

# Knots in Time: The Ghost Estates of Ireland's Celtic Tiger

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“The disaster ruins everything, all the while leaving everything intact.”<sup>1</sup>  
Maurice Blanchot

Irish-Swiss photographer Valerie Anex's photo series documenting Celtic Tiger<sup>2</sup> “Ghost Estates” presents a range of images, some of which are immediately identifiable as ruins, others not so, but even in this latter case there is conveyed a sense of deathliness; an aesthetic presentation of architecture as something untied to the conditions of contemporary life; unused by the living for the sake of life. In the series of Anex's images published as a part of the Slate article “A Stroll Through Ireland's Eerie Ghost Estates,”<sup>3</sup> the first few photographs depict houses with mown lawns. Together with this, the smooth, un-ruinous surfaces of the buildings depicted grant the houses a sense of recent life – a feeling that perhaps it was only recently that life left them. As ruins yet to decay, this architecture depicted is like a scene from a nightmare, where a peaceful suburb transforms through increasingly decomposed stages of appearance. In the early Ghost Estates of Anex's image series published in book form (pages 8-9, 10-11, 12-13)<sup>4</sup> there is an eeriness conveyed by the sense that people *should* be in these scenes, as the houses appear livable, and would be normal were signifiers of life such as bodies, cars, pets etc. not missing. As the photo series progresses (pages 28-29, 30-31, 32-33)<sup>5</sup> decay starts to set-in; time is read in the images, time marking distance since these houses were “alive” with occupation, even if they were in fact never lived in. While some images suggest that these Ghost Estates once were alive and are now dead, others depict such estates under construction, therefore yet to ever support life, becoming a kind of unborn ghost. Towards the end of Anex's series Ghost Estates truly start to ruin (pages 42-43, 68-69)<sup>6</sup> seeming to come from a possibly war-torn setting rather than one of economic crisis and speculative error. The series ends with images which juxtapose real estate renders against conditions of their failure (pages 75, 79);<sup>7</sup> on page 75 a banner is hung over the exposed blockwork wall of one of many abandoned constructions; on 79 the ultra-clean image ripples with the ageing of its material form. These last images serve the series with a temporal loop back to the origin of Ghost Estates as idyllic images rather than abandoned, decaying and decayed ones; these are images of architectural life rather than stillborns and corpses. This loop demonstrates the significance of architectural imagery to the world in which we live; the power

- 1 Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster* (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press), 11.
- 2 The “Celtic Tiger” refers to the Irish “boom” economy which existed from the mid-1990s until its crash in the late 2000s as a part of the Global Financial Crisis. The transformative effects of the rapid rise and harsh fall of this era have made the Celtic Tiger a major event in contemporary Irish history.
- 3 Jordan G. Teicher, “A Stroll Through Ireland's Eerie Ghost Estates,” *Slate*, August 10, 2014, <https://slate.com/culture/2014/08/valerie-anex-photographs-ghost-estates-in-ireland-in-her-series-ghost-estates.html>.
- 4 Valérie Anex, *Ghost Estates* (Geneva: Les Éditions d'Uqbar, 2013). Available as a digital publication on Issuu, the page numbers of which are those referenced here in-text: [https://issuu.com/ghost\\_estates/docs/ghost\\_estates\\_book\\_issuu/1](https://issuu.com/ghost_estates/docs/ghost_estates_book_issuu/1).
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Ibid.

of real<sup>8</sup> images to the understanding of societal crises, and the power of speculative images to processes which lead to such crises.

This essay explores the phenomenon of Irish Celtic Tiger boom-era “Ghost Estates”: housing developments left in ruin by the burst of the Irish housing bubble in the late 2000s:

“A ‘ghost estate’ — the term used extensively in the media and everyday discourse — is an extreme example of such an estate and was first coined by David McWilliams (2006). Following initial work by Kitchin et al. (2010), a ghost estate is generally accepted to be an estate of 10 or more housing units where 50% or more of units are either vacant or under construction. As of October 2011 there were 2,876 documented unfinished estates in Ireland, present in every county in the state, 777 of which met the criteria of a ‘ghost estate.’”<sup>9</sup>

Ghost Estate imagery is perhaps the most evocative of those associated with the Celtic Tiger. Ghost Estates have been the subject of many photographic series, documentaries, novels, and political advertisements. This has led these ruins and their images to become symbolic not only of the Irish boom-era and its crash, but of neoliberalism more broadly. This ideological valency held by Celtic Tiger Ghost Estates makes them an important point of interrogation in the question of how architecture and architectural aesthetics have processed the period, and how they relate to subsequent ideological attitudes towards Ireland’s enduring housing crisis. The phenomenon also raises deeper questions regarding ruins in relation to architecture, aesthetics, history, and concepts of time. The estates will be analyzed for their dual expression of the ephemeral and the permanent. Architectural ruins will also be shown to transmit multiple conceptions of time; in some ways as burdened by the future as they are by the past. By interrogating this recent history of Ghost Estates in light of the deeper cultural history of the architectural ruin, the article examines how this contemporary phenomenon reveals or disrupts the narrative structure of neoliberal progress, and how architecture contributes to aesthetic conceptions and images of time.

### Neoliberalism, Post-Politics and the Present

In the 2010 article “A Haunted Landscape: Housing and Ghost Estates in Post-Celtic Tiger Ireland” by Rob Kitchin, Justin Gleeson, Karen Keaveny and Cian O’Callaghan, the phenomena of Ghost Estates are described as an effect of “the de-coupling of housing development from any sort of realistic demographic projections”;<sup>10</sup> a symptom of the Celtic Tiger’s pervasive planning failures – failures associated with the general recklessness of neoliberal deregulation:

“As well as a catastrophic failure in Ireland’s banking and financial regulatory system, there has been a catastrophic failure of the planning system at all scales. Planning should have acted as the counter-balance to the excessive pressures for development, working for the common good to produce sustainable patterns of residential and commercial property. Instead, both fiscal and planning policy formation, implementation and regulation were overtly shaped by the neoliberal policies adopted by the state, particularly in the period from 1997 onwards. During this time, the government pursued a neoliberal agenda of promoting the free market, minimizing regulation, privatizing public goods, and keeping direct taxes low and indirect taxes high, framed within a political system in which localism, clientelism, and cronyism existed to varying extents across the modes and scales of governance.”<sup>11</sup>

8 “Real” here meaning an actually built, physical architecture.

9 Rob Kitchin, Justin Gleeson, and Cian O’Callaghan, “The New Ruins of Ireland: Unfinished Estates in the Post-Celtic Tiger Era,” (*NIRSA International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* no. 38 (April 2014): 1072.

10 Rob Kitchin, Justin Gleeson, Karen Keaveney, and Cian O’Callaghan, “A Haunted Landscape: Housing Ghost Estates in Post-Celtic Tiger Ireland,” (*NIRSA Working Paper Series* no. 59 (July 2010): 56.

11 *Ibid.*: 2.

The ubiquitous and often imprecise use of “neoliberal” as a cultural and ideological term, as opposed to a technical economic one, is both a difficulty and an opportunity – the opportunity arising from the fact that the ubiquitous use of the term points to its cultural synonymity with contemporary Liberal Democracy and therefore the “present” as an ideological construct. Neoliberalism is generally understood as the dominant ideological, political and economic force which replaced the Keynesian welfare-state as the hegemonic model for Liberal Democracy. The adjacent term of “Post-politics” refers to the ideological era of neoliberal dominance following the end of the Cold War – a period from early 1990s on when Liberal Democracy was perceived as unchallenged on the global stage, with a move towards “consensus” between the major political parties of the western world. This era of ideological consensus saw a still familiar competition between forces such as the American Democratic and Republican parties or British Conservative and Labour parties each pursuing marketisation or “pro-business” platforms – distinctions which, to the generally Marxist commentary of those associated with the critique of consensus and post-politics, are not genuine political differences but rather nuanced administrative distinctions, which have increasingly relied on cultural signifiers for branding.<sup>12</sup> In the context of Ireland and Ghost Estates the post-political is addressed by Cian O’Callaghan, Mark Boyle and Rob Kitchin in the article “Post-politics, crisis, and Ireland’s ‘ghost estates’” published by *Political Geography* in 2014. The article, published just as Ireland began to recover from recession, frames the euphorically neoliberal Celtic Tiger era within the discourse of post-politics via Jacques Rancière, Slavoj Žižek, Chantal Mouffe, and Alain Badiou, arguing that the Irish two-party system of Fianna Fail vs. Fine Gael had been exemplary of neoliberal consensus and focus on nuance rather than genuine political opposition,<sup>13</sup> a consensus now shaken in the western world by the resurgence of right and left populism, visible in Ireland with Sinn Féin’s successes in the late 2010s and early 2020s. O’Callaghan, Boyle and Kitchin argue that ghost estate images serve a disruptive role in terms of Rancière’s politics of aesthetics – images of housing ruins serve to fracture neoliberal symbolic order. The article also invokes Walter Benjamin to consider the temporal relations and conditions of this “fracture,” leading back to Benjamin’s *Theses on the Philosophy of History* and its critique of the conceptualization of the present<sup>14</sup> as a utopian space – that is to say, the concept of the present as a space in time which has progressed on from the past’s various atrocities and is therefore clearly superior to it. This utopianism manifests itself through phrases like “how could *this* be happening *now*?”; *this* referring to things such as symmetrical warfare in Europe, slavery, racial violence, far-right or far-left resurgences etc. The ideological response to such faults in the present constructs an equivalence between economy and time – the economic underdevelopment of a nation, region or continent equates an underdevelopment of time itself – these places are simply further behind on history’s linear path, or a stuck on it, or travelling backwards; narratives of time likely to match phases of growth, stagnation and recession or depression. When a rupture in the present occurs in a place that is, by developed-world consensus, at the front of history (or not far behind it), the answer isn’t so simple.

In order to fully comprehend the temporal effects and implications of Irish Ghost Estates as images, the neoliberal “present” as an unstable ideological and historical construct must be understood: what are the edges of our present, how is this present framed by a symbolic order, and how do Ghost Estates promote or reject this order?

For an individual, it’s hard to avoid a view of the present as something which includes a portion of both history and future. To refer to one’s life “at present” is likely a referral to a portion of time that has passed (yesterday, last week, last year, the last three years) as well as to a portion of the future in which the general conditions of the present are expected to continue without radical alteration. For an individual, the personal-present is the space between a past seismic

12 Perhaps most obvious in North America.

13 Cian O’Callaghan, Mark Boyle, and Rob Kitchin, “Post-politics, crisis, and Ireland’s ‘ghost estates,’” *Political Geography* 42 (September 2014): 121-133.

14 Notably written prior to both neoliberal and Keynesian histories.

event (a graduation, a new job or job loss, marriage, birth of a child, a pandemic, a war etc.) and one expected in the future – hopefully or fearfully – which will be equally or more seriously life-changing than the last.

The collective “present” is of course an incredibly nebulous field of time – it’s an ideological image of history with contradictions, inconsistencies and frayed edges.<sup>15</sup> The neoliberal post-political present or “end-of-history” as theorized and popularized by Francis Fukuyama’s 1992 book *The End of History and the Last Man*, was originally marked by the collapse of the Soviet Union from 1988-1991, and therefore the end of the global ideological binary of Soviet-led Communism and American-led Liberal Democracy, with Liberal Democracy proving itself as universally superior to all other political projects. Even potential “re-starts” to history such as Al Qaeda’s attack on the World Trade Center and the subsequent War on Terror were argued as an affirmation of global post-political hegemony by Slavoj Žižek in *Welcome to the Desert of the Real: Five Essays on September 11* (2002).<sup>16</sup> Further ruptures in the neoliberal present occurred with the Global Financial Crisis (the rupture which Ghost Estates are a part of) and the waves of political activity that it directly or indirectly generated. As the recession eventually ebbed, the Obama Administration came to be seen by the left as a force of neoliberal continuity, a sentiment illustrated for example by Tariq Ali’s 2011 book *The Obama Syndrome: Surrender at Home, War Abroad*. The eventual left and right reactions to consensus politics in the western world were most visible in the campaigns of Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump in North America, Marine le Pen in France, Jeremy Corbyn in the UK, and Sinn Fein in the Republic of Ireland – with the victories of Joe Biden (2020), Keir Starmer (2020 takeover of the leadership of the British Labour Party), and Emmanuel Macron (2017, 2022) frequently reported as victories of normalcy and order<sup>17</sup> (to different extents, with various compromises).

### The End of Neoliberalism?

There has been much talk about the “end” of neoliberalism. This discourse has often taken the form of theorization or speculation as to what the “next” “present” is: both McKenzie Wark’s 2019 book *Capital is Dead: Is This Something Worse?* And Yanis Varoufakis’s reference to terms such as “Techno-Feudalism”<sup>18</sup> speak to an argument that capitalism has already morphed in at least nuanced but perhaps even extreme ways beyond the banalised term of “neoliberalism.” The question of neoliberalism’s end does however often take on a more optimistic attitude through reportage, such as in Jacobin Mag’s “Neoliberalism Has Finally Reached the End of the Road,”<sup>19</sup>

15 A problem with the above point arises when the history of neoliberalism is taken more seriously: the neoliberal erosion of the Keynesian era pre-dated the collapse of the Soviet Union, in which case, “the present” as framed as beginning in the early 1990s, travelling endlessly into the future, is specifically the “post-political” age of neoliberalism.

16 Across pages 10 and 11 Žižek states, “...the Colin Powell doctrine of warfare with no casualties (on our side, of course) as warfare without warfare, the contemporary redefinition of politics as the art of expert administration, that is, as politics without politics...”. Despite being published before the attack on the World Trade Center, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s 2000 book *Empire* provided a similar argument in which the ideologically totalizing global “Empire” of American-led corporate power frames its enemies as terrorists and criminals – terms which, within the history of the War or Terror and War on Drugs, came to connote an othering of such enemies to a status below or outside of civilized political subjectivity.

17 The (ongoing) 2020 Coronavirus Pandemic served as another chasm in time, another challenge to the present, with major discourses taking the form of discussion as to how, when, and if a “return” to normalcy was possible, and to what extent this “return” would be to the present versus an edited present; a modified, updated, compromised, “new” one.

18 Yanis Varoufakis, “Techno Feudalism is Taking Over,” *Project Syndicate*, June 28, 2021, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/techno-feudalism-replacing-market-capitalism-by-yanis-varoufakis-2021-06>.

19 Cédric Durand, “Neoliberalism Has Finally Reached the End of the Road”, interview by Daniel Finn, *Jacobin Mag*, March 21, 2022, <https://jacobin.com/2022/03/neoliberalism-state-economic-policy-monetary-pandemic-inflation; Varoufakis, “Techno Feudalism.”>

“The end of neoliberalism? Why the current crisis is different to 1989, 2001 and 2008”<sup>20</sup> in the London School of Economics blog, “The age of neoliberalism is ending in America. What will replace it?”<sup>21</sup> in *The Guardian*, “The neoliberal era is ending, What comes next?”<sup>22</sup> in *The Correspondent*, and “From COVID-19 to the End of Neoliberalism.”<sup>23</sup> This widely asked question of if, when and how the neoliberal era – which is also to say, the present – is ending, reveals the difficulty of comprehending history at close range, which is also the problem of understanding the recent past and “present” historically. What this end-of-neoliberalism discourse does tell us affirmatively is that “the present” is unstable and indeed shifting, but while this wave of thought may in the future be read within the context of our neoliberal present’s wavering tail-end, this is only something that time is capable of proving.

### Irish Neoliberalism

The Irish neoliberal present is framed similarly to the End of History: it begins in the mid-90s and is roaring by the 2000s (1993-2007). The Global Financial Crisis triggered the death of the Celtic Tiger, and therefore ended “the end of Irish history.” However, to the dismay of those active in the political unrest which responded to the GFC, this crisis did not prove to be neoliberalism’s global endpoint, with Ireland’s economic recovery in the early 2010s or “Celtic Phoenix” illustrating the sense of continuity that American political commentators saw between the Bush and Obama Administrations – the neoliberal post-political order had pushed through the crisis without dying, in Dublin reinventing itself under the guise of “The Silicon Valley of Europe.”

Part of the significance of Ghost Estates in Ireland is that they produce a historical malaise – not just one based in the economic trauma of the Celtic Tiger’s crash as an isolated event, but rather one which contemplates the reality of that crash against the narrative of continuity produced by the entrepreneurial Celtic Phoenix, Silicon Valley of Europe, housing-crisis present – it is a malaise suggesting that lessons of reckless deregulation were not learned, that history will repeat, and that the poor will suffer the worst from the consequences.

### Ghost Estate Ruins: Past, Present, and Future

Architecture’s political and aesthetic integration into neoliberal social order has been written on widely through book-length studies such as collection edited by Mike Davis and Daniel Bertrand Monk, *Evil Paradises: Dreamworlds of Neoliberalism* (2008), Douglas Spencer’s *The Architecture of Neoliberalism: How Contemporary Architecture Became an Instrument of Control and Compliance* (2016), and *Neoliberalism on the Ground: Architecture and Transformation from the 1960s to the Present* edited by Kenny Cupers, Helena Mattsson and Catharina Gabrielsson. Existing discourse on neoliberal ruins can be found in Martino Stierli’s article “Hollow Gigantism: Tom Seidel’s Images of Dubai,” which analyses the photographer’s documentation of Dubai architectures halted by the Global Financial Crisis – images often similar to Ghost Estate documentation in Ireland.

In light of the previously discussed and enduring neoliberal “present,” Ghost Estates in a fairly obvious sense serve as symbolic glitches or wounds in neoliberalism’s “distribution of the

20 Luke Cooper, “The end of neoliberalism? Why the current crisis is different to 1989, 2001 and 2008,” *London School of Economics Blog*, June 24, 2020, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/covid19/2020/06/24/the-end-of-neoliberalism-why-the-current-crisis-is-different-to-1989-2001-and-2008/>.

21 Gary Gerstle, “The age of neoliberalism is ending in America. What will replace it?” *The Guardian*, June 28, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/jun/28/age-of-neoliberalism-biden-trump>.

22 Rutger Bregman, “The neoliberal era is ending. What comes next?” *The Correspondent*, May 14, 2020, <https://thecorrespondent.com/466/the-neoliberal-era-is-ending-what-comes-next>.

23 Alfredo Saad-Filho, “From COVID-19 to the End of Neoliberalism,” *Critical Sociology* 46, no. 4–5 (July 2020): 477–85, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0896920520929966>.

sensible”; these ruins, in their continued physical existence and wide circulation as images reify and illustrate economic contradiction – rhetorically, they summarize Ireland’s enduring housing crisis. This absurd contradiction of an excess of large yet generally unlivable (due to ruination and separation from infrastructure) and unsellable (due to the former condition) houses simultaneous to a massive demand for housing, makes ghost estate imageries ones in which architecture becomes symbolic of market contradictions. In this sense, the term “Ghost Estate” takes on a particular meaning with emphasis on the word “ghost”: these buildings and their imagery “haunt” the present with signifiers of the dead Celtic Tiger era.

However, these Ghost Estates and their imageries are not resigned to this singular symbolic function, as these ruins, perhaps as with ruins in general, wear complex relations to time beyond “the present,” which makes them fundamentally ambiguous — an ambiguity spoken to by Stierli in his aforementioned article, “The half-finished objects hover in curious limbo between the desire to be completed and the state of anticipated ruins.”<sup>24</sup> To explore the complex temporal relations of these ruins – within the context of neoliberal presentism – is to consider the terms of permanence and ephemerality as embedded in architectural form.

In contemplating the temporal nature of Ghost Estates, especially from an historical perspective, the obstacle of the present once again arises, as it does in considering neoliberalism; how can history be written from such close range? This problem, which is the problem of historically analyzing an enduring phenomenon (which began in 2007 approximately) – which ideologically came out of the same “present” as “now” – may also be a conceptual opportunity, as this impasse of the present may make Ghost Estate ruins more powerful as tools of speculation rather than reflection. This observation links to another: that the intrigue of ruins (which in Benjamin is allegorical as opposed to symbolic) is that they invoke imaginative speculation: what was the past that could have been? What was the present that’s not taking place? What can these fragments tell us of our future? Such questions are reminiscent of David Lowenthal’s comparison, in *The Past is a Foreign Country*, between the past and future as places that our imaginations, in the present, are unable to avoid. While Ghost Estate housing ruins are descriptably somber or grave – metaphorically evocative of the death and decay of human bodies (as perhaps ruins always are<sup>25</sup>) – they are also perhaps more likely to conjure positive images of the past than dark ones, as even in the case of Ghost Estates that were not fully completed or were never inhabited, the apocalyptic aesthetic with which they’re photographed makes an imagined past where people lived normally, even happily – an image of life which is the negative of that depicted. This kind of imagined idyllic past as produced by ruins is often encountered in apocalypse fiction, where nomadic protagonists wander violently through a collapsed civilization, with ruins, especially residential ones, triggering a utopian vision of the past; the past before the apocalypse was utopian because it was not apocalyptic. This positive sense of a lost paradise is encouraged, in the case of Ghost Estate photography, by the juxtaposition of real estate imagery and ruins; these image comparisons can be thought of not just as a message for what went wrong, but also what was lost, what could have been.

In Naomi Stead’s article “The Value of Ruins: Allegories of Destruction in Benjamin and Speer”, Speer’s intended deployment of “ruin value” is framed as a champion of ruins-as-symbols as opposed to Benjamin’s ruins-as-allegories, with Nazi ruins, as with Greco-Roman ruins, symbolic of the grandeur of a past civilization which echoes throughout time via a caricature of Nietzsche’s “Eternal Return.” While Speer’s symbolic ruins or ruinous symbols were in a sense highly preoccupied with the future, this future was an endless or at least endlessly reinvented present:

24 O’Callaghan, “Post-politics”: 121-133.

25 As Svetlana Boym wrote in her article “Ruinophilia: Appreciation of Ruins”: “Vertebrae and carcasses overlap in the double vision of ruins. Ruins embody anxieties about human aging, commemorating our cultural endeavours and their failures. Joseph Brodsky once compared his ruined teeth to the Parthenon; while the comparison does not do justice either to the classical ruins or to the bad teeth of Leningrad, it captures poetically their uncanny symmetry.”

“The notion of the isolated image ‘blasted out of the continuum of history’ reoccurs throughout Benjamin’s philosophy of history, reflecting a central tenet of historical materialism, that the past is constructed by the present, and must therefore be read in and through that present. Different interpretations of history would thus result from changing modes of perception brought about by the effects of new technology. Speer’s Law of Ruins is predicated on exactly the opposite premise - since his ruins are designed to ‘inspire’ subjects a thousand years in the future with the same aesthetic affect he admires in the present, they are predicated on the belief that the citizens of the future will be no different from those of his own time.”<sup>26</sup>

In turning towards the relationship of Ghost Estate ruins to the future – or rather, how Ghost Estate ruins produce contemplation of the future – one symbolic role is obvious: they produce an apocalyptic yet literal, concrete image of how the present might end: in crisis, in ruin. For such a future event to actually end the present though, it could not be followed by anything like the “Celtic Phoenix” or “Silicon Valley of Europe.”

### Ghost Estate Images as Neoliberal Ideology

Part of the intrigue and complexity of Ghost Estates and their imageries is the fact they can be used to illustrate opposing arguments. While the relation of Valerie Anex’s images to a critique of Irish neoliberalism has been stated, the way in which Ghost Estate imageries may be used to reinvigorate or defend neoliberal ideology must also be contemplated. In “Post-politics, crisis, and Ireland’s ‘ghost estates’” O’Callaghan, Boyle and Kitchin state,

“The ‘ghost estate’ was a powerful political symbol because it linked the abstract machinations of capital to the level of everyday reality. But for these same reasons, the ‘ghost estate’ became a potent tool in the service of neoliberal ideology, by linking the narrative of ‘excess’ to the individual ‘consumer’. Thus, individual homeowners were encouraged to feel a sense of personal responsibility for having bought into the property bubble, therefore contributing to the crisis: ‘we’ were all guilty of ‘enjoying the market too much’, ‘we all partied.’ It was precisely because the crisis in Ireland was bound up in a property bubble driven by personal indebtedness (Murphy & Scott, 2013; Norris & Brooke, 2011), and because the icon of the crash, the ‘ghost estate,’ was a symbol of ordinary life, that the narrative of excess was internalized rather than collectivized.”<sup>27</sup>

This narrative of “excess” which individualizes and de-systemizes guilt and culpability is perhaps best exemplified by the ridicule of “McMansions.” McMansions (or “Muck Mansions” in Ireland) are a building type synonymous with vulgarity. The vulgarity of the McMansion can be immediately read through architectural style – or rather, the corruption of style or its ineloquence in the extreme. McMansions are popular subjects of aesthetic ridicule on platforms like “McMansion Hell,”<sup>28</sup> well-known for meme-like diagrams comically deconstructing incorrect architectural grammar, which of course includes a Celtic Tiger-themed suite of attacks.<sup>29</sup> In Ireland there is also a subgenre of McMansion-bashing aimed at Traveller communities, typically published by tabloids; a parallel to the targeting of Roma mansions in continental Europe. The architectural vulgarity of the McMansion comes with social implications, ones which are often raised in critiques of McMansion-bashing, which speak to the class politics of such aesthetic criticism. These implications can be summarized as a) the pointing out of stylistic incorrections by the sort of aesthetes who might follow McMansion

26 Naomi Stead, “The value of ruins: Allegories of destruction in Benjamin and Speer,” *Form/work : An Interdisciplinary Journal of Design and the Built Environment* vol. 6 (2003): 6; Kitchin, “A Haunted Landscape”: 56.

27 O’Callaghan, “Post-politics”: 131.

28 “Mc Mansion Hell: Ireland Edition,” accessed September 2, 2022, <https://mcmansionhell.com/post/157457285986/mcmansion-hell-ireland-edition>.

29 *Ibid.*

Hell logically leads to belief that there's a correct, unvulgarian way to make mansions (as McMansion Hell admits to by comparing right and wrong ones), and that therefore, there's nothing inherently wrong with mansions as a building type from a social perspective that might otherwise see extremely large detached dwellings as inherently problematic in relation to economic inequality and environmental sustainability, regardless of whether the dwelling's designed by a notable architect or by one's untrained self or cousin, and b) following on from the previous point, this purely aesthetic criticism of McMansions is simultaneously a criticism of their nouveau riche owners as vulgarian in a broader sense. In the context of the crash of the Celtic Tiger and its aftermath, this aesthetic critique of McMansions – a type to which many Ghost Estates belong – plays a role in neoliberal ideology by individualizing blame and directing it at foolish consumers who knew not how to be wealthy. The relationship of Ghost Estate imagery to Irish neoliberalism is clearly neither solely critical nor ideologically reproductive; Ghost Estate images simultaneously de- and re-establish the present's symbolic order. This multivalent position makes them an important phenomenon in the history of the Celtic Tiger, illuminating the value of aesthetics as a tool with which to access political and economic processes through their artefacts.

### Permanence and Ephemerality

To contemplate photographic imagery is to consider the permanent and the ephemeral; the permanence of the moment frozen in time by the photographic device, the ephemeral of that which the capture reflects, time ongoing, unrestrained by the frozen image or permanent moment. Ghost Estates have an ephemerality defined by their place in their physical world, their subjugation to the kinds of decay documented in moments by Anex, their submission to demolition, perhaps even to repair. As images, Ghost Estates are given a sense of permanence, they are fossils of the Celtic Tiger as an historical period; an historical construct. In this sense Ghost Estate images remain bound to the present, used both for its critique as well as its justification.

The way in which the neoliberal present has been framed as permanent has been established: the neoliberal post-political order is one through which the present is framed as permanent, a ship which passes through ephemeral crises (political, economic or environmental) like storms, with hopes that the worst of consequences will be the re-bracing of the normal for the sake of a “new normal.” Ghost Estate ruins suggest the ephemerality of the present. But ruins evoke both permanence and ephemerality; the life of architecture is fleeting, but its remnants may be permanent, even if only in some trace form that continuously withers away.

The present is unstable, as is post-political neoliberalism (both as something advocated for and as something critiqued) – they are unstable in terms of their diagrammatic ideological concepts of history, and the complex and contradictory material histories and realities which these diagrams cannot possibly draw with accuracy. Ghost Estate imageries are moments in which these instabilities are made powerfully manifest; their ambiguity, which is produced by the fact that they are not remnants of a lost world but rather those of the present one, is necessarily complex, as their historical implications are not yet known. In our attempts to imagine what these contemporary ruins might evoke if they last long enough to become ruins proper – that is, ruins from a time fundamentally distinct from the present in which they were produced – it is almost as if we are being transmitted fragments from the future, from a future present outside of this one; the contradiction of these ruins is both economic and temporal.

Ghost Estates are temporarily complex because the “present” in which they exist, like any other “present,” is subject to slow yet extremely complex tectonic shifts which require historical distance for true comprehension. Ruins are maybe not so concerned with symbolic representation of the present's eventual fate, but rather with the complexity of the present which exceeds the power of symbols. Ghost Estates are a temporal knot, the implications of which are



Fig. 1: Ghost Estate near Bridgetown South, County Wexford, April 2012

yet to be known; yet to be energized by history. The military ruins studied by Paul Virilio in *Bunker Archaeology* for example, ultimately became historical markers for the obsolescence of purely flat or “horizontal”<sup>30</sup> territorial warfare,

“...from the Roman *limes* to the Great Wall of China; the bunkers, as ultimate military surface architecture, had shipwrecked at lands’ limits, at the precise moment of the sky’s arrival in war. . . . From then on, there was no more protective expanse or distance, all territory was totally accessible, everything was immediately exposed to the gaze and to destruction.”<sup>31</sup>

In considering Virilio’s well-known use of Aristotle’s proposition, “the accident reveals the substance” to arrive at the substance as,

“... equally invention of the ‘accident.’ The shipwreck is consequently the ‘futurist’ invention of the ship, and the air crash the invention of the supersonic airliner, just as the Chernobyl meltdown is the invention of the nuclear power station.”<sup>32</sup>

It may follow then that architecture and ruin are irreversibly embedded in one another, but whatever it is that neoliberal housing ruins may “invent” is not yet clear. This mutual embedment may be best illustrated by one of Valerie Anex’s photographs which portrays the raw concrete blockwork wall of a ghost estate from which an advertising image of what the estate was supposed to be is hung. This image shows large white suburban houses, expensive cars, nuclear families and well-mown dark green grass, an image of idyllically normal suburbia. In this particular photograph, “normal” suburbia and ruined suburbia are displayed together as a diptych – the former as two-dimensional propaganda, the latter as reality. But in all of Anex’s photographs, and perhaps also in all photography of ghost estates, these senses of the normal and the ruinous are always simultaneously at play – the ruin always maintains some trace of the normal; it evokes the normal through loss and decay – and the normal is always ridden with the potential for ruination, brought forth by some little apocalypse.

30 Developing on from Virilio’s work, Benjamin Bratton’s 2016 book *The Stack: On Software and Sovereignty* focuses specifically on the techno-political shift from “horizontal” to “vertical” dimensions of geo-political governance.

31 Paul Virilio, *Bunker Archaeology* (New Jersey: Princeton Architectural Press, 2009), 12.

32 Paul Virilio, *The Original Accident* (Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley, 2005), 5.

## Questions for History

Celtic Tiger Ghost Estates as architectural and historical subjects also bring into question the relations between intertwined histories, primarily those of architecture with economics, politics and ideology, which could be summarized together within a history of capitalism. Ghost Estates are an example of capitalism's history in which architectural objects, produced by political and economic contradiction and failure, are inseparable from any comprehensive understanding of such crises. This is due in particular to the fact that the architectural imagery of Ghost Estates was perhaps the clearest or most powerful of ways that the abstraction of the Celtic Tiger's crash was reified aesthetically – made immediately understandable in an image. The pervasiveness of Ghost Estates throughout cultural reflections on the Celtic Tiger, as well as in the Irish media, including the use of Ghost Estate images for the sake of political propaganda, reveals the journey of architecture from a place of pure financial speculation back into culture and ideology, a journey suggesting that the history of architectural objects and images is one which can reveal much about historical forces “beyond” architecture and aesthetics, but these revelations would be impossible in absence of an architectural and aesthetic inquiry.

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