

Understanding Limerick: place, heritage and inequality in post-Celtic Tiger Ireland

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Debates about social exclusion are central to heritage, because heritage spaces are not blank canvases. They are spaces where people live and work and when those residents are deeply disadvantaged, their poverty presents specific challenges to heritage development. In Limerick, the most prominent heritage site in the city, King John's Castle is located in an area adjacent to one of the most deprived electoral districts in the Irish state (St. Mary's Park). This part of Limerick city also features the strong presence of some of the city's most notorious criminal gangs.

Despite the significant levels of resources devoted to preserving the King's Island area, heritage development in this part of the city has not been particularly successful. I would argue that the sociological realities faced by local residents are part of the reason why heritage projects have met with mixed success.

Dictionary definitions define heritage as 'valued objects and qualities such as cultural traditions and historic buildings that have been passed down from previous generations'. It is clear that when discussing heritage, we must consider not only the physical object or building itself, but also the meaning that people give to that building and its perceived value linked to that meaning. Not all objects or buildings, even very old ones are regarded as valuable in terms of 'heritage'. Meanings can change and different groups in society often have different sets of meanings.

In these recessionary times, there are strong economic reasons why heritage projects are supported. Heritage sites often form the core of the ‘post-modern leisure district’. These sites provide an anchor structure within a district which becomes gradually surrounded by shops, restaurants and cafes which generate jobs and revenue. Heritage sites attract tourists with money to spend. These sites also strongly attract young professionals with disposable income who populate these districts on a more long-term basis. The net result of the heritage process can often be gentrification – the gradual replacement of poor people with wealthy, middle class residents.

However, disadvantaged residents who already live beside heritage sites may not necessarily co-operate with this process. These residents may have a distinct sense of belonging to that place which differs from the vision of gentrification. They may be hostile to a process which brings in new people, disrupts existing community life and challenges their dominance in that particular territory. In Limerick, the Kings Island area has been populated by disadvantaged residents for hundreds of years and dominated by families involved in criminality who view it as their territory. In examining Kings Island as a heritage site, I do not think much consideration was given to how the site would be managed if gentrification did not occur or was resisted by the residents who already lived in the area.

Apart from the particular challenges of developing a heritage site beside an area of extreme social exclusion, I think there is also a need for heritage authorities to think more seriously about the meaning that King John’s Castle has for the people of Limerick. Having grown up in Limerick city, I never once heard someone say wasn’t King John great, didn’t King John do great things for Limerick. Unlike some of the more successful country house heritage sites in Munster, King John’s Castle has a very strong association with colonialism and was a

symbol of the colonising presence in the city. I have often heard Limerick people describe the building of corporation houses within the Castle itself during the 1930s as an act of local government madness. More recently however, I started to view it as a massive gesture of post-colonial disrespect, a metaphorical two fingers to a bygone colonial regime. Meaning matters. Given that many citizens of Limerick have a complex relationship to colonialism, this complexity has in my view impacted on perceptions of the Castle.

Given these distinct challenges, there will have to be a greater realism about developing heritage in the Kings Island area of the city. It may be useful to examine other European sites where heritage has been developed in disadvantaged neighbourhoods such as the ‘Bairro da Sé’ in Porto, Portugal. There is a need for a bottom-up as well as top-down view of heritage. The Kings Island area of the city has been very important in modern Limerick history in terms of rugby, food and Limerick’s band culture. What constitutes heritage is ultimately subjective and the heritage of those citizens of Limerick who are ordinary or marginalised also needs to be celebrated and valued. The challenge in Limerick is not just to preserve the built heritage of the city but to do it in a way that recognises the specific sociological realities that shape the city’s landscape.