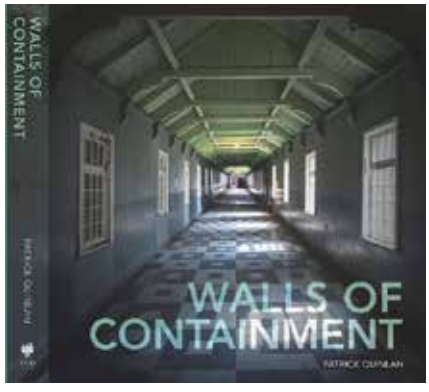
Walls of Containment: The Architecture and Landscapes of Lunacy
by Patrick Quinlan

Review by Dervla MacManus



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Abandoned buildings, particularly large institutional buildings, seem to have a special attraction, sparking feelings somewhere between terror and curiosity. They have an uncanny character. They are strangely familiar. Asylums in particular have this quality. They are set pieces of Irish architectural history that are at once close by and well known, and at the same time set apart and unreachable. Reading Patrick Quinlan's rigorously researched book, it is clear that this is no accident, that the settings, atmosphere, and architecture of these buildings may be traced back to the contemporary treatment philosophies which underpinned them.

The desire to enter and explore such buildings is, I think, particularly felt by architects, and one cannot help but feel a little jealous of Quinlan and photographer David Killeen as they toured around the island of Ireland documenting each of the twenty-nine publicly funded, purpose-built 'lunatic asylums' as they were called. The resulting book, *Walls of Containment*, is substantial, both in terms of its content and its research. It is well written and enjoyable both as a long-read and as something to dip in and out of. The book is beautifully and generously illustrated by Killeen's photographs, alongside historical drawings and images, supplemented by analytical plans showing the chronological development of each site.

The book is divided into two halves. The first traces the trajectory of asylum architecture from the original instution on this island – the Richmond, later known as St Brendan's Hospital, Grangegorman – to the decline and squalor of the 1980s, through to the final push in the second decade of the twenty-first century to close all remaining wards still operating within these sprawling, unedifying buildings. The second half contains the case studies outlining the architectural history of the twenty-nine sites.

Quinlan is careful to set out from the start a note of caution about the 'language of lunacy', and warns that though words such as 'lunatic', 'idiot' or 'imbecile' are considered politically incorrect today, during the time periods discussed in the book they were the accepted medical and legal terminology, and that their use in the book is a reflection of the authentic language of these periods. Nonetheless, as a reader it is difficult to disassociate one's emotional reaction to the use of such terms, whatever the rationale for using them.

Quinlan's analysis rests on the central tenent that the 'quality of the buildings is reflective of the priorities of those in power'. For him, the concept of asylum as initially conceived was as an undivided trinity, of idea, institution, and place, and he traces the evolution and eventual decline of each. Asylum as idea, may be summarised as the treatment philosophies of the time. The concept of 'moral management' – that the insane would respond favourably to kindness and care – dominated for most of the nineteenth century, supplemented by William Tukes concept of 'the retreat', a healing space that would allow the patient to become a new person (here, crucially relating surroundings to cure). But as Quinlan demonstrates, as more and more asylums were built, housing more and more inmates, the further away from these principles asylums moved, and the institution began to take over, replacing principles of cure with principles of economy and efficiency. It is clear from the careful account Quinlan gives that as the asylum as an institution overtakes asylum as an idea; they become little more than 'a storage dump for inmates'. The history Quinlan sets out is depressingly familiar to anyone familiar with the history of the Magdalene Laundries in Ireland: under the guise of occupational therapy inmates were made to work, either on the asylum farms for men or laundries for women, without payment and without any idea when or if they would be released. One of the many hair-raising details provided is that in the 1950s, Ireland had the highest number of psychiatric beds per capita in the world, a fact which though alarming, corresponds well to the shocking estimate that about 1% of Ireland's population was incarcerated in the 1950s.

Unsurprisingly, given Quinlan is a practising architect, it is very much an architectural history, rather than a social or cultural history of these institutions; though it is written in full awareness of the importance of social and cultural factors to architectural history. Quinlan is careful not to stray beyond his architectural expertise. The book is based on rigorous archival research and importantly extensive fieldwork, which allows the evolution of the typology of the asylum buildings to be traced, but also a typology of the attendant buildings emerges: superintendents' houses, chapels, graveyards. Killeen's Candida-Höfer-style photography underpins the typographical comparisons in Quinlan's text. Abandoned dining halls and recreational rooms, all photographed empty, from a central position, give a forlorn yet somehow romantic atmosphere. These typographical comparisons come together to form an undeniable overarching narrative of aspiration, decline, and fall. The richness and originality of this book lies in these typographical comparisons, which is a substantial and important contribution to Ireland's architectural history.