

# The Management of Heritage in Contested Cross-border Contexts: Emerging research on the island of Ireland



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*This paper introduces the recently begun REINVENT research project focused on the management of heritage in the cross-border cultural landscape of Derry/Londonderry. The importance of facilitating dialogue over cultural heritage to the maintenance of 'thin' borders in contested cross-border contexts is underlined in the paper, as is the relatively favourable strategic policy context for progressing 'heritage diplomacy' on the island of Ireland. However, it is argued that more inclusive and participatory approaches to the management of heritage are required to assist in the mediation of contestation, particularly accommodating a greater diversity of 'non-expert' opinion, in addition to helping identify value conflicts and dissonance. The application of digital technologies in the form of Public Participation Geographic Information Systems (PPGIS) is proposed, and this is briefly discussed in relation to some of the expected benefits and methodological challenges that must be addressed in the REINVENT project. The paper concludes by emphasising the importance of dialogue and knowledge exchange between academia and heritage policymakers/practitioners.*

## **Introduction**

The EU referendum debate (henceforth Brexit) in the UK starkly revealed the distance and mistrust between people and the political establishment, exposing suspicions of expert knowledge while confirming societal differences based on geography, demography and other socio-economic indicators. Talk of disruption and division has permeated the media over recent years, and where heightened political rhetoric and the apparent weight of public opinion appears to lead, policy tends to follow. For example, the 'refugee crisis' in the summer of 2015 led swiftly to the reactive reintroduction of border controls (and fences) in many places and the de facto suspension of the Dublin Regulation concerning asylum seekers seeking international protection. Not unrelated, in the aftermath of the Brexit vote, attention on the island of Ireland is largely centred on the possible return of a 'hard' border. Although this eventuality is presented as a remote prospect, the centrality of immigration to the Brexit question ensures that the prospective status of the UK's only land border with an(other) EU member state will inevitably be subject to the vagaries of public opinion and decision-making processes elsewhere. Hence, boundaries and borders are firmly back on the political agenda in spite of (or because of) their increasing invisibility due to globalisation, European integration, and, more locally, the Northern Ireland Peace Process. Although the UK's leave process

will have potentially profound implications for the subject matter discussed, Brexit is not the predominant focus here. Rather, drawing initially on Haselsberger's (2014) discussion of 'thick' and 'thin' borders, this article introduces a recently begun research project focused on the challenges pertaining to the management of cultural heritage in contested cross-border contexts – 'Re-inventory-ing Heritage: Exploring the potential of public participation GIS to capture heritage values and dissonance' (REINVENT).<sup>1</sup>

It is recognised that all borders are complex phenomena consisting of overlapping sociocultural, economic and environmental boundaries and spaces; rarely coinciding with geopolitical and administrative lines on a map. The permeability of European borders to the flow of people, goods, services and capital has markedly improved over recent decades, but the 'top down' drivers of these processes ensures that they predominantly relate to geopolitical and administrative borders. In contested border regions, however, where difficult questions of heritage and identity are frequently to the fore, Haselsberger (2014, p.506) underlines the importance of simultaneously negotiating 'new relational geographies' relevant to sociocultural and environmental boundaries and spaces. Facilitating such 'soft spaces' for cooperation from the 'bottom up', in essence, 'allows different forms of coexistence to emerge and flourish irrespective of the underlying state border', with cultural heritage representing one arena where 'relational thinking' can usefully be applied in cross border contexts (Haselsberger, 2014, p.510). Thus, the REINVENT project critically engages with participatory practices and the application of digital mapping technologies to capturing a plurality of heritage values ascribed by a range of communities, taking the cross-border cultural landscape of Derry/Londonderry as the principal case study focus.

Furthering cross-border cooperation on the island of Ireland and maintaining the 'thinness' of the border, as the introduction above alludes, requires that policymakers pay attention to the management of cultural heritage. This article initially considers the issues of contestation and cooperation in relation to heritage, which, for Winter (2015, p.998), represent 'two sides of the same coin'. The policy space for cross-border cooperation on heritage on the island of Ireland is subsequently the focus of attention, referencing emergent concepts such as 'heritage diplomacy'. The next section addresses the application of digital technologies within cultural heritage management with particular reference to Public Participation GIS (PPGIS), which it is argued can bring a new dynamic to traditional heritage inventories and values-based approaches to their management.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, methodological challenges must be overcome to successfully utilise this technology. The penultimate section elaborates upon the selection of the cross-border cultural landscape of Derry/Londonderry as a case study focus, highlighting the richness of its cultural heritage and some of the related issues of contestation that it exemplifies. Finally, the key expected outputs and outcomes of

1 Haselsberger (2014, p.507) explains that 'the more boundaries a border is comprised of (meaning the more functions are imposed on one particular line in space), the "thicker" or harder and even oppressive' it becomes. Thus, thick borders are extremely 'rigid' whereas thin borders are 'permeable'.

2 PPGIS is defined as 'the practice of having non-experts or the lay public identify spatial information to augment expert geographic information systems (GIS) data' (Brown et al., 2014, p.191).

the REINVENT project are outlined in the conclusion, which emphasises the reciprocal benefits of pursuing academic and heritage policymaker/practitioner dialogue and knowledge exchange.

### **A contested phenomenon**

Cultural heritage is at the heart of the European agenda and is recognised as ‘an irreplaceable repository of knowledge and a valuable resource for economic growth, employment and social cohesion’ (European Commission, 2014, p.2). The positive values typically associated with heritage are recognised in numerous international, national and local charters and conventions, policy documents, research and advocacy reports.<sup>3</sup> Heritage is frequently central to regeneration and place-making initiatives, while, at a personal level, it is taken to be a critical component in the formation of identity, whether national or otherwise. However, heritage is also an inherently ‘dissonant’ or contested concept, created through a process of selection – historically by the state – subject to inevitable tensions deriving from its use (and abuse) as a cultural, political and economic resource, and occasionally the locus of outright hostility and violence (Tunbridge and Ashworth, 1996).<sup>4</sup> There are numerous examples of the latter, with the recent destruction of monuments across the Middle East and Africa a manifestation of conflict underscoring the symbolism of cultural heritage sites. Such conflict, of course, is not only associated with contemporary expressions of violence, but arises in relation to the continued management of the physical reminders of an uncomfortable past, like the ‘undesirable heritage’ surviving in Germany from the Nazi-era (Macdonald, 2006). Indeed, the global popularity of ‘dark tourism’ and the touristic consumption of ‘sites of atrocity’ poses significant management challenges, with the recent banning of Pokémon Go at the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum indicative of the sensitivities involved (see Figure 1). Such difficulties surrounding ‘conflict heritage’ remain an unresolved issue in the Northern Irish context (see, for example, McDowell, 2008; Flynn, 2011; Hocking, 2015), and although cultural tourism helps sustain heritage and many local economies worldwide, it physically erodes fragile sites and can severely disrupt the sacred and deeply held beliefs of many people.

- 3 See, for instance, the Council of Europe’s Faro Convention; the 2015 *Cultural Heritage Counts for Europe* report, and; the Department of Environment-commissioned *Study of the Economic Value of Northern Ireland’s Historic Environment*.
- 4 Dissonance relates to issues of discordance and disinheritance that are argued to be integral to the concept of heritage. By way of (stark) illustration, the ‘creation’ of any heritage ‘actively or potentially disinherits or excludes those who do not subscribe to, or are embraced within, the terms of meaning defining that heritage’ (Graham et al., 2000, p.24).

**Figure 1:** Tourists gathering at the entrance to the Auschwitz I concentration camp, a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1979. Photo taken in 2009.



*Source: Author*

Several other prominent tensions are associated with critiques of traditional approaches to cultural heritage management. Firstly, concerns have been expressed over the potential reinforcement of social exclusion, whether along socio-economic or ethno-religious lines. The question of 'whose heritage to conserve' is particularly resonant in multicultural and diverse societies (Tunbridge, 1984), while gentrification remains an attendant danger in many heritage-led (and other) regeneration projects often causing the pricing-out or displacement of poorer citizens (Ripp and Rodwell, 2015). For instance, Gard'ner (2004) discusses the needs and aspirations of ethnic minority groups in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, focusing on the designation and protection of sites of importance to the Bangladeshi community. He argues that without proactively recognising 'what different communities value within their environment, the built heritage of these groups will continue to be ignored or only recognised as part of our common heritage by chance' (Gard'ner, 2004, p.88). As such, heritage agencies are paying increasing attention to the history and stories of a more diverse range of people, whether they cohere around race, religion, gender, class or sexuality. Different communities will ultimately value different things, differently, of course, but gaining nuanced understandings of diverse place-attachments is inevitably difficult to achieve if they are not actively included within the conversation.

Secondly, the over-privileging of expert over non-expert opinions has been the subject of sustained critiques as certain types of heritage are inevitably afforded 'official' status at the expense of others. Thus, traditional heritage inventories tend to reflect value-sets that are mostly hierarchical in nature, representing a relatively narrow and limited range of 'elite' values, and typically associated with straightforward expressions of architectural and historic interest (Clark, 2002). In the Irish context, Parkinson et al. (2016, p.294) contend that 'expert/elite values' continue to dominate 'contemporary planning processes for built heritage, institutions and practices', and, in effect, serve to replicate an 'authorised heritage discourse' (AHD). In response to such concerns, alternative conceptions of heritage embracing the local and everyday expertise of people in their local environment are being devised that embrace social and other values. These emanate from 'participatory and bottom-up processes' that are 'grounded in local concerns and interests', albeit set within a broader national and international framework' of legislation, institutions and practices (Schofield, 2014, p.2).<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, mediating between the competing uses of heritage depends upon identifying value conflicts and dissonance and seeking to manage them over time (Tunbridge and Ashworth, 1996). It is critically important, therefore, that sound participatory mechanisms are developed to accommodate diverse value-sets, including non-expert values.

### Heritage diplomacy

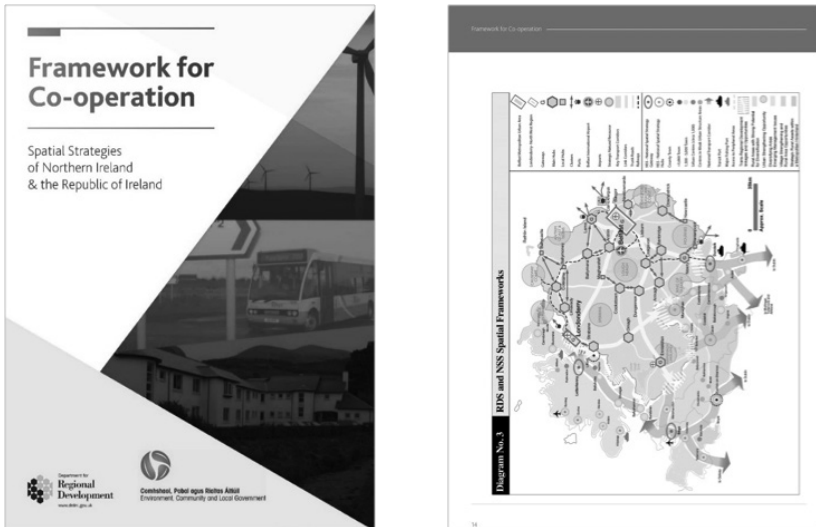
The perceived over-dominance of scholarly analysis on heritage contestation, dissonance and conflict prompted Winter's (2015, p.11) exploration of the concept of heritage diplomacy, which he defines as 'a set of processes whereby cultural and natural pasts shared between and across nations become subject to exchanges, collaborations and forms of cooperative governance'. This is predicated on the viewpoint that, although heritage is frequently a source of conflict, it can also be central to the mediation of differences between individuals, groups and even states. As Winter (2015) elaborates, governments around the world are increasingly deploying the idea of a 'shared heritage' in their diplomatic relationships with other states. Such language is evoked in the Northern Ireland Executive's *Together: Building a United Community Strategy*, which references 'shared society, 'shared space' and 'shared history, heritage and culture'. More can be done to embed heritage within local conflict resolution processes, of course, with Horning et al. (2015), for example, recommending enhanced cross-community involvement in archaeological investigations and the complexification of historical narratives (see also Phillips and Stein, 2016). The location of the Historic Environment Division within the Community Cohesion Group of the new Department for Communities in Northern Ireland may conceivably facilitate the emergence of such an approach. However, further progress is also possible on a cross-border basis where non-governmental networks are taking an active lead on heritage cooperation (Wilson, 2015). Fostering such connections can create economies of scale for a historically small and under-resourced heritage sector on the island of Ireland, while also cherishing

5 The title (and content) of Schofield's edited book, *Who Needs Experts?*, is particularly pertinent given the recent Brexit debate and the contested political discourse surrounding experts and expertise.

shared aspects of our common heritage and contributing towards reconciliation and mutual understanding.

The strategic policy environment to progress heritage diplomacy on the island of Ireland is relatively favourable. For instance, the 2013 *Framework for Cooperation for the Spatial Strategies of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland* represents a 'positive reimagining of cross-border regionalism' and an example of 'high-level [spatial] public diplomacy' (Peel and Lloyd, 2015, p.2224) (see Figure 2). More importantly, for the purposes of this discussion, the *Framework for Cooperation* specifically endorses cross-border cooperation to secure the 'careful conservation and enhancement of shared natural and cultural heritage assets', and thus provides a strategic entry point to further cooperation under the umbrella of spatial planning (DRD and DoEHLG, 2013, p.28). However, the *Framework for Cooperation* serves largely as a non-statutory statement of intent and is expected to evolve over time 'as part of an iterative process' (Peel and Lloyd, 2015, p.2224). Indeed, recent reforms to the structure of government in Northern Ireland, together with the imminent emergence of the new Planning Framework for Ireland, suggest the need for a second iteration to ensure continued relevancy. In the interim period, the Framework's identification of cross-border heritage management within a landscape context as an 'important emerging planning issue', indicates the desirability of developing innovative local policy initiatives in this space (DRD and DoEHLG, 2013, p.21). The REINVENT project will contribute towards realising this strategic policy objective.

**Figure 2:** Front cover and key diagram within the Framework for Cooperation for the Spatial Strategies of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland



Source: DRD and DoEHLG, 2013

### Digital technologies in heritage management

The benefits for cultural heritage management deriving from innovative digital technologies are increasingly recognised. In particular, GIS is capable of handling vast quantities of data, at a variety of spatial scales, representing it to the public in readily accessible forms, while also facilitating the monitoring of change over time. Prominent examples of its usage include the creation of 'cultural landscape atlases' and 'digital deep maps' at places such as the Angkor World Heritage Site (Fletcher et al., 2007; Fitzjohn, 2009). Further instances relate to other facets of spatial planning and environmental management, including national park planning, the management of ecological systems and landscape character assessments (Stephenson, 2008; Brown and Weber, 2011; Ives and Kendal, 2014). GIS has been successfully deployed by the All-Island Research Observatory (AIRO) to map census data on a cross-border basis, greatly informing public policies on health, economics and spatial planning on the island of Ireland (Gleeson, 2015). In respect of cultural heritage, Cooney (2013, p.68) argued in a previous issue of *The Journal of Cross Border Studies in Ireland* that the 'current availability and enormous potential of digital technology', together with 'minimal investment', could readily link heritage inventories in both jurisdictions. However, no such advances have yet been made and this represents an area where collaborative action could enhance public understanding of heritage in the Irish border region.

The REINVENT project will contribute to technological innovation in cultural heritage management in two principal ways. Firstly, it is intended that an embryonic 'cultural heritage atlas' be created for the cross-border region centred on Derry/Londonderry, utilising GIS technology to map data from official heritage inventories in both jurisdictions. Initial scoping work will be undertaken to determine what data, from which inventories, but it will be predominantly focused on the built heritage. Secondly, a PPGIS-based methodology and associated mapping tool will be developed to capture a plurality of 'unofficial' heritage values ascribed by a range of communities in the region, including those associated with expressions of dissonance and contestation. This latter aspect represents a particular methodological challenge as past PPGIS studies have raised several critical issues, including the age profile of participants, sampling techniques and the ultimate failure of public authorities to integrate learning into management processes (Brown and Kytä, 2014; Brown et al., 2014). The development of appropriate strategies to address these challenges in local contexts, therefore, can greatly assist heritage policymakers and practitioners as they progress their own participatory strategies and practices.

PPGIS can also assist in counteracting one of the other critiques of traditional heritage inventories concerning their essentially 'static' nature. For instance, the mutability and changing nature of heritage values, together with the fact that judgments of significance of heritage sites are time- and context-dependent, suggests the necessity for regular review if management processes are to retain their relevancy and up-to-dateness (McClelland et al., 2013; Fredheim and Khalaf, 2016). Historic England recently launched 'Enrich the List', an initiative whereby members of the public are invited to augment the

official heritage inventory by sharing their knowledge, photographs and other insights online relating to listed buildings or places in England. Before submitting, all contributors are required to complete a 'Heritage Passport' form and all contributions are moderated for appropriateness, with the Terms and Condition of the project clearly stipulating that the publicly-generated content complements rather than forms part of the official listing record.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, this initiative represents a novel means of engaging with the public, using digital technologies to inject inventories with a dynamic quality, while facilitating the introduction of material from non-experts. The REINVENT project likewise seeks to explore the use of publicly generated data in heritage inventorying processes, including values-based ascriptions of dissonance and contestation.

### **The case of Derry/Londonderry**

The selection of the cultural landscape of Derry/Londonderry as the case study focus is central to the REINVENT project. The symbiotic relationship that the city historically enjoyed with its rural hinterland was severely curtailed by Partition and the hard border imposed during the Troubles. However, the city is once again an emergent regional capital, identified in the National Spatial Strategy for Ireland 2002-2020 as a 'linked gateway' with Letterkenny and recognised as the 'principal city' of the North West in the Northern Ireland Regional Development Strategy 2035. Regional stakeholders continue to explore new collaborative forms of cross-border governance and this is an opportune moment (in spite of Brexit) to address the place of cultural heritage management within this evolving institutional context. The selection of Derry/Londonderry is further predicated on the following:

- *Rich in tangible cultural heritage* – The city's cultural inheritance includes the seventeenth century city walls and numerous statutory designations in the form of conservation areas, listed buildings and scheduled monuments. Furthermore, in County Donegal, surveys have been completed by the National Inventory of Architectural Heritage and the data mapped and available to view online. So too has the historic landscape characterisation of the county, which identified 44 Landscape Character Areas (Doyle, 2016).
- *Contested symbolism and ethno-religious segregation* – The city has historically been contested, including over its name and symbolism for the two main ethno-religious groupings in Northern Ireland. Indeed, for Horning et al. (2015, p.9), the city walls are the 'most obvious example of a Plantation monument continuing to symbolically and physically exemplify division'.
- *Regeneration, heritage revalorisation and economic reorientation* – Ongoing regeneration and associated reimagining strategies are encouraging a revalorisation of the city's heritage through the reuse of historic buildings, the creation of new public spaces, symbolic artworks and community infrastructure (McClelland, 2013). For example, Troubles-era fortifications have been removed from the city walls, the former Ebrington Barracks is undergoing transformation into a mixed-use site, and

6 See <https://historicengland.org.uk/terms/website-terms-conditions/enriching-the-list-contribution-terms> [accessed 11 September 2016].



the award-winning Peace Bridge symbolically connects ‘both sides’ of the River Foyle (see figures 1-3). The UK City of Culture year in 2013 exemplified attempts to reorientate the local economy towards cultural tourism, creative industries and digital technologies, while forming part of a conscious effort to rhetorically frame ‘a new story’ for the ‘LegenDerry’ city.

- *‘Moving from a disputed past to a shared future’?*<sup>7</sup> – The positioning of Derry/Londonderry as an exemplar of conflict resolution inevitably poses questions about the extent to which such claims can be evidenced, particularly given the often static and one-dimensional view of contestation, which typically ignores socio-economic concerns. For instance, Doak (2014, p.494) notes the ‘little obvious evidence of a city transformed’ outside of the central ‘revalorised spaces of the City of Culture’, suggesting a highly uneven and differentiated economic impact from regeneration initiatives in the city to date (see also Boland et al, 2016).

**Figure 3:** The Troubles-era fortifications and surveillance apparatus (since removed) surrounding the Verbal Arts Centre on the historic city walls. Photo taken in 2005.



Source: Author

7 This characterisation is taken from Derry City Council’s unsuccessful application for the inclusion of the ‘Hill of Derry~Londonderry’ on the UK’s Tentative List of Potential Sites for World Heritage – see [http://www.worldheritagesite.org/countries/The%20Hill%20of%20Derry%20\(Northern%20Ireland\).pdf](http://www.worldheritagesite.org/countries/The%20Hill%20of%20Derry%20(Northern%20Ireland).pdf) [accessed 25 August 2016].

**Figure 4:** The view from Ebrington Barracks towards the Guildhall, before and after the construction of the Peace Bridge. Photos taken in 2008 and 2013.



*Source: Author*

**Figure 5:** The former Ebrington Barracks parade ground undergoing transformation into a multi-purpose public space. Photo taken in 2011.



*Source: Author*

## Conclusion

The two-year REINVENT project began in September 2016 and concludes in what promises to be a momentous year for cultural heritage. Not only does 2018 represent the 400th anniversary of the completion of the city walls of Derry/Londonderry, but it has also been proposed by the European Commission as European Year of Cultural Heritage with an anticipated focus on shared heritage.<sup>8</sup> However, much remains to be done and the initial stages of the REINVENT project entail establishing an online and social media presence, assembling a consultative group of spatial planning and cultural heritage management representatives, as well as further defining and refining the methodological boundaries of the research. Future expected (non-academic) project outputs, in addition to the PPGIS methodology and mapping tool, include published working papers, workshops and policy briefings in the North West. Furthermore, a key motivation not discussed above concerns the active engagement with heritage policymakers and practitioners. As Hurley et al. (2016, p.447) state: As with practice benefiting from research knowledge and evidence, research benefits from being informed by practice problems and practical knowledge, leading to broader issues of knowledge production in both spheres'. It is intended that the knowledge generated by the project will be embedded within local cultural heritage management and spatial planning networks and will also inform policies and practices. This presents another boundary-spanning challenge for the REINVENT project.

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8 See [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_IP-16-2905\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-16-2905_en.htm) [11 September 2016].

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