

Planning and the Significance of Built and Cultural Heritage in Urban Centres

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Currently, there is a development proposal being put forward for Moore Street, Dublin. The site of the Provisional Irish Government during the 1916 Rising is now subject to a large redevelopment project that will mainly incorporate retail and residential development. This subject area merits research now more than ever as the critical issue that must be addressed in the development outlined above is; how is a site that represents so much to the Irish psyche addressed respectfully? Therefore, there is an inherent tension involved in allowing much needed retail/commercial development in town and city centres to maintain vibrancy and vitality and this is commonly stated in Development Plans across the country, when equally, Irish towns and cities are normally where the greatest concentrations of our built and cultural heritage are found. Inevitably, as urban areas progress, more and more pressure builds on historic areas to deal with the rigours of development. Adaptation and a willingness to protect and introduce longevity to our built and cultural heritage is essential where profitability is not the only primary goal. This paper seeks to review the literature supporting the significance of built and culture heritage in society and its importance within the Planning Process.

Keywords: Planning, Built Heritage, Cultural Heritage, Heritage, Urban Centres.

1 Introduction

Society's needs have progressed and developed over time paralleled with advancements in technology. The Greek philosopher Heraclitus said that *'the only constant is change'*. Bearing this in mind as the world proceeds at pace around us, we must be able to adapt and be aware that there are many challenges facing us in the future. As we progress as a society it is imperative that cultural and built heritage plays a vital role in shaping the future of our built environment. What is heritage? Heritage is a word with many meanings, most relating to its general interpretation as *'that which is inherited from the past'* (McManus, 1997). In a changing world, our built heritage represent significance cultural ideologies which we may recognise for the first time only when individual structures are lost or threatened. It must be ensured that our heritage is conserved in order to pass it on to our successors (Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, 2011). Historic buildings and areas enrich the Irish urban landscape; they help define a unique character that resonate the history, folklore and physical development of our nation.

2 The Significance of Built Heritage

According to Ashworth & Tunbridge in Nasser (2003), heritage is the most modern phase of conservation. It is the concept that provides *'the link between the preservation of the past for its intrinsic value, and as a resource for the modern community'*. There are a range of varying arguments for and against the preservation/restoration/conservation of our cultural and built heritage in urban areas but it remains that it forms an important link between societies past and present milieu.

The [Council of Europe; Granada Convention 1985](#), sets out general objectives of all signatory states including Ireland to meet international standards in the identification and protection of architectural heritage, including groups of

buildings and monuments and their settings. The objectives of the Convention were translated into Irish law through the provisions of Part IV Planning & Development Act 2000 superseding previous legislation (An Taisce, 2011).

According to O' Connell (1989), the city's built fabric should be considered an accumulating resource, whether floorspace or of architectural value, or of both. The city continually adds to this resource by collecting elements from each period of development. Such additions are regarded as achievements in the maturity of the city. Careful protection of that which is already achieved is an important part of development in any sphere. Protection of established achievements should therefore be critical when progress in particular areas could alter the urban fabric. Each generation inherits the city collection in trust for future generations.

Larkham (1996) suggest that psychological, didactic, financial, fashion, and historical motives create the greatest reasoning purporting the significance of built heritage. Lozano in Larkham (1996) states that psychologically, there is a human need for visual stimuli to provide orientation, the observer's awareness of his or her own location in a given environment. Historical areas provide this as a visual confirmation of the past and a fixed reference point of inestimable value. Furthermore, Tuan in Larkham (1996) implies that didactically, there is a moral duty to preserve and conserve our historic heritage to remember past accomplishments of our ancestors. Moreover, Larkham (1996) suggests that financially, there are a number of arguments including; that demolition is cost effective but attitudes have shifted to the 'green' argument and the concept of 'embodied energy' or calculating the energy cost of the existing building compared to the energy cost of its demolition or replacement which often suggest the former is more efficient. Additionally, Larkham (1996) determines that protecting our built heritage has become fashionable, especially, in the political agenda and equally for affluent members of society desiring a form of status through association. Equally, Ruskin in Larkham (1996) advocates that historically, built heritage should be preserved intact without alteration and without exception but this extreme view is impractical with a more favoured view currently of adaptive re-use to inject life back into disused buildings.

Conservation of built heritage is not a neutral process but subject to and shaped by competing interests and values. Urban conservation is often a facet of urban renewal. The older areas of cities, which tend to contain a significant amount of heritage in terms of built form, are those which are subject to regeneration (McCarthy, 2006). There are a number of varying methods that can be associated with the protection of our built heritage with each having their own merits and flaws. John Ruskin championed the preservation of the historic built form whereby he stated that:

we want no new style of architecture...there seems to me to be a wonderful misunderstanding...as to the very nature and meaning of originality, and of all wherein it consists...our architecture will languish, and that in the very dust, until...a universal system of form and workmanship be everywhere adopted and enforced (Ruskin in Larkham, 1996, p.35).

However, his contemporary in the form of [Eugène Viollet-le-Duc](#) created a new science, the scientific restoration of monuments. Past masterpieces should be studied and their lesson applied to current problems. Restoration based on a survey of the remains would see the rebuilding of buildings to a conjectured complete state rather than consolidate existing ruins (Larkham, 1996). Notwithstanding this, William Morris founder of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB) favoured conservation meaning that:

'protection was now not limited to specific styles any more, but based on a critical evaluation of the existing building stock...authentic material was undisturbed and preserved in situ; any attempt to restore or copy would only result in the loss of authenticity and the creation of a fake' (Nasser, 2003, p.469).

These methodologies still form part of the protection agenda today and are constantly put forward as one being a superior approach over the other but the fact remains that the desire to protect the historic built form is at the forefront.

3 The Cultural Importance of Built Heritage

The cultural importance of built heritage is not something that is readily apparent to most observers. It may be something as simple as the remnants of bullet holes on the façade of the Four Courts in Dublin and its associated

history. Equally, it is an intangible element associated with built heritage or a place and may not require a physical manifestation to represent it, could potentially be in the form of a story or local folklore. According to Isar (1986, p.21) *'a people's awareness of its cultural identity can be a force that supports economic development and modernisation and gives them a special dynamic quality'*.

However, cultural heritage is often seen as an economic resource which is ripe for exploitation. An aspect of the focus on economic gain from tourism has seen a narrowing of our perception of heritage (McCarthy, 2006). The commodification of our heritage for the purpose of mass tourism can lead to the dilution of history, whereby the popular histories are the ones which define the character of a particular place and the true nature of cultural heritage is lost. McCarthy (2006) also determines that there is a dichotomy between heritage as a cultural resource and heritage as a capitalist item for consumption.

'As economic pressures in boom-and-bust environments intensify, preserving the character-defining qualities that keep a community invested becomes increasingly important. As important as economic vitality is to the endurance of living historic contexts, it is the shared legacy embodied in historic character that binds community to place, enabling it to rebound from disasters and economic setbacks, whereas economic activity alone can always relocate to another place' (Alderson, 2006, p.32).

Isar (1986, p.21) advocates that *'the only effective modernisation is a process that integrates the heritage of the past'*. Modernisation is equalled with industrialisation and its consequences, particularly urbanisation. There can be no doubt that the destruction brought about by such processes has been and continues to be considerable.

'The urban landscape, in particular, has paid a heavy price...there is also one particularly insidious, apparently non destructive effect for what passes for international modernism...the specific cultural characteristics of all people, their cultural identities, are severely threatened by an advancing tide of uniformity' (Isar, 1986, p. 21).

An import feature of defining the cultural significance of built heritage is the concept of Genius Loci - character or spirit of the place. Originally, the Genius Loci was a Roman invention. In Roman histories it was not only man who had a genius or 'spirit' that followed him through life and determined his fate but also places such as temples or entire cities (Price & King, 2009). Genius Loci is represented in the built form with two key variables, namely; unity and diversity. All urban landscapes contain elements of both. The character of the existing built form should be respected but it could potentially lead to repetition of forms and ultimately lead to gentrification of an area (Larkham, 1996). Standardisation is not something that will maintain the genius loci of an area, therefore, a number of conflicts arise in terms of how best to deal with change.

4 Conflict and Conservation

According to Nasser (2003), there exists within the context of planning in historic environments, a dichotomy between preserving the past for its intrinsic value and the need for development in response to changing societal values. However, Larkham (1996) suggests that the common depiction of conservation tension as a simple dichotomy of 'retain or redevelop' is a gross over-simplification. Substantial planning problems arise as townscapes age and as the social and economic conditions under which they were created change. Buildings become structurally, functionally and economically obsolete. Scale of use has in some cases joined with short-term market forces to produce a disturbing pace of change in urban places. The pace of change induced by short-term market forces is destroying temporal continuity in the city. In this process, permanence and stability are lost (O' Connell, 2006).

Larkham (1996, P.17) determines that *'the key question is how much originality, how much change?'* What is the context; the physical area made up of buildings and spaces, the socio-cultural aspects of land use and psychological value. There is also a tension of design creativity versus retention of existing structures. One of the strongest issues that arises in conservation practice is whether new additions can be made without detracting from the character of an historic structure (Mulligan, 2006).

Consequently, there are a number of approaches that have been developed to approach the conservation of built heritage with a range of varying outcomes, including:

- Deliberate Contrast is premised on creating a distinction between the old and the new. In this sense it adds a new element to the genius loci. The new structure deliberately seeks not to distract attention from the pre-existing structure which itself can become an attraction (Larkham, 1996).
- Façadism is increasingly used as a form of redevelopment in conservation areas, where the front wall of a building is retained and a new structure built behind it. Façadism seems to offer the answer to the dilemma of fitting new buildings into the conserved townscape, although opinion is divided as to whether it provides an imaginative or deceptive solution to townscape conservation. However, its over-use, as the least-cost conservation solution, results in the loss of much fabric and often traditional uses, destroying the character of a conservation area, whilst superficially retaining its appearance (Barrett, 1993).
- Local Architecture Idiom, according to Larkham (1996) attempts to create a 'pseudo-vernacular' whereby it mimics the language of the architecture in the vicinity but unfortunately this often results in token efforts which do not add but rather detract from the genius loci.
- Revival Styles results in the recreation of traditional styles (Neo-Classical or Neo-Georgian for example) to reflect the technique of the existing structures (Larkham, 1996).

5 Planning Practice and Built Heritage

There is widespread agreement that urban areas must change, or they will stagnate. Yet, at the same time, there is growing pressure for preservation from the general public and increasingly from the design and planning profession (Larkham, 1996). The protection of cultural and built heritage requires a multifaceted approach and planners have a key role to play in the process. Mulligan (2006) states that in recognising that a full and comprehensive understanding of a building is essential for successful intervention, collaboration with other experts is paramount.

The preservation of cultural identity is far from being a mere figure of rhetoric. Creative interaction with the past offers a new series of opportunities rather than a string of constraints (Isar, 1986). This allows creative interpretation of the challenges that cultural and built heritage create when development inevitably occurs. Planners have a vital role in regulating and maintaining the importance of cultural and built heritage in society. According to O'Connell (1989) if we did not interfere in the management of the city, it would assume a free progression which many would claim to be natural and thus worthy in principle. In such case, market tendencies would freely adjust the city to a structure serving the strongest needs, destroying anything which no longer had a marketable place in that structure. Intervention is therefore justified as a protection for established values of civilisation which the city in natural progression is inescapable of recognising. Therefore, the planner's position is to create a strategy that minimises adverse impact while allowing for development and prosperity.

Whitehand (2007) suggests that frequently planners show little appreciation of how the form taken by the urban landscape is connected to the historical grain of the city. Awareness of the existence of historic features is not enough. How they fit together in forming a 'mosaic' is critical. Historic features tend to be treated as disconnected patches; management of historical urban landscapes rarely goes any further than conservation of individual buildings, monuments and special areas of historical or architectural significance or both.

Conversely, Larkham (1996) describes Conzen's Morphological Approach, which he determines as a beneficial methodology for planning professionals in determining the correct steps when assessing the merits of a development with cultural and built heritage significance. The approach is threefold: firstly, the approach emphasises the need for some continuity in the built form and the need to understand the significance of genius loci. Secondly, it addresses the concept of 'historicity' which considers various periods and culture associated with a place or building. Thirdly, it provides an analytical framework; the division of the urban landscape into the hierarchy of streets, plots and buildings, which would be extremely useful in measuring the accumulative process of change over

lengthy periods to inform the decision and policy making process and to show precisely how the 'character' is changing.

6 Commercial Development and Built Heritage in Central Areas

Barrett (1993) explains that conservation in most city centres is no longer a marginal activity: it has become an important issue underpinning many city centre planning documents in both the 'recognised' historic towns and large industrial cities. Commercial reuse of the built heritage seems to be a beneficial solution as it is easier to find investors for retail projects than for social or cultural projects. Moreover, the building will have a public function, allowing it to become part of contemporary urban life (Plevoets & Van Cleempoel, 2009). Planning plays a vital role in the spatial organisation of town centres, in a study carried out by English Heritage and CABE (2001), it reviewed a number of retail schemes that were incorporated into the historic fabric of their respective towns and cities. Some of the schemes shown '*...came about only because the Planning Authority had the courage and conviction to reject inferior schemes and demand something better*'. Geddes (2012) suggests that the historic built environment, if imaginatively integrated and invested in can have outstanding results in terms of creating business.

Commercial development performs an important role in all city centres. City centres predominantly have the highest concentration of historic urban fabric. The importance of commercial development in historic areas is key to their durability in terms of creating a new dynamic. Retailing makes a key contribution to the culture and economy of cities, as well as allowing for the continued viability of historic buildings through their adaptation for new uses. In retailing terms there is an increasing focus on the benefits of maintaining and enhancing local distinctiveness of historic areas to give multiples a competitive edge. Above all, the retail sector represents a dynamic, fast changing and competitive environment. The centres which are not able to adapt to new challenges and respond to the ever-increasing competitive pressures are likely to lose trade to those centres which can. If historic centres are starved of new investment, then it is likely that their built environment will suffer alongside their economic vitality and viability. The sensitive development of new retailing therefore is of vital importance (English Heritage, 2005).

7 Conclusion

'Heritage, Driver for Development' was the core theme during the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), 17th General Assembly and Scientific Symposium in which Mr. Benjamin Mouton (Chairman of the Scientific Committee) stated *that*:

'heritage must again be placed at the heart of development concerns; its ownership must be restored to the communities to whom this heritage belongs and to those who come to discover and enjoy it, by rendering it accessible in all its richness' (www.international.icomos.org/Paris2011).

However, according to McCarthy (2006, p.247), '*heritage continues to play second fiddle to economic gain and this is unlikely to change*'. Rodwell (2010) suggests that the most significant threat to the built and cultural heritage of our towns and cities stems from the pace of change and dynamics of development and the need to cater for large floorspace for commercial, retail and services. Conversely, this trend does not necessarily mean the degradation of our cultural and built heritage whereby imaginative and adaptable new uses will offer new leases of life to historic building stock that would otherwise go unused.

Planning will remain a key process in protecting, maintaining and prolonging the built and cultural heritage of our urban centres. The unavoidable consequences of development in urban areas will put pressure on the historic building stock, yet, '*the city must not become the museum of an earlier city, ceasing to live in its own time*' (O'Connell, 1989 p.67). It is only through proper planning that the protection, conservation and management of the historic environment, supported by investment in its maintenance, repair and adaptation that these substantial benefits of our built and cultural heritage can continue to be realised.

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Biographical Statement

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