THE DOMESTIC LANDSCAPE - THE OUTWARD EXPRESSION OF SELF?

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> "Wait... consider the alternative to the endless
> scramble for ostentation. Here it is. No compulsion
> from state, society or fashion can force a living
> soul to be other than himself inside the one toehold
> he has on this planet - his home... Self Image;
> Come Home...?
>
> Robsjohn-Gibbings (1976)

The above quote poses many questions concerning the part played by the domestic landscape in presenting our identity to ourselves and others. To what extent does the house we live in represent a mirror image of ourselves as individuals, as part of a community or even as a nation? Conversely, is modern housing simply an expression of the vagaries of 'fashion' or taste? As Stilgoe (1983) might argue, are changes in architectural styles simply the result of the centrifugal lure of innovation overthrowing the centripetal tug of tradition?

In attempting to formulate possible answers to these questions, this paper utilises a two-fold mode of analysis - namely, an outsider approach which looks at the exterior of the house itself and explores what it seemingly purports to relate about the individuals residing in the house; and an insider approach which goes beyond the outward facade of the dwelling exploring the personal world of the individual through the people themselves.

It must be noted that, in trying to unravel the complex relationship between a house and dweller in rural Ireland, an attempt is not made to provide conclusive answers to the questions posed above. It is felt that to do so would be to act in an overly facetious manner, especially when, in all probability, the house dwellers themselves are uncertain, if not unaware of bequeathing a part of their own personal identity to the house they have chosen to build.

In utilising the findings from a survey carried out in the Millstreet area, it will thus only be tentatively suggested that one's house may, to some extent, reflect the ethos and motivations of its inhabitants. In other words, the house as one's public exterior, "the self we choose to display to others" (Cooper, 1969),

may in fact be a mirror image of the character of its occupants. If this is the case, then it can be hypothesised that modern housing in rural areas, which exists in stark contrast to the Irish vernacular tradition, not only reflects the living standards of the modern society that built them, but, more importantly, their new and altered social worlds and perhaps even reflects a changed rural society.

In examining the possibility that the house represents "a status symbol critical to one's social or personal identity" (Duncan, 1981), an obvious starting point is an examination of the exterior of the house itself - the public exterior of the self.

The architectural style and setting of these house types has often been seen as drawing their main inspiration from their suburban counterparts. As Shaffrey (1985) concluded, there appears to be a desire to create a "suburban atmosphere, rather than adopt a distinctive design approach influenced by the landscape characteristics and the local building techniques. Thus, there - would seem to be a desire among these inhabitants to remain somewhat apart from their physical surroundings. Could this possibly reflect an inner desire among these inhabitants to maintain a certain apartness from their immediate neighbours whereby an ethos of privacy and independence takes precedence over a need for integration and a sense of belonging within the community? This question will be addressed once the inner personal world of the individuals themselves has been explored. Suffice it to say at present that the suburban atmosphere embodying these modern houses may be due, to some extent, to the dominant characteristics of the inhabitants themselves - being predominantly urban-based mobile commuters. In this regard, these housing styles may conclusively be seen as reflecting the suburban outlook of their pseudo-rural inhabitants.

'The look of a house and its appearance in the landscape are contentious matters' (Gailey, 1985). He continues by pointing out that only a few generations ago, the thatched cottages now commonly regarded as fitting well into the Irish landscape, were once the subject of adverse comment. However, in arguing for the preservation of single-storey thatched cottages in the landscape, it must be remembered that the physical reality of living conditions in the context in which they were built, no longer exist today. In

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this regard, one cannot expect modern houses to retain the traditional architectural design that thatched cottages which belong to a different age have; they too reflect the living standards and ethos of the modern society that built them.

But what of the houses themselves, what does its external display appear to signify to the people who built them? I would argue that the highly personal nature of the design details of each house may be regarded as reflecting and representing the individual's own personal self in its aesthetic display; in essence, each house is unique since it symbolised the highly individualistic nature of each house builder. Conversely, it is also likely that most people desire to conform to certain requirements as laid down by other modern houses in their area; few would probably wish to be singled out from the pack. All one may conclude from this apparent paradox is that the external self displayed through the medium of one's house in the Irish countryside may best be regarded as individualised conformity.

Moving to the interior of th house, the personal world of the individual, I defy attempts of being regarded a facadist and gingerly step across the threshold into Pandora's box, that labyrinth of a multitude of rooms from whence I may catch a fleeting glimpse of the hidden identity endowed on these seemingly innocent man-made constructions. And so I cautiously enter that outer sanctuary of man - the living room which sociologists describe as the "room most accessible to outsiders" (Felson, 1978; Goffman, 1959 and others). It is from this vantage point that I can begin the most important part of my quest, namely an attempt to transcend the interviewer-interviewee boundary and gain access into the inner or personal world of individual rural dwellers.

As I dogardly reflect on the multitude of fragments, those tiny pieces of information, a picture (though incomplete), finally begins to emerge. The hidden complex relationship between man and the most personal of his environments - his home - slowly begins to divulge its secrets.

At its most superficial level the outcome of this analysis illuminates the important part one's house plays "as an influence in the shaping of identity by structuring one's social network and social world" (Steinfield, 1981). As a result, one may to some extent, regard social interaction as beginning with oneself or home

and radiating outwards - pockets of social interaction that decrease somewhat as the friction of distance takes precedence. It is these social relationships that give the term community its meaning "as a place where individuals interact with each other and receive the greater part of their physiological, psychological and social needs" (Lewis, 1979). This analysis may be seen as quite straight forward, being the general characteristic of rural communities to date.

At a deeper level, glimpses of the workings of the personal hearts, minds and motivations of these rural dwellers achieved through personal contact would seem to indicate that more individualistic or personal rather than traditional communal concerns have become more important for those surveyed, whereby supportive ties are sought along friendship lines rather than the more traditional neighbour ties. Thus, in answer to the question posed earlier, the distinctly suburban atmosphere emanating from these modern constructions would seem to reflect an inner desire for freedom of choice generating a certain distance between oneself and one's neighbour and freedom from the constraints this may inflict. In this regard, these mobile pseudo-rural commuters, in not belonging to traditional farming concerns, are more likely to develop friendship patterns on free choice of associates based on homogeneity rather than propinquity. This type of social interaction may be regarded as emphasising "personal choice rather than conformity to local will, achievement rather than ascription, affection and emotion rather than tradition and a mobile dynamic rather than a static lifestyle" (O'Carroll, 1985). Sadly, it has been found that this trend has led to the dilution of the importance of neighbour ties resulting in the decline in importance and frequency of social exchange. The former custom of seeking one's neighbour for an evening of story-telling, card-playing, dancing and companionship seems to be a thing of the past.

According to Duncan (op. cit, 1981), once traditional modes of communication are weakened - kinship, neighbour, local ritual - self-definition and display through one's house becomes an important arena in expressing one's identity in modern society. He continues to argue that where "individualism is a dominant ideology, the house is intimately bound to the individual's self-concept, reflecting his personality, social status or accomplishments" (Duncan, op. cit, 1981). In this regard, the house in rural Ireland would seem to

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reflect the more individualistic concerns of its occupants, in stark contrast to traditional houses which in their uniformity of design seemingly "stresses group rather than individualistic status display" (Duncan, op. cit, 1981) as the collective identity of the personal worlds of the individual have been weakened.

The foregoing represents some tentative reflections relating to the complex relationship between people and their place. All one may conclude is that home, although it may not be so "sweet", represents the personal worlds of the individuals concerned; an outward symbol of self, and as such contains hidden psychological meaning.

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