The measure of man

Raymund Ryan assesses the career of Níall McLaughlin, the Irish architect whose research engages with the values of humanism

1 Tracing floor installation UCD plaster drawing floor installation 20x20metre Photo Níall McLaughlin Architects

2 Níall McLaughlin

3 The Alzheimer Society of Ireland – The Orchard Day and Respite Centre: the quiet room with views to the garden. Photo Nick Kane

4 Drawing of the Orchard Day and Respite Centre Photo Níall McLaughlin Architects

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How to instigate a professional life is, for many a young architect, a formidable challenge to encounter at an early age. How to keep a career lively, innovative and purposeful can be even more perplexing for the architect in mid-career, by then fêted for the originality of first works yet cocooned perhaps by an ability to produce 'signature' buildings conforming to client and media expectations. Exhibitions should be an occasion to take stock, challenge assumptions, and point to the future.

Born in 1962, Níall McLaughlin is now well into his third decade of independent practice, a practice launched by a set of rooms – ecclesiastical chambers – inserted into existing building stock for the Carmelite community of London's Kensington Church Street. He has realized several subsequent projects (the insect-like Shack, for example, on its rural pond in Northamptonshire and Fishing Hut, Hampshire) that, while of modest square footage, are similarly complex and expansive in terms of ideas and spatial experience.

Concurrent with such artistic interventions, McLaughlin's work has increased in scale to encompass multi-unit housing projects (Figs 5 & 6) as well as such high-profile institutional and planning assignments as the raft of recent competition-winning proposals for historic Oxford colleges, a context in which tradition and the known have frequently been at odds with the new and the experimental.

Can the intellectual and poetic intensity of McLaughlin's earlier works translate into larger buildings? Indeed, how much should complex, civic institutions, frequently adhering to tight budgetary constraints, reflect their architects' interest in concept, theory and art?

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Raised and educated in Dublin, Níall McLaughlin relocated to London soon after graduation from University College Dublin in 1984. Shortlisted for the RIBA Stirling Prize, the most prestigious in Britain, in 2012 and 2014, for the Bishop Edward King Chapel, east of Oxford (Fig 10), and Peabody Trust housing in London's East End respectively (Fig 6&7)), he can now be numbered among the Great and the Good; an insider, even, in an English

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scheme of things. Yet McLaughlin has not abandoned the home country. Indeed, since those inventive early works in and around London, McLaughlin has consistently returned to Ireland, designing what might be categorized as a suite of Irish houses, for Cork, Dublin, Wexford and Galway. Some were built; others remain unrealized. Two dwellings in rural Cork – one at Dirk Cove, near Galley Head Lighthouse; the other just outside Goleen – are admirably tectonic and articulate. They riff fluently on context.

Dirk Cove, the earlier of the two, is a planar extension to small coastguard cottages, vernacular forms now reimagined as 'found objects' on a topography of striated rock. McLaughlin's intervention is a wing both in the sense of house extension and, more metaphorically, of limb, here hosting living space glazed on multiple facades to prioritize maritime light and views. It's a surprisingly delicate thing, this crystalline white canopy taunting, it seems, the Atlantic waves.

Further along the coast, the house near Goleen takes vernacular form into the realm of couture (Fig 8). There the traditional Irish typology of elongated cottage with linear pitched roof has procreated, sashaying seaward as an array of sharp parallel bars. On close inspection these commodious structures are unmistakably new and Modernist, clad in a monolithic limestone cloak detailed to create an origami-like profile. Perhaps only an Irish person of cosmopolitan persuasion could have sought this particular Hibernian sense of place.

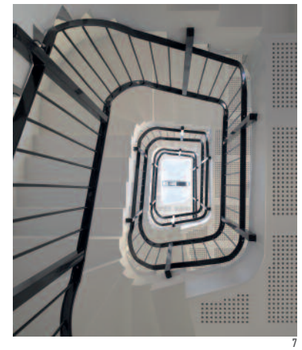
McLaughlin's design for Goleen recalls the double strategy of Robin Walker, in the early 1970s, for a West Cork retreat for the artists Louis le Brocquy and Anne Madden. Although neither was built, Walker developed two distinct proposals: one a kind of Miesian earthwork, the other a rationalization of traditional long house typologies. The Goleen house synthesizes the two attitudes. It is abstract and singular as well as vernacular and local. We might claim it is simultaneously international *and* Irish.

Now that Níall McLaughlin is to represent Ireland at the 2016 Venice Biennale, attention may focus on the Irishness of his work. 'Represent' is in this regard a curious verb. Every second year, an architect or practice or curator, or some combination thereof, is tapped to exhibit in Venice. 'Represent' suggests more than nationality. Architects and curators may not see things this way; nevertheless their presentations communicate to a global audience something of the character and talent, social objectives and technical ability of their country of origin.

The character of McLaughlin's architecture is due at least in part to his Irish upbringing and training at UCD. It is tempting to align his concerns with the almost primal yet generous work in brick and oak by Shane de Blacam, then recently returned from the Philadelphia office of Louis I. Kahn. Younger than de Blacam, John Tuomey also returned to UCD around this time, in his case from the London office of James Stirling, with inspirational ideas regarding architectural and urban form, history and the narrative of site.

It is not, I think, an exaggeration to imagine the young McLaughlin, with his encyclopaedic interests, distilling the lessons of Walker (McLaughlin worked for Scott Tallon Walker after graduation), de Blacam and Meagher, and O'Donnell + Tuomey (Sheila O'Donnell and John Tuomey established their own practice in 1988). McLaughlin is of course his own man, tuned now to avant-garde ideas of art and technology in the British metropolis. If his work seems at home in both British and Irish culture, its origin is in Dublin.

Three decades ago, architecture might have been broadly described as Postmodern, codified in fact at the famous Venice Biennale of 1980 as a collage of signifiers cherry-picked from history. Although McLaughlin's architecture is fecund with allusion, references are, in the finished product, distilled with specific attention to use and context. If Postmodernism aspired to evoke memory and a sense of place through imagery, McLaughlin aims for not dissimilar ends through a critical integration of structure, material, programme and light.



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To-date, Níall McLaughlin's largest Irish project is the Alzheimer Society of Ireland - The Orchard Day and Respite Centre in Dublin's Blackrock (Fig 3). Dubliners may already know it, in a casual way: a walled garden, once belonging to a convent, just south of Frascati Road as it enters Blackrock village. Of course many also know it in ways considerably more stressful and personal.

As Western societies age, dementia is an in creasingly urgent topic. An enormous challenge for staff and government budgets, architects have by-and-large avoided this complex and difficult subject. Countering the somewhat hermetic specialization of healthcare design, especially in the United States where hospital design seems withdrawn from mainstream design culture, now is the time, surely, for Irish architecture to work inventively for the betterment of those dealing with public health.

The Blackrock Respite Centre was designed through processes of evolutionary analysis and discussion as befitting a subject of great sensitivity. That experience may now prove to be the seed, or retroactive origin, for McLaughlin's installation representing Ireland in Venice.

The word 'image' is a difficult one for Modernists, especially older architects trained under the tenets of 'form follows

5 The Stratford regeneration housing project.The façade is made from relief castings from the Elgin Marbles. Photo Niall McLaughlin Architects

6 Darbishire Place, Whitechapel, Housing for the Peabody Trust, London. Photo Nick Kane

7 Darbishire Place, Whitechapel, Housing for the Peabody Trust, London: interior stair Photo Nick Kane

function'. Yet image and recognition are crucial to our sense of wellbeing and, to paraphrase the Phenomenologists, our being in the world. For Blackrock McLaughlin produced a delicious image – part plan, part orthogonal projection – with colour and incident, not unlike an Indian miniature (Fig 4). This graphic idealization presents to us the ranges of safely aligned rooms; the various shared spaces (like crossroads or small interior squares); the protected gardens associated with each cluster of rooms; and the ludic presence of plants and trees.

In contemporary healthcare facilities, nature is all too frequently banished, depriving patients and staff alike of a beneficial awareness of sunlight, chlorophyll, weather and the seasons. Early Modernist projects addressed these issues with aplomb, opening up hospital wards to light and air, as in seminal projects by the Finnish master, Alvar Aalto, and the comparatively neglected Dutch architect, Jan Duiker; or the family of Functionalist hospitals erected across Ireland in the 1930s and 1940s, closely associated with the new state's campaign to eradicate TB. Perhaps it is time for architects to engage anew with health and treatment.

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For each Biennale, a distinguished practitioner or academic is appointed as *direttore* to curate the main international exhibition and set a theme that national pavilions are encouraged to follow. This year the young Chilean architect, Alejandro Aravena, has been appointed. Best known for his work on housing and planning for underserved communities, Aravena's influence reflects a new attention being paid by architecture worldwide to social issues. Underlining this significance, Aravena is also the recipient of this year's Pritzker Architecture Prize, the most prestigious international award for an individual career.

In vigorous contrast to the recent phenomena of flamboyant Starchitecture, Aravena's theme for Venice in 2016 is 'Reporting from the Front', a potential call-to-arms for architects to address our many pressing social and environmental crises.

In response, McLaughlin is proposing to learn from the Respite Centre, the processes of its design and the human experience of its spaces in use. To achieve this ambitious goal, he aims to engage drawing in an active sense. Drawing as a process, as something much more than static graphic representation. Drawing as a kind of spatial installation constructed *in situ* in Venice. And drawing with multiple protagonists that will potentially reflect or represent the spatial understanding of Alzheimer's patients at home in Dublin.

Some years ago McLaughlin and his team made a drawing that may be a precursor to what is presented in Venice, a room-wide construct, on plaster, at UCD. *Tracing Floor* was something of a measuring instrument, revealing the elliptical layout of the plan and structure of the King Edward Chapel near Oxford (Figs 1&10). It was also, one might claim, alive in the sense that, after McLaughlin's team had worked on the floor for several days, the drawing was gradually erased by the passage of feet transiting the space.

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For Venice, McLaughlin is after some similar conflation or concurrence of construction and memory. He and his clients for Blackrock viewed that building process (which took several years) as a test case, as an experiment. In collaboration with London-based Yeoryia Manolopoulou (Manolopoulou recently published a book titled *Architectures of Chance*), McLaughlin now envisages the installation as a multi-dimensional drawing capable of responding to the desires and memories of dementia sufferers. It promises to have something of 'the eternal and the immovable,' to quote Baudelaire, but also 'the transient, the fleeting, the contingent'.

NÍALL MCLAUGHLIN AT MID-CAREER SEEMS WILLING TO CONTINUE TAKING RISKS, EXPLORING THE POSSIBILITIES OF ARCHITECTURE AND DESIGN

Níall McLaughlin at mid-career seems willing to continue taking risks, exploring the possibilities of architecture and design and how these disciplines effect our sense of being in the world. His work may not 'represent' Irish architecture in general; rather it points constructively to potential futures in which society is better served and enriched by design. That's a risk worth taking.

Venice Architectural Biennale 28 May - 27 November 2016.

Raymund Ryan is Curator of the Heinz Architectural Center, Pittsburgh.

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8 House at Goleen, County Cork. Photo Nick Kane

9 Fishing Hut, Hampshire Photo Nick Kane

10 Bishop Edward King Chapel, Oxford View of main chapel looking towards the lectern. Photo Nick Kane