

The Ghost of a Post



You notice a lot of strange things when you spend time cycling down back roads just to see where they lead. This gate is near Trillick in County Tyrone.

It seems here was a wooden gatepost here once, fastened to the tree with a metal strap. The tree grew round the post, and at some point the post rotted away. Now the tree has become the gatepost; it has grown far enough to prevent the gate swinging out and a loop of twine holds it in the opposite direction. This is the sort of improvisation you can see everywhere if you keep your eyes open. It was never designed to work like that, but it works well enough. It has a rough familiarity that a manufactured post, doing only the job it was designed for, can never have. You might even say it has 'soul'.

Soul is a matter of integration and history. The tree and the gate accommodate each other. This interconnectedness is one aspect of what Christopher Alexander calls the Quality Without a Name

Imagine a prefabricated window which sits in a hole in a wall. It is a one, a unit; but it can be lifted directly out from the wall. This is both literally true, and true in feeling. Literally, you can lift the window out without doing damage to the fabric of the wall. And, in your imagination, the window can be removed without disturbing the fabric of what surrounds it.

Compare this with another window. Imagine a pair of columns outside the window, forming a part of the window space. They create an ambiguous space which is part of the outside, and yet also part of the window. Imagine splayed reveals, which help to form the window, and yet, also, with the light reflected off them, shining in the room, they are also part of the room. And imagine a window seat leaning against the window sill, but a seat whose back is indistinguishable from the window sill, because it is continuous.

This window cannot be lifted out. It is one with the patterns which surround it; it is both distinct itself, and also part of them. The boundaries between things are less marked; they overlap with other boundaries in such a way that the continuity of the world, at this particular place, is greater. . . .

Connection seems to have become a theme of this issue: connection to Nature and locality in the case of *Conscious Writing* and the work of *Common Ground*; connection to the Slieve Beagh community in *Forgotten Song* and the *Growth and Decay* project; or connection to the past through *Living Legacies*.

No man is an island, and neither is a work of Art. Art makes and celebrates connection, and great Art makes more connections than even its creator can comprehend. It is not the perfect execution of a single-minded idea: there is a wonderful boat-building phrase for designs like that – they ‘smell of the lamp’.

No. If you want to make art that lasts, art that makes connections, let your first draft or sketch be something simple and humble, as humble as an untreated wooden gatepost.

Then see what grows up round it.

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