



## 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.

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### 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, emphasising 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 and 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

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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.

## 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 (2012) 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 marginalisation 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

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