

TROUBLING IRELAND

Man is Natural
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The bible tells us that man has “dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth” Genesis 1:26. The very roots of our culture tell us from an early stage that man is different from nature, and that he controls it.

I built myself a house in a field, watching the field become house as I worked, as I watched the domestic animals around me alter their habitats I realised that it is by working with nature that animals (including humankind) flourish. The making of a building can be fundamentally a natural act where man simply re-arranges materials to make a small portion of the earth more useful to him. As this happened around me I started to understand houses as being, in fact, a part of the landscape from which they are won. This is clear when we look at cottages of the past which were built from materials gathered on the site, but if we extend this reasoning to larger, more complex buildings the same argument can hold. The first thing that we realise is that the site, that is both where the building sits, but also, and perhaps more importantly, the site from which the materials are collected and processed, is greatly enlarged, often the site has a global dimension. What we must realise as architects is that the hole in the ground on the other side of the world from which the slate, for example, is quarried is as much a part of the act of architecture as the building itself, as is the clearing in the forest, or the mineshaft. Through this thought process architecture can become beautiful not just visually but ethically. This is a clear, physical reality, not an abstract concept. We must understand the act of construction, this re-arrangement, in its global totality.

It seemed interesting to explore how buildings happened in rural areas, how man’s agency is organised.

Like all work that is done in common on the island thatching is regarded as sort of a festival. As soon as a roof is taken in hand there is a whirl of laughter and talk until it is ended as the man whose house is to be covered is a host instead of an employer he lays himself out to please the men who work with him.

J.M Synge ,1907

Synge is relating events he witnessed while spending five summers on the Aran Islands, which lie off the coast of Galway on the west coast of Ireland. I could really relate to this way of working with people because when I was building my house I wasn’t employing people either. So in that way a house has happened without employing anybody and without having a building contract. It happened as a result of friendship, neighbourliness and hard work.

The mutual-aid tendency in man has so remote an origin, and is so deeply interwoven with all the past evolution of the human race, that it has been maintained by mankind up to the present time, notwithstanding all vicissitudes of history.”

Pyotr Kropotkin, 1904

Meithel, like all mutual aid systems, can be understood as a pre-industrial banking system. Giving surplus time or labor to a friend or neighbour was done because you knew the favour would be returned, you had in effect ‘labour’ stored up in the bank for when you needed it. Thus mutual aid, which happens through the creation of good communities has huge benefits to a society (but not to GDP). In rural Ireland the populations housing needs were met with no incoming capital, and the by-product of this was a secure, close knit community. It is possible for communities to concentrate on close relations with one another instead of close relations (debt) to a bank. We should remember this in Ireland at a time when our dependency on the banking system had such dire consequences both on our economy, and on the landscape.