

Jenny Moran, *Time isn't holding us, time isn't after us*, 2012Jenny Moran, *Time isn't holding us, time isn't after us*, 2012Jenny Moran, *Despicably Utilitarian*, 2012, soap

Home as Universe

JENNIE MORAN PROFILES HER COLLABORATIVE ART / ARCHITECTURE PROJECT WITH ARCHITECT LAURA HARTY, FOR OLDER PEOPLE'S HOUSING IN NAAS, CO KILDARE.

IN April 2009, I crossed paths with a woman called Margharita Solon and heard of her plans to set up a new kind of housing for older people in Naas, Co Kildare. It was to comprise 53 self-contained apartments in and around an empty convent in the centre of the town. Named McAuley Place, it would house a cultural venue and café, and lie adjacent to a community centre. All parts would be open to the public. Prospective tenants had to be over 65, be able to live independently and be residing in Naas or thereabouts. I got to thinking about these tenants and how 53 homes would soon be closing down and moving into another building. This was intended to be their final move: the lifts in McAuley Place were designed to accommodate coffins. I felt that this moment of enormous collective bravery should be marked in some way. I thought about all the layers of history within these 53 homes, momentarily accessible in the disruption of the move, like dust raised, soon to be swept away. To me, there was an urgency in collecting some of this important history dust.

I visited Margharita Solon and discussed the possibility of creating some sort of archive: a way of making the history from the tenants' previous homes present at McAuley Place. Following this, I approached architect, Laura Harty – having seen her and a colleague give a presentation at an Irish Architecture Foundation Pecha Kucha event – about accommodation for older people from the perspective of two architects. We went to Naas together and continued our conversation from there, with a view to developing a project together. We were subsequently awarded funding from the Engaging with Architecture Scheme and Kildare Arts Service. This is a relatively new award funded by the Arts Council in partnership with the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, under the Government Policy on Architecture Implementation Programme 2009 – 2015. The scheme aims to enhance and extend the public's experience of and engagement with architecture. Laura and I applied as an architect / artist collaboration after an initial research period where we identified or respective tasks and roles. Our application focused on the architecture of the home.

Laura and I were both interested in the idea of the home as primary universe: a place that might shield us from the elements, from danger and from the public; a potential site for restoration and intimacy, where the body is inclined to stay still; a place where we might accumulate the debris of minor and major excursions, dream about them, awake and asleep. But also a place to leave. A springboard. For some, the exit is more pleasing than the entrance / re-entrance. A place men come out of.¹ In particular, it was the task of transporting the home that interested us both. What happens when you move a universe from one place to another? One of the first things we discovered was that the home is made up of movable and immovable

things. Some things can be transported, others cannot. Like the house and the way it has influenced the occupant. For instance, a dweller might have become accustomed to bathing in the late afternoon because of the type of sunlight that was sent in through their bathroom window at such an hour. This is unlikely to be the case in the next house. Silence and noise will be different. The distance a person will travel into the house before they remove their coat will change. This is where the architect's focus lay. She wanted to understand and describe the setting, which frames, directs and positions the experience of the home. The task was to move the immovable. Scale was often mentioned as a tool.

The movable things were my territory. I concentrated on possessions and atmosphere. These are some of the devices with which the dweller can influence the home. Possessions are objects used to re-orient oneself. They are how we can resist displacement. 'These are my place mats. This must be my dining room.' In the case of McAuley Place, the new apartments were usually smaller than the tenant's previous home. This meant that most tenants had to filter their possessions somewhat. Items secured their inclusion by being either indispensable or of sentimental value. The sentimental objects are interesting because, when one chooses to leave behind a landmark, that place or experience is no longer physically represented and permission is given to begin forgetting it. A narrative is reconstructed or edited slightly.

The word 'atmosphere' describes the air surrounding a thing or the tone or feeling of a place. I wondered if there was a connection between the two meanings – that the air surrounding a thing (the thing here referring to the dweller) could affect the tone or feeling in a place (the place being the home). I thought back to my grandmother's house and how it would only function with her in it. Without her it was dreadful, regardless of how many fires were lit, meals cooked or other perfectly pleasant people were present. Atmosphere is movable and must travel with the person like a portable, external soul.

Next, I decided to consult a scientist. NUI Maynooth microbiologist, Kevin Kavanagh, received me graciously, furnished me with Petri dishes and incubated samples taken from new and old homes so that I could watch spores develop under a microscope. I discovered that the air in a home is different when the occupant is present. I also discovered a whole new language that I could use to articulate the idea. This was also a response to Laura's suggestion that scale be used to move immovable things. Although I am quite sure she was referring to the act of reproducing something on a smaller scale, it got me thinking about particles.

The home is a tricky site. The factors that make it fascinating also make it very fortress-like. We don't want to present our private

domestic heritage to the public, especially after a physically and emotionally demanding relocation. I kept thinking about hospitality during this project. People looking for information are more than strangers. It seemed to me that the laws of hospitality are pretty much reversed. Let us say no to who or what turns up.²

We only visited homes when we were invited, and where possible we would be the hosts. Initially, we wrote a letter to each of the prospective tenants, introducing ourselves and the project, which we followed up with an invitation to supper in McAuley Place. We each made a cake and whoever was interested came along. I liked this dynamic and decided to try and maintain it. Shortly after this, the Convent Tea Rooms opened in McAuley Place: the café open to tenants and the public. I decided to work there occasionally to keep up my role as host and also to become familiar to the place and with the place. It also meant nice wide-open potential for informal exchanges in doorways *etc.*

Everything was recorded and taken to our respective workplaces to be processed. It seemed appropriate that this archive (which is about the home) be comfortably re-housed in a home. So the information gathered is spread across a group of objects, which can function in a domestic setting. There is a series of soap sculptures, *Despicably Utilitarian*, which references some unremarkable parts of houses that are usually experienced through touch.³ Let the soap clean the hands that do the touching. We have a limited edition series of napkins screen printed with images from our research and have printed our publication on heavy gauge plastic bags. The very thing that renders these bags so undesirable works very well for us. They possess a life of their own and a longevity that suits the long-term dissemination of information very well. The longer they hang around, the better. There are also some cumbersome sculptural responses – a mirrored double pendulum entitled *Time isn't holding us, time isn't after us* and a film of spores growing called *Everything that ever happened is here.*⁴ Both of which, I trust, will find their audience.

Whenever an artist brings their practice to a new place, there is an onus to represent that practice as sincerely as possible. It is a shame to sweeten it or water it down. I feel that we stood our ground here and didn't really add anything that didn't belong. The main benefit to the McAuley Place tenants was the awareness that we raised about the complex everyday architecture of the home: in particular, the highlighting of an otherwise unmarked historical moment. A group of people spent more than a year frantically pursuing momentary billows of dust from dismantled primary universes. That is, perhaps, interesting to watch.

Jennie Moran is an artist based in Dublin.

Notes

1. Pierre Bourdieu, 'The World Reversed', *The Logic of Practice*, Stanford University Press, 1980, 282. In this case study of the Kabyle house, Bourdieu identifies the different roles of male and female inhabitants within a group of Berbers. It is not the gender analysis, but the energy behind the different attitudes to the home, that I identified with, especially in terms of the 'movement outwards' or turning of ones back on the house.
2. Jacques Derrida, *De l'hospitalité*, Calmann-Lévy, 1997. According to the law of hospitality, unconditional welcome must be offered to the new arrival. However, we were not entitled to such concessions.
3. The term 'Despicably Utilitarian' comes from an essay by Jean Sebastian Marcoux entitled 'The Refurbishment of Memory', included in *Home Possessions*, ed Daniel Miller, Berg, 2001
4. Lyric taken from the Talking Heads song, *Once in a Lifetime*, 1981