

Place Re-Making in Dublin

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One of the defining features of the city of Dublin in recent years has been its diffusion into the surrounding hinterland, creating major outlying suburban communities some of which now qualify as 'edge cities'. One consequence of this diffusion is a re-orientation of the citizenry away from the downtown. It is hard to imagine now but, in the 1940s and 1950s, O'Connell Street was the vibrant core of the city of Dublin replete with entertainment, restaurant, hotel and business facilities. If we try to think of an iconic image from that period, it has to be that of young men and women, sensibly belted against the wind and rain, waiting expectantly for their dates under Clerys' clock. From the 1960s, as the commercial heart of the city migrated across the River Liffey to Grafton Street and St Stephen's Green, O'Connell Street and its surrounding environs went into decline. While the city centre's main thoroughfare retained its status as the civic centrepiece – it is still the main route for all protest marches in the city – lax planning laws saw it increasingly colonised by burger joints, gaming arcades and pound shops. The sad decline of O'Connell Street served to deepen the northside/southside distinction already embedded in the city's narrative.

By the late 1990s, Dublin City Council (then called Dublin Corporation) had devised a bold strategy for visually

refashioning O'Connell Street, and restoring the thoroughfare to its former glory. Central to this strategy was the commissioning of a millennium monument to be erected on the former site of Nelson's Pillar. Throughout 2001 and 2002, Dublin City Council, the general public, the business community on O'Connell Street, artists and environmentalists publicly debated the merits of the chosen design, the 'Spire of Dublin'. While it is clear that part of the agenda is to make the street economically viable once again, there is a wider reasoning behind the municipality's plan of aestheticisation. Cultural objects are more than simply aesthetic, they are part of the symbolic economy which 'constructs both a currency of commercial exchange and a language of social identity'.¹ The Spire represents a vehicle both for the economic revalorisation of the northern side of the river and the expression of a new kind of national and urban narrative. Furthermore, it constitutes a key artefact in the attempted transformation of the spatial order of the city.

Re-orienting urban renewal in Dublin

The evolution of the built environment, whether in the urban core, on the edge of the city or in the outer suburbs, takes place in a political and economic context. Changes have been wrought by the impact of economic global forces working themselves out on local urban landscapes. Urban planning processes have become dominated by the objective of positioning the inner city as an object of inward investment. There is ample evidence that this has been the case in Dublin.

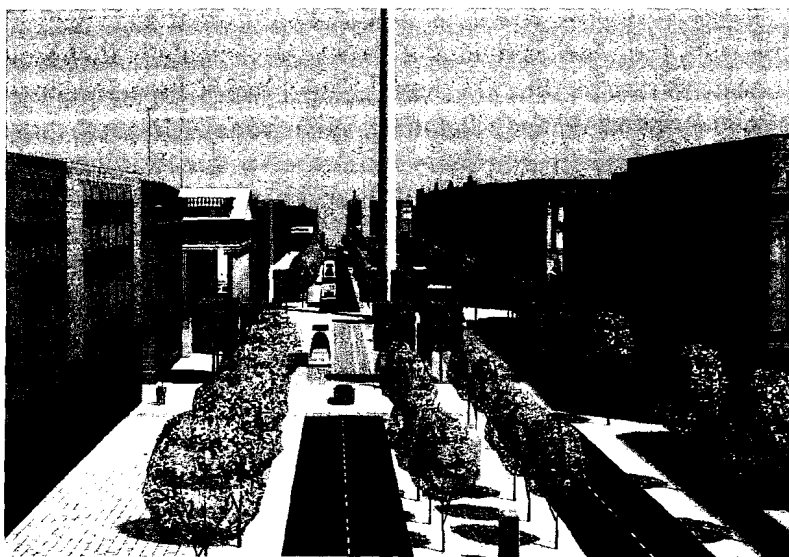
The impetus for urban regeneration in the city was provided by the Urban Renewal Act, 1986, which made available a generous package of tax-based incentives to

¹ S. Zukin, 'Space and Symbols in an Age of Decline', in A. King (ed.), *Re-presenting the City*, London: Routledge, 1998, p. 45.

developers, investors and owner-occupiers. In response to this scheme, and given the generally more favourable prevailing economic circumstances, Dublin in the 1990s experienced a building boom in the office and commercial sectors. The state effectively acted as a catalyst for commercial development and, at the same time, ensured a market for what was actually built through the additional tax incentives for occupancy of commercial buildings and private dwellings. More significantly though, the Act set the context for a re-imagining of Dublin, which altered the vernacular of the city over the decade that followed, in particular through flagship development projects such as the International Financial Services Centre and the cultural quarter of Temple Bar. Provincial Dublin was consigned to the past, to be replaced by gleaming new office blocks, riverside apartment developments, a new restaurant culture and the super pub.

Integrated area planning

More recently, Dublin City Council has attempted a re-crafting of its urban renewal programme to incorporate a 'public good' dimension alongside the more overtly economic motivation that had hitherto dominated. While the original urban renewal scheme developed in 1986 was generally deemed successful, it has been widely accepted that the scheme did little to enhance the socio-economic opportunities of indigenous urban communities. The need for an integrated planning approach was highlighted and subsequently translated into the Department of the Environment's *Guidelines for Integrated Area Plans* (1997), and the Council's *Dublin City Development Plan* (1999). The government approved a new urban renewal scheme in 1998, which provided for a more planned, integrated and focused approach to urban renewal designations. Relevant local authorities seeking designation were required to prepare integrated area plans (IAPs) for parts of urban areas in most need of physical and socio-economic rejuvenation.



O'Connell Street plaza, Dublin City Council

The core objective of the IAP drafted for O'Connell Street is to alter the character of the public domain of the street and its environs through a combination of cultural and aesthetic projects and the tax designation of specific sites. This approach is predicated on the view that economic engines underpin local areas, but equally important are local cultural clusters. The idea underlying the IAP is to stimulate both the economy and culture of the neighbourhood, to re-animate the city centre and to re-invigorate its civic character. According to the IAP:

... nothing short of a redefinition of the existing uses is necessary if the street is to become effective as the main street of the capital and of the country. This will involve the development of a range of uses that generate animation, vitality and the kind of atmosphere that draws all sectors of society into the street and makes people want to stay.²

² www.dublincity.ie/dublin/oconniap2.html

Rather than the street being simply a place that is passed through, the plan envisions a street that people will choose to visit. But to do this, O'Connell Street has to have its sense of place restored.

The Spire and place-remaking in Dublin

As part of the overall strategy for the improvement of O'Connell Street, Dublin City Council advanced a proposal to construct a new monument at the site of the former Nelson's Pillar, to be chosen by way of an international competition. The winning entry – 'Monument of Light' by Ian Ritchie Architects, London – was announced in 1998. The stainless steel monument is a conical spire that tapers from a diameter of 3 metres at the base to a 0.1 metre pointed pinnacle at a height of 120 metres. Initial work on the monument was delayed by Judicial Review proceedings, which sought an environmental impact statement for the project. The statement was duly prepared and certified by the minister. Work began on building the Spire in 2001 and was largely completed by the end of 2002. This was followed by the second part of Phase 1 of the O'Connell Street redevelopment programme, which involves the construction of a paved granite plaza from the Spire to the General Post Office, lined with clipped lime trees and lit by four 16-metre-high lighting masts.

Cultural politics and politico-economic power inevitably become intertwined in the social process of place construction or re-construction. The 'Monument of Light', later renamed the 'Spire of Dublin', is intended to celebrate and become symbolic of the re-invention of O'Connell Street. The tawdry provincialism of the street will be refashioned into a European-style boulevard of the twenty-first century. The creation of the Spire in O'Connell Street, however, is about more than the aestheticisation of the street, although that is central to its brief. It is also about revalorising the street as an economic entity. The development of the Spire cannot be divorced from the expensive makeover of Clerys

department store, the introduction of planning laws to make it more difficult to open 'low-end' outlets on the street and the proposed re-development of the former Carlton cinema site. Indeed Dublin City Council's vision is to re-create O'Connell Street as a quality environment with a range of higher-end uses. It is hoped that the Spire will draw people across the river, providing a beacon of the regeneration of the north inner city and a landmark to orient the local and visiting *flâneur*.

Public monuments, street names, urban planning and architectural initiatives are fundamentally spatial phenomena, rooted in the domain of the cultural landscape.³ Building on the insights of Lefebvre, Harvey contends that 'the material practices and experiences entailed in the construction and experiential qualities of place must be dialectically interrelated with the way places are both represented and imagined'.⁴ We can think about the Spire in terms of these three dimensions: the materiality of place, its representation and its place in the imagination.

O'Connell Street is a distinct cultural space, with its own specific history and determinants. In the eighteenth century, O'Connell Street (formerly Sackville Mall) was originally intended as an elongated residential square rather than a busy commercial thoroughfare.⁵ By the early nineteenth century, the street had become a prestigious commercial boulevard complete with shops, hotels and businesses, predating the similar development of great city-centre avenues in London and Paris. During the Rising in 1916, three-quarters of the buildings on the street were destroyed. The re-building of O'Connell Street became a major concern in the immediate aftermath of the Rising and

³ Y. Whelan, *Re-inventing Modern Dublin*, Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2003, p. 234.

⁴ D. Harvey, 'From Place to Space and Back Again', in J. Bird et al. (eds.), *Mapping the Future: Local Cultures, Global Change*, London: Routledge, 1993, p. 17.

⁵ www.dublincity.ie/profile/publications/iap/oconnellfullaca.pdf

strict guidelines governing height, proportions and corners were implemented in a bid to retain the character of the street. In the 1940s and the 1950s, the street was at the height of its popularity, playing a key commercial, cultural and civic role at the heart of the city.



Clerys' clock

The spatial reorganisation of the city since the 1960s has not been kind to O'Connell Street. Uneven capitalist development in Dublin helped to produce the material decline of the street and its environs, as commercial development moved south of the river or out of the city altogether. The street became characterised by fast food shops, games arcades and vacant lots (a building next to the Carlton cinema site, for example, has been vacant since 1979). In terms of its representation, the street became defined predominantly by its marginality to the city's economy and culture despite its central location. Dubliners increasingly viewed it with foreboding (a 'no-go' area was a popular designation) or indifference. Sited in the unfashionable quarter of the city, O'Connell Street soon became a leitmotif for all that we dislike about the urban condition – drab, dangerous, run down, and virtually deserted at night.

As the city of Dublin has become increasingly subordinated to the capitalist marketplace, there is increasing pressure to counteract placelessness by differentiating spaces within the urban landscape and celebrating them symbolically. Dublin City Council's re-imagining of the city, which is given expression in the *Dublin City Development Plan*, the integrated area plans and in the City Development Board's strategy, *Dublin: A City of Possibilities*,⁶ attempts to revalorise the city through a new focus on place, identity and neighbourhood. This interweaving of economy and culture is key to the setting of objectives for particular places in the city:

The vision for O'Connell Street must include a broad-based commitment to create the kind of quality environment, range of uses and powerful sense of place that can live up to its unequivocal role as the main street

⁶ Dublin City Development Board, *Dublin 2002-2012, A City of Possibilities, Economic, Social and Cultural Strategy*, Dublin: Dublin City Development Board, 2002.

of the capital city; a street where there is a strong dynamic relationship between quality architecture and a vibrant mix of uses, and where a co-ordinated design approach to the public domain is balanced by a concern to develop the social and cultural dimensions of the public spaces; a place where people are attracted to, and feel both stimulated and secure by day and night.⁷

While acknowledging the significance of economic engines of regeneration, Dublin City Council seeks to promote the cultural and civic character of Dublin's neighbourhoods. As an acknowledgement on the part of the municipality that place matters, this represents a significant development. In the wake of the first Spencer Dock planning debacle, a long overdue attempt has been made to articulate a coherent vision for the city of Dublin. The Council is responding to the fear of placelessness, associated with the erosion of a public moral sphere in favour of privatised consumption and tourism. This entails the adoption of a clear political position, wherein culture is promoted as 'a point of concern' underscoring the decision to invest (even in the face of public criticism) in a new symbol for O'Connell Street. That symbol can then be appropriated instrumentally to achieve cultural, political and economic ends.

The Spire is more than a cultural or aesthetic intervention on the street. It is there to safeguard the viability of current and future commercial space. Clerys department store has undergone a multi-million euro makeover and plans are now advanced for a major redevelopment of the Carlton site. The business community has been vocal in its support for the Spire, because of the potential spin-off economic benefits for the street. In a letter to *The Irish Times* on 15 January 2001, the Chairman of Best Ltd, a family-owned company that has traded on the street for more than fifty years, commented: 'we are very conscious

⁷ A. Graham, *O'Connell Street Integrated Area Plan, Annual Report 2000-2001*, Dublin: Dublin City Council, 2001, p. 2.

that the street has suffered during the years since the departure of the Nelson monument. Accordingly, we thoroughly approve of the decision to replace Nelson with a landmark monument worthy of the capital of our country'.

The attempt to bring the rejuvenation to fruition has neither been smooth nor straightforward. The execution of the plan for O'Connell Street alerts us to some of the tensions and ambiguities that exist between the stated goals for the street and how they can be achieved in practice. For example, much of the rhetoric of Dublin City Council focuses on O'Connell Street as a civic space, with the Spire and the new GPO plaza providing a pedestrian-friendly focal point at the south end of the street. Yet, at the same time that plans were moving ahead for the Spire, the Council sought (unsuccessfully) to ban protest marches from O'Connell Street. Had the Council succeeded this would have negated the whole notion of the street as a particular kind of public sphere lending itself to mass gatherings and symbolic speech-making in front of the GPO.

Similarly, the democratic idea of creating high quality civic space at the centre of the city sits rather uncomfortably with the need to ensure that the city is safe for visitors and citizens alike. A major multi-agency initiative launched in 2003 targeted littering, vandalism and other anti-social behaviour in an effort to create a safer, cleaner environment in Dublin's main business and shopping zone, described by the Dublin City Manager, John Fitzgerald, as 'the front parlour' of the city (*The Irish Times*, 22 October 2003). Under the initiative, thousands of people on the city streets were arrested, and begging and street drinking in the city centre have been almost fully eradicated as a result. The streets, in effect, have been cleared of those members of the public who are deemed 'undesirable', in order to make them more attractive to everyone else.

A third tension emerged in relation to the vernacular element of the streetscape. The original plans for the street clearly indicate that most of the plane trees on the central median would be replaced with smaller, European-style

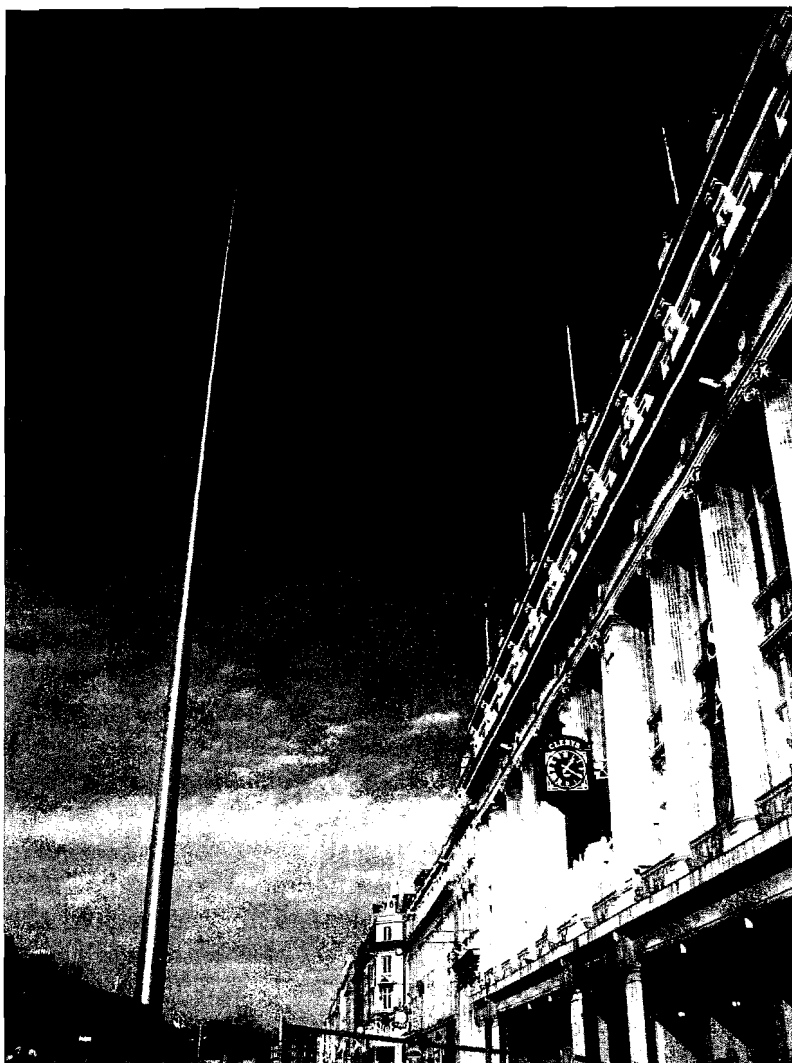
trees and manicured hedging. But when the offending specimens were being unceremoniously felled, a number of Green Party politicians dramatically chained themselves to the trees, and Dublin City Council received hundreds of email and telephone complaints from the general public. After a flurry of public debate, some of the trees were subsequently given a stay of execution. Apart from their historic role as 'witnesses' to the 1916 Rising, the trees also formed part of a natural habitat for wagtails. The reluctance on the part of the public to accept the demise of the trees signals a certain ambiguity about the terrain of O'Connell Street. On the one hand, the idea of re-modelling the street along the lines of a European boulevard is welcomed as an example of Ireland's 'coming of age'. On the other hand, people retain concerns about sweeping change that threatens to obliterate memory, history and heritage on O'Connell Street.

These tensions suggest that the question as to whether or not 'the public' can be successfully re-claimed on O'Connell Street remains. And, more pertinently, we might ask to what does 'the public' actually refer, particularly in the context of conflicting policies that seek to re-animate civic space while simultaneously clearing that space of those deemed undesirable. This has prompted some cultural critics to question whether there is 'any such thing as a public sphere in the culture of late capitalism'.⁸

Inspiring imagination

The evaluation and hierarchical ranking of places – both within cities and between different cities – occurs largely through activities of representation. It is possible to think about O'Connell Street as a space of representation that has over time played a significant role in how Irish people imagine their capital city, the country and themselves.

⁸ W. J. T. Mitchell (ed.), *Art and the Public Sphere*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992, p. 2.



The Spire of Dublin

Despite its material decline it has continued to exercise a distinctive hold on the public imagination. The buildings and monuments on O'Connell Street speak of legendary heroes – Daniel O'Connell, Charles Stuart Parnell, James Larkin and the popular movements that they led: Catholic

emancipation, national self-determination and the labour movement, respectively. The street also evokes memories of the Rising, of the blowing up of Nelson's Pillar, of wet St Patrick's Day parades, of soccer team homecomings and of political marches. Now, the street (and the city centre) is being re-imagined.

A main attraction of the Spire is its iconic potential. While it has only been in place for a short time, it is well on its way to occupying a symbolic place in contemporary culture. One of the early battles that had to be fought by Dublin City Council was to get control of the Spire's potentially lucrative Internet domain name. The Dublin City Development Board has made the Spire a central element of its logo. Two recently published books use the Spire to great effect on their front covers.⁹ RTÉ Television features the Spire on its promotional inserts between programmes. The Spire represents a vehicle through which we might dream of new urban futures. In fact, Ian Ritchie has described it as 'symbolising growth, search, release, thrust ... a pure symbol of optimism for the future' (*The Irish Times*, 9 December 2002). As such, it is intended to embrace a new social identity for both Dublin and Ireland.

Rather than provide another 'hero on horseback', the Council has offered us a piece of abstract art, which, while more difficult to appreciate, suggests a new sophistication in our relationship to the urban landscape. Vivenne Roche, a sculptor and member of the selection jury, describes the Spire as a 'signature' of Dublin for the rest of the world and, because of its sheer simplicity and lack of historical connotations, as 'an ideal emblem for the current times' (*The Irish Times*, 2 January 2001). Furthermore, the monument, which is purely secular but at the same time spectacular enough to invoke the transcendent, eclipses the church spires in the cityscape. In this sense, the Spire represents

⁹ B. Arnold, *The Spire and Other Essays on Contemporary Culture*, Dublin: Liffey Press, 2003; T. P. Coogan, *Ireland in the Twentieth Century*, London: Hutchinson, 2004.

the transformation of social identity in a post-religious, post-rural and post-national Ireland. It re-positions us as urban and would-be-urbane Europeans, who have outgrown the old politics and ideologies and who seek to anchor ourselves in a shiny new future.

The Spire's significance goes beyond its imposing presence as a piece of public art on O'Connell Street or as a vehicle for economic regeneration. The citizens of Dublin have a mental map of the city configured around its key northside and southside co-ordinates. The postal code system – even numbers for the southside, odd numbers for the northside (with the exception of the President's residence and its environs) – allows for automatic categorisation. Property prices on the northside lag behind those on the southside even in the more salubrious neighbourhoods. The symbolic relations between the city's northside and southside are somewhat uneasy. Dublin humour is replete with pejorative jokes about northsiders. The *Phoenix* magazine playfully parodies our northside Taoiseach's diary, which makes generous use of Dublin street idioms. There is a world of difference between the 'cheap and cheerful' ambience of Moore Street and Henry Street on the northern side of the river and the more 'pricey' feel to Grafton Street and its environs on the southern side.

Part of Dublin City Council's overall city strategy is to challenge the north/south division by creating an alternative east/west axis along the northern quays, with the National Museum at Collins Barracks at the western end and O'Connell Street at the eastern end. In this context, the Spire forms the centre point of a strategy to reverse the stereotyping of place in the city, and to encourage Dubliners to think about the spatial ordering of the city in a different way.

Conclusion

Art is frequently seen as somewhat detached from the everyday interests and concerns of the citizenry. In pursuing

a controversial public art project as the centrepiece of the regeneration plan for O'Connell Street, Dublin City Council challenged this viewpoint. The municipality did so in the face of considerable public criticism particularly about the 'wastefulness' of spending public money on art rather than on hospitals and homeless shelters. Significantly, the Council was supported by influential lobbies from within the arts and business communities, as well as by local representatives on the IAP monitoring committee. A partnership of interests succeeded in bringing the Spire into being, not only as an aesthetic re-visioning of O'Connell Street but also as part of a wider strategy of civic boosterism for the north inner city.

The 'Spire of Dublin' is undoubtedly part of a commodity culture and it is already being deployed as a mechanism to get more consumers into O'Connell Street and its environs. But perhaps it also has the potential to be part of an anti-commodity culture. It challenges our aesthetic sensibility, and our received notions of how a monument should look and what it should represent. As public art it arrests our vision in a dramatic way both from a distance and close up. It reinforces the idea that the urban is now an embedded part of Irish social identity, and that we can aspire to the taste and sensibilities of our European counterparts.