



# Describing Architecture 2014

## Memory and Place

Opening Address by Professor Elizabeth Hatz  
in the Octagonal Room, City Assembly House,  
South William Street, Dublin  
on Thursday 16th October 2014

### Describing Architecture

*NOTHING can be described - so NOTHING can also take place*

*Things and places become Sphinxes. Acquire silence. All things need to be loved this way, unconditionally.*

*E. Hatz, Nothing, Describing Architecture 2014*

What is it to *describe*? And describing architecture?

Is it at all possible to describe architecture?

Probably not. But the impossible is the attraction.

The word itself - describing - means both writing and drawing.

So it is interesting as it links word and figure.

But we should discriminate here between describing and explaining  
- as two quite different things

*explaining* aims towards understanding  
but *describing* ... not necessarily so.

Igor Stravinsky said that he had during his whole life never understood music - he had only felt it.

The most accurate description, in the form of carefully drawn components of a construction or building or space, will still fall short in truly describing it  
... as architecture or as a place.

It will always be just a part, an approximation or an abstraction in some sense.  
Something relying on translation.

But it will also be a thing in its own right. As such it will be parallel to architecture.

In a lovely book called 'Translations from Drawing to Building', Robin Evans talks about James Turrell's early works - those which create geometric spaces - just through light and shadow - and he points out that they are works that are not born in the drawing, but created from repeated trials and observations in real life. The drawings are dry manuals. You actually understand how the thing is made; but still the experience of the space is amazing. It is much stronger than your intellectual, cerebral understanding. Even when you understand - you are taken aback, overwhelmed by the sense of space itself...

Architecture will always contain this capacity to move us, this element of recollection, of magic and of integrity, despite our attempts at describing.  
Yet we continue to try describing.

It is like a love poem. Close - but never really there. Yet a lovely thing in itself.

That is why this form of exhibition can go on forever. We will never be able to exhaust the theme of describing architecture - but we will always be interested in the approximations, the transcriptions, the surprising stories of this incredible physical world we continually shape, re-shape and inhabit together.

And when I look around the exhibition of this year, I see all these works that move me - literally - into moments of architecture and memory.

## Memory and Place

This show, to me has something specifically Irish about it.

I see Irish architectural culture as belonging clearly in a continental context. Brian Friel's play 'Translations' brilliantly captures the particular conditions around this. Grounded in the local and connected to the world. And here in this show this is somehow linked to another peculiar and also very strong dimension. And this - is the seemingly contradictory combination of the ordinary and the magic.

In this show many everyday, obsolete, ordinary, yet enigmatic, places are revisited. It reminds me of Ignasi de Sola Morales Rúbio, in his text 'Terrain Vague', when he talks about art photos from the 1990s, of abandoned, left over spaces in urban contexts, and he said that they stand for the un-rehearsed, for the not yet defined, for the open - for the ultimate possible ....

In this show too, we can see familiar places, but we see them anew.

In this show many everyday, obsolete, ordinary, yet enigmatic, places are revisited. At the crisis of the West's blind belief in progress, at the beginning of unequalled environmental challenges, can we start to perceive creativity emerging from handling the already existing, rather than obsessively focussing newness? Paul Valéry certainly anticipated this.

Place and memory then, opens for creative re-connection. The alteration of the existing, relying on re-interpretation of place, is the real creative fuel. Interestingly, place in Ireland, is a complex matter, obliterating the boundary of urban and rural, as well as old and new. It is all a fine, rich weave.

Without memory there cannot be architecture, there cannot be place, there cannot be anything. But even memory has its own no-where and its own point zero - a moment of suspension when you are facing the familiar but on the verge to leave it and embrace the unfamiliar.

Memory is also about absence and loss - falling without knowing where you will hit.

But somewhere memory is recaptured, fragmentarily. In 'The Theater and its Double', Antonin Artaud traces the origins of theatre to the famine in Spain, where people would enact the memory of food and through acts sublimate eating, as a creative staging of life. The loss of something as the origin of art is also traceable in Mircea Eliade's interpretation of cave paintings. Paintings executed due to the dilemma of losing the sacred animal, in order to sustain life.

It seems the losses through the Irish downturn, have propelled again a thrust of creative power, embedded in both memory and sense of place. Seeing it anew, and bringing it back into life.

Look around Describing Architecture: watercolours, films, models, photos, words - and architectural drawings... They reveal, they hide, they evoke..., they tease...

You see few people in the works. It doesn't mean they are not there. Their figurative absence is like murder in a play; when only implied, not acted out, it hits with twice the blow. Like Van Gogh's pair of shoes.

We stand there, our eye wide open ...and this new seeing makes us long for the next occasion to test and tease the limits ...of describing architecture.