

Toxic Recurrences

Kaitlyn Rabach

Like many in Ireland, Sharon begins her morning with a cup of tea. Living with defective concrete, however, makes her routine a bit unusual. Due to the extreme dampness in her home, only one working electrical outlet remains on the first floor. In the kitchen—the room most affected by mold—she moves swiftly to limit her exposure. Many homes in County Donegal, Ireland are full of cracks and mold, and are turning into dust.¹ Sharon’s house is one of more than thirty thousand buildings in Donegal crumbling due to the failures of a self-regulated construction industry. Low estimates for addressing just the housing aspect of this disaster exceed 3.2 billion euros and the current governmental redress scheme is rooted in a politically contaminated system—with regional abandonment, “laughable science” (Rabach 2024) and stalled bureaucracy.

¹ Donegal remains the epicenter of the disaster. [Here](#) you can read about other affected counties.

Unlike other examples of late industrialism (Fortun 2014) with environmental pollutants coming into the home, the toxic substances present in Sharon’s place are produced by the structure itself. The home itself has become toxic. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in County Donegal from 2022 to 2023, I trace the “toxic flows” (Dewan and Sibilis 2023) in the defective concrete homes crisis to unpack the major roles that repeated abandonment and failed governance have played in both producing and prolonging

these toxic exposures. Following Ali Kenner’s (2019) invitation to translate “mold into pharmakon,” I argue that the intimate relationship between homeowner, infrastructure and mold has ignited new forms of political resistance and activism in Ireland.



Concrete and Contamination

During the Celtic Tiger years (1995–2007) the construction industry in Ireland was self-regulated, which resulted in a system without comprehensive audit or inspection—as new property developments, the majority made of concrete, nearly tripled.² Concrete, now seen as synonymous with modernity (Forty 2012), is “dense with contradictions and possibilities” (Woodworth and Chu 2024: 3). In Ireland, the contamination which resulted in the defective concrete crisis happened across many sectors—at the concrete factories, at the level of local and national governance, and finally the polluting of homes and neighborhoods. With demand rising, concrete factories cut corners. At the cement quarries they diluted the mix with aggregate full of iron sulfides, producing poor-quality blocks that have disintegrated over time (Leemann et al. 2023). Donegal

Iron sulfides like pyrite have been identified as the main culprits in Donegal’s defective concrete. Due to their presence, many homes are crumbling.

Photo: Angela Tourish, 2024.

² See Ó Broin 2021 on building defects during the Celtic Tiger years.

County Council continued to use these concrete companies for local projects, boosting trust in them. Amid a mounting housing crisis, the Irish national authorities placed concrete industry professionals on some of the most substantial regulatory committees for the construction industry.³

³ For an analysis on the stakeholders of the crisis, see [Ireland's Timeline: On the Precipice](#) by Debra MacCoy.

Mary Douglas's (2005 [1966]: 36) early work argues that common pollutants such as dirt/waste are "matter out of place," meaning they are not inherently dirty but that they have an ability to disrupt social order when present in our environment. The crumbling blocks in defective concrete homes were thus out of place and in need of containment/reordering. In the case of defective concrete, the pollution actually "enabled and maintained ways of life" (Liboiron, Tironi and Calvillo 2018: 342) because it allowed the industry to build at a pace that matched the financial boom. By turning

Extreme dampness and mold are some of the symptoms of defective concrete. For many homeowners, navigating mold's toxicity has become an everyday reality.

Photo: Angela Tourish, 2024.



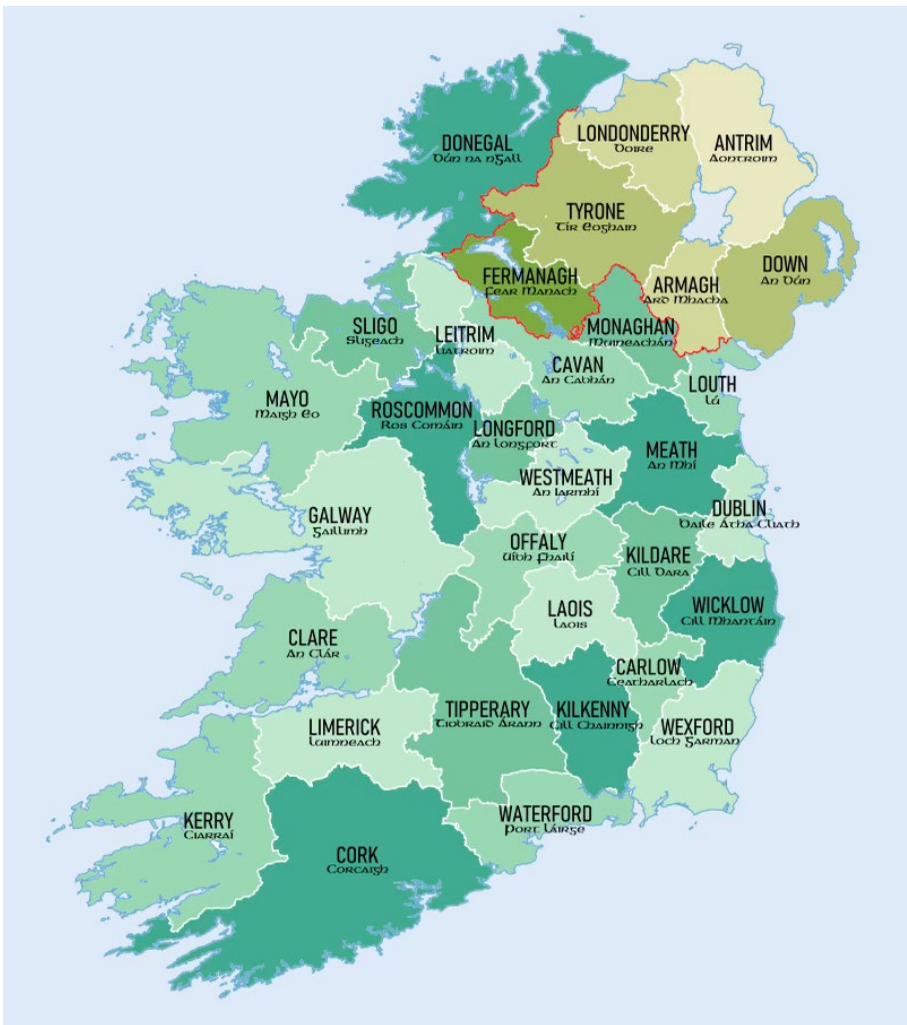
a blind eye to contamination, the government was able to meet the housing demand; meanwhile, social order was disrupted in the homes and neighborhoods themselves. For Douglas, the very definition of home is about bringing a space under control (Douglas

1991), but for these homeowners, mold, cracks and the overall structural stability of their homes were far from controllable.

Latency and Slow Violence

In some places, maintaining the façade of a structurally stable neighborhood, the very integrity of that neighborhood, became the main priority. One homeowner in Letterkenny explained:

“No one wanted to be that neighbor. For years no one wanted to admit it. Both to ourselves, but also to others. We kept our heads in the sand because to take our heads out, to say we had it [defective concrete] meant to out our entire [housing] estate. Just by saying it aloud we completely devalued not only our house but the one next door. We all knew we had it, but we couldn’t say it out loud.”



Map of Ireland, displaying the island’s partition and County Donegal’s isolation from the rest of the Republic. Source: [Wikipedia Commons](#).

By acknowledging the reality of their crumbling homes, homeowners were in danger of polluting the social order. Defective concrete was creating disorder and thus required sorting out. In some instances, threats and insults were targeted at some of the homeowners who were the first to admit that their homes had defective building materials.

Repeated Exposure

When homeowners exposed the situation, they were subject to repeated neglect. Suffering “slow violence” (Nixon 2011), many described the defective concrete disaster as a “slow moving tsunami.” The ongoingness of the problems calls us “to delve into the past to exhume the violent structures of social disparity” (Davies 2021: 23–24) that continue to linger in the contemporary landscape. In Donegal, much of this contemporary abandonment dates from the creation of the modern Irish state and the partition that this entailed. Located in the northwestern corner of the Irish mainland, over ninety percent of the county’s land border is with Northern Ireland. Donegal suffered several bombings during the Troubles. Nicknamed the “forgotten county,” there are still no train lines that link Donegal with the rest of Ireland, nor connections to the national gas network. It was one of the last counties to access high-speed broadband. The physical and political distance from Donegal to Dublin could be a major factor in why defective concrete in the county has not been given serious attention from national lawmakers. Previous iron sulfide disasters have been swiftly remedied in Dublin, but the drawn-out approach for Donegal is yet another example of the county being left behind.

Some of my interlocutors remarked that current remedies by the government are “laughable.” After years of denial, the government finally convened an expert panel in 2015. Relying on a desktop study rather than proper examination of the material in question, the panel identified the wrong mineral as the culprit of the crisis, resulting in major delays for those looking to rebuild. While homeowners continue to live in toxic boxes, the government has not prepared plans to arrange temporary housing while their homes are being rebuilt. The few families who have been able to access the convoluted bureaucratic system of redress are facing shortfalls of up to eighty thousand euros. Many homeowners who need to use the scheme are reminded of previous institutional violence by the Irish state and its failed remedies.⁴

⁴ See [here](#) for an example of another failed Irish redress scheme.

Mold as Pharmakon

With the assistance of local action groups, Sharon and other homeowners had their homes tested for mold (O’Reilly 2023). Results showed elevated fungal spores of *Aspergillus* and *Penicillium*, which emit mycotoxins that can cause fever, chills, shortness of breath, headaches, and long-term problems such as liver and kidney damage and immune deficiency (Shurety 2024). *Penicillium* mold also naturally produces penicillin, the most widely used antibiotic in the world. The mold in Sharon’s home, then, is pharmakon—both remedy and poison. In her work on the housing crisis in Philadelphia, Ali Kenner argues that mold can act as a “remedial pharmakon of the Anthropocene,” an element which can “expose deeper social values and priorities and perhaps policies” (Kenner 2019). In Donegal, exposing the mold in defective concrete houses became a tipping-point

in homeowners' campaign for a one hundred percent redress or full compensation to rebuild their homes. Images of the problem were released via national news coverage and the public gained awareness of the health impacts of mold exposure.

Yielding themselves as toxic subjects, "subjects, human and otherwise, that have been produced by harms that are degrading" (Morgan and Fortun 2020: 4), these Donegal homeowners are shifting the politics of activism in rural Ireland. Instead of hiding the pollution, many are opening up their homes to journalists and documentarians, sharing stories of what it means to breathe late industrialism (Ahmann and Kenner 2020). They have refused to support the two traditional center-right parties—Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil—and have harnessed their experiences to become "[accidental politicians](#)," using their intimate knowledge of failing infrastructure to create an anti-mainstream political party. This new party—100% Redress—became the third most represented party on Donegal County Council and now has a representative in Dáil Éireann, Ireland's primary legislative body. By bringing in experts to test their domestic spaces for mold, they are pushing against the government's former desktop studies. Using mold as pharmakon, they are refusing to allow their campaign to dwindle.

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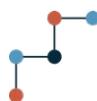
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