

Garden Estate

Fergus Jordan

Foreword

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Ballymena, or in Irish ‘An Baile Meánach’, meaning the middle townland, is a market town in the centre of County Antrim famous for its weekly and annual agricultural markets and fairs. To the north of Ballymena a housing development called Dunclug was constructed in the 1970s in a small townland of the same name. Building on Ballymena’s standing as a trading town, the area became infamous during the 90s as the heroin dealing capital of the North of Ireland.

During the Troubles Dunclug was one of the largest mixed housing estates in the North where Catholics and Protestants lived side by side in almost equal numbers. The high level of integration within this social experiment made it difficult for paramilitaries to take hold of the space. However, it was perhaps this political neutrality that left the community so vulnerable, as dealers sought out localities where they could openly sell drugs without paramilitary intimidation or control. By 1999 local police estimated Ballymena had several hundred active heroin users with others regularly travelling the 27 miles from Belfast to score in the Dunclug and the Doury Road housing estates.

The design of Dunclug was loosely based on the Radburn planning principles conceived by Clarence Stein, Henry Wright and Marjorie Sewell Cautley. Around the world council estates based on the Radburn model have become synonymous with high crime rates and social deprivation. The basic principle of the Radburn model was to distance roads and cars from pedestrian pathways. Typically this involved the creation of cul-de-sacs and parking spaces servicing the rear of houses, with the front of housing opening onto communal gardens and pathways envisioned to help stimulate community relations. This planning style

enabled drug dealers to keep watch on the single entry points of the estate and make quick getaways through the warren of pathways in and out of the communal gardens. This problem was common to many Radburn-based estates, particularly in the North of Ireland during the on-going Troubles. Police were wary of entering into areas with so many cul-de-sacs for fear of being lured into a trap. Even entering the neighbourhood on foot posed problems—pathways and densely overgrown bushes created rat runs with hundreds of shortcuts and hiding places. Almost every aspect of the urban environment became problematic for the police.

The low-rise flats became the dwellings of choice for dealers, with stairways and shared entrances making entry difficult but anonymous transactions easy. A 1998 BBC Spotlight documentary captured this system, filming drug transactions taking place in the flats with users posting money through a ground floor letterbox whereupon drugs were dropped from a first storey window. With a misdirected desire to eradicate this problem, the local authorities decided to take action by demolishing the flats in question. This was a standard response by authorities to eradicate the ‘cancer’ of drug dealing from the area. This tactic merely interrupted the dealers’ trading until they could find a new location within the boundaries of the estate to set up shop.

In 2006 Dunclug was ranked the fourth worst area for crime and disorder in the North of Ireland. The council continued to eliminate dwellings, cut down trees and block off pathways in an attempt to increase surveillance practices and access to the estate. Yet dealers continued to sell: using vacant housing stock,

hidden behind hedges, anywhere they could, even protected by their own security cameras. All of which implicated these seemingly non-descript landscapes, turning them into spaces of tactical menace.

In 2013 the impact of over a decade of social dysfunction is revealed through the visible fragmentation of the estate, a shell of its former layout, now full of strange empty voids crisscrossed by poorly lit footpaths, high security fencing and overgrown gardens. The estate is policed from the verges, as if to contain this dysfunction. Its short life has been complex; it is the invisible other, beginning as a sectarian free community, its neutrality leading to vulnerability, descending the estate into chaos, physically collapsing under the weight of its deep-seated social problems.

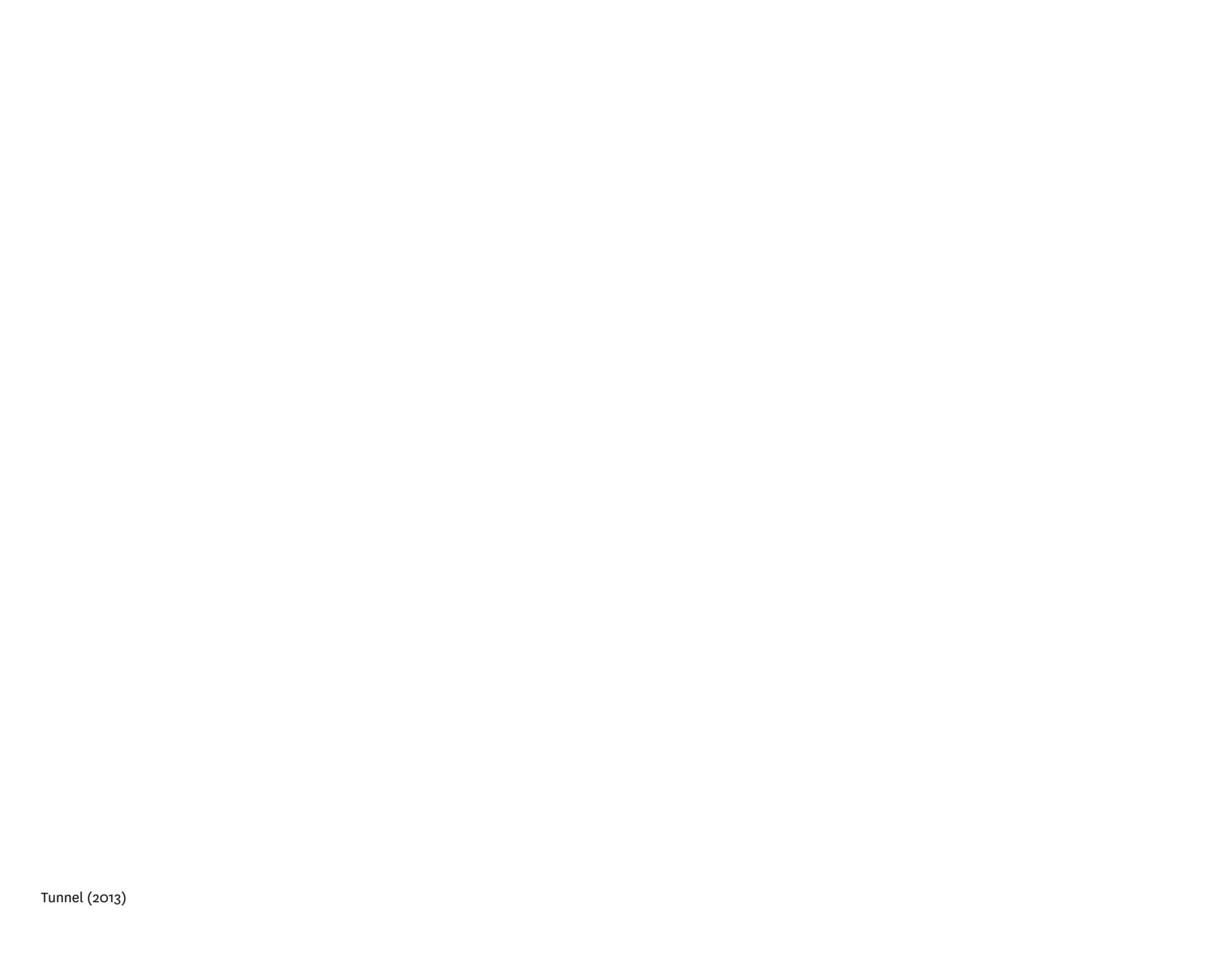
These photographs are an encounter with the Garden Estate, following the labyrinth of footpaths and rat runs, dead ends and cul-de-sacs. Reflecting the tensions and social complexities of council estates found on the edges of many towns and cities, these open dark spaces are the residual landscapes of what is left behind. Like contaminated brown field zones they sit dormant as a testament to the failures of the police and local authorities that govern them.



Dunclug Night 1 (2012)



Dunclug Night 2 (2012)



Tunnel (2013)



Passageway 2 (2013)



Plastic Window (2013)



Den (2013)



Rat Run (2013)







Garden Path (2013)



Five-a-side (2013)



Black Path (2012)





The Forest (2013)

In-Out (2012)





Garden Estate (2013)

Garden Estate

Mirjami Schuppert

When the sun goes down the stars come out. The darkness sets in and changes an inviting looking park or overgrown secret path into something scary, uncomfortable and uncontrollable. Children must go home, it is not safe for them to wander around in the dark. In the comfort of home parents read their children bedtime stories where all the monsters and beasts come out of their dens when the light fades out.

Fergus Jordan's photographs of Dunclug estate tell another story, a story about a utopian garden estate that failed miserably. The series examines a place where all hope has faded, the sun has set indefinitely, and there is no prospect of dawn.

Garden Estate depicts a generic semi-rural housing estate, where there are plenty of green areas, small paths, sparse street lighting and terraced houses. Yet, everything is not quite as it should be; there is a certain unease about the situation, the surroundings, those poorly lit paths. Indeed, it is not quite clear what exactly lies in the bushes, behind the fences and in the shady doorways. No matter how closely we try to look, squint our eyes, the picture does not get any clearer, nor the object in hiding more visible. There is a need to get closer, to go deeper into the maze of traversing walkways of the unknown. Darkness transforms the estate into a game that is laced with a mix of mystery and aversion, curiosity and anxiety.

The lack of light at once emphasises the discomfort of bushy paths, yet it also willingly plays down, disguises and neutralises. In darkness details become nearly invisible, the poor state of the buildings is not quite as clear, the plasticity of the windows not quite as evident. Only barely are the signs of tactical surveillance visible behind the blanket of darkness. Garden Estate

creates a peculiar dynamic between safe and unsafe; although the shadows hide boarded up windows, the feeling of unease and discomfort remains.

The sombre photographs echo the underexposure of the landscape's place within society; not only are the details shielded from public view, it has been consigned to oblivion and become almost invisible. An estate that once aspired to being a lively public place has been transformed into a space controlled by menace. The residents have taken over the estate from the planners, creating new paths that were never anticipated, thus creating a new set of rules that no outsider can follow or refute. What was supposed to be for the community, for the public, has become virtually private and impenetrable by outside forces.

Jordan defies this self-contained injunction by entering its territory when it is nearly vacated. By traversing the estate, pacing up and down the rat runs, the marked and unmarked paths that the community has created over time, he enters a closed area otherwise isolated and guarded. The pattern of the walkways, the paths that cross one another, and the park, leading to the fences and dwellings behind them, are all laid out on a master plan, a diagram plotted on a piece of paper, a view of the future garden estate from above. Only by descending to street level, by walking the ways drawn in a diagram decades earlier, does it come alive to its observer.

By documenting the estate in the stillness of the night, the silent witness stays invisible. The photographer keeps his distance from the housing, and does not wish to be exposed. Not only is the night still, so are the images. The scenes are devoid of people, only an odd police car and horse are visible. Beneath the

empty and calm surface apprehension builds up. The soft images narrate a story of anxious negotiation with the site, where social protocols dictate the movement of the photographer and his methods of production. Snapshot aesthetics and a distinct lack of composure visible in the photographs frame the immediacy of the situation and the tension present at the moment of capture.

The personal presence, the fluidity of the motion and the pace of the observer are strongly visible in the encounters. Together the distance, the closeness, the movement, the hastiness and the blur compose a rhythm, a pace that reflects the experience created by the encounter with the uncontrollable and incomprehensible. The immediacy of the experience is accompanied by a knowledge of the past, the history of the site. Although the original design of the estate is only a faint echo of its utopian dream of functional housing, the past is nevertheless present. The site where the torn down houses once were tells their story as loudly as the buildings that still stand. The memory of the past is confronted and challenged by the present in each picture. The past lives on in the photographs, even if the houses are demolished, the memory of the place will stay. Once the photographs have faded away, the foregone impressions still remain.

Garden Estate is a study about a confined area with its networks of paths and cul-de-sacs surrounding the once to be pedestrian heaven. By engaging with a very specific and limited situation, darkness isolates, yet it also connects this particular area to other dysfunctional geological locales. Darkness does not only cover the signs of decay, it also has the capacity to anonymise and abstract, to create distance.

Imprint

Garden Estate

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Printed in an edition of 750
TVC#027

Published by The Velvet Cell
www.thevelvetcell.com
October 2013

ISBN 978-1-908889-18-8

Photographs: Fergus Jordan
Contributing texts: Mirjami Schuppert | Fergus Jordan
www.fergusjordan.com

Designed by Alex McCooke
www.thisiswork.eu

Printed by GPS Colour Graphics Ltd
www.gpscolour.co.uk

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About the Artist

Fergus Jordan is an Irish artist based in Belfast. He completed a PhD in Photography at the Research Centre of Art, Design and the Built Environment, University of Ulster (2012). His work with photography investigates the conflict between darkness, night and artificial light, city in photography and the study of post-conflict societies. Fergus is currently a member of the Belfast Exposed Engagement Team, set as part of the Paul Hamlyn Foundation 'Our Museum' project.

About the Writer

Mirjami Schuppert is a curator working with photographic archives. In her practice she deploys dialogical curatorial strategies and is interested in the concept of the curatorial as a slowly evolving process.

About the Publisher

The Velvet Cell is an independent publisher of photography books. We are about photography that tells stories, asks questions and encourages dialogue. Each book is a monograph, a solo show for the artist. The Velvet Cell was founded in London in 2011.

Acknowledgements

Garden Estate is funded by the Arts Council of Northern Ireland's Artist's Career Enhancement Scheme.

In addition to receiving funding the project has been developed in partnership with Belfast Exposed Gallery. I would like to thank Joanna Harvey from the Arts Council of Northern Ireland for her guidance throughout the year; I would also like to thank Pauline Hadaway and Ciara Hickey from Belfast Exposed for their invaluable support. This series is published by The Velvet Cell, thanks to Editor-in-Chief Éanna de Fréine for his support and indispensable advice throughout the process of publishing the work and Alex McCooke from This is Work for his seamless design and creative direction. Finally I would like to thank my co-author, Mirjami Schuppert for her contribution, time and many conversations helping shape the outcome of this publication.



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