

There is a forest in my backyard but my house is built from trees grown far away

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Solstice Arts Centre

Review by Sally Starbuck FRIAI

There is a forest in my backyard but my house is built from trees grown far away is the culminating exhibition of Wood Works, a collaboration in which Irish and Estonian architects aim to explore wood, primarily, as a building material.

Since the launch of the exhibition, the climate emergency is both worsening and compounded by the vulnerability of energy supply and price exposed by international threats. The exhibition theme has relevance to both these global crisis and part addresses them directly, albeit at too small a scale. The IPCC is sounding alarms now, impatient about the lack of urgent action being taken. However, even one of the exhibitors expressed their doubts about timber technology having wider applications. Such equivocation is not going to convince hearts or minds in time.

Without reference to the exhibited works as art, the academic aspiration professed overall might have gained more – a springboard perhaps – from greater engagement with the state of the art (in the technological sense). A limited connection to the locality exposes a significant blind spot regarding a five-storey timber office building completed seventeen years ago in Navan (two-hundred metres away). The exhibition's premise infers Estonia holds some kind of apogee to which Ireland ought to aspire, while culture and biomes differ. It would be a mistake to underestimate the intrinsic skills and generations, if not centuries, of acquired expertise. Just one exhibit references Irish timber construction, in fifth- and eight-century oratories and their possible building techniques, illustrated in the abstract.

Each work does have a large explanatory leaflet/poster for visitors to collect from around the gallery and the educational outreach programme has been ambitious: a day for first- to sixth-class primary school students and another for families led by artist Anne Cradden; also a day of hands-on workshops for first- to sixth-year post-primary students, and another for adults with artist Claire Halpin. In addition, Eamon O'Kane's interactive Wood Block Laboratory was especially commissioned by Solstice. Learning and engagement with the exhibition has been provided with teen and adult informal gallery tours in visual-thinking strategies.

To echo the IAF's remark at the opening, there is so much more to this than the exhibition itself. There have been extensive professional and academic seminars to both open and close the exhibition. These were scheduled on Saturday afternoons. Hence, although attended by students, academics, practitioners (or both), there seemed to be scant public service presence by the likes of

the OPW or other commissioning bodies. Arts Council funding supported a free bus from Dublin to the seminar (which was welcome with forecourt price increases breaking long-term records).

Certain works stand out in particular. *Symphony of the Forest Metsanoodikiri*, an original sound art composition, lends atmosphere to the three interconnected gallery spaces. Field recordings of ambient sounds have been transcribed to be recreated on an accordion (with simple percussion). Fascinatingly, these sounds of an Estonian forest were interpreted to be in the musical key G sharp (an insight which may not be gleaned by the casual visitor).

Rammed-earth floor tiles that form one exhibit did intrigue one student architect who may have been expecting timber only. The clay was shuttered in wooden box forms and board-marked like the in-situ concrete of the venue itself.

Leave No Trace, the associated film-screening choice being might tend to reinforce the stereotype of the forest harbouring sensitive individuals retreating there to live on the fringe of society.

Architecture Ireland's January/February edition on the theme of 'wood' reminded us that there is little entirely novel. One exhibit, by an Estonian fabricator, revisits the seemingly tantalising quest for modular technology to build new homes, afresh, after perhaps a century of examples (although none of these forerunners are referenced specifically).

It is unclear whether that original concept, of co-exhibitors with stereo points of view, was rewarding in itself. The effort is necessary but insufficient perhaps to apply knowledge with understanding. The living characteristics of green timber are not explored here nor the reality of shrinkage in use of seasoned or kiln-dried elements. Preservation techniques for external finishes, which are essential, can also have a refined texture worthy of an art gallery in the rediscovery of Japanese charring to seal the grain. For practitioners, there is a sense of constantly receding goals along a narrowing path: ground won is taken for granted without then being scaled up to make the next step needed.

Production through COVID-19 restrictions must have challenged the artistry and perhaps also the dilemma of an overt purpose versus art. Perhaps the elaborate length of the exhibition title is to signify that this change in technological culture, though essential, has no quick-fix without openness to imagination, generosity of creative endeavour, and broader minds.

