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Commissioned Essay for Describing Architecture 2013 - [www.describingarchitecture.com](http://www.describingarchitecture.com)

*A line, an area of tone, is not really important because it records what you have seen, but because of what it will lead you on to see.*

John Berger, 'Drawing is Discovery', 1953

The brief for this year's 'Describing Architecture 2013' exhibition is seemingly simple yet tantalisingly challenging. It's about architectural 'work in process' not end product. Curators, Antóin Doyle and Alice Clancy, have invited would-be participants – architects of all stripes, designers, artists and students – to re-present their work at a particular stage of its making. Not quite a dramatic 'medias res' approach where the story begins in the middle of the action; instead it's a provocation to render behind the scenes work visible, audible, tangible even visceral to a community of peers and, refreshingly, to the general public.

Doyle and Clancy are absolutely on the button. For at least a decade now, the talk in international architectural circles has been to break the so-called mystique of the architectural process – an activity deemed exclusive to architects including (ironically) the architectural education sector. The very existence of a communications gap between what architects actually do and public perceptions about how they do it seems at odds with a discipline so connected to collective cultures and the inhabiting of everyday spaces and places.

Attempting to bridge this perceived gap, 'Describing Architecture 2013' is solutions-led and problem solving in its orientation. It opens up space for dialogue and transdisciplinary reflection, with its curators acting as creative mediators between the profession (in all its recessional shapes, sizes, and, at times, dramatic mutations) and the public.

In its conception, design and execution 'Describing Architecture 2013' appears to promote a sense of international inclusivity not a closed shop for 'national' professionals. Its democratic, outward-looking instincts are vividly illustrated in the media on display – drawings, photographs, models, paintings and films – together with an eclectic mix of participants from Ireland, the UK, Australia, Germany, France, Italy and Sierra Leone, who, in turn, hail from established architectural firms, big, medium and small or are sole traders, artists, students and recent graduates.

The inclusive nature of the call for participants and the selection process around 'work in process' signals a healthy departure from disciplinary cliques and a 'who you know' parochialism. Established by Doyle in 2010 with the AAI and subsequently joined by Clancy in 2011, there's a quiet determination to challenge architectural orthodoxies and push the boundaries of what a public exhibition can offer. It is a space for collaborative, horizontal learning, indeed bartering and skills trading, together with the strategic use of 'work in process' as a prompt to engage the public and cultivate wider debate.

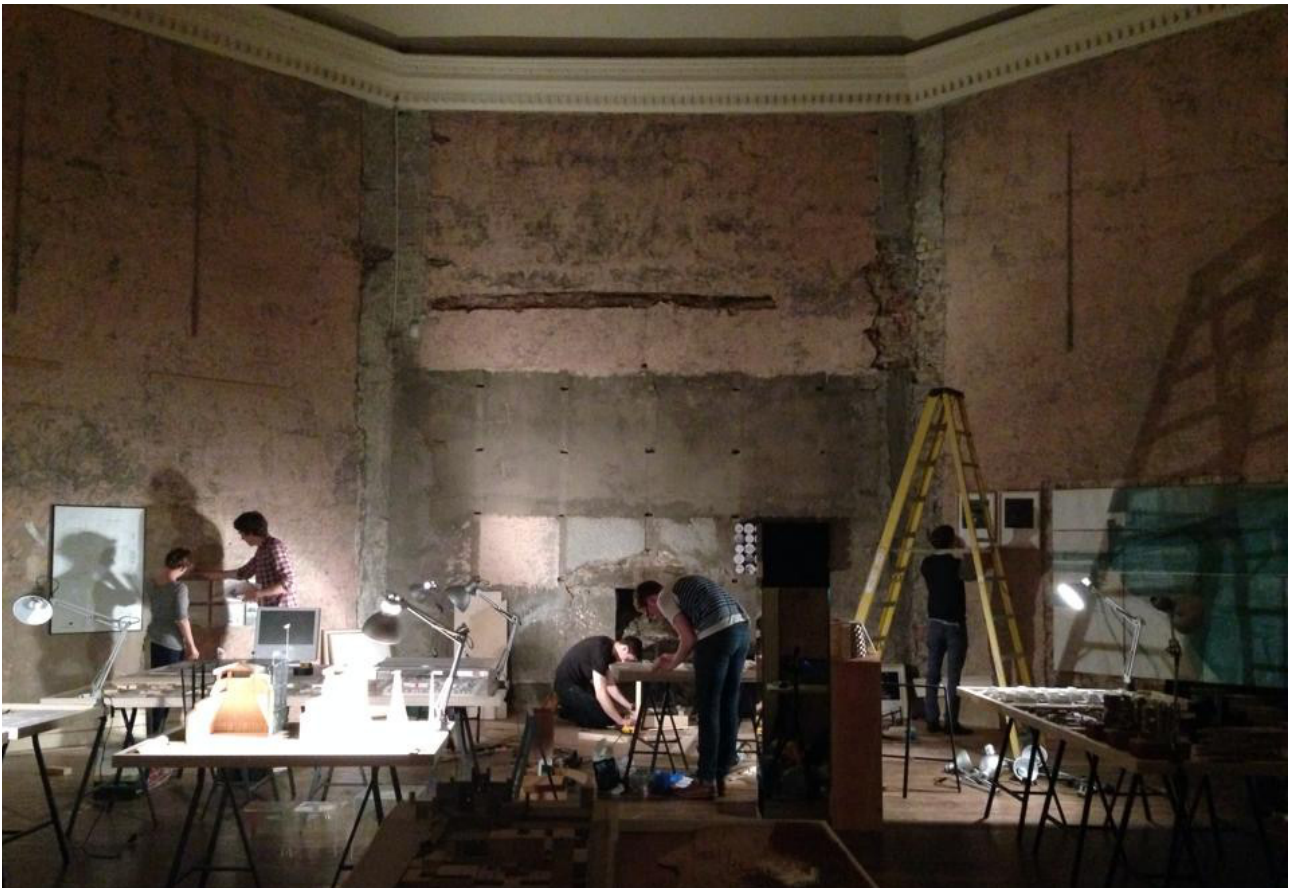


Figure 1 Installing the exhibition in City Assembly House, South William Street

In so doing, Doyle and Clancy curate the story of ‘work in process’ via a series of immersive stages, taking their cue from the received physical wisdom of a Georgian octagonal space whilst encouraging us to understand ‘process’ as fluid, somewhat porous without firm or fixed boundaries yet integral to architectural practice. The exhibition follows a narrative arc moving either clockwise or anti-clockwise (you choose) between ‘Afterlife-Recovery’, ‘Reflection’, ‘Inhabitation’, ‘Process Drawings’ and ‘Collaboration’, with the room’s middle space acting as a hub for miscellaneous projects that overlap with themes straddled around the wall.

Yet curating the complexities of the architectural design process and its inherently collaborative approach presents formidable, not always obvious, challenges. Former Chief Curator of Architecture and Design at MoMA, Barry Bergdoll, speaks eloquently about these challenges in the context of the emerging field of architectural curation:

*The art of curating [architectural] exhibitions is young and if it is to be vital as a medium of scholarship as well as communication, it must remain in a continual state of inventing itself. In every case, such exhibitions are involved with a double absence, for the materials on display are asked not only to represent absent buildings but also to invoke absent contexts or environments in which the architecture participates [whether] ‘historical, urban or theoretical.’*<sup>1</sup>

Representing the ‘absent building’ via drawings, photographs and models calls for the double challenge of re-presenting larger contexts or environments intimated by Bergdoll – notably urban planning/design, construction, housing, finance and community needs

in addition to sociological and historical discourses to which architecture as a practice contributes. Is architecture unique in this regard? Bergdoll talks elsewhere about the need to *strengthen interdisciplinary connections between landscape and architecture, between regional planning and economic analysis, between design and the current demographic crisis.* <sup>2</sup>

Whilst 'Describing Architecture' facilitates an open space for learning across disciplines and practices – between architects and artists – a striking difference remains around the unique subtle and intimate relationship between architect and client (in whatever guise) without which no building or community complex would ever get built. Surely notions of authorship differ, as do ideas and methods of collaboration across the disciplines? How and in what ways does the artist, other than those working in the field of participatory arts, engage in the complex circuit of communication and brokering expected of the architect – a continuum of imagining, tendering, budgeting, drafting, modeling, re-drafting, pitching, translating, executing and retro-checking?

The 'double absence' evoked by Bergdoll arguably has even deeper resonances throughout 'Describing Architecture 2013', since several submissions in the 'Afterlife-Recovery' section and elsewhere reflect on work abandoned in Ireland because of the recession, leaving poignant yet hard won traces recorded in respective drawings, models and photographs of structures persistently present in the form of 'contemporary ruins'.



Figure 2 Dublin City Morgue by McCullough Mulvin Architects - Photograph by Alice Clancy

This is hauntingly (if not literally) captured in McCullough Mulvin Architects' submission of what was to be a new Dublin City Morgue – a public/private initiative stalled during construction and since abandoned. The desire to chronicle the memory of this project cannot be narrowly interpreted as some form of professional nostalgia but points to the rich relational contexts which architecture continues to bridge. Notwithstanding the building was intended as a morgue with obvious connotations of death and decay, are we to simply erase it from the public record, from collective memory because of lack of funding?



An excerpt from their description of this project beautifully captures the complex interplay between time and space underlying most architectural blueprints:

*A new Dublin City Morgue was planned near the Casino in Marino, a delicate Portland stone pavilion in a damaged 18th century landscape. Located on the site of another (vanished) pavilion in the original garden – the Gothic Room – the new building re-imagined the implicit relationship, becoming another stone pavilion, now within a walled garden, enclosing its most private functions, from arrival of a hearse to the private grieving of a relative in a garden...The building, started on site in 2010, was 30% complete when the contractor went into liquidation, leaving a huge basement and skeletal rising walls. A building about death came to understand its own demise.*



Figure 3 Aerial View of Dublin City Morgue - McCullough Mulvin Architects

Are architects offices and hard drives now the custodians of ‘living archives’ comprising diverse imaginings of another Ireland? Can exhibiting architecture in this way mediate and translate something beyond architectural process and allow us catch a glimpse of what we might become?

Anthropologist Svetlana Boym writes about the many meanings of the term ‘ruin’, which have relevance here:

*‘Ruin’ literally means ‘collapse’ – but actually, ruins are more about remainders and reminders. A tour of ‘ruin’ leads you into a labyrinth of ambivalent temporal adverbs – ‘no longer’ and ‘not yet,’ ‘nevertheless’ and ‘albeit’ - that play tricks with causality. Ruins make us think of the past that could have been and the future that never took place, tantalizing us with utopian dreams of escaping the irreversibility of time. Walter Benjamin saw in ruins ‘allegories of thinking itself’, a meditation on ambivalence. At the same time, the fascination for ruins is not merely intellectual, but also sensual.*<sup>3</sup>

You could say the architect or artist who chooses to reflect on ‘what was to be but never was’ enacts a form of urgent social thinking now needed more than ever to open up humane horizons for the future. Interestingly the section on ‘Aftermath–Recovery’ primarily



Figure 4 Nothing Set in Concrete - Bernadette Keating

comprises photographs taken by artists of abandoned sites and structures, seizing the opportunity to produce a visual allegory, pace Benjamin, of the local and everyday legacies of the aftermath of the boom and economic crisis, often met with defiant, creative re-interpretations and adaptive uses by the public.

What is commonplace to architects as part and parcel of their craft is intriguing to the non-architect. 'Describing Architecture' opens a window to the public to bear witness to the creative imagining and sheer labour behind 'work in process'. Even more necessary it would seem when projects never see the light of day because of funding crises and remain within sketches and office portfolios.

Walking through the exhibition space I was struck by the fragility and minutiae of the submissions: from clusters of card models illustrating composition, varied dimensions and incremental stages of communication with peers, clients and funders to exquisitely painted watercolour sketches and drawings evoking atmospheres of interiors or spatial nestles within rooms.

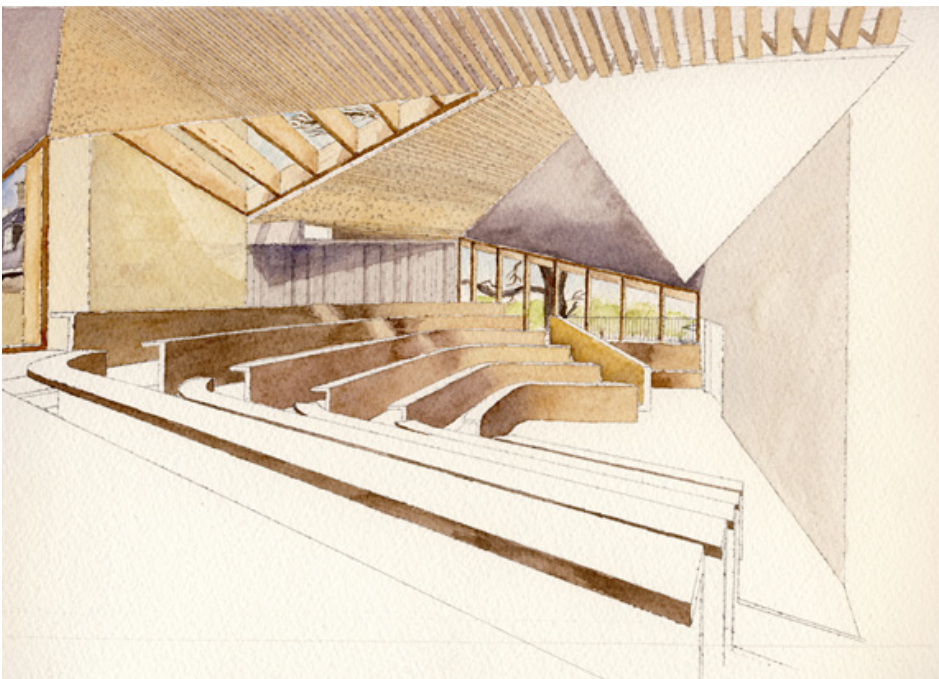


Figure 5 Watercolour by Sheila O'Donnell - O'Donnell + Tuomey Architects





Figure 6 Models in the office of O'Donnell + Tuomey Architects

Equally relevant to the public gaze is the dogged persistence of the individual and collective labour. This is obvious in the way conceptual and engineering problems are resolved for the practitioner through a one-dimensional sketch being transmuted to a two-dimensional relief then morphed to a three-dimensional model and back again. Problems are solved through endless iteration and an embodied sense of repeated enactment and display.

The sociologist Richard Sennett refers to this form of craft as an essential life skill where theory and practice are re-united and ways of *using tools, organizing work, and thinking about materials...remain alternative, viable proposals about how to conduct life with skill.* <sup>4</sup>

Intimacy of knowledge mediated through tactility is evident in the section named 'Inhabitation' where architects and artists explore the lived, everyday dimensions of domestic space and diverse notions of 'home'. These practitioners travel with ease

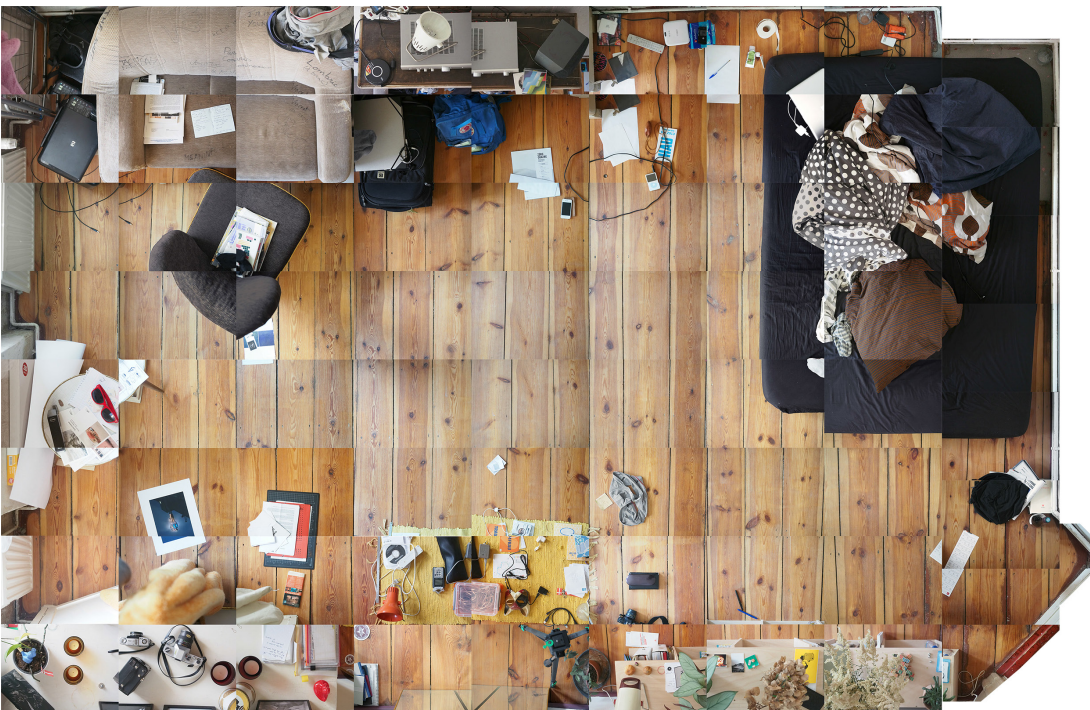


Figure 7 Untitled, from the series 'A Search for Home' - Dorthe Slej Pederson

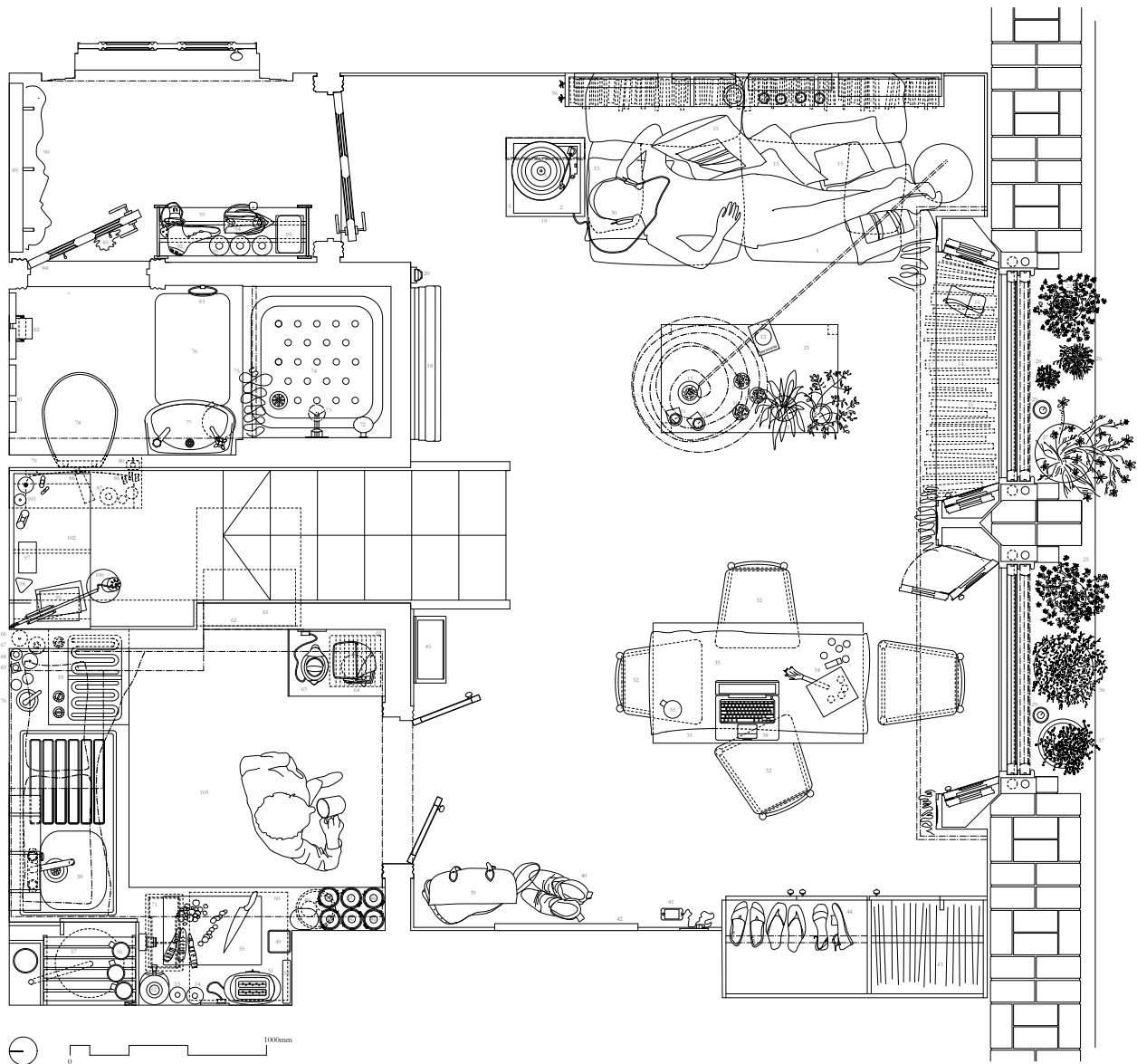


Figure 8 20 square metres - Jennifer O'Donnell & Jonathan Janssens

between reflection and inhabitation suggesting that to design a 'home' for another one must first understand the intricacies of one's own.

Exquisitely enacted through a series of photomontages and drawings that differently record quotidian objects and aspects (at times quirky if not a tad obsessive), we see here echoes of Gaston Bachelard in *Poetics of Space: The Classic Look at How We Experience Intimate Places* (1958):

*A house constitutes a body of images that give...proofs or illusions of stability. We are constantly re-imagining its reality: to distinguish all these images would be to describe the soul of the house; it would mean developing a veritable psychology of the house.*<sup>5</sup>

The politics of 'home', urban development and the brutal imprint of rogue property developers on communities of place are tenderly expressed in Frances Leach's 'House' (from the series 'The Future is Left Behind So Many Times'). An artist, Leach borrows



from the architectural practice of modeling using display pins to outline an alternative map of pain, experienced by the residents of Priory Hall in Dublin - whose lives and livelihoods have been so tragically and uselessly disregarded. Merging materials and metaphors this 'two-sided house' makes a surprisingly simple, evocative statement about the 'absence of compassion', indeed social ethics, within the world of property development in Ireland.

The human impact of urban renewal and the practice of that ugly word 'decanting' in Southwark, London is further explored in Mathew Benjamin Coleman's 'Heygate: A Natural History'. Here architecture blends with social history to record the lived legacies of 'regeneration' and the effects of imposed experimentation on embedded communities together with the balance wrought between built and natural environments.

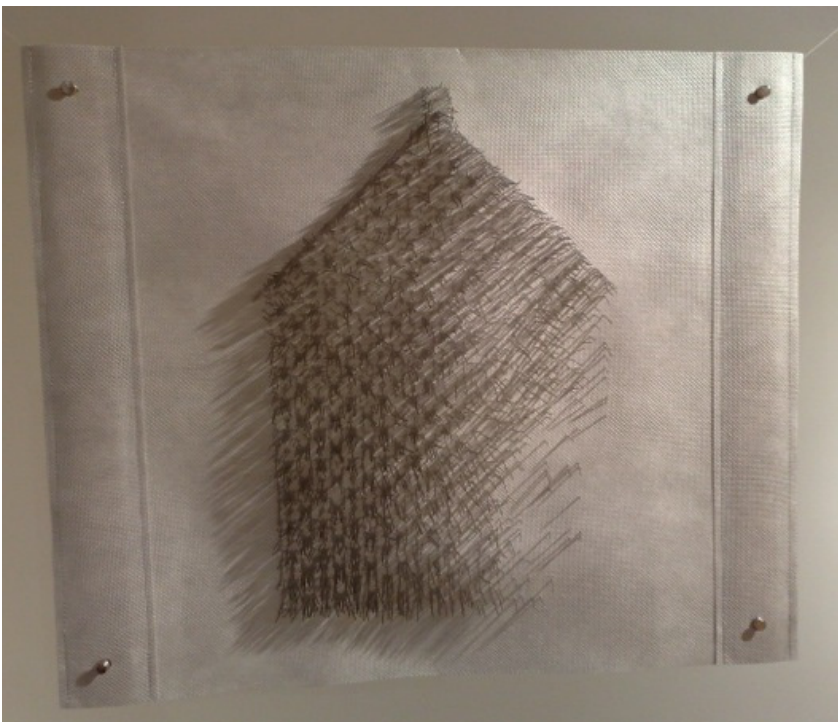


Figure 9 House, from the series 'The Future is Left Behind So Many Times' - Frances Leach



Figure 10 Heygate: A Natural History - Matthew Benjamin Coleman



Participants were asked to submit a piece of writing of approximately 200 words describing their 'work in process' with the aim of communicating to a wider audience. Sumita Sinha's written contribution is in itself the 'object on display'. In this excerpt Sinha poetically explores the 'non-iconic' in architecture and the vibrancy found in participatory design and collaborative practice:

*Much of architectural debates and critiques of today centre on the iconic. Yet most of the world's architecture is self-designed, handmade and experienced without needing financial decisions and design critiques. It serves an immediate need. Whatever its purpose, buildings and spaces are perceived at a human scale. We do not read plans – we navigate spaces. Iconic buildings like celebrities need emptiness around them to be admired in isolation. The everyday jostles and nestles amongst our lives and makes a profound impact on how we live – whether by teasing out the human experiences that change it or by reading it in its contextual environment. The young are the experts of such dissection and interpretations. They have the sensitivity and curiosity to be involved in the minutiae of spatial experience - for them these are tactile and exciting adventures waiting to be turned upside down.... Participatory design recognizes that architecture is always work in progress: and people and the environment will change the original intentions of any work, whether deliberately or accidentally.*

'Describing the un-Iconic', Sumita Sinha, Charushila, 2013

'Describing Architecture' is a veritable Lab for experimentation, shared learning and collaborative adventures. The grouping of signatures at the bottom of the Callan Workhouse Mapestry resulting from the Commonage Summer School '13 – presented in an 'embroidered drawing' – acts as social palimpsest for that heady mix of confluences that makes participatory design so rewardingly unpredictable. The sheer scale of the tapestry with its front and back texture provides a touchable, organic record of an evolving community of place.

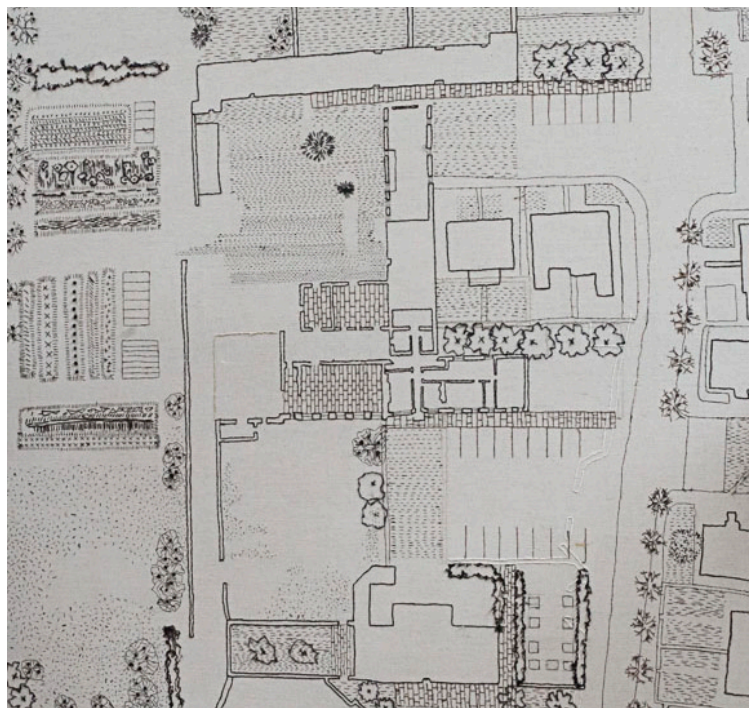


Figure 11 MAPESTRY - LiD Architecture, Dee Harte, Workhouse Assembly - Photographs by Brian Cregan



Figure 12 PRACTICE - Taken at 2013 Steam Threshing Festival, Moynalty - Photographs by Dominic Lavelle

Collaborative, seasonal ventures are likewise evoked with the communitarian building of a unique hay bale construction, facilitated by PRACTICE (Barber, Conway, Lavelle, Swan, Ward and Young) in Moynalty, Co Meath. It's a perishable structure working as catalyst for the excavation of a popular history of the cyclical 'threshing festival' and simultaneously a spatial refuge for community retreat and reflection.

The healthy fusion and juxtaposition of practitioners in 'Describing Architecture' lends itself to necessary comparative conversations. But there's a pedagogical principle evident throughout which is startlingly clear: problem solving goes hand in hand with reflection and theory and practice are dialogical allies not compartmental foes, as is often the case in other disciplines. As if taking their cue from Bergdoll, who warns that the art of curating architecture 'must remain in a continual state of inventing itself', curators Doyle and Clancy are already imagining the next exhibition platform for 2014, refusing any easy institutional complacency. 'Describing Architecture 2013', currently in its fourth year, has opened a space for dialogue, action, debate, engagement, play and reflection while simultaneously communicating what is already a multi-pronged discipline to those very people architecture should generously and humanely strive to work alongside and serve.

#### Endnotes:

1. Barry Bergdoll, 'Curating History', *The Journal of the Society of Architectural History*, 2010.
2. Bergdoll, 'The Art of Advocacy: The New Museum as Design Laboratory', *Design Observer*, 2011.
3. Svetlana Boym, 'Ruinophilia: Appreciation of Ruins', *Atlas of Information*, Tranzit, 2011.
4. Richard Sennet, *The Craftsman*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008
5. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space: The Classic Look at How We Experience Intimate Places*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1958.