ {38} \) I have returned to see it on many occasions subsequently and, in some sense, it has held an enigmatic place in our studio, not quite a reference, more a presence.

Crucial to my growing understanding of this presence, I feel, is the story of its making. One of Caro’s early works, it was made in his studio in Hampstead. Having returned to London from working with Henry Moore in Hertfordshire, Caro and his wife, Sheila Grielimg, rented...
a house in Hampstead – a converted stable at 111 Frognal Road, the design of which, incidentally, had been carried out by Alison and Peter Smithson. Caro used the garage here as his studio and these confrontational abstract steel pieces emerged from this very intimate space. In fact, their form was a result of the confines of the garage’s dimension. Appropriate, perhaps, given the work’s use of industrialised components and the measure of the studio being that of the motor car. This becomes most explicit in the arrangement of certain pieces of work – hopscotch, for example, amongst others – where the cross walls of the garage become the armature for the completed work.

Once *Early One Morning* is returned to this context we begin to understand it in a very different way. The studio was small, so small that the sculptor could not stand back to view the work as a whole. In fact, Caro states that he did not allow himself to do so. He defines the advantages of this imposed methodology as a means to prevent himself from resorting to previous knowledge of balance and composition. And while necessity is the mother of invention, it is a method Caro claims to have learnt from the colour field painter Kenneth Nolan, who worked on the floor of his studio for the same reason. Caro defines this working process as a discipline that forced

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39 Caro noted that the couple were ‘very clever about putting staircases where you wouldn’t expect them’.

him to refrain from backing away and editing the work prematurely. In the case of *Early One Morning*, it literally and metaphorically burst out of the studio with its length forcing the sculptor to work for some time with the doors permanently open.

One can only imagine the wonder at the moment the assemblage was backed out of the garage enclosure into the garden. Interestingly it was originally painted green by Caro but observing it sitting on the lawn the morning after its emergence Caro’s wife, Sheila Girling, said ‘that’s definitely a red sculpture’ and duly that is what it became. The bright red finally unifies the various pieces as a vivid and unstable whole, red being the most unstable colour in its mixing.  

The connection between Caro and the Smithsons does not only reside at Frugnal Road. The architect Peter Salter’s description of the working drawing programme for the Second Arts Building by Alison and Peter bears striking resemblance to the sculptor’s studio methodology. Salter describes a working process which necessitated the forming of rules both to maintain a consistency in detail and also as a tool to better understand the spaces of the building. While strategic plans were drawn at a scale of 1:200 these were immediately followed by detailed fragments of the building drawn at 1:25 and sometimes full

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40 We discovered this in the making of ‘Big Red’ (see Practice Chronology).

ills 2.34 Axonometric, Big Red, Pavilion London
scale. He describes this constant trawl between strategy and detail continuing for a full year. In this process of developing precise details in relation to, and at times in advance of, the strategic, ‘rule systems’ gradually emerged for the project. This process is described as a means ‘to temper invention and verify intuition.’

The last drawings to be made were the general arrangement plans describing the total work at 1:100.

Increasingly, in our work, we begin a project with a conversation towards a detailed fragment. Following much sketching and talking this takes the form of a 1:30 spatial study model often attempting to describe, however crudely, an assembly both tectonic and spatial. A series of similar studies are then developed in parallel, with a


42 The working process has been consciously deployed on a series of projects in the studio during the latter course of the PhD. These projects include the adaptation of the barn at Shatwell Farm, the renovation and extension of houses at Albany Road, Belgrave Square and Bohemabreena and, finally, in the proposal for a new dwelling at Ventry, Co. Kerry.

For me, the title Early One Morning has always somehow rhymed with the title of a sculpture by Alberto Giacometti called The Palace at 4 a.m. (1932). It is a simplistic coupling on my part but one that bears a little exploration. The rhyme doesn’t stop with the title as both sculptures, although radically different in scale, could be described as figurative armatures. Also, to me, both titles suggest a sort a narrative set in a twilight zone, an early morning mist, a space not clearly discernible and outside of clear logic. A good place to make work!

Giacometti’s own description of Early One Morning is wonderful. He claims the work relates to ‘a period of six months passed in the presence of a woman who, concentrating all life in herself, transported my every moment into a state of enchantment. We constructed a fantastical palace in the night — a very fragile palace of matches. At the least false movement a whole section would collapse. We always began it again.’ In: Rosalind E. Krauss, Passages in Modern Sculpture (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981).

ills 2.35 Axonometric and plan drawings of Prairie by Antony Caro, Steel, Painted matt yellow, 96.5x582x-320cm, 1967
strategic understanding of the plan arrangement often established by a loose structural schematic, this structure being about effect as opposed to efficiency. It is a working process of obfuscation and intentional frustration whereby the totality of the project is postponed for as long as is possible in order that the conversation, and by consequence, the design, can remain live to the possibility of further development.

43 This idea of the life of things is very much influenced by conversations we have had while collaborating with the artist Maud Cotter in the making of a commemorative landscape (see Aras, Practice Chronology). Extracts from her artist statement below are a profound description of this.

‘We exist in a network of relations, one that allows formation in pattern in order to engage with its force. In this field of play, in which things carom, my practice lies. Sculpture as an action is critical to our understanding of this mercurial game of randomness and order … Making in this arena of presence and absence, within the full context of the work, offers continuity, live engagement – a propagation of form and idea. Achieving this level of live engagement within the work is my primary goal. I seek to assert such spatial sequences, movements in time, as the viewer moves around the work in a commitment of seeing, allowing the piece to reach completion in their perception of it.’

http://maudcotter.com/a/information.html
ils 2.36 Timber-Framed Structure, Belfast, 2015
Formed in Recollection

Of the city and its million inhabitants, I remember little. Dusty streets, a barren hotel room, cheap and yellow; a neglected flat-tiled roof grandly titled a terrace, from which the prospect of a sea of signs advertising the identical experience. Backpackers and curry in pressed tin plates. A familiar scene broken by the extraordinary, mountains of aedicules housing a multitude of residents, gaudy gods and stone demons painted. These mountains are gateways marking entrances to the various sanctums of the temple below. Dedicated to the Hindu gods Parvati or Meenakshi and Shiva or Sundareswarar, this temple sits at the centre of the city of Madurai in Tamil Nadu, India. A labyrinth, the building is itself a small city. Its perimeter of tall, painted barber’s pole-patterned walls, red and white, a dazzling defence to the secular din outside. As you enter, all colour and light are left behind, drained by the flamboyant proclamations above.

44 Emmet Scanlon, “Practice Profile interview with Clancy Moore,” New European Architecture 34 (July/August 2010):
ES: ’It’s interesting you use the room to explain what you are doing. What is, in your view, a room? Are there rooms that you seek out again and again to assist the development of your own?’
AC + CM ‘… The rooms we seek out are not necessarily in the canon of architecture and not always real, often they occur in art, in literature, or in memory.’

45 Her editing merged two buildings into a single frame, blurring the distinctions between sites and delivering a newly contoured image, a visual rendition of an invented space. In Lambri’s film loop, a clearly defined but virtually non-existent place appears, as palpable and unreliable as memory.” Susan Morgan, “A Form of Recollection: The Architectural Interiors of Luisa Lambri,” Aperture 202 (February 2011), 32-39.

ills 2.37 Plan of Meenakshi Amman Temple, Madurai, Tamil Nadu, India
Every evening, for five nights, I returned to bathe in the cool, dusky half-light its vast interiors offered. As if in some subterranean cistern, with relief, I swam in the reflected light of the concrete floor polished by the tap-tap of so many TATA flip-flops slapping. Tailing and travelling in the wake of courting couples (the temple, an engine of adoration), I played interloper, exposed, clammy and underdressed for the occasion. Delicately locked, swan-chested, they sauntered abreast – the men with pleated pants, high-waisted and pulled higher. The women’s coconut-oiled hair, pungent black and lustrous like the floor, jasmine pinned to the crown of each head. Silhouettes paired at dusk. Man and woman interlocked, arms poised. Man and man, locked arms swinging. The buffed floor inscribed with the desire lines of endless devotion of one kind or another. Meandering so, drifting from hall to hall – a network of hypostyles calibrated by mysterious orders. Deep field after deep field, each one incrementally different. Skating the floor’s reflection amongst columns, some plain and unadorned, others the most exotic of caryatids, puffed up, posturing and jostling with their adjacent partners, a display more than excusing their apparent lack of purpose. Somewhere in here is a space called the hall of one thousand columns, containing 985 pillars carved in stone. A misnomer endearing in both it’s ambition and failure. And somewhere else
a column, anonymous, another amongst many, has been chosen, singled out – its spare granite length eroded by worshippers’ repeated caresses, purposefully drawing out a lingam in stone. A sort of phallus, a spiritual erection, smeared in red tikka and dripping with the ghee of makeshift candles with wishes cast on wicks that zip to the floor now and then. A figure brought forth collectively into form, abstraction upon abstraction, its presence more intense than any other.

Meenakshi Amman Temple,
Chitrail Street,
Toruchirapalli,
Madurai,
Tamil Nadu,
India.

9.5510N, 78.0710E

46 The lingam meaning sign, symbol or phallus is an abstract or aniconic representation of the Hindu deity Shiva, used for worship in temples, smaller shrines, or as self-manifested natural objects. In traditional Indian society, the lingam is seen as a symbol of the energy and potential of Shiva himself. One possible origin of lingam-worship is a hymn in the Atharvaveda that praises a pillar or column.

47 I was reminded of this encounter when reading an essay sent to Andrew and I by the artist Maud Cotter on her own work, during our collaboration with Maud on a recent project. Part of the text refers to Briony Fer’s recent description of the way in which forms of European abstraction were reconfigured in Brazil. She suggests that in translation they were divested of the previous association of universal themes and machine aesthetics. Instead, Fer suggests that these Brazilian artists were guided by the idea that abstraction could be sensitised to external circumstances and is highly receptive to lived experience. ‘No less significant were their ideas that art could behave according to experiential models, that were heavily charged by the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Susanne Langer. Even more of a radical challenge to the mechanised vision was the sense that geometric abstraction was ‘organic’, more like a body than a machine.’


ills 2.39 Interior photograph, column detail, Meenakshi Amman Temple, Madurai, Tamil Nadu, India.