

*Inversion/was the nook warm?* A project by Laura Harty and Jennie Moran

Here's a new party game. Ask your friends, "When you are older, where do you see yourself if you can no longer live at home?" Chances are that they will look away, make a joke, say they haven't thought about it. Why not? Most people – of a certain age at least – have probably given some thought to how they will fund their latter years, be it through a pension or through the sale of property. But as to where they will physically be during those years...well, imagining, and describing, that place, that building, that room or set of rooms is, let's be honest, daunting if not depressing.

That thought-provoking question was put to me during a visit to the Nás na Ríogh Housing Association (NnRHA)<sup>1</sup> in Naas, Co. Kildare, by Margharita Solon, the driving force behind this extraordinary housing project, and current chairperson of the NnRHA Board. Nás na Ríogh Housing Association was conceived by Solon many years ago, as a reaction to the practice of putting – and I choose the verb carefully – older people into homes without sufficient consideration of their desires, their needs, their abilities – their human rights. Her 'mantra' for the project was the United Nations Principles for Older Persons<sup>2</sup> and every detail within and without the building reflects this commitment. It is an indication of the success of her approach that President Michael D Higgins, on a visit to Nás na Ríogh Housing Association on 13 June 2012, spoke of "the good example" this project offers<sup>3</sup> and recommended that it be promoted as a model for all such ventures in Ireland.

What brought me to Nás na Ríogh Housing Association, however, was art. Through Kildare Arts Service, I had learned of an intriguing art project taking NnRHA as its starting point. This project, *Inversion/was the nook warm?*, conceived by architect Laura Harty and artist Jennie Moran, received funding<sup>4</sup> from, amongst others, the Arts Council under the *Engaging with Architecture* Scheme, one of four projects (out of 31 applications) to be selected for a grant and the only one of the four to be submitted by individuals rather than an organization.

It was the uniqueness of the Nás na Ríogh Housing Association project that Harty and Moran took as their starting point, not just in its physical and organizational structure, but also in the nature of its realization. How often do more than fifty people from an area all move into a new housing arrangement at almost the same time? This process, which began in 2011, deserved, they felt, to be acknowledged and recorded, and provided an opportunity to investigate "the processes by which a home and its inhabitants transform each other"<sup>5</sup>. The focus for Moran would be the movable: the furnishings, objects, memorabilia, that each tenant<sup>6</sup> brings to their new home. Harty would look at the immovable: the four walls, the internal and external space left behind, the new environment which each tenant must discover and adapt to.

Reflecting both this complementarity of the movable and immovable and their individual practices, the two artists take different approaches. Moran works as an occasional volunteer in the Nás na Ríogh Housing Association Tea Rooms, which allows her to observe and chat to tenants in an informal manner; Harty interviews directly. What they uncover during these encounters is not just recorded, but re-presented, by replicating architectural features on a different scale or by re-casting familiar or precious objects in a different medium. Moran, for example, is currently exploring the notion of atmosphere, the dual notion of the tangible (the air in a place) and the intangible (the 'feeling' of the place).

What is particularly striking about *Inversion/was the nook warm?* is how it embodies so much of the ethos of NnRHA. Harty and Moran had one meeting with the tenants to explain what they hoped to do, but from then on, participation in their project was a matter of personal choice. In discussion with Harty, Moran and Solon, it was clear to me that the notion of putting people into categories is anathema to them, and the idea of a group not far behind. As Harty points out, very often people are put into groups on the basis of what we see as being ‘wrong with them’: they are physically disabled, they are mentally challenged – they are old. It’s true that one criterion for admittance to NnRHA is age (65 years or over), but once a person becomes a tenant, that’s as far as any classification goes. Look into the Tea Rooms, Solon suggests, and identify the tenants. Impossible, because the Tea Rooms are open to everyone. Join the Bridge Club in the Community Centre. Chances are none of the members is an NnRHA tenant, because the Community Centre does what it says on the tin – it provides a place for the people of Naas to meet. Individuality is even reflected in the physical environment, as no two apartments in the housing complex are exactly the same.

As part of the commitment which gained them the Arts Council funding, Harty and Moran have promised to create awareness around architecture. As President Higgins put it, “architecture is not...[simply] functional”<sup>7</sup>. But, Harty explains, the word ‘architecture’ can be daunting and indeed even that overworked term ‘space’ can be off-putting. However, when she asks, “What do you think of when you think of home?”, the answer often relates to the physical environment. “I used to go under the table...”, “We had a bay window where we kept...”. She points out that for the new tenants, the move to Nás na Ríogh involves a re-adjustment to the space around them. Their favourite armchair can’t be placed at the same angle to the television; the head of the bed is now to the left of the door; the light from the window no longer falls on the rug in quite the same way. This change of scale and orientation adds, Harty feels, new layers to the narrative between the old and the new that she and Moran are attempting to capture and archive not just for current tenants but for future ones.

This provides a nice segue into the notion of intergenerationality, another point of crossover between Nás na Ríogh and *Inversion/was the nook warm?*. Examples of intergenerationality abound in the NnRHA buildings: the combination of the old and the new in the (carefully chosen) fittings throughout; the old photos of Naas donated by a local person and framed by local school pupils; the tapestry worked on a loom by people from 7 years of age to eighty-five. But if anything expresses this concept succinctly, it is the image *Dawn Light* from the *Luisne* project where an exchange is taking place between the older man and the young girl: it is not clear who is giving and who is receiving – intergenerationality is a two-way process. (Note: 2012 is the European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity Between Generations<sup>8</sup>).

Though it is not an expressed aim of their project, Harty and Moran would like to think that remembering and re-visiting the old and re-viewing and re-appraising the new will be a positive experience for those tenants who engage in it. Again, there is a parallel to be found between their aspiration and Solon’s, for whom stimulus of mind and body is a human right. Too often, she feels, the focus with older people is on keeping the body alive, more than the mind and the senses. Indeed, to return to the theme of movable and immovable in relation to body and mind, we tend to consider the body as the moving element and the mind as the fixed, but often, especially as we get older or infirm, the balance shifts, but is not necessarily allowed for.

It is important therefore that our physical environment provide opportunities for both body and mind to be stimulated, and we don't have to look far for an example in Nás na Ríogh. Along the walls of the reception area are paintings by a local art group. These are for sale and will be displayed for six weeks, after which another exhibition will be shown. Again, there are layers of motivation in this process. Apart from the stimulation that changing the visual environment on a regular basis ensures, it's also a way of bringing the external community and the NnRHA community together, a key element of Solon's vision.

Here too, *Inversion/was the nook warm?* reflects the Nás na Ríogh Housing Association ethos. Harty and Moran have many ideas about bringing the project into the wider community, through projected images or models in window displays, for example. Favourite items – a teddy bear, a piece of china – might be reproduced as a drawing on a shopping bag or as a keyring souvenir; texts and images might appear on a table cloth or placemats offered for sale in local shops. Other elements may be more 'formally' exploited as the basis for sculptural pieces for exhibition; when I visited Moran in her studio, she was in the process of developing a piece using paper inspired by an NnRHA tenant's pendulum clock.

*Inversion/was the nook warm?* is about finding in the mundane, the simple, the uneventful, that which is unique to each of the people involved, the objects they preserve, cherish, take for granted, and the environment, the four walls, the air, the light, in which they do so. It is about finding art in daily life and about bringing art to daily life. It is perhaps no exaggeration to suggest that Nás na Ríogh Housing Association is, in this sense, also a work of art, respecting and celebrating the individuals who live there. As Harty, Moran and Solon all were keen to emphasize, getting older doesn't mean we stop needing not just physically comfortable but visually pleasing and creatively stimulating surroundings. President Higgins clearly appreciated the fact that in Nás na Ríogh art is "at the heart of everything being done" and that everything that is provided is done "as if we were going to live there ourselves"<sup>9</sup>. Less is not enough, just because we are old.

Mary Catherine Nolan, August 2012

This essay was commissioned by Kildare Arts Service

#### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.NnRHA.ie/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/pdf/olderpersons.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.kfmradio.com/kfm-podcasting/kildare-today-podcasts/president-higgins-visits-naas>

<sup>4</sup> Funding for the project has been granted by:

- Engaging with Architecture Scheme 2012, supported by the Arts Council, Government Policy on Architecture Implementation Programme 2009-2015, and the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht. [http://www.artscouncil.ie//en/we\\_funded.aspx?fid=f8258e53-c983-45ac-bc0f-e43ce5e0e332&yyyy=2011](http://www.artscouncil.ie//en/we_funded.aspx?fid=f8258e53-c983-45ac-bc0f-e43ce5e0e332&yyyy=2011)
- Arts Act Grant Scheme 2011, Kildare Arts Service
- Nás na Ríogh, fundraising

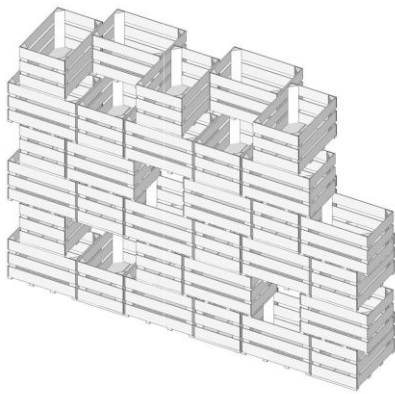
<sup>5</sup> Daniel Miller, *Home Possessions*, 2001, Berg: Oxford and New York

<sup>6</sup> Solon is very clear about the importance of language in reflecting, and forming, attitudes. She speaks always of the 'tenants', never of the 'residents'. The Nás na Ríogh Housing Association, she points out, is the landlord and the people living there are independent tenants with all the freedoms that status entails. This is not a 'sheltered housing' project, and indeed one of the things that shock, initially, is that there is no onsite medical care. But, then, because of Solon's insistence that the project be located right in the heart of the town, any medical help required is close to hand. As she says, the Nás na Ríogh Housing Association "provides no care, but we care".

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.kfmradio.com/kfm-podcasting/kildare-today-podcasts/president-higgins-visits-naas>

<sup>8</sup> <http://europa.eu/ey2012/>

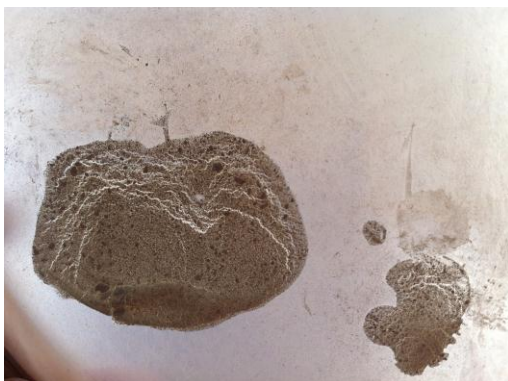
<sup>9</sup> <http://www.kfmradio.com/kfm-podcasting/kildare-today-podcasts/president-higgins-visits-naas>



*Boxes*

Line Drawing

Credit: Laura Harty



*Everything that ever happened is here*

A translation of images recorded through a microscope, mixed media

Credit: Jennie Moran



*Dawn Light*

From the *Luisne* Project, NnRHA

Credit: Emma Birkett



*Re-weaving the tapestry of generations*

Credit: Tony G Murray



*A transformational President acknowledges a transformational project*

President Michael D Higgins visits Nás Na Ríogh Housing Association's development at McAuley Place, June 2012

Credit: Tony G Murray