Towards a Collective Spatial Form: an Analysis of Achill’s Deserted Village

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Towards a collective spatial form – an analysis of Achill’s Deserted Village

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“We have so long accustomed ourselves to conceiving of buildings as separate entities that we now suffer from an inadequacy of spatial language to make meaningful environments” Fumihiko Maki Investigations on Collective Form (as reprinted in Nurturing Dreams MIT Press 2008 p45)

In 1990, Bob Kingston published a carefully drawn and important study of the famous deserted village on Achill. Though the village dates from the 1700’s the 74 buildings or their variants were in continuous use until abandoned in the 1930’s.

Kingston’s study is beyond value as it documented the village in its derelict state which has grown more perilous each year. It is clear from visiting the site and from the text that there is a high degree of consistency in the design and size of each house. Moreover there are significant consistencies in their orientation and their placement appears to have a common goal.

Some of these are raised in Kingston’s study but this paper proposes further insights. This paper seeks to answer the following questions;

What are these “design” decisions and what are they in response to?
Is there a spatial discipline behind the apparent “organic” cluster?
What can be deduced from the particular scattering, or clustering of the buildings?
Does the Deserted Village constitute a meaningful environment?

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The initial findings suggest that there is a strong link between building and environment as well as other coherencies which will add layers to our understanding of the village. In “Investigations on Collective” Maki asked a further question “... what are its possible implications for our current thinking in architecture and urban design?” Using particular case studies it is possible to show how similar strategies have been used to produce meaningful contemporary environments.

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The 74 structures that constitute the deserted village are strung out along the lower reaches of Slievemore. These are loosely aggregated into two main groups.

Toir (west village)             Toir Reabhach (east village)

An old path strings the buildings together like pearls on a necklace. Both pearls and necklace have suffered the ravages of time since the village was abandoned in the 1930’s. The built and cultural memory suggests that the structures may be over 150 years old. They may even be echoes of earlier settlements, modernised over time for want a better description. Subsequent improvements however were insufficient alone to prevent the migration from the land that followed the industrial revolution and the famine. Though the landscape that bore up these people has changed little since Neolithic times other concerns made redundant a way of life, no longer sufficient or sustainable. This paper will not be a paean for humbler times rather it will merely seek to discover whether the pattern is by accident or design, even in part.

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Type 1

Bob Kingston should be acknowledged for the work he has undertaken to record the vanishing village. With no protective measures in place the village is deteriorating into the hillside. Kingston’s study quite properly concentrates on the buildings. The plans of each of the remaining structures were recorded. On the face of it the structures appear to have a common ancestry, corresponding to a very simple cottage type. Kingston further documented the various typical details of wall, quoins, doors, windows, niches etc., more about these later.

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Type 2
If the village solely consisted of 1 room cottages that would have made the story simpler but there are 2 and 3 room cottages. Does this describe social strata or generational growth? In the main these first two patterns have a predominant character. They are oriented roughly along a North South Axis, pointing their gables perpendicular to what may be discerned as the local contour.

Building 24  Building 25  Building 30  Building 32

Type 3
Beyond the first two patterns there also exists, for their uniqueness small square buildings which do not seem conducive to human habitation and a singular building that is isolated from the rest and oriented in complete opposition to the others with its axis oriented East West. This head house is located at the extreme western end of the collective set apart from Toir (West Village). It is comparable to the chieftain’s house in traditional villages one finds in primitive societies or an overseer’s house one finds in industrial mining villages. Whatever it comparator it is distinct in its appearance, layout, orientation and location.

Building 2  Building 3

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Taxonomy

Kingston provides an interesting insight into these structures in a very detailed matrix or table of features. This table has been re-organised for the purposes of this presentation.

\[ See \ appendix \ for \ each \ taxonomic \ table \]
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Reorganising the table according to the features that are most common an interesting picture emerges. 91% of the buildings have an East facing door, (in 19% a West facing door has been blocked). This is a significant feature of the whole of the two villages. Evidence of plastering in 72% of the buildings confirms human habitation. Interestingly a further 57% have an associated manure pit and 50% have what appear to be storage niches. With tethering posts in 41% buildings it confirms the close association with domesticated animals.

Windows occur in only 34% of the buildings are in the main and like doors, face East. Since the path connects the various buildings by their gables it would seem that doorways are positioned according to environmental reasons rather than concerns about access. Kingston’s survey and reconstruction goes some way to explain the pattern and character of these buildings relying on folk history or memory.

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“The wall behind the fire often contained a keep hole or niche, usually one on each side and it is believed that the left hand niche belonged to the woman while the man owned the one on the right. These were used for the safekeeping of small items such as pipes or knitting. While generally these were just small holes they sometimes developed into elaborate storage niches or dressers, sometimes with many compartments. It is believed that the spread of tea drinking, and the use of delph lead to the spread of a wooden dresser with open shelves and where timber was scarce to the use of built in stone dressers……. Behind these conventions must lie ancient traditions possibly relating to a pastoral way of life.”

The predominant features of these buildings however point clearly to an environmental factor. The predominant eastern orientation of doors directs the entrances away from the dominant westerly winds. The presence of niches, almost exclusively on the northern gable elevation, is a stronger outlier than folk art. This is not to say that folk memory should be ignored. Maybe it is just a layer over a deeper structure. Whatever the reason these acts can only be considered wilful, evidence of “design”.

Analysis by author

Niches in location  Niche detail  Niches on northern elevation (gable)

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Just what are these “design” decisions and what are they in response to? The evidence is clear. The niches are located on the coldest elevation of the building. They are deeply inset, nearly half the thickness of the wall further exposing the contents to even harsher conditions. If they were “used for the safekeeping of small items such as pipes or knitting” it seems odd that they would be exposed to the high risk of dampness and cold present on the exposed gable. More importantly Kingston points towards, I believe, the right direction, that “Behind these conventions must lie ancient traditions possibly relating to a pastoral way of life.” In this pastoral way of life “.........the everyday diet consisted mainly of cattle products: meats, milk, milk products – butter, curds, cheeses and whitemeats, blood oatmeal and oaten breads.” “Butter was also eaten, mixed with oatmeal and curdled sour milk and soft cheeses were popular. Sarphus butter was preserved for later use by burying it in bogs, where it would keep for considerable periods.” While the presence of bogs along Slievemore may seem to be a suitable asset for such functions it would seem eminently more practical to provide a place inside the home that would preserve such goods. The intimacy that the inhabitants had with their animals is clear from Kingston’s survey and reconstruction. It follows that they would be intimate with their products as well. The use of animals to “heat” the sleeping lofts above, their waste ejected via a channel to a manure pit one could dare call these modest structures “machines for living”. Certainly there seems to be a considered design at play, disciplined yet flexible, consistent and varied. We have no evidence of the skills or traditions that formed these structures, whether there was an “architect” or craftsman at the helm of these decisions.
Pattern 1

This leads us to consider the possibility that aside from determined individual buildings there might be a spatial discipline behind the apparent "organic" cluster.

The data set is organised into seven distinct groups. Aside from the two definable “villages” there are 5 other arrangements consisting of 2, 1, 2, 4 and 2 buildings. Separating out the background noise the buildings appear to be a mere scattering; a clachan\(^{vii}\). Analysing the data set by type indicates a wide range of distribution.
This analysis, while informative, does not signify an overwhelming tendency towards a recognisable signal. If we ignore type and look to collective organisation there may be something we can deduce from the material. Though the buildings are mainly are organised on a North South Axis their orientation is less than true. However this may be only an impression. In any planned composition one would expect to find consistencies even where randomness dominates, it may be possible to distil the order in the chaos. This order is certainly recognisable, at least in principle, in traditional villages throughout the world.

In Maki’s search for a collective form, he cites examples from his own country;

“In the past, many Japanese villages, developed along major country roads. Houses generally U-shaped and juxtaposed against one another perpendicular to the road …….”

The first order is an order of exception, exception to the general approach or direction of building, of which there are 9 buildings.
Orders 2 & 3

Orders 2 and 3 appear to be the two strongest alignments. Apart from minor exceptions these appear to relate strongly to either the West or East village. One might even hazard a guess that this in part may relate to the chronological development of the village. The coherence of Order 3, located exclusively in the West village cluster, for instance may indicate that this was the prototype which extended in both directions along the contour.

Order 2

The West village core has an alignment variation is only 1°. This almost aspires to a modernist and uniform grid. Constructed as it is on the side of a mountain on rough ground notwithstanding the robustness of the traditional tools of building this is a remarkable exercise in planning and restraint. Given the varied local contouring it appears that the alignments are in spite of the local condition. One could see this as an extension of medieval burgage (field) plots.
Order 3

The East village core has an alignment variation of 7°. This should not necessarily be a surprise. In many vernaculars we expect to see some level of coherence, either in terms or form, material or arrangement.
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In these examples from Switzerland offer similar clues into the character of the upland village on Achill. The typologies present interesting comparisons, from the single mountain huts to the multistorey barns. The singular orientation, the strategic placement on the hill and the consistent morphology confirms an evolutionary development syncopated to the surrounding pastoral landscape. According to Maki, these have simply evolved. The iterative shifts that underpin the final forms have long been subsumed into the dust of history. The evidence here though hints at a more purposeful, directed and knowing response.

“Cities, towns and villages throughout the world do not lack rich collections of collective form. Most of them have simply evolved; they have not been designed.”

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Soazza: Vielzweckbauten und Heuscheunen auf der Alp Pinderia und in Gorgin Switzerland XIII

Multipurpose buildings and barns in the Pinderia Alps.

12 Drawings extracted from various other publication for conference presentation only – not for commercial reproduction
Maki’s seminal “Investigations in collective form” puts forward an analysis that still holds true, that has a mirror here in Achill.

“Consistent use of basic materials and construction method as well as spontaneous but minor variations in physical expression; 

Wise and often dramatic use of geography and topography. 

Human scale preserved throughout the town (frequently in contrast to superhuman land forms); and 

Sequential development of basic elements such as dwellings, open spaces between houses, and the repetitive use of visual elements such as walls, gates, towers, open water, and so forth.”

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Maki’s essay has long been inspiration for architects seeking a way out of the dead end of some modernist circles that preferred the definitive grid; the complete solution. However long on inspiration it is short on the mechanics. If we are to discover the secrets of these “collections of collective form”, we need to interrogate their forms and arrangements with a finer lens. Is this analysis fine enough, complete enough? Are we any closer to discovering whether “the Deserted Village constitutes a meaningful environment”? There is sufficient evidence in play here from the individual design of the dwellings to their placement and overall organisation that this was meaningful to those who worked and lived on this land. The buildings are tied specifically to the farming that supported the people. The evidence is concretised, to use Norberg Scultz’s term, in the very structures, their details.

However we are left with a haunting realisation that the fundamental question at the heart of the deserted village remains that if this collective expression of architectural form is filled with meaning and character why was it abandoned? In Kingston’s book some blame has been laid firstly at the introduction of the potato as a stable diet for farmers, the loss of traditional pastoral activities followed by a devastating famine led to the village’s abandonment, for greener pastures, firstly to towns and then to England or America. One might also cite the increased influence of industrialisation and the changes to both traditions and ambitions of a population seeking a better more comfortable life. The very separation of people from their place, their activities from the land is central to this story. It confirms that architecture rather than defining activity is merely the residue of the activity called life. Without life there is no architecture. The deserted village offers us a rich vein of ideas about the relationship of architecture to life, to environment. It is in danger of being lost to time as it slowly sinks into the land from which it came, returning to where it originated.
Appendix A – Taxonomic Tables
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1 Bob Kingston, P 48 The Deserted Village, 3rd Edition 1995
2 Bob Kingston, P 36 The Deserted Village, 3rd Edition 1995
3 Bob Kingston, P 42 The Deserted Village, 3rd Edition 1995
5 Bob Kingston, P 17 The Deserted Village, 3rd Edition 1995
6 Bob Kingston, P 30 The Deserted Village, 3rd Edition 1995
7 Clachan or clochán a word originally used to describe a dry-stone hut with corbelled roof, a monk’s cell.
8 Fumihiko Maki, P 51 Investigations in collective form (as published in Nurturing Dreams MIT Press 2008)
9 Bondo - Weinkellerreihe Switzerland, P 220, Alpschermen Graubunden
10 Soazza Oberstafel Lughezzon Switzerland P 247, Alpschermen Graubunden
11 Soazza Unterstafel Pinderia Switzerland P 247, Alpschermen Graubunden
13 Soazza Vielzweckbauten und Heuscheunen Switzerland P 246, Alpschermen Graubunden
14 Fumihiko Maki, P 51 Investigations in collective form (as published in Nurturing Dreams MIT Press 2008)