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Reading the Isolated Landscape

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Explorlab 21

The purpose of this study is to develop and approach to working as an architect within the isolated landscape of the west of Ireland, in particular that of my home county, Mayo. Having been confronted with a commission from the local authority Mayo County Council to design a retreat/refuge along the county's hiking trails, I wanted to enrich my knowledge of these landscapes and in doing so develop an understanding and a methodology for working within them. To question how to resolve the man made object and Isolated landscape. This question opened many lines of enquiry, all aiming to give a greater depth and understanding of both the landscape and the man made object.

The project takes place at four sites located within the county of Mayo, The Sea Cliffs of Achill, the Bog flats of Ballycroy, The Mountain range of Mweelrea and the Islands of Clew bay.

Methodology

To investigate the problems of reconciliation a conflict must be created. The Isolated landscape stands as an exaggerated form of nature, and while the temptation is to subtly scratch its surface, greater observation can be made through a more significant interruption. Namely countering this extreme form of nature with the pinnacle of culture, the city. The examination of this clash aimed to provide methods of harmonising the two, methods which could be employed on any scale of intervention. To pose the conflict a greater understanding of both elements was required, the research element focused on the landscape and the various methods of reading and interpreting it, while from a design perspective an study of the city and its fundamental elements was carried out.

Three methods of reading the landscape were analysed: Formation, Language and Memory and Perception. The study of formation provided a base for the others, an understanding of the many fundamental and characteristic features within the landscape, the processes that created them and the compositions they implied. The Corries, glacial valleys, Drumlin belts and Boggy Plains. All of which culminated in the soft landscape of old rounded hills and blanket Bog. The study of Language and Memory investigated the methods by which humans engage with their surroundings. Place names, story, folk and myth all allow for vast landscapes to be assimilated and conquered by man, blank terrain become symbolic and storied and a method for humans to not rationalise their surroundings but also their own origins. The segment on Perception, focused on two elements, the Horizon as a frame as described by Cornelius Van Peursen and the Hodological method of Otto Bollnow. Bollnow describes an alternative to the euclidean reading of space, one that accounts for terrain, obstacle, effort, desire and limitation. Together they offer a perceptual method that can be applied from the scale of the room to the open landscape.

It is at this point that three converge. In the Drumlin Belt of Clew Bay, the small hills provide a perceptual issue that is long described in myth, history and local story. The formation of small hills prevents a clear reading of one's surroundings and obscures any landmark that might guide the way. It is here that Architectural solution is prompted and the first instance of how the landscape and the man made object can interact.

Alongside the methods of reading the landscape the design element aimed to understand the fundamental elements of the city as the pinnacle of the man made. The idea of the plinth as an intermediary between landscape and object, the grid as an organisational method and also formal reductions and types within the city as analysed by Holl in his alphabetical city and Hybrid Buildings, Rossi in his teatro del mundo and Hedjuk in his compositional sketches. Here quite literally the formal building blocks of the city and the man made can be established.

Relation Between Design and Research,

Peter Eisenmans thesis “the formal basis of modern architecture” describes the initial processes of design as a tension between the utilitarian and symbolic functions of a building. Each offering a specific and generic form respectively, the play and negotiation between the two eventually resulting in the final form. The utilitarian function of each intervention was establish by returning to each site and assessing it on the basis of the research, more specifically the base formation and perception. The Corries of Mweelrea imply and reference the setting a greek amphitheatre, the harsh exposed valley of Achill required shelter and refuge, the open bog flats of Ballycroy draw focus to the open sky unimpeded by light pollution place for an observatory, and the Drumlin belt do Clew Bay presented the aforementioned perceptual issue, prompting a tower to bring clarity. These functions act as anchors at each point in the landscape reacting the form of each site and the way in which it is experienced.

Jorn Utzon in his 1962 essay Platforms and Plateaus describes a similar occurrence to that of the Drumlin Belt. In which the Aztecs use the pyramid to overcome the dense rainforests which carpet the plains of Mexico. Through the basic pyramid a revelatory moment is achieved in which the individuals understanding of the landscape is inverted. The dense forest canopy becomes a carpet beneath and open sky. This simple architectural object and the landscapes of the dense forest and the drumlin provide two perceptual treatments in which a revelatory moment can occur. Firstly through inversion, as in the pyramid, where a new perspective is opened up, and secondly through denial, removal of any given landmark or point of constant reference,, a form of mimicking a landscape that causes moments of such uncertainty.

This perceptual treatment provides us with our symbolic function, but also a point at which the Landscape and City can meet. While not every site provides the opportunity for it to be inverted, common to all is the possibility to be denied. A revelatory moment through detachment, removal from the isolated landscape and immersion in the inverse scenario, the pinnacle of the man made, the city. Creating this moment not only introduces a moment in the city to the isolated landscape but also creates the tension between utilitarian and symbolic. Allowing the man made object located on each site to straddle that line between wilderness and urbanity. It must function formally in both thus reconciling the two.

Design Method

This resulted in a series of tools to perform the perceptual trick by constructing the image of the city. Here the initial study of city came into play. Each scale needed to be addressed, the immediate the middle ground and those prominent distant landscape features, even the through materiality and scale of detailing. A controlled route, which slowly immerses the individual, drawing to a particular space or point at which the shift occurs. The immediate can be controlled by creating a reduction of an intimate urban space, the square, the side street or the colonnade, which to a certain extent obscure the middle ground. The more prominent features are masked by larger and more distant volumes. Volumes that take the form of the formal urban reductions similar to that of Holl, Rossi and Hedjuk. The limit of the reduction is found the point where the form can be representative of both scenarios dependent on context and the way in which they are presented These elemental forms also tread the line between the city and the landscape, from within they impersonate towers and skyscrapers, while externally they form a seemingly haphazard collection of dispersed elementary blocks. The random appearance is however a conscious arrangement in order to obscure the more dominant landscape features, arranged on an a notional grid that references them to one another through their orientation. Further reinforced through materiality, while the materials

themselves reference those found on site, their finishing and detailing is unapologetically man made. The end of this controlled route leads to the utilitarian function which anchors each scheme to the site, it is through these functions that the landscape is sharply reintroduced.

These tools and the three point process (composed of 1 - approaching the scattered objects, 2 detachment and immersion in the urban 3 reintroduction to the landscape) was then applied to each site and context. What resulted was variations of the same theme influenced by site and function, but distinct interventions and experiences

Along with developing a method which attempts to reconcile these two extremes of the isolated landscape and the city the study opened up avenues for further investigation, whether its the research of language, geology or the further investigation of the composition of the city, studies that will be continued beyond the project. One of the more significant and powerful realisations to come within the project was the ability of these vastly different scales to form a relation. The enormity of the landscape and this apparent scratch on its surface can communicate with one another. The shifting perception and the reduction of form, right down to the level of detailing and materiality which allowing the man made object to exist in two scenarios. This understanding can not only have an impact on the way I will design in these landscapes but also can be impact on designing in an urban scenario.