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SPACE – THE FINAL FRONTIER

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This paper ranges over a number of questions to do with the seemingly general sense of anxiety and discontent about life at this time, a time when we should be enjoying the embarrassment of riches heaped upon us in the West. Certainly, here in Ireland, we have experienced unprecedented wealth over the past ten years and yet you would be hard pressed to find a positive voice. Why is this? And how are we to turn this state of affairs around?

My own work, over a thirty-year period, has engaged with the social, cultural and arts world and so these musings reflect this background. Such work has brought me into contact with many different people and situations and it has touched on some fundamental issues to do with personal fulfilment and communal development. Here I wish to outline some of the problems as I see them and pose a number of solutions, which, at the very least, may frame a debate around these confusing and troubling issues.

Ireland is witnessing an unprecedented nation-wide building programme. Everywhere you look there are new apartment blocks, office buildings or shopping centres. This is not confined to Ireland, of course. All over Europe a forest of cranes rear skyward like exotic animals. The centre of Berlin is currently described as the largest building site on the continent. All of this construction raises an interesting and seemingly obvious question – what will this newly created space be used for? Or, more interestingly, what is the use of space?

When the twin towers were destroyed, a small but interesting statistic caught my eye. Only 10% of the towers constituted physical structure. The rest was, space. This I found fascinating because it suddenly struck me that most structures must have a similar ratio. Every enclosure is there to create space, to hold it for a purpose. If it does its job well, it creates the necessary space in proportion to the land it occupies and supports the purpose for which it is intended. A truism, you may say, but not always true.

I am thinking particularly of the civic building. It now seems to be the case that the façade of a building is more important than what is housed in the building. Take the spate of new galleries

³⁵ Sandy Fitzgerald was, until recently, Director of the City Arts Centre, Dublin. Prior to that he acted as Director of the Grapevine Arts Centre in Dublin, of which he was one of the founding members.

such as Tate Modern in London or the Guggenheim in Bilbao. These are 'landmark' structures that attract visitors because of what they look like on the outside not what they contain on the inside. And they have become the new 'must have' for aspiring city councils and Lord Mayors.

But this doesn't only apply to large-scale projects. For instance, both England and Ireland have a growing population of arts and cultural facilities. These Lottery/EU funded projects now rival the local shopping centre as part of any development plan. Yet, in many cases, their remit is unsure and their sustainability questionable. One may look no further than Dublin's Temple Bar to see this problem breaking the surface with the closure of Art House and Design Yard.

This preoccupation with façade rather than substance is, one could say, a sign of the times. Packaging has become the all-important element in selling or delivering anything, from Government policy to soap. And the packaging of space is no different.

But creating *meaningful* space is a different matter. And, I believe, it must start from the inside out, with the internal space, that place which houses all that we are as a living, breathing, human beings. There is a lot of talk these days about 'finding yourself' as if you inadvertently left yourself behind at the Post Office. In truth the idea of 'self' has been appropriated by marketing managers and advertisers to create, like the buildings, a personal façade of self. Our lives have been objectified to such an extent that we have neglected the subjective us, the real us, in favour of a more superficial way of living. We are objectifying our lives at an alarming rate and the loss of our sense of self and our connection with the world is deeply troubling, for us as individuals and as a community. And this investment and belief in the surface of things is reflected in planning, politics and the built environment.

But how have we lost such a vital connection? The answer is complex and to do with a strong motivation to escape the physical and psychological hardships of life. Since the beginning of recorded time human beings have sought to find escape from pain and suffering. As have all animals. No sentient being will turn down the opportunity for a moment's comfort. The difficulty arises when this desire goes out of balance with what is good for us. In theory we should know, instinctively, what will make us well or ill. And we do if given the chance. But our present day life style is not based on health and happiness but on shifting product. We no longer sustain ourselves by what we produce and no commercial producer has your health and well being in mind when developing new goods for the shop shelf. The bottom line is cash and how to entice you to hand it over in exchange for that little item you never knew you needed or, indeed, for the tasty but none too healthy treat.

While consumerism has always been with us, the difference now is that it aspires to buy us wholesale, body and soul. It has become the new religion. Slowly advancing over the course of the last century, the pace of consumerism has now reached staggering proportions. Driven by innovation and technological advance, we have become fixated with the possibilities for escape that consumerism offers. Escape has become the new leisure industry. In fact, it has become the industry and everything is geared to a continual assembly line of new, improved and advanced product.

One of the results of this lifestyle is that every minute of every day is filled with some distraction or other. Television, radio, music, Internet, mobile phones, cinema, music, video games, DVDs; the list is almost endless. Often these distractions can be experienced at same time! Visit almost any pub and you will find piped music, television and conversation all competing with each other. This, in turn, disconnects us, more and more, from a fundamental link with the natural world and ourselves and instills and ever-increasing need to buy, buy and buy.

With every waking minute filled with outside stimulus, our capacity to create any sort of inner space is almost non-existent. Finding ourselves is easy in that we are not lost. We are always there if we take a minute simply to connect. What happens then is called 'day dreaming', a much maligned and censored activity. Yet, daydreaming is the simplest and easiest form of meditation, therapy, healing, problem solving and living skill that we could employ. The reason is very simple. It facilitates the subconscious to do its work. Without getting bogged down in the realm physiology or cognitive science or, even, sleep study, which is more than this article allows, the subconscious can be described as that part of our metaphysical selves of which we are not aware on a day to day basis. As we go about our business our reality is rooted in habit and conscious decisions: I get up, I brush my teeth, I make tea. And our day continues thus. But alongside this, almost, automated behaviour there is a whole other process going on that is informing our decisions and assisting us in our life. During sleep this deep well spring of knowledge comes to the fore and literally realigns us, helping to solve problems, create new possibilities, and heal our body and mind. Just because we wake doesn't mean that our subconscious sleeps. It is just dominated by our waking reality, our much more conservative, timid, and often, none too clever, waking reality. If we gave ourselves the chance of allowing this most potent of personal tools, this intelligence, to come through and assist us, the benefits would be enormous.

We all suffer from this deficit. Children most of all as parents and teachers are heard to say 'stop day dreaming'. Yet, this is probably the most beneficial learning experience of all. A business consultant once told me that the most important job of any chief executive is to stare out the window. His reasoning was that during these periods of 'dream time' the executive was forming ideas for the future of the company. And business only survives on new ideas.

And this brings me onto the results of dreaming. Allowing the subconscious to do its work always results in ideas. They will come bubbling up like a fresh spring. And this is where we really begin to run into opposition, quite often self-imposed. While daydreaming is seen as a waste of time, ideas are positively dangerous. The first thing we learn in school is that our ideas are not worth anything. There are better ideas, tried and tested ideas, much more useful ideas. After years of not having our ideas validated, we self censor or are censored, which, in turn, leads us to buying our dreams and ideas off the shelf and so, we become passive consumers with little stake in our future and a feeling that we are inadequate and useless.

At the heart of all this is the concept of creating space for a purpose. Understanding that we need time for the creation of inner space and that we need to do work in the construction of that space, clearing the site, so to speak, in order to reconnect with our real selves. Without trying to proffer any sort of conspiracy theory, the current status quo benefits the powerful and the wealthy. They succeed in taking (or perhaps we, in our desire to escape, give up) our dreams, repackaging them, and sell them back to us. We repress our own creativity and bury original ideas. How could our meagre efforts possibly be better than the shiny new video game or slick television programme? And where would we get the time anyway, exhausted as we are from commuting in all that traffic and trying to answer our text and e-mail messages before getting some 'relaxation' in front of the box?

But, if we don't rehouse our dreams, in a personal and communal way, then the façade of living will continue to fail us on any meaningful level and the public manifestation of the communal dream, the civic space where we are meant to collectively appreciate and develop as a group, will mean nothing more than an architectural statement, a nice package, an empty promise, to be passively consumed. Is it not time to clear some space?

In future research I will look at some possible ways to clear this space, the first step towards taking some power back in creating our won future.



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