



White, abstract interior of Dirk Cove house with panoramic views of Cork coastline (left); view across new roofs to sea (below)



Illumination as Place: Irish Projects By Níall McLaughlin

By Raymund Ryan

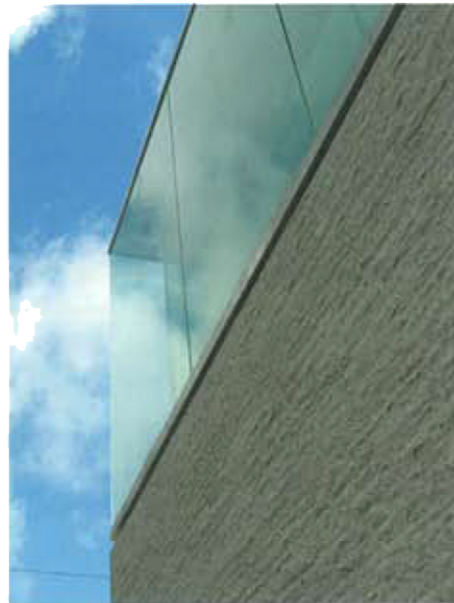
To presumptions that architecture might somehow be a direct representation or encapsulation of place, one imagines Níall McLaughlin bringing to our attention the many complex layers topographic, historic, ecological, meteorological – that fuse on any given piece of ground.

McLaughlin's work is certainly tuned to specificities of place: geological strata (hovering chalk slabs for the proposed Turner Centre at Margate), complex adjacencies (sacristy insertion for the Carmelite Monastery, Kensington), light (a three-storey mews, like a solar periscope, in Knightsbridge), wind (turbines as totems by the North Sea at the CABA Information Centre in Hull), and history as narrative (the story of Lancashire mill workers, opposing the Confederacy during America's Civil War, interwoven into a proposal for a park pavilion in Preston).

Viewable on his website, www.niallmclaughlin.com, these projects have a sense of place that is not only poetic, as is the work of other Dublin-trained architects, but able to integrate environmental responsiveness in surprisingly inventive ways. This assimilation of a Green Agenda informs the siting of many McLaughlin designs, their massing and their enveloping membranes (with implications for the filtration of light, as at The Shack, Northamptonshire).

Based in London but now with several projects on site in Ireland, McLaughlin has little interest in being categorised as an Irish architect or as an English architect *per se*. This perhaps in part due to sensitivity against categorisation in general, but also because his work does not fit into any obvious Irish or English architectural club. Nevertheless there are clues from McLaughlin's days at UCD (such Kahnian or de Blacam-like moments as the sacristy window in Kensington) together with a commitment to experimentation linked to his teaching regimen at London's Bartlett School of Architecture.

A hybrid, therefore. To one side of, or above, simplistic architectural classifications. International yet tuned to the local. Able to distil from cultural stimuli such as vanguard art practice and – as with his seemingly delicate



Anglesea Lane mews with glass pavilion above entry level granite walls

bandstand at Bexhill – advanced technology and modes of fabrication.

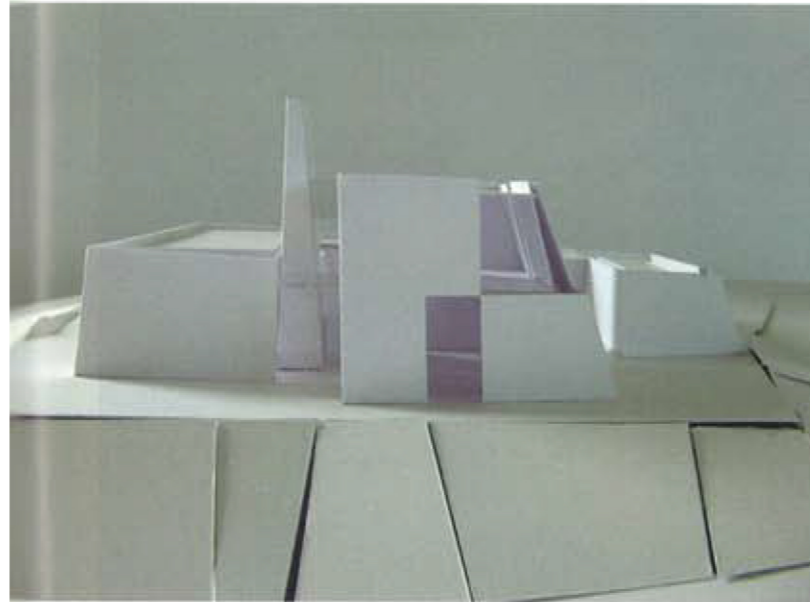
The house at Dirk Cove in West Cork is already well known: a wing-like pavilion (slate exterior, dreamy white interior) spreading, from the mute fulcrum of a refurbished coastguard station, out towards the sea. Executive jet...or streamlined angel? As with many McLaughlin projects, there is something idealistic about Dirk Cove, some instinct beyond mere typology or composition. The site, of course, is extraordinarily beautiful, photographed at dusk with the white innards of the new construction at their most seductive, pure, and opalescent.

Construction is now almost complete on McLaughlin's second residential project in Ireland. In Victorian Dublin 4, at the intersection of mews lanes off Anglesea Road, a slender and taut glazed box is raised to hover above the network of old garden walls. Communal areas of the house open up below, between orthogonal space dividers, a screen of slender granite slats against the lane, and one of the most beautiful new staircases in Dublin – a folded steel plate set within a cage of the same granite slats.

The pavilion contains a master bathroom and sleeping area to the east, stair hall in the centre, and a library or study towards the river Dodder. This allows the limestone floors below to read like covered courtyards, with interconnections suggestive of Mies van der Rohe's open planning and the domestic labyrinths of Luis Barragán. The house has an A:B:A:B rhythm with subtle slippages in plan. The two primary bands in plan – the 'A's' – are separated by a narrow interstitial zone, 'B', that accommodates a change of level down to the living area. As with the second 'B' module, alongside Anglesea Lane, the roof is glazed to allow in plentiful natural light and glimpses of the pavilion above.

If the addition at Dirk Cove is asymmetrically open and expansive (McLaughlin's Fallingwater, or a Clonakilty corollary to the sleek projectile of Case Study House #22 above 1950s Los Angeles), the raised portion of the Anglesea Road mews – the visible, iconic part – inverts a Miesian interpretation. It exposes neither its structure nor, thanks to a fritted outer surface and motorised curtains yet to be installed, its contents to public scrutiny. The flanks are flush so that this upper structure reads as pure, prismatic volume, with inner and outer layers of glass separated by ventilation space. It is highly abstract yet sensuous, catching reflections of the sky.

McLaughlin's third Irish house is soon to break ground on an exposed site near Roundstone in Connemara; like Dirk Cove it has been commissioned by Irish clients living abroad. Beneath that most kinetic of Irish skies, the Roundstone house exaggerates the immediate topography to rise up as a splayed, pyramidal mound or inhabited hillock pinned by a high chimney stack. Interior planning is subtler than allusions to monumentality might infer. There are tailored views far along the coast, towards Clifden or, in one instant, to Slyn Head lighthouse and the beacon at Coruach na Caoile simultaneously – "an intersection of lights."

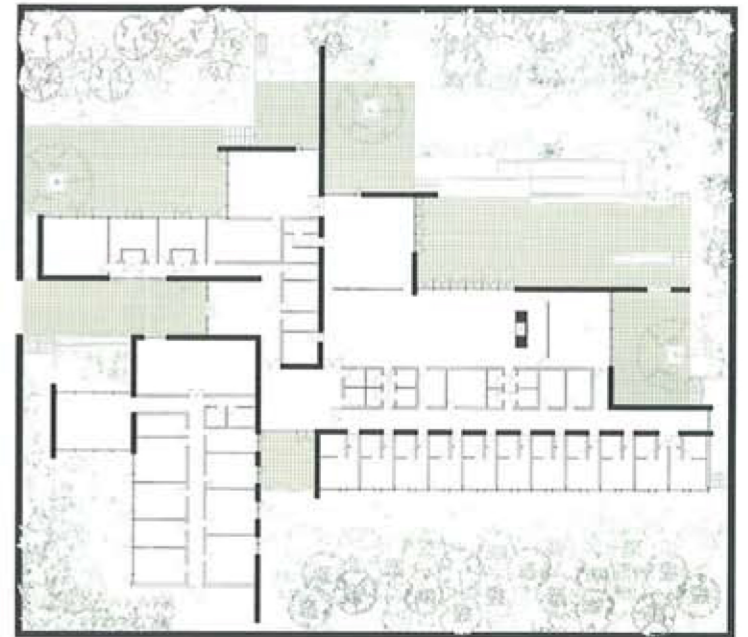


Model of Connemara house showing topography and canted walls

If the Anglesea Lane house is about luminosity and glass, Roundstone explores solidity and a sense of protection against the oceanic weather. There's a centrifugal progression through the volume of the house – about the glazed, interior courtyard and the chimney – that subverts any simplistic assumptions of axiality. Canted walls of granite, reminiscent of fortifications and with echoes of National Romanticism and the work of Liam McCormick, are held apart to allow for narrow gaps into which are inserted vertical windows and troughs to capture



Alzheimer's Centre: rendering of south-facing courtyard



Plan of Alzheimer's Centre: a courtyard in each corner, entry from northeast

the plentiful rain water. The living room has the single expansive window, with an external stone bench.

McLaughlin has no intention to be limited to the design of houses. The Alzheimer's Daycare and Respite Centre is his first non-residential building in Ireland (the refurbishment of lavatories at Cork City Hall was his first built project in the Republic). Currently under construction in the grounds of a former religious institution in Blackrock, County Dublin, the Alzheimer's Centre must have internal clarity in order to prevent serious spatial confusion.

The architect has proposed a rectilinear compound with well-planted courtyards in each corner established by a pinwheel plan. This plan and the use of flat roofs again suggest Mies (it should be noted that McLaughlin once worked for Scott Tallon Walker). Yet the palette of brick and Douglas fir suggests Kahn. Rooms open out into the courtyards through generous glazing; communal internal spaces are signalled by higher volumes and clerestory windows. Thus the building's users may simultaneously feel protected and enjoy variation in volume and light, be encouraged to explore without becoming lost.

Here again, as exhibited first at the Kensington monastery and then through all his projects both in England and Ireland, light is clearly a primary concern for the architect. The Alzheimer's Daycare and Respite Centre aids the identification of place within a refined spatial frame. It is by necessity a thorough synthesis of instinct, brief, site, daily cycles, an understanding of construction and materiality. In this project there can be no rough edges. It may prove to be the most meaningful of McLaughlin's projects thus far.