



REVIEW:

The Great Reimagining: Public Art, Urban Space and the Symbolic Landscapes of a 'New' Northern Ireland (Bree T. Hocking: Berghahn, 2015)

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The Great Reimagining: Public Art, Urban Space and the Symbolic Landscapes of a 'New' Northern Ireland is written by Bree T. Hocking, a Research Associate at the Open University with a background in exploring the intersection of art, spatial politics and society. This book critically investigates the global and local processes shaping public spaces in the two largest cities of 'post-conflict' Northern Ireland: Belfast and Derry. A particular emphasis is placed on interrogating selected state-financed public art commissions, questioning their intended impact, the sometimes contested and unforeseen community responses, and the insights derived as to the vision of citizenship the State is seeking to engender in the 'new symbolic landscapes' of Northern Ireland (p. 4). In essence, the study explores the dissonance and contradictions that typically manifest in the spatial restructuring of urban space, particularly where public art is mobilised by policymakers and funding bodies as a means of promoting local reconciliation and shared space while simultaneously calibrated to attract global investment capital and 'consumer-tourists'. To this end, the author posits a conceptual framework for the analysis of official discourses shaping such 'transitional space' and asserts its wider applicability to other post-conflict and post-industrial societies.

The use of physical regeneration and reimagining as tools in conflict mediation is a familiar subject for scholarly attention in the Northern Irish context. The creation of high-end shopping malls, new public spaces, coupled with marketing slogans, spectacle events and other boosterist strategies, have prompted numerous critiques by academics and others. This is perhaps most amusingly characterised by William Neill's (1995) questioning of the urban redevelopment processes underway in Belfast in the 1990s as akin to putting 'Lipstick on a Gorilla'. Nonetheless, an overview and in-depth focus on prominent examples of public art within the transformation of the wider built environment marks a welcome contribution to the debate, particularly in the afterglow of Derry's year as UK City of Culture. *The Great Reimagining* addresses ongoing attempts to 'reimage' Northern Ireland, acknowledging the struggle of successive Direct-Rule administrations during the Troubles to project 'normality' in the face of seemingly intractable conflict, while primarily concerned with the stop-start period of devolved government following the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement of 1998.

From a theoretical perspective, the work of a well-known cast of cultural and economic geographers, sociologists and anthropologists is drawn upon in theorizing the power dynamics, role of the image, and contestation in the social production of space and 'symbolic landscapes'. Scholars such as Henri Lefebvre, David Harvey, Denis Cosgrove, Sharon Zukin, Michel de Certeau and Pierre Bourdieu, amongst others, are referenced in the introductory chapter. Following their lead, the author proposes a number of designatory terms to denote public art. For instance, public art that is abstract in composition and typically overlaid with non-controversial location specific narratives and safe heritage themes – with a view to har-

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monising symbolic forms, distinguishing place and bolstering cultural capital – is termed ‘civic identikit’ art. Borrowing from Manuel Castells, the worldwide replicability of the production process by which such art is created is labelled the ‘civic identikit of flows’, while the use of a ‘limited menu of nostalgic images’ in the theming and commodification of space is referred to as the ‘civic identikit of place’ (pp. 7-8). These terms are regularly evoked throughout the book to categorise the specific pieces of art discussed.

The theoretical contribution goes beyond the terminology adopted. The two latter classifications above are incorporated within a broader conceptual framework orientated towards the analysis of transitional space (including public art) in post-conflict societies, which is offered as a structuring device for investigating official discourses. Five key discourses are identified by the author in the model, although they are not assumed to be definitive. The globalisation and consumption discourses are taken to represent ‘top-down’, global processes closely aligned with the civic identikit of flows. In contrast, the community and troubled history/reconciliation discourses relate more to the local scale and the civic identikit of place. A cultural discourse effectively bridges these other discourses, acting as a potential mediator of global and local forces, and whose malleability makes it attractive to public authorities seeking strategies to circumvent the various realms of contestation in conflicted societies. The ultimate limitations and contingency of this latter discourse in practice, however, are laid bare within the book in the discussion of Derry’s year as UK City of Culture.

The five public art cases investigated by Hocking, each of which relate in some way to the ‘shared space’ agenda promoted by government in Northern Ireland, are structured around the discourses identified above in the conceptual model. The cases include *Rise*, a large geodesic sculpture situated at Broadway Roundabout on the southern arterial route into Belfast city centre; *Spirit of Belfast*, an abstract sculpture at Cornmarket, in close proximity to the new Victoria Square shopping centre; *Hewitt in the Frame*, a community artwork project focused on the Cupar Way peace wall in West Belfast; the *Diamond War Memorial* in Derry city centre; and *Mute Meadow*, an abstract art piece located at the former Ebrington Barracks site in Derry. In addition to being differentiated according to the five discourses, the cases also contrast in the several other distinctive ways. For example, the *Diamond War Memorial* does not constitute a new work, but rather represents what is characterised as a ‘cognitive “recasting” as a “shared monument to joint Catholic-Protestant First World War military sacrifice”’ (p. 20). Furthermore, the cases illuminate an array of behind-the-scenes differences, contradictions and unspoken opinions evident in their conception, creation, and use. By way of illustration, the contrasting ‘public’ and ‘hidden’ transcripts of those participating in, or reflecting upon, shared commemoration initiatives, were exposed by the *Diamond War Memorial* case. Traditional community narratives were, in effect, unspoken and subsumed for wider public consumption. In the case of the *Rise* sculpture, the mutability of the message propagated by public officials in their efforts to secure local community ‘buy-in’ for the project, both in advance and following its construction, was a notable feature of the process that was largely met with scepticism and indifference. The narrative teases out such nuances from each of the cases and relates them in a convincing manner to the broader conceptual framework.

The exploration of experiences in other countries within the book is particularly informative and helps frame the Northern Ireland case within a much wider debate. The discussion of continental Europe and South Africa in the concluding chapter is especially interesting. The similarities detected in the public art processes between Northern Ireland and the Balkans, for instance, where the ‘absence of a shared struggle or unifying narrative’ is asserted to lead to ‘the proverbial path of least resistance’, and, in effect, a ‘two-tiered aesthetic portfolio’, is a pertinent observation (pp. 179-80). In short, the proliferation of abstract urban forms in city

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centres and prominent public spaces contrasts with the toned down (in some cases), essentialist, and 'simplistic heritage tropes' that characterise the symbolism and many public art examples in working-class areas (p. 173). Somewhat ominously, this speaks to a conflict frozen, rather than resolved, and is considered indicative of the weakness of the Northern Irish state, given the relative ease with which official discourses on public art were circumscribed in practice. Further discussion of these issues would be welcome in the context of the inability to constructively deal with 'legacy issues' and the past in Northern Ireland, as evidenced by the talks impasse over the reforming of a power-sharing Executive.

Notwithstanding the broadly positive review, a number of criticisms are merited. On a relatively superficial level, the eccentric chapter numbering system, whereby the introduction and conclusion chapters are unnumbered, in contrast with those in-between, is slightly confusing. In addition, the book could be better illustrated as many of the images are poorly reproduced, making it sometimes difficult to appreciate the object under discussion. On a more substantive point, however, the role of planners and the land-use planning system in mediating the use and transformation of urban space is largely absent. This is regrettable, firstly, because a rich seam of planning-focused literature already engages with the subject-matter of public art in regeneration and place-branding initiatives (for example, Peel and Lloyd, 2007). Secondly, other literature critiques the 'neutral' and 'technocratic' culture of planning that emerged in Northern Ireland in response to the political-administrative circumstances of the Troubles, and which had a bearing on regulatory decision-making processes impacting the built environment (see, for example, Ellis, 2000). None of the approximately 60 interviewees appear to represent this important dimension. Finally, the fact that the *Diamond War Memorial* is a 'listed' structure suggests the ascription of a range of other state-sponsored values related to its historic and architectural interest, quite apart from the social and other meanings derived from the local community. Again, this aspect arguably merited some consideration.

Nevertheless, this book offers valuable sightlines into the public art creation processes in Northern Ireland. The well-written, informative and accessible narrative can in part be read as a cautionary tale, and is unintentionally satirical in places in its account of the backstage happenings in several of the cases explored (see, for example, pp. 60-1). The subject matter could easily have lent itself to polemic, ideological heavy-handedness, or overly-normative prescription. However, the anthropological approach taken ultimately succeeds in its attempt to understand some of the complex socio-economic dynamics and nuances at play. Hardened aesthetic judgements are largely avoided, and, although the author recognises that each of the cases were a failure to varying degrees, their perpetual state of 'becoming' is acknowledged, ensuring they are constantly open to reinterpretation and re-appropriation over time. Nonetheless, one of the conclusions that resonates is the recognition of the 'credibility gap' and disjuncture between the local social reality of the places where much public art has been imposed in Northern Ireland, and the hyperbolic way in which it is repeatedly sold for consumption to an outside audience (p. 191). This opens up a host of potentially interesting avenues and future research questions which are sketched out in the concluding chapter.

The Great Reimagining is published at an opportune moment given recent changes in the institutional, funding, and societal landscape in Northern Ireland. The unfolding austerity agenda will presumably reduce the monies available for public art projects, while planning powers were devolved to new local authorities in April 2015 (many of them with Nationalist majorities). Moreover, as the 2011 census indicates, the population dynamics of Northern Ireland are subtly shifting, including a marked increase in those self-classifying as having no religion (McClelland and Gleeson, 2015). This book, therefore, provides a timely insight into what are now historical examples of public art in the post-Good Friday Agreement era, and a

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useful comparative against which future public art processes can be judged in the changed institutional, and changing societal, landscape of Northern Ireland.

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