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Patterns of Thought

Noel Brady

Technological University Dublin, noel.brady@tudublin.ie

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Review of i.e. Patterns of Thought Ellen Rowley and Maxim Laroussi

Unravelling the threads of influence

noel j brady 2012

It is important to approach anthologies with great care and certainly the editors here go some way to mitigate the inevitable critiques that can easily be levelled at such a task. Setting aside any potential political or social representational intent, selecting material for such a publication is at risk of excluding more pertinent or critical work in favour of that readily available, popular or even controversial. Moreover following the contentious publication in 1991 of the first Field day Anthology of Irish Writing, often referred to as the “*Male Anthology*”, because female writers were excluded. (*For the record 6 of 28 authors in this anthology 6 are female and most of these are of a more recent vintage.*) Perhaps the editors of *Patterns* found solace in the then editor, Seamus Deane’s comment that “*Sheer inclusiveness is not of itself is not necessarily a virtue or even an advantage*”. A later admission that he had forgot. Even though it is impossible to represent every voice the editor’s responsibility remains. If this collection is indeed tasked to determine patterns of thought then that is the measure by which the pieces should be selected. An alternative approach might have been to cast a wide net over the wide the spectrum of Irish architectural writing from which an analysis might wrought common themes or concepts. It would appear that this work is closer to the later for which the editor(s) seek absolution from the start. “*The gathering might seem dubiously random. We raise our hands in admission of guilt.*”¹ They progress this idea extolling the fictive constructs of many of the pieces. “*...rather we intend for this book to be a string of novellas about architecture/space which is at times specifically Irish in context.*”² The chronological framework begins in 1943 and ends in 2010, a period of incredible social and political change for the country. The period begins with the ending of World War II, parallels the space race, the emancipation of minorities, the creation of the EEC and its evolution into the EU, the fall of the Communism, the end of the Cold War, the rise of China and ending around the deepest recession since the Great Depression to name but a few of the critical issues that from the contemporary world. We glimpse this outer reality in only a small number of the pieces. This may be the fictive aspect of the selection or perhaps it points to a more salient issue of a disconnection or isolation. But architecture is a product of its place and society, a concretisation, to use CN Schultz term. If the pieces here point towards an actual architecture perhaps it would hold evidence of those relationships. It may provide the forensic evidence revealing the structures of thinking and influence. The world in which we live is no accident, it is a reflection of the best and the worst of use, and we get the environment we deserve. There is a feeling amongst the chosen pieces of an architecture that is separate from reality. This is understandable where the editors have favoured speculative writing as opposed to merely project descriptions. This is hinted at by the editor(s); “*The ubiquitous “crisis” underlying Dublin’s Architecture during the past 50 years is as I perceive it, founded upon the universal crisis of the “self-referential” nature of architecture.*”³ This is in truth architecture’s nemesis, a place from which it is possible to see the world but be blinded by the autonomous vision from which it is to be righted. There have been times when such visions are largely imported ones, under the influence of various aesthetic, philosophical and political movements. Frank Gibney’s Framework for a National Plan which launches the anthology is typical of the faith in progress, the scientific and technological promise, even of plastics “the great building material of the future.” The irony of this piece is that it is written at the height of the Second World War.

Although his faith in progress is prescient to a point, *“I am assuming too, that after the present war an international order will gradually come into being and that Ireland will take its place as a unit member of that order, and will develop simultaneously along national, regional and international lines”*,⁴ the vision is laced with imagery drawn from Ebenezer Howard’s Garden City Ideal, Gropius’s Master Houses and in particular Corbusier’s Radiant City transforming Dublin with *“6 tall pencils of buildings pointing to the sky, grouped on the north side of a winding blue ribbon which is the Liffey. Each office building is 100 storeys high, and is situated in the centre of a square formed by a grid of wide streets at ¼ mile intervals.”*⁵ Ten years later this faith is undiminished in Dorothy Cole’s report from the penultimate meeting of CIAM (9) in Aix-en-Provence, with no sense of any reservation in applying these principles announcing that it is *“self-evident; that large buildings are more in keeping with the scale of population in large cities than a number of small ones. It is more suitable in a large city, to have thousands of people living separately in one large, fine building of combined dwellings, than to have thousands of people living separately in thousands of tiny identical dwellings spread for miles over a large area of land.”*⁶

The swings in Architectural fashion have been at least fairly represented with Arthur Gibney providing a suitable riposte to CIAM 3 short years later in a quest to find a National Aesthetic borne in part out of our ancient skills of pattern making. *“Yet any attempt to carry the already overloaded abstract principles of modern architecture further, without an awareness of environment or without recourse to traditional or organic limitations, will end in facile and over-mannered expressionism.”*⁷ It would appear though that the central pattern of thought that emanates from the page is reactionary, a response to problems, some real, some imaginary, and some temporary. The alternative visions provided by Gibney, Twomey or Stevens emerge from what is seen as inadequate, unfulfilling, dangerous or barren. John Twomey sets out his analysis of the problem of Irish Cities; *“This problem (chaos) arises out of a misunderstanding of the architect’s role and the value of architecture to society”*, which he corrects, *“People are under the impression that the architect, by definition, should produce an extraordinary invention as a particular response to the special demands of the site, climate, client etc. Happily, this arrogant and anti-historical view seems to be losing sway following disastrous effects on town and countryside.”*⁸ Much of this ebb and flow would, I expect, be found in similar architectural anthologies. Since the Renaissance in Italy the promulgation of architectural theory through printing has made more rapid the dissemination of architectural theory and thinking. This is a particular symptom of an increasingly integrated global system of business and communication. There are occasions where that ebb and flow is brought into focus, especially where Maurice Craig’s *“Attitudes in Context, 1974”* is placed directly before and standing apposite to Robin Walker’s *“Man & Matrix 2, Reason, Intuition and Change, 1978”*. Rarely do architects call as spade a spade and it is Frank McDonald, our Rachel Carson, who thoroughly demolishes any pretence that the commissioning and execution of the built environment is a benign activity. As a catalogue of influence, deceit, greed and malice aforethought it eschews the polite academic writing that pervades the rest of the book in favour of a journalistic directness. Despite his clear prose written so early into the record this sorry state of affairs expanded from Dublin to the rest of the country. Such observations can also be found in the writing of that other urban journalist Jane Jacobs who asked why people were so feckless. Frank McDonald’s *“A Handyman, His Son & a Ladder, excerpt 1985”* ought to be required reading as part of civic education in every secondary school. If anything this anthology proves is that *“the past is another country”*, that cannot be re-visited yet we are doomed to repeat it.

Like the McDonald piece the most informative of the articles are the most rewarding. They drill deeper into the psyche of the Irish condition opening up more questions posing possible answers and leaving you with a sense of wonder. In particular Edward McParland's wonderful detective story about Edward Lovett Pearce's Deanery of Christ Church is a lens into long forgotten and vanished parts of our cities. From a mere scrap of information, a 1912 photograph, a sketch at the margins of a portfolio and a map is sufficient to act as guideposts to a deeper understanding of a building *of the imagination*..... He brings to life the lost world of past. Tim Robinson's elegiac "*Residence, 1995*", goes further to evoke a beautiful poetic collection of images but in the main it is the inevitability of time's arrow, as we move forward towards a destiny we do not necessary know, to echo the words of Fintan O' Toole "...gazing back at Ireland as they walk away." ⁹

This anthology has placed a foundation stone for the erection of the underdeveloped edifice of Irish Architectural Documentation. There have been great strides in discovering, preserving, documenting and exhibiting in recent years with landmarks such as the Irish Architectural Archive. It will be important to build upon this start, even if it is to widen the range of contributors. The period covered by the publication is also remarkable because it parallels the transformation of education, the rise and fall of the dominant religious institutions and the revolution in housing standards. The voices that are obvious by the absence include (among many others) Richard Hurley (architecture of faith), Niall McCulloch (urban history), Peter & Mary Doyle, Noel Dowley, Shane de Blacam, David Keane (Law) etc. etc... Perhaps it is because of this embarrassment of riches that makes selection difficult. The challenge the editors gave themselves to "*leave traces of the poetic patterns of architecture imprinted on the reader's mind.*" ¹⁰ And it is with a poet that architects are reminded of our sacred role "... *it is the architect's responsibility to bear witness to space as a human home rather than space as a geometric dimension.*" "*But I do suggest that each architect could do well to remind himself or herself that each new structure involves in a deep metaphorical senses, recreation of the world, and so contributes towards the bringing into being of a certain kind of world.*" "*What is improvised upon the drawing board today will be impressed upon the consciousness of the future, the writing, so to speak, is on the wall.*" ¹¹

If this anthology does nothing more than establishes this Architectural Hippocratic Oath then it will have done no small service for the Irish Architectural Scene.

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¹ Ellen Rowley P. 15

² Ellen Rowley P. 15

³ Ellen Rowley, P. 292, *Crisis Culture and Memory Making across Two Generations of Dublin Architecture 2007 - 2008*

⁴ Frank Gibney P. 40 *Framework for a National Plan*

⁵ Frank Gibney P. 45 *Framework for a National Plan*

⁶ Dorothy Cole P. 53 *Review CIAM Aix-en-Provence 1953*

⁷ Arthur Gibney P. 58 *Towards a National Architecture, 1956*

⁸ John Twomey P. 128, *Images of the Past 1982*

⁹ Fintan O'Toole, P. 226, *Ireland 1999*

¹⁰ Ellen Rowley P. 17

¹¹ Seamus Heaney P. 157, 158 *From Maecenas to MacAlpine 1986*