

## Thoughts and Drawings on a Landscape in Formation

### *The Marconi Landscape, Clifden, Galway, Ireland*

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**Abstract.** In my research as an architect, I am interested in transitional moments involving the ground and the figure, - the figure/ground relationship intrinsic to the discipline of architecture. This research is driven and conducted through drawing in an attempt to trace the impact of the figure on the ground and the impact of the ground on the figure. It is the quality in this exchange of forces that defines aspects of spatial identity.

In the case of this Irish landscape, I am interested in the transitional moment of how a landscape is culturally perceived: peat land harvested by man becoming a protected cultural heritage. Transitional moments are moments of change. They release cultural information on how we handle matter and how situations are culturally conceptualized.

This paper investigates a notion of authenticity concerning the change of status of this landscape.

**Keywords.** Drawing; Marconi Ireland; Relative authenticity; Irish Landscape.



*Figure 1*  
*The Marconi Landscape, Clifden, Galway, Ireland.*

### **The Notion of Trespassing**

I drive up a small road towards the Marconi Site in Clifden, eager to enter this desolate Irish landscape. Winter had just passed and I'm all geared up to withstand the harsh weather in this ancient landscape. All I can see is the topography of carved peat topped with scars vegetation. As I step out of the car, I hear but the wind in my ears.

This infinite and desolate landscape with its rough weather allows for this interpersonal imagination where one enters a wild landscape; alone with nature without anyone in front or behind: the romantic idea of trespassing into natural territory to experience something basic, something authentic.

Walking in isolation surrounded by vastness, there is no one on the land, except sheep and deep carvings stretching across great distances. The markings seem to reveal a sectional history of the soil beneath my feet. This is a landscape in formation, at a slow steady pace, depositing one millimetre per year.

For every meter I see cut, I see a thousand years.

### **Landscape as Cultural Heritage**

The origin of this thick landscape is situated thousands of years ago, aided by man, burning the land, making it impenetrable by water. The following centuries allowed for the formation of a stratified geology of deposits; a gift to the 19th century dweller harvesting the top layers called peat for them to be dried and used as burning fuel in their homes and businesses. This landscape finds in its relationship with man a balance between growth and harvest. Over past centuries, owners of the land developed this particular relationship with the land and passed on to following generations their skills to sustainably harvest the peat landscape. Now implementation of European legislation means this landscape needs to be protected and peat can in principle no longer be harvested. The owners of the land have become mute.

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My interest lays in the tension between the landscape that has been growing in horizontal layers over thousands of years and the farmer cutting land vertically. The typical carvings and tool marks present on the site reveal as much about the horizontal peat layering as it speaks about the farmer and his tools. It is this friction between the slow and steady growth of this landscape and the instant sectional consumption that resonates when considering this landscape as cultural heritage and its political policing. What shall we eradicate, the rich soil or the worker ploughing his land? EU legislators have decided where the quality of the cultural heritage resides. I am looking for the qualities embedded within the interaction between land and harvester in an attempt to understand the quality of the status of this landscape. It is this friction between the land and mankind intervening in it that made this landscape to what it is. The notion of cultural landscape is defined here by the active role mankind has had in this landscape for thousands of years.

The drawn research focuses on the information embedded in the stance of a situation, including visual information collected on site (photographs and video footage) and understanding the dialectics surrounding this landscape through drawing. The observational drawings I produce generate information much in the same way as matter can be tested for its material properties such as resistance or brittleness by putting it under pressure. The representation (photographs and film footage) is put under pressure through drawing enabling it to release underlying strata and hidden resolution beyond the representational, until it presents a figural nature. In the drawing process from the figurative to the figural, from representation to presentation, the outcome of the process

is strongly related to the author using particular methods and related to the author's enculturated standpoint. During those observed moments in the drawing process, when matter presents itself freed from political discourse, sustainable balance or narrative associated form (its figural nature), different content can be noted that is strongly related to the author's standpoint and the enculturated presence of this landscape.

### **The Field Drawing**

My drawings are field drawings: selected tracings of visual information of what presents itself in photographs and video footage of the subject. Drawn in repetition and iteration, these figures are looked at from different points of view to extract an embedded resolution. There is a critical surrender to the situation when the visual information is projected and traced on the drawing board.

The drawing engages with the represented information to a degree that aspects of the representation come to a pivotal point where the drawing starts to perform in a speculative way. This pivotal point is a threshold moment in the drawing process very much as in Heidegger's reference to poises as a bringing-forth when something moves away from its standing as one thing to become something else

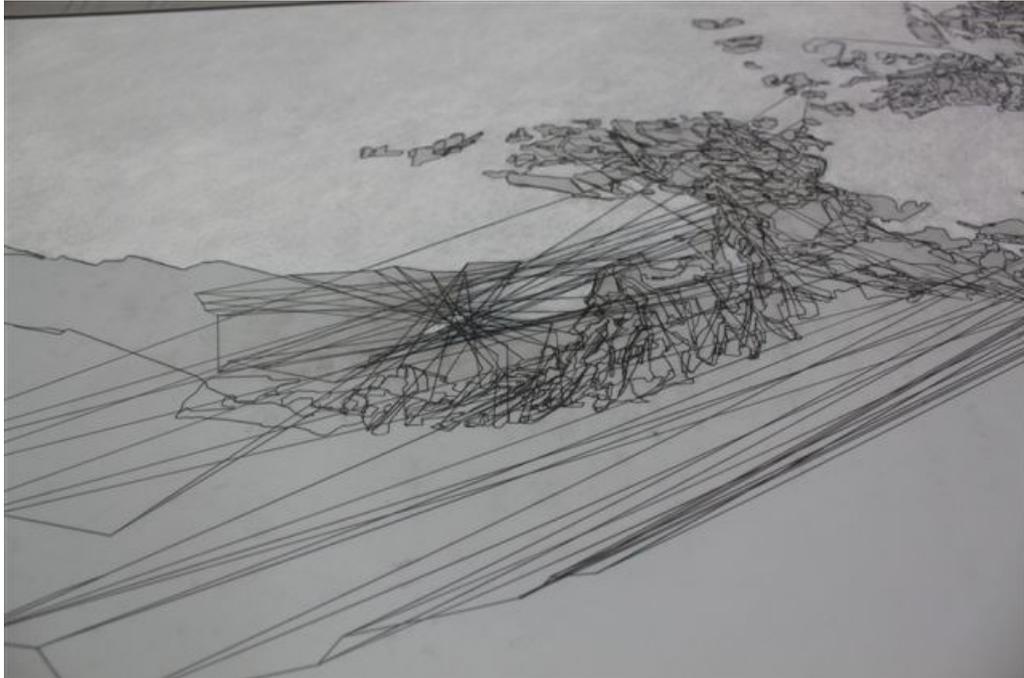


*Figure 2*  
*For every meter I see cut, I see a thousand years.*

### **Sectional History**

The ground remains mutely dominant, growing as we speak, and will outlive the figure harvesting its top layer. But for now, these grounds speak of the figure's passing. The deep carvings hold a temporal permanence, freshly split open soil exposing sectional histories spanning thousands of years.

What amazes about the concept of being able to observe a section through history is the unspeakable overview. A section dares to objectify. It makes what we see measurable. Its thickness stays in the persuasive hidden perspective of the imagination. Not even imagination maybe, just a potent swell. It is just earth that has been sitting there decomposing for a very long time. Its simplicity is seductive.



*Figure 3*  
*Marconi drawings, detail.*

The drawings attempt to reach behind the representation of this piece of peat bog, behind the representation of history, left there, in principle to be kept, to be overgrown by the very process that makes up this history.

The first set of drawings trace the texture and rhythm present in the peat section in an attempt to get closer to an understanding of its visual consistency.

The type and amount of detail this landscape demands, forces a certain (drawing) slowness, seemingly in relation to its desolate and harsh character. As much as the texture of peat and its vegetation is articulated in this section, the tool marks made by harvesting the bog indicate a slow harvesting by the farmer. These traces at an acute angle to the horizontally layered peat stand witness of the resistance between the peat and the farmers harvest tools. I draw the repetitive tool marks and their geometric iterations in search of a particular relationship between man and this landscape; man intervenes and leaves his marks as the landscape continues its slow and steady growth, encroaching on these marks once again.



*Figure 4*  
*Marconi drawings, detail.*

### **The historical section and authenticity**

At a growth rate of one millimetre per year, there seems to be a measurable clarity to the section that triggers an experience of authenticity; the seductive visual simplicity as a result of the layered complex biological processes and mankind intervening.

#### *Relative authenticity*

The notion authenticity relates to how connected you are to the natural world, through actual presence and through the encultured idea of what the experience of authenticity is. Besides being a topic in philosophical debates, authenticity is also a pervasive ideal that impacts social and political thinking. It is the specificity and authentic nature of this landscape that prompted the Special Area of Conservation status. To know how we should handle the importance of this landscape, we should understand the nature of its authenticity and how we access or experience it.

Looking through a vertical section of bog, we gaze at a surface showing an historical overview, surrendering layered evidence of the complex interaction between climatic processes and human behaviour. There is a simultaneity of compressed time here for us to conceptualize as an 'object' of historical placement. Landscapes inevitably have within their modus operandi this historical continuous presence, layer after layer - in this case at a speed of one millimetre per year. But rarely do you get to see a sectional cut exposing the identity of place through the soil beneath your feet.

In today's urban environments, sited in network, the notion of place, as described by Marc Augé (1995) and Michel de Certeau (1984), has a reduced capacity to designate 'fixedness' or instigate the notion of an absolute emplacement. When we look at a site, a location or a place, we often aim to define its intrinsic character through relations of proximity connecting a network of information, such as climate, program, history and socio-political organizational strata, in order to understand and generate contextual relevance for the spaces/objects we design. Place in itself is thus inevitably relational to its surrounding (E. Joris 2011).

Up to this day, the preservation doctrine established through the Venice Charter (1964), still defines renovation practice as part of a 'positivist truth-based method'. This objective approach to renovation implies somehow the substantiation of a material fetish aiming to consolidate historical sites as valuable material objects ideally 'frozen' in a distant past; thus designating it to a particular timeframe (E. Joris 2011).

In reference to the Venice Charter (1964), historical placement is absolute. We are able to categorize matter and allocate it to a specific time period. In this landscape, when we look at the current status quo through a section of these inevitable processes, there is an awareness of duration as we are observing: Although we halt the situation and appear to be looking at a frozen state of the ground, we know there was a before and there will be an after. Any after situation of this ground will inevitably impact the before. Thus, any layer visible in this section has changed under the circumstances that came before and will come after. Man burning down the land and making it impenetrable for water impacted the biological processes and circumstances of the following thousands of years. Similarly; the weight, climatical impact and man handling its top layer over time, impacts on all previous layers of this section.

The authenticity we are looking for in this landscape is in principle not time related in the absolute sense, rather, it is a relative authenticity where within the performativity of the soil and its multiple players (the ground, the figure and ruling culture), all past time is present simultaneous in all layers: the simultaneity of history.

So what does this mean for this landscape, in the light of the notion of relative authenticity, to step out of the categorization of time-related historical value?

When we compare this shift from an absolute towards a relative authenticity in this landscape to build heritage and restoration principles.

In postmodernism, which held on to the Venice charter, we placed ourselves outside history. History was there to be observed. You could only come after what had already happened, leaving the edifice in a passive role in an attempt to freeze the maelstrom of change and transformation. It is this frozen passive role allocated to the edifice, whereby it is in principle excluded from transformative force exchange of times to come, which halts the durational development of spatial identity of place.



*Figure 5*  
*Marconi drawings, detail.*

The transformation of the ground is inevitable, with or without the figure ploughing the land. The ground will always remain dominant. This maelstrom is part of bigger omni-directional non-linear development of the environment that surrounds us. When we venture into rural landscapes, and experience an authenticity that seems to be needing protection, we are not trespassing into nature, we are nature ourselves and by stepping in, we allow ourselves a proximate involvement that generates an awareness of place embedded in time. It is this awareness, given to us by the current harvested landscape, where the quality of cultural heritage rests.

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