Critical Essay: The Ghost Estates of Ireland

A ‘Wasteland’ is a barren, desert like, overgrown, bleak uninhabitable, unused or neglected urban or industrial site. The wasteland in this essay is an urban landscape that is almost unique, in Europe, to Ireland. The essay investigates how these estates came into existence and why they have remained almost hidden. How the Irish ghost estates have been photographed compared to other ‘wastelands’ will be explored. Finally where Ireland is with these estates and how this type of development can be avoided in the future is investigated.

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. Two years later Ireland joined the Euro zone. Bank interest reduced dramatically and almost anyone could obtain a bank loan. 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 or staff to check that buildings were being constructed to the correct standards. Then Lehmann’s bank, in the United States, got into financial difficulty causing a global banking panic. Banks began to recall loans. 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 with no completed houses. But in some estates a small number of the completed houses were occupied. The term “Ghost Estate” began to creep into news stories to describe these half built housing estates.

These unfinished estates were mostly outside the towns and villages on the edge of urban developments. There were no streetlights installed, no refuse collections and incomplete road and path surfaces. The estates began to deteriorate further. They were 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 (2). For some authors notably Paul Farley and Michael S Roberts (1) 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 were similar to those 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. Ruth Connolly, a young student, 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. In an email I received from 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.

Like Connolly and Anex, photographers in other countries have not ignored the ravages of modern industry on their lands. David Hanson, an American photographer, was not been afraid to show the destruction, caused by modern industry, in 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 tells the story of wastelands in a very personal way. His 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, of interiors, 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.
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.

It can be difficult to know how wastelands should be photographed. In today’s world it appears to depend on the destiny of the images. If the images are destined for the gallery wall they will normally be rendered aesthetically beautiful rather than
realistic. Images of Irish Ghost Estates will probably never be viewed in a Gallery space. They have not attracted much media attention.

Ghost estates are not exclusive to Ireland. France has a number (12). Brovès (Var) was abandoned on the 10th August 1970 following the establishment of a military camp nearby.

[Image 1]

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. Speculators built this village. 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.

https://vimeo.com/120498940

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

[Image 2]

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 the 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.
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 2011 there was an election that resulted in a change of government. This new government was faced with the task of trying to right the wrongs of the Celtic Tiger. In order to try to deal with the Ghost Estate scandal a whole new usage of the English language was created to ‘soften’ the stark images that were emerging from these abandoned estates. The new government talked about ‘realising our rural potential’, reactivating sites, ‘resolving’ developments, UFHDs, ‘weak’ markets (13).

It is the law in Ireland that developers must lodge a certain sum of money with the local authorities before a building project is started. This money is kept as a bond and is used for infrastructure development after the estate has been built. The new government decided to release this money to ‘complete’ or ‘resolve’ some of the ghost estates. Sixty three million euro worth of these bonds was given to a number of builders to ‘clean up’ the ghost estates. 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. Photographers may not be able to change or greatly influence what happens in the world around us. But it is our duty to document and record what we see.

We believe that photographers can be more effective when connecting to those who are already working towards change in an ongoing way. (15)

We should ask ourselves how we can better explain and demonstrate to the public how and where Ireland went wrong in the past. I would suggest that a photographic archive should be created of all the images that have been made of the ‘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 of these 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, an expanding population, a growing number of homeless people and with the spectre of Brexit just over the horizon.


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