

The Affective Material Spatiality of the Handball Alley
in the Everyday Irish Landscape

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Tag der Disputation

Research Subjects, Aims and Questions

The subject of this dissertation is an outdoor ballcourt built in Ireland from at least the mid 1700s to the late 1960s. It is referred to as a 'handball alley', but served many social and political uses in addition to game of Gaelic handball; a rebound ballgame played by hand against a high wall. Not yet the subject of any scholarship, only its most recent history in the early decades of the Irish Free State is acknowledged in its appraisal in architectural heritage practice and in its popular appreciation as a vernacular building type indigenous to Ireland. Today these structures can be found as ruins in various states of disrepair and abandonment in villages, towns and especially the open countryside.

The doctoral research presented in this dissertation pursued an interpretative examination of the material evidence of 570 handball alleys. It did so from a spatial perspective, rather than from a historical or ethnographic perspective. The aim was to explore an observation that had formed gradually over a period of 10 years through the direct experience of locating and documenting hundreds of handball alleys: that, they enabled the perception of a large-scale spatial phenomenon. One stemming from the functional experience of routine daily life and not equivalent to any spatial entity promoted in the master-planning or strategic-planning of settlements and regions. A landscape produced by default to ordinary life within it, rather than by professional planning.

The primary research question was *how the handball alley building type can be interpreted as an expression of a socio-collectively experienced landscape*. Secondary questions asked how this interpretation *advances a spatial understanding of the Irish landscape* as well as a *description of the heritage of the handball ball alley building type*. The research is situated in the interdisciplinary fields of landscape studies and heritage studies and was undertaken in association with the DFG Research Training Group 2227 'Identity and Heritage'.

Relevant Current Discourse

Very little is known about the handball alley building type. It is mentioned indirectly in political histories as a venue for resistances to colonial rule, in oral folklore as a meeting place both in the real world and in fairy tales, and in the few local and national histories of handball as the backdrop to memorable social, political and sporting occasions. The documentation project

commenced by this researcher in 2007 provides information on the locations of the remaining handball alleys in Ireland and living memories of them (see. www.irishhandballalley.ie).

Discourse on vernacular or ‘everyday’ landscape was advanced intermittently from the 1970s. It began in phenomenological geography (Buttimer, 1976; Hägerstrand, 1976; Meinig & Jackson, 1979; Thrift, 1977a, 1977b), was discussed again from the 1990s in archaeology and anthropology (Bender, 1998, 2002; Ingold, 1993, 2009, 2011; Massey, 2006), somewhat in human geography (Thrift, 1996, 2008; Waterton, 2013), and most recently in landscape studies (Edler & Kühne, 2019; Larsen & Hemmersam, 2019). Its return to a spatial discipline brings the chance to belatedly develop ideas that challenged conventional notions of lived space as a concentric hierarchy of ever-increasing scales or as a neutral Euclidean plane. Additionally, the conceptualisation of everyday landscape as a “shared human material experience” (Larsen & Hemmersam, 2019, p. 67) helps to connect the divergent social constructivist (human) and more-than-representative (material) perspectives within the discourse (Howard & Graham, 2016; Kühne, 2022; Waterton, 2013). Finally, the illustrative, case study nature of everyday landscape research in landscape studies starts to fill the knowledge gap between the core argument that material features make the shared experienced world perceptible through the unconscious bodily experience of them (see for example, Ingold, 1993, p.169; Meinig, 1979, p. 6), and descriptions of how they operatively do this.

The material turn in heritage studies has introduced conceptual ideas and practice approaches centred on deriving meaning from things themselves, instead of in terms of what they mean for humans (*Object Matters. Archaeology and Heritage in the 21st Century*, 2019; *Ruin Memories*, n.d.; *Unruly Heritage – An Archaeology of the Anthropocene*, n.d.; Olsen, Burström, DeSilvey, & Þóra Pétursdóttir, 2021). This is of relevance to the research on the handball alley in three ways. Methodologically, it informs and validates interpretations of the material evidence of things, for example, with the notion of ‘affective acknowledgement’ on the part of the researcher in the field (Olsen, Burström, DeSilvey, & Pétursdóttir, 2021, p. 9). Thematically, the landscape scale has gained importance as a framing viewpoint whereby the examination of material features can reveal long-term transformation processes, alternative heritage practices based on other values and assumptions around remembering and caring for the past and relating it to the future (see *Archives in Place*, 2017; *Assembling Alternative Futures for Heritage*, 2019; *Landscape Futures*, 2020). In terms of theory, conceptual arguments that challenge philosophically-established scientific concepts of time as that ‘made by materials’ rather than any absolute chronological historical past they existed within (Harman

& Witmore, 2023; Lavigne, 2017; Lucas, 2021), provide a template for attempting a similar argument for a concept of material spatiality as space made perceived through the experience of a material object or building type.

Methods Employed

The research followed an inductive approach whereby the material evidence as presented in the situational contexts, built forms and spatial distribution of the 570 handball alleys were mapped to reveal spatial patterns. This exercise drew on information indicated in two sets of georeferenced historical cartographic surveys (dating to 1929-1941 and 1897-1913), a set of georeferenced aerial photographs since the 1990s, together with information visible in the field.

A theoretical framework was developed from the key literature on everyday landscape to inform the interpretative examination of these patterns. This describes material features in the real world or landscape that make a socio-collective experienced version of this world perceptible through the embodied and nonconscious experience of them. It was possible to reformulate this argument as four premises directly related to certain characteristics of these material features that could be examined with the material evidence and the oral and anecdotal secondary sources available; namely that they

- transmit social meaning, via non-conscious embodied engagement in habitual social activities that belong to the socialisation processes of a society or social group;
- first emerge as a material objectification of a shared social situation and are subsequently decoupled from the situation and replicated elsewhere;
- link people to many places and times, through their interchangeable physical forms and familiar social activities that trigger embodied memories of events at similar material features in other places, times and stories;
- through their use, enable the socio-collective experienced landscape to *occur* rather than permanently exist, and to find temporary spatial expression in the material everyday landscape.

Main Outcomes

By confirming the four premises, the interpretative examination could verify that the handball alley was a material feature in which the real-material and cognitive-experienced dimensions of an everyday landscape overlapped. The characteristics that enabled this were a fluidity in its social meaning, a lightness to its siting in the geographical world, and a

diagrammatic and dynamic quality to the spaces it expressed both as a single landscape feature and as larger-scale configurations formed by multiple alleys with other landscape features including fair greens, ancient ecclesiastical routes and topographical features.

Its emergence as a building type is therefore explainable as a material means with which to affect the spatial expression of key sites and movement routes of social communication for the descendants of Gaelic society in a colonially transforming landscape. Its architectural form resulted from the ‘material objectification’ (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973) of previous (late-medieval) sites of social communication where handball was among many activities that took place at habitual social gatherings and assemblies (FitzPatrick, 2001, 2015; O’Sullivan & Downey, 2022); firstly as proto alleys at the ruins of abbeys and churchyards and the contemporaneous tower-house castles of Gaelic clans, then replicated as purpose-built structures at crossroads and in cluster settlements along the movement routes. Eventually, as the native population reclaimed control of the restructured landscape – enabled by land-reform, cultural-revival, and political-independence movements – handball alleys were built at meeting places away from these routes and ultimately and in villages and towns, at first at English-built social infrastructure at finally the new social infrastructure of the aspiring Irish nation state.

Reflecting on these outcomes of the interpretative examination from the perspective of heritage, the emergence of the handball alley building type and its diffusion along the social communication routes in the period between the mid 1700s to the mid 1800s is presented as a non-conscious heritage practice that enabled a subjugated Gaelic-Irish society to survive during colonial rule. As both a ‘narrative landmark’ (Smyth, 2008) and a social space ‘territorial template’ (Whelan, 2012), the handball alleys made a socio-collectively experienced Gaelic landscape perceptible. The interpretation suggests it achieved this *affective material spatiality* through a bidirectional human-object engagement. In one direction, the familiar diagrammatic form of any handball alley triggered users to recall experiences of alleys in other places and stories, making them interchangeable with each other and effectively only loosely connected to their geographical locations. In the other direction, the familiar habitual social activities that took place in alleys rehearsed a nonconscious and embodied socio-material skill that enabled users to receive and revise fluid social meanings transmitted by their material presence.

Two possible responses from the field of heritage studies are proposed. One based on respecting the meaning integral to objects with an ‘an ethics of attention without intention’ to make the world meaningful for humans (DeSilvey, 2021), and another proposing affective-

material landscape study as a heritage enquiry tool that can highlight processes, practices and infrastructural solutions of past societies that may be informative in the present-day and into the future.

Areas for Potential Further Research

The latter enquiry tool integrates the ‘affective acknowledgement’ of researchers in the field before any ‘intellectual interpretation’; somewhat in the manner of the methodology of this research on the handball alley. Further theoretical research could refine the methodological profile of such a tool and identify robust, effective and replicable fieldwork methods. Such as those being advanced in the study of ‘landscapes as future archives’ (for example, in landscape studies and in heritage futures practice) and those employed in the landscape research of archaeologists like Christopher Tilley and Chris Whitmore and their peers in the French discipline of archaeo-geography, including Laurent Olivier, Cédric Lavigne and Magali Watteaux (Blaising et al., 2017; Harman & Witmore, 2023; Larsen, 2019; Tilley, 1997; Tilley & Bennett, 2004; Witmore, 2020).

Further research could also explore similar ballgames in neighbouring countries that also originated in churchyards, including Fives in England, Pêl-law in Wales, Pelota in the Basque Country, and hand tennis in France. One aspect of this common history are the social communication routes between the churchyard-ballcourts as revealed by the handball alleys, which seem to correlate with ancient ecclesiastical routes. A preliminary mapping of churchyards in Wales where ballplaying took place (based on places mention in a history of Welsh handball (Dicks, 2017), suggests that communication routes extended between these countries. Another aspect is the possibility that as familiar material feature in all of these countries, the handball alley might have also served as a place encounter between the native Irish and colonial English societies that “embodied and directed transformations” (Keehnen et al., 2019, pp. 3–4).

Finally, the evidence-based outcomes of case study research on everyday landscapes should demonstrate the importance of developing alternative concepts of space based on the immediate experience of the surrounding environment. Without these, as Olaf Kühne has pointed out, the abstract ‘container space’ concept of Euclidean thinking will continue to represent “the ontological basis for many spatial sciences, especially for planners. Without contradiction to the container space concept, space can [continued to] be conceived as an arbitrarily definable section of the earth’s surface” (Kühne, 2018, p. 16).

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