CONTESTING CONSERVATION-PLANNING: INSIGHTS FROM IRELAND

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Where conservation evolves in contentious political contexts, it can be framed by competing priorities reflecting collective remembering, cultural politics and identities intertwined with the symbolic representation of the built environment. Ireland provides a unique lens to examine these themes as the only western European country to experience colonial domination, which forms a key aspect of the context for the evolution of conservation policy and practice. The aim of this paper is to chart the shifting representations of built heritage in Ireland, and their relevance in the emergence of conservation and heritage policy, set in the context of broader social, political and economic change over time. This is achieved, firstly, by a review of secondary source material to identify key events, eras and trends. Discourses of heritage are then examined in debates of the *Oireachtas* (the Irish legislature), identifying tensions around the emergence of conservation in a historic environment largely associated with colonial power and identity. These shifting discourses are then related to policy evolution, particularly the late adoption of a legislative framework for conservation (in 1999). Finally, conclusions are developed to identify wider lessons from the production of urban conservation priorities in the context of contested heritage.

Keywords
Ireland, post-colonial, conservation-planning, built heritage, discourse

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INTRODUCTION

In most European countries, the 20th Century witnessed a growing interest in urban conservation as both a social movement and public policy concern, and by the 1960s urban conservation had emerged as a key planning and urban policy goal and thereafter became a central feature of how cities positioned themselves within the globalised economy. However, urban conservation can be subject to competing priorities in contentious political contexts, where collective memory and identity can figure strongly in how historic landscapes are understood and valued, thereby impacting upon decision-making within the urban development process. With respect to built heritage in Ireland, specifically, urban centres have their historical roots in waves of colonial settlement, and the built environment in general was often shaped by the tastes of the colonial elite, ranging from prominent domestic architecture in urban settings to large estate houses outside the main urban centres (referred to as the 'big house') and their associated estate villages. Key buildings were inevitably perceived as tools of colonial oppression representing the imperial state's power and dominant colonial capital interests, and landlord estates represented domination of landownership and agricultural production. This context provides an important backdrop to the evolution of conservation policy and practice in Ireland and to how representations of heritage have been continually (re)shaped in the urban development process. The aim of this paper is therefore to chart the sifting representations of built heritage in Ireland, and their relevance in the emergence of conservation and heritage policy, set in the context of broader social, political and economic change over time. To achieve this, we focus, firstly, on secondary source material to identify key events, eras and trends. This informs an examination of discourses of heritage in debates of the *Oireachtas* (the Irish legislature), which provide a consistent record of national heritage debates in the Irish state. This identifies tensions around the emergence of built heritage policy in a historic environment largely associated with colonial power and identity, and shifts in how the historic built environment was represented in different eras. These range from outright antipathy, towards a more positive revalorisation of heritage, and a recent reawakening amongst policymakers to the potential of heritage as a driver of urban regeneration. We then relate these shifting discourses to policy evolution, particularly the late adoption of a comprehensive legislative framework for conservation (from 1999) and the important influence of international charters rather than bottom-up or national priorities in policy agenda-setting. The paper is structured chronologically, firstly outlining the pre-independence context, setting the scene for the second main section of the paper, examining built heritage protection in the period since independence. This section is sub-divided into key themes in the development of conservation over this period: the role of planning and heritage in nation-building; the emergence of a recognisable conservation movement in Ireland; the context which led to early developments in the protection of built heritage in legislation and policy; and the impact in Ireland of wider international trends in conservation. Finally, conclusions are developed to identify wider lessons from the production of urban conservation priorities in the context of contested heritage.

BUILT HERITAGE PROTECTION IN PRE-INDEPENDENCE IRELAND

Though the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland (founded 1849) and the Royal Irish Academy (founded 1785) were involved in the study of archaeology through the nineteenth century, there is little evidence of any concern for the conservation of historic monuments, let alone other older buildings, through much of the 19th century. Such lack of concern is in significant part due to the lack of industrialisation and associated urbanisation, particularly when compared with Britain. Structures or artefacts were first protected in law in Ireland in 1869 under the Irish Church Act[1]. This act, which also disestablished the Church of Ireland, sought to protect ecclesiastical structures or artefacts through transfer of their care to the Commissioners of Public Works[2]. This pre-dates protective legislation in Great Britain, and was concerned exclusively with structures or artefacts of archaeological interest. It was also confined to the property of the Church of Ireland, so is extremely specific and exclusionary in its remit. However, thirteen years later, this concern for monuments was broadened through the Ancient Monuments Protection Act 1882, the first piece of legislation in the then United Kingdom aimed at the

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wider protection of monuments of archaeological importance[3]. The Local Government (Ireland) Act[4] that followed in 1898 was of considerable political significance in that it effectively removed local administration from the hands of wealthy landowners[5]. This was replaced with a system of local authorities elected by the public and, for the first time, created a generation of experienced local politicians. This new Act also gave the new local authorities the power to prosecute for endangerment of 'ancient monuments'[6]. Further Acts in 1900, 1910 and 1913 increased the number of sites protected and improved the operation of the legislation[7].

While there is no evidence that SPAB (the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings) had any impact in Ireland[8], nor the National Trust (UK), a briefly lived 'Georgian Society' in 1908 was the first time in that any serious study was made of structures of less than archaeological interest in Ireland. The existence of such a project gives some indication that, at the beginning of the twentieth century, there was some level of appreciation of architectural heritage, albeit only a very specific type. This society was founded with the intention of making a record of eighteenth-century domestic architecture and decoration, but it was not concerned with the physical conservation of the buildings being recorded, and it existed only for a period of five years until its task was completed[9]. Its founders lamented the decay and destruction of Ireland's Georgian buildings, but the Society seemed resigned to the loss of this heritage. This society is not to be confused with the Irish Georgian Society, discussed later in this paper, founded fifty years later and primarily concerned with preventing the loss of structures, and their physical conservation.

CONSERVATION IN THE MODERN IRISH STATE

Upon the foundation of the Irish Free State in 1922, there was no formal protection for structures not considered to be of archaeological interest – i.e. most of the state's building stock. Furthermore, independence more effectively insulated the state from any direct influence from conservation movements in the United Kingdom. This left the built environment subject primarily to threats within its own confines but also, conversely, to new, more vigorous, indigenous and representative developments in the protection and appreciation of built heritage.

PLANNING, HERITAGE AND NATION-BUILDING

In this context, though there was little economic or industrial development following the foundation of the Irish Free State to threaten Ireland's built heritage, the new government was highly active in solving the state's slum housing problems, and huge swathes of new housing were built in the first ten years of independence[10]. Whelan[11] argues that the built environment can become the focal point of struggle in contentious political contexts. For example, Kincaid[12] notes that Irish planning discourse often dwells on the link between planning, development, and national identity. Similarly, Dublin Corporation had been nationalist-dominated for some time before independence, so Dublin city was well endowed with monuments celebrating nationalist Ireland at the time of independence. Though Whelan specifically examines the role of memorials and monuments, equally, it can be argued that the construction of new estates, such as those at Marino, Drumcondra, Donnycarney and Cabra in the 1920s, were also influenced by the establishment's desire to forge a new identity for the capital of the newly independent state[13]. Comments such as those of John McBride TD illustrate how some within the establishment sought to do this: "Dublin is really a foreign town … The front bench talked about the reincarnation of the Gaelic State; we are going to start from the beginning."[14] In the decades following the establishment of the Free State, the government cleared some of Dublin's worst slums, alleviating social problems that, if ignored, may have had the potential to destabilise the new state. However, the policies of renewal were not effective in the way that John McBride might have hoped. Many corporation-designed estates were regarded as being of low quality and lacking in any distinctively Irish character[15].

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THE EMERGENCE OF HERITAGE CONSERVATION

Into the 1930s, national discourse relating to historic sites tended to dwell upon historical events and places, rather than focusing on buildings. For example, a 1932 Seanad debate on Muckross Estate, the chair of the Seanad mentioned the estate as an inspiration in literature, as the home of "the noblest warriors of the great clans", and as the resting place of "the greatest of the Munster Poets". However, the 15th-century Franciscan friary is only mentioned briefly (albeit in warm terms) as "one of the most beautiful mediaeval buildings in the country", and the 19th-century estate house is ignored[16]. Though archaeological monuments had been protected for some time, there was awareness – at least amongst some – that the level of public appreciation of the historic environment was low[17]. It is in this context that the first piece of post-independence legislation to specifically deal with the protection of built heritage emerged: the National Monuments Act 1930. This was, for the most part, an update of the pre-independence legislation, and therefore related almost exclusively to pre-1600 structures, i.e. those of archaeological interest. However, the 1930 Act took one step to slightly widen influence on the protection of national monuments through the establishment of a National Monuments Advisory Council. The nominated members included representatives of the Keeper of Irish Antiquities from the National Museum, and representatives from the Royal Irish Academy, the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland, and the Royal Institute of the Architects of Ireland[18]. Though significant, the choice of nominees (unsurprisingly) reflects a still narrow, professional interpretation of heritage value.

Another early piece of legislation, the Town and Regional Planning Act, 1934, for the first time provided "for the preservation of structures and objects of artistic, architectural, archæological, or historical interest" under local planning schemes[19]. However, this did not introduce a statutory planning and development control system, so had limited impact, confined largely to Dublin[20]. It did, however, mark a change in professional and political attitudes towards the built environment, as it contained for the first time a statutory recognition that that "structures" other than monuments might be offered statutory protection, though on a discretionary basis only[21]. Implicit in the text is a broadening of that considered to be of importance. Professional discourse had shifted to recognise that there was more to be protected, and for more diverse reasons, than to date; that there was a real threat to Ireland's landscape and towns – in the name of industrial and urban development and of progress more generally.

Following the end of the Second World War, this professional awareness was reflected in the formation in 1948 of *An Taisce* (the National Trust for Ireland), set up following a meeting of leading members of civil society concerned with the impacts of modernisation and development[22] and, arguably, representing the interests and concerns of the elite of the day. From the outset, *An Taisce* set out to protect both the natural and built environment and was later notable as the only non-statutory body prescribed under Section 21(1) of the 1963 Planning Act, to be consulted by local authorities in the making of a development plan. An Taisce's formation perhaps owes as much to the establishment's observance of the impact of urban and rural development on other countries, and their responses to it (compare, The National Trust for Places of Historic Interest or Natural Beauty, England, 1842; the National Trust for Scotland, 1931), as to a growing awareness of the potential for change to harm Ireland's own environment. This reflects an uneven growth in awareness of 'Cultural Built Heritage' in wider society[23]: the political elite used it as a nation-building tool; professionals had (perhaps unknowingly) used it as a means of reinforcing their own value-system; and a third group – the privileged upper-class – began what is today recognisable as the architectural conservation movement. *An Taisce* was not, however, the only expression in civil society of an emergent conservation movement. Specifically, the Irish Georgian Society, founded in 1957, was initially preoccupied with architectural heritage[24], and particularly that of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy, though it slowly broadened its focus over time[25].

Though concern for the protection of certain types of non-archaeological structures had begun to emerge in the 1940s and 50s, it is notable in the discourse of the time that no aspect of the built environment was commonly referred to as 'heritage'. Another notable shift is evident in public discourse in debate relating to the 1951 Arts

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Bill, the remit of which included architecture. The then *Taoiseach* (prime minister), John Costello, referred to the broader arts as part of Ireland's heritage[26], but there was no direct reference to buildings as heritage. In contrast, by 1961, public discourse had shifted to the extent that buildings were now described by some as heritage, specifically, and there was a willingness to accept the colonial architectural legacy as part of Ireland's heritage[27]. In the same period, however, others expressed considerable hostility towards any buildings associated with British rule: "Anything the British built should be knocked down … it is time we showed them we are not afraid to take down the buildings they put up with the blood of Irishmen"[28].

It is notable above that the narratives of Maguire, Burke and Dockrell tend to focus on expert or elite values (the arts, architecture). However, fifteen years later events took place in central Dublin that marked a seminal popular awakening to built heritage and support for its protection. Dublin City Council had proposed the development of new offices on a site at Wood Quay, beside the River Liffey. This site also happened to the principal location of Viking settlement in Dublin and, as a result, a popular campaign emerged against its development. Of this campaign, one of its leaders, historian and Roman Catholic priest, Francis Xavier Martin, wrote that "It was unique because it embraced all classes, creeds, cultural interests and political groups", and, "It was the biggest march in Dublin since the workers came out in the Great Strike of 1913 … Around 20,000 was the accepted figure."[29] Regardless of whether the numbers here are exaggerated, it was a popular campaign in favour of heritage protection for the first time involving the wider public to any significant extent, and attracting the support of public figures as significant as Mary Robinson, then a Senator, and later *Uachtarán na hÉireann* (President of Ireland). It also provoked strong rhetoric, for example that of Senator Gordon Lambert, whose narrative of the situation presented the development of Wood Quay, Ireland's leaders, and even the Irish nation with disdain:

Those who destroy the soul of a city destroy the soul of some of its citizens and the intrusion of the type of office blocks which are planned will be monuments to the cultural ignorance of this generation … The proposed decision to go ahead with the original office block design on this site indicates the very low standard of visual taste in this country.[30]

While the narrative mirrors that presented by some in the 1920s[31], the fundamental difference is that by this time, a section of the wider public had strong opinions on the conservation of physical heritage. Though still speaking from an elite position, Lambert's comments were now reflective of a much wider section of society.

DEVELOPMENT CONTROL AND THE PROTECTION OF ARCHITECTURE AS HERITAGE

Following independence and the end of the Civil War, Ireland of the 1920s experienced agricultural prosperity[32]. However in the 1930s, world depression coupled with the 'economic war' with Britain had a negative impact on Ireland's agricultural industry. Ireland's economy was disproportionately dependent on agriculture, and industrial development lagged behind other northern European countries[33], so the effect of a downturn in agricultural exports was severe. The Second World War followed soon after, giving the Irish economy little chance to recover until afterwards. Therefore, it was not apparent that the government's protectionist economic policies were hindering recovery until 1949[34]. Political crisis ensued[35], resulting in the adoption of free-trade policies by the late 1950s[36]. Bannon[37] suggests that a peculiarly Irish approach to economic programming began to emerge, characterised by "…an abhorrence of 'planning in any rigid sense'; rather, 'flexibility is rightly recognised as being the essence of planning'". It can be argued that this approach has characterised Irish planning ever since, mirrored in what Bannon[38] identified as Ireland's "post-colonial tradition of individualism". Arising from this change in economic policy grew an increasing acceptance that physical planning was integral to successful social and economic development. This shift, in turn, led to the Local Government (Planning and Development) Act, 1963, under reformist *Taoiseach*, Seán Lemass, which for the first time established local planning authorities and a system of development control, and marked an epoch in Irish planning. From this Act emerged the key tension between the perceived public good and the individual private property right, enshrined in the constitution[39], and embedded deep in the Irish psyche as a result of the history of colonial control. Specifically, if a development was

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deemed to be against the public interest, and permission refused, the developer could be compensated for loss suffered through refusal to grant permission. This had implications for the operation of the planning system, as planning refusal cost the state considerable sums of money. In turn, this also led to conflicting narratives in planning relating to what is in the public good – such as protection of structures of artistic, architectural or historic interest. Despite this, protectionary powers were only discretionary[40].

'Preservation' of buildings of interest very much played second-fiddle to the issue of the day – that of economic development. Nevertheless, in 1969, *An Foras Forbartha* (Irish National Institute for Physical Planning and Construction Research) published *The Protection of the National Heritage*[41] most notably recommending that national heritage inventories should be made, financial assistance offered to owners of buildings of architectural significance, and a national Heritage Council be established. It would be many years before these were implemented, perhaps due to both the low level of threat, and ambivalence towards architectural heritage – which many to an extent still saw as foreign, or belonging to an elite. Legislation for a new National Heritage Council was not considered until 1981 and, even then, fell by the wayside. The words of a senator at the time, Dr. Timothy Trevor West, encapsulate the shift in contemporaneous heritage discourse, lauding buildings that many had disowned and condemned less than 20 years earlier[42]:

This Bill marks an increase in our awareness of the importance of the preservation of our heritage. By taking a rather carefree attitude since the foundation of the State and, perhaps going back even further, we have lost a great deal which is now irretrievable... One does not have to go back very far and not very far away from here, to come across one of the major pieces of desecration carried out since the war on the far side of Merrion Square by a State body, when the finest stretch of Georgian housing in the world — a Georgian street one mile long from the bottom of Merrion Square up to Leeson Street — was savaged by the ESB [Electricity Supply Board]. ... I am glad to say that I do not think, with or without this council, that a State body, or any other body, would get away with a design or a development like that nowadays.[43]

A National Heritage Council was eventually formed in September 1988[44]. Amongst other functions, this body had responsibility for the administration of conservation grants for buildings of architectural significance, funded through the National Lottery, and continued in this form until it was abolished by the 1995 Heritage Act.

THE INTERNATIONALISATION OF ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE PROTECTION IN IRELAND

From the late 1940s onwards, the influence of cultural nationalism had begun to wane and new international relationships had begun to develop, notable milestones including Ireland joining the Council of Europe in 1949, and accession to the EEC in 1973. Kincaid[45] suggests that in the 1960s, "International style architecture reflected the state's desire to move beyond what its leaders saw as the jaded rhetoric of cultural nationalism, to create an ideologically objective, a specific, progressive urban space, one that was uniform and ahistorical in design." The architecture of the time reflects these social, political and cultural developments. In parallel with these changes were developments in conservation policy, though Ireland would be very slow to embrace them.

Over time, a number of international charters and conventions sought to establish key principles in relation to conservation of heritage. However, the first to have significant impact on legislative measures for heritage protection in Ireland was the Granada Convention of 1985[46]. Ratified by Ireland in 1997[47], this was a seminal moment in the protection of architectural heritage that would lead to fundamental changes in its protection under the development control system. The long period between signing and ratification is indicative of the extent to which Ireland's existing legislative and policy framework on heritage lagged behind that of other European countries. Stemming from the measures of the Granada Convention, the Irish government published *Strengthening the Protection of the Architectural Heritage48*, which, in turn, finally led to the establishment of

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a National Inventory of Architectural Heritage[49], a new Heritage Council[50], and the mandatory protection of architectural heritage through the Planning and Development Act 2000[51].While in the early 1990s there was a shift towards promotion of 'heritage' in tourism[52], this did not last into the 'Celtic Tiger' era, as funding was cut, for example from *Bord Fáilte's* (the former name for the Irish tourist board) Heritage Towns programme[53]. More recently, however, and reflecting trends elsewhere[54], there has been a resurgence of interest in the potential of heritage to act as an agent in economic and social regeneration[55].

CONCLUSION

This paper has sought to identify key events, eras and trends, to examine shifts in discourse over time, to trace policy evolution, and, finally, to identify wider lessons for urban conservation in contested contexts. The meaning and value of heritage are shaped by their time, and shift slowly, as observed by elsewhere[56]. However, heritage semantics have been further muddied in Ireland's post-colonial context of contested narratives. Narratives of place, cultural memory and power relations between elites and the wider public have played and continue to play a central role in shaping how heritage is understood and is made use of. Built heritage in the early years after independence was represented as foreign, and as a reminder of the former colonial power and oppression. However, heritage has been subject to a revalorisation, characterised by the slow fading of antipathy to legacies of colonialism, and an awakening to the potential of heritage as a resource in social and economic regeneration.

The elaborate conservation system now in place in Ireland implies that the meaning and function of heritage has reached a point of equilibrium. This is, however, questionable, particularly given arguments that that heritage should be about the everyday – for and of everyone[57]. Difficulties are evident in current urban conservation and regeneration efforts in Dublin's north commercial core, which continue to be complicated and stalled by conflict rooted in divergence between policy officials' attempts at impartial assessment of heritage value associated with Ireland's 1916 Easter Rising[58], and the starkly contrasting priorities of professionals and others in wider society. Only if conservation decision-makers make more meaningful and substantive attempts to take account of lay representations of heritage – at all levels from policymaking to individual cases – and reconcile these with professional representations, can there be hope of mitigating these kinds of conservation conflicts rooted in symbolic meaning and identity.

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