

ART, ARCHITECTURE AND PLACE

The Lake Isle of Innisfree



YEATS INTERNATIONAL ARCHITECTURE COMPETITION
LIMINAL SPACES EXHIBITION

ISLE OF THE LIVING, ISLE OF THE DEAD
POETRY, ART AND ARCHITECTURE IN THE YEATS 2015
COMPETITION AND LIMINAL SPACES
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Arnold Böcklin, Painting, *Isle of the Dead*, 1888

In 1888, W.B. Yeats wrote a poem that has become part of the cultural myths of Ireland. The three-stanza verse titled: *The Lake Isle of Innisfree* presents us, with the poet longing for the beauty of a wooded island, visited in his childhood. With the 150 year anniversary of his birth the Institute of Technology Sligo Architectural Design Program has organized an international architectural competition for a design to honor the poet and poem. Besides the generous prize monies the competition also produced a temporary construction of the winning scheme on the Isle of Innisfree in June 2015.

Parallel to the architecture competition is an exhibit *Liminal Spaces* at The Model Sligo of seven invited practitioners (six artists and a town planner) who have also commented on the Yeats poem. I will describe and critique the architects first and the artists second.

To start the review of the architectural competition entries I am placing them into two categories. The first type articulates the stated goal of the poem to envision “a small cabin there, of clay and wattles made...” except in a modern vocabulary. The second type uses the poem as only a touchstone, or excuse, for an exploration of abstract sculptural figures and forms becoming a different type of memorial to the poet.

PRIMITIVE HUT AND THE ISLE OF THE LIVING

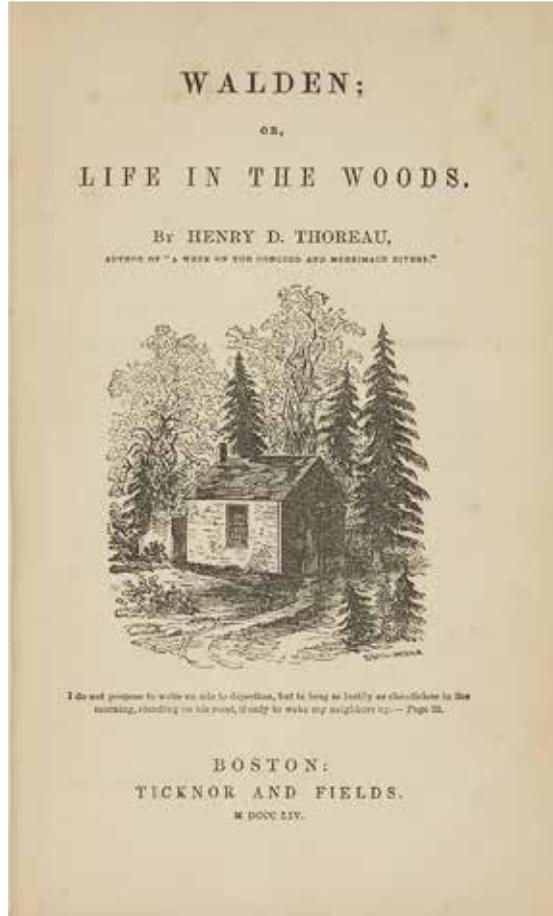
The first idea, concerning man withdrawing from civilization into the wild to find an uncorrupted world, can be traced back to eighteenth century France. The archetypal object of this direction is the “Primitive Hut” derived from the Frontispiece drawing in the 1755 book *Essai sur l'architecture* by the Abbott Laugier. The Primitive Hut is seen as a shelter made by four tree trunks holding up a gable roof of cut branches. It proposed a logical first house for mankind that connected with the order of neoclassical architecture. It also presented an image of purity and balance in the interaction of man and nature. The influence of this concept can be found in 1854 with the publication of the book *Walden or life in the woods* by



Abbe Laugier, Frontispiece, *Essai sur l'architecture*, 1775

Henry David Thoreau. The Thoreau work was read by Yeats and certainly influenced his poem by the fact that Thoreau makes the simple act of a forest retreat into a radical, symbolic and political act. I find that the Yeats poem can be nothing but political, nationalistic and demanding.

The first entry that matches this criteria is the work, awarded Highly Commended, by the architectural team *time(scape)lab* (USA). In their touchingly delicate pencil drawings of sections thru a small angular hut the



Henry David Thoreau, Title page, *Walden, or life in the woods*, 1854

architects present their interpretations of Yeats small cabin. With built-in desk, seats and book shelves it recalls the “Petite Cabin” by the French Modern architect Le Corbusier, also discussed as a variant on the Primitive Hut. They further articulate the single room hut with tiny baffled windows inspired by Le Corbusier’s church at Ronchamp and add a moon viewing skylight, an extra effect not mentioned in the poem.

The next four architects are grouped under one section because of the conceptual similarities in their works. The two architectural offices that were awarded a Commended are *Nós Workshop* (Ireland) and *Samuel Little* (London, UK). Whilst two works in the Student section which won a Highly Commended are from the *Dundee School of Architecture* (Scotland UK) and from *Queens University*

Belfast (N.Ireland). Each of these works is in some way an articulation of an open timber frame structure. Although their stated intent may be different the end results are most similar. Whether the object is a triangulated A-frame or an open roof cube (which included a photo of an “intriguing precedent” primitive hut) or a set of paired sheds or a pine / plywood box, they make an interpretation of a traditional cabin by an exposed modern structural wooden skeleton.

ABSTRACT ART AND THE ISLE OF THE DEAD

For the second set of types, labelled as abstract art, I propose that all of these geometric shapes exist as a marker in memory of the poet. They are in my view, all cenotaphs and monuments to the dead.

Three of the entries are grouped together based on the innovative placement of their artwork in the water of Lough Gill surrounding the island. The collective *AP+E* (Denmark) was awarded a Highly Commended with a hauntingly beautiful environmental art work titled “Still, I will arise and go now”, consisting of fifteen floating reflective metal discs arranged in the water. And two student works, the first from the *University of Technology and Economics in Hungary* presented a circular bridge walkway and second the *Creative Leap Collective* from the *University of the West of England*, (Bristol, UK) arranging a sine-wave of three meter tall laminated glass fins in the water. I have included an image of Robert Smithson’s earth work *Spiral Jetty*, located in the Great Salt Lake, to place in context these art proposals.

The circular bridge-walkway by the Hungarian student team has lightness and elegance beyond its simple geometry made by articulating a subtle curve to its parapet. The metal surface is inscribed “William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) who longed for this island” which I consider makes this abstract work explicitly a memorial and cenotaph.

Another project within the abstract art listing is the student entry of Andras Dankhazi (Ireland) with a triangle of angular forms presented under the title “Pavilion in Three Verses” for which he won a Highly Commended rating. The main pencil drawing is a wonderful perspective with a style from the fifties. The three dynamic sculptures would have been sufficient alone but the designers felt it necessary to put an additional narrative of a path up into the object to a symbolic book of poems.

And last is the Overall Winner, the architects *shindesignworks*, a collaborative with partners John Randle



Le Corbusier, *Cabanon à Cap Martin*, 1952

in London, UK and Yong ho Shin in Daegu, South Korea. Titled “Square moon – a window to Innisfree” the main rendering is an atmospheric work with a glowing white square panel (4.5 meters on a side) centered in the landscape of the island. The computer rendering is so sophisticated in its depiction of the morning mist that it recalls the best Turner landscape painting. Also, I cannot help but to compare this image to the famous German romantic painting by Arnold Böcklin titled “Isle of the Dead” with the fifth version finished in 1886. Note that date is two years before Yeats completed his poem.

The Böcklin shows a small boat approaching an island with a glowing white figure. The dramatic island seems like a rocky mountain top planted with cypress trees and imagery from some dark Greek myth. The painting is part of another tradition of romanticism that of the sublime. Not the positive definition of sublime we use now, but a meaning evoking the horror of nature in all its crushing power. I am using the Böcklin to show that the dramatic force of “Square Moon – a window” can also be seen as ominous, threatening and alien to its surroundings.

One line from the Yeats poem: “And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow...” can be interpreted in many ways, an escape from a noisy London street or a more somber tone. Peace comes to us in the rest of death and Yeats passage to the Isle of Innisfree on a small boat matches the barge rowed by Charon carrying souls across the River Styx on its way to Hades. The value to me of the Yeats Competition is not just in its celebration of the poet but also in its opening another “window” onto his words.

I cannot make the same divisions on the artists that I imposed on the architects; it is obvious that all of the selected practitioners are concerned with the handmade, the written, the familiar and the figural. The connection of Yeats to Thoreau is explicit in the works of two of the artists and the Yeats pavilion makes its way directly into two additional artist’s pieces. Those associated with the Yeats/Thoreau amalgam are Cléa van der Grijn and her works *Magical Thinking I and II*, while Andy Parsons produces eight works along similar lines. I cannot help but be charmed by van der Grijn’s quote from Thoreau: “What should I learn of beans or beans of me”. These works, which utilize numerous fragments (boats and beans) are ephemeral metaphors for each artist’s personal view.

Those inspired by the imaginary Yeats’ hut are Fergal MacCabe (town planner) and Corban Walker. MacCabe’s installation of letters and documents traces the permit process of his application (and failure) to build a hut on the island. Whilst Walker’s work titled: *Untitled, 6 Drawings for Sligo* consists of six stacked (like bricks) paper panels, each covered in a background pattern and foreground slash of silver paint. The artist notes: “...the construction of these works is deliberately limited by latitude combined with a mercurial dislocation to an elusive site”. Perhaps, this text relates the art work to the plaster on lath for the Yeats’ imaginary island hut. All the artists’ works are so intensely personal that somehow the great poet seems left behind on the shoreline, which is not necessarily a bad thing.

In summary, I would like to quote one stanza from W. H. Auden’s poem *In Memory of W.B. Yeats* that holds that poets and their poetry are adapted anew for each generation and that each reader rewrites the text. This is the separation of the Isle of the Living and the Isle of the Dead. Just as in Yeats2015 the curators, historians, writers, architects and artists invent a new Yeats to match their own special needs.

*Now he is scattered among a hundred cities
And wholly given over to unfamiliar affections,
To find his happiness in another kind of wood
And be punished under a foreign code of conscience.
The words of a dead man
Are modified in the guts of the living.*