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Architecture and Rural Planning: ‘Claiming the Vernacular’

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ABSTRACT In this paper, drawing on qualitative interviews with a small number of Irish architects, we explore the discourses that architects use to produce the rural social world and the vernacular. The academic literature has explored discursive representations of rurality as well as power relations of various stakeholders in the rural housing policy arena (planners, lobby groups, local communities); however, there has been very little research on how the rural is constructed in architectural practice as well as how these representations compare with equivalent planning and housing policy discourses. The Republic of Ireland offers a fascinating case for exploring discourses around rurality and housing development, due to the country’s relatively permissive planning policy and impressive rural housing output during the boom period. Our analysis suggests that the concept of vernacular might offer a new opportunity for communicating a common vision, culture and practice regarding rural housing development amongst rural housing agents. In this context, discourses of the vernacular are explored, which demonstrate its neo-endogenous attributes, in describing not only traditional aesthetics and local material, but also collaborative action and governance.

1. Introduction

Constructions of rurality have been well discussed in the literature suggesting that rural areas are contested spaces regarding housing development (Scott, 2006; Satsangi et al., 2010; Murdoch et al., 2003; Sturzaker and Shucksmith, 2011). Arguably, constructions of rurality can be also attached to particular housing types and styles and, indeed, vernacular architecture is commonly associated with rural house aesthetics. Vernacular, according to Upton, is ‘a catchall term for the study of buildings neglected by traditional architectural history’ (1983, p. 263), one that is frequently used in rural housing policy documentation in an effort to preserve a particular, and sometimes unchallenged, rural aesthetic. This paper treats the vernacular as another discourse that represents and describes the rural (see for example Matless, 1994). Such constructions of rurality are important as they can legitimise (or marginalise) particular developments, aesthetics and actions in rural settlements,

emphasizing the power relations of different stakeholders in the rural policy field (see also Satsangi et al., 2010).

Rye (2006, p. 409) observes that, instead of investigating what rurality is, ‘the pivotal question has become: how do actors socially construct their rurality?’, and Richardson (2000) further questions the impact of professional discourses of rurality on power relations and on promoting selective policy agendas. There has been significant research on discourses of rurality in policy-making (for example: Frouws, 1998; Gray, 2000) and, similarly, the academic literature has explored the role of various agents (such as lobby groups, planners, community groups and house builders) in the field of rural housing development (Scott, 2012; Sturzaker and Shucksmith, 2011; Ryan, 2006). However, the role of architects as agents of rural change and stakeholders in rural housing policy has been relatively unexamined (an exception: Foley and Scott, 2012). This is particularly surprising given that issues around housing design have been discussed in rural studies literature, but without necessarily involving architects in the research design (for example: Scott et al., 2013; Bevan, 2009). Jones (2009) highlights the danger in seeing architecture as solely an arts practice outside the political, economic contexts in which architects operate. There is very little consideration in academic research of the narratives of rurality that drive architectural practice or, *vice versa*, the rurality that architects wish to (physically, socially and culturally) construct in rural settlements. This paper, aims to address this gap by exploring discursive representations of rurality and of the vernacular in architectural theory and practice.

Furthermore, a literature on the sociology of architecture is emerging (for example: Jones, 2011) that seeks to reveal ‘how social forces impinge on architecture’s production’ (Jones, 2009, p. 2520). Jones (2009) suggests that social science research needs to seriously consider

the aesthetics and semiotics that form architectural practice and knowledge and to critically examine the role of architects in the cultural and physical production of places. In this context, the emerging research has explored architects' discourses including their role in constructing national identities (i.e. Jones, 2006) and expertise (i.e. Shadar et al., 2011); however, there is scant research on the role of architects in the development process beyond urban contexts and flagship projects.

This paper, therefore, aims first of all to explore the 'complexity in the discourse of the rural' (Matless, 1994, p. 8; see also examples by Halfacree, 1993; Pratt, 1996), particularly when this involves a discipline such as architecture, which has scarcely been considered in rural planning debates. Secondly, the paper offers a new imagination for reproducing the vernacular in both rural development, planning and architectural discourse, that enables the vernacular to evolve, while ensuring that issues such as affordability, social housing and a new urban-rural (or local- non local) relationship are well embedded in vernacular design. Thirdly, the paper advances debates on the role of architects in the rural development process, a particularly underdeveloped field.

The Republic of Ireland offers a fascinating case for exploring these issues due to its relatively permissive rural housing policy (Duffy, 2000) and the substantial rural housing construction that took place during 'Celtic tiger' period, notwithstanding criticisms regarding the governance mechanisms attached to rural housing planning consent and construction (Gkartzios and Scott, 2009). Uniquely perhaps, the contemporary housing landscape that dominates rural Ireland is characterised by a relatively dispersed pattern of simply-designed bungalows, commonly referred to as 'one-off housing' or 'bungalow blitz', a popular and pointed recasting of the title of Jack Fitzsimons' planbook 'Bungalow Bliss' (1971). These

terms highlight the low-density pattern of such settlements, their dominant position in the Irish rural landscape, but also their popular appeal (to what extent, for example, does ‘bungalow bliss’ represent the Irish version of a ‘rural idyll’?). They are therefore indicative of the role of housing (and of housing construction) in discussing the contemporary contested rural social space in Ireland.

The paper firstly reviews the literature on representations of rurality in rural studies literature and policy as well as in architectural theory and practice. It then explores the particular issues around rural housing policy in Ireland before the methodology is discussed. The analysis of the qualitative interviews is thematically organised around discourses of the rural amongst architects, the relationship between architecture and rurality as well as the discourses that are used to construct the vernacular. Finally, reflections on integrating rural development, planning and architectural theory within a common vision based on the vernacular are put forward at the paper’s end.

2. Discourses of rurality

Two contrasting discourses of rurality are usually discussed in the literature: pastoralism and modernism (Murdoch et al., 2003). Pastoralism highlights the environmental, anti-urban and communitarian features of rural areas, attributes that resemble the so-called ‘rural idyll’ (see also Bell, 2008). The discourse of an ideal countryside is highly linked with notions of pre-industrial nostalgia, resulting from the intense urbanisation and the subsequent dereliction of the English industrial city, though it has also found expression in North American culture (Bunce, 1994). Conversely, researchers have noted countryside narratives that portray rural

areas as technologically, culturally and economically ‘backward’ places and in need of modernisation.

Matless’s seminal work (1994), drawing on the English village, demonstrates not only how such dualistic pastoralist/modernist constructions can coexist (across different agents), but also the numerous representations and combinations of understanding the rural. Matless’ work also illustrates the discursive representations of the vernacular which is both defended out of preservationist nostalgia (for example in the writings of W.G. Hoskins) and dismissed out of a requirement to modernise the countryside and to seek new ways of building to meet new needs (for example in the writings of Thomas Sharp). Selman and Swanwick (2010) review the importance of constructions of ‘natural beauty’ in the development of planning policy in Britain. Cloke (1992) has argued, predominantly in England, how nostalgic representations of a pre-industrial rurality have resulted in the commodification of the rural, particularly targeting the urban middle classes. Similarly, social scientists have discussed how such idyllic countryside narratives have been used (i.e. by interest groups, planning practitioners, the middle classes) to normalise a particularly anti-housing development ethos, ultimately furthering an exclusive and gentrified countryside (see also: Newby, 1979; Murdoch and Lowe, 2003; Smith and Phillips, 2001). However, it should be noted that these phenomena do not necessarily travel outside the contexts in which they are studied (see Lowe’s (2013) essay on the universality of Anglo-Saxon rural sociology). Unlike the hegemonic pastoral rural discourse observed in England, McDonagh (2001) discusses discourses of rurality (particularly in literature and arts) that are far from the pastoral and idyllic, drawing also on poverty and memories of struggle associated with the Irish famine in the mid-nineteenth century. Similarly, other researchers in Ireland have found little evidence

of exclusive countrysides and displacement due to gentrification, given the very pro-housing development ethos of the Irish planning system (see for example Gkartzios and Scott, 2012).

Discourses of rurality in architecture are equally diverse, encompassing productivist, pastoralist and modernist features of the social and physical world in which architecture is performed. Relationships between a productive and profitable rurality, social class and architecture have been reconsidered in the works of architects from the Renaissance to the 20th century to various ends (see detailed reviews in Ballantyne, 2010). For example, Palladio's 17th century villas in the Veneto, Italy reconsider the relationship between the productive landscape and social class. Modernist architects often saw in the countryside a free space for the elaboration of ideas related either to purist abstraction (for example, Le Corbusier's unbuilt 'radiant farm' project of 1934) or a romantic Rationalism (such as Alvar Aalto's mid-century Finnish forest retreats). The rural as a space for architecture, conceived in opposition to the urban, has offered opportunities for the relation of nature to building (Forty, 2000), an elaboration of the picturesque (Ackerman, 1990), as well as an outlet for 19th and early 20th century utopianism (in, for example, the English 'Garden-City' schemes of Ebenezer Howard, Barry Parker and Raymond Unwin, whose influence may be seen in European housing projects of the interwar period – see Kafkoulas (2013)). In contrast, the relative poverty and marginalization of some rural communities has sometimes been seen to offer practitioners latitude to work 'away from the normative concerns of the centre' in 'a space of radical openness' (see, for example, Wigglesworth and Till, 2003, p. 80, on the discussion of Sam Mockbee's 'Rural Studio').

In the latter part of the 20th century, the global influence of critical regionalist theory on architectural practice has promoted another discourse of the rural. First elaborated in the early

1980s (Tzonis and Lefaivre, 1981; Frampton, 1983), critical regionalism attempts to integrate the progressive (even universalising) qualities of Modernist architecture with a renewed interest in the local environmental and topographical circumstances of the architectural work. While by no means exclusively related to architecture in a rural environment, its tenets of authenticity, localization and connectedness have reawakened interest in forms and methods of making architecture that are related to an identifiable territory (Canizaro, 2007). The characterization ‘regional’ ensures the territory is of a size to encompass elements (ideal and material) of the rural built environment that are capable of maintaining a resistance to standard (pre-conceived) forms and methods. The discourse has in part given rise to the current foregrounding of issues of ecology and sustainability in architecture; rather than demonizing construction in the landscape outright, these concerns have situated architecture at the centre of a challenge to provide innovative solutions around ‘place-based sensibility informed by an in-depth knowledge of the local natural landscape’ (Canizaro 2007:32). It should be noted that such issues of connection between a people’s way of dwelling and the identity offered by its surrounding landscape have already been explored in human geography; an early example may be found in the works of Paul Vidal de la Blache, for example, whose theory of *genre de vie*, or ‘lifeways’, suggests a fluid relationship between what the environment offers and the human community requires. Building in the rural landscape, then, often previously construed as a ‘vernacular’ activity, has increasingly become an overtly architectural one, though the conceptualization of the role of architecture has had to adapt (i.e. to embrace applied technologies) to accommodate this.

Fitting into the discourse of critical regionalism under the rubric of ‘the authentic’, the term ‘vernacular’ became increasingly important. Dell Upton and others have sought to widen the discourse of the vernacular in architecture. Rather than being reduced to an object status, a

work of details and materials, the ‘vernacular’ building has begun to be discussed as an element of everyday existence, an element of culture (mediating between the perceived outsider culture of architecture and the indigenous culture of rural places) and an element of symbolism (Upton, 1983). Common in each of these avenues is the suggestion that vernacular architecture cannot be understood independently of the context (social, cultural or symbolic) in which it is made.

3. Rural housing in Ireland: Policies, bungalows and the vernacular

Ireland has been described as one of the most ‘rural’ countries in Europe (McDonagh, 2001). Uniquely perhaps, the countryside in Ireland is characterised by a dispersed pattern of single, detached houses traditionally self-built on family-owned land, a pattern that is commonly referred to as ‘one-off housing’. This pattern has been a longstanding feature of rural Ireland, and for many commentators it represents the traditional form of Irish rural settlement (Brunt, 1998), consisting of dispersed small farm holdings and encouraged through various land reforms in the late 19th and 20th centuries as part of wider political reforms in pre- and post-independence Ireland (Dooley, 2004). However, the number of one-off, self-built housing developments in the countryside drastically grew during the period of economic growth in Ireland (see also pictures 1 and 2), as it represented an affordable and unproblematic pathway to homeownership during a period of house price inflation (Gkartzios and Scott, 2013).

The dispersed nature of this settlement pattern has been facilitated by the Irish planning system, which has resisted rigorous regulation regarding rural housing output (compared at least to the UK, see Gallent et al., 2003). Instead of a policy that prohibits housing development in the countryside driven from an environmental conservationist rhetoric (the

case for example in England, see Gallent and Tewdwr-Jones, 2007), the Irish planning system has supported housing development in the countryside, which in many cases, as Scott (2012) argues, is seen as a visible indicator of community health. Indeed, the planning system in Ireland, from its introduction in the early 1960s, largely ignored the rural as a space for planning intervention out of a common perception that there was an absence of development pressures in the countryside and a strong parallelism between rural spaces and agriculture (Scott, 2008). Duffy (2000) also refers to the Irish system as one of the more lax rural planning regimes in Europe and suggests that the dispersed settlement pattern is a product of this attitude.

Finally, the form of these houses is commonly associated with a well published manual of architectural designs and specifications for affordable and simply constructed ‘self-build’ houses (i.e. without the engagement of an architect) entitled ‘Bungalow Bliss’ (Fitzsimons, 1971). The book offered 250 generic designs for ‘bungalows, dormers, two storey and split level’ houses all at ‘a nominal charge’ (Fitzsimons, 1971), without particular regard to siting, use or material. ‘Bungalow Bliss’ was only one of a number of pattern books in circulation in 1970s Ireland, but has been frequently credited as the most significant influence on the shape of the modern Irish rural landscape (Quilley, 2002). It had, by its 12th edition in 1998, sold over 250,000 copies, and begun to style itself ‘the book that changed the face of rural Ireland’. The popularity of the book has been associated with the exclusion of architects from domestic work in favour of building contractors. Not only has the title of the book been associated with the form of houses it involves, it has been widely adopted as a term for a more general housing phenomenon associated with Irishness and its relation to rurality (Gkartzios and Scott, 2009). As the journalist Frank McDonald (Irish Times 26/6/1997) argued ‘‘Bungalow Bliss’ is not just the title of a book; it encapsulates our social aspirations’.

In this context, one could argue that ‘Bungalow Bliss’ might represent Ireland’s own version of a ‘rural idyll’, which does not draw on narratives of environmental conservation and pastoral beauty, but on private homeownership and attachment to family-owned land.

The growth of housing developments in the countryside during the ‘Celtic tiger’ times (a period of significant housing construction, both urban and rural), was also met with increasing demands to manage one-off housing development, due to the system’s associated environmental (i.e. impact on landscape, proliferation of septic tanks and groundwater pollution), planning (i.e. sprawl, impact on clustered settlements and urban areas) and economic costs (i.e. increased difficulty in the provision of infrastructure; increased cost of service delivery) (see a review in Gkartzios and Scott, 2009). These concerns were addressed in the country’s first National Spatial Strategy (DOELG, 2002; a strategic document to echo European, regionalist and participatory approaches to planning, see also Davoudi and Wishardt, 2005) and later on in the Ministerial Guidelines for Rural Housing (DEHLG, 2005). These policy documents distinguished between housing needs for local and non-local members of the rural community through constructing a dichotomy between ‘rural generated housing’ and ‘urban-generated housing’ needs respectively. Drawing on these documents, planning authorities supported the growth of rural generated housing anywhere in the countryside, while suggesting that urban-generated housing should take place in designated areas (rather than scattered in the open countryside) or in rural areas that have exhibited prolonged periods of population decline. Essentially, rural housing development in Ireland has been heavily contested, involving various constructions of rurality. Scott (2006) points that, on one hand, conservation interests and many planning officials favour restrictive policies as a means to protect landscapes and reduce car dependency, and, on the other hand,

community development interests and many local councillors favour less rigid policies in order to enable greater social vitality and to avoid further loss of rural services.

Rural planning authorities in Ireland promote vernacular architecture through design guidelines and by attaching design conditions to planning consent (Scott, 2012). Such preoccupations in planning policies have been criticised in the literature as expressions of the elite tastes of expert stakeholders (Selman, 2010). Scott et al. (2013) report a great consistency amongst design guidelines in rural planning authorities in Ireland. The authors suggest that these largely promote a neo-vernacular design, drawing on physical features of traditional Irish rural housing (i.e. on house form, proportion and scale, materials). For example, vernacular architecture is defined in one policy documentation as ‘a term used to describe methods of construction which use locally available materials and traditions to address local needs’ (Kerry County Council 2009, p. 9). In other Local Authorities the vernacular is not defined *per se*, but a set of descriptions and examples typifies characteristics of vernacular architecture (i.e. Kildare Country Council, 2011). Alternative terms, such as ‘traditional design’, are sometimes used to mean the same thing (i.e. Offaly County Council, 2008). A vernacular aesthetic is promoted in such policy guidelines, emphasising its traditional and local characteristics and its compatibility with the landscape, even to the extent of becoming almost invisible:

‘A contemporary interpretation of the traditional design is encouraged on suitable sites at appropriate locations. Successful contemporary designs generally reflect the best principles of traditional vernacular architecture. For example, the Barn House - is a typical vernacular structure that can integrate successfully into the rural countryside’ (Kerry County Council 2009, p. 32)

As also reported by Scott et al. (2013) in their analysis of design guidelines in Ireland, vernacular architecture is often presented through nostalgic terms, reinforcing certain perceived elements of a rural idyll, such as simplicity, honesty and an old-fashioned quality:

[...] Irish vernacular architecture is simple, honest and has inadvertently almost effortlessly integrated into the landscape; an unconscious technique that should be mastered in contemporary rural design practice (Cork County Council 2003, p. 59)

‘Donegal’s homes and farm buildings, often referred to as rural vernacular architecture, have been built over years by using local materials to meet their own needs within specific site restraints. More often than not these buildings evolved through time unaffected by architects, formal styles or fashionable trends’ (Donegal County Council 2012, p. 98)

Sterrett and Bassett (2005) comment, albeit in a Northern Irish context, on how these romanticised views of the vernacular reflect the interests of urban elites, who view the countryside as an amenity for their own use. However, such vernacular designs are often rejected by people living in rural areas:

‘While the rural community, particularly in the west and south of Northern Ireland, continue to prefer a suburban aesthetic replete with as much ornamentation as the planners will allow, a small but increasing number of (obviously) affluent, urban people are keen to embrace a vernacular aesthetic (p. 153).

Similarly, a traditional rural aesthetic is often rejected by rural residents in the Republic of Ireland, as it carries associations of poverty and deprivation (IRDA, 2004), linked with, as

discussed earlier, a collective memory of harsh living conditions in rural areas (Scott, 2012; McDonagh, 2001). Scott et al. (2013) also report that preferences of people who have applied for planning permission for rural housing run contrary to policy guidelines which favour modesty and simplicity in the design.

Like planning authorities, the practice of contemporary architecture in Ireland also promotes and values the vernacular. Established design-led (as opposed to commercially-led) practices in the country make a point of contextualising themselves in the local, cultural and symbolic features of the landscape. This sensibility was galvanised in an exhibition at the Royal College of Art, London, in 1974 called 'A Sense of Ireland: Traditions and Directions'. Comprising a large number of paper projects that tried to establish a sense of continuity in Irish architecture, the exhibition was catalytic in the formation of the contemporary culture of architecture in Ireland. The legacy of a strong interest in critical regionalism, established in the 1980s, is embedded in the generations of architects currently practicing (see Becker et al., 1997).

4. Methodology

This research draws on in-depth semi-structured interviews with 12 qualified and practicing architects with expertise in rural house design, construction or renovation. The interviews were loosely based on an interview guide, which explored issues such as the rural discourses that drive architectural practice (for example how rural-relevant or rural-proofed architectural practice is; whether a rural architecture exists; views on rural housing issues in Ireland) and the role of architects in both rural housing policy and rural planning. In this paper we seek to explore the first set of questions regarding architectural interpretations of rurality.

Some of the architects were identified by the researchers as relevant to the topic due to their visibility in the field of rural house design (i.e. through publications, architectural awards, etc.). Other architects were interviewed as part of a snowball sampling approach. For the most part, they have worked in small design practices, which rely heavily on strong relationships with independent clients, rather than large scale developers. The views presented here are not representative of Irish architects as a whole or their professional organisation. The focus of this research is not to generalise these positions. Rather, the focus has been to explore the ways with which the countryside, rural architectural practice and the vernacular are approached through the lens of a small sample of practitioners. Representations of the vernacular were also contrasted with those found on planning policy documentation and, particularly, design guidelines. The research is based, therefore, on a thematic analysis of qualitative interviews focusing on the discourses that are used to produce the rural social world, the vernacular and the ways that architecture is positioned in the rural policy field.

5. Multiple and antithetical ruralities

Constructions of rurality were very diverse and multiple, reflecting on personal experiences with the rural (for example some architects reflected on whether they come from an urban and or rural background, while others discussed rurality drawing on their own counterurbanisation experience). These constructs drew on both physical and social properties of the countryside. This diversity was expected and is in accord with literature on lay discourses of the rural. In some cases however a strong urban/rural divide was presented:

‘Well, it’s probably the antithesis of the urban. Open space, an association with fresh air. A freer, less restrained way of living’ (Architect 1)

‘Completely different. I’m surrounded by hundreds of acres of farmland, and forest, and birds, and rabbits, and cattle, and screaming during the night, trains in the distance. It’s very different’ (Architect 5)

‘It’s a kind of unspoken... it’s almost an unspoken silence about it, that actually you sit there, you meditate on it, but you never... it’s always an inner world. It’s never... whereas living in the city, for me, is more of the kind of outer world. It’s more of a kind of relationship, a kind of conversation, whereas living in the country is kind of a meditation on those things’ (Architect 7)

It’s a slow weaving in, or knitting in of people into the community, and it’s much more a characteristic of living in the countryside than living in the town or city (Architect 10)

It is not unusual in research to come across such antithetical, and to some extent idyllic, constructions of rurality. Frouws (1998), for example, discusses a hedonist discourse of rurality in the Netherlands, encompassing aesthetic, cultural and spatial qualities associated with rural areas, held amongst urban elites who view the countryside as the garden of the city. The notion of a romanticised rurality is probably most explored in the discourses used to describe the English countryside (see Murdoch et al., 2003; Newby, 1979). Idyllic representations of an Irish rurality are also discussed in Irish rural studies literature in relation to the rural in-migration (i.e. Mahon, 2007).

While all interviewed architects recognised different agents associated with landscape change (such as European agricultural policy, Irish farmers and planners), there was little discussion, with the exception of one architect, on how contested rural space is, i.e. the conflicting interests and different ideologies promoted by external and internal actors in the rural development process (see also Murdoch et al., 2003). This suggests that while the diversity of ‘rural stakeholders’ is explicit in these professional discourses, the contested nature of rural development is less understood. Furthermore, architects do not, as a professional group, seem to enter these discussions as an agent of rural change.

6. Rurality and Architecture

A ‘rural’ architecture?

This section aims to explore relationships between rurality and architecture. In some instances architecture is constructed as an urban activity contrary to rural values and rural realities. Some of the interviewees’ comments suggest that urbanism and urban solutions such as high-density living are embedded in architectural thinking:

‘it’s unrealistic to ask somebody who’s used to living in the countryside, who’s born and bred on a farm, to go and live in a terraced house. Every architectural policy says, ‘This is how we must live, in high density,’ but they won’t do it, they’ll never do it’
(Architect 2)

Similarly, unlike some other professions perhaps, they are seen as being urban-based and unknown to country people:

so many architects are based in the cities and some of these people are living in towns, or in the countryside, and they don't know an architect. But they would all know a solicitor, they would all know a dentist, they would all know a doctor
(Architect 5)

In terms of a so-called 'rural architecture' or rather an architecture that is performed in rural spaces, some interviewees highlighted a lack of appreciation of intrinsic rural conditions. In this context they discussed out-of-rural influences (such as classical influences, European and international waves), but also ideas that are borrowed perhaps uncritically from other spatial and cultural contexts.

'We're influenced by global, international, academic, philosophical, and very many different things that we're influenced by. So what we produce will not always be as connected to place, or reflective of that place' (Architect 6)

This is different from similar discussions around urban architecture of flagship projects that in some cases aim to produce specific 'bottom up' identities and ideologies (see for example McNeill and Tewdwr-Jones, 2003). The following architect, for example, suggested that the architect *needs* to be external to a place in order to produce work there that is significant:

I mean, I think being an architect is important as well because actually, as an architect, you're exploring all the time, and people ask architects to do work for them based on their work. As architects, you explore the themes that you're interested in,

and actually the only reason why... yeah, so you build buildings from that point of view. So you have to be outside to be able to work as an architect in order to make personal work, or personally important work, because if you're entrenched in the place you just make work that people want you to make. (Architect 7)

Positionality and expertise

The interviewees also emphasize the role of architecture in creating spaces where community can be exercised. Architecture in this case is crucial in the material production of structures for community use. Inherent in these discourses is an understanding that these community spaces already exist (at least symbolically). Yet, in the rural context, these community spaces are not perceived to be so by outsiders. In that regard, the architect is again construed as an exogenous expert that makes things visible to the external:

‘So this idea of making a new village centre was partly what we were doing here in this scheme. So there was the cluster of housing, there was the new community centre, there is already a church, school, other facilities. It was already known as the centre if you like, but there’s nothing there, except the community’s perception of it as a centre [...] So you were making that fabric built. When you drive through an area in a rural landscape, you think you’re driving through a place with no centre. But each, if you like, town land, has its own identity, and each village then has its own identity, and communities are very strong. So there’s a lot of bonds there that are invisible in those landscapes’ (Architect 2)

It is as if the architect can deliver in physical form a preconceived, nascent, local community:

‘Architects think that community happens in towns and they don’t realise that community happens out in the countryside where you can’t see it. And I think a really important, and maybe quite on subject, is the fact that in a town an architect can design for community. They can make a public square, they can put a library on it, they can make a housing estate that has a better attitude to communal spaces, they can make apartment buildings [...] In a rural area, it’s a network of understanding and it can’t be designed and it can’t be owned by experts, and people are only interested in stuff at the moment that’s owned by experts. So it might be invisible, but it’s community [...] But that can’t be designed by architects. Some architects don’t understand it and aren’t interested in it’ (Architect 12)

Finally, regarding the positionality of Irish architects in rural housing debates it should be acknowledged that architects are not simply external agents to rural housing processes, advocating and reinforcing unbiased ideologies regarding environmental conservation and community functions. As a professional elite with specialised knowledge in house-building, their views also represent their own economic interests over development in the countryside. Scott (2005) for example points how the Royal Institute of Architects in Ireland formed alliances with a pro-housing lobby group called the Irish Rural Dwellers Association in effort to resist increasing planning regulation over house-building in the countryside.

Despite the professional expertise on design, it should be noted that in most cases architects are not directly involved in the production of (one-off) house building in rural Ireland. There is no legal obligation to employ an architect for building a rural house, while even the title ‘architect’ became regulated (subject to specific qualifications) only in 2009 when

registration of architects was introduced. This suggests that many different agents in rural housing development (engineers, developers, land surveyors, technicians) could claim professional expertise on the architecture of rural housing. Though the vast majority of (one-off) rural housing in Ireland is not architecturally-led, the amount of house-building that took place in rural Ireland during the boom years represented a timely opportunity for architects to get involved in designing and renovating rural houses as well as experimenting with ideas surrounding rural living (see O'Toole, 2010). These issues have also been highlighted in some of the interviews as demonstrated below. More than anything else, they demonstrate the paradoxical positionality of Irish architects in the production of rural housing: while professional expertise is demonstrated, it rarely exercises an effect on existing housing and rural settlement patterns:

But I would say that the problem in rural Ireland is not that we have too many architects designing houses in rural areas; we have too few, so the houses that are being built in rural Ireland are not designed by architects. So very little thought goes into, in particular, siting, and maybe that will change now with legislation and all of that (Architect 6).

Architects hadn't gone after that market [i.e. one off housing market], which was crazy. So I was saying, 'What? Why are architects not doing this sort of research, as a profession and saying where can we find more employment per annum per person? [...] If architects do get into this market, I suppose one of the assumptions in my mind, and it may be an erroneous assumption, is that we should start seeing quality houses which get recognised in award schemes, and things like that. (Architect 5).

You know, so architects just washed their hands of it. They didn't talk about it [i.e. rural housing] in college and it wasn't a battle to be won or anything. It was just something to be sneered at, but it wasn't architects, so it was okay. (Architect 12).

7. Constructing the vernacular

An obvious way to further explore the relationship between architecture and rurality (or locality) is through architecture described as 'vernacular'. A vernacular 'approach', as discussed previously, is heavily promoted in development plans and design guidelines, which emphasise its local, simplistic and, sometimes, 'free-of-architect' attributes (see also Scott et al., 2013). Our interviews revealed the multiple facets of interpretations of the vernacular used in architectural practice. The term 'vernacular' might, for example, relate to form, as it does often in policy documentation; types have been inherited over time, have proliferated and been altered according to place, environment and custom are, unsurprisingly, part of the avowed cultural baggage of the practicing architect in Ireland. Local instances of universally recognised types are valued as generators of form. Thus, for example, the idea of the vernacular is often understood as specifically related to the physical facts of certain (domestic) buildings as they engage with environment, material, craft etc. The interviews also imply that we cannot talk of one Irish vernacular, but many locally differentiated vernacular physical features:

[...] 'vernacular architecture which tends to be formulated because there are rules to do with materials that you have, the topography of the site, the shelter you can gain, how you planted the site, the wind direction, where you put openings so that you don't have huge openings on to the windy side of the site ... ' (Architect 9)

[...] when you look at rural houses in the west of Ireland, along the western sea front, you see very few examples of very ornate... certainly most of the houses are not overburdened with detail. It's quite simple. Rectangular plan form, white rendered walls. A simple arrangement of windows. Good orientation because people had a natural sense of which way to face their building. (Architect 4)

The dynamic existence and value of the vernacular is highlighted perhaps most when architects resist it. Acknowledging the vernacular does not necessarily confine the architect in practice:

Interviewer 1: 'Do you find it important in your work to attach yourself to older methods of building or older ways of building I suppose?'

Architect 4: 'Not so much older ways of building but an association with the visual and association with the farm and with arrangements rather than copying the craftsmanship or the traditions because they're outdated...'

'I'm just not willing to do it constructionally. It's not necessarily that I think, 'Oh, yeah, they're lovely old forms, I must follow that.' (Architect 2)

These views are consonant with the belief, engrained in critical regionalism, that the work of architecture must appeal to the universal as well as to the local. Frampton goes further on this issue and distinguishes between critical regionalism and 'small-minded attempts to revive the hypothetical forms of a lost vernacular' (1983, p. 21). To do otherwise, he maintains, is to freeze architecture out of its universal connection and, moreover, to unhook the architect from

his wider culture and training. Moreover, the degraded sense in which Frampton uses (and dismisses) the term 'vernacular' in this last quotation is one which is often used by architects in discussion with others outside the profession:

Architect 12: I see it as a game [i.e. planning policy] and there's different ways of playing that game. And around here, it's either you do something that has got white walls and some slate roofs, [...], and you draw up the frontal elevation so that the planner looking at it doesn't even really read it three dimensionally. And you write 'vernacular this' and 'appropriate that' all over the drawings and you put big arrows to 'a traditional slate roof' and all that kind of stuff. So you either say, look, this is vernacular in its format...

Interviewer 2: So you're trying to vernacularise the design?

Architect 12: You try to describe it as a piece of... and I suppose I became extremely upset by planners and everybody else, you know, would say something like, 'Make it look more vernacular.' And this house really came out of... it's the end result of understanding the vernacular as a way of doing things and not a style. And so, you know, to me, it's all to do with the tradition of making things yourself and relying on neighbours and using the things to hand to make something

Interviewer 2: So self-build, you'd say, by definition is vernacular?

Architect 12: Yes, vernacular. It's a vernacular action

Deconstructing the vernacular is important because the word carries the sense of allowing an architectural project to legitimize itself to a different audience, particularly the planners who regulate development. Though the term is shared by the two disciplines, it seems that architects understand the word as being meaningful in different ways, depending on the

audience. In that sense, the vernacular becomes a set of discursive symbols that can be used to exercise power over planners and policy-makers in order to secure planning permission. Similarly, the vernacular becomes a discourse that planners can use to resist modernity and experimentation in the design (Ryan, 2006). Architects and planners may each use the term ‘vernacular’, but in keeping within their own specific interests, either to promote particular housing developments or to resist them. More importantly, this communication demonstrates that the vernacular is communicated between the two disciplines and continuously co-constructed but within limited interpretations, i.e. with regards to physical attributes as described earlier. It might even be suggested that the term becomes diminished when used by one profession to project its own meaning onto the other.

However, as the previous dialogue demonstrates, the vernacular holds other meanings as well. These have allowed it to remain and develop within the essentially ‘non-provincially regionalist’ architecture of the late 20th century Ireland (the preferred term of Irish architect Gerry Cahill, quoted in Becker et al., 1997, p. 32). Despite resistance and criticism, the vernacular has not ceased to be a term of meaning and value for architects working in the countryside. This meaning might go beyond issues of form, material and craft into questions of identity, culture and governance, and few of the interviewed architects discussed this:

‘I suppose the thing is that when we talk about the vernacular in Ireland we usually talk about farm houses [...] so it's associated with the land and with agriculture. And you're also talking about buildings that are built from local materials, you know, that didn't have to be brought very far, and buildings that could be built by skills that were ready to hand. So those kind of buildings reflect a traditional way of life; a lot of the time they reflect the agricultural way of life. In Ireland, the outhouses or farm

buildings, and the layout of farmyards and all that, is as interesting as the houses themselves. Sometimes they're more interesting, and they are better built. So I'm interested in that [...] because it's more about place making, actually, and it's much more connected to place than the buildings that we build now, either under the 'bungalow bliss' thing, or even to some extent that we build as architects' (Architect 6)

‘[...] the sharing of skills is something that is what community is all to do with as well; that you feel a bond with somebody who does things in the same way as you do, which is what vernacular housing really is, the bond that it produces’ (Architect 12)

The above quotations promote the communitarian features of the vernacular, which in essence one could argue are as important as the built fabric in co-producing the vernacular in planning and rural housing policy discourse. In this context, the vernacular becomes not only a method of producing housing based on form and building material, but also the method of governing housing. Consequently, the vernacular is constructed as something more than a set of design guidelines that regulate an almost invisible and unchallenged aesthetic placed upon rural areas by urban experts. Vernacular translates into a way of action, of governance and a method of place making in rural areas. Vernacular in this context, as in critical regionalist architecture rhetoric, suggests a new local-global (as well as urban-rural) relationship, reinterpreting local traditions, challenging dominant and normative perspectives of development, without resisting change (drawing on Frampton, 1983). This hybrid emphasis on local/extra local scales and forces of development is also strongly embedded in planning philosophy (see for example Healey, 1998) and rural development theory, particularly through the (ideal) model of neo-endogenous rural development (see Ray, 2006; Lowe et al., 1998; Shucksmith, 2009).

Neo-endogenous or networked rural development is a hybrid approach to development aiming to depart from exogenous (top-down) and endogenous (bottom-up) development models, following a fundamental shift in rural governance practices which have aimed to engage multiple stakeholders in rural policymaking (OECD, 2006). Exogenous models have been criticized for their dependency on external funding and extra-local (i.e. urban) experts (Lowe et al., 1998). On the other hand, endogenous rural development models sought to promote sectoral integration in rural policymaking through territorial strategies that place the interests of local communities at the heart of the development activity (Ray, 1997). Research and practice have, however, demonstrated that endogenous models of development are not realistic (Ward et al., 2005), while problems of participation and elitism have been described particularly in relation to European-funded rural development programmes that demonstrated an endogenous accent (Barke and Newton, 1997; Shucksmith, 2000a). Without undermining the interests of local communities, neo-endogenous development brings attention to the role of extra-local factors (i.e. the nation state, the supra-state, forces of globalisation) in shaping the future of local areas. The key challenge here is the ability of local areas to mobilise networks of both local and non-local actors for their own benefit. In that context, neo-endogenous development is locally rooted, but outward-looking and characterized by dynamic interactions between local areas and their wider environments (see also: Atterton and Thompson, 2010). This hybridity between the local and the extra-local, central to the concept of neo-endogenous development, is also embedded in critical regionalism.

8. Conclusions

This paper views architects as agents of housing development and aims to explore the ways they construct their own professional ruralities. This is particularly important because, while understandings of rurality that frame the interests of some of the agents in rural housing development are well discussed in academic literature (see for example: Scott, 2012; Sturzaker and Shucksmith, 2011; Ryan, 2006), narratives of rurality, and also of the vernacular, amongst architects have received scant attention. Furthermore, academic discourse about the rural is usually produced by sociologists and geographers (Woods, 2011), but there is little interaction with disciplines outside the social science spectrum, such as architecture.

Our analysis, based on a set of qualitative interviews with a small number of Irish architects engaged in rural housing design, demonstrates, firstly, multiple discourses of rurality, highlighting how rural realities contradict urban experience. Secondly, architecture tends to be construed as an urban activity, an exogenous force to rural realities. Architects claim professional expertise, but, paradoxically perhaps, their expertise is not reflected in the rural settlement pattern.

Finally, the interviews highlighted the importance of the vernacular. Our analysis demonstrates that different stakeholders may each use the term ‘vernacular’, but often only in keeping within their own specific interests, either to promote particular housing developments or to resist them. The Irish design guidelines, for example, represent certain elements of a purified rurality when promoting vernacular design which focuses on simplicity and minimal landscape impact. The discourse of the vernacular also supports certain ideologies, expertise and tastes regarding housing development and aesthetics in rural areas. As Sterrett and Bassett (2005) suggest, these qualities ‘reflect values, and values reflect

cultural heritage, social position and aspiration. Design in this context is about social communication not aesthetic contemplation’.

The significance of this paper lies, therefore, in promoting a more inclusive discursive representation of the vernacular across different stakeholders, in an effort to remove it from the (pure) aesthetic preoccupations with which it is usually associated, and positioning it within theoretical approaches in both architecture (i.e. in critical regionalism) and rural development theory (i.e. in neo-endogenous rural development). In particular, our analysis, suggests that current communication between architects and planners as regards rural housing development may co-produce a diminished meaning of the vernacular, drawing only on physical features and local construction material. These are usually represented in design guidelines (see also Scott et al., 2013), which, one could argue, instead of promoting the vernacular, serve rather to idealise it and freeze it, not allowing it to evolve. While the vernacular appears to be associated with the local, an integrated urban-rural as well as local-global relationship are concerns well-situated in both rural planning practice and critical regionalist architecture. We argue therefore that a more nuanced understanding of the vernacular, is necessary to provide a new frame for communicating a common vision, culture and practice regarding housing development amongst rural housing agents, such as architects, planners, house builders and rural development practitioners.

A ‘vernacular approach’ to rural housing development moves beyond form and physical preoccupations to link house-building with local and regional social needs. It also reveals its neo-endogenous characteristics: it not only seeks to translate a local culture into physical form or structures, but, most importantly, to translate it into collaborative governance. Vernacular housing policies can, for example, highlight the role of self-developed or self-

built housing, not only in providing housing that addresses local needs, but also in resisting an increasingly neoliberalising house-building sector. It can highlight the role of social and affordable housing, particularly in contexts of exclusive countrysides such as in Britain (Shucksmith, 2000b) or in rural areas where there are few alternatives to tenure beyond private homeowner-occupation such as in Ireland (Finnerty et al., 2003). In this context, social housing or self-built housing in rural areas *is* vernacular because it responds to local and wider societal needs. A vernacular approach can also strengthen the role of architecture in rural housing output, in conceptualising, experimenting and realising new ideas around rural living that focus on place making and affordability. Certain architect-led projects in Ireland demonstrated affordable solutions to rural house building during the boom years (for example picture 3; The Guardian, 2012) which move beyond idyllic representations of the rural or a purist preoccupation regarding landscape impacts. A ‘vernacular approach’ can promote an urban-rural relationship that understands housing beyond rural/local and urban/non-local need, realising that opportunities for rural communities also arise from attracting extra-local resources and populations.

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Pictures

Picture 1: 'One-off housing'

Picture 2: 'One-off housing'

Picture 3: Architect Dominic Stevens, 'House for €25,000' - A new vernacular? (see also The Guardian 2012)