

# BÓTHARBUÍ

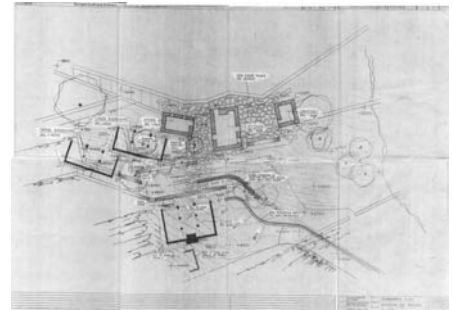
## INTRODUCTION

This is the story of the house my father built for his family and friends on the remote Beara Peninsula of Cork, from 1970-72. Called “Bótharbuí” [meaning ‘yellow road’ in Irish], it comprises a settlement of three ancient and three new structures, on a steep wooded slope of several acres, facing across the salt-water Kemare River to the Reeks of Kerry. Built from local materials, using local labour, this strikingly distinct house is also deeply contextual. The rugged and timeless form of the cottage and its attendant *botháns* is added to by three new blocks in a modern idiom, solid-walled on three sides, with glazed seaward sides perched on concrete piers. Thus the ground flows freely below and between the buildings, with steps and paving formed by slate flags, which run continuously into the old interiors.

Since its inception the house has taken on the role, both ancient and modern, of *villa*, hosting a series of semi-formal cultural events every year and providing shelter for poets and painters to work in retreat and to indulge in the gregarious life of weekend parties. In the 1970’s and ‘80’s Bótharbuí was a country salon, where the worlds of Dublin politics rubbed shoulders with the artistic community in an informal yet grand manner. In this case, reflecting the wide-ranging interests and commitments of the family as both patrons of Irish design and active protagonists in the fabrication of a modern Irish cultural identity.

Many artists have stayed and used the studio to paint, writers too have worked there for extensive periods, immersed in Bótharbuí’s magical landscape. Seamus Heaney, Patrick Scott and Louis le Brocqy were regular visitors also, and the visitor’s book records the thoughts of a cast of guests over 35 years. The house has had many lives, continuing to be the setting for memorable encounters with nature and architecture.

The archive of drawings and photographs of Bótharbuí has not been placed into the public realm until now, but exhibiting in Venice, in close proximity to Palladio’s Veneto, seems apt. The aim of the exhibition is two-fold - to situate Bótharbuí in the historical tradition of Irish villas and to establish thematic relationships across time, enabling speculation about the place of other villa projects in relation to this tradition, including two unbuilt projects by Robin Walker, two by Simon Walker Architects and two by Lynch Architects.



Site plan drawn by Robin Walker 1969



Bótharbuí photographed in 1972

## ROBIN WALKER

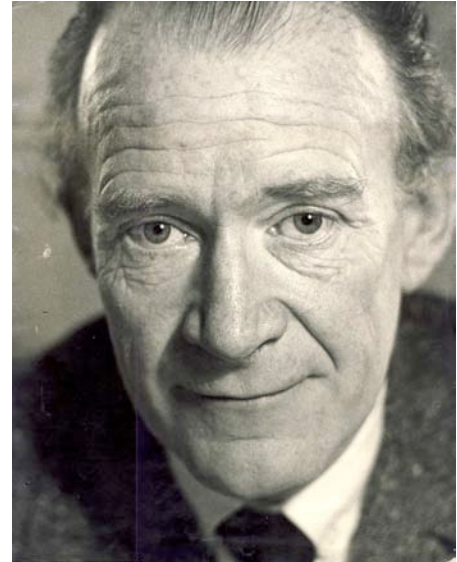
Robin Walker, as a partner first of Michael Scott, and later in Scott Tallon Walker, had worked in the offices of both Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe before his return to Ireland at the end of the 1950's. He quickly became a prominent figure, and maintained a prolific output of work, highly regarded by his peers, from then until the mid-1970's. He enjoys a reputation now within Irish architecture as one of the champions of modern orthodoxy, a talented and original designer, who matched the clarity of his buildings by the rigour of his polemic. However, on closer reading, we will see that this impression of the man gives us an inaccurate picture.

Born in 1924 into an Anglo-Irish family in Waterford, Robin had always felt a sense of otherness - from his childhood he was an exile *within* the country, sent to a Protestant boarding school, culturally at a remove. At the height of his architectural career, he was an exile *returned*, making a statement, seeking his place in a new republic, fervently committed to a national cultural project, married to Dorothy, daughter of an Irish Republican political leader.

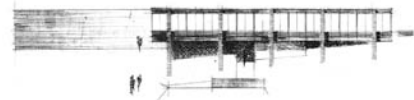
Robin's writing about architecture, which he carried on continuously from his early retirement from practice in 1976 until his death in 1991, betrays an intellect riven by the dichotomy between a classicist, objective morality – St. Augustine's "city of God" – and the subjectivity of perception – St. Thomas' "doubt" – which is the inescapable condition of modern humanity. At the time of his writing, the certainties, what he calls the 'direction', of architecture up until the end of the 1960's, had been lost, and much of his polemic is concerned with the debate which held sway at the time between contextualists, conservationists and others, on one side, and modernists, on the other.

But it is in his original buildings that Robin's greatest insights as an architect are borne out – although his reputation is that of a 'structural' modernist, it may now be possible to critically re-evaluate his work and position him as essentially a form of post-modernist, a radically subjective architect, Merleau-Ponty's 'phenomenological subject', who desires, above all else, to rediscover "an ingenuous contact with the world", and, in particular, with the country of his birth.

In all of his work, Robin was engaged on a quest for a modern vernacular, a search that reveals the ground where tectonics meets typology, meets contingency, and where nationalism [or perhaps regionalism] meets classicism. But, as Barthes decrees, "to get out, one must go in deeper"... to try to find a



Robin Walker, photo by Fergus Bourke, 1968



project for a house in Ballybrack, unbuilt 1963



studio at Bótharbuí

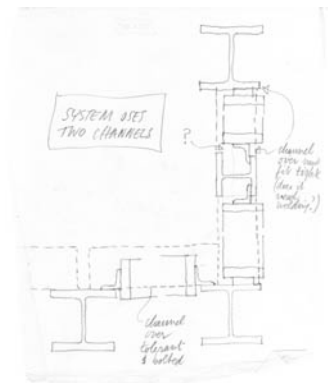
spiritual truth, like that revelation bestowed by his former teacher, Mies van der Rohe. The mullion detail of Crown Hall, with its unnecessary [from a functional point of view] angle fillets, represents an essentially mannerist position – Robin knew that unless he could admit to this sophisticated corruption, he was doomed to merely copy, never to reach behind the objective certainties that impede the actions of discovery, or that relegate the ‘merely beautiful’.

Much of Robin's writing during the 1980's takes the form of an interior argument concerning the opposition of ‘reason’ and ‘intuition’, a distinction which probably seems needless and outdated now. But it offers an insight into the difference between Robin's real thinking and the positivist, or doctrinaire, kinds of attitudes that were mistakenly ascribed to him, and it reveals why it is not unreasonable to use the term ‘post-modernist’ in relation to his work.

“Buildings are largely determined by their function, and if you extend the meaning of function to include such elements as beauty then their form is entirely determined by function. ‘Form follows function’ is only understandable to me as a tenet in terms of architecture and aesthetics if I admit into the term function a meaning which goes far beyond the quantifiable, polytechnical, mechanistic and particularly sentimental / sociological interpretation of function... The choice of materials and techniques and their employment for functional ends should form a fountain of energy for the outpouring of the spiritual qualities and aspirations of the buildings and of the people who use and observe them – the sum of architecture” [Robin Walker, *Philosophy of Architectural Design III* ].



Robin Walker in St. Mary's Lane, 1984



Robin's sketch of an alternative mullion detail [after Crown Hall]

## ST. MARY'S LANE AND BÓTHARBUÍ

In a perfectly symbiotic coincidence, Robin's two houses designed and built for himself define the man - St. Mary's Lane in Dublin, aloof, withdrawn, artificially international, and Bótharbuí in Cork, gregarious, social, artificially natural. An assessment of Bótharbuí, therefore, would not be complete without the benefit of comparison to its corollary, the urban house.

The Spanish architect Inaki Ábalos, in his beautifully conceived book “The Good Life”, brings us on a tour of the houses which offer us a crystallisation of types – not architectural typologies in the conventional sense, but stylistic “types”, which reveal to



St. Mary's Lane, dining area looking through to entrance hall

us the conception of life which lies behind their design. Thus we have the existentialist house, the positivist house, the pragmatist house, and so on. There is a neat parallel, however, between, firstly, his “Zarathustrian house” [Mies’ courtyard houses] and St. Mary’s Lane, and secondly, his “phenomenological house” [Picasso’s holiday houses] and Bótharbuí.

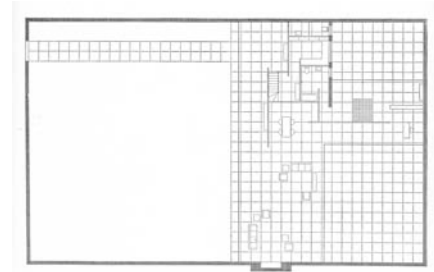
The St. Mary’s Lane house - the embodiment of Ábalos’ ‘Zarathustrian’ world - is a highly original re-working of the Mies courtyard house in a native context. But it is in the completely private, rarefied world of the horizontal space created within its walls that we find the clue to Robin’s character, that we see his response to the society in which he found himself. Hence the courtyard house is a mechanism of both isolation and expansion, for the construction of the self.

“...a subject like the one Mies imagines needs isolation, needs to restructure his self at a physical remove from other people” [Ábalos].

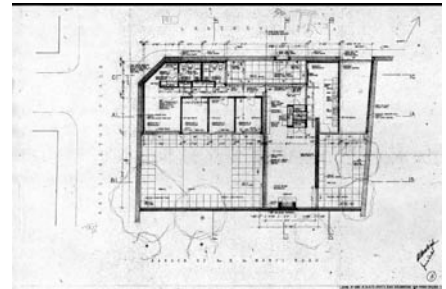
Mies, the architect protagonist, within the unfolding, horizontally symmetrical space of his courtyard house, manipulates a phenomenological effect, a floating quality – and this sensation of floating, of levitated matter, is common to almost all of Robin’s work, present too in the projecting suspended floor-plates at Bótharbuí. Rather than being ordered according to a fixed, vertically aligned hierarchy, we see that objects, furniture, architectural elements, are all encountered in an ambulatory sequence, given meaning by the action of the inhabitant.

One can now see the two houses as mannerist constructions, which embody the essential contradiction of the man, his *self-consciousness*. In this he was not an exile, but rather a modern man, inextricable from society, fully engaged in the production of a truly original, subjective body of work. He is seeking, in Aalto’s words, “a functionalism which goes beyond the mere technical and which considers also the psychological in architecture”.

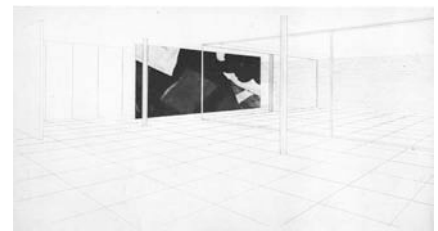
If modernist time can be seen as a vector, a positivist straight line, then post-modernist time, as embodied in the phenomenological subject, is a sine-curve oscillating between reference and place, questioning any predetermined procedural logic against the empirical measure of sensory perception. Bótharbuí belongs in one of the areas subtended by the overlap of curve and line. If, as Patrick Lynch elucidates in the accompanying essay to this exhibition, the construction of the modern villa is an open-ended, indeterminate project,



plan of house with three courtyards, Mies



plan of St. Mary's Lane house, 1964



house with three courtyards, perspective



St. Mary's Lane, elevation



St. Mary's Lane, entrance court

then it needs radical extremists, such as Robin, to conceive of living in such an austere, yet classically dynamic, building as Bótharbuí.

In one reading, Robin, and his friends, including Séamus Heaney, could be seen as savages seeking a return to the land – but the success of Bótharbuí is that it is not just a retreat from the world. If the house were to set itself up as a formula for building in the landscape, at the national level, it would rightly be seen as decadent and corrupt. But because of its absolute radicalism, it succeeds in positing an ascetic, urbane view of culture *within* a rustic, almost bucolic, context of rural life. As in a microcosm of his own life story, Bótharbuí interrogates the relationship between landscape and society, between place and belonging.

## A DREAM HOUSE

In much the same forensic way as Robin had found a place for his Dublin house by identifying ideal sites and seeking out their owners, he searched the coastline of the Beara peninsula six years later. What he found was a tiny ruined settlement comprising the buried remains of a cottage and two *botháns*, concealed in a native oak forest, accessed only from the sea. But what fantasy was he looking for? And when he found it, how did he construct the logic of his project? What is Bótharbuí's architectonic system?

While its topographical attributes may be clearly described, it is the project of inhabitation which establishes the true uniqueness of the house. Therefore we have to speak in terms of the architect's intention, and his response to both the physical phenomena of the place and the social programme of the holiday home. Gaston Bachelard, in his seminal book "The Poetics of Space", alludes to this programme of 'villa':

"When we live in a manor house we dream of a cottage, and when we live in a cottage we dream of a palace... The two extreme realities of cottage and manor... take into account our need for retreat and expansion, for simplicity and magnificence... thus the dream house must possess every virtue. However spacious, it must also be a cottage, a dovecote, a nest, a chrysalis."

Bachelard's 'phenomenological topology' presupposes that our choices will be guided mainly by our perception, by memories and feelings – "by means of the house, the warm substance of intimacy resumes its form, the same form that it had when it



Dorothy and Robin, Bótharbuí, 1979



enclosed original warmth”. But is there a sense in which Bótharbuí is a refutation of Bachelard’s polemic that “inhabited space transcends geometrical space... a house [the geometrical object] is transposed to the human plane whenever it is considered as space for cheer and intimacy”?

While Bótharbuí represents a fundamental, directly felt, connection with place and a former life, it is also a consciously wrought work of architecture. Here, *expansion* – the urbane self-knowledge of the courtyard house dweller – *precedes* the retreat to the wild. Here, we see the perfect life complement to the urban model with its isolating perimeter walls: the ‘phenomenological’ house, built in the landscape, and at the same time constructed in the imagination.

“Man’s image of place, particularly of home, seems to me instinctually and explicitly sensual and his demand to satisfy this image a normal expectation. Event and place, in memory, are inseparable and so action and environment are inseparable. It is equally true that environments designate actions... [by] sensory perception I do mean bodily perception – I have been moved to throw my arms about the Parthenon’s columns and if I can *love* Amiens and *love* the Pantheon, can one not *love place*, isn’t that what an understanding of site, interaction with site, means?” [Robin Walker, *A Sense of Place*].

I have in my mind an image of Robin in his armchair, by the window out to the bay, the fire burning, the doors to the cottage wide open, children laughing and running around the buildings, while he is listening with one ear to a heated conversation carried on by Dorothy and friends at the kitchen table – it recalls what Juan Navarro Baldeweg describes as “the burning reality of Vermeer’s rooms”, a complex structure of relationships and reflections captured in a moment.

Ábalos refers to the “privileged moment of the house... a moment of special phenomenological splendour... in which the drizzle stops and the entire natural surroundings blossom forth once more” as having supplanted those other elements of architecture canonized by modern orthodoxy – “the platitudes of the positivist project: structure, skin, efficient layout” – transforming the search for an intensification of perception into “the unfolding of a specific design method”.

Following Robin Walker’s ‘design method’, Bótharbuí is not conceived as an objective, geometric composition, but as a *happening*, a confluence of physical and perceptual phenomena. It represents a multiplicity of microcosms, each one with its own distinct, topological attributes. Any single



spatial understanding is broken down into a sequence of different autonomous structures and rooms, organized according to variable positions within the terrain.

However, rather than avail of the opportunity this house affords for a kind of *ad hoc* overlapping of exterior and interior, a deliberate order is established – the slate floors, the exposed undercrofts, the sound of the rain on the tin roofs - maintaining a technical and constructional economy that is just as tectonic as it is haptic and sensory.

“Design and analysis, if they are a search for form, are actually a search for reasonable or acceptable constraints... but there are a few examples which do more than this and actually enrich their sites, fewer still which extract the essence of their sites” [Robin Walker, *A Sense of Place*].



## DELPHI

In notes written at the end of his life Robin describes his concern that the search for unity, rather than diversity, has been the greatest mistake of the modern movement in architecture: “Dionysus has just as much to do with Delphi as Apollo himself, a statement rather startling to modern ears... Apollo is the principle of simplicity, unity and purity; Dionysus of manifold change and metamorphosis”.



We could imagine Bótharbuí as Robin’s Delphi – the site sets up a classical dynamic, a precarious, shifting relationship between the building and the mountainside. The house then exaggerates its size by disseminating itself into distinct bodies that create an effect of greater scale and freedom of use. The complex topological organization of Bótharbuí into six separate buildings creates a series of horizontal spatial layouts, locating the buildings around enclosures, clearings, terraces, leafy glades, pathways and thresholds of all kinds that establish the presence of the natural environment on the inside.

While this horizontal layout is modern in kind, intensifying the ‘active presence’, maintaining an implicit, active relationship with the physical environment, it is overlaid by a commemorative layout, represented by the original cottage and stone sheds, which orients and guides the actions of the inhabitants. We can see that, in its juxtaposition of ancient and modern forms, Bótharbuí confronts the memory of the past with a new topological spatial order. Yet it is a simple house, built with hand-tools at a time when this part of Ireland had no

electricity, which asks to be lived in simply.

It is precisely this reduction of the cosmos in a simple form which engenders the 'poetic' response to the house: "through the poet's window the house converses about immensity with the world". Bachelard describes how a simple house is inhabited by the mind of the poet: "An immense cosmic house is a potential of every dream of houses... winds radiate from its centre and gulls fly from its windows. A house as dynamic as this allows the poet to inhabit the universe. Or, to put it differently, the universe comes to inhabit the house".

"... then I found myself in the shadow of the structure, dry-throated and timorous from wonder and anxiety. It seemed ordinary enough at close quarters except that it was very white and still. It was momentous and frightening; the whole morning and the whole world seemed to have no purpose at all save to frame it and give it some magnitude and position so that I could find it with my simple senses and pretend to myself that I understood it... I cannot say why I did not stop to think or why my nervousness did not make me halt and sit down weakly by the roadside. Instead I walked straight up to the door and looked in..." [Flann O'Brien, *The Third Policeman* from Robin Walker, *A Sense of Place*]



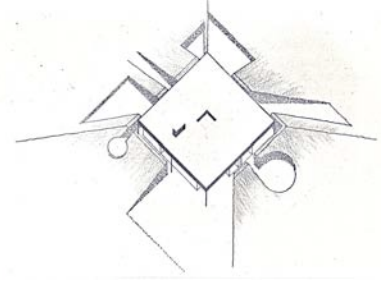
## WORK IN PROGRESS

This exhibition would not be complete without two unbuilt house projects commissioned by the artist, Louis le Brocquy, for a coastal site close to Bótharbuí, which engender two very different strategies in response to its particular topological attributes. The le Brocquy projects are equivalent to Bótharbuí in their concern to avoid a deterministic world-view and produce an architecture that is essentially referential, organic, derived from place, and, at the same time, a response to that unbearably intimate territory for architecture that distinguishes the Irish context. Bachelard's revelation that "the more simple the house, the more it fixes my imagination as an inhabitant" is a clear indication of the intention behind Robin's projects.

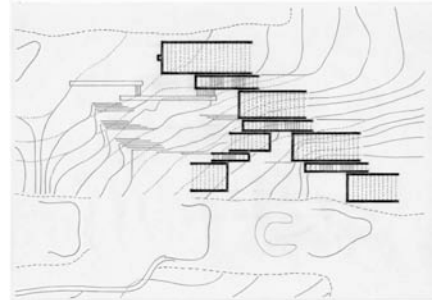
In a further chapter, the exhibition includes two of my own projects, one realised, the other not yet completed, and two projects by Patrick Lynch, one realised, the other not yet completed. Patrick Lynch, my collaborator and mentor in the matter of revisiting Robin's work, is an architect practicing in Britain, who has visited and stayed in Bótharbuí on several occasions. In the accompanying essay in this catalogue, he expounds on the historical locus of the 'villa' in society, and positions the villa in relation to contemporary life.

The inclusion of recent projects by Patrick Lynch and myself makes particular reference to this theme – in the case of my work, they are projects situated, like Bótharbuí, also on the Kenmare River in southwest Ireland. One is commissioned as a holiday villa, the other is a year-round dwelling for two artists, but by addressing a similar, if not exactly the same, context as Bótharbuí, they deal with many of the same issues, programmatically and physically. In the case of the Lynch projects, one is in Norfolk in England, the other in vineyards at Liewen, in western Germany. They introduce the programmatic and topographical themes of this exhibition into two different contexts.

In these projects the nature of the 'villa', programmatically and architecturally, is re-examined in the light of the example of Bótharbuí. That simple house acts as a lantern, illuminating a landscape interwoven with memory and relationships, projections and reflections.



le Brocquy house 1, project, 1973



le Brocquy house 2, project, 1973



house at Coomnahorna, Simon Walker, 2004



house at Marsh View, Lynch Architects, 2005

## Acknowledgements

Inaki Ábalos, '*The Good Life*', Editorial Gustavo Gili, Barcelona, 2001

Gaston Bachelard, '*The Poetics of Space*', Presses Universitaires de France, 1958

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, '*Phenomenology of Perception*', Editions Gallimard, 1945

Robin Walker, '*Philosophy of Architectural Design III*', 1976; '*A Sense of Place*', 1976; '*Seven Apollonian Trails*', 1988; notebook, 1990.

Flann O'Brien, '*The Third Policeman*', written in 1939, first published MacGibbon and Kee, 1967

Patrick Lynch, in conversation, 2008