Using old farm buildings for transmitting vernacular traditions in Ireland

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ABSTRACT: This paper explores, through the experience of administering a farm building repair grant scheme, how a State authority could support a vernacular tradition. Irish traditional farm buildings are the cultural expression of 'the ordinary people'. They were often self-built using available resources, and are considered 'vernacular' for this reason. This paper addresses whether state grant aid supports or undermines the autonomy and vitality of a vernacular building tradition and how to address the issues of agency whilst supporting that tradition. It will describe how effort invested in communication between key parties makes vernacular skills transmission possible, and a positive values-changing process.

1 INTRODUCTION

The Heritage Council is a national public body whose remit is to provide advice and support to government, civil society and the public about cultural and natural heritage, and to support heritage conservation through grant funding, including and especially in allocating small-scale grants for minimum intervention repair and maintenance works to buildings. The traditional farm buildings grant scheme is run by the Heritage Council in partnership with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, as part of the Rural Environmental Protection Scheme (REPS). It sets out to protect the 'ordinary' buildings used in agriculture, on the basis that these buildings add value to the landscape of Ireland.

2 ICOMOS' APPROACH TO VERNACULAR HERITAGE

The ICOMOS Charter of the Built Vernacular Heritage provides a clear description of a set of discrete qualities that ordinary buildings might possess[i]. But there is an irony in this precise and thorough definition – it could not have emerged unprompted from within an unselfconscious vernacular tradition. Instead, it comes from the reflective and self-conscious world of ideas, of architectural expertise, of the global consciousness of ICOMOS and international reviews, shared understandings and insights. It is the outside view of the expert.

In particular, the provisions regarding training rely heavily on the expert-technical paradigm:

"In order to conserve the cultural values of vernacular expression, governments, responsible authorities, groups and organisations must place emphasis on the following:

- *Educational programmes for conservators in the principles of the vernacular*
- *Training programmes to assist communities in maintaining programmes to assist communities in maintaining traditional building systems, materials and craft skills;*
- *Information programmes which improve public awareness of the vernacular, especially amongst the younger generation; and*
- *Regional networks on vernacular architecture to exchange expertise and experiences"*

In these clauses relating to the transmission of a vernacular tradition of building, the Charter, alas, assumes that vernacular building is a style of architecture, rather than something which might be found to have its own internal life and autonomy. Ireland is fortunate enough to host building traditions that remain independent of the world of governance, regulation and ideas – perhaps a relic of recent historical experiences where resilience, self-sufficiency and sustainable exploitation of the resources to hand, were a matter of life and death. In accordance with the Nara Document on Authenticity, we accept these local traditions of conservation and reuse.

3 HERITAGE COUNCIL'S EXPERIENCE

The ironies manifest themselves in reflecting on the Heritage Council's experience of sustaining Irish vernacular traditions. The conventional methods of the expert – to implement 'good practice', to provide specifications, to insist on conditions, or accredited training, to refer to international charters - indeed, to apply any standards at all that come from outside the community - to 'lead' a 'project'; all these, to some degree, distort, or do a disservice to, the quintessential nature and defining characteristics of the vernacular heritage that we set out to conserve. To be a true or living vernacular tradition, it ought to be possessed by a community, and its methods, and future evolution, belong to those who hold the tradition. The appropriate role of the expert in relation to the maintenance of vernacular traditions might be to tiptoe quietly away!

In Ireland, vernacular built heritage is practically synonymous with thatched roofed houses, or 'cottages'. They play a central role in the symbolic self-understanding of Irish people as rural, self-sufficient, and resourceful. The Heritage Council's experience of supporting this tradition by the provision of grant aid for repairs for thatched roofs permitted us to develop an understanding of some of the dilemmas and compromises involved in translating international principles into practical locally-relevant support. We imposed conditions with grant-aid to achieve defined standards and objectives. Much was achieved through the use of on-site negotiations between inspectors, thatchers and grantees, in broad conformity with the spirit of the charter. However, we recognised several trends that diverged from the Charter's conception of 'good practice' in this field.

Firstly, grant support accelerated the professionalisation of the craft of thatching. We participated in setting up a craft training scheme for thatchers in partnership with the State training agency, FÁS. This led towards standardisation and away from the informal transmission of traditional expertise (point 1a in the Charter), displacing the traditional apprenticeship tradition, and the one-to-one relationships that sustained regional variations in technique.

Secondly, in the agreement of specifications of the repairs for individual roofs, the expert approach, in relying on an archaeological and regional correctness, tended to stifle innovation. This evidence basis for specification – very methodical, scientific, logical and conforming to approved conservation practice – prevented development of personal technique by individual thatchers, and ultimately living and evolving regional 'styles'. This imposed on the community (of thatchers) a 'manner of building' that wasn't necessarily theirs (1(a) & 1(d) in the Charter).

And finally, the availability of grant aid frequently prompted applicants and their thatchers to re-thatch a roof in its entirety, where patch repair may have been all that was required; this would have demanded less resources and conformed to the principle of 'minimum intervention'.

4 THE TRADITIONAL FARM BUILDINGS GRANT SCHEME

This scheme had a different starting point. To begin with, its funding source is in an agricultural measure to protect the environment – the Rural Environmental Protection Scheme (REPS) – and the buildings have to be in agricultural use. The recognition of these buildings as being worthy of support in the environmental protection context is ground-breaking; the grant scheme was conceived of, and valorised as, a contribution to the conservation of the Irish rural landscape character through their repair. Built in traditional construction methods, of stone bound with lime mortar, with slated or corrugated iron roofs, and rustic timber windows and doors, the low-key building volumes asserted the human presence in the landscape, harmonised over time with their settings.

In devising the detailed aims for the scheme, we set out to encourage the owners of the buildings to carry out their own repairs. Farm buildings, by definition, are not for human habitation. This enlarges the scope for essaying with traditional building techniques, as the stakes are lower. Farmers are practical, 'hands on' and self-reliant people, adept at utilising the materials to hand to solve problems. They could experiment with, and absorb, the conservation skills related to the repair of these relatively simple buildings within their own farmyard. These skills would then be available locally for other buildings, on- and off – farms, and could provide the farmer with the opportunity to engage in further income-generating activity. Accordingly, the scheme application forms allows the project's costings to be expressed in two ways – the conventional builder's estimate, and, as an alternative, an 'own labour and materials' estimate.

The scheme is aimed at getting farmers to put a cultural value on their buildings, which may otherwise be neglected or demolished. As part of the application process, the owner must make a statement of what they see as the heritage value of the building. The works are carried out in the farmyard, so the farmer is inevitably, at the very least, a witness to

the process, but in the majority of projects, much more actively involved.

Training and skills demonstration days are run in partnership with Teagasc, the Irish agriculture and food development authority, ensuring that the widest possible section of the farming community is reached. Training increases the reach of the scheme beyond the project, and beyond the location of the building, on and off-farm. Upskilling and training in the use of particular materials is an eligible cost under the grant. Onsite training is also provided whereby an experienced builder acts as a mentor to the owner's builder for a short period.

Two other relevant aspects of the scheme – it is essential that the applicant appoint a 'Conservation Supervisor' – someone with conservation experience to specify the works, and oversee their implementation on site – and, secondly, the applicant has to demonstrate that the works will not adversely impact on wildlife populations, typically bat colonies, which regularly use roof spaces as maternity roosts in Ireland. The grant-giving ethos of the Heritage Council minimises bureaucracy for the applicant. It is easy and cheap to make an application. There is generally a timeframe of 12 months between the offer being made and the works being completed, which allows farmers to exploit fallow times.

5 CASE STUDIES

Through the early years of the scheme, its ethos was transmitted more by multiple on-site dialogues between conservation supervisors, Anna (the grant scheme's administrator), and the client and builders than by the brochures and guidance made available by the Heritage Council. There are many conversations about why a traditional building method is being adopted, or why, contrary to what the farmer takes to be 'common sense', some works are not necessary. Nonetheless, a definite appreciation of the craft skills involved in repairs has grown among the grantees. Participants are willing to listen to and absorb some, or all, of the ethic of conservation, to deploy their time and effort to explore new ways of doing repairs, to seek out opportunities to view and understand the traditional skills, many of which were remembered from childhood experiences.

5.1 *Roscommon*

This granary is part of a 'clachan' of dwellings, with small dispersed land holdings nearby. It is one of the more 'modern' buildings supported under the scheme, dating from the early 20th century. The technology of the time is evident in the concrete barges, concrete lintels over the openings, the corrugated iron roof and tin gutters.



Figure 1. Granary, Co Roscommon. Before (left). After (right).

The owner originally proposed a restoration project – a new roof, wholesale re-pointing of stonework and new external joinery. We gave qualified approval for the project, provided that less works were carried out. Over a period of months, we painstakingly negotiated a schedule of works with the conservation supervisor and the owner's son, who was to carry out the works. This was done through email correspondence, telephone conversations and inspections, approving samples and the works as they proceeded. The extent of re-pointing needed generated much debate, as the owner did not want a patchy result, whilst we were concerned with only doing what was needed. The owner's son attended a lime training day, where he met builders experienced with lime mortars, and although he had no previous experience in their use, the work was executed well. This is a case of a happy compromise between the family's desire not to have a patchy effect, our desire to minimise works, whilst also doing what was necessary for the building's survival.

5.2 *Donegal*



Figure 2. Barns, Co Donegal. After

The repair of these barns was exemplary in demonstrating both a genuinely vernacular ethos, and the partnership between owner, builder and architect. The farm comprises two barns running perpendicular to each other, originally roofed with 'Roshine' stone slates, a slate distinctive to a few square miles of the locality, and, whilst modest, they represent the very special character of this area. The owner applied for a grant in spring 2010. As well as the required photographs and map she attached some interesting historical documentation relating to her great grandfather who was evicted from the farmhouse, to which the barns are attached, in 1889. Her architect had submitted a short programme of sensitive works, reasonably costed and we offered a grant of €10,000.

One barn had lost its Roshine slate covering; the other still retained them virtually intact. The heavy purlin roof structure, an intrinsic but invisible component of the construction, was retained. Once a scaffold had been erected, a close examination of the roof covering revealed that its condition was not as good as initially thought. Instead of localised repairs, it was agreed that the middle section was to be reslated with localised roof repairs to the gable end. The owner's husband mined for slates in the back garden, where they had been buried some years ago when the other barn had been re-roofed in corrugated iron. This was sufficient to make up any deficit.



Figure 3. Barns, Co Donegal. Roshine stone slate roof. (Photo: Dedalus Architecture)

The slates were originally fixed with wooden pegs and bedded in lime mortar. The builder, a stone mason, had originally planned to make replacements himself but, on reflection, he felt this may be too onerous, so imported readymade wooden pegs. A shortfall forced an alternative experiment, trying a variety of materials. The local bog timber produced a virtually identical result to the original. Additionally, with the "bog oak", the ends splay slightly when hammered home and this helps to keep the pegs in place. The collaboration of owner, builder and architect re-discovered the local materials and in the process came to appreciate their special constructional characteristics.



Figure 4. Barns, Co Donegal. Detail of pegs before shaping; the sample on the left is the bog timber which was used and the right is an alterative hardwood peg cut from a railway sleeper. (Photo: Dedalus Architecture)

The architect and stone mason were working at the same time on a Roshine slate roof on a nearby house. The barn repairs were carried out as closely as possible to the original materials and techniques, whereas on the house stainless steel screws with washers and roofing felt were used. Because it is a barn, they could follow the traditional form of construction more closely - any future roof failure would be less risky than for a house. The architect noted to his surprise that the pegged roof construction was quicker and easier to execute than the felt and stainless steel screw fixings.

5.3 *Tipperary*

This 'linhay' structure is an uncommon building form in Ireland, though of typical construction, with open arcade running across the first floor. Its heritage significance is beyond doubt, and on the basis of its rarity value and traditional construction, the owner was offered a grant. Amongst other works, the builder had originally priced for the roof to be reslated, but no conservation specification had been submitted. An initial site inspection found that the lime parging to the underside of the slate roof was substantially intact (the parging acts as a secondary means of fixing to the nails and a secondary line of defence against rain that penetrates the slate coursing).



Figure 5. Linhay building, Co Tipperary. After

We discussed a revised approach of only localised and selective slate repairs to best secure the historic fabric. The owner raised concerns that this would increase the cost. Apart from the roof, stonework and external joinery works had also been proposed. A system of priorities was worked out, placing roof repairs at the top, with no requirement to carry out the other works if resources did not permit it. Whilst normally we carry out only one interim inspection, in this case, at the request of the conservation supervisor we carried out three as repairs progressed. We met the builder on each of these inspections, and learned that he had come across lime parging being used in the 1960s but had not handled it since. This past knowledge and the sympathetic approach of all ensured a conservation-sensitive approach to the building's needs. The owner rang to thank us when the paperwork was completed and payment made! The same builder and his colleague went on to work on a number of other farm building projects where their skill in applying lime parging has continued to develop.

5.4 *Carlow*



Figure 6. Co Carlow. Lime extraction following burning using lime from farmer's land

A particular challenge for many of the farm building projects is making the use of lime mortar accessible to the uninitiated. In a Carlow case, the farmer knew that the lime used in his buildings was sourced locally from the river basin and burned in a kiln a half-mile away. Lime was sourced from his land and burned. He made use of a modern kiln that happened to be located nearby. The sand was also sourced locally.

5.5 *Summary*

Each of these case studies illustrates what can be achieved by the application of a vernacular ethos in the multiple small-scale decisions within the project as to methods and materials. This requires attention to detail, recognition of the autonomy of the non-State actors, and respecting their input into decision-making. The results do not always conform to regulation, nor to the canon of 'acceptable' visual appearance of the structures conserved, nor are all the outcomes successful from a building conservation point-of-view; however, through communication which is sensitive to the agency of the permanent guardians of these buildings – the owner/farmers – the responsibility for the long-term care of these structures has been safeguarded.

6 REFLECTIONS

It is interesting to note that architects do not always emerge as the best conservation supervisors. Some appeared to misunderstand the nature of the built heritage to be protected – the buildings do not contain any obvious or familiar 'art-value', or the marks of the rhetorical languages of architecture in their construction. Instead, the focus of the conservation effort is on the actual materiality of the buildings, the exact type of stones, and slates, and on the maintenance of their simple agricultural functions to provide shelter for utensils, fodder and livestock. Overseeing for minimum intervention, and precision in matching the existing materials and not introducing new construction forms, are challenges. Some miss the point, doing too much or focus instead on non-traditional interventions that they consider would last longer and represent better value for money. Others accepted deviations from the specification made on site by builders, because they thought the stakes were low.

So, how does this scheme advance the conservation of vernacular built heritage?

Firstly, one of the objectives of the scheme is to actively transmit skills in the vernacular context. Training at multiple levels has become a component

of the project, initially by the applicant being challenged to declare the heritage value of the building, by on-farm skills training and awareness-raising demonstration days, and by challenging the perceived ideas of the conservation supervisors about the non-aesthetic values to be found in these buildings. We also adopt modes of communication that focus on one-to-one (or one-to-few) dialogues.

Secondly, all the projects are 'first attempts' at conservation for a new grouping of conservationists, who may not even think of themselves as such. This may reflect in some rawness of appearance in the buildings when the works are completed, but this is a proud mark of the re-acquisition or transmission of traditional building skills, and of knowledge and appreciation being imparted. Not having a list of approved 'heritage contractors', and actively involving local builders or the farmers who own and use these buildings, means that long after the grant application is over, the owner who has always carried out the repairs is encouraged to do so, 'future-proofing' these buildings. It has also helped to ensure goodwill throughout the scheme and beyond. The project buildings are often exemplars for the repair of others on the farm, and indeed in the locality.

Thirdly, by adopting a (sometimes uncomfortable) 'buffer' role between the regulatory norms, and building practice on site. Council certifies works as having achieved the aims of the scheme without demanding complete adherence to every statutory regulation. As one conservation supervisor put it, *'The Heritage Council is the buffer between reality and the legislation'*, by which he meant that the non-bureaucratic organisational ethos allows for flexibility and a significant devolution of control over how works are carried out. This is not done, it should be emphasised, to 'cut corners', but to protect the central tenets of the scheme, which are the transmission of tradition, the application of minimal treatments, and the maximisation of the retention of existing fabric, regardless of how anomalous, or irregular. In one encounter, an architect asked if the building works had to conform to the Building Regulations, and we told him that they didn't, as it is not a requirement of the scheme to certify that the buildings are fit for human habitation. By taking many small responsibilities like this, the farmer's impulse to use traditional or self-devised, innovative, repair solutions to improve the condition of the buildings, becomes possible.

7 CONCLUSIONS

These buildings are on the human scale, there is a sense of emotional connection between people and the places that they own. With patience and diligence, it is possible to foster the passing on of skills, not only from expert to apprentice, but also through empowering owners with the lore of traditional building skills, allowing them to continue to be their curators or guardians when the grant scheme is gone.

The grant scheme has allowed us as a heritage body to reach a new audience, the farming community. The application process has permitted a group of people who do not normally consider that they have the opportunity to engage with the ethics of conservation to do so.

Simply by having this scheme, we have placed a value on these 'ordinary' buildings, which has elicited a positive response from farmers, encouraging them to utilise resources at their disposal, to engage with their buildings. One day a farmer phoned up because he had seen the brochure about the grant scheme. He wanted to know if it was really true that we were giving out money for the repair of outhouses. He said *'When I took this farm over from my father, everyone told me to knock down those old buildings, but I couldn't do it. Just the idea that there is a grant now available to help me maintain them means I was right not to 'toss' them all those years ago, and that makes me happy'*. His comment shows how values can be changed by the approach we have taken. By connecting the owner with the buildings in this way it improves their chances of being cared for and lasting into the future. There is also recognition that this sense of connectedness is available to everyone.

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[i] *"1 Examples of the vernacular may be recognised by:*

a) A manner of building shared by the community;

b) A recognisable local or regional character responsive to the environment;

c) Coherence of style, form and appearance, or the use of traditionally established building types;

d) Traditional expertise in design and construction which is transmitted informally;

e) An effective response to functional, social and environmental constraints;

f) The effective application of traditional construction systems and crafts."

(ICOMOS Charter on the Built Vernacular Heritage, 1999, para. 1)

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