The writer Norman McLean cites his brother – “All there is to thinking, is seeing something noticeable which makes you see something you weren’t noticing, which makes you see something that isn’t even visible”.  

The title of this paper – Invisible Landscapes – alludes to a contemporary difficulty in seeing landscape. The landscape idea is often perceived as a matter of scenery or decoration. Seeing landscape as scenery prioritises appearance at the expense of habitability and in Spirm’s words “risks trivialising landscape as decoration – landscaping – concealing the significance of senses other than sight and parts hidden from view, the deep context under the surface” – Landscape understood as process – dynamic changing unfolding and concealing, and landscape as a repository of place and memory, of home and community. We are, as landscape architects, concerned with the poetics of dwelling. If landscape is demoted to the scenic and the decorative, the landscape architect’s role is correspondingly diminished.

Definitions of landscape abound in geographic literature. It is not the purpose of this paper to pursue definitions. It is however my contention that the landscape architect must understand landscapes, their forms, processes and creators. A theory of landscape architecture requires such understanding. It is a prerequisite to the act of shaping the land for human needs.

Two projects are presented that illustrate aspects of landscape understanding. Both projects were commissioned by the Heritage Council, a semi-state agency in Ireland with responsibility inter alia for advising the Government on policies and priorities relating to the national heritage, both natural and cultural.

**LOUGH RYNN, CO. LEITRIM**

The first project is located in County Leitrim in the north west of Ireland, and in an estate called Lough Rynn. This estate was assembled by an English lord in the early part of the 19th century, and consists of a large manorial house, ornamental parkland, farm buildings and extensive woodlands.

Irish estates represent unique areas with their assemblage of manmade landscapes, architecture, archaeology and social history. They are important in the role they have played in the very recent evolution of the Irish landscape. They evolved as distinct social and economic settings, and their layout – including the house, farm buildings, gardens and woods, still occupy a dominant role in the appearance of the Irish landscape. Many of the estates have a medieval nucleus, which survived due to the 18/19th century parkland
style. They provided ideal conditions for the survival of earlier landscape features predating the park’s establishment.

The primary function of the estate was that of a farm producing agricultural goods and yielding profits. With the evolution of the ‘landscape’ idea (the English style) and its idealisation of nature, estate landscapes were fashioned to reflect the associated themes. Lough Rynn’s baroque symmetry was complimented or counterpointed by a naturalistic style including the device referred to as a “ha-ha” allowing an unencumbered view of the surrounding countryside.

A distinctive feature of the Lough Rynn landscape and that of many other Irish landscapes is the somewhat uneasy tension between the designed man-made landscape and the wilderness of lake, wetlands and woodland. Since the establishment of Ireland as a republic in 1922, Lough Rynn and many other such estates have gone into decline. The decline is having the effect of intensifying the tension. The natural elements are threatening to overwhelm the formal landscape.

Developers have now taken possession of the Lough Rynn Estate and propose to re-cycle it as a tourist leisure facility. The proposals include the conversion of the house into a luxurious hotel, a leisure centre, apartments and golf course.

Under Irish planning legislation, the developers were required to test the proposals by means of an environmental impact statement. The environment impact statement argued that the developments would have no significant impacts on the environment. The Heritage Council was concerned at the likely significant alteration to the landscape, and commissioned a landscape capacity study. The methodology adopted for the study derived from a number of sources including Article 1 of the European Landscape Convention, under the headings – landscape protection, planning and management. In summary three topics were addressed:

1. Conserving natural and cultural values
2. Regular upkeep as deliberate stewardship to maintain the quality of the landscape
3. Forward looking action to enhance and restore the landscape

The analysis consisted of describing:

1. The state of the landscape. The character of the landscape was assessed using landscape character assessment methodology
2. The dynamics of the landscape arising from functional and structural relationships. The description derived from two areas:
   a. Landscape ecology. The terms used to describe the landscape – patch, corridor and mosaic
   b. Perceptual resources. This involved an evaluation in terms such as the sense of character, place, meaning, sacredness of the landscape. The criteria included scenic quality, tranquillity, wilderness values, cultural values
3. Evaluating how well the landscape is functioning – in terms of health and aesthetics
4. Determining the suitability of the landscape for change and how changes could be incorporated sympathetically into the landscape
5. Determining what predictable differences might be brought about as a result of developments
6. Evaluating, in the light of the above, if the developments should proceed.

The Landscape Capacity Study judged that the landscape could absorb the proposed developments, with minor modifications, without adversely impacting on the Estate’s ecological and perceptual resources. It was judged that the Estate’s unique landscape – an undisturbed demesne located in a remote rural land of woods, lakes and small fields – would not loose its integrity. The Estate’s integrity was in fact under severe threat due to lack of maintenance and use. The three terms of conservation, stewardship and forward-looking action would be accommodated as a result of the new proposals.
DURROW ABBEY, CO. OFFALY

The demesne is located in a rural area in the Irish midlands. The lands consist of a 19th century house, outbuildings, a walled garden and c. 190 ha. of grassland in agricultural use. The site was the subject of development proposals similar to Lough Rynn, and additionally a proposal for 500 houses. The proposals were the subject of an environmental impact statement, which was followed by a study to produce a Statement of Cultural Significance [SCS]. The requirement for the SCS arose because the site contains supremely important archaeological and geological endowments.

It was the site of a Columban monastic settlement, and associated secular settlements from the 9th to the 13th century. There is a small number of artefacts at ground level (including a stone cross, a well, an enclosing embankment and a medieval church) but the greater part of the material is underground and requires excavation. Its existence has been recorded by geophysical survey.

A wooded ridge or Esker [from the Irish word ‘Eiscir’] forms the north traversing almost continuously in an east-west direction across central Ireland. The Eskers provided natural track ways in older times. The Esker Riada carried the great western road of ancient Ireland, An Slighe Mhór. The ridge was the greatest natural boundary line of ancient Ireland, dividing the country into Leath Chuinn and Leath Mhogha.

The Heritage Council commissioned a landscape capacity study, which included an evaluation of both the Statement of Cultural Significance and the Environmental Impact Statement.

The landscape capacity study sought to:
1. Determine the capacity of the landscape at Durrow Abbey Demesne to absorb change.
2. Determine the type and degree of change, if any, which the landscape of the Demesne can absorb.
3. Test development proposals against the criteria established through the above two steps.

The study examined the Demesne resources under the headings:
- Historical/Cultural
- Architectural
- Ecological/Geological
- Perceptual

The Statement of Cultural Significance, in summary, identified the archaeological and architectural endowments of the Estate as being highly significant and with particular reference to the monastic site, the undisturbed landscape, the potential for future archaeological investigations, and the integrity and evolution of the cultural landscape.

The Landscape Capacity Study stressed the importance of the Demesne landscape as a setting for these significant endowments and its geological/historical values. The importance of landscape dynamics for the ecological health and wellbeing of the Estate was also identified. Perceptual resources of the Demesne include its importance locally and nationally as a focal point of historical memory and place. In addition to these specific areas and values, it was noted that the landscape setting is fundamentally important to the overall sense and integrity of the historical legacy of the Demesne. It is contended that the Demesne landscape has a very limited capacity to support change and absorb development when the landscape is interpreted as a whole. Its integrity is a product of and therefore dependent on these overlapping values. The recommendations were adopted, and a new planning process was commenced.

COMMENTARY

For the purposes of this presentation, there are a number of issues raised by both projects pertaining to the perception and definition of landscape. The most palpable expression of an invisible landscape is that part of
the heritage of Durrow Abbey which is largely below the ground surface. What is being afforded protection is the sub-surface archaeology. It cannot be afforded protection without leaving the landscape untouched. The landscape is in other words the context. In scenic visual terms, the landscape is not particularly distinguished apart from the quietly dramatic presence of the Esker. It requires to be read to secure its meaning, and once that act is partaken of, the landscape is transformed into a place of meaning and of memory.

The landscape of Lough Rynn was not invisible in the sense that Durrow was, but it too required a reading. Reference would be made to its history as a seat of colonial power in the 19th century; to reflections on the relations between the local community, who would have worked on the farm, and the owners; to its recent history of decline and to the manner in which the native and austere landscape is invading the cultivated landscape, creating an interesting tension between it and the indigenous wilder landscape. The environmental impact statements for both projects perceived landscape in terms of views, of visual quality. The Statement of Cultural Significance considered landscape under the heading “aesthetics”, and referred to “visual significance”. It is clear that landscape has a visual component. Landscape impacts can however arise without significant visual impacts. As noted above the Durrow landscape was the context or setting within which occurred the sub-surface archaeology. Changing the landscape in this instance would change the context and the aura in addition to potentially damaging the archaeological remains.

It is notable that both projects were produced by architect planner teams. It is my contention that the version of landscape as “aesthetic” originates in a failure of understanding by architects and planners. Landscape is understood solely as an object or a view and not a repository of place, meaning and memory. It is perhaps symptomatic of a wider problem in contemporary practice – “The problem of much contemporary architecture and urban design is that it has been simplified and cleaned up to such an extent that all it has to say is revealed at a glance. A range of meanings and possibilities has been eliminated”.

It is likely too that the crisis of meaning has more profound roots and is an outcome of deeper and more problematic shifts in our interpretation of the natural world. The questions require deeper study—an examination of the history of our relations with the natural world and an examination of the impacts of ‘modernism’ on our way of life.

Olwig argues that landscape should be defined in the context of the relations between society and land. The scenic concept of landscape involves a shift from the subjective qualities of perception to the scenic object as the ultimate object of perception. A more substantive understanding of landscape recognises the historical and contemporary importance of community, culture, law and common geographical existence. The dilemma arises from the distinction between ‘landschaft’ [the Polish word ‘krajobraz’] as defined by Olwig and ‘landskip’, which in its original usage referred not to the land but to a picture of it. Land becomes landscape, in contemporary usage, when it is configured according to prior imaging. Lands evolve through use and domestication, and become meaningful through habitation and attachment and memory. Deliberate design is not generally a component of this evolution.

Ireland, like Poland, is a land distinguished by its history, culture and sense of landscape. It is undergoing rapid transformation with many negative impacts, despite the acute sense of place claimed by Irish people. Memories of loss, displacement and emigration contribute to this sense of place or even ‘displace’. There is too a vigorous tradition of nature poetry from the 9th century called Filiocht Finiochta and another much later tradition of poetry called ‘aisling’ or dream, in which sorrow and loss of land is evoked through the appearance of a beautiful women in the landscape.

There is a transition from a rural agricultural society to a more secular
urbanised society. Agriculture is in decline. New land uses are emerging with profound impacts on the character of the rural landscape. These include a vigorous programme of afforestation, infrastructure for tourism and leisure, and a demand for new housing in the countryside. Attitudes to the land are inevitably changing. Urban expectations see the land as a place for recreation, retreat and nostalgia and the enjoyment of scenery. Rural affluence, and increased affluence generally, is placing difficult burdens on sensitive landscapes.

Seamus Heaney says that the whole of the Irish landscape is a manuscript that we have lost the skill to read “when we go as tourists... we go with at best an aesthetic eye, comforting ourselves with the picturesque ness of it all”... “We have little felt knowledge of the place, little enough of a sense of wonder or a sense of tradition” and he further states that the landscape “was once more or less sacred... was sacramental, instinct with signs, implying a system of reality beyond the visible realities”.

The situation demands fresh modes of practice and reflection, to recover or re-discover landscape not just as spatial milieu but also as a place capable of carrying cultural images and ideas. As previously noted, the character of our rural lands are not the outcome of deliberate design or of performed aesthetic themes or images. The changes occurring in the countryside however appear to demand that it become a ‘landscape’ through purposeful design. In that sense, landscape design must embrace both the concept of ‘landschaft’, and the concept of ‘landskip’. Landscape planning and design can contribute to recovering landscape. The task of landscape architecture is to mediate between nature and culture, and to reconstitute our sense of meaning and of value in our connections to the Earth. It involves looking at the land over an extended period of time to discover what really exists there— to ‘see’ meanings and values.

In conclusion, and because of all the uncertainties associated with the task, I would like to quote the Polish poet Adam Zagajewski:

“Clear moments are so short
There is much more darkness
More ocean than firm land
More shadow than form”

Michael Cregan

Endnotes
1 MacLean N., A River Runs Through It, Chicago 1976.