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Touring Temple Bar: Cultural Tourism in Dublin's 'Cultural Quarter'

Stephanie Rains

Department of Communications, Dublin City University

This article explores the processes and effects of the development of a large-scale, state-supported 'cultural quarter' in Dublin city centre, and the ways in which this development, as an example of postmodern cultural and economic activity, intersects with the city's position as a postcolonial capital. This is examined with particular reference to the construction and use of space within the city, and the ways in which this reflects the complex relationship between and sometimes conflicting demands of those forces of postmodernism and postcolonialism.

This will therefore assess these contemporary developments against an understanding of the ambiguous position which Dublin has held within the Irish national narrative. This historical factor is of particular importance to the present development and, crucially, marketing, of the city's 'heritage'.

The reasons for Dublin's marginalized position within Ireland are complex, but in the present century are largely a result of its perceived 'anglicization' as the former seat of colonial administrative power, combined with a degree of urbanization which it was assumed divorced the city from the rural-based nationalism of a newly independent Ireland. These factors were—and importantly, still are—reflected in the material fabric of the city, which is largely Georgian, and therefore a colonial legacy.

The ways in which the material fabric of the city is converted into heritage locations for visitors—from both the Irish diaspora and

beyond—suggests a delicately and only recently negotiated method of re-habilitating Dublin’s colonial and Anglo-Irish history in a way which both appeals to the tourist market and is acceptable to the city’s inhabitants. The necessity of achieving this balance between promoting a version of heritage which appeals to the international tourist market by delineating ‘this space’ from all other spaces within the global system, and at the same time working from a selection of local (or national) history with which the inhabitants feel comfortable, is made particularly difficult in a postcolonial city whose cultural and material fabric is a direct link back to a colonial past. As Ashworth and Tunbridge note, in a world-wide context,

... emergent nationalisms in former colonies have difficulty in relating to a conserved urban heritage that recalls former colonial administrations or settler minorities (Ashworth and Tunbridge 1990: 29)

The difficulty obviously felt within Ireland about promoting Dublin as a site of national or even local history as a source of pride appears to have continued well past the point of an ‘emergent’ sense of nationalism. This was illustrated by the widely perceived failure as a project of Dublin’s 1991 status as ‘European City of Culture.’ The principle reason identified at the time appeared to be “the absence of policy-led planning” (Lincoln 1993: 205), which had led, in practice, to the continued whole-sale destruction of much of the eighteenth-century fabric of the city. Indeed, even during 1991 itself, a large section of Georgian houses on Arran Quay—whose position on the riverfront makes it part of a key aspect of the cityscape—was demolished in order to make way for a new development scheme (ibid.: 224). As well as complaints against the treatment of the physical structure of Dublin, another serious criticism laid against the city’s programme for 1991 was the lack of any long-term and committed cultural policy to be enacted within that physical structure. As Proinsias de Rossa complained, the celebration of Dublin’s historic and cultural ‘capital’ (in both senses of the word), “may stretch little beyond a bit of street theatre and a lot of face painting as a sop to those who can’t or won’t go to the National Concert Hall.” (de Rossa 1991: 5)

However, as Colm Lincoln argues, the fact that Dublin sought and received the ‘European City of Culture’ designation in 1991 may have served both as a dawning realization that the city did possess a cultural heritage worth celebrating, and as an experience

which focused discussions on what that heritage consisted of and the ways in which it should be promoted.

The key point involved in that new approach was the negotiation of Dublin's role as a colonial administrative city as well as its present status as a European capital city. As discussed above, the necessary balance between heritage presentation which would appeal to international tourists and which would also be acceptable to the self-identity of Dublin's citizens is particularly difficult to achieve in this context. A strong emphasis upon the history of British occupation and the Anglo-Irish tradition, whilst it would probably be of great interest to many tourists, and is amply illustrated by much of contemporary Dublin's remaining structures, would not be generally acceptable to the majority of the indigenous population or, significantly, to the systems of national power and government symbolically and literally represented within the city.

Perhaps the best known and most distinctive feature of contemporary development in Dublin city centre has been the regeneration of the Temple Bar area. Before discussing the implied as well as explicit attitudes and responses to the current concept of the city which this project has suggested, it is worth examining the nature of the development and the way in which this area of the city relates, physically and cognitively, to the other significant sites of the city.

The Temple Bar area is a strip of land running between the southern bank of the Liffey and Dame Street, bounded by Westmoreland Street and the city's Civic Offices at either end. It is therefore placed in a central position on the river quay, which would have traditionally ensured its significance to the city's mercantile trade, and is bounded elsewhere by prominent examples of public architecture and infrastructure. It is effectively surrounded by Dame Street (one of the eighteenth-century Wide Streets Commission's more notable projects), Trinity College, one of the city's grandest eighteenth-century constructions, O'Connell Bridge with its monuments to the city's contribution to the struggle for national independence, and the 1990s development of the Corporation's Civic Offices, a truly monumental representation of modern state bureaucracy.

As an area of the city centre, therefore, Temple Bar is placed in the heart of the phases of both physical development and symbolic meaning which have been constructed in Dublin over several centuries. The area itself reflects this, with much of its architecture dating from the eighteenth century, when it was used as a residential and business area of the city, centred around its prominence to the quays.

By the early 1990s, much of the area's existing building stock, in a similar state of disrepair to that of other older buildings in the rest of the city, had been purchased by C.I.E. (Irish Bus and Rail) with the intention of demolishing it and building a bus station. This original development plan was therefore quite typical of the institutional approach to inner-city renewal plans, which concentrated on encouraging the construction of new buildings and afforded little protection to the existing fabric of the city. This ideological preference for demolition and new building was institutionally supported by the planning support programmes aimed at property developers, which targeted concessions and benefits at single-use, new projects (Lincoln 1993: 209). (Photo 1)

However, in the course of acquiring the Temple Bar building stock, C.I.E. had adopted a policy of inexpensive short-term lets to the properties, which had provided the environment for a variety of cultural and artistic projects to move into the area. It was the effect which these operations had upon the area, operating on an ad hoc basis, which was eventually to become institutionalized in the Temple Bar Renewal and Development Act of 1991 which specifically aimed to develop the district as a 'cultural quarter'. The change



PHOTO 1 The Temple Bar Gallery and Studios, before redevelopment.

of emphasis within the civic and even national government towards the 'heritage' offered to the city by an area such as Temple Bar is illustrated by Charles Haughey's 1987 statement,

Temple Bar is one of the most important, traditional, attractive and noteworthy parts of the city, and it has to be refurbished and kept, and I won't let C.I.E. near it. (Wentges and Quillinan 1996: 18) (Photo 2)

After the long-standing and overwhelming preference in the approach to Dublin for demolition as opposed to restoration, the decision to designate Temple Bar as an entire area worthy of conservation along with harmonious new development, combined with the frequently stated desire to maintain and enhance the district's function as a cultural quarter, represents a definitive and comprehensive shift in what was recognized as being of value in urban culture and history. Bearing in mind that much of the older building within Temple Bar was the construction of colonial businessmen, the public statement by the Taoiseach that it was one of the most



PHOTO 2 The Project Theatre Company's building, before redevelopment.

important parts of the city, whose conservation was important to the collective heritage of its citizens, represented perhaps the decisive break from the public and private ambivalence (at best) which the Irish State has shown towards the material fabric of Dublin during the twentieth century.

The architectural and design approach to the regeneration of Temple Bar represented an attitude to architecture in Dublin which was as equally unusual as the development policy itself. While many new buildings were designed, much of the work undertaken by Temple Bar Properties was the restoration and conservation of older buildings, and the newer designs were produced specifically in order to be used and 'read' in harmony with (though not in mimicry of) their older surroundings. This process involved the architects and developers in an attempt to build from the intentions, ideas, and complications inherent within Dublin's older architecture in order to attempt to produce a contemporary equivalent to the eighteenth-century designs, rather than merely producing 'facsimile' buildings which copy the architectural details instead of their ideological foundations. (Photo 3)

The ideological features of the existing architecture which the new developments needed to reinterpret in order to provide genuine revitalization to the Temple Bar area are described by Simon Walker as being a knowing tension between 'masque' and 'vernacular', which, he argues, arose out of precisely the conditions of colonialism which were described above. He argues,

Each public facade had an internal symmetry and a preconceived relationship to a streetscape or urban vista, each building played a role in a kind of urban theatre. (Walker 1996: 45)

The new structures or more complete renovations, therefore, Walker argues, had to attempt a similar relationship to each other and the street in order to create a contemporary performance of 'masque' and 'vernacular'. He sites the new designs on Temple Bar Square, which play with the ideas of Bauhaus, as well as those of the Temple Bar Gallery, as using their structurally obvious 'skin', working in tension with their internal 'body' in a way which represents a re-working of the eighteenth-century understandings of the role of a building's public face (*ibid.*: 47).

A particularly striking example of extensive modern (or post-modern) renovation is that of the Friend's Meeting House on Eustace



PHOTO 3 The new foyer of the Irish Film Centre, built as an addition to the renovated 18th century structure of the Friend's Meeting House.

Street which was redesigned in 1993 as the Irish Film Centre. The original structure, and its function as a Quaker religious hall, are clear examples of the Protestant, Anglo-Irish legacy which is so abundant in Dublin. The building's new function, as both the showcase of Irish cinema, as well as the base for the Irish Film Archive, is one of the foremost examples of officially funded contemporary Irish culture, acting as a focal point for both film-makers and the general public. This institution, and its housing within a building such as the Friend's Meeting House, is a significant example of the ways in which contemporary cultural identity within the city have been re-negotiated against the previous frameworks of both colonialism and nationalism. As a quintessentially modern, international and commercial art form, film provides an articulation of identity within Ireland which is removed from the essentialist frameworks imposed by both colonial and nationalist systems of thought. Equally, its status as an important cultural institution in the contemporary capital makes its siting within the restored Meeting House, which retains many of its original features, a significant gesture of acceptance to the city's architectural heritage. (Photos 4 and 5)

The inference of developments such as the I.F.C., as well as smaller but significant details, such as the re-laying of cobblestoned streets, is that the regeneration of Temple Bar represents the very public embracing in Ireland of a postcolonial hybridity, expressed through forms as well as economic conditions which are fundamentally postmodern. The vital use of the Temple Bar area as a tourist attraction and resource is particularly important in this context, as is the more explicitly desired concept of the area as a 'cultural quarter'. The fact that the city and national government encouraged the present redevelopment in order that it could house much of the contemporary cultural production and display within Dublin, rather than aiming the funding and support specifically at that cultural work regardless of its geographical location, suggests that the concept of a defined area in which 'culture' could not only be produced, but also be seen to be produced, was felt to be more important to the needs of the city than the cultural work itself. And this in turn points to the importance of the project as a whole to the growing heritage and leisure markets within the city. This can also be seen in the fact that, despite the clear emphasis laid by Temple Bar Properties upon bringing residential use back to the centre of the city, and their significant amount of success in achieving this, the

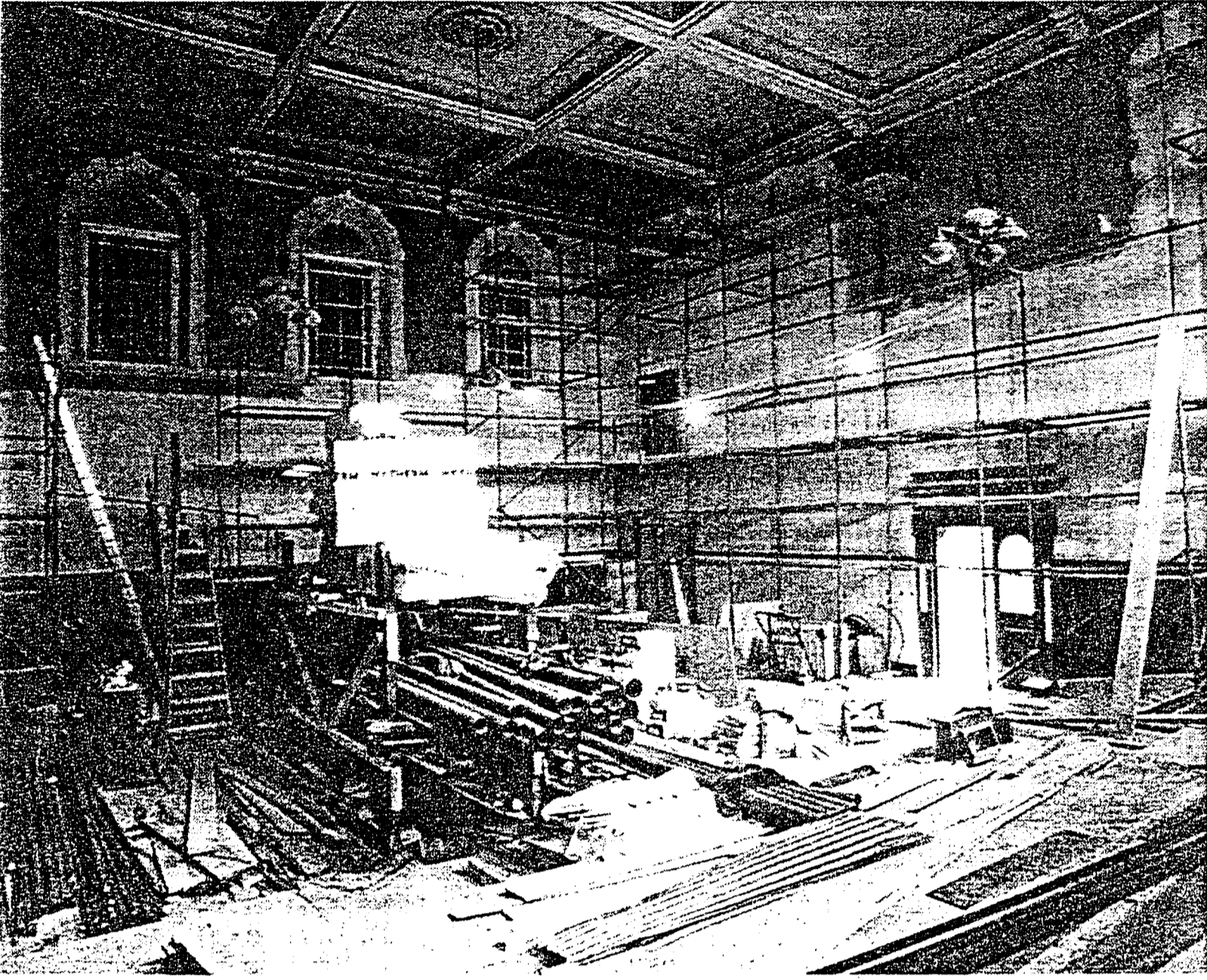


PHOTO 4 Cinema 1 of the Irish Film Centre, before renovation.

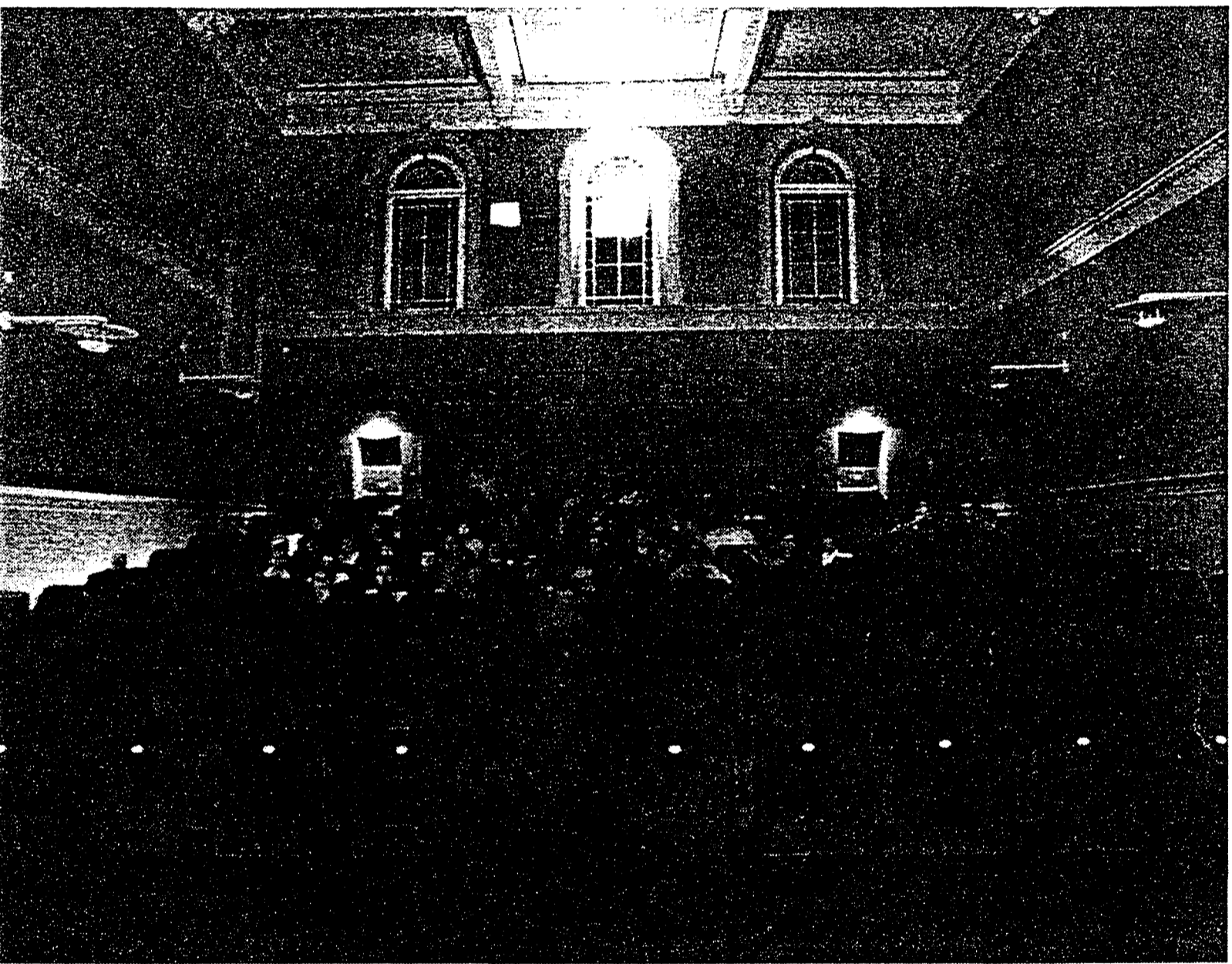


PHOTO 5 Cinema 1 of the Irish Film Centre, after renovation.

dominating form of use for the ground floors of most redeveloped buildings in the area is that of bars and restaurants, as opposed to the small retail shops which would normally be expected in a residential area, even in the city centre.

Therefore, whatever the merits of the architectural developments and renovations within Temple Bar, the use to which the area as a very clearly delineated space has been put in the name of preserving an important and valuable part of Dublin's heritage raises once more the question 'whose heritage?' Despite the emphasis in Temple Bar's development plan and action on cultural production and residential use, the predominant attraction and most obvious activity within the district is that of tourist leisure and consumption in the numerous and very visible restaurants and bars. (Photo 6) The fact that the business of these establishments frequently overflows onto the streets of Temple Bar (despite belated attempts to curb on-street drinking) (McDonald 1996: 41) adds to the deliberately cosmopolitan or even Mediterranean atmosphere within the district. In this way, Temple Bar now operates within Dublin in much the same way

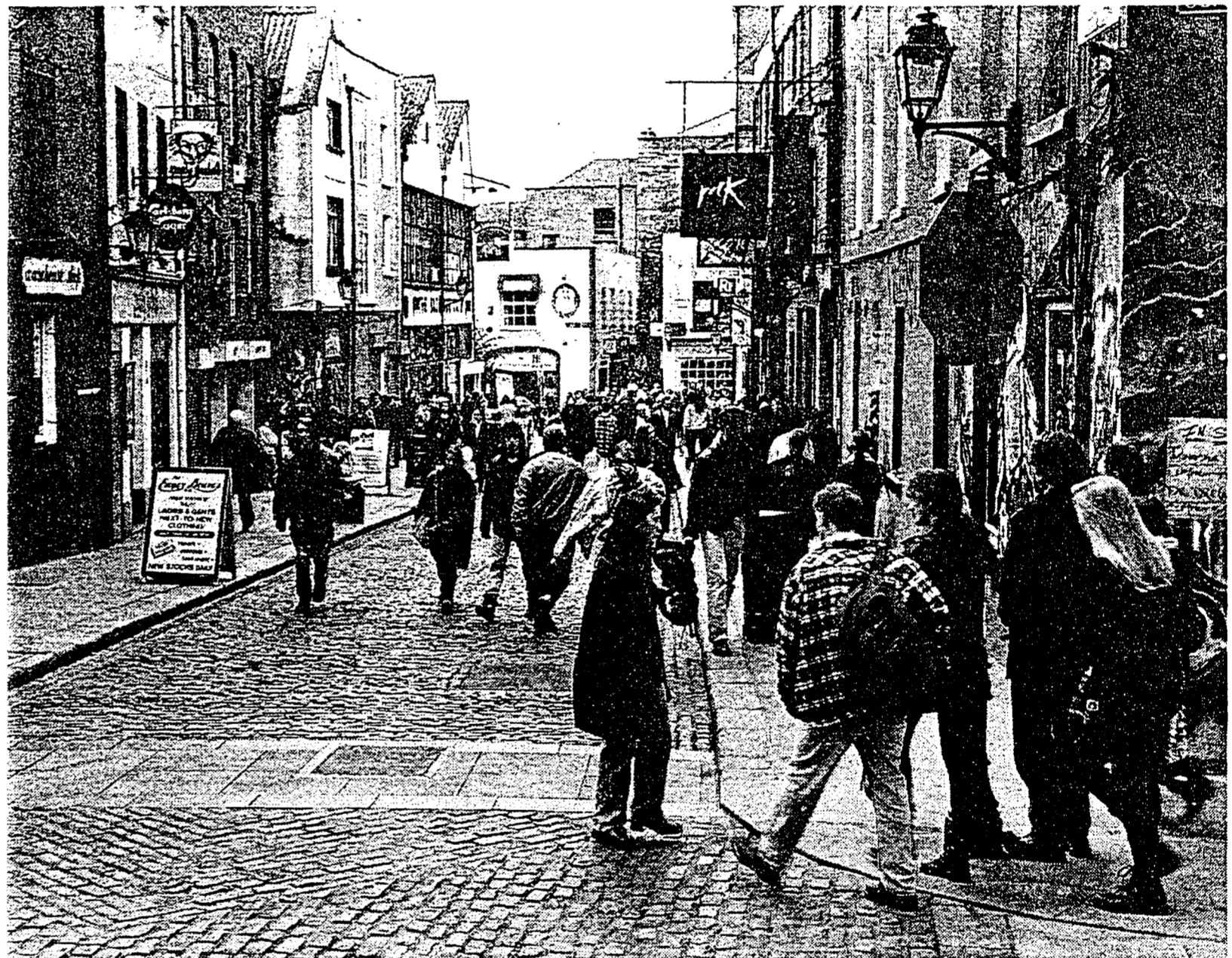


PHOTO 6 Crown Alley, in the centre of the Temple Bar area.

as Soho does within London, or the Left Bank within Paris. In this respect, as a geographical container of 'heritage and culture' within the larger city, Temple Bar fits the description by Ashworth and Tunbridge of one of the two distinct ways in which a city becomes identified as 'historic'. While some entire cities, such as Cambridge or Venice, are so designated, in other cases,

... the phrase can be used in a distinctly different sense of a particular district within the town, known as the 'historic city' so as to distinguish it from other more modern districts. (Ashworth and Tunbridge 1990: 35)

Within Dublin, the designation of Temple Bar as the primary site of heritage and cultural consumption, while it does not intrinsically remove other areas, old or new, from these patterns of consumption, does act as another 'canalization' of urban behaviour, and the power of Temple Bar as a proper name, with all the powers ascribed to it by de Certeau (de Certeau 1984: 107), is increasingly dominant in the way in which the city describes itself to both citizens and visitors.

This process, as a method of rehabilitating and reviving Dublin within the context of the Irish nation by emphasizing both its place within contemporary cultural production and its ability to provide a style of urban living which is directly comparable to that of other European capitals, raises a number of questions.

If the predominant result of the Temple Bar development (whatever its original intention) is to appeal to visitors, then it must have a continued purpose which will extend this appeal in the long-term, rather than becoming a self-referential attraction which will tend to exclude the citizens of Dublin and, eventually, the tourists as well. Equally, the continued development of the district must primarily be targeted for the use of public space by the resident population. The architect Niall McCullough appears to recognize this necessity when he states that,

Although the cultural aspect of development has been important, it is in some ways not critical to the area's success, which is founded more on the recreation of urban possibility, on the idea of not only living in the city, but living well in the city, of a city that has changed, but is alive and may change again, which involves the intelligent reuse of ordinary buildings without 'themed' facades, and contains the seeds of its own regeneration. That will be the real legacy of Temple Bar in Dublin, and perhaps in wider contexts as well. (McCullough 1996: 29)

However, the extent to which this vision of the role of the city at the end of the twentieth century can operate effectively is limited by the

extent to which this 'recreation of urban possibility' is working for the city's inhabitants as well as for the tourist economy.

If, however, the urban renewal programmes such as that in Temple Bar are, because of the economic imperative to appeal to visitors, essentially constructing a concept of Dublin based mainly upon what it is believed will attract those visitors, then the symbolic power of the city will eventually be reduced to, in a sense, a self-reflexive 'masque' rather than one engaged in a meaningful dialogue with the 'vernacular' produced by its citizens. As Colm Lincoln argues,

The danger—despite the prospect of greater protection for historic buildings and areas tentatively proffered by the National Monuments Bill of 1986—is that the city's architectural heritage will only be seen as worthy of protection in as far as it fits our perception of what incoming tourists might expect to find. (Lincoln 1993: 222)

This issue is operating at the point of tension between Dublin's position as a simultaneous site of colonial legacy, postcolonial inheritance and postmodern role as a localized place linked to the universal space of the global, predominantly articulated through the economic relationship between the two. As such, the city has a considerable incentive to emphasize its local distinctiveness, or vernacular, in order to distinguish 'this place' from all other spaces in order to attract international capital (in the form of both tourist visitors and investment funds). This process, however, holds a double-edged danger for a city such as Dublin.

On the one hand, the articulation of this distinctiveness in an economic context for a city which is historically placed in an ambiguous relationship with the nation and sense of national identity of which it is supposedly emblematic, must involve the presentation of a cultural heritage which contains at the very least that ambivalence, or alternatively very real historical pain. And while, in order to successfully construct an inclusive contemporary sense of national identity, that painful cultural legacy must be successfully negotiated, the cultural space produced by the 'time-space compression' of globalized postmodern economic forces is a structure of power which has a significantly determining effect upon how this negotiation will take place.

That postmodern structure of power and cultural exchange also has important implications in itself for a postcolonial capital such as Dublin. Those implications are grounded in the contradictions

described by Harvey as being contained in the process of localization within globalization which characterizes postmodern economic and cultural development. For a postcolonial site, the potential homogenization which Harvey describes as being inherent to this process through the circulation of global capital, producing a 'recursive' monotony of cultural production in localized spaces (Harvey 1989: 295), is complexly woven into the other process of hybridization, implicitly containing an 'asymmetry' of power which Gibbons describes as an inherent risk for a postcolonial culture operating within a global system (Gibbons 1996: 180).

Therefore, within Dublin, the development of districts such as Temple Bar, or, in a slightly different sense, the Financial Services Centre on the former docks area, are a spatial representation of the intricate relations of power contained within the negotiation between postcoloniality and postmodernity. (Photo 7) While the cultural

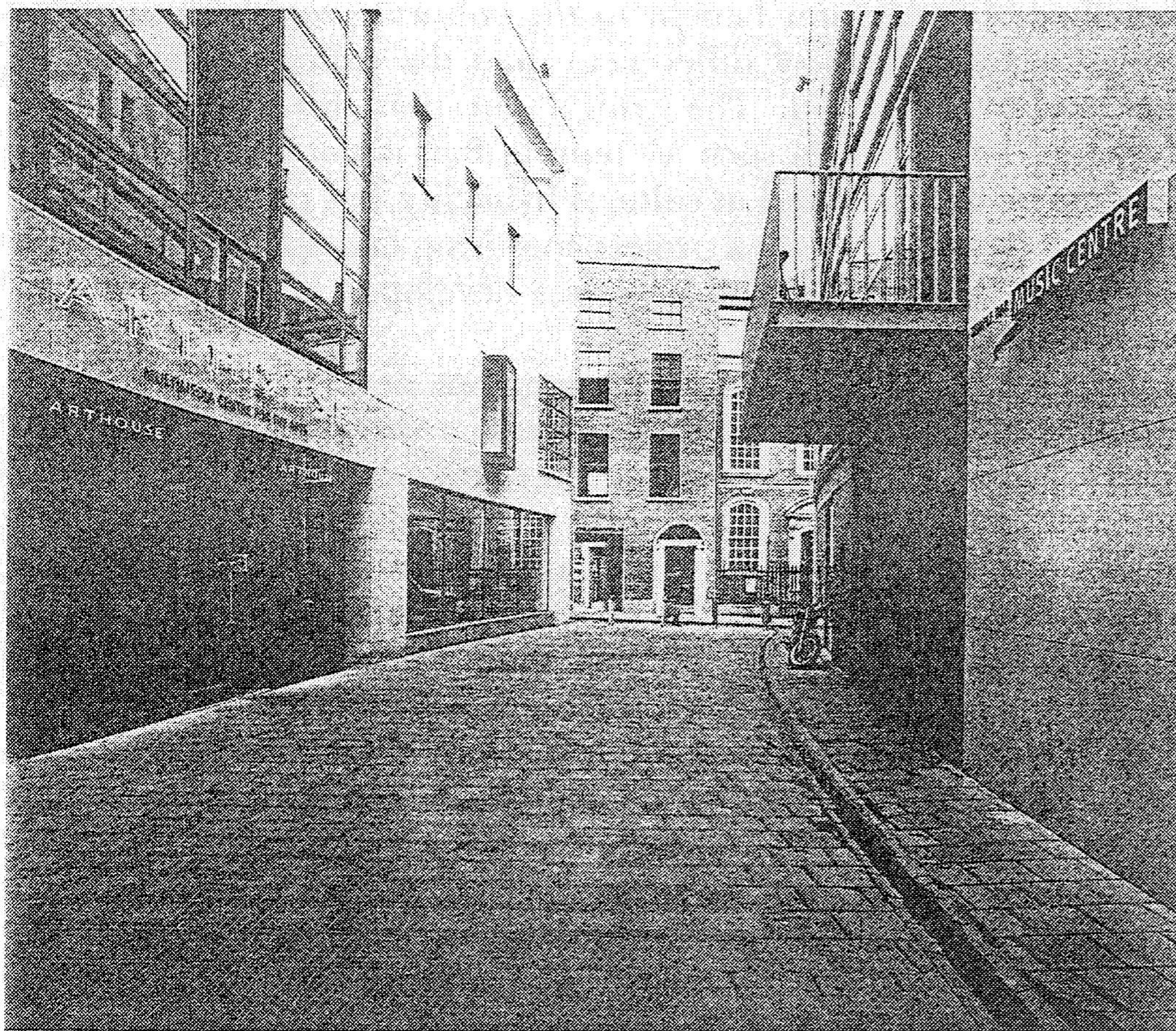


PHOTO 7 The new buildings of The Music Centre and The Art House, on Curved Street, facing onto the 18th century buildings of Eustace Street.

innovations and economic regenerations of Temple Bar undoubtedly contribute both to a recognition of and coming-to-terms-with the hybrid inheritance of the city, their positioning within the competitive cycle of international capital not only risks a homogenizing tendency which can equate Temple Bar with Soho or similar districts in any other city in the world, but is simultaneously risking, through its uncritical acceptance of the notion of cultural hybridity, the incorporation of a contemporary cultural imperialism within its postcolonial identity. This risk is contained in that very homogenising tendency produced by the imposition of non-locally specific patterns of development and redevelopment within a specific locality. Therefore in the process of projects developed in one locality being replicated within another, the non-specific characteristics of such development may be uncritically read as cultural hybridity when in fact they are a cultural monotony distinguished only by geographical variety. In this way, the specific locality of the development is therefore of far greater benefit to the cultural project (through its provision of markers of difference) than the cultural project is to the locality concerned. The critical question this process raises, therefore, with an area such as Temple Bar, is not one of inherent dangers being contained in cultural hybridity, but rather one of the inherent dangers of such a project confusing cultural hybridity with the uncritical acceptance of processes developed in, and appropriate for, other localities.

An apparently trivial and amusing, but nevertheless revealing, example of the way in which this potential threat to the area's cultural value within the city has been recognized, is the ban issued in late 1998 by Temple Bar publicans on British stag parties. Dublin has, in recent years, become the venue of choice for these weekend-long events, and Temple Bar in particular (due, ironically, to its successful marketing) had become their focus-point. Increasingly, Dublin residents and other visitors were avoiding the area at weekends because of the atmosphere created by these groups, and they were eventually banned. The official reason given for this was that the lost business of other visitors was worth more than that of the stag parties. The undoubted truth of this statement, combined however with the less officially stated distaste of Dubliners at seeing an ever-increasing and obtrusive 'army' of drunken British men on the streets of the city centre serves as a microcosmic example of the delicate economic and political negotiations involved in Dublin's new-found prominence on the international 'heritage' circuit.

This is particularly difficult territory to negotiate in a culture in which hybridity and diversity must *necessarily* be incorporated into identity, as described by Joyce in his argument that,

Our civilization is a vast fabric, in which the most diverse elements are mingled, in which nordic aggressiveness and Roman law, the new bourgeois conventions and the remnant of a Syriac religion are reconciled. In such a fabric, it is useless to look for a thread that may have remained pure and virgin without having undergone the influence of a neighbouring thread. (cited in Gibbons 1996: 168)

This analysis, written as a critique of early twentieth-century Irish cultural nationalism, remains a valid thesis for the postcolonial development of the capital city. It is not the cosmopolitan and hybrid nature of cultural production and symbolic role of a district like Temple Bar in itself which represents an inherent threat to the urban/national culture. Indeed, at one level, these developments emphasize the extent to which Dublin has successfully positioned itself as a postcolonial and European capital city, participating in contemporary European cultural and economic activity against an articulated and therefore reconciled colonial past.

However, for a project such as the redevelopment of Temple Bar, it is important to note Tomlinson's argument about the way in which contemporary cultural imperialism works to destabilize all localities through the effects of the global. As he suggests,

The cultural space of the global is one to which we are constantly referred, particularly by the mass media, but one in which it is extremely difficult to locate our own personal experience. (Tomlinson 1991: 175)

The extent to which Temple Bar's redevelopment can be seen as the creation of "the cultural space of the global" in which the troubled history and culture of the local has been elided rather than negotiated therefore becomes a vital issue, not only for the inhabitants of Dublin, but even within the frame of reference of that global culture itself. If the area is now 'located' and therefore recognizable only within the scope of an internationally homogeneous urban space, then its appeal to visitors—and therefore its capacity to earn revenue—will quickly dissipate due to its lack of locally-specific reference, which is the very quality visitors seek to find in it. But most importantly, such developments in urban culture within a city whose identity is already scarred by a previous era of colonialism risk, in effect, exchanging traditional forms of imperialism

(and an imperialism of forms in spatial representations) for another, even more pervasive form which is most dangerous when it articulates itself as a process of emancipation and liberating local identity.

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