

SYMPOSIUM: TOOLS TO UNDERSTAND DESIGN (2 papers)

'And ... Action!' Keeping it Real in Dublin's Suburbs

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Introduction

Frank Perry's 1968 film, *The Swimmer*, follows a day in the life of middle aged Ned Merrill after he decides on a whim to swim his way home through suburban Connecticut, via his neighbours' backyard pools. As the day progresses the mask of this seemingly popular, successful family man begins to crack until Ned at last arrives home, and is revealed as a ruined man, utterly alone. As we embarked on a journey to test film as a means of design in Dublin's suburbs, *The Swimmer* – an alarming critique of the suburban condition – seemed an apt first film to watch.

Our group, called *Imaginative Territories* was one of three 4th Year design studio groups working in suburban Dublin during the 2013 autumn semester at UCD School of Architecture. Reflecting on previous experience of teaching design studio projects located in suburbia, we felt that students often lacked the analytical and design tools to operate with confidence and imagination in a suburban context. The loose formal structure of the suburb, compounded by lack of grain or dense mixture of function, challenged students and tutors in the search for parameters to offset and test proposals. The comment that 'there is no there there' sums up this lack of resistance, which is not encountered to the same extent when working in the city or the landscape. A search for a governing system can yield little deeper understanding and a form-based approach can literally end of up in 'cul-de-sacs' of subjectivity and whimsy.

Following on from recent short films made in practice, our group, called *Imaginative Territories*, aimed to test whether the structure and discipline of producing and directing a short film could offer students the freedom to consider the suburban context as one of potential delight, utilizing the filmic devices of sequence, narrative, framing and depth-of-field. We wondered if this studio could offer a means to imaginatively engage suburbia, to keep the students in the mindset of 'play' for a longer period in the design process, through the suspension of belief that film can offer. We wanted to test whether the use of film, as a design tool, might offer students a means to respond explicitly to the suburban context. And we wanted to challenge students to be both engaged and ambitious: to give

them the space not to know all the answers, but to at least be able to ask the pertinent questions. As the School explores better ways to articulate its voice beyond the campus, we wanted to see if film could communicate the potential of architecture, across platforms, age groups and territories.

Methodology (5 x 5)

Knowing that one semester would be a tight time-scale to design and produce a short film – while also analyzing, understanding and responding to a new territory – we divided the studio into five groups, each with five students. Our location was the suburb of Walkinstown, in west Dublin. Film and architecture were discussed in parallel from the beginning. The primer task set for the first week, called *First Shot*, asked students to choose a still from a film that they admired and to then design a still from their own imagined film which in some way related to the first one *and* to their first visit to Walkinstown. This first brief and the review discussion of the stills immediately immersed the group into the language of film. Colour, framing of territory and of people, shadow, pattern, and depth-of-field emerged very early as techniques used consciously by filmmakers to construct illusion and to build a relationship between the space of the film and the audience. The exaggeration of a particular idea or atmosphere in film, which edits out other aspects of reality, allows the viewer to focus on what the director wants the audience to notice.

This bubbling of ideas about film accompanied the students in their initial mapping of Walkinstown. Working in groups they collected and mapped a diverse range of data: from demographics to street lighting; from information on commuter patterns to signage; from housing typology to studies of public space. Students sought out similar spaces in Walkinstown to those they had enjoyed in film: empty playing fields under a big sky in Walkinstown Park echoed the wide open landscapes in Wes Andersen's *Moonrise Kingdom*. Other research unearthed historic characters that had been instrumental in the shaping of the suburb. Interviews conducted and filmed by one of the groups in a purpose made Storybooth revealed that local residents felt the area lacked both a sense of place and social amenity: many had fond memories of the former cinema. The data was brought back to the studio,

drawn and analyzed, and formed the basis of spatial strategic responses to this suburban context. Students were repeatedly reminded not to think of Walkinstown as a problem to be solved. Instead, they were challenged to understand and describe a particular spatial or socio-spatial characteristic of Walkinstown, in order to consider means of intensifying its potential to be *wonderful, fantastic, and delightful*. These three words were chosen deliberately as counter to how suburbia is often described.

In parallel, and in order to better understand suburban typology, the utopian origins of the suburb were explored, including the theories of Ebenezer Howard and Parker and Unwin, and the impact of Development Plans for Dublin proposed by Patrick Geddes and Patrick Abercrombie during the early twentieth century were considered. Dublin was effectively a slum city at the end of the nineteenth century and the new suburbs were hailed as a panacea to the city's poverty and the colonial legacy of its overcrowded tenements. The provision of new housing for those who lived in dire conditions was contested political ground.

Today, the suburb of Walkinstown comprises low-density housing and an established industrial zone, on the inner edge of a series of ring roads that circumnavigate the city. The population is settled and stable, house values are low and amenities are scarce.

Storyboard

Armed with their initial analysis, each of the five groups was asked to propose an initial spatial response in the form of a storyboard. Designing a storyboard allowed students to frame their ideas temporally. They could propose a narrative, move the camera around the territory and dwell on spaces and spatial qualities, which might otherwise be overlooked or judged to be negative according to traditional urban design standards.

An example of how this process opened up the response to place can be seen in the work of one group who began to work with the Walkinstown roundabout. (Fig. 1) Seven busy roads feed into this junction and it has a reputation in Dublin as a junction best avoided unless you're sure of your exit. With film in mind, one group simply enjoyed the experience of circling this roundabout continually over the course of a day, from dawn to dusk. The backdrop to the roundabout shifted as daylight changed. Lights going on and off behind the walls of buildings affected the reading of the space of the roundabout. Streetlights provided a grammar, traffic lights a syncopated rhythm. Spatial experience of depth-of-field became the focus. This group's film, *Carousel*, pays homage to circular movement and acknowledges the role of the car in shaping suburban landscape. Instead of dismissing the car as a negative force on urban form, *Carousel* embraces it. The group began a process of re-calibrating the perimeter of the

roundabout to create a thick wall of spaces for the community through which vehicles, pedestrians and cyclists were choreographed.



Fig. 1. Still from *Carousel*

Animatic

Five 'stories' began to develop and gradually clarified into structured animatics. An animatic is a series of stills that provides a framework onto which the rest of the film is produced. Viewing the animatic gives an idea of the look and timing of the finished film and highlights how much work needs to be done to develop continuity between the shots.

Technique differed from group to group. One group chose to explore Walkinstown through watercolour-painted backgrounds, over which they laid spaces and characters, which the camera explored through shifting perspectival viewpoints. (Fig. 2) They initially worked with stop motion, but it became apparent that a smooth stop motion animation of their full story would take months (and an army of artists) to make.

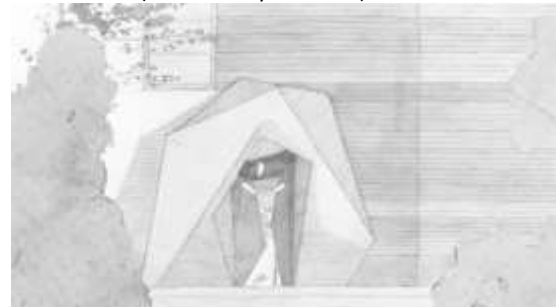


Fig. 2. Still from *Will's Walk in his Town*

Another group chose to explore the existing and newly imagined territory of Walkinstown through sectional model. Their test models and shots revealed that panning a camera through a 1:50 sectional model of a suburb required more space, and technical resources than we had at our disposal. And the *Garden City* group, which used black and white vector line drawings to re-imagine Walkinstown as a continuous garden suburb realised that they would have to find a way to manipulate and move through and over their drawings without sacrificing the quality of line they had worked hard to achieve. (Fig. 3) In response to these challenges, two types of software came into use. The

first, *Adobe AfterEffects*, allowed students to work as they would with *Photoshop*, but over time. The second was editing software (a range of programmes was explored), which facilitated the postproduction, cutting, sound and export of the final films.

Once the basics of these programmes were learned, there was a huge leap in the development of the films. Conceptually, each film could now get to the point at which it had been aiming. Yes, you can travel by section! Yes, you can follow the camera through your hand-painted perspective and out the other side. The marriage of analogue and digital formats (be they painting and perspectival movement, or sectional model and continuous panning) meant that the projects held on to the character of their initial concepts, consciously resisting the homogeneity that can be part of the language of digital rendering.

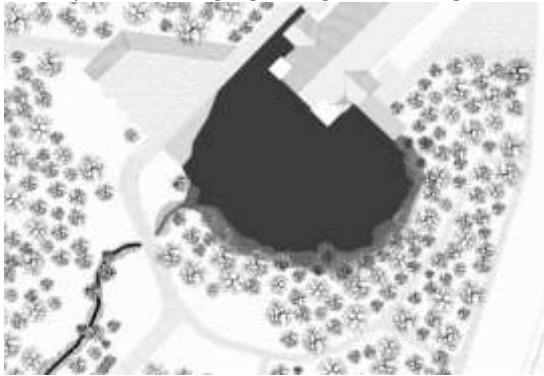


Fig. 3. Still from *Garden City*

We Love Film

As the films evolved each week, the studio was infused with films and filmmakers. Short film, animation, documentary, features, films by artists, films by architects, recent films, classics, we watched and shared them all. The studio became a temporary minicinema, energizing students and staff. Of particular interest was the use of film in recent work by practices such as MOS Architects, Urban Think Tank and Studio Mumbai. Film is used differently, and for different reasons, by each, but there is a common thread of deliberate intention which comes with a knowledge of what film can offer, *in the communication of ideas*, that is different to static drawing and model. We invited guests to share their experience of working through film. Dublin filmmaker, David C. Lynch spoke frankly about how he produced some of his own short films and artist Niamh O'Malley, described how her work through film explores themes of perception, relationship of the viewer and the object.

In the concluding weeks of the semester, draft film clips were screened and discussed in tutorial sessions. Students were confidently handling and manipulating their proposals in drawing, model and film and began to describe fluently how they changed through time,

how the viewer/occupier moved through them, how people bumped into one another in their daily encounters within the spaces they were making.

We Love Design

The five films were completed and screened as part of a one-day final review at the end of the semester. (Figure 4) The screening formed a background to the subsequent world café discussion on how architecture might better respond to the space of the suburbs. Students submitted their films into national and international film festivals. The film festival circuit is a surprisingly easy network to access, and one that offers an inexpensive way of widely disseminating the work. Developing tools and skills to evaluate and respond to suburban context is a pressing issue. Low-density suburbs, particularly common in Ireland, the UK and the United States, are coming under pressure as urban populations continue to expand. The traditional tools with which the form and space of cities are analyzed and designed do not necessarily work when applied to suburbs. Therefore we can assume that other models need to be tested which tune into different factors at play here.

The importance of the car, lack of enclosure, the shifted relationships of fore-/mid- and background, the scale of the sky, the connectedness of people in their daily routines – these are parameters that film can cope easily with, can drop in and out of, can even enjoy. Without doubt students found this studio challenging, but also enabling. They found that working with the process of film and designing and describing space through it, as part of a collaborative team, gave them the opportunity to say more, with less. Their work is engaged, direct, and self-explanatory. Film enabled students to maintain a dynamic connection to the context in which they were working, which was then manipulated and tested over time. Designing through film, in its open-ended and plastic nature, allowed students to work imaginatively for a longer period on the thesis of a project, and to hone this thesis with clarity.



Fig. 4. Final Review Film Screening

Five Films

1. *Boundaries of Suburbia*

Produced and directed by Eoin Diamond, Julien Miguel, Mathew Mullin, William Spratt-Murphy.

Curious about what residents of Walkinstown felt about their area, this group designed and built a portable storybooth, based on Buckminster Fuller's geodesic dome structures, and conducted and filmed interviews with local residents. The collected stories revealed the under-use of Walkinstown Park and how much residents missed the since demolished cinema. The interviews directly informed the brief for an intensified edge to Walkinstown Park incorporating new performance and film screening spaces. The film folds together the documentary footage (of the construction of the storybooth and filmed interviews) and animated plano-metric drawings of the proposed new boundary to the park. (Fig. 5)



Fig. 5. Still from *Boundaries from Suburbia*

2. *Carousel*

Produced and directed by Sarah Browne, Marwa Elmubark, Grainne Nic Gearailt, Sanaa Shaikh.

With a nod to Jacques Tati's roundabout sequence in *Playtime*, the camera enjoys the circular movement of the car as it passes streetlights, other cars and the change in translucency of the background buildings from dawn to dusk. Into this context of continuous movement this project proposes new structures, housing public buildings that accentuate the experience of shifting depth of field and parallax. Circulation remains orbital, the car, the cyclist, the pedestrian, tying together, above and below, in front of and behind the isolated spaces left behind by a roundabout while spaces of communal activity overlap as thick spokes within the field. This film directly emerged out of the process of designing through film, having developed from a combination of observation based on movement through time. Film offered students the intellectual space for experimentation and the opportunity to find spatial potential for delight in a mundane and challenging environment.

3. *Garden City*

Produced and directed by Maryam Bakhtvar, Lisa Blumenthal, Fiona Gueunet, Bruna Moraes and Darragh O'Shea.

Taking its clues from the landscape architecture of Roberto Burle Marx, this film re-imagines Walkinstown as a continuously cultivated garden. The leaky space of low-density roads, backlands, unused park areas and even back yards are seen as opportunities for the garden city to spread. Drainage and control of water is a key factor, explored at a variety of scales through the design of channels, streams and wetlands. The use of film allowed the new landscape to be explored through the passage of daily and seasonal time and in changing weather conditions. As the camera pans out of the suburb, we see that the garden city principles are starting to spread.

4. *InSection*

Produced and Directed by Justine Ackers, Dylan Callanan, Rachel Hoolahan, Nicky Rackard and Sarah Richard.

Joe and Mary are lonely. They live near each other but have never had the opportunity to meet. This film brings the viewer on a lighthearted journey through the suburb of Walkinstown, travelling through section. As each section is given the freedom to expand, adapt, heighten and clash, unlikely encounters start to take place. Neighbours who never had occasion to meet find themselves brought into contact in how they overlook space, work, live and in what is a happy-ever-after story, Mary and Joe find eternal love. Each of the five students in this group surveyed a long section through Walkinstown, onto which they grafted saprophytic structures that added benefit to the existing context, while also injecting new use. Proposals vary in scale. An existing factory becomes the base onto which new housing, a swimming pool and multi-story car park are added. The frequently empty church is converted into a library, while maintaining its sacred function in a smaller chapel insertion. Existing back lanes become home to small business workshops and a training center. And the interface between the front of suburban terrace of houses and the road is re-ordered to provide a long public park and a continuous inhabited edge to the private domestic space. This lighthearted narrative allowed the students in the group to develop and maintain a positive attitude to suburbia; they fell in love with Walkinstown.



Fig. 6. Still from *InSection*

5. *Will's Walk in his Town*

Produced and directed by James Corboy, Roisín de Paor, Aoife Morris, Emilio Souto and Ailish Walker

Will Wilkins grew up in Walkinstown, but he no longer lives there. After receiving an invitation to view a film in his old neighbourhood he boards a tram that brings him from the city to Walkinstown. He remembers his halcyon days as a teenager, playing soccer, hanging out. On his return he finds a place empty of people. He takes out his sketchbook and begins to imagine a collection of new spaces tied into the existing, from a community centre to a new sheltered market space, from a small shelter beside the playing pitch to a bike repair shop and café. We walk with Will as he moves through his newly imagined neighborhood. This film uses hand-made watercolor paintings, perspective and the manipulation of fore-, mid- and background (as though they were stage sets) to capture and expand the traditional image of the suburb. The film plays with memory and place (memories of growing up in suburbia can be a colliding mixture of the freedom to roam the streets and the choking claustrophobia of having nothing to do). The analogue format of the paintings convey this emotional connection with place, while the digital editing process allowed the proposals to open out the inner eye's journey into one of possibility and potential.

Filmography

Mon Oncle (1958), *Playtime* (1967) Jacques Tati
The Swimmer (1968) Frank Perry
Powers of Ten (1968 and 1977) Charles and Ray Eames
Not By Bricks Alone (1969) Sean Egan
Persepolis (2008) Marjane Satrapi and Vincent Paronnaud
Paraisopolis (2008) Urban Think Tank
The Polish Language (2009) Alice Lyons & Orla Mc Hardy
Island (2010) Niamh O'Malley
Moonrise Kingdom (2012) Wes Anderson
Irish Folk Furniture (2012) Tony O'Donoghue
Already Happened Tomorrow (2012) MOS Architects
Praxis 1 (2012) Studio Mumbai