**The Spectacle of the Spire:  re-inventing Dublin's O'Connell Street**

**Mary P. Corcoran**

**Department of Sociology**

**National University of Ireland, Maynooth,**

**Maynooth, Co. Kildare, Ireland**

**Mary.Corcoran@may.ie**

The very conditions that allow art to come into being-the sites of its display, circulation and social functionality, its address to spectators, its position in systems of exchange and power are themselves subject to profound historical shifts.[1]

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

By the  late 1990s, as part of a general commitment to renewing the city, Dublin City Council had devised a bold strategy for visually refashioning O'Connell street, and restoring the thoroughfare to its former glory. At the centrepiece of the plan was the erection of a new monument on the site of the former Nelson's Pillar, blown up by Irish nationalists in 1966,  and the creation of a new plaza to the front of

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[1]  Mitchell, W.J.T.(ed) *Art and the Public Sphere*.  University of Chicago Press, 1992 p. 3

the General Post Office building. The monument chosen in 1998 was conceived of as a millennium project, but for a number of reasons, the installation was not completed until the end of 2002.  During that period Dublin City Council, the general public , the business community on O'Connell street, artists, the arts community  and environmentalists publicly debated the merits of the Spire of Dublin, formerly known as the Monument of Light.  The saga of its delayed erection yet again highlighted the seeming inability to deliver infrastructure within a time frame and with minimum disruption to citizens.  While it is clear that part of the agenda is to make the street economically viable once again, there is a wider reasoning behind the municipality's plan of aestheticisation.  Cultural objects are more than simply aesthetic, they are part of the symbolic economy which "constructs both a currency of commercial exchange and a language of social identity"[2].  The Spire of Dublin represents  a vehicle for expressing a new kind of national and urban narrative, and for the economic revalorisation of the North side of the river.  As Zukin has suggests "making a place for art in the city goes along with establishing a place identity for the city as a whole".[3]  The Spire represents a key artefact in the municipality's attempted transformation of the spatial order of the city.  As an urban spectacle the Spire is an important mechanism through which the restructuration of the contemporary urban imaginary can be accomplished.  It is actively being promoted as the expression of the symbolic  identity of the city.   But the conceptualisation, evolution and implementation of the Spire—its production in space- has also demonstrated the

[2] Sharon Zukin, "Space and symbols in an age of decline" p. 45 in A. King (ed) *Re-presenting the City*. London, Routledge, 1998.
[3] Zukin, S. op. cit.  p. 45

tension between art's subjectivity and consequent potential for controversy, and the municipality's need to promote the public good.[4]


**The re-imagining of Dublin**

According to Zukin the most productive analyses of cities draw on the complex inter-relationships between culture and power. This means approaching the city from both the political economy perspective which emphasises the impact of land, labour and capital on the built environment and equally, viewing the city in terms of its symbolic economy- how the cultural meanings embedded in a myriad of built forms contribute to the construction of social identity.[5]

The evolution of the built environment, whether in the urban core, on the edge of the city or in the outer suburbs takes place in a political and economic context. The political context is largely provided through the planning regime, which in the Irish case is provided by the local authorities working under the auspices of the Department of the Environment. According to Byrne the nominal objectives of planning in relation to the urban core have changed dramatically, and in particular, over the last thirty years or so, mirroring the transitions that have taken place in capitalism.[6] These changes at the level of the political have to a great extent been wrought by the impact of economic global forces working themselves out on local urban landscapes. Planning, argues Byrne is always about constructing futures. He argues that the actual planning processes of urban cores have become dominated by the objective of positioning that urban core in relation to global process, in particular, with the creation of a city centre profit zone as a key objective. There is ample evidence that

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[4] Hoffman, B. " Law for Arts sake in the public realm" pp 113-146 in W. J. T. Mitchell (ed) *Art and the Public Sphere*, University of Chicago Press, 1992.
[5] Zukin, S. op. cit. p. 43
[6] David Byrne, *Undertanding the Urban*, London: Palgrave, 2001.

this has been the case in Dublin.  The impetus for urban regeneration in the city was provided by the Urban Renewal Act (1986)  which made available a generous package of tax-based incentives to developers, investors and owner occupiers.  The scheme was designed to promote private investment in the built environment of designated inner-city areas either through refurbishment of existing buildings or through new developments.   In response to these conditions, and given the generally more favourable prevailing economic circumstances, Dublin in the 1990s experienced a building boom in the office and commercial sectors.  The state effectively acted as a catalyst for commercial development, and at the same time, ensured a market for what was actually built through the additional tax incentives for occupancy of commercial buildings and private dwellings.  More significantly though, the passage of the Urban Renewal Act set the context for a re-imagining of Dublin which was to greatly alter the vernacular of the city over the decade that followed, in particular through the flagship development projects such as the International Financial Services Centre and the cultural quarter at Temple Bar.

**Integrated Area Planning**

In recent years however, Dublin City Council has attempted a re-crafting of its urban renewal programme to incorporate a "public good" dimension alongside the more overtly economic motivation that had hitherto dominated urban renewal strategy. While the original urban renewal scheme developed in 1986 was generally deemed successful,  a government sponsored evaluation concluded that  "in those designated areas which have adjacent indigenous inner-city communities, the local communities believe that urban renewal as defined by the incentive schemes, has not addressed issues which are central to the regeneration and sustainable re-development

of those areas such as unemployment, the lack of public amenities, education, training and youth development." [7]   The need for an integrated approach was highlighted and subsequently translated into the Department of the Environment's *Guidelines for Integrated Area Plans(1997),*  and the *Dublin City Development Plan* (1999).   The government approved a new urban renewal scheme in 1998, which provided for a more planned, integrated and focused approach to urban renewal designations. Relevant local authorities seeking designation were required to prepare Integrated Area Plans (IAPs) for parts of urban areas in most need of physical and socio-economic rejuvenation, and to identify targeted sub-areas or key developments within them for which designation was sought. A starting point in the preparation of the IAP was an analysis of the physical and social needs of the selected area and a vision statement as to how urban renewal could address those needs. The IAP areas were chosen because they were areas in need of regeneration, where there was a spatial concentration of physical decay and social problems.  Each IAP is tailored to the specific strengths and weaknesses of the target neighbourhood.

The core objective of the IAP drafted for O'Connell street is to alter the character of the public domain of the street and its environs[8] through a combination of cultural and aesthetic projects and the tax designation of specific sites. This approach is predicated on the view that economic engines underpin local areas, but equally important are local cultural clusters.  The idea underlying the IAP is to stimulate both the economy and culture of the neighbourhood, to re-animate the city centre and re-invigorate its civic character.   According to the IAP " nothing short of a redefinition of the existing uses is necessary if the street is to become effective as the main street

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[7] KPMG,  (1996: x). Full reference to be supplied

[8] The IAP for O'Connell street takes in the adjoining properties back as far a s Marlborough street on one side and Moore street on the other. It also extends north to include Parnell Square and south across the river to College street, along with Westmoreland  street and D'Olier street.

of the capital and of the country. This will involve the development of a range of uses that generate animation, vitality and the kind of atmosphere that draws all sectors of society into the street and makes people want to stay".[9]  Rather than the street being simply a place that is passed through, the plan envisions a street that people will choose to visit.  But to do this, O'Connell's street has to have its sense of place restored.  There is a clear recognition here that the legibility of the city and its identity are interdependent.  In other words, the municipality explicitly recognises that spaces are formed by capital investment and by sensual attachment. [10]

**The Spire and  place-remaking in O'Connell Street**

As part of the overall strategy for the improvement of O'Connell Street, Dublin City Council advanced a proposal to construct a new monument at the site of the former Nelson's pillar by way of an international competition.  The winning entry, "Monument of Light" by Ian Ritchie architects, London, was announced in 1998.  The stainless steel monument is a conical spire which tapers from 3.0 metres in diameter at the base to a 0.1 meter pointed pinnacle at a height of 120 metres.    Initial works on the monument were delayed due to Judicial Review proceedings which sought an environmental impact statement for the project.   The EIS was duly prepared and certified by the Minister.  Work began on building the Spire of Dublin in 2001 and was largely completed by the end of 2002, although there are ongoing technical difficulties with the illumination at the top of the Spire. The second part of Phase 1 of the redevelopment programme is underway involving the construction of a paved granite plaza from the Spire to the GPO, lined with lime trees and light by four 16

[9] http://www.dublincity.ie/dublin/oconniap2.html
[10] Zukin, S. op. cit. p49

metre high lighting masts.   Interestingly, the actual production of the Spire in space has become a symbolic commodity in its own right.   The largest crane ever assembled in Ireland was necessary to lift the segments of the Spire into place. Thus, the visual spectacle associated with the technical aspects of the Spire's production has become part of the monument's story.   A film, co-funded by Dublin City Council, tracking the project over a three-year period, will be marketed around schools and engineering faculties of universities in America and Australia.   According to the Spire's designer and architect,  the film  is also expected to be sold publicly as a souvenir.[11]

Cultural politics and political-economic power inevitably become intertwined in the social process of place construction or re-construction.   The Monument of Light, later renamed the Spire of Dublin, is intended to celebrate and become symbolic of the re-invention of  O'Connell Street.  The tawdry provincialism of the street will be refashioned into a European style boulevard the 21st century. According to Lefebvre the task for a critical urban theory is to show how spatial forms and organisation are the product of a specific mode of production- capitalism.[12]   The creation of the  Spire in O'Connell Street, is about more than the aestheticisation of the street although that is central to its brief.  It is also about revalorising the street as an economic entity. The development of the Spire cannot be divorced from the expensive make over of Clerys, the introduction of planning laws to make it more difficult to open "low end" outlets on the street and the proposed re-development of Carlton cinema site. Indeed Dublin City Council's vision is to recreate O'Connell Street as a quality environment with a range of higher-end uses.  The Spire will draw

[11]  "Spire to make fortune says designer Ritchie" *Irish Times*, January 25th, 2003
[12]  Peter Saunders, *Social Theory and the Urban Question*, 1995 p. 157.

people across the river, providing a beacon of the regeneration of the North city, and a landmark to orient the local and visiting flaneur. As an architectural publisher with a specialist interest in O'Connell street remarked "It's a focal point, a necessary vote of confidence in the north inner city."[13]

Lefebvre suggests that when space is produced in capitalist society, contradictions are likely to emerge since they are inherent to the capitalist system as a whole. These contradictions are inscribed in the plan for O'Connell street which alerts us to some of the tensions and ambiguities between the stated goals for the street, and how they can be achieved in practice. This brings into sharp relief "the problem of artistic production and spectatorship in relation to changing and contested notions of the public sphere".[14] For the Spire to work as aesthetic spectacle its environs need to be cleaned up. The act of cleaning-up the streets however, has the effect of narrowing and re-defining the idea of the street as public sphere.

For example, much of the rhetoric produced by Dublin City Council focuses on O'Connell street as a civic or public sphere, with the Spire and the GPO plaza forming the new heart of the street. The city Street has promoted its use for over two hundred years as a place of public assembly council points out, for example, that " the width and spatial coherence of O'Connell and civic ritual" [15]. Yet at the same time that plans were moving ahead for the Spire, the City Council sought (unsuccessfully) to ban protest marches from the street. Had they succeeded this would have negated the whole notion of the street as a public sphere. Similarly, the democratic idea of creating "high quality" civic space at the centre of the city, sits rather uncomfortably with ensuring that the city centre is safe for visitors. A major multi-agency initiative

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[13] "So now that the Spire is up, do we think it's art?" *Irish Times* January 25th, 2003
[14] Mitchell, W.J. T, op. cit p. 2
[15] Dublin City Council. The O'Connell Street Architectural Conservation Area- Part 1- An Appraisal and Assessment. http://www.dublincity.ie/profile/publications/iap/oconnellfullaca.pdf

launched in 2003 targeted littering, vandalism and other anti-social behaviour in an effort to create a safer, cleaner environment in Dublin's main business and shopping zone, described by City Manager, John Fitzgerald, as "the front parlour" of the city.[16] Under the initiative thousands of people were arrested over a six-month period. Begging and street drinking in the city centre have been almost fully eradicated as a result. The streets in effect, have been cleared of those members of the public who are deemed "undesirable. This is part of a well documented tendency for urban renewal projects "to aestheticise the social problems they displace."[17]

A third contradiction emerged in relation to the vernacular element of the streetscape. Much has been made of the fact that O'Connell Street has been central to generations of Dubliners, in the same way that the Champs Elyesees is of symbolic importance to Parisiens, and Broadway to New York.[18] The original plans for the street clearly indicated that most of the plane trees on the street would be replaced with smaller, European-style trees and manicured hedging. But when the trees- described as the last standing witnesses to the 1916 rising- were being unceremoniously felled, a number of politicians dramatically chained themselves to the trunks, and Dublin City Council received hundreds of email and telephone complaints. Some of the trees were subsequently given a stay of execution, even though this means compromising the overall design of the street. Apart from their historic role as "witnesses" to the rising, the trees also formed part of a natural if unusual habitat for wagtails in the city. The reluctance to accept the demise of the trees on the part of the public demonstrates that while one the one hand, the Europeanisation project is welcomed, on the other hand, people are concerned about

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[16] Reid, Liam. 2003. Clampdown on city center begging, Irish Times, October 22.
[17] Zukin, Sharon, op. cit. p. 44
[18] An Taoiseach quoted by Kathy Sheridan, "Seeing the woo for the trees" in *Irish Times*, November 9th, 2002

obliterating memory, history and tradition in O'Connell Street.   It also reveals the ambiguity of our relationship to place which is time deepened and memory qualified.

Finally, tensions emerged in relation to the wider public reactions to the re-invention occurring on the street.  One of the unsuccessful artists who had entered the competition to design the replacement for Nelson's pillar, took judicial proceedings to challenge the decision of the selection jury.  As a result, the Courts ordered that Dublin City Council should produce an  Environmental Impact Statement for the proposed development.  Three quarters of the submissions received from members of the public strongly objected to Dublin City Council's plan to erect the Spire in O'Connell Street.   Objections were made on the basis of the Spire's perceived inappropriateness in terms of the character, history or architecture of the area.  It was also criticised for being too high, ugly and out of scale with its surroundings.[19]  The inspector charged with carrying out the environmental impact study concluded however, that though the monument's effect on the urban landscape was its most controversial aspect, "the purpose of the development is to produce a significant visual impact and it would be a failure not to do so".   On the other hand, letter writers to the *Irish Times*, voiced support for the proposed Monument arguing that it "would be a much needed contemporary symbol identifying Dublin as a progressive modern European city." [20]  The fact that the Spire evoked public debate has been seen as a good thing.   The Director of the City Arts Centre, Declan McGonagle enjoyed "listening to the various radio and telephone polls and so on, the extent to which people have responded to it, so that it takes on this collective sense of the centre of Dublin".[21]  One such poll featured the Spire in both the list of the ten worst and the

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[19] "Planner says Spike is pivotal to renewal of O'Connell Street"  Irish Times, December 28th, 2000
[20]  Irish Times, 20th July 2000
[21] "So now that the Spire is up, do we think it's art" Irish Times, January 25th, 2003

ten best developments in 2003, pointing to the lack of consensus among the public on its merits.

**The political economy of place construction**

Public monuments, street names, urban planning and architectural initiatives are fundamentally spatial phenomena, rooted in the domain of the cultural landscape.[22] Following Lefebvre we can think about the Spire in terms of three conceptual levels: the level of spatial practices (or materiality) the representation of space and the space of representation or imagination. Although these three can be analytically separated, Lefebvre saw the three as intertwined with none of the levels privileged over the others. In terms of spatial practices we can see how particular places are constructed and experienced as material artefacts, and how they are materially constituted through the actions of key sets of actors. O'Connell Street is a distinct cultural space, with its own specific history and determinants. In the eighteenth century O'Connell Street (formerly Sackville Mall) was originally intended as an elongated residential square rather than a busy commercial thoroughfare.[23] By the early C19 the street had become a prestigious commercial boulevard sporting shops, hotels and businesses, predating similar development of prestigious city centres avenues in London and Paris. As a consequence of the Rising in 1916, three quarters of the buildings on the street were destroyed. The re-building of O'Connell street became a major concern in the immediate aftermath of the rising. Strict guidelines governing height, proportions and corners- were implemented in a bid to retain the character of the street. It was in the 1940s and the 1950s that the street was at the height of its popularity playing a key commercial, cultural and civic

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[22] Whelan, Yvonne, *Re-inventing modern Dublin*. University College Press, 2003 p. 234
[23] Dublin City Council. The O'Connell Street Architectural Conservation Area- Part 1- An Appraisal and Assessment, http://www.dublincity.ie/profile/publications/iap/oconnellfullaca.pdf

role at the heart of the city.   The spatial reorganisation of the city since the 1960s has not been kind to O'Connell Street.   In 1966, Nelson's Pillar, a tall column with a viewing platform which offered a view over the city, was blown up by Irish nationalists.[24]   The Pillar had been the major focal point and visitor attraction in the city, and its passing—which left many Dubliners ambivalent or downright indifferent- was mourned by many in the architectural heritage community.   Ian Lumley of An Taisce (the National Trust), for example, has suggested that " the destruction of Nelson's Column was an act of cultural vandalism on a par with anything done by the Taliban.   It was the tallest Doric column in Europe, it had full public access, and it complemented the classical architecture of the street perfectly.   It ranked among the great monument in an European city and it was a terrible historical loss"[25]   Over subsequent decades the municipality toyed with a variety of ideas for replacements but none came to fruition. Meanwhile,  the street  went into a spiral of decline.

Uneven capitalist development in Dublin helped to produce the material decline of the street and its environs, as commercial development moved to the Southside of the river, or out of the city altogether. The street became characterised by fast food shops, games arcades and vacant lots (the building next to the Carlton cinema site has been vacant since 1979).   In terms of its representation, O'Connell Street became defined predominantly by its "otherness".  Dubliners increasing viewed it with foreboding (a "no-go" area was a popular designation) or indifference.  Sited in the unfashionable quarter of the city,  O'Connell street soon became a leitmotif for all that we dislike about the urban condition—drab, dangerous, run down, deserted at night.  Like Trafalgar Square in London-- recently given a make over by Sir Norman

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[24] For discussion see Whelan, Y. 2003 op. cit.
[25] "So now that the Spire is up, do we think it it's art?"  *Irish Times*, January 25th, 2003

Foster-- O'Connell street has more recently been associated more with the stench of diesel and questionable hamburgers than a sense of history in- the-making. [26]

As the city of Dublin has become increasingly subordinated to the consumer capitalist marketplace, there is increasing pressure to counteract placelessness by differentiating different spaces within the urban landscape and celebrating them symbolically. Dublin City Council's re-imagining of the city which is given expression in the *Dublin City Development Plan*, the Integrated Area Plans and in the City Development Board's strategy, *Dublin: a city of possibilities*,[27] attempts to revalorise the city through a new focus on place, identity and neighbourhood. This interweaving of economy and culture is key to the setting of objectives for particular places in the city:

"the vision for O'Connell street must include a broad-based commitment to create the kind of quality environment, range of uses and powerful sense of place that can live up to its unequivocal role as the main street of the capital city; a street where there is strong dynamic relationship between quality architecture and a vibrant mix of uses, and where a co-ordinated design approach to the public domain is balanced by a concern to develop the social and cultural dimensions of the public spaces; a place where people are attracted to, and feel both stimulated and secure by day and night."[28]

While acknowledging the significance of economic engines of regeneration, the Council seeks to promote the cultural and civic character of Dublin's neighbourhoods. In the wake of the first Spencer Dock planning debacle this constitutes a long overdue attempt by the municipal authorities to articulate a vision for the city of Dublin. The City Council is responding to the fear of placelessness, associated with the erosion of a public, moral sphere in favour of privatised consumption and tourism. The question remains as to whether or not "the public" can

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[26] Sudjic, Deyan. 2003. "So Nelson, What's your vierw?" *The Observer*, June 29.
[27] Dublin City Development Board. 2002. Dublin 2002-2012, A City of Possibilities, Economic, Social and Cultural strategy. Dublin.
[28] Graham, Anne. 2001 O'Connell Street Integrated Area Plan, Annual report 2000-2001. Dublin City Council. P. 2

be re-claimed, and more pertinently, to what does "the public" actually refer particular in the context of conflicting policies that seek to re-animate civic space while simultaneously clearing that space of those deemed undesirable. This has prompted some cultural critics to question whether there is "any such thing as a public sphere in the culture of late capitalism?"[29]

The municipality is taking a clear political position. Culture is taken as "a point of concern" with the decision to invest (even in the face of public criticism) in a new symbol for O'Connell Street. That symbol- the Spire of Dublin- can then be appropriated instrumentally to achieve cultural, political and economic ends. The Spire is more than a cultural or aesthetic intervention on the street. It is there to safeguard the viability of current and future commercial space. The Clerys department store, has over the same period, received a multi-million euro makeover, and plans are now advanced for a major redevelopment of the Carlton cinema site, which will probably include new shopping and hotel facilities. The business community has been vocal in its support for the Spire, because of the potential spin off economic benefits for the street. In a letter to the *Irish Times*, for example, the chairman of Best Ltd, a family owned company that has traded on the street for more than fifty years, commented: "we are very conscious that that the street has suffered during the years since the departure of the Nelson monument. Accordingly, we thoroughly approve of the decision to replace Nelson with a landmark monument worthy of the capital of our country,"[30] Nevertheless, consensus on the Spire's symbolic value remains elusive. Others perceive a more dystopian vision of the city of Dublin in the monument's visual statement. The artistic director of the Project theatre, for example, remarks that "it is a bit unfortunate that it resembles a

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[29] W.J.T.Mitchell (ed) *Art and the public sphere*. Chicago, Univeristy of Chicago Press, 1992 p.2
[30] Irish Times, January 15th, 2001

hypodermic needle given its location…it must be said that O'Connell Street needs much more than the spike to revive it." [31]

**Inspiring imagination**

The evaluation and hierarchical ranking of places—both within cities and between different cities- occurs largely through activities of representation. It is possible to think about O'Connell street as a space of representation—that has over time played a significant role in how we imagine the capital city, the country and ourselves. Despite its material decline it has continued to exercise a distinctive hold on the public imagination. De Certeau suggests that legend, memory and dream offer three symbolic mechanisms through which we can organise a discourse of the city.[32] The buildings and monuments on O'Connell Street speak to us of legendary heroes- Daniel O'Connell, Charles Stuart Parnell, James Larkin-- and the popular movements in which they played key roles: Catholic emancipation, national self-determination and the labour movement, respectively. The street also evokes memories of the rising, of the blowing up of Nelson's pillar, of wet St. Patrick's Day parades, of political marches. Now, the street is being re-imagined as part of a project of civic boosterism. The Spire of Dublin represents a vehicle through which we might dream of new urban futures. In fact, Ian Richie describes it as "a pure symbol of optomism for the future".[33]

The main attraction of the Spire is its iconic or "spectacular" potential. Vivenne Roche, a sculptor and member of the selection jury describes the Spire as a "signature" of Dublin for the rest of the world, and an "ideal emblem for the current

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[31] "So now that the Spire is up, do we think it's art? *Irish Times*, January 25th, 2003

[32] Michel de Certeau, *The practice of everyday life*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 1988 p. 105

[33] *Irish Times*, December 9th, 2002.

times".[34]    Barbara Dawson, director of the Hugh Lane Municipal Gallery in Parnell Square which borders the North end of O'Connell Street, says that "it is interesting that [the Spire] is disproportionate to its surroundings. It wouldn't have the same impact otherwise. It's brave and symbolic.."[35]

While it has only been in place for a short time, it is well on its way to occupying a symbolic place in contemporary culture. One of the early battles that had to be fought by Dublin City Council was to get control of the Spire's potentially lucrative internet domain name. The Dublin City Development Board has made the spire a central element of its logo. Two recently published books use the Spire to great effect on their front covers.[36] It is anticipated that merchandise associated with the Spire will have the potential to generate considerable income.[37]

The Spire's significance though goes beyond its imposing presence as a piece of public art on O'Connell Street, and as a vehicle for economic regeneration. The citizens of Dublin have a mental map of the city configured around its key North side and South side co-ordinates. . The postal code system—even numbers for the South side, odd numbers for the North side (with the exception of the President's residence and its environs) allows for automatic categorisation. Property prices for private houses on the North side of the river lag behind those on the South side even in salubrious neighbourhoods. The symbolic relations between the city's North side and South side are somewhat uneasy. Dublin humour is replete with pejorative jokes about Northsiders. The *Phoenix* magazine which specialises in political satire, playfully parodies the North side Taoiseach's (Prime Minister) diary which makes generous use of Dublin street argot and colloquialisms. There is a world of difference

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[34] *Irish Times*, January 2nd, 2001
[35] "So now tht the Spire is up, do we think it's art" Irish Times, January 25th, 2003
[36] Bruce Arnold, *The Spire and other essays on contemporary culture,* Liffey Press, 2003; Tim Pat Coogan, *Ireland in the Twentieth Century*, 2003 reference to be supplied
[37] "Spire to make fortune says designer Ritchie, *Irish Times*, January 25th, 2003

between the "cheap n' cheerful ambiance of Moore Street/Henry street and the more "pricey" feel to Grafton street and its environs.    Part of  Dublin City Council's overall city strategy is to challenge the North/South division by creating an alternative East/West axis along the quays, with the National Museum, Collins barracks at one end and O'Connell Street acting as the anchor on the other end, on the eastern side of the river.  In this context, the Spire forms the centre point of a strategy to reverse the stereotyping of place in the city, and to encourage Dubliners to think about the spatial ordering of the city in a different way.  The spectacle of the Spire then is being put to work to shift the public imaginary—so that the the North side/South side division can be attenuated and new ways of reading the city can evolve.

**Conclusion**

According to Zukin,  "visual artefacts of material culture and political economy reinforce or comment upon social structure.  By making social rules legible, they represent the city"[38]    .  A visual artefact such as the Spire in Dublin generates a variety of responses and forces us to question our notions of what is art, what is the public, and how are the two supposed to relate to each other  in the contemporary city?   Art is frequently seen as transcendent and somehow detached from the everyday interests and concerns of  the citizenry.    The Spire has been criticised by some artists for failing to adequately embody the city and its contemporary citizenry. Sculptor, Michael Warren questions whether the Spire is anything more than an engineering feat:

> "To move beyond that, for me, for it to become art, there has to be a sense of limit. If we can read it only upwards, if it simply soars away from us, then it disregards the human scale and that would take from it.  This sense of limit,

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[38] Zukin, Sharon op. cit. p 44

and the question of ratio, both with the piece and in relation to its setting, are the vital questions. That's what would make it more than a piece of spectacular street theatre. As a symbol of Dublin it should be more".[39]

On the other hand, the very quality of reaching upwards toward the transcendent is viewed by others as symbolic, linking the Spire with the mediaeval cathedrals of the past[40] and providing a reason to gaze up in the sky. It is Dublin's first secular spire.[41] In pursing a controversial public art project as the centre piece of the regeneration plan for O'Connell street, Dublin City Council attempted to challenge the "hero on a horse" view of public art, and at the same time, to devise a centre piece for the city's main thoroughfare that would capture the imagination of the public. The municipality did so in the face of considerable public criticism particularly about the "wastefulness" of spending public money on art rather than hospitals and homeless shelters. Significantly, the City Council was supported by influential lobbies from within the arts and business communities, as well as by local representatives on the IAP monitoring committee. A partnership of interests succeeded in bringing the Spire into being, not only as an aesthetic re-visioning of O'Connell street but also as part of a wider strategy of civic boosterism for the North inner-city. The Spire of Dublin is part of our commodity culture, because it is already being deployed as a mechanism to get more consumers into O'Connell street and its environs. As a symbolic space, O'Connell street blends public and private uses, and commercial and non-commercial functions: "while (the street) is structured by governmental incentives to include public uses (the plaza) it is also shaped by the fact that people are more active as consumers than as citizens. [42]

[39] "So now that the Spire is up, do we think it's art?" *Irish Times*, January 25th, 2003
[40] *Irish Times*, January 10th, 2001
[41] *Irish Times*, December 10th, 2002
[42] Zukin, S. op. cit. p55

But the Spire  is also anti-commodity culture in that it arrests our vision in a dramatic way both from a distance and close up.  It forces us to look up, extending our line of vision.  The Spire is both a symbol of capitalist logic and an expression of art that transcends the culture of consumerism.