



THE LECTURE HALL

Redrawing the Future

Words by Niamh Gilmore | 25.03.15



The constant upheaval and uncertainty of political and social climates leaves us without a clear image of the future. Therefore we are disengaged—from both space and time—as architecture is the medium through which we ‘overcome the terror of time’. The ephemeral nature of time is what terrorises us; it is constantly in flux, imbuing *here* with *there as present becomes past*. Time preceding living memory is comfortably stored away as history, but it is from our most recent past and modernism that we feel most removed. The difficulty with this recent past is that ‘we yearn to grasp it, but it is baseless and elusive; we look back for something solid to lean on, only to find ourselves embracing ghosts’. We cannot identify with a past that has already disintegrated, and we console ourselves by romanticising memories which have become so swollen by nostalgia that we can no longer discern them from reality. Nostalgia cannot comfort us, and in order to reconcile this disengagement we must confront ourselves by articulating the traces of the past in the present.

Abstraction can be used as a tool of articulation; a means of dissecting reality in order to best represent it. Irish artist Julie Merriman achieves this in her drawings of the dissolution of social housing projects in Dublin. Merriman uses multiple layers of line drawings on carbon paper to illustrate different periods in the life of a building in one composite drawing. The delicate blue lines are traces that express the method of drawing and reveal the temporality of the projects. This process can leave 'incidental marks' in the drawings, but these only emphasise the palimpsest of both the drawings and the construction sites represented in the drawings, such as St. Michael's Estate, built on the site of a former barracks.

The medium of drawing allows Merriman to relay the entire lifetime of the building in one image, offering an historical interpretation of the site in tandem with an interpretation of its future. The emphasis is on the allegorical; we can read the imbued time of the buildings as well as their eventual destruction and reconstruction. While the drawings are not memorials, there is memory within them. Merriman describes the act of drawing as an amalgamation of 'the *memory* of what I had seen and the *image* of what I had seen'.

The drawing also pertains to very recognisable periods in Dublin's history; the panic as the young Irish state sought to efface its colonial past while struggling to modernise against the backdrop of successive housing crises, as well as a moment of great optimism when these dystopian estates were eventually redeveloped. Its historical significance transcends the temporality of the event. By showing the inherent hope in their redevelopment, this drawing illustrates the possibility that 'the modernities of tomorrow and the day after tomorrow will heal the wounds that wreck the modern men and women of today'.

The drawing does not intend to cause frustration over the disappearance of our past, nor does it call for digression. It does not dismiss the past, but dismisses a return to the past. It evokes individual memories as well as shared cultural memories. The confrontation between memory and these images reveals our built environment to be not only modern but also a palimpsest that clarifies our understanding of the present. This stimulates an instantaneous recollection of memory, known as anamnesis, which is a cathartic method of remembering the old to create something new. Through this iterative process of overlaying we construct an image of the future as a temporal collage.

Through the image's explicit temporality we perceive it as familiarising, hence, taming modernism. The abstraction of these images allows for a more objective individual interpretation and understanding of our modern condition. It domesticates a way of living which was deemed so uninhabitable it had to be destroyed. By remembering modernism in terms of both the recent and historical past it provides the foundation for an image of tomorrow. It is not a question of past successes or failures but of parallel and continuity. As our present rapidly becomes past, it is only through this recognition of our past that we can see the future with a clarity that allows us to better understand our built environment.

Photographs courtesy of Niamh Gilmore.



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