

ATLAS of an IRISH CITY

with the Architectural Association of
Ireland & Oonagh Young Gallery

Students from Studio Tom
Emerson, ETH Zurich have
produced an architectural survey
of Galway and design projects
that explore new ways to think
about the future of the city.

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The economic crisis of the last few years has shown that, like in nature, urban growth cannot be endless. A new architectural approach is needed that responds to the cycles of growth and decay and offers a vision of the future that is more responsive to what already exists. To explore the potential in re-use of existing urban fragments is to approach the architecture of the city as a form of *bricolage*. Re-use and bricolage have always formed a significant part of the building economy. As cities fill up and resources diminish, re-use and bricolage can be invested with new possibilities and meanings to include not only the re-use of buildings and materials but also at a larger territorial scale where the *debris of history*¹ are as much material for re-use as stone and timber. Can small adjustments to boundaries and thresholds lead to a larger spatial transformation? At the heart of bricolage is the inventory of existing material and means. If the task is at the scale of an individual maker the inventory is ostensibly simple: materials and tools. When looking at a larger scale, a neighbourhood, a landscape or even a city, then the architect's inventory is the survey.

Like all surveys, Galway Atlas is incomplete and subjective. It bears all the naivety of the outsider's gaze, however it is also a record, an attempt to retain something and to look more carefully for a future in what is there. 'Learning from the existing landscape is a way of being revolutionary for an architect' cried *Learning From Las Vegas* in 1972. The sentiment remains as prescient today. The Atlas creates a new reality, both record and fiction. At first glance, the survey is the background and the proposals are the synthesis. But that would be too simple. The survey is as synthetic as the proposals. The selection of subjects represented edits the city and landscape down to a collection of scenes, a latent proposal. The story of architecture has shown time and again, the survey can be the most radical act in the design process. From Piranesi's *Antichite Romane* to Rem Koolhaas's record of the Berlin Wall, the survey has been instrumental in not only recording but also projecting a vision of the past into the future.

The rules of the Atlas were simple: working in pairs, the students produced two A2 line drawings and two A2 photographs. The material diversity of the physical environment – from the blade of grass to the horizon – is reduced to thin black strokes. What is omitted is as important as what is included. The accompanying photographs restore the light, shadow and colour that were excluded from the drawing. They also testify to a kind of realism, a proof that these spaces exist. They contain time too, both in the instant in which the image was taken but also in the traces of wear and tear of stone and in the turbulence in the sky. Some of the photographs (plates 36–41) we made in situ, in a suitcase transformed into a pinhole camera with a sheet of A2 photographic paper in the back. Exposures of over thirty minutes erased all movement, all life from these well-known landmarks. The Atlas makes no distinction between the used and the abandoned and between the well known and the forgotten.

Cliffs, rocky crenellations, lakes and rivers, bog pits, towering ruins form a strangely mystical landscape around Galway but it is the sea that *torments*² the city centre. Even when out of sight, the sky over the city centre could only come from the Atlantic. Galway can feel like a series of islands bounded by water or uncertain industrial spaces. The centre is small and vibrant, gently guiding visitors back to the sea.

The ancient walled city still asserts its territory despite losing its fortifications and Forthill cemetery is the island par excellence in an artificial sea of industry. On the other side of the water, the coastline west of the city centre is raw with pockets of conviviality. People promenade and swimmers congregate around the melancholic diving platform at Blackrock projecting out to the horizon.

The diving platform is only one of many points of potential intervention in Galway's infrastructure. Although modest in scale and formal expression, it activates a far greater coastal territory. Other unused or forgotten infrastructure all over the city suggest possibilities for a return to public life: the former branch railway line leading to Clifton, the industrial port which is due to move further along the coast, the network of river and canals, the station and adjacent railway yards. The projects propose parks, walks, baths, playing fields, a funeral hall, all grafted onto these existing and precarious fragments. What appears as no more than the adjustment of a few lines in the Atlas, could restructure a territory. A single step to shift horizons, a room for contemplation or the form of the coastline around the opening in the river, contested and redrawn over centuries (see plates 001–004), can be re-imagined. Like the city, the survey is a single resource from which many different pasts and futures can be invented.