

Losing myself

Níall McLaughlin and Yeoryia Manolopoulou's exploration of dementia in drawings enlightens and enthralls, writes *Mary Duggan*

Do we fear being alone? Solitude is usually a choice; a state in which one can choose to reflect, to read, to bathe, to drink a cup of tea, to make the cup of tea; to enjoy a space we are in that is designed to our liking; that is familiar, tidy or messy, fresh or foggy. Alone or in company, our understanding of that space, our state of being is very clear. We can close our eyes and still walk a room; we follow patterns of activity set by the spaces we become adjusted to. That room can also be curated to allow us and our friends to inhabit it predictably and safely. This is a given feature of our lives.

But what about being lost? Occasionally we get lost in our physical surroundings; lost in a shopping centre; lost in the woods. Occasionally we get lost emotionally and lose the ability to find routes through our lives or to think straight and decipher problems. What we have probably all experienced is a state of confusion that brings angst and fear. Imagine this as a permanent or progressive state, and one that is terminal. It is a frightening thought, being out of control and unable to recall.

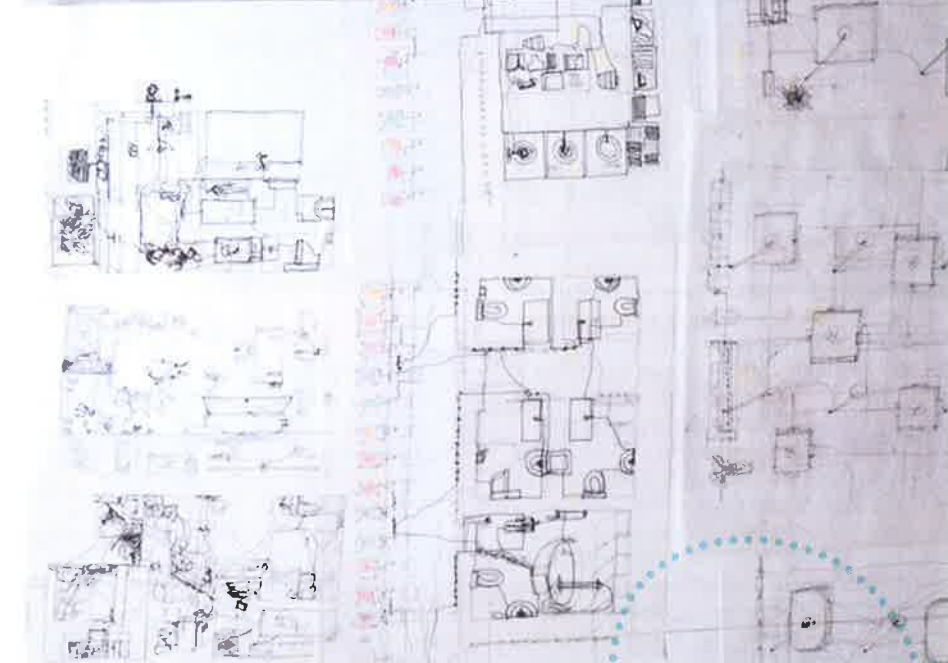
As architects, we hold a particular set of skills which are enhanced through observing, orientating, drawing, research and architectural practice. These skills are our own, we are independent in our particular interests. We are alone in our intellectual interpretations, both stylistically, and emotionally.

In conventional practice, these skills are wholly necessary to create architectural drawings; drawings that may then be interpreted by others to construct buildings; buildings that will then be occupied by people in various states of being.

The buildings contain us, keep us warm, ensure our work surfaces are illuminated, and keep us safe. They keep us safe because we understand what it is to be safe through familiarity. But dementia is a condition that slowly degrades these familiar conditions of orientation, sense of place, sense of safety, and often but not always involves a loss of memory. It can be a slow or fast process whereby the sufferer becomes disorientated or lost in conditions that were once familiar. But that is not to say: well that's it then. Are there ways in which familiarity and safe environments can be reconstructed unconventionally to suit new thought patterns prevalent in the condition?

In Níall McLaughlin and Yeoryia Manolopoulou's research for their installation in the Irish Pavilion at the Venice Biennale they have attempted to tackle the fears associated with dementia.

This is a project based on technical knowledge. McLaughlin and Manolopoulou understand the science and have consulted neuroscientists and anthropologists. McLaughlin shows me a very detailed sketch he has drawn. It looks like a landscape. It is a diagram of the brain, and he describes what happens biologically as the disease takes over the mind.



Left Níall McLaughlin and Yeoryia Manolopoulou's installation at the Venice Biennale
Above The drawing process
Below McLaughlin and the team engaging in social drawing

'As architects, we hold a particular set of skills'

The two came upon neurological research showing that the way we construct and compose an understanding of space is completely different to the way architects figure space. McLaughlin explains that neuroscientists interpret our experience of space in a non-linear form, as a series of fragmented episodes or memories coexisting in time and space – a fourth dimension.

What are these episodes? In the short term they are a slowly layered memorised depiction of a room or a spatial sequence. In the long term it is the space of your first memory, your first kiss, the room where a relative died. Is the physical backdrop an important part of the memory? Or is it the artefacts within the room that led to the habitual behaviour engraved in the mind never to be forgotten or so easily re-enacted?

The research for this architectural project sets out to ask questions about designing a space for sufferers of dementia, but also to consider other ways of constructing space from a new position, without the tools we are used to deploying. As Manolopoulou describes, 'from the perimeter and then inwards, the artefacts come last, and the activities that construct the life within the room'. She draws a sketch, impatiently creating a loose frame, then diving into the detail, 'What's in there? A brain. Activity. We should be thinking in the reverse order,' she says.

The project is not an architectural proposal, it is a drawing, a conversation about user's experience. The large-scale drawing projected on to the floor at the Arsenale is very loosely based on a building for Alzheimer sufferers designed by Niall

McLaughlin Architects, but the point is not to critique it, but use it as a soft framework to form a social drawing; to study ideas of disorientation. For an architect the thought of these skills deteriorating raises questions about how rigid we are, how we churn ideas, what questions we are asking. How important is the plan logic, the framework for the building? If a building is a series of layers, of fragments, of disorder, what does that look like? And how could one recreate and record the process?

A number of collaborators are chosen to generate a drawing together and separately. The individuals are asked to draw alone in their own room defined within the drawing framework, to get into character. You are in your bedroom, you wake up, what do you do? Very few rules are given. They do not draw walls. Some fixtures exist – a sideboard for

example – but only to prompt responses. They are asked to draw their movements and thoughts, instructed to keep the pen on the paper, the point being to place these individuals alone in a room without interacting. The drawings are recorded from underneath. The footage is mesmerising. The pace of the pen modulates between slow and fast activities, from walking sleepily, swaggering across a room, to pausing at family photographs. The group comes together in the dining room. They enter together, peruse the menu, sit down and eat and drink, all in pen squiggles, in part defining movement, part artefact, others scratch out in frustration. They are confused. In the common room there is dancing, big round shapes, a jig.

Overall the drawing traces the activities and interactions, the private, the social,

'The drawing process depicts spatial parameters but is not measured by walls'

humanity, sharing, an understanding that to be in a room one may have a heightened experience, rich, illogical but nonetheless emotional. Or alone lost in a process, but nonetheless trying to muddle through. The drawing process depicts spatial parameters, but is not measured by walls or fixtures, rather by the extent of the line and the pace by which it is drawn. A corridor is respite. A toilet is respite. The animation drawing makes this conscious.

This huge body of research is presented in the Venice Arsenale as a collage. Manolopoulou is obsessed with the hand-drawn quality, the movement within the piece, and was initially worried that the inevitable reproduction or digital manifestation would not be the same. Her concern was that the reality would be stripped away making it appear artificial. It had to be a production or a series of films, to present the process.

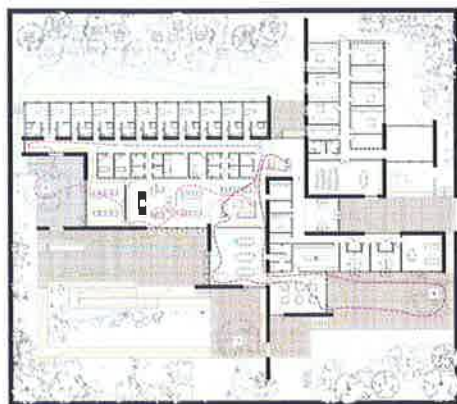
In the Arsenale the drawing is taken to another level using 16 video projectors installed on a grid of 1.92m-high brass quadpods. They project an animated drawing on to the floor, measuring 4.8m x 6.4m – a total of 64 A1 drawing sheets, four per quadpod. The sheets are neither singular, nor fixed. The overall projection is an assemblage of 1,024 video recordings of drawings: 64 A1 rectangles (areas of the plan), captured as drawn distinctly by 16 separate individuals in 16 time windows.

Above the projection a matrix of 64 speakers hangs from the ceiling, arranged on three different heights, and playing local, regional and global sounds. This soundscape corresponds to the drawn activity below. The overall piece describes the life of the building occupants in a 16-minute loop, representing a 24-hour cycle.

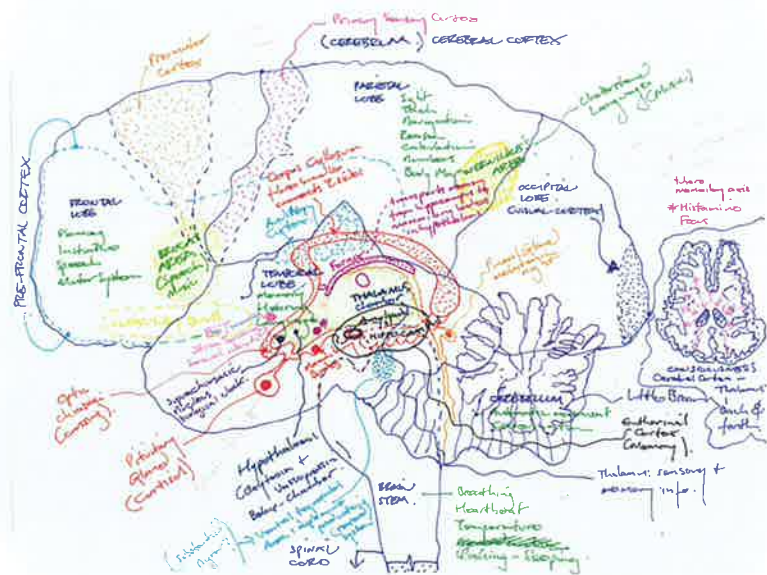
The Biennale contains many works and presentations in the form of texts and exhibits; beautiful pieces displaying built form, often with a signature style. But most are non-sensual, numb, static even. McLaughlin and Manolopoulou's piece stands out as an interactive exhibit.

The research gathered by McLaughlin and Manolopoulou certainly gets under the skin of dementia, but in examining this medical condition, it has also opened a new way of thinking about the end user, by setting new limits, a new paradigm. Diagrams and pragmatic programmes of function, square meterage and construction are cast aside for a staged interaction; a collaboration of minds that considers the emotional consequences. It is not artificial.

When asked quite specifically to summarise the exhibit, McLaughlin and Manolopoulou describe it as a drawing, and the drawing quite simply 'a way of being'. Perhaps this is a new paradigm; neurological, anthropological, theatrical – a counterpoint to the speed at which we now operate; our humanity positively reinstated into the wider debate about the relevance of architecture.



Above left The plan of Niall McLaughlin's Dementia Respite Centre in Dublin
Above middle Sixteen architects acted as drafters, placing themselves into the mind of a building user and recreating the process of spatial apprehension
Above right *Snow* by William Utermohlen
Below One of McLaughlin's drawings depicting the brain
Opposite Sketch by Yeoryia Manolopoulou



'There is another language expressed and unified through the drawing'

the party. The drawing is dense in ink in the social spaces and light in the bedrooms. Respectfully the authors are unnamed. That's not the point. Manolopoulou is keen to describe the project as a collaboration; a live conversation which includes dialogue and drawing pens with equal emphasis.

So, what did McLaughlin and Manolopoulou expect to discover from this drawing? 'Why should it necessarily take us anywhere?' they ask. 'It is a study, a means to understand life, and human interactions. It is not contextualised. We should not be desperate for answers, but enjoy the process, the moments.'

Manolopoulou references one particular person they looked at while researching the subject, the artist William Utermohlen, who continued to paint for five years after being diagnosed with Alzheimer's dementia. These works document his deterioration; the loss of motor skills as well as the stripping down of his self-perception, his consciousness and his identity.

Utermohlen's earlier work depicts conversations between characters. Manolopoulou talks about a piece entitled *Snow* (1990-1991) depicting a warm house with a snow-covered exterior. The content of the piece has many parallels with the social

drawing created for the Biennale. There are five characters in the room, two cats and photographs on the wall. The interior is colourful, alive, full of conversation, full of artefacts; outside is minimally painted, silent and lonely. The perspective in the painting is distorted so the eye does not circumnavigate a space, but rather reads it as a collage constructing stories which flow from one to the other. The man on the sofa is contemplative, the characters at the table deep in conversation. This is a painting with one author, but with multiple stories to tell.

The social drawing has a number of authors. McLaughlin and Manolopoulou were interested in the fact that when multiple hands came together, the pace of the pen and the drawing style operated in synchronicity. While there is conversation during the work, there is another language expressed and unified through the drawing. This is the opposite to what one might think; the combined drawing takes the individuals' self-conscious away. Seen in animation, it is very intuitive and empathetic.

It may well be a single drawing, but it unites minds. As a whole, it does not adopt an individual style. Constrained by the limitations of the single line, there is space in the drawing to consider detail. There is