

**Haunted Landscapes**

During the Celtic Tiger boom Ireland experienced an unprecedented growth in property construction and house prices, as levels of development and its underlying finances were allowed to become massively over-extended. Construction became a major component and driver of the Irish economy. Residential houses and apartments became investments rather than homes, and buyers were forced to compete with prices set by buy-to-let and buy-to-flip speculators. The substantial money to be made from this vastly inflated market created a country awash with developers. Like a tremor shaking the earth, housing estates emerged as if from the landscape itself, transforming every city, town and village.

The inevitable collapse of the Irish property market in late 2008 has left its mark on the landscape in the form of empty houses, abandoned retail parks, and half built estates. The ghosts of the Celtic Tiger are visible across the country in the fragments of development that now stand as unfinished or unoccupied shells of what they were planned to be. The National Institute for Regional and Spatial Analysis has estimated that there are currently 338,031 vacant units around the country (120,248 properties in excess of the present market) and 620 ‘ghost estates’ (estates of ten or more houses where 50% are either vacant or under-construction).

These ‘ghost estates’ are a particularly austere example of the spectacular collapse of the Celtic Tiger, a metaphor for the glut of excess characteristic of the era and of impending social dissolution. The remnants of constructions sites stand frozen in time, often with cranes, diggers, cabins and other artefacts left undisturbed behind steel fences cordoning them off from the occupied dwellings that encircle them. Perhaps the starkest examples are in rural areas, where small populations and obscene overdevelopment has left high levels of vacancy and lush natural landscapes irrevocably transformed. These estates are also

places of ordinary life, where the everyday struggles and joys of post Celtic Tiger Ireland will be played out by residents, ultimately with the hope of building something better from these incomplete spaces.

In this way they are ‘haunted’ or ‘spectral’ places. Ireland is now entering a period in which the traces of recent economic prosperity, cultural cosmopolitanism, and particularly property investment are overlaid by the trauma of unemployment, negative equity, and the death of a dream. A spectral space, John Wylie suggests, is ‘the very conjuration and unsettling of presence, place, the present, and the past’. The ‘ghost estate’ forcefully encapsulates this unsettling. Materially and metaphorically, visually and psychologically, personally and communally, they represent the intense transformations and aspirations of the Celtic Tiger period and the sobering anxieties and uncertainty of the current period. They are literally places haunted by the Celtic Tiger.

Anthony Haughey’s photographs capture the contradictions of these places. All the images in the *Settlement* series were produced between sunset and sunrise. The combination of darkness, artificial light and long exposures draws attention to the effects of development on the natural environment by reducing the images to their key components of land and manmade constructions. These are decidedly modern landscape photographs that also allow themselves to be haunted by Ireland’s past. The images foreground the natural environment – the grass, soil, and rock – and visualise the developments as disordering the topography. The absence (or oblique traces) of human life in the photographs highlights the uncanny decoupling of these houses from their function as places of dwelling. They evoke not so much the intrusion of people into the unspoilt landscape, but the incursion of a more senseless and arbitrary capitalism, itself decoupled from the basic premise of supply and demand. As such, they offer a fitting visual metaphor for the property boom, a record of the tangible material affects of the international financial crisis and Ireland’s

entangled property crash.

Haughey’s images evoke more than the spectre of the recent past, however. As landscape photography, they operate in relation to the stereotypical images of Ireland as green, lustrous, ancient and unspoilt. They depict the struggle over place and narrative characteristic of the current moment as people engage in complex renegotiations of personal and collective history, identity, and purpose in an effort to rediscover what Ireland ‘means’.

As a title, ‘Settlement’ proffers an ironic statement on the deranged financial and planning systems that created the decidedly anti-humanist residential patterns depicted here. In a more abstract sense, it offers an oblique reflection on the current moment. Celtic Tiger Ireland was characterised by intense social, economic, demographic, and spatial transformation that pushed the country headlong into a shifting array of national imaginaries. As Ireland trundles into economic freefall another set of transformations will be ushered in. However, this moment is also paradoxically a time of settlement. The abrupt halting of development provides us a space to dissect and reflect upon these changes. Yet, while these photographs capture the stillness of life, they are not dead images. Nature slowly reclaims the landscape of these abandoned sites. That there is still movement and growth within these ostensibly bleak places offers a potent metaphor for our continued capacity to affect change in landscapes produced by capitalist politics. These are places haunted by Ireland’s past, but alive also to the potentials of the future.

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