Critical Essay: The Ghost Estates of Ireland

Wastelands mean different things to different people. A Google search describes ‘wasteland’ as barren, desert like, overgrown, bleak uninhabitable, unused or a neglected urban or industrial site. The wasteland I will describe, in this essay, is not really any of these things. It is an urban landscape that is almost unique, in Europe, to Ireland. I investigate how these places came into existence and why they have remained almost hidden. I will compare how the Irish ghost estate has been photographed compared to other ‘wastelands’. Finally, I will examine where we are now with these estates and perhaps what we photographers can do to try to halt another scandal of mammoth proportions.

In 1998, the Irish Minister for Finance introduced a tax incentive scheme, The Shannon Rural Development Scheme. This scheme provided tax relief to developers to build houses in rural areas. On 1st January 2000 Ireland joined the Euro zone. Money became cheap to borrow. Banks gave loans to anyone and everyone. The “Celtic Tiger” was born it roared ahead. People who, traditionally, would have lived in social housing were given loans and purchased their own properties. There was a building boom.

Many of the houses were constructed in places with no infrastructure and no chance of employment. The authorities did not have time to check that buildings were being constructed to the correct standards. Then, banks, worldwide, got into difficulties and loans were recalled. Irish developers were unable to re-pay their bank loans. Construction stopped. Houses were left with only foundations, half built or not started at all. Estates were abandoned, in some cases with no completed houses. In other cases, some of the completed houses were occupied. The term “ghost estate” began to creep in to news stories to describe these half-built housing estates. The country sank into recession.

These unfinished estates were mostly outside the towns and villages on the edge of urban developments. They were deteriorating and rapidly becoming wastelands. They were hidden away out of sight. They were a cause of shame, not something to be photographed except by some interested press photographers. Most of the stories were about the people who had purchased or rented some of these houses. They were photographed with the derelict houses in the background (1). For some authors, notably Paul Farley and Michael S Roberts (2) wastelands are places where nature returns after a site has been abandoned, a return to a natural beautiful wilderness. They are places where wild flowers grow in abundance. They are sometimes ‘inhabited’ by hermits using what nature provides or places where beehives are home to honeybees busy making wild flower honey. In the Irish Ghost Estates, no one was talking about wild flowers. The talk was more of rats and anti-social behaviour. Eric Luke, a freelance photographer took a great number of photographs of these estates and their unfortunate occupants. His work appears in many Irish Times articles (3)
The images that were made of these ghost estates resembled the work of the ‘New Topographic’ photographers. They exposed, warts and all, these embarrassing secrets lurking in the Edgelands of our towns and cities. There was nothing sublime about the images. They were terrifying only from the point of view that they demonstrated how greed breeds disaster. Like the work of the ‘New Topographic’ photographers the images showed the landscape as it was. What was before the lens was mundane and the photographers who bothered to seek out these places showed them in all their sad reality. One such photographer was a young student called Ruth Connolly. She spent a year touring Ireland photographing these estates. She described them as ‘very bleak, very quiet’ (4). The result of her year’s work was a book (5). There is no eye candy in this book. It tells the story of this shameful period in Irish history. A second Irish female photographer, Valerie Anex, created a book of her images of Irish Ghost Estates (6). This is an interesting book because it shows a mix of straightforward house images, almost like sales posters and abandoned areas around the estates. An exchange of emails with this author she admitted:

The sales have been alright so far. We are not on amazon or on any commercial platform so I don’t think it will ever be a bestseller!

It is expensive and would not sit happily on Irish coffee tables. It is interesting to note that both books were produced by female photographers.

Like Connolly and Anex, photographers in other countries have not ignored the ravages of modern industry on their lands. David Hanson, an American photographer, has not been afraid to show the destruction of modern industry throughout the United States. He has also been prepared to challenge the lawmakers of his country. He gave a copy of his Waste Land: Meditations on a Ravaged Landscape to every member of Congress, holding meetings with many of them to discuss environmental legislation (7).

He brought out a new book Wilderness to Wasteland in 2016 (8). This is a truly shocking proof of how mankind is destroying our planet with the production of toxic waste. These are aerial images. Other photographers have photographed the devastating effects of industry both from the air and at ground level. Edward Burtynsky, a famous wastelands photographer, tells the story of wastelands in a very personal way. Burtynsky’s images, although representing the bleak effects of modern industry on the landscape, are aesthetically beautiful. Many are created from an elevated position and in vivid colours.

In the YouTube video ‘Manufactured Landscapes’ (9) one can see how Burtynsky represents the effects of modern industry on the landscape. But the images do not
make us recoil in horror. None of the adjectives used to define wastelands could be applied to his images. They border on the sublime. Josef Koudelka’s black and white images of the industrial landscape are more realistic and shocking (10).

Robert Polidori (11) also photographed wastelands. Poldori’s images lie somewhere between Burtynsky and Koudelka’s work. Many of Poldori’s images are of abandoned interiors. They are not always titled so we have no idea whether the property was abandoned due to catastrophe of whether the property had fallen into disuse. The colour and lighting of these images makes them less devastating. They are almost like images of a film set.

Dan Dubowitz (12) also photographed abandoned interiors worldwide. As with Polidori’s work the lighting and vivid colours render the images less shocking.

Both Poldori and Dubowitz’s images could be mistaken for film sets. Their images resemble, for me, the work of Gregory Crewdson.

The artist, George Shaw, painted many images of the Tile Hill Estate, where he grew up. Some of these resemble the Irish Ghost estates. They are hauntingly realistic paintings, beautifully executed.

How wastelands should be represented in images can be very different. Does the representation depend on whether the image is made to hang on a gallery wall or will it be used to alert the public about some situation that is being hidden. Images of the Ghost Estates of Ireland will probably never be hung in a Gallery space. Neither have they attracted much media attention.

Ghost estates are not exclusive to Ireland. France has a number (13). Brovès (Var) was abandoned on the 10th August 1970 following the establishment of a military camp nearby.

The residents were rehoused elsewhere. It is forbidden to visit this village today. Some villages were destroyed during the war. Some were destroyed by natural disasters. Pirou Plage in Normandy is the one village that has a similar history to the Irish Ghost estates. This village was built by speculators. Planning permission was refused but the builders had already built 120 houses. None of these were ever occupied. The abandoned houses were, as in the ghost estates of Ireland, stripped of anything valuable. They became a canvas for graffiti artists.

In 2016 the French photographer JR and the cinematographer Agnes Varda went to Pirou Plage to include it in their film Visages Villages.

JR and Varda gathered the local community together for a picnic at Pirou-Plage. He made enormous printed images of some of the adults and children. He attached
these to the facades of the abandoned buildings. In 2016 the authorities of Pirou-Plage ordered the demolition of this phantom village. They plan to construct a brand-new village, on the site, with all the same amenities in the original plan.

Some other European villages were abandoned hundreds of years ago in the wake of war or disease. These become ancient ruins. They are considered attractive places to visit now. Other European villages have been joined with neighbouring villages to create a single unit. But, unlike Ireland, there are few examples of housing estates being built in places where there was little or no need for them.

So, what does a government do when they are faced with more than 3000 ghost estates and no money to complete them? This was the situation in Ireland in 2010.

In order to try to deal with this scandal a whole new usage of the English language was created to ‘soften’ the stark images that were emerging from these abandoned estates. The government talked about ‘realising our rural potential’, reactivating sites, ‘resolving’ developments, UFHDs, ‘weak’ markets (14). They threw carrots to local authorities and builders in the form of €63 million worth of bonds to either ‘finish out’ or demolish these sites. The latter practise was described as ‘resolving’ the estate. The programme would appear, at face value, to have been a success.

The map shows a significant drop in the numbers of ghost estates, down from 3000 in 2010 to 420 in 2016. Vacant unit numbers, within the remaining unfinished estates, has also fallen. We now have the National Vacant Housing Re-use Strategy. It is therefore very hard, for the ordinary person in the street, to understand why the number of homeless in Ireland is increasing continually.

For the future, lessons need to be learned. What part can we, the photographers of Ireland, play in ensuring that the follies of the ‘Celtic Tiger’ are not repeated? How can we better explain to the public how and where we went wrong in the past? I would suggest that a photographic archive should be created of all the images that have been made of these ‘ghost estates’. The archive should include the planning applications made for the construction of each estate and the resultant outcome of each application. The final section could show the places where the estates were never going to be viable and where it has been possible to ‘recover’, at least some houses as viable living accommodation. We need to study and record how and where living accommodation is constructed in other countries. We are being told that our economy is improving on a daily basis. But one has to ask are we heading for another boom and bust in Ireland. I cannot see that a great deal has been learned from our recent experience. We are a country with an enormous national debt, a growing number of homeless people and with the spectre of Brexit just over the horizon. **We, the photographers of Ireland, need to do something to stop the madness.**