

GARDEN ESTATE

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Idealism and the endless striving for utopia, appears to cause problems more profound than those they claim to solve. As an Architect and designer, I trace most of our urban problems back to a pantheon of idealistic and intelligent professionals who I was taught to venerate and revere in architecture school. This tells me that there is something severely lacking in our understanding of the problems, not just in architecture, but also generally across the board, when it comes to decision makers and those in a position to affect real change. It is these fundamental problems with modernity and urbanity that photographer Fergus Jordan confronts in his recent exhibition and publication 'Garden Estate.'



Running in Belfast Exposed from 17th October to the 4th November, the new photographic series investigates the post-utopian landscape of Dunclug housing estate on the outskirts of Ballymena. Based on the principles of the Radburn housing model, Dunclug can trace its ideologies back to the garden city model devised by American architect Frank Lloyd Wright. The estate's expansive communal gardens and low rise, high density housing were developed to provide a sense of community among its residents; while the winding narrow roads and cul-de-sacs which marbled the plan were intended to give the motorcar prominence while at the same time putting an end to the constant thru-traffic of conventional urban living.



This was all in theory of course, not reality.

The reality of Dunclug is rendered in Jordan's stark and haunting photographs. Shot in the dead of night in a series of perilous trips through the troubled estate, risking life, limb and camera, the photos depict the utopian communal gardens as dark and threatening spaces, filled with an unsettling absence; absence of light, absence of people, absence of direction.

A yawning blackness, dotted with delicate highlights of vaguely recognisable objects; a street light, a chimney pot, a fence, a basketball net dominate Jordan's photos. No sooner than the object is discerned however, it dissolves again into inky darkness. One image depicts an overpass, a snaking path leading up to it, a puddle of vibrant light in the black. As the eye is drawn to it one realises how exposed it is; light should suggest safety but in this case it entails visibility, exposure to whatever lies invisible in the dark beyond.

The background to the current condition of Dunclug is the heroin epidemic of the mid 1990's, which tore the social life out of the estate, opening it up to a breed of criminality lacking even the poor excuse of sectarianism. The design of the estate became a tool for the dealers and criminals who knew the warren of

cul-de-sacs and the layout of the housing better than law enforcement ever could. What occurs on a daily basis is an intricately choreographed game of infiltration and withdrawal, attack and retreat; a complex game with rules beyond the understanding of most. There is an inherent logic to these activities, but being beyond even the suggestion of normality imposed by the paramilitary control present in so many of Northern Ireland's sink estates, Dunclug is far beyond what we may refer to as socially functional.

It is the physicality of being in a place devoid of recognisable social conventions which Jordan's photographs lay before us, forcing us to look at the phenomenological reality rather than hackneyed and obvious images showing dereliction, and the patronising objectification of the lower working class present in works with a similar social aspiration.

'Garden Estate' asks us to do more than look; it forces us to empathise.

For more information on 'Garden Estate', or more of Fergus Jordan's work, visit www.fergusjordan.com. 'Garden Estate' is also available as a stunning limited edition photo book from Belfast Exposed or thevelvetcell.com.