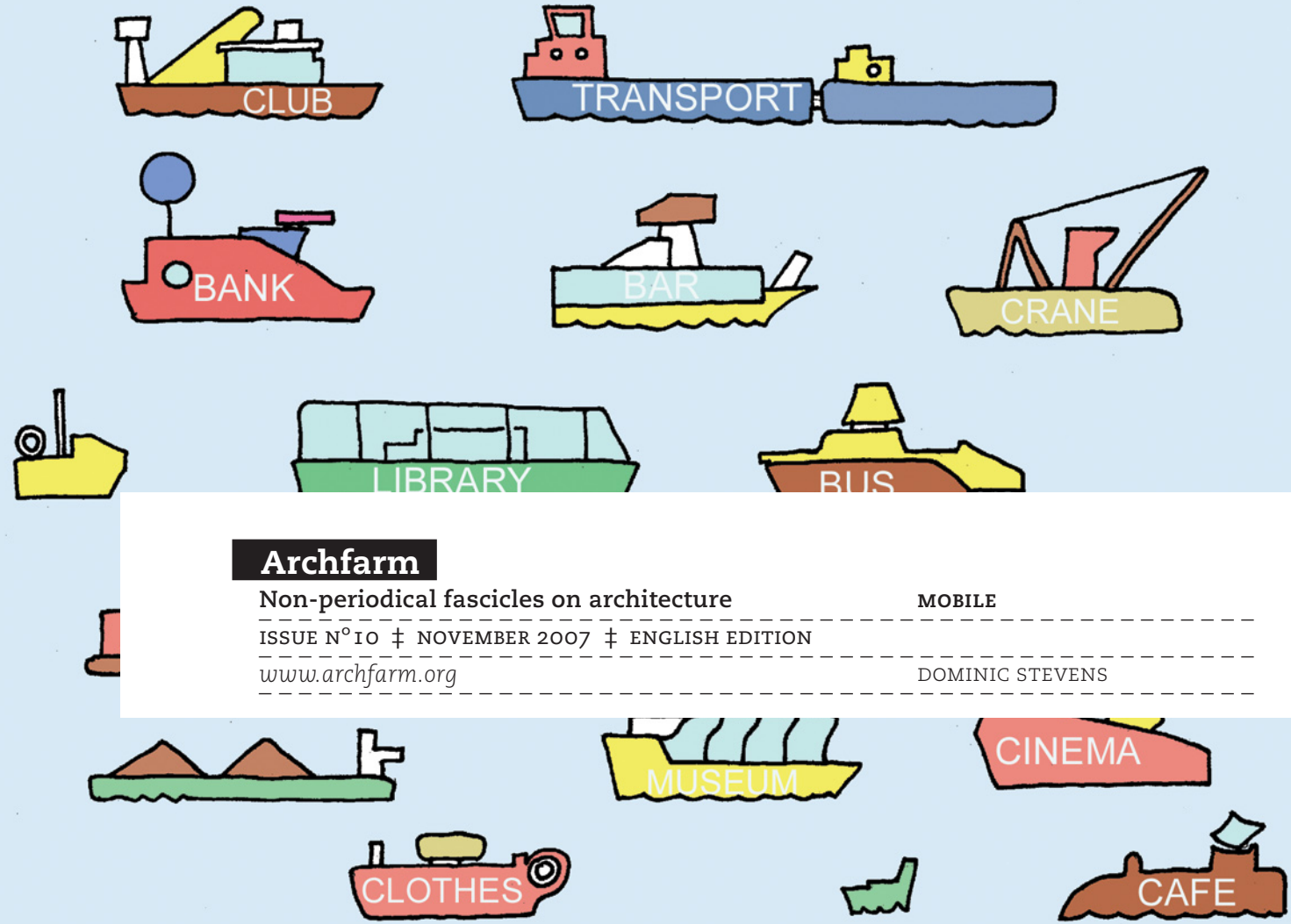

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MOBILE

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A lot of noise is made about the fact that half of the world's population now lives in cities. There may well be, however, a lot left to examine about patterns of inhabitation and activity in the countryside, and it probably has a lot to do with the future and the survival of civilization. If we are to avoid the suburbanisation of rural areas then we must implement a mobile infrastructure.

This article is excerpted from the author's forthcoming book, *Rural*, to be published by Mermaid Turbulence (mermaidturbulence.com)

Cover illustration by the author

MOSES AND THE MOUNTAIN

Life in the countryside at the moment operates around fixed points. Roads have been improved to facilitate transport of the resources no longer available locally (and the improving of roads and the distribution of cheap goods has made the local production of resources redundant), and the people who have seen the ravages of years of rural depopulation have a natural instinct to move to more accessible places. Sites that are close to large roads are the most valuable. The closest towns are where the places of advertised entertainment, places of work and education are, value is placed upon houses that although rural, surrounded by a little of controlled nature —a lawn—, are within easy drive of these towns. The bigger the town is, the more possibilities for work and fun, then the more valuable the house.

This peculiar state of affairs struck me from the start. Having decided to move to the country —we were thinking of green fields, the sound of birds singing, trees and a plot to grow some food— we kept being offered by every single estate agent overpriced minute fractions of acres deafened by the sound of passing cars. As we were looking to find somewhere to live each prospective seller tried to

play down the countryside aspect and brag about the access to nearby towns, motorways, etc as if there could be no life without access to what we were in effect keen to leave behind.

In this way rural life has become suburban. We live now in a serviced landscape. Roads, rail (to a lesser degree), electricity, telephone, heating oil, food… all have to be delivered to rural areas for life to carry on. The state has fully embraced rural Ireland, it is serviced just as urban areas are with a thorough infrastructure. Motorways, electricity pylons, mobile phone masts, articulated lorries full of food, oil tankers… criss cross the landscape bringing a new lifestyle to rural areas, there is no beyond the pale anymore, but at what cost?

A lot of energy is put into moving people from one place to another as quickly as possible, very definitely from any spot in rural Ireland to Dublin (see the road and railway maps). Work and leisure are removed from the home, and the countryside is alive only with the sound of people driving around from place to place. This leads to a general belief that living in a rural house is in essence 'unsustainable', by which people mean that it is heavy in fossil-fuel use. This lifestyle also leads to a dissolution of a sense of community in rural areas which are now more often than not made up of houses occupied in the evenings only, by tired people watching television while worrying about their mortgage repayments.

The forms of economic and social development pursued throughout the latter half of this century have resulted in this situation, for it was not always so. The patterns of life in rural areas were quite different, and were built upon a much more economic use of movement.

MOBILE CINEMA

The year before last I attended a two-day festival of Werner Herzog films. It took place in a nearby small town, in a state-of-the-art hundred seat cinema. All kinds of people came down out of the mountains for the festival.

This was able to happen in a small town with no fixed cinema because Leitrim County Council, our local authority, invested in a mobile cinema. This cinema travels from town to town as an articulated lorry. It stops, plugs into the mains, and unfolds. Fifteen minutes later the town has a cinema, a cinema which you can walk to. Replacing in the smaller towns the cinemas that have long closed their doors.

It seems revolutionary that something as large as a cinema can move, but if we look in the past we see the mobile library and bank in the 1970s, and earlier still, shops, markets, fairs, circus, a whole world was on the move.

GOOD NEIGHBOURS

My neighbour George is, to borrow his phrase, 'the best of the best'. He

Fluidcity, 2006, 1'38". Dominique Stevens

Produced for the 2006 Venice biennale

The piece examines a new super-rural settlement where a 'soft infrastructure', the existing river system, affords traditionally urban advantages to a linear rural settlement

is kind, gentle and extremely entertaining. Having worked as a bartender for most of his life and having a good ear for stories, he knows everybody for miles and has a good word to say about all, or at least most, of them. He rarely travels beyond Mohill, about three miles away, although once a year his sister in law may drag him away from home to Mayo for a day.

He grew up in the 1950s surrounded by many more people than live here now, in those days there were over thirty people living on our lane, now there are only six (four of which consist in our family). On a day-to-day level more people brought more fun. Lots of conversations during the course of the working day, lots of asking for and receiving help for tasks requiring more hands, and in the evening music, card-games and stories around someone's fire. There were three mobile shops, Tommy Kelly with horse and cart, Bernie Quinn with a lorry, and Jack McBrine with a tractor and trailer. It was a walk

to the pub in the village of Cloone, about 25 minutes, and for a dance hall on a special night you had to get on a bike. Once a week there was a market in Mohill, it was one and a half hours walk away or a cycle ride, but it was worth it, livestock and products to sell, people to meet, and all kinds of journeying traders and musical types, all the stuff you did not have at home.

A few weeks ago McCormicks' circus came to Cloone community centre. It was quite amazing in that it consisted of just one family, two parents and their two sons aged twelve and sixteen. They put on a two-hour show on a Sunday afternoon, and by Monday lunchtime had packed up and headed to the next village. I got talking to George about this and he started to tell me about the circuses of his childhood. In the 1950s a circus would come to Mohill about twice a year, big ones, Duffy's and Fossett's being the notable ones that are still around today. He says normally all the men and children would go for a day into town. When I started to look at the history of the circus in Ireland I began to realize what a big thing it was, in 1870 for example, Duffy's circus was on the road with two hundred and fifty horses with a one mile street parade. As well as this in those days too there were three big fairs a year in Mohill and two in Cloone, so all in all, to balance a day to day life of hard work there was great entertainment. I can relate to this too, my parents went to live in England when they were married, and until I was four years old we lived in a village in Buckinghamshire, from which my father commuted to London. Just like George's stories once or twice a year the Circus came to the village. Sideshows, animals, clowns and strong men all appeared for a few days, and these constitute my first real memories so exciting it all seemed to me. The circus would pack up one morning, your heart would sink, but each time someone would run off with the circus, some bored teenager looking for a life of freedom, who perhaps like me had their first memories of excitement at that circus, left to become the assistant lion tamer, a new trapeze artist, or maybe just to travel to the next town.

What I find enlightening when George describes his life to me is that it seems rich through contact with people, there was enough diversity flowing through Mohill, travelling to him when home seemed boring. When he describes the circus his eyes light up with the memory of it in a way quite unlike the way seen-it-all children who these days fly off to Disneyland or to Lapland to meet Santa describe their trips. He has really not wanted for anything except that as time went on, his neighbours and friends have died or moved away. This not just leaves him more alone than a natural socialite like him would like, more importantly it means that the critical mass of people needed to support the travelling tradesmen and entertainers in fair towns like Mohill does not

exist, so entertainment becomes television and pub based, or reliant on a car.

In contemporary terms he has a very small carbon footprint—he does not drive, he lives in the house that his father built using local materials, uses little electricity, as progress would have it, however, he had his solid fuel range changed into an oil-fired one a few years back, but it's easy to understand as back then oil was cheap and was going to be forever and the local 'mud' turf is so poor and so work-intensive. His life's work in shops and as a barman has served the public, entertained them, given people company. When experts say that it is 'unsustainable to live in a one-off house in a rural area' I think of George and I laugh. The secret was the tradition of a mobility of services across rural Ireland.

TRAVELLERS

The settled community looks at travellers at best with suspicion, more often than not as trouble-makers. Society traditionally mistrusts those who-do-not-do-as-we-do, and since the book of rules is written by the settled community a lot of effort is put into settling travellers, long-term in houses, or short-term in halting sites. This itinerant lifestyle is seen as a problem to be solved.

Wherever one perceives there is a problem, it is worth considering that in fact that very problem is the solution to another problem, and I believe that in fact the travellers are showing us one of the solutions to the current dysfunction of rural life, not one of the problems. Travellers, Gypsies, itinerant are the last stand of a large population of travelling tradesmen, journeymen and itinerant musicians, who have mended, built and made entertainment for rural people since the middle ages, and in living their lives on the move solved one of the intrinsic problems of rural life, the fact that a settled community can be a stifling thing, where conformity is required, where there is no place for new ideas.

It was not just entertainment that travelled, there used to be many travelling trades in Ireland, whitesmiths would travel door-to-door fixing pots and selling tools, weavers too and tailors, creel makers, all people who could not be supported by the work in any one district. Throughout northern Europe the fair as a mean of exchange and social intercourse is an institution far older than the town, and around Ireland some still do exist—the Puck fair in August in Kerry and the horse fair in Ballinasloe are two that I know, that last for a few days, but weekly fairs as a place to buy local foods and services are on the rise again around Ireland in the form of the farmers market.

MARKETS

About two years ago a farmers market started in Boyle, a town close to us. Mari-aymone has a stall, maison djeribi, for which she bakes sourdough bread and

French pâtisserie. This allows us to exchange bread for food from the other stalls and means that if we accept to eat only organic seasonal produce we only enter the doors of a supermarket to buy butter.

For me it is in the politics of food, its production, its sale and its consumption, that the small choices that we make have the largest impact on our lives, our local landscapes and the environment as a whole.

The sale of food is simply the business of getting it from a farm onto your table while remunerating the farmer. Forty percent of freight on the roads is moving food hither and thither, and around the supermarket food industry lies an extraordinarily complex and expensive system of distribution that is only maintained by the buying weight of the supermarket keeping buying prices from farmers uneconomically low, for example a head of cabbage that a farmer is payed 40 cents for by a supermarket might retail at €1.40 a head. The divorcing of consumer from producer has meant that a mesmerizing array of food safety standards have had to be drafted and enforced, since trust is unable to happen at this global scale that supermarkets operate at.

A local market solves many logistical problems.

1. It is local, so the food does not have to travel very far. This means that the food we eat becomes less reliant on imported energy.

2. The person selling the food has produced it, he is a member of your community, if he makes salami that is poisonous, he will simply lose his customers. This means that standards are self regulating. The farmer becomes a visible part of the food chain with direct responsibilities to his customer.

3. The farmer or producer gets a fair price for his food. This makes farming more attractive and profitable. More people can move back into farming, which means more people inhabiting the land.

4. The landscape becomes more essential to the lives of the people that live in it because it is where the food comes from, it becomes more used, and cared for as a resource.

5. The consumer gets good value as the goods are not reliant on numerous middlemen making a profit.

6. Because the market happens only once a week there is an intensity of use that means a community of market users and traders grows up, shopping becomes a social thing, an event, an enjoyment, not a chore.

All this accomplished not by a revolution, not by draconian planning laws, just by a change of shopping habits.

INFRASTRUCTURE

The mobility of services is the key to a functioning rural community. The growing farmers market movement is concerned just with food. What is hopeful, however, is the fact that a mobile structure,

the farmers market, can service a rural area very effectively for its food needs and that we can look at this structure as the germination of a bigger idea, we can examine what else can be hung onto it. Historically the weekly fair sold food, but this aspect was of more interest to the gardenless town dweller, for the farmer the fair allowed him to exchange his goods for money which he could then use to buy services, equipment or entertainment that was not available locally. It was much more then than a food market.

This is where the potential for our growing system of farmers markets lie, add to the market the mobile cinema, bank and library, a computer expert, a doctor, and market day becomes full of opportunities for both trader and consumer, a day out, social contact and all close to home.

Society does not have the resources to service the rural landscape as if it is a spread out city. We need to invent a new mobile infrastructure, that learns from the past and celebrates a different ethos, a dynamic future that draws on the most modern technology, yet fulfils the most ancient desires.

About the author

Dominic Stevens graduated in architecture from University College Dublin in 1989. Worked for Langhof & Leipe Steigelman in Berlin, returning to Dublin in 1995 to commence private practice. Focuses on making buildings and theoretical projects in the irish countryside. Awarded the Kevin Kieran Arts Council Office for Public Works Bursary for research for 2005-2007.