

## Thinking through making

Traditional Irish settlements had 'rambling houses' whose doors were always open to harpists, fiddlers and singers needing shelter for the night. John Tuomey tells Chris Foges about O'Donnell + Tuomey's three experimental Rambling Houses created with furniture maker Joseph Walsh – places for gathering and conversation that demonstrate the value of hands-on expertise

### How did this project evolve?

I'd met the furniture maker Joseph Walsh at a crafts exhibition. Having asked us to design a test piece, he spotted a sketch in my notebook of a conceptual 'vessel' for zenithal light, and offered to make it. We went on to do a few investigative pieces together.

At Joseph's farm at Fartha, County Cork, he has an annual festival for makers, Making In. He suggested we build something to mark the occasion. I emailed a sketch of three similar structures, with the idea they would be made by local craftsmen with materials found nearby, as a demonstration of a vernacular intelligence that is not yet gone but is not properly harnessed. Joseph replied with one line: 'How about one a year for three years?'

He knew carpenters, general builders and a thatcher, so we got started with Passage House, a thatched structure on the path between his studio and workshop.

### How did collaboration shape the project's design?

I wanted a stone 'footprint' and a rising timber structure. A fantastic builder, Ian Scannell, set out foundations and found

big fieldstones for piers. We brought in a couple of stonemasons to make low walls of vertically stacked stone, like those found on rivers around Cork. Stone-to-timber connections were made by a local blacksmith. Joseph has connections with a furniture college in Japan, and asked if they might send somebody who knew about traditional timber joints. A great man came for 12 days and developed some bespoke details that worked in native Douglas fir.

We didn't do hardline drawings. I made sketches and card models, and Joseph made larger timber models which builders could measure from. Sheila [O'Donnell] and I set out the lines on site using string. It was a fantastically head-clearing experience because we are used to ranks of project managers and client advisors. Here the programme was: June, foundations; July, stonework; August, structure and thatching. At the September event it immediately became a gathering spot and a beautiful space for music recitals.

### What did you set out to demonstrate in its construction?

We wanted to work with solid wood that isn't treated or kiln dried. The

timbers are large, but since they are dry-jointed and pinned with dowels, I don't think there's much redundancy. We worked with sawmills whose native Douglas fir wasn't structurally graded, but by testing it to destruction we've demonstrated its capacity. We must use more structural timber, and there's nothing like building with it to interest other people.

For the thatch I wanted an American crew-cut: sharp angles, not fuzzy lines. The thatchers did a lot of mocking up until everyone was happy. We had to cut reeds in January and dry them until summer. Those sequences are in danger of being forgotten, and it's great to maintain them with fresh ideas.

Reeds are interwoven or overlapped to get a thickness at the bottom, where wet thatch deteriorates fastest. Thatchers return every 10 years to remake the edge. The ridge is on a 20- or 30-year cycle. When you thatch a building you're committed to maintaining it, which raises questions about liability, guarantees and expectations of longevity in conventional construction.

### What was the thinking behind the second building, Stone Vessel?

My initial intention was three similar structures, like a little campsite, but at the first festival I realised there's no point in repetition. I'd enjoyed watching the stonemasons work, and asked one if he thought we could build a stacked stone structure. 'Well now,' he said, 'if you were doing that I'd come back next year.' I'd also been thinking about stone-roofed chapels in Ireland, where hermit saints holed up in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. So I proposed an angular structure aligned east-west to catch the rising and setting sun.

Again, it developed organically, with models but no construction drawings. One mason knew another, and an archaeologist got involved. Together we planned to build it entirely in fieldstone from the farm, which took a lot of excavation even though it's a small thing.

Once we got started, the masons told us the stone was too friable to give



**Above left** Passage House and Stone Vessel form a backdrop to the Hedge Theatre stage.

**Above** The prismatic Stone Vessel contains a rounded chamber lit by oil lamps in beaten copper,

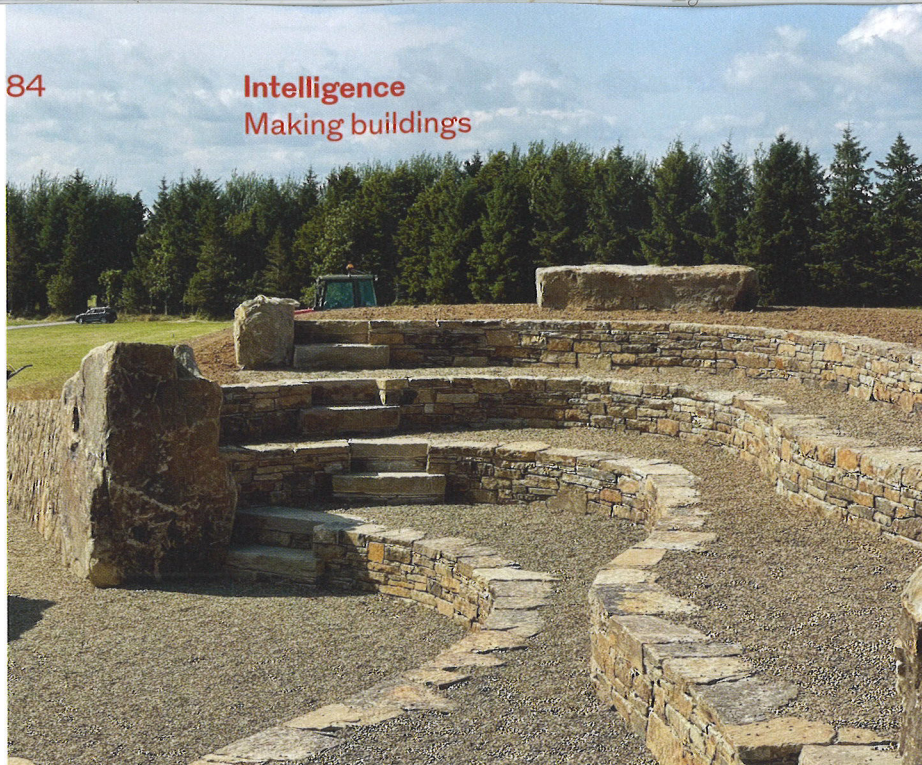
on brackets handmade in bronze.

**Below** Passage House incorporates a flagged floor and stone piers from a nearby quarry, and dry stone walls quarried from the site.



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sharp edges. We wanted a clean-lined form with a 'soft' centre, so we found harder sandstone at a nearby quarry, and limestone from Tipperary to make lintels. I questioned myself about that, but looked at structures like St Kevin's Chapel at Glendalough, and saw they all made openings or quoins in that way.

#### How did the stonework take shape?

We started by drawing the lines of a 9m-high building in the sky, with string tied to scaffolding poles. The 15 masons brought stone up to the string, drew a line and cut it by hand. They were excited because while they had repaired national monuments, they'd never built from scratch. It was a colossal endeavour.

Solid stone is roughly coursed to make walls, and corbelled in the roof. It's crazy that we quarry stone in Ireland and send it to Portugal to be sliced into cladding. It makes more sense to build with it, and this is a good demonstration of that ethos.

We needed to site the building in its surroundings. Our Japanese carpenter had heard of a guy doing temple gardens in Kyoto. He arrived without knowing exactly what he was coming for. It was interesting to see how their traditions have been maintained, and what we could learn. They use boulder stone, laid so that large and small pieces interlock and self-settle. Low walling around Stone Vessel is built in that style, from stone that Irish masons would reject.



STEPHEN TIERNEY

**Top** Hedge Theatre, which completes the trilogy, is entered via a gravel path slicing through raised ground, with walls of vertically stacked stone.

**Above** A roof of reeds cut from the Shannon. **Below** Cutting the capstone for Stone Vessel, which employed stonemasons from Ireland, France and the UK.



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#### Why did you turn to stone again for the third structure?

At the second festival I decided we shouldn't do another pointed roof, but was thinking about the quarries we'd excavated – wonderful chambers of space. Walking between the pavilions, I backed myself into a thick hedge to get out of the rain and imagined a theatre between the rows of thorn bushes. Hedge Theatre crosses the boundary into the next field, with the amphitheatre on one side, a timber stage in the hedge, and the pavilions as a scenic backdrop.

Because an excavation would fill with water, we raised the ground from a long way off and built the auditorium inside. Its plan is based on asymmetrical tree rings. Sinuous retaining walls of dry-stacked fieldstone make theatre boxes, terminated by standing stones.

We wanted to counterpoint the blandness of typical building specifications, and the feeling of loss they arouse. I've seen structural-grade stone dug out in order to bring in concrete blocks for fat bungalows; what's to hand is often treated as having no value. Having finished three pretty rhetorical pieces, we are now talking with Joseph about a prototype 'lean house' that uses the intelligence of the vernacular, adapted to be economical and scalable.

#### Do the Rambling Houses offer other architectural lessons?

Three quite different structures add up to one thought. I'm interested in that because working life rarely allows us to develop our thoughts through making; everything is specified in advance. We're not trying to set an alternative course for construction, but to show that there is undervalued intelligence in the hands of people who make things. If there was more respect and consultation between designers and makers, the class hierarchy might not be so extreme.

At Stone Vessel, a mason from Cumberland hesitantly asked for a word: 'All the lads are wondering what it's actually for.' I asked what he thought of it and he said, 'Oh, it's the best bloody thing I've done in my life.' Well, that's really what it's for – to honour their work. ●