REDEMPTION IN LETTERFRACK

SHANE O'TOOLE finds that the tragic atmosphere that had dogged the buildings of St Joseph's Reformatory has been excised.

Some buildings have savage histories. Histories that can leave a place - the bare walls having witnessed too much sadness and absorbed in all its need of a kind of architectural exorcism, a project of redemption. For almost a century, troubled boys were brutally chastened and subsumed in the former industrial school at Letterfrack, Co Galway until, in the words of the poet Richard Murphy:

"Pedalled in numbed boys, stunned in hills..."

Of melancholy airs, they braved with sail, Abel Amos.

"Girls there with shells, Constable at Loughshanna..."

With winds,foundland the birds..."

These doors, the tragic atmosphere that dogged the buildings of St Joseph's Reformatory for so many years is being gradually dispelled (Fig 1). The buildings belong to Connemara West, a community-owned and managed rural development company, established in 1991. The complex is home to Letterfrack Furniture College-a campus of the Coleg Menai Institute of Technology-providing facilities for furniture technology, conservation and restoration, as well as a range of community services, including Connemara Community Radio, which broadcast ten hours daily.

Letterfrack was a poor and neglected area until the Quaker, James and Mary Ellis, settled there in 1849. They more or less founded the town as a relief to the horrors visited on the locality during the Famine. James Ellis had retired from a successful woollen manufacturing business in Bradford, northern England, at the age of 56. His concerns for the distress caused by the famine in Ireland—highlighted through Quaker famine reports from Connemara in 1841—led him to purchase the house on an estate of almost 1,600 acres, moors, bogs and mountains, in Letterfrack. Much of that land is now occupied by the Connemara National Park.

There were few Quaker residents in Connemara at the time and the nearest Quaker Meeting was in Mayo, Co Westmeath. Ellis' intention was to become a resident landlord, to provide employment and to try to alleviate the appalling conditions. Employing 80 men, he drained the bog land, cleared thousands of trees and constructed walls, garrets and roads. The country consisted of a few houses, one a village with a shop, a two-storey school and meeting house, a dovecote, a barn, a dispensary and a small impressive hospital, along with cottages built of stone and slate roofs for his employees.

It is tempting to speculate on what other remarkable things might have happened had the Ellises remained in Letterfrack for longer than eight years or if their work was continued by others of their persuasion. But this was not to be. When James Ellis' health failed in 1857, he sold out to John Hall, a supporter of the poor-relief-irish Church Mission Society, and moved back to Yorkshire with, as Mary Ellis wrote, 'a feeling of the mark we have left behind, and the darkness which exists there, where nature looks so fair'.

In 1882 the Archbishop of Tuam purchased Hall's estate and requested the Christian Brothers to establish an industrial school there. Purpose built to accommodate more than one hundred Roman Catholic boys, St Joseph's opened in 1887. Forming three sides of a square measuring 50 metres each way, the building was made up of three dormitories, a barn room, the classroom, kitchen, refectory, washrooms and laundry (Fig 2). The former Ellis home became the Monastery. A row of cottages became the workshops. In later years a recreation hall was added.

Ogilvie, beggars, the barbed and banners were sent to St Joseph's, as were children found guilty of minor criminal offences. Few remained past their sixteenth birthday. Along with normal school subjects, boys were given grounding in tailoring, carpentry, shoemaking, knitting, pastry, and manual work.
The trades of wheelwright and blacksmith were taught. The boys worked the farm that provided most of the school's food and fuel.

After the reformatory closed in 1974, the mountainous area of Letterfrack became part of Connemara National Park, in the Twelve Bens, and the community bought the imposing but dilapidated school buildings.

"There had been no intervention on the site for 100 years," says Kevin O'Donnell, Director of Connemara West. "We had to find some way of owning it that would protect it for the future."

They invited several architects to consider what the complex might become, rather than what it then was, before appointing O'Donnell and Toohey in 1984 because, says O'Donnell, they were very good at avoiding the historical and some of the social development and what should happen to that landscape now?"

In a recent essay, John Toohey identified the creative value of 'the careful use' in coming to grips with the interpretation of the phenomenon of place. "We began by thinking like anthropologists might do, he wrote. "Metaphorically peeling the ground, searching for traces of what made it the way it is and setting up unorthodox ideas to inspire it further. Our ambition is to build something completely new that feels like it is already there before we started, as if we had discovered the solution rather than designed it.'

One of the options considered was to demolish the Brechts' Brecht studio. However, a series of public meetings, the community decided that it should be kept. It was felt important to retain aspects of different layers of the site's history. Nevertheless, the first move was to strip the school of some of its furnishing formality. The once rigidly straight path leading from the village to the front door is gone, replaced now by a softer, more convivial approach. Later, the main entrance porch will be demolished and the front door moved to one of the outbuildings.

"We want to let some air through the building," says Toohey. "Monuments linger in stereotypes and stereotypes. Our plan is to take them all out, together with the cultural partitions." (Fig. 9). The old school will be reduced to a natural shell and opened up to its surroundings.

Window ells will be added to let light into the rooms. The grim concrete interior, echoing with neglect, will become an academic gallery, overlooked by the library and cafeteria (Fig. 3). This metamorphosis will be central to the next phase of work at Connemara West, due for completion in the early 2030s, to Hugo Hilgers, the Dutch firm firms building near Paris and to Eirish Meubles' Dunskey furniture factory at Lusk, alongside. That was a time of new building types, the clarification of modern movement orPostmodernism, a time when the search for an appropriate mode of expression in modern architecture was fuelled by the continuous overlaying of symbolism. Rising out of the black bag below the ground, against the hard shoulder of better land, the glass concrete plans of the workshops and machine hall appear at the stilling branches of powerful beasts of burden (Fig. 6a). We see the bulk articulation joints in the concrete legs bend a load, a mechanical edge to this masonry. The concrete frame, driving a dummy, presses a cold heart. O'Donnell and Toohey have seen in this structure many times before. Toohey calls it 'the emotional charging of space, the question of character in architecture.' It is also to their work. Ten years ago, in an interview about their Irish Pavilion, originally built for an exhibition in The Netherlands and subsequently reconstructed in the courtyard of the Royal Hospital, Kilmainham, to mark the opening of IMMA, they described working to provide an emotional response with their work: "We work with associations, seeking something that might be evocation. So you are in a territory that opens up to interpretation ..."

Many connections can be made between Letterfrack and the Irish pavilion, built to highlight the expertise of winning Irish architect. That was an unusual, disarming psychological space, one with a minimum emotional quality. Here, the concrete, 'classical' chimney rising out of the black bag below may yet act as a kind of emotional lighthouse for another time. (Fig. 9).

At Letterfrack, all superfluous detail has been stripped away by the leading architects of their generation to produce an architecture more direct than anything seen before in Ireland.
project in the flat plains of Kildare, Uda in Paris. Recalling Stirling's 1978 Ronan Intermezzo project, a revision to the Nabul plan of Boman, described in AD as "a triumph of modernism and self," perhaps what we are seeing here is the beginning of a gradual evolution or revision of Letterfork itself. A kind of Connacht Intermezzo, where the entire essence of the building architects' vision, both built and unbuilt, can inform the augmentation of the now. That will all.

To date at Letterfork, all superficial detail has been stripped away to produce architecture more direct than anything seen before in Ireland (Fig. 3). The idea of staked light is assimilated where the noble distance pitch. Interior wall and ceiling linings are sheets of oriented strand board or birch-faced plywood, simply put together. Internally, there are no finishes, soils, or even patterns except at entrances, which are protected by short lengths of large, slightly roughened, left open at one end to some water spout. Materials have been chosen for their affinity with the garden landscape (Fig. 4). Stones from the nearby banks imagined the unpolished, buckthorn-pink limewashed steel; painted wash-painted red. Weatherboard greenwood.

Ivory is dark brown known like the side of the mountain.

For all its expressive power, for all the undeniably character of this place conveys in abundance, one feels a profound absence, particularly in the empty territory (Fig. 5). It is hard to look at the mountain in the weight of the concrete mass, in the unreal way the timbered walls and ceiling range in the bluestone. Boys who died here were buried in the hill above, in unmarked graves. It seems right to pause a while in this place, to remember and reflect, before moving on.

Over the next few years, the magnificent sheds will be extended. In an echo of the pioneering Ellinor, the builing will be enlarged to provide new housing. And, in such a manner does it of the amorphous part of the brief, the lingering melancholy that dogged the soul will be extinguished. "We don't want to leave ghosts in the old building," he says. "We have to take the old building and make it new."

Shane O'Tool is an architect, a writer, and a recipient of the 2004 Domestic Architecture Award from the Irish Architecture Federation.

Acknowledgments: Photography: Brian O'Sullivan

Black & White Photography: Sean O'Hare

1. The selection from Manchester Metropolitan, where the project was shown, was entitled "The Place of the Unstable." 1970