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Urbanity, Exclusionary Discourses and Built Heritage Policy in Ireland

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores shifting representations of the historic built environment in Ireland within both the historic and contemporary policy context. The discussion firstly draws on documentary sources to examine the emergence of built heritage and conservation policy in Ireland, charting the tensions this created in a historic environment largely associated with colonial power and identity. Secondly, the paper examines heritage discourses among policy elites, applying a critical discourse analytical approach to reveal and understand the competing representations of heritage that can underpin conflict in the contemporary policy arena. This draws on a series of in-depth semi-structured interviews with national built heritage policy actors employing photo-elicitation to further reveal unconscious or assumed representations that could be overlooked or simply not mentioned through exclusive use of verbal prompts. The paper concludes by arguing that policy elites, consciously or otherwise, use the ostensibly urbane authorised heritage discourse to exclude competing voices, thereby shaping policy priorities and outcomes. This raises questions over the legitimacy of heritage policy, and its capability to respond in a resourceful and sustainable manner to shifting identities, meanings and relationships.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The nature of the role that policy elites play in heritage policy has come under increasing attention in the last decade. Internationally, heritage professionals have come to dominate heritage policy and decision-making through an official, 'authorised' heritage discourse (Waterton *et al.*, 2006). However, heritage decisions are judgements made in a context where the relationship between place identity, planning and heritage is constantly shifting (Neill, 2005). Though there is a considerable body of literature examining heritage discourse internationally, little attention has been given to exploring post-colonial contexts where a residual colonial legacy can perform a key role in framing place-making processes. This paper aims to address this deficit, and hypothesises that conflict in planning for the cultural built

heritage can be underpinned by competing representations of heritage. The core aim of this paper is therefore to reveal and analyse the competing discourses that can underpin conflict in the contemporary heritage policy arena in Ireland. The paper begins by summarising the conceptual framework in greater detail. Following this, methodology is outlined, including design of interviews involving photo-elicitation. Discussion begins by analysing the historical context, followed by critical discourse analysis of interviews with national policy actors.

2.0 DISCOURSE ANALYSIS AND HERITAGE

Jacobs (1999) and Rydin (2005) both contend that policy decisions constitute a setting where different groups compete to establish a particular version of ‘reality’ in order to pursue their objectives. In this context, Hastings (1999: 91) argues that analysis of discourse is useful in “identifying instances of the exercise of power”, and particularly “ways in which power is being exercised which may not be apparent to or acknowledged by those involved”. In other words, discourse analysis provides a means of delving beneath the more superficial values and meanings of what is said or written. Building on this, Chiapello and Fairclough contend that the social world is made up of “interconnected networks of social practices of diverse sorts” (2002: 193, after Fairclough, 1989). They define a social practice as:

a relatively stabilized form of social activity. Examples would be classroom teaching, television news, family meals, [and] medical consultations[...] Every practice is an articulation of diverse social elements in a relatively stable configuration, always including discourse. (Chiapello and Fairclough, 2002: 185)

They suggest that social practices are comprised of a series of dialectically-related elements: activities, subjects and their social relations, instruments, objects, time and place, forms of consciousness, values, and discourse. The dialectical relationship means, firstly, that discourse can impact upon these various other elements and, secondly, discourse can contribute towards the shaping of social practices. On this basis, Fairclough argues that critical discourse analysis of speech and text can show how language relates to social processes and practices, power, domination and ideology. In other words, crucially, critical discourse analysis can define the role of discourse in the “(re)production of dominance and inequality” (van Dijk, 1993: 279).

In the context of this research, this means that heritage discourse impacts upon the various elements of social practices associated with heritage, and vice versa, causing a shift over time.

More specifically related to the subject of this research, Pendlebury *et al.* (2004) argue that conservation of the Cultural Built Heritage (CBH) is elitist in origin and Waterton *et al.* (2006) further argue that the heritage professional and policy elite have adopted particular narratives, meanings and assumptions related to heritage – what they have styled as the ‘Authorised Heritage Discourse’ (AHD) – the expert account of the heritage story. However, two issues arise from this. Firstly, non-expert and subordinate groups in society may hold radically different views and priorities in relation to heritage and, secondly, these groups often don’t possess the specialist knowledge to engage substantively with the heritage elite. So, heritage decisions are framed by an ‘official’ or ‘authorised’ discourse that is power-laden and potentially contested (Waterton and Smith, 2008; Prangnell *et al.*, 2010; Dryzek, 2001, after Foucault). In this context, Waterton *et al.* (2006) contend that the AHD tends to reinforce the power-position of the heritage elite, though not necessarily deliberately. Even with the best of intentions, the expert nature of the AHD – and therefore exclusionary nature – prevents parity of engagement between experts and non-experts. So, where non-expert groups hold alternative views and priorities, these may not be properly represented in policy, and conflict may result in interactive policy settings due to the contested meanings and assumptions of competing expert and non-expert ‘discourse communities’. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to uncritically assume that everyone in the expert heritage community rigidly conforms to exactly the same views. The discursive territory is complex, with different groups and individuals influenced by, and participating in, multiple discourses.

Shaped through time by a unique combination of shifting political, cultural, social and economic forces, heritage discourse varies with context. In Ireland, as elsewhere, this has implications for the capability of heritage policy to respond to unique, multiple and shifting representations of built heritage.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Documentary Analysis

This section of the paper is intended to explore shifting representations of the historic built environment, relating the emergence of heritage and conservation policy to the wider social, political and economic context unique to post-independence Ireland. It is therefore not intended to form a comprehensive account of every historical turn in events. The examination involves two steps. Firstly, a review of relevant secondary sources was carried out to identify key events and eras, including controversies relating to specific sites or structures, changes in government policy, seminal legislation, or the formation of state or voluntary bodies which championed the causes of heritage and conservation. Secondly, contemporaneous examples of discourse are examined within the context of competing (and shifting) representations of place, and how these played out. Oireachtas (Irish Parliamentary) debates were chosen as the primary source material due to their status as a substantial and consistent record of public debate at a national level over time. Debates were searched for keywords and key phrases, such as names of public bodies, names of reports or legislation, and names of buildings. Where the date of a specific key event is known, the search was narrowed in order to limit the number of results. Quotations were selected to serve as examples of national discourse at key times in relation to specific events or issues. This means that, while the quotations are not necessarily representative of the prevailing public mood, they can reveal examples of shifts in discourse through time, and how discourse reflected, and was used to further, particular interests.

3.2 Interview Design

The form of interviews deemed most appropriate were one-to-one, qualitative, in-depth, semi-structured interviews, to enable individuals to freely and openly articulate their professional and personal opinions and experiences, whilst also facilitating in-depth exploration and discussion within the interview setting. Interviews began with discussion based on the series of open-ended questions. Photographs were then shown to informants separately, firstly facilitating general discussion, allowing

informants to discuss their own examples if they so choose, but also, secondly, allowing informants to consider and discuss issues, values, meanings, etc. elicited specifically from the photographs. Interviews each ran for an average of approximately 1 hour 15 minutes.

3.2.1 Choice of Informants

Informants in the first stage of the process at the national-level are chosen from the group of elite actors involved in defining built heritage discourse at a national level. In relation to this group, Gaskell (2000) highlights the importance that interviews are representative of the full range of the expert group. In the context of this research, this means identifying those with either a formal role in the formation of national built heritage policy, or other key actors in the national built heritage sphere in contemporary Ireland. The list assembled therefore includes government departments and bodies; statutory and professional planning, architectural and heritage bodies and agencies; and voluntary campaigning bodies. Following the identification of national-level organisations, the number of individual informants was decided. Gaskell (2000) emphasises that a large sample of interviews is not required, and that between 15 to 25 interviews is a sufficient and manageable size for a number of reasons. Firstly, the size of the elite/expert community is limited. Secondly, the depth content of responses given by the elite community is where the value of the interviews lies, rather than seeking superficial data from a representative sample of a large number of people. Thirdly, due to the time and resource limits of this research, there is a limit to the number of interviews that can be conducted. Therefore, a target of twenty interviews was set, though in anticipation that some informants might be unable or unwilling to meet, or simply may not respond, twenty-eight individuals were contacted. In the event, nineteen suitable interviews were carried out.

3.2.2 Interview Questions

The style adopted draws specifically on the research design guidance of Wengraf (2001: 57, after Maxwell, 1996, pp.4-5). The starting point in the design of open-ended interview questions is the core research aim, i.e. to identify and examine representations of heritage in the contemporary policy arena in Ireland, and their deployment to further particular interests. Therefore, based on the core research aim,

a number of inter-related research questions are drawn up which, in turn, inform the design of interview questions. These include:

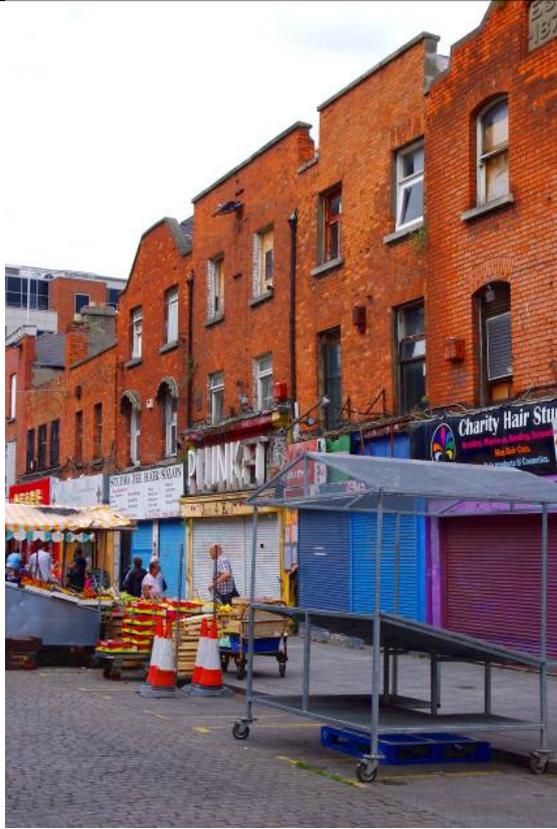
1. What are the heritage prejudices and preferences of the group?
Where do their priorities lie?
2. What is their 'world view' of heritage, the built environment, conservation, architecture, etc.?
3. What is the self-view of the heritage 'establishment', the way it is constructed, the way it operates, and the policy it makes?
4. Are there any areas of conflict within the heritage community or with other groups?
5. How does the heritage establishment regard alternative representations of heritage (e.g. alternative conceptions of heritage and alternative – and potentially competing – heritage priorities)?
6. Do any particular representations or associations cause conflict in dealing with heritage?
7. Do they view the heritage establishment or the 'practice' of heritage, as elitist?
8. What is the accepted view of the heritage 'establishment' on what heritage encompasses/comprises?
9. What do they regard as being the purpose/function of heritage?
10. How do they view the wider public's role in heritage?
11. Do they believe that the colonial roots of Irish planning have an impact today?

Interview questions are formulated to elicit information that might answer the above research questions, and are grouped under topic headings to assist the informant in understanding each area under discussion. In cases where an informant has difficulty in understanding or answering a particular question, more specific prompt questions are asked to aid discussion. In all cases, prompts were kept to a minimum, so as not to distract the informant from their own perspective and comments, or to direct them towards specific answers. All questions were formulated in advance and included in the interview guide.

3.2.3 Photo-Elicitation

Stephenson (2010: 9) contends that the planning field largely ignores the intangible qualities of place and that the planning research community needs to develop “a conceptual framework that accounts for both the rational and intangible qualities of space and place”. Further, while there is much in the literature relating to visualisation methodologies to elicit perceptions in the landscape field (see, for example, Beilin, 2005; Bell, 2000; Stewart *et al.*, 2004; Tress and Tress, 2003), there is little similar material assessing the relationship between historical areas and perceived values (Tweed and Sutherland, 2007, after Tweed *et al.*, 2002). Stephenson goes on to argue that the theories of other social science disciplines can offer inspiration in the development of suitable tools to evaluate “people-place connections, and associated meanings and significance”, and (after Stewart *et al.*, 2004) cites the use of the visual sociological methodology of photo-elicitation as one such means, used alongside more traditional interviews (see for example Harper, 2002; Beilin, 2005; Loeffler, 2005; Gibson and Brown, 2009). Similarly, Van Auken *et al.* (2010) argue that photo-elicitation is rarely used in the planning field, but has the potential to reveal informants’ “tacit, and often unconscious, consumption of representations, images and metaphors”, more effectively than other techniques, can produce different information, and can also help to break down differences in power, class and knowledge between the interviewer and the informant. Drawing on this work, this research proposes to make innovative use of photo elicitation to analyse how informants perceive and interact with the historic built environment. Therefore, the semi-structured interviews described above are complemented by a series of twenty-two photographs. Each photograph was chosen with the aim of eliciting informants’ views on specific topics. Some verbal prompts were included, but without at first explicitly stating the topic concerned, so as to provide some structure, but to leave interpretation as open as possible to the informant. The following table contains examples of the photographs used in interviews, an explanation of what each photo intends to elicit, and the prompts that were used where necessary.

No.16 Moore Street



Aim

Gauge views on different reasons for protection, specifically:

- (i) Historical significance, and
- (ii) Architectural significance

Prompts

- No.16 is the building used by leaders of the 1916 Easter Rising
- The building is a national monument

Lifford Old Courthouse



Aim

Assess attitude towards the architectural legacy of the former ruling elite in Ireland prior to independence

Prompts

- Old courthouse in Lifford, Co. Donegal
- Refurbished and used as a café, library and offices.

Urban vernacular buildings from small Irish towns	
	<p><i>Aim</i></p> <p>Assess attitude towards importance of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Townscape and collective value of architecturally mundane buildings; • Setting;
	<p><i>Prompts</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Location is Raphoe, Co. Donegal • How important are these buildings?
Vernacular farm buildings	
	<p><i>Aim:</i></p> <p>Assess attitude towards importance of vernacular buildings.</p>
	<p><i>Prompts</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Location is Co. Donegal. • Building is unprotected and unlikely to be protected. • Are rural vernacular buildings such as these of value? • Should they be protected?

4.0 ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The results are discussed here under two broad headings that relate to the two methodological stages: firstly examining the historical context and, secondly, examining contemporary heritage discourse in Ireland. Discussion in the first section relates to both secondary and primary documentary material. The second section discusses interview material and is broken down into sections according to informant-generated themes.

4.1 The Emergence of Conservation and Built Heritage Policy in Ireland

Whelan (2001, 2002) argues that the urban landscape can become influenced by a struggle between conflicting interest groups, and Kincaid (2006) further contends that the construction of vast new estates in Dublin, such as those at Marino, Drumcondra, Donnycarney and Cabra in the 1920s, were influenced by the desire of a section of the political establishment to forge a new identity for the capital of the newly independent state. This is evident in the discourse of the time, for example in the words of John McBride, TD, in a 1924 Dáil debate: “Dublin is really a foreign town. The streets, as you pass along, speak of the foreigner and of the foreigner's power [...] we are going to start from the beginning” (McBride, J., 1924, cited in Kincaid, 2006: 74, after Campbell, 1994: 48). The proportion of the Irish people who had any strong views on the architecture of pre-independence Dublin is open to question. In any case, John McBride used this representation of Dublin's historic built environment as a means to further his own political agenda. However, in a Dáil debate of 1955, Donogh O'Malley TD argued that national policies of urban renewal did not deliver the uniquely Irish built environment that John McBride had hoped for: “Unlike other countries, we have nothing in housing typical of our nation [...] We just copy the working-class districts of [...] industrialised Britain.” (O'Malley, 1955).

In a 1932 Seanad debate on Muckross Estate, the discourse dwells on the significance of historical events and places, rather than focusing on what buildings might represent, never mind any suggestion that they should be conserved or protected. The estate house was not even mentioned, and other buildings only mentioned in passing:

And it has inspired many gems of literature, both Irish and English, as for example Tennyson's finest lyric in The Princess. Muckross [estate] means more than that, however, to the Gael, for in the ruined priory of its age-old abbey is the last resting place of the noblest warriors of the great clans of the McCarthys, the O'Sullivans and the O'Donoghues. Here, too, in the chancel, lie two of the greatest of the Munster poets, Egan O'Rahilly and Owen Rua O'Sullivan, the Robert Burns of the native Irish. (Bennett, 1932).

Therefore, an identifiable *movement* for the conservation of built heritage evolved very slowly, over an extended period of time. The Town and Regional Planning Act 1934 marked a change in professional and political attitudes towards buildings, as it contained for the first time a statutory recognition that ‘structures’ other than monuments might be offered statutory protection, though on a discretionary basis only (Town and Regional Planning Act 1934, 2nd Schedule, Part III). An Taisce, the National Trust for Ireland, was formed in 1948, following a meeting of leading members of civil society concerned with the impacts of modernisation and development (Mawhinney, 1989: 94) and, as such, arguably represented the interests and concerns of the elite of the day. Ten years later, the Irish Georgian Society was founded by the Hon. Desmond Guinness, a member of the elite Irish ‘Ascendancy’ (Tovey, 1993). Initially founded following a public outcry against the demolition of two Georgian houses on Kildare Place in 1957, its upper-class origins resulted in a preoccupation with Georgian architecture and with the architectural legacy of the landed classes; even the society’s name betrays its early prejudices explicitly.

Though concern for the protection of buildings was beginning to emerge, it is notable in the discourse that no aspect of the built environment was explicitly referred to as ‘heritage’. However, a 1961 Seanad debate indicates a shift in public discourse, firstly, in the specific mention of buildings as architectural heritage, but also in a willingness signalled, at least amongst Maguire and Burke, to accept the architecture of the Ascendancy as part of Ireland’s heritage.

Many of the 18th century houses in Ireland are wonderful specimens of domestic architecture. Although we may not agree with the reason for building “the big house,” as it was called, we have very good reason to be proud of our fine examples of Georgian architecture. [...] Our Georgian houses are part of our heritage. Some of these houses are wonderful examples of architecture, decoration and stucco-work. Great European artists and architects worked on many of them. We should now use them as a tourist potential because they have become our heritage. (Burke, 1961)

In this debate, Edward Maguire and Denis Burke may have been among the earliest to explicitly refer to buildings as ‘heritage’. Nevertheless, identity and the architectural

legacy of colonialism still held the potential to underpin arguments relating to the built environment:

Some people who had no thoughts about the matter began to have them as soon as the Earl of Pembroke indicated his objection. Then they said: 'What is Irish is good; what is foreign is bad and therefore Fitzwilliam Street must go.' I can think of no stronger evidence of poverty of thought if that is the kind of attitude that is to determine what the architectural future of this city is to be. (Ryan, 1963).

Over time, the discourse further shifted and the priorities of society changed. For example, An Taisce began to broaden their campaigning to a wider range of buildings in the late 1970s (Mullally, 1980, cited in Negussie, 2004: 207) – a process that continued in subsequent decades. Notably, in the *Planning and Development Act 1963*, a key tension emerged between the perceived public good and the individual private property right – a right enshrined in the constitution (*Bunreacht na hÉireann*, Article 43), and embedded deep in the Irish psyche as a result of the history of colonial control. This tension would remain when mandatory protection of built heritage was finally introduced under the *Planning and Development Act 2000*, following Ireland's ratification of the *Granada Convention* in 1997.

4.2 Semi-Structured Interviews with National Policy Actors

The discussion here is broken down according to broad informant-generated themes. Within each section, sub-themes are analysed and discussed in relation to the hypothesis that competing representations of heritage can underpin disagreement and conflict in planning for the historic built environment. Quotations were selected as representative of a particular theme or argument identified as being significant through the coding process (e.g. in terms of the number of informants who raised it, or in terms of the significance of a particular argument relative to the views of the rest of the expert group, or to the research aim). Each informant is referred to by a codename (e.g. N2) to protect their identity.

4.2.1 Built Heritage and Character

To explore elite actors' opinions on non-expert representations of the built environment, informants were asked for their opinion on protection of built heritage arising from character alone, as opposed to professionally assessed statutory criteria. Nine informants were of the opinion that a structure regarded as being of character should be given statutory heritage protection – regardless of whether it meets the statutory categories of special interest. However, N9 was strongly defensive of existing legislation and guidelines, and dismissive of the possibility that anything of character might be overlooked: “Character is contained in the Act. Part IV covers everything; it’s comprehensive. The Act is robust in that regard.” In contrast, N11 made the key argument that legislation doesn’t define the full extent of what the term character means. The implication was that buildings or areas that non-experts regard as having character are being overlooked. N11 attempted to define character, arguing that built heritage is place-specific, and contributes to a sense of place and local identity:

‘A familiar and cherished thing’, so it’s something that people are used to, part of their daily experience, part of their mental map, part of their identity [...] It’s bound up with their place identity. So that’s character as well.

Here, an apparent divergence of opinion from the approach in legislation and guidelines emanates from an unresolved dichotomy between a need, on one hand, for heritage to be representative of the public to whom it belongs and, on the other, the assessment of heritage according to clearly-defined criteria controlled by elite actors. In this regard, N1 argues that there is “maybe a lack of critical appreciation of what community values - or community value - should be assigned to heritage issues”. So, while some within the policy elite may wish to develop and broaden elite heritage discourse, others are perhaps unwilling. Indeed, what incentive is there for the heritage elite to complicate the assessment of built heritage and character with values that they may not even recognise?

4.2.2 Predilection for Traditional Professional Architectural Heritage Values

Informants were asked for their views on heritage protection priorities. It is not surprising that eleven informants prioritised authenticity of material fabric and physical architectural details though, notably, N12 perceived that many are “up yer fuckin’ arse” in this regard, i.e. unnecessarily obsessed with what N12 regards as

minor details. There was also explicit prejudice expressed by four informants against consideration of anything other than exclusively architectural reasons for protection – even if already in legislation. In relation to 16 Moore Street, N16 was particularly outspoken:

N16: Yea, well, that's always been a funny one, in my view.

INT: Should the building be protected?

N16: From what, like?" [...] There's nothing else to be done with it, other than just leave it there. So it's a waste of resources. [...] I'm not somebody who necessarily believes that everything that has had a significant past has to be retained. And, eh, so, if somebody says, 'oh! It was a place where the 1916 people were hanging out, or did this, and that, and the other.' I say well, right, ok. Now, what does that mean in terms of this floor and this wall [in tongue in cheek manner]? You know? I'm not so sure. I'd like to hear that argument made.

4.2.3 Built Heritage Protection in Ireland

Seven informants were critical of the system of heritage conservation and management in Ireland, making a variety of criticisms. More specifically, eleven informants contended that the approach to built heritage conservation and management in Ireland is too narrowly focussed, and needs to be more holistic, encapsulated by N18:

Well, I mean, one of the glaring ones, from my perspective, is the lack of understanding of how – even among other people in the field: the Landmark Trust activists; the Civic Trust activists; the Georgian Society activists – the lack of understanding of the holistic approach. It's probably to do with training; it's to do with universities.

Under the same sub-theme, and specifically in relation to built fabric, N2 frames the case that conservation is too narrowly focussed, in simple terms, as two conflicting traditions:

[Conservation] was too legalistic; it was – probably to some extent – was not embracing enough of the context of conservation. [...] And that, probably, the idea of urban fabric and so on, it's become too object-specific; too building-specific. And probably [conservation] disregarded the fact that some very fine architects who might be identified as what might

be called mainstream or competitive architects, have demonstrated a sensitive and an enterprising and innovative way of dealing with heritage

This suggests that while current practices are long established in the narratives, priorities and institutions of the professions and bodies of the expert group, the system – or those with control – is not adequately self-critical. Again under the same theme N12 makes very specific criticism of the Heritage Council's Village Design Statement programme:

Personally, I don't like them. [...] I believe they are too narrow in their focus, and would be of the opinion that a planning and economic study would be a better way to do things.

However, while N2, N12 and others share the same criticism of built heritage conservation, their criticisms are framed by their own perspectives, and show some attempt to further their own agendas (N2 furthers a broad architectural agenda; N12 furthers a planning agenda). This does not render their views invalid, but illustrates the capability and tendency for discourse to reinforce actors' own interests. Eleven informants also specifically criticised groups other than heritage experts, and similar conclusions can be drawn from the arguments put forward.

4.2.4 Elite Heritage

Four informants attempted in various ways to downplay the idea that heritage is the pursuit of elites (of one kind or another) by stressing that heritage – in broad terms – is not something that only elites are concerned about. For example, N13 argued:

It's not that simple. The success of heritage week suggests that these are not just the pursuits of the elite. Heritage week has arguably changed people's perspective of built heritage.

Similarly, N19 argued that interest in heritage and conservation have now become popularised through the media. However, eleven informants that heritage *is* an elitist pursuit. Of these, seven informants explicitly referred an expert/professional elite. N18 highlights the issue:

*One is us, the specialists, talking down to people. And that is a factor of all specialities; **all** professionals tend to do that. [...] That, plus, if I could call it gentrification or 'grandification' of heritage. You know, the big house heritage, the fine art approach to things. And that, of itself, is naturally elitist.*

N10 makes a similar argument:

You see traditionally you'd have somebody with a moustache maybe with a tweed jacket with leather elbow patches and they were the expert. And they called all the shots. But that'll only get you so far because it's a very narrow range of values.

N10 also highlights that international heritage charters and conventions over the years fell into this pattern, though notes that this has started to change:

Take the traditional ones [conservation charters], the Granada and Valletta one. It's all about experts and values, em, very much top down. You should do this, you shouldn't do that. But if you look at the Florence one and if you look at the really interesting Faro one, it talks about heritage as almost as kind of a common human right, something for society as a means of expressing themselves, forging identity.

Further, N17 specifically highlights the exclusionary function that expert language can have:

I find that the [...] language used in development plans, [...] which have architectural heritage chapters, is very much, you know, architects and it's to do with planning, it's to do with language. You can see it's not the sort of terminology most people would use or in many cases even understand.

It is significant that as many as seven out of twenty informants took the view that heritage is the preserve of an expert elite. With the power to exclude alternative, non-expert representations of heritage, this places the legitimacy of conservation and heritage policy in question.

4.2.5 Appreciation of Built Heritage

There was a perception amongst seven informants that the wider public don't appreciate built heritage. For example, N19 expressed bemusement as to why the public in small towns in Ireland have no interest in their own local built heritage. Four informants believe that a lack of understanding is responsible, but N9 contends that the cause is an absence of a sense of ownership of heritage. The notion of a sense of 'ownership' is discussed further, below, in relation to both colonial legacies in the built environment, and public involvement. Informants were also asked for their opinions on different types of buildings. Although there was consensus that modernist buildings are of architectural significance, five informants were ambivalent

in their views, which hold the potential to impact upon priorities in decision-making. For example, N4: “Call me philistine, but I do not consider *Busáras* has any beauty [laughs]. But I appreciate that it was built to the very highest of standards [...]”. There was similar ambivalence relating to vernacular buildings. While twelve informants believe vernacular buildings have heritage value, only eight believe that they are worthy of protection. N11 attempted to explain:

I always get annoyed when people talk about ‘vernacular architecture’; I think they’re two completely separate things [...]. [People] find it easier to identify with the values associated with the vernacular tradition of building; and very difficult to accept the values associated with, eh, high-art architecture.

This suggests that the heritage value of vernacular buildings is not properly accounted for under current legislation. This also mirrors the dichotomy between expert and non-expert heritage values, discussed above.

4.2.6 Colonial Legacies

Opinion was also divided on the extent to which colonial history has a bearing on the conservation and management of the historic environment in contemporary Ireland, and even whether it has any relevance at all. Informant responses can be divided into two broad, inter-related categories: firstly, a view that legacies of colonialism still have an impact today; and, secondly, attempts made by informants to downplay the impact of legacies of colonialism, or to entirely dismiss that colonialism has any impact today.

Fifteen informants made comments that fall into the first category. In simplistic terms, N7 uses one specific example:

In relation to Carton House – now open to the public as a golf course and luxury hotel – Paddy Kelly said ‘we have it now’. He didn’t fully appreciate that the owners of the house were Irish – the FitzGeralds. It’s perception.

The place of the FitzGerald family in Irish society and history is subject to different representations. These may involve variation in how Irishness is defined, how membership of the elite Protestant Ascendancy is interpreted, sense of ownership of elite heritage, or whether architectural design and craftsmanship are emphasised. N6

therefore argues that those charged with the management of built heritage must bear people's perceptions in mind, and certainly not dismiss or ignore them:

[...] but I kind of think that, from the heritage community's point of view, that they need to be careful about how they present things [...] and you know, without making a value-judgement about it, you know, we are an independent state and that relationship of the big house to the countryside was a difficult relationship.

Still under the first category, another five informants discussed how some rural groups view Ireland as an intrinsically rural society. They further view urban development and planning (and, therefore, many types of built heritage) as legacies of colonial rule and, as such, question their legitimacy. Conversely, N6 and N2 use a discourse that portrays urbanisation and environmental planning as universal – as characteristics of human development, rather than a legacy of colonial rule:

*It's a cheap trick, but I think as time passes, I think it's less of an issue. Nevertheless, I think that the idea that's embedded in the new state, that cities are essentially British constructs – which is bullshit; you know, **cities happen**. The sheer fact that – we pure Irish would never live in those horrible places – that idea is so embedded, and was conveniently used; they were seen as the garrison town, and whatever. That language pervades, and it will probably take a few generations for that to be flushed out. (N2)*

N7, similarly, emphasised distinctions between British and Irish planning and dismissed the colonial argument as racist. However, the rural-colonial view of planning, which emphasises the relationship between the people and the land, is deeply embedded in Ireland's political and social culture. For example, it is manifest in Fianna Fail's party constitution, *Corú Agus Rialacha*, which aims "to maintain as many families as practicable on the land" (*Fianna Fail*, 2013: 2), or in the protection afforded to individual property rights in the Constitution of Ireland. This discourse is arguably, *per se*, a legacy of colonialism.

Under the second category, fourteen informants attempted in various ways to downplay the relevance of colonial legacies today. Of these, five argued that the involvement of local Irish craftspeople in the construction of buildings associated with

the Ascendancy allows these buildings to be viewed as Irish heritage today, through the sense of communal ownership arising from such historical connections. N9 explains the argument:

The question is whether there is a buy-in there. The local craftsmen built them, so this is how people in Ireland now have come to buy into this heritage. Now the 'house' is in actual public ownership and is accessible.

N4 quoted both former *Taoiseach*, Albert Reynolds, and former President, Mary McAleese, as both having made the argument that the Irish 'big house' has become part of Ireland's heritage, though they had not historically been regarded as such. It is also notable that another former *Taoiseach*, Bertie Ahern, made the same argument in his foreword to the government-sponsored report, *The Historic House Survey* (Dooley, 2003: 2), in which he explicitly emphasised the involvement of Irish builders and craftspeople. The fact that two *Taoisigh* and a President should be compelled to publicly express this broad representation of colonial heritage as 'official' national discourse is indicative of the extent to which the Irish public felt – or still feel – alienated from this form of heritage. N11 addresses this directly, and acknowledges that, though many Irish people may no longer bear any outright antipathy towards colonial heritage, they often simply feel no connection with, or sense of ownership of, these places – no matter how hard heritage campaigners, politicians or others may try to raise public appreciation, "it is hard to get the broad mass of Irish people to go and visit these houses." (N11)

Of the fourteen informants who downplayed the impact of colonialism, four contended that colonial history should have no bearing on heritage decision-making. For example, N5 argued that heritage is everything inherited, regardless of how people feel, and baldly stated that, "Your heritage is your heritage whether you like it or not". Similarly, N10 contends that heritage can be unpleasant and dissonant, and gave an extreme example:

*What was the report published about two years ago about children being treated terribly by religious orders? Somebody on the radio, some commentator was describing that, '**this is part of our heritage**'!*

Referring specifically to Lifford Old Courthouse, a building once associated with colonial power, N18 similarly advocates an objective approach:

I mean it's a fine piece of architecture, it's an expression of good architectural values, and it is an important building to the community. And it is not who built it, or why it was built

Eight informants also specifically highlighted the tendency for heritage meaning to shift and vary over time:

I think what's striking about this is that the image of a colonial legacy of these [buildings] has long passed on [...] If you look at the Obama visit, Obama – and previously Clinton – being televised in front of the Bank of Ireland, the old Parliament House. If you look at the GPO, [it] was [later] associated with the 1916 rising (N17)

The divergent arguments made above hold the potential to result in disagreement, not least in designation or planning decisions, or the prioritisation of grant assistance. Further, the potential for conflict lies not only between expert and non-expert groups, but also within the expert group, itself.

4.2.7 Alternative, non-expert representations of heritage

Closely related to the above, ten informants took the view that non-expert representations of heritage should be considered to be a valid basis for some form of statutory protection, for example, as N11 explains:

There's a really interesting study [...], which is to document handball alleys [...] And that's quite 'left-field'. That's not something that you would think about, and yet it's a valid subject for consideration in the heritage gaze, if you want to call it that.

N10 similarly argues that the definition of heritage should be broad and local:

[...] a national heritage. It's almost nineteenth century thinking. It seems a bit uncomfortable. So I mean really what's the alternative? [...] Heritage is very much a personal thing. I mean I'll give you – it's a series of value judgements. I mean we ascribe value. [...] Like, heritage is very dynamic. It's being created the whole time. I get, not cross, but I always smile – when I hear some of the people in the Department saying that heritage is a finite resource. No, we're creating it the whole time. Even the 1970's bungalow!

In this regard, N11 contends that a shared basis for understanding heritage can help to reconcile the dichotomy between expert and non-expert representations of heritage – or, even, ‘polychotomy’ between multiple groups’ representations:

[...] the familiar and cherished thing [...] But that phrase captures the prosaic and cultured sense of a good citizen having an affinity – a relationship – with a place. It might be generalised, and lack the professional, expert acuity, but still be just as important. [...] And it’s a foundation stone from where expert and the public can diverge.

Despite this argument, N11 later warned against relating heritage to identity, which suggests that their view is unresolved:

When you start relating heritage to personal identity or group identity, it acquires power [...] but it also acquires the capacity to be divisive. So, my identity, your identity, whose heritage, and so on. [...] So it’s a trap – associating heritage and identity is a way of turning it into something controversial and dissonant, or a cause of dissonance, or it becomes the nub of the conflict [...]

In contrast with these arguments, six informants downplayed the validity of alternative non-expert representations of heritage – or gave examples of others doing so. For example:

The RIAI were writing to us saying ‘what on earth is this about? There’s protected structures and then there’s everything else, and we can do whatever we like with everything else!’ That’s the mindset that they were coming from. They didn’t know why we would be concerned with non-protected heritage. (N11)

Similarly, N4 and N8 both suggest that a multiplicity of public views is good reason not to allow the public a role in defining heritage:

I suppose, in creating the National Inventory, you have to standardise the criteria that you’re using, and it needs to be applicable on a nationwide basis. And if you were to make exceptions, in every case, then it might compromise the end result of your survey. The National Inventory of Architectural Heritage is presenting a professional [view] on what is considered to be of heritage interest. And if you veer from that, then perhaps you’re compromising that professional view. (N4)

Five informants also cautioned against the involvement of non-experts because they can use representations of heritage to further vested interests. While this may be a real difficulty, it is difficult to argue against non-expert involvement purely on this basis.

Closely allied to debate over validity of non-expert heritage is the question of the extent to which heritage value is intrinsic, or is a cultural phenomenon. Seven informants argued that certain heritage ‘objects’ have intrinsic qualities that make their heritage value objective, whereas other ‘objects’ have subjective value. The idea that heritage value is always *exclusively* socially constructed was dismissed: “You have to acknowledge that something like Brú na Bóinne, Newgrange, Tara, Dublin Castle, this building, they’re objectively heritage.” (N18) “There’s an intrinsic quality – that the layering of the centuries is irreplaceable and often authenticity is irreplaceable.” (N17). N6 even contended that, in the most significant cases, objective importance should be above local democracy. However, N5 pointed out ongoing disagreement between different international parties in ICOMOS (the International Council for Monuments and Sites) surrounding ‘intangible’ and ‘tangible’ heritage, indicating conflict resulting from contrasting representations of heritage at an international level.

4.2.8 Expert Opinion of Non-Experts

Five informants explicitly expressed the view that the culture of the Irish people is not amenable to the notion of protecting aspects of the historic environment for the greater good. For example, N5 contended that, “This country is bad at community, [...] we look after our own things”. In this regard, N2 and N10 specifically argue that Irish culture has contempt for law and authority: “There is a culture here of, if you can find a way around doing something you do it.” (N10) and, “there’s the law and...there’s wriggle room...and wriggle room is very important in Irish culture. But we’ve paid a huge price for wriggle room.” (N2). Perhaps because of this perception, opinion was divided on the usefulness of involving the public in heritage decision-making. Eight informants view public participation relating to heritage as important or essential and, within this group, six argued that this is to ensure, firstly, that decisions are made democratically, but also to ensure public ‘ownership’ of heritage. However, eight further informants questioned the usefulness of involving the public: “The

heritage-planning nexus is an important discourse where the public are involved and, frequently, not listened to, but they are involved.” (N11) The conflict that can result from such a top-down approach was described by N13:

*The atmosphere was **scary**. There was a lot of bad feeling [...] People feel that the designation has been imposed by central government. A man from the IFA (Irish Farmers' Association) talked about the 'sterilisation of the landscape' and walked out, followed by others.*

Regarding non-experts more generally, implicit in the discourse of nine informants was a view that 'conversion' of non-experts to the expert view would solve many of their problems, for example:

*I think he's [the Town Clerk] really come over to our heritage agenda. Government departments are trickier. Sometimes, I mean, ok, you've got professional staff, you know, you don't really have to win them over. Sometimes you just have to change them to your point of view. It's their bosses, the civil servants, that you've got to try get to as well. [...] Whereas if you can get the teacher converted, converted is a bad word. You can never do enough to try to change understanding – [alters statement] **improve** understanding. (N10)*

Related to this, two informants were critical of the state's approach to the involvement of non-state actors more generally, as N3 argued:

I mean, there's a whole 'tell 'em nothing'. There's a whole centrist control thing; if you don't conform, you don't get money. If you speak out, you get cut. You know, there's a real power and control thing within the state, as an institution.

5.0 CONCLUSION

This paper argues that the meanings and heritage value assigned to the built environment are shaped by their time and are in constant flux. Competing representations of heritage, cultural memory and power relations between elite and non-expert groups have played and continue to play a central role in defining and redefining the way different discourse communities think about heritage, and how it is used, thereby causing conflict in the policy arena. At various times, multiple discourse communities have used their own representations of heritage to maintain their own power-position. However, the discursive picture is complex and nuanced, with a series of shifting, overlapping and competing views both between and within discourses. In this context, an unresolved dichotomy has emerged over time between, on one hand, the elite and arguably modernist (see Pendlebury, 2009: 14) origins of the conservation movement and, on the other, a postmodern understanding of built heritage as being comprised of multiple international, national, local, or even individual patrimonies. This is compounded firstly by a lack of understanding and awareness of non-expert heritage values amongst much of the policy elite and, secondly, by the maintenance of current practices and institutions through the 'authorised' discourse of the heritage elite. Given that the heritage elite generally retain the power to exclude alternative, non-expert representations of heritage, this raises questions over the legitimacy of aspects of conservation and heritage policy today.

With regard to methodology, and photo-elicitation specifically, a small number of photographs in the pilot interview elicited comment on a wider range of issues than anticipated, which can be useful where comments are relevant to the research questions. Specifically, the informant did not prioritise comment on the intended discussion topic, or they only commented on an unanticipated topic. For example, a photograph of an unprotected street of terraced houses built around 1905 was intended to elicit discussion on the foreground streetscape. However, the image also featured the large and dominant Croke Park GAA (Gaelic Athletic Association) stadium in the background, which elicited the informant's initial comments. Similarly, a photograph of 16 Moore Street (a Georgian house associated with the 1916 Easter Rising) also featured street market stalls in the foreground, which elicited initial

comments in the pilot interview. In both these – and a small number of other – cases, additional verbal prompts were used to ensure that the informants made comment on all relevant issues. The responses to these two photographs illustrate the range of visual prompts potentially contained in the images and, therefore also, emphasise the potential complexity in using photographs to elicit responses. They also serve to emphasise that different individuals can read images in differing ways, each informant often drawing out different issues from the same image, necessitating considerable care in the choice of photographs. However, the substance, extent, and variety of responses prompted by the photographs highlights their importance in the context of this research; information gathered would not have been as in-depth had photographs not been used, and some information would have been missed altogether. The approach also has considerable further scope for in-depth examination of broader public values, perceptions and priorities relating to built heritage, for example in the Irish context, where competing representations of heritage can underpin conflict in the policy arena.

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