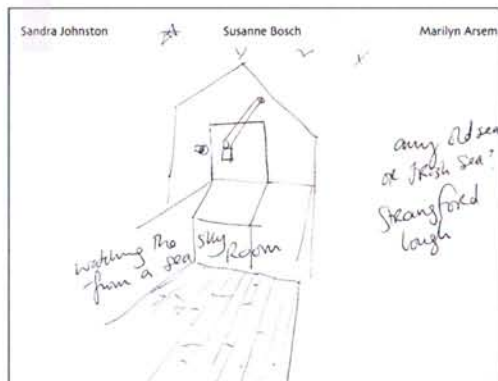


des/IRE

designing houses for contemporary ireland

My Dreamhouse



a view of the ocean
near fields
and in a forest with walking paths
gardens surrounding it - perennial flowers and vegetables
and herbs and fruit trees
not a new house - stone preferred
wooden floors
double tall windows
very high ceilings
fireplaces, even in the bedrooms
sunlight in every room
cross breezes between windows throughout the house
always clean, never any dust
kitchen, with more than enough counters, a gas stove and
double ovens
library, with bookcases floor to ceiling
enough room for all of my books and papers
studio, empty except for a long work table
big porches, with tables and chairs
cupboards and more cupboards
and time (Marilyn)

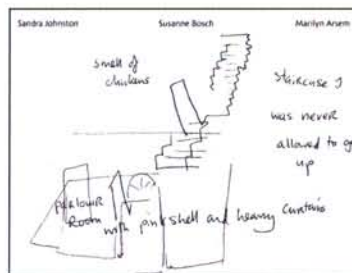
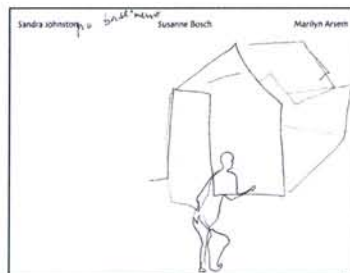
(Sandra)

What are the spaces that we imagine ourselves occupying? What feels safe? What is it that restores us, reminds us of a time when we had no real fears, or believed that there would always be someone with us who could protect us and make everything right again?

When I imagine the perfect home it is a combination of elements of all the different places that I have lived. The ocean site of childhood vacations and a current summer home. The gardens of my grandmother on her farm. Different forests and fields that I played in as a child. The porch of the house I grew up in – the porch on which I spent my summers.

But is it really the space itself, or a quality of how I occupied my body as a child, the way I experienced time and the quality of my attention to my surroundings and to what I choose to do. And to what degree is that understanding of myself then a construction of my memory now? (Marilyn)

Mies Van Der Rohe (with my collaboration) would design my ideal house. This is because I love Minimalism. I don't know anything about architecture but as it'll be the place where I will live, then I think that my opinion really counts. I have no idea where it will be placed, but I do know it will be ideal. So, I'll design it myself. My ideal house would be a built in a place where all the people loved themselves and each other. This is because the people who are living in it are fantastic. Our main goals are to improve* ourselves and to help other people to be better.* Our surroundings do not need help because they are perfect. I don't know if this place could be on earth, it's not important. What I do know, what I'm sure about, is that this place exists, exists in my mind.
*more cultured and healthy (Marc, response through postcard)



(Sandra)

My Dreamhouse, a compilation of artist and participant writings and drawings taken from postcards sent or given back to the artists after the project had ended. (see also page 141)

A Viewing

AGENCY / CHERIE DRIVER

These project pages are based on A Viewing, a participative happening by the artists' group Agency, which was conceived as part of the performance art festival Out of Site 07: live art in public space, held in Dublin in August 2007. Calling to mind many of the underlying anxieties, which themselves gave rise to the des/IRE conference and its related projects, A Viewing provides a further perspective on the issues under discussion at the conference. The project pages have been created by Agency to echo the (often anti-design) conceits of estate agents' brochures, while the text, written by Chérie Driver in collaboration with Agency, underlines people's real experience of domestic/territorial space.



One of the postcards used during the project – each section represents the artist's idea of home.

Our dwellings and their relation to each other are determined by the conditions we find within our environment, our responses to them necessitated by life and our values and notions of the individual, the family and community. The design of the built environment – architecturally and through planning processes – both echoes and forms the hopes of whole communities with regard to the wider environment and our use of its resources. So what is at play when we consider the frenzied housing market of today? What is it that we are buying into when we covet the sexy dream house in the glossy brochures sitting in the estate agents window? Marjorie Garber describes the highly emotional and erotically charged housing market as a form of 'Yuppie pornography', where a house as 'space [be]comes ... [a] substitute for time' in which we can 'stage the life we wish we had time to live'.¹ The collaborative art project that this text represents examines this, and it illustrates the role that the artist, in dialogical collaboration, can have in critical thought and public

The project itself particularly focuses on dwellings for sale, and the community and regeneration context in Dublin 8.

The text that follows is extrapolated and edited writings, e-mail correspondences and informal discussions between the artists and myself [Driver] about the project. It is structured under seven headings, which emerged as key aspects of the project through the conversation and writing process.

DESCRIPTION OF A VIEWING

BOSCH — *A Viewing* allowed us to invite an audience to accompany us as we looked at properties for sale in Dublin 8. We choose properties between €280,000 and €390,000, a price range we believed we could individually afford on our current incomes. We each arranged two viewings, one for each evening, with a real estate manager. All of the viewings took place between 6pm and 6.30pm. We met the audience at the Fatima Luas station. The audience was divided into groups of two to four people, and invited to accompany one of us. An introduction was given at the Luas station or during the walk to the property.

The audience was invited to be the extra eyes at a viewing process and to consciously observe details about the viewing and the property. They were told that this is a real-life situation and that the agent did not know about the art aspect of this viewing.

JOHNSTON — The structuring of *A Viewing* had the deliberate intention of providing an experience where the audience would be on an equal footing with us from the moment of stepping through the door, independent within the process to form their own opinions and have those carried through into a broader discussion. People formed surprisingly strong opinions, considering the brevity of each viewing – fifteen minutes to survey the absent someone's quality of life.

QUALITATIVE ENVIRONMENT / COMPULSORY DREAMING

BOSCH — We predominantly spoke, expressing an interest in the property and Dublin 8, and communicating that we hoped to get a better sense of the area and the properties available. We accepted the status of not being familiar with the neighbourhood, of being middle class and transient. We hoped to get more insight from the participating local audience.

After fifteen minutes with the agent, we then walked through the area for a further ten minutes, reflecting on and in conversation about the viewing while absorbing the neighbourhood context, until reaching the Fatima Community Buildings. This community centre – a complex form of modular structures – has been temporarily displaced on the periphery of the neighbourhood by a major redevelopment programme. This centre provided a conducive environment for us to provide hospitality and open up our discussion on property.

Here, every person was given postcards and asked to write down their observations of the property, and their thoughts as to whether they could live in the place they just viewed. So, across the kitchen table, over tea, bread and soup, we discussed our experiences and observations. The conversation was then followed by our own individual idea of home, presented by indicating three images on the front of the postcards, representations of our own homes. Following this, the audience was invited to send or tell us their idea of home.

A VIEWING EXPERIENCE: RIALTO COTTAGES

(extract from one viewing, 22 August 2007)

ARSEM — Rialto Cottages is a series of cul-de-sacs, with cottages facing into a widened street, some with small greens. This one, closest to the Luas, had just a paved open area. Some of the houses had flowers in pots, and there were children's toys and bicycles strewn on the sidewalks. A few people were out in front of their houses and answered my 'hello'.

Cottages. My image of cottages, especially when I think of cottages in Ireland, is of small, single-storey homes with thatched roofs, surrounded by pastures. These cottages were one-storey row houses, sharing common walls, no yards, no trees. Our estate agent got out of his car as we approached, and greeted us, shaking hands with my companions as well as myself. I asked if it was okay to have my friends along, and if we could take photos. He was, of course, agreeable to both. He excused himself and knocked on the door, used the key to enter, and emerged after a brief moment with an older couple. He told them it would be about fifteen minutes, and they said that they would come back then, as they walked down the street.

We entered, and I felt like a giant. Even though the ceiling had been opened up in most of the rooms to the peaked roof, the rooms were tinier than I expected – a bedroom with only enough room for the bed; a narrow kitchen. And as I write this, I realise

—
A photo-merge image of the discussion on 22 August 2007 of the activities after the viewings, taken around the kitchen table at the Fatima Community Buildings (photo Susanna Bosch)



that there was no table on which to eat a meal. I couldn't really imagine living in a space that small. I have too many books, too many things. But it had a fireplace, something that I have always wanted in a home.

The agent told us that the woman who lived there was moving or had moved to the country to be near her family. It clearly felt half-lived-in – enough furniture, the beds made. The bathroom seemed too stripped of evidence of bodies using it. But there were pictures on all the walls – family photos, photos of the Pope, a mirror map of Ireland. High on a cupboard was a collection of dolls, looking down at us. The woman's personality was evident, but I didn't feel her presence. Nevertheless, I did not feel as if I should look in cupboards or the refrigerator, even though it might make sense to do that if I was serious about buying the house.

I can't remember what the estate agent said – something that made me think there was a garden out back. I opened the back door to see a narrow concrete space. It seemed not even wide enough for a chair; just enough room for a garbage can and maybe a clothesline. A knee-high cement wall separated it from an identical space for the house next door. Nothing green. Certainly not a private space.

As I examined the features of the house, I talked with the agent about the differences between houses in the US, and asked questions about aspects that were different from my own home – the heating, the electrical wiring, the water heater, vents, damp spots on the walls, etc. But I was also worried about taking up too much of his time, and although I did not know who they were, I was conscious of the couple I had seen earlier. Were they also viewers, tenants or the owners, and now hovering somewhere in the neighbourhood?

I was acutely conscious of my three companions and their wandering through the house. I began to wonder about their investigation, and whether their curiosity about the traces of the prior occupant was obvious. I began to panic when one of them used the bathroom and seemed to be in there too long. I knocked on the door, heard a muffled answer, and shortly he emerged. I thanked the agent for his time. I had been clear that this was the first stage of exploring the housing market in order to learn what kinds of houses were available and what they cost, so our departure was speedy. He let us take his picture in front of the house.

STAGE MANAGEMENT OF THE HOME

BOSCH — Any potential home must be a positive sight – clean, light, with a good smell. Before the potential buyers come, there are all kinds of ways to 'make up' the house – new furniture, wallpaper, paint indoors and outdoors, new surfaces, tiles, kitchen, bathrooms, major cleaning of the house, no clutter anywhere, and a smell of flowers. This staging of home



Rialto Cottages, Dublin 8, Wednesday 22 August 2007 (photo Paul Murnahan)
opposite – *Glenmalure Road, Dublin 8, Wednesday 22 August 2007*

also necessitates the removal of objects that link the previous owner to a sense of home. So, private things are removed such as food, make-up and toilet utilities, books, newspapers, clothes, shoes, clutter of all kind. It makes a space look neutral and bigger; it gives potential space for imagination.

DEFERRING THE SPECTACLE FROM THE ARTIST TO THE AGENT TO PARTICIPANT: THE PERFORMANCE OF THE EVERYDAY, THE SALES ACT

BOSCH — The daily work of an agent is to create visions and evoke desires in a perspective buyer's/viewer's head. They choreograph the space to correspond to the potential owner's dreams. They have to be positive and resist fuelling or confirming any negative doubts from residual events in the property, neighbourhood or the agent's presentation. This choreography through the space must also give the potential buyer suspense, with a crescendo at the beginning and/or the end. And, as part of this, the agent must imagine him/herself living there. What would he/she do with it? He/she must step into our shoes and get emotionally engaged with the site.

JOHNSTON — One strategy that several estate agents employed was to stand in the best room of the apartment/house, allowing you to drift and pry, unimpeded, through

the rooms. They are professionally disinterested in the particularity of you, the buyer's movements. Still, their voice travels through the rooms, picking up selling points, and always you are drawn back to that core room, the one space in the building that might sell it to you.

They give the same verbal spiel every day, maybe ten times a day – the stories, compressions of half-truths, semi-plausible suggestions or admissions of ignorance redressed with information about some other feature. Each potential buyer leaves with their own belief as to the real situation, the real reason for selling.

ARSEM — What we did in this work was to shift who and where the performance actually was. Rather than it being us, the artists, as the primary performers, it was, instead, the house, the estate agent. The event was the viewing, which had a very formulaic and familiar structure. Our role as potential buyer was shared with the audience. They joined us in the task of imagining living there, and hence they had as much investment in dissecting the viewing as we did. And, in that respect, it triggered in them, just as in us, consideration of what the ideal home would be; you can't help but compare what you see with what you have now – how and where you live, or how and where you hope to live someday.

All of that was counter to our audience's initial expectations. While they agreed to meet us at the Fatima Luas station, they really knew little else about the event, their role or our role. I assume that their expectation was that they were going to see a staged event, a fiction that was sited at the station. Instead, they were asked to engage with us in a real-life experience, to participate in a viewing of a house for sale, and then to talk about the experience.

Concerning the tension of being there and the perception of transgression, I realised, when writing this material, that I had had that transgressive feeling even when I was actually buying a house. It was directly related to being exposed to the intimate details of someone's life, space, home. Even knowing that certain aspects were staged, and in the effort to imagine living there, those became, on some level the details of my life, of another version of me. It's enough to make a shiver go up your back, a glimpse at an alternative universe.

(RE)VIEWING BEHAVIOUR

JOHNSTON — To scan, to browse, to glimpse, to gaze through the different property strata of an area undergoing rapid gentrification... How many ways are there of looking at property? What is the behaviour that we exhibit? Is there something carnal and aggressive in the action of moving through the compartments formerly known as somebody's home?



Marrowbone Lane, Dublin 8, Thursday 23 August 2007 (photo Carol Lung)
opposite – *Railto Court, Dublin 8, Thursday 23 August 2007*

Have the cupboards, the fridge, the old man's walking stick behind the bedroom door become benchmarks for financial fluidity or desperation? Have the minute personal traces been left inadvertently on a bedside table, or strategically? The smell of a place, saturated saccharine air, a scent plugged into the mains, competes with the smell of the neighbour's Chinese take-away in the hallway. The smell of emptiness, a scent before loneliness and one after separation, a descending ladder of nasal assaults, made up of the nebulous essence of human presence that continues to filter through the air. Is this a sense of neglect or a window of investment, unpacking the stage management of the space, designing the first abstracts we construct of the fiction of occupancy?

Could you live here? Could you leave here? Could you share here?

REFLECTIONS

ARSEM — What rises to the surface now, after several weeks, is the memory of the feeling of being caught between performances – that of the estate agent, of the house, of the absent owners of the house, my own, and that of the audience accompanying me. Each person was fraught with desires in the context of the event. Each had different expectations. Each anticipated certain results, and the potential dynamic of the intersection of different needs was unpredictable.

I remember feeling the desire to flee, or at least not to draw out the interaction. I felt as if I was an intruder in someone's home, in her or his private space. I recognised the feeling from when I was actually buying a house and, prior to that, finding apartments to rent. It was no different, despite the fact that I wasn't intending to buy this time. I was also aware of the desire to look, to find evidence of the owner or the previous people living there, to imagine who they were and how they lived. At the same time, the details that one discovers are often too intimate, too revealing. And the presence of the person is overwhelming.

But my relation to the estate agent was different. I didn't feign intention to buy. I posed my interest as thinking of applying for a job in Dublin and wanting to understand the housing market – what houses were like inside, what they cost, etc. I was honestly curious about the differences between homes, and the market for them, in Dublin and Boston. Nevertheless, I did not want to use too much of the agent's time.

My gravest anxiety was centred on the audience who accompanied me. During the first house visit, I realised that I didn't know those people well enough to even know if they would respect the situation of being in someone else's home. We were made most vulnerable by the audience that we brought into that situation. They could conceivably have taken the stance of being absolved of anti-social behaviour because it was an artwork, i.e. not real life. We had limited control of their behaviour in the house. They could, likewise, have exposed us and what we were doing there.

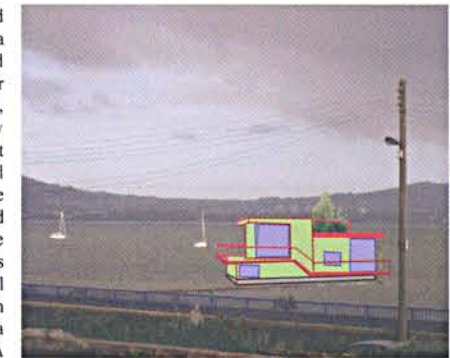
But, more than anything, I was aware of how I always imagine myself living in any city, in any house or apartment that I visit. I imagine what my life might be were I living in that context, how it might be different, who I might be instead...

24/08/07 my ideal home is where I am now. With space and light, location within walking distance of the city. Close to the sea, airport, work and botanic gardens. I live with those I love and am in a community of neighbours and friends, some I have grown up with and known parents, their children & grandchildren. We have shared a lot of living and also respect each other's differences. It's a warm three-bedroom semi in chaotic order! South facing and at present not overlooked with a green playing pitch and trees at the back. (Francis)

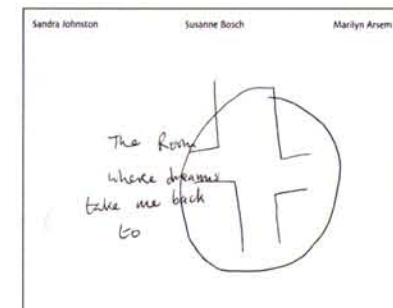


My ideal house is a personal modification of an Edward Larrabee Barnes house. It is single floored and wooden framed, a house that could be built in stages. It centres on a living room and kitchen with mostly glass walls and open spaces. Its quite and peaceful, a safe place for my family and me. It's a place to work, to have time and space, to focus and enjoy life. My parents put a deposit on a new house today, and our old house, a house my father built over thirty years on my families land of a few generations is being sold. I feel sad about that, about losing access to those rooms and spaces that hold important memories. (Chérie)

Ideally my house would be mobile e.g. like a houseboat. It can move from a city site to the countryside. I would always try to find something to rebuild rather than build a new house. Surfaces are important. High-end surfaces. Good paint on the walls, smooth and soft, velvety, a wooden floor or nice tiles like terracotta. I also like tiles from Portugal, Arabic countries and Spain. I would like it to be light, empty and clean. With no clutter. The rooms would have a different character according to the atmosphere I imagine to be ideal for the usage. Examples: The studio space would have a huge window with a view for gazing: sky or landscape. A big, solid table. A good chair. Empty walls and a concrete floor. The living room would be in Arabic style. Colourful carpets, lots of patterns, cushions to sit on, a room with low sofas along all walls. Low tables with ornaments, warm light, ideally with landscape windows, low in height. A space for drinking tea and being comfortable with people. Laying and sitting. A mobile garden in pots on a terrace. (Susanne)



(Susanne)



(Sandra)

ENDNOTES

¹ Marjorie Garber, *Sex and Real Estate: why we love houses* (Anchor, New York, 2001), cited in Joe Moran, *Reading the Everyday* (Routledge, New York, 2005) p.136

Chérie Driver is an observer at Agency projects and has edited this text from various material sent to her by Arsem, Bosch and Johnston.

Credits and thanks to Michelle Browne, curator of *Out of Site 07: live art in public space*, Fiona Whelan, Fatima Community Buildings, and Beyond, Belfast.

My Dreamhouse, a compilation of artist and participant writings and drawings taken from postcards sent or given back to the artists after the project had ended. (see also page 132)