

Dressing For Success: the waterfront image of Cork and Limerick.

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Abstract

Based upon the urban regeneration of Cork and Limerick in the south of Ireland, this paper explores how recent transformations of the urban framework of these cities illustrate the re-articulation of economy, culture and governance in urban Ireland. With a primary focus on waterfront development, the paper illustrates a range of new developments, and presents the background to new investment, demonstrating how the configuration of the space in the city is subject to the contingencies of the broader political economies increasingly expressed in European cities in late-capitalism. The paper argues that as Cork and Limerick made moves towards adapting to new 'post industrial' economies, there has been a simultaneous drive to redefine the image of these cities and to 'brand' them in particular ways. These activities – which were characterised by image enhancement projects and in the case of Cork, the 2005 European Capital of Culture event – often privileged a claim to the city that was based on commerce and urban regeneration at the expense of social inclusion and sustainability. This paper looks at the ways in which new urban imaginaries were constructed around the regeneration of waterfront areas and the packaging of culture, before arguing for development strategies that are more sensitive to issues of social equity and sustainability.

I Introduction

Urban geographies emanating from Marxist and Lefebvrian emphasise the produced nature of space. (Lefebvre 1991, Harvey 1990, Merrifield 2002, Smith 1996) Key structural changes in the governance of cities, which favour a neo-liberal approach to development coupled with the expansion of the financial and service sectors and an explosion in industries of consumption has resulted in a dramatically different urban political landscape. (Anderson 2001, Bartley and Shine 2002, Goodwin and Painter 1996, Jessop and Ngai-Ling 2000, Peck 1995, Tickell and Peck 1996, Ward 2003) In addition to this, the collapsing together of economic and cultural infrastructures and the increased emphasis on place marketing has impacted significantly on the urban realm. (Bunnell 2002a 2002b, Castree 2004, Graham 2002, Jessop 1998, King 1995, Kong 2000, Thrift 2000) As the model of the 'post industrial' city – based on service provision and consumption practises – ever emerges as the dominant paradigm of cities in the western world, urban governance strategists have become increasingly enamoured with the cultural and heritage spheres as a tool for reshaping the

urban realm. These developments preclude radically new forms of urban geography. Much recent work in urban geography has been undertaken in an attempt to unravel the new culture/economy relationships. (Albet 2005, Chalkley 1999, Florida 2002, McCarthy 2005) As Mommaas suggests;

“Whereas in former days local cultural policy-making mostly restricted itself to its redistributive role within a vertically organised public arts sector, today urban cultural policy-making has to operate on a much more comprehensive level...A more inclusive, process orientated and transverse perspective, consciously taking into account ‘external’ economic and spatial effects and conditions, has replaced or complemented a confined, vertical perspective, predominantly based on artistic notions of the refined citizen” (Mommaas 2004, p.508)

The packaging of culture and heritage has often been expressed in the built environment. In this arena dockland areas have been noted as of particular importance as they often represent key strategic and emblematic landscapes in a shift from industrial to post-industrial function. (Breen and Rigby 1994, Harvey 1989, Marshall 2001) The redevelopment of waterfront areas has emerged as a tried and tested way for local authorities to stimulate the property market and re-orient the image and function of cities. Dockland sites offer a space that segues maritime and industrial heritage into post-industrial office, residential and recreational function, facilitating the illusion of continuity between two disjointed economic epochs (O’ Callaghan, 2005). In this way they are frequently used as flagship sites to express the transformation of cities. In addition they are often coupled with other forms of image enhancement endeavours.

Taking the examples two cities, Cork and Limerick, in the south of Ireland that have been experiencing rapid urban and economic growth in recent years, this paper explores how waterfront redevelopment was linked with a re-imagining of the city. Situating the research in the context of responses to deindustrialisation and disinvestment, the paper traces the evolution of urban growth machines in Cork and Limerick and explores how the marketing of particular urban images grew in synchronicity with the demands of the burgeoning property market. The paper argues that despite an overhaul of the urban image, problems associated with deprivation are still prevalent in these centres.

II

The growing tendency to centralise planning powers, the increased involvement of the private sector in provision of urban services and a decline in the public provision of housing and recreational facilities increasingly shape the Irish urban landscape (Punch 2005, McGuirk and Maclaren 2001). The roots of these transformations lie in the 1986 Urban Renewal Act, which established tax incentive schemes designed to encourage investment in residential infrastructures (Department of Revenue 2005). During the early years of the scheme, extensive regeneration projects were launched in Dublin. (Bartley and Shine 2002, Corcoran, 2002, McDonald 2000, Moore 1998, 2002, Russell, 2001) With the central driving force of rejuvenating the city’s expansive docklands, along with the regeneration of the cultural quarter of Temple Bar, the late eighties and early nineties saw the city transform from a European backwater to one of fastest growing regional economies in the EU. (Haider 2005)

This process not so much the case in Ireland's other urban centres however. While the Urban Renewal Act helped kick start development in these areas, the level of development experienced in the capital was not replicated in other parts of the country. In recent years however, Cork and Limerick have been experiencing unprecedented levels of growth. Riverside cities both, Cork and Limerick have launched major programmes aimed at reinstating the river as a focal point within the urban realm, while the burgeoning number of development sites stand testament to the intensified interest in these cities. The heritage of Cork and Limerick lies in their early status as port cities and in 20th Century the cities' docklands became major sites of industrial activity. Both cities were hit hard by deindustrialisation during the 1980s, which resulted in large-scale unemployment and major disinvestment in the urban realm (Linehan 2005). This unemployment, along with the resulting disinvestment in the urban realm and the growth of suburban shopping centres put a huge strain on the viability of the city centres of Cork and Limerick in terms of sustaining commercial activity.

From the early 1990s, the City Councils in Cork and Limerick began to think in more proactive terms about how to get the cities performing again. In Cork for example, seminars entitled 'Getting Cork Moving' were held and the Cork City Council and Cork Chamber of Commerce oversaw the establishment of Cork City Challenge; a group proclaimed as 'our city centre advocate' (Cork Chamber of Commerce 2005) whose remit was to encourage the upkeep and upgrading of premises in the city centre. Significantly, in order to make any sort of effective over-hall of the cities, the local authorities would need to shake the property market into action; a challenge that was met early on with the development of two city centre shopping centres, Merchants' Quay in Cork and Arthur's Quay in Limerick. Apart from a desire to reendow the city with commercial clout, there was a simultaneous attempt to bring back residential density to these centres, which had lost out to suburban locations. Early initiatives such as the 'living over the shop' scheme allowed for the diversification of the housing stock through the creation of apartment style living. Over the following decade, this market was continuously expanded, as developers took advantage of Section 23 and 50 tax relief schemes.

By the turn of the century the City Councils of Cork and Limerick were beginning think on a more grand scale in regard to urban development. The steady successes of urban regeneration projects paved the way for the cities to begin the whole scale re-articulation of the urban environment and the pervasive marketing of the city region. In this context both cities turned to face the river. For Cork this meant the publication of the *Cork Docklands Development Strategy* (CDDS) in 2002, and in Limerick the launch of the *Riverside City Project* (RCP) in 2003.

III

"The Cork Docklands Development Strategy, commissioned by Cork Corporation, sets out a vision for a new urban quarter in Cork that will revitalise the city through high quality, contemporary design and a vibrant mix of uses. Building on the unique character of Cork and the dramatic setting of the Docklands, the vision for the area identifies the need for a development strategy to compete with other Irish and European waterfronts" (Cork City Council 2001, p.2)

“As road, rail and air transport rose to supremacy in the 20th century, Limerick turned its back on the River Shannon and its estuary...it [Limerick] will rediscover it [the Shannon]. In the 21st century, Europe’s new Riverside City will use and face the mighty Shannon and its adjacent waters.” (Shannon Development 2003, p.9)

Taking guidance from other waterfront cities, Cork and Limerick developed programmes that would help exploit the riverside as an amenity and to extend the commercial and residential sectors of the cities. The newly developed waterfronts were expected to become the primary location for the new types of post-industrial economy that Cork and Limerick were bidding towards, while at the same time they were to act as the major tool for promoting this image. The CDDS was a major document that aimed to exploit Cork’s extensive waterfront through redeveloping the city’s docklands, an area twice the size of the city centre. Primarily designed to integrate the regenerated docklands with the city, the overriding concern for the City Council was to establish the docklands as the focal point for future investment (see O’ Callaghan and Linehan, 2007). The goal was to extend the commercial, residential and recreational axis of the city along the city’s waterfront and to make the docklands an economic driver for the region. As a discursive tool, the plan made visible the untapped potential in the city and attempted to position Cork on the map of international investors.

While Limerick had not the same level of land available for redevelopment as in Cork, the *Riverside City Project* (RCP) focussed investment attention on the waterfront. The RCP was formed as a major partnership project featuring Limerick City and County Councils, Claire County Council, Shannon Development, Limerick’s universities and IT, and a host of other agencies. The concept of the Riverside City was established to give “the City of Limerick & its hinterland a new focus” that would “act as a catalyst for a host of future developments” (Riverside City 2006). Recognising the waterfront as a space for development attention and as a means to market a strong image the project centred on six main areas; Docklands, Quayside, Riverside Navigation, Kings Island, Park Canal and the University and River. What both the CDDS and the RCP had in common was a desire to transform the waterfront with the development of residential, university, office, retail and recreational space and to use the metaphor of ‘waterfront living’ as the driving force behind the cities’ re-imagination.

Since their inception, waterfront programmes in Cork and Limerick have helped to stimulate development. In Cork, City Manager Joe Gavin has been extremely proactive in re-evaluating the city’s development potential and re-focussing its’ urban growth dynamics. Along with the *Cork Area Strategic Plan* (CASP), the CDDS marked the beginnings of focussed entrepreneurial strategies by City Council aimed at transforming Cork into a post-industrial European city. The CDDS provided an imaginary blueprint for the future of the city. Using the transformation of the waterfront as an identifier of the city’s more general transformation, the CDDS establishes Cork as a growing site of the knowledge economy.

Historically Cork has functioned as Ireland’s second city and has been a key driver of the prosperity of the sub-region as well as the wider region. Factors such as the University, the Ports, Airport and availability of labour have all attracted inward investors and the business community...the retailing, leisure and residential sectors have all experienced significant investment...In the light

of the foregoing, the role of the City Centre has begun to change with a focus upon shopping, commercial leisure, (including hotel, restaurants and bars) professional, financial and administrative employment sectors (Cork City Council, 2002, p. 25)

Subsequent to the publication of the CDDS, and the success of early docklands developments such as Howard Holdings' Clarion Hotel on Lapps Quay, Cork's development brief has expanded considerably and the city has increasingly become host to cranes marking construction sites. More importantly, after the publication of the CDDS, Cork City Council has become increasingly focussed on targeted redevelopment and more specific in their planning policies and objectives. The creation of Development Briefs – documents containing the aims, objectives and requirements of the planning authority – for individual sites is one example of this. Having proved successful in, amongst other sites, the negotiation of the retail development on Cornmarket Street in the city centre, this approach has been incorporated into individual Local Area Plans (LAPs) for the North and South Docks. This proactive and anticipatory approach from City Council has translated into a more fertile development climate and into the growth of public private partnership in the city. As one private sector planner suggested;

“There's been a re-balancing of priorities [in the City Council] to a certain extent I think ...Patrick Street, the Academy Street site and the Guy Cornmarket Street site were zoned specifically for high order retail development. City Council anticipated demand and they encouraged developers, and they knew who these developers were, there was a close enough partnership to assemble a certain number of sites together and this is the type of development they would get. Whereas before...the whole city centre was [zoned] commercial city centre retail. This was very focused development I'm saying, they actually identified sites. They also produced a wide range of development briefs for individual sites...”
(Brady 2005)

Using the docklands as the flagship initiative, a neo-liberal approach to urban governance was forged through the partnership between City Council and the private sector.

At the same time, Limerick began to experiment increasingly with entrepreneurial forms of governance aimed at lubricating movement between the public and private sector. The establishment of the Limerick Co-Ordination Office (LCO) in 2001 is one example of this. Funded by the Limerick City and County and Clare County Councils, Shannon Development and the private sector, the LCO essentially acts as a liaison between the different public and private interests within the city in creating a brand for the region and facilitating development. The office chairs meeting between the various bodies involved in individual developments, providing a skeleton structure for the continuous formation and dissolution of public private partnership. In addition, the LCO is responsible for cultivating the brand image of the city, through running projects. In both contexts the river and the waterfront remain central to the production of space and spectacle within the city. As the LCO Director suggested;

We believe we have the best riverscape in the country. We are beginning to turn to face the river, I know it's the cliché but it is happening and it's a

mixture of public private partnerships...[For example with the plan for the new street design] basically the principles were very straight forward but one of them was definitely to link to the river as much as possible and to create a pedestrian friendly city centre. So the river focus has now acted as a catalyst for private sector development on these particular streets and off them as well. The city has realigned itself. [For example] Henry Street is now much more retail orientated than even four years ago... (Nahinney 2006)

In both cities then the waterfront became the primary identifier of urban and social change. The re-interpretation and re-development of waterfront sites has enabled new modes of urban governance to be practised and has had profound impacts on the urban political landscape of Cork and Limerick. In this context waterfront developments are emblematic of the ways Cork and Limerick seek to re-design their urban image.

IV

Emerging from the same entrepreneurial agenda that produced the strategies for the waterfront, from about 2000 onwards Cork and Limerick began experimenting with other types of image enhancement programmes. These primarily enlist elements of the cultural sphere in an attempt to stimulate an identity for the region. This follows trends in other European and North American cities, where the cultural sphere has been used to 'sell' the city for inward investment and tourism. (Albet 2004, Hannigan 1998, Ward 2003)

In Cork, the European Capital of Culture (ECOC) festival, which the city hosted in 2005, created a context in which culture and developments such as docklands could be co-produced (O' Callaghan and Linehan, 2007). In preparation for the culture year, developments in the city such as the re-design of the main thoroughfare St. Patrick's Street were cited in terms of their role in the ECOC year, while Cork's waterfront and harbour are integrated into the fabric of the ECOC in a number of ways. The redevelopment of the docklands provided evidence of contemporary growth and change in the city, while Cork's maritime past was used as a way of imagining the city as both local and global (Cork City Council, 2001). Presenting the image of Cork as a cultural city, the ECOC aimed to market Cork for international tourism. Integrating these concerns with the development of knowledge industries, the ECOC provided Cork City Council with a platform to advertise a changing city. More significantly, taking a vision of the city that was geared towards developing the knowledge economy as a starting point, the ECOC succeeded in bringing various actors in the city together and channelling their energies towards particular goals. Art and culture became important nodes upon which the city's public and business leaders staged their plans for the city. The ECOC provided a space for the business sector and the arts sector to meet and collaborate. The convergence of actors within these sectors was viewed in positive terms by many and the activities that were initiated during the cultural year continue to be important to the evolving governance structures within the city. Speaking of the Cork 2005 event, a representative from Cork Chamber of Commerce suggested that the year will in time be seen as "being a catalyst and a stimulus for an awful lot of things to happen" (Healy, 2007). He suggests that through the ECOC,

People [working in business and tourism in Cork] sort of suddenly realised and woke up to the fact that Cork had an awful lot to offer from

a tourism point of view, from a weekend break point of view. All that whole area, that was never really something that we focussed on before. And for the first time I think it got people thinking around the real potential of a strong tourism product, based around the theme, which was the culture one for 2005. I think regardless of the year itself and I think people will argue the merits of it up and down, but I think we'll look back on it as being a kick start for a lot good things in Cork (Healy, 2007)

While Limerick – who also made an application for the ECOC – did not have the advantage of the notoriety the ECOC can bring, interests in the city have attempted to bring elements of the cultural sphere to bear on the production of the city's image. The LCO for instance run an annual event called Riverfest, which focuses a series of events (ranging from concerts to food markets) along the Shannon. This combination of culture and waterfront living is intended to highlight the city's Waterfront City moniker.

Overall in terms of the brand we want to keep it kind of simple, the Riverside City. But we need to live up to what's on the tin, it's no use saying we're Riverside City when we don't use the river... (Nahinney, 2006)

In addition, Limerick has also been branded in a number of subsidiary ways. Limerick has been promoted as a healthy city and a city of good food, while the relocation of the National Chamber Orchestra to the city has seen attempts to brand Limerick as a centre for music. The most prominent of these initiatives has been the branding of Limerick as a sporting city. Taking the moniker of Home of Rugby, this motif has been built upon in recent years by the Meet Shannon Limerick organisation, whose work aims to sell the Limerick Shannon region as a destination for athlete training and sports conferences.

Particular aspects of cultural in Cork and Limerick then have been selected as a means to stimulate economic and urban growth. While these can have positive outcomes for cities in terms of inward investment, tourism and urban renewal, many critics have noted how concentrating on a marketable image can detract from real social problems. Using examples from both cities, the following section compares indicators of social deprivation from the most socially deprived EDs in Cork and Limerick with the national average.

Despite large scale transformations in both cities in urban and economic terms, Cork and especially Limerick nevertheless still contain a number of the most disadvantaged areas in the country. Areas such as Moyross, Southill and Garryowen in Limerick and Knocknaheeny and The Glen in Cork rank as some of the poorest scores in indicators of social disadvantage. (Linehan and Edwards 2005, McCafferty 2005) For example, in Limerick the numbers who have attained no higher than Lower Secondary Level education stands at 41%, almost twice the national average. In certain areas of the city, this figure is as high to 66%. While Cork is less deprived in this regard, in the city's most socially disadvantaged areas this figure stands at 30%. Limerick similarly scores high in terms of numbers classed as Semi-Skilled or Unskilled workers, with these classifications accounting for almost 50% or workers in some areas. The corresponding figure for some of the most socially deprived areas in Cork stands at almost 8% above the national average of 10.9%. In comparison to 21.7% of households in Ireland who do not own a car, in areas such as O' Malley Park and Moyross in Limerick this figure rises to 66%, while in Cork almost 50% of people in areas

such as Blackpool, Mayfield and The Glen do not own a car. Overall, despite Ireland having one lowest levels of unemployment in the EU (4.5%), in certain areas of Limerick this can be as high as 37.7% and as low as 4.2% in other areas of the city. In Cork this figure can be as high as 15.2%. (Linehan and Edwards 2005, McCafferty 2005)

Despite the rhetoric describing Cork and Limerick post-industrial, cosmopolitan cities that are guided by the principles of sustainability and social inclusion, the evidence points out that social inequity is still a major problem for these urban centres. As the City Councils of Cork and Limerick propel these cities towards new forms of economic activity and new states of urbanisation, the struggle to ensure that the benefits of this development reach all citizens emerges as a critical challenge to the people of these cities.

V Conclusion

As this paper demonstrates, development strategies in Cork and Limerick have been underwritten by emblematic initiatives focussed on regenerating the cities' waterfronts and by city branding campaigns designed to re-imagine their image. Such strategies have proven successful in transforming the urban image and in stimulating development and growth. These developments have seen Cork and Limerick grow at an unprecedented rate, rapidly transforming the urban environment and articulating new types of economy. However, at the same time social exclusion and severe disadvantage still exists. As many critics have noted, the marketing of cities through specific urban and cultural credentials can create an exclusionary society where only those who fit the image can partake (Albet 2004, Harvey, 1989). Thus far, it would seem that the most disadvantaged communities in Cork and Limerick have not benefited from the strong levels of growth these cities have experienced. Moreover, these communities are generally absent from the images of these cities as presented through marketing documents. This is not to suggest that the situation is hopeless. Indeed in Cork, plans which aim to make docklands a socially inclusive area, by not offering a buy-out clause to developers for the 20 per cent social and affordable housing to be included in all residential developments under the *Planning and Development Act 2000*, may prove decisively positive for social integration in the city (English, 2007). However, the outcomes of these regeneration projects in Cork and Limerick, as they are played out between public and private sector interests, remains to be seen. Going forward these issues remain of critical importance. Any vision of the city will not only need to be guided by the principles of a post-industrial urban aesthetic and the knowledge economy, but will also need to be guided by principles of social equity and inclusion, if real and sustainable transformation is ever going to take place.

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