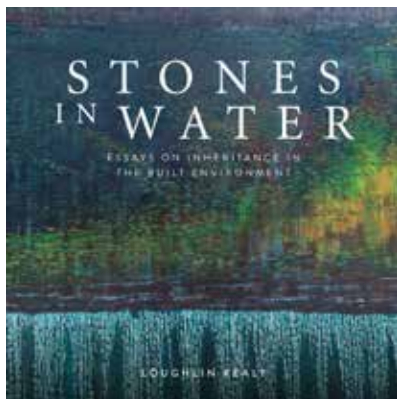


Stones in Water: Essays on Inheritance in the Built Environment

by Loughlin
Kealy

Review by Caitríona
O'Connor MRIAI

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Stones in Water is collection of thirteen Essays exploring various dimensions of cultural heritage conservation by Loughlin Kealy, Emeritus Professor of Architecture at UCD and an expert voice in the field at both a national and international level. The author studied architecture at UCD in the 1960s, having previously undertaken studies in arts and philosophy. After participating in a demonstration of dissatisfaction with the course, Kealy was directly involved in the first staff-student committee in 1968 which brought about a key transition in leadership and ushered a new era in teaching practice in the school.

The subject matter of this book is inheritance, described through the lens of heritage conservation. But what is ever present in this writing is pedagogics. Each offering is a lesson as well as a story – the opening essay dates from 1996, the same year that the author was appointed as Professor of Architecture at UCD. This, and the following four essays, broadly concern Ireland. The author sets the ground for us to understand the markers and signs of an evolving conceptual framework for conservation practice on the island. Words which dance from these pages are remembering, change, possession, and drama. These lessons animate centuries of island life activity, tracking Ireland’s own expression of cultural symbolism, early identity, pre- and post-colonial values, industrialisation, urbanisation, globalisation, and so on. The external influences are clear – we did not arrive at this place in a vacuum – but the specifics are captivating.

‘Possession’ (2009) is a particularly pertinent exploration of sacred spaces and their rendering in daily life in Ireland. The differences illuminated by the historic and ongoing uses of sacred spaces stretch the imagination and beg the question of whether this can happen in a non-transactional way. Maybe it should not. The making of the immaterial as material seems to universally crystallise a power dynamic. The author rightly identifies that the challenge today in the presentation and transmission of such cultural heritage values is to find a common language that can ‘mediate the more effectively between the culture of tradition and the culture of change’.

Over the next few essays, the author situates us in a European context, exploring common themes of urban regeneration, abandonment, economics, and regionality. We take a flying journey over a continent which has been ravaged by man and time. Female influences come through in poetry and ritual (Eavan Boland, Mary Laheen, Rebecca Solnit). And the objectifying gaze of the consumer of heritage is identified as such. In this phase of the presented work, strong ideas around ecology, interconnectedness, resilience, and complexity come to the fore. The author is teaching us how to think differently and giving permission to the outsider to influence the discussion.

‘Dialectics’ (2011) and ‘Their history is a grain of wheat [...]’ (2020) explore the twin themes of loss and empowerment with regards to the changing nature of towns and small settlements. There is a lot of emotion encapsulated in the prospect of an abandoned town. One of the richest responses proposed is that the regeneration of the entity (building, town) must be analogous to the transformation required to do the same to the territory (setting, hinterland). This is a matter of cultivation, attention, and care, and brings us to the final essays of this book which focus on reconstruction and transformation through direct engagement with people.

As the study and practice of global heritage conservation has improved to better encapsulate non-European perspectives and to deconstruct systemic hierarchies surrounding the arbitration of value, the author provides guidance through this broadening of the field. The reviewer was pleased to note the term ‘man-environment relationship’ has been replaced with ‘person-environment relationship’ in later writing and to encounter a diversity of experiences illustrated through accounts of trauma and recovery which are very real and felt. We are reminded that the driving instinct when faced with destruction is to rebuild. Making futures requires physical, intellectual, and emotional tools but trauma is known to disrupt the flows of inheritance and memory – we don’t need to be told. Our hyper-exposure to the destruction of heritage resulting from conflict, over exploitation, technology, and natural events can drive action or foster ambivalence.

This speaks to the wider limits of framing authenticity on the scale of common humanity – one may feel genuine distress at images of destruction resulting from war, or the digestion of the Amazon rainforest yet feel little towards a working-class or immigrant community disenfranchised by large-scale transformation at home. It is an urgent challenge to lift our own prejudices which may hinder the mainstreaming of equity, equality, and justice. The writer reminds us that conservation practice is no exception to this fact. In the final essay, we return to Ireland. Here Kealy notes, debate on the conservation of cultural heritage may need to be revived to reflect a recalibration of our cultural identity which integrates more complex and new-Irish identities – at the heart of the matter is that diversity fosters resilience.

The journey to this point, the arc and scope of these book is quite incredible. These essays are a pilgrimage of thought and should be seen as essential for any student or practitioner of heritage conservation in Ireland. In reading these words, we are offered a window into the conscientização of the author as they move through a life lived in sharp focus to the intricacies of contradiction, but with a loving softness for the richness of difference.