

The Robinson Centre, Roundstone

I am currently preoccupied with the Robinson's house. On my first visit there with Rachael Chidlow in the early 90s, Tim brought us into the Folding Landscapes studio, where he was busy working on the Connemara map. I was struck by the relationship of this room - perched just above high-tide level and set at an angle in the sea-wall - to the unfinished map itself, closely focused as it was on the fractal geometries and intricacies of the Connemara coastline.

Since that introductory visit, I have studied the house, measured it with students and philosophised with Tim and Máiréad about its qualities. And then, at their request, in response to their vision, we made a design proposal for its future prospects.

I am now working with Tim's nephew and executor John Drever, to try to save the house for cultural use in accordance with their wishes, clearly stated when they bequeathed the House to NUIG in 2006, for use as a research centre. The bequest was publicly welcomed by the University at the time. Tim subsequently donated his Archive to NUIG. I have no doubt that he saw the Archive and the House as a connected donation. In 2006 he wrote of the house:

“...Now we have arranged for the NUI Galway to have it when we are gone, with all its contents of books and paintings, plus the archive of material collected over thirty years of research into the regions I have been concerned with, for use as a small conference venue, as accommodation for writers, thinkers and researchers on sabbaticals or residencies, and for similar purposes in tune with its current ethos....”

The University took possession of the gift of the Archive and it is now safely housed in their Galway city campus. The bequest of the House requires the University to carry out works and run the “small conference venue”. However, NUIG has had a change of heart and now “formally disclaims its interest in the bequest.” So, my preoccupation is urgent and anxious: my energies are needed here.

The project for the Robinson Centre was important to Tim and Máiréad, conscious as they were of the significance of the site in the history and culture of Roundstone. The stores where Alexander Nimmo kept his supplies, while building the pier and the village, were on the site. The airy roof-lit room where Tim and Máiréad conducted their lives was originally a Congested District Board lace-making school, later a knitting factory. The little room overlooking the sea, which the sea sometimes entered at high tide, is the place where Robinson made his maps and wrote his books during their thirty years of occupation. They described themselves as “temporary caretakers of the house”. They believed that their legacy would be respected.

Robinson’s essay *A House on a Small Cliff* lovingly describes the house, the garden, its occupants and their relationships with each other. It’s a wonderful piece of writing; musing and evocative. It reminds me of William Maxwell’s story, *The Thistles in Sweden*, and Primo Levi’s essay, *My House*.

These works speculate on lives lived and spaces inhabited; the way layers added by occupants predict and remember emotions and events.

At the centre of the site is a forum for outdoor discussions: the so-called 'numerological garden'. This square of interlocking concrete blocks, painstakingly laid out in the evenings as a break from the hunched-up focus of working all day on his map, is now a cultural landscape in itself. It embodies aspects of Tim's wide ranging interests: mathematics, landscape, human effort, time and weather. It reflects the structure of his work. It was part of the process of making the Connemara map, a reflection on the limestone landscape of Arainn; a site-specific art work in parallel to his writings, his cartography and his paintings. Now, together with the house, it is at risk of eradication.

I have set a series of projects with UCD Architecture students in and around Nimmo House. In 2015, we brought a group of Masters students there. They made survey drawings, accurately mapping the house with all its contents. They discussed their design proposals with Tim and Máiréad, who loved the work and the process, encouraging more radical proposals. These discussions helped them to formulate their brief for the Robinson Centre. Eventually, we were commissioned by Galway University Foundation to make a design.

Tim's essay *The Wind through the House* ends on an upbeat note, having resolved with NUIG that the house would continue as a place of intellectual exchange and study:

"we have begun to anticipate that future by opening up the house to such events ... We feel relieved of the burden of ownership, as if we were now just the temporary caretakers of the house, and we revel in the freshening wind of futurity blowing through it, wafting away the spiderwebs of anxiety. "

Unfortunately those webs of anxiety wafted back in the last few years of their lives, spent in ill health in their small London flat, anxious that NUIG might not take on the house as promised.

And so, I have been working with John Drever, with support from cultural practitioners and other supporters of the project, to save the house from commercial development and hold it for cultural use. It could begin with basic repairs and adjustments to make the house and garden accessible to the public, with Folding Landscapes information on display. Or, more closely in accordance with Tim and Máiréad's wishes, it could become the research centre and gathering space they envisaged with NUIG. The priority is to act now, before it is too late.



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