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Revalorizing colonial era architecture and townscape legacies: memory, identity and place-making in Irish towns

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ABSTRACT

Within place-making, heritage is framed not only by professional priorities, but by wider societal values. In contentious political contexts, this is manifested in the way in which townscape is represented in the collected memories that underpin identity conflicts. This paper seeks to contribute to an understanding of these relationships in post-colonial contexts through discourse analysis of interviews in three small towns in Ireland. The paper concludes that although a cultural ambivalence to colonial architectural legacies remains, attitudes have become predominantly inclusive. This shift is substantially underpinned by local collected memories connected with place identity, and has implications for place-making processes.

Introduction

Heritage policy has become a central concern within urban planning and place-making strategies, performing a diverse role from maintaining place distinctiveness and urban character to neoliberal conservation-led urban regeneration or place-branding initiatives (see, for example, Neill 2011; Pendlebury 2015). However, within this context, built heritage conservation practice has been dominated by conservation professionals, with an ‘expert’ knowledge and status that has allowed them to frame decision making (Smith 2006). It therefore tends to focus on expert knowledge and skills, universal value, a hierarchy of significance and protecting the authenticity of tangible assets. Moreover, as an element within place-making strategies, heritage policy, and related conservation practices, are not only framed by professional discourses but also intersect with wider societal values (Farmer and Pendlebury 2013). These tend to be based on experiential and local knowledge, connected with a sense of place attachment and identity (Stephenson 2010; Schofield 2014), and manifest as nostalgia for places, buildings, traditional urban forms or appreciation of the aesthetic properties of buildings. Moreover, where they evolve in contentious political contexts, conservation and place-making practice can reveal historic or latent social conflicts reflecting collective remembering, cultural politics and identities intertwined with the symbolic representation...
of the built environment (cf. Neill 1997, 2005). This is particularly heightened in divided societies or in places containing a legacy of past conflicts (Bakshi 2014).

This paper seeks to contribute to an understanding of the role of memory and identity in framing place-making in post-colonial contexts, whereby the built environment fabric reflects past economic, social and political domination by an external power. Drawing on empirical research in Ireland (independent from British rule since 1922), the paper examines the ongoing revalorization of colonial era architecture and townscapes at the scale of everyday life through a bottom-up, lay discourse perspective. There are arguably four key dimensions of the colonial built environment legacy in Ireland (Parkinson, Scott, and Redmond 2015). First, Ireland’s urban centres have their historical roots in successive waves of colonial settlement. Second, and related, buildings within these urban centres were inevitably tools of colonial oppression, representing the colonial state, its power and domination of colonial capital interests. Third, the built environment was shaped by the tastes and preferences of the colonial elite Ascendancy, particularly in relation to prominent residences in the urban landscape. Fourth, outside the main urban centres, landlord estates represented domination of landownership and agricultural production, manifested in large estate houses (referred to as the ‘big house’) and remodelled rural villages. In the post-colonial context, the built environment can, therefore, be associated with colonial and contested power and national struggle (Whelan 2001, 2002, 2003). In this regard, post-colonial narratives and ‘collective memory’ (cf. Rothstein 2005) perform a role in shaping shared norms and culture, which in turn shape spatial practices, the regulation of the built environment and urban design outcomes. This paper argues that a bottom-up perspective of narratives around the meaning of the historic built environment offers a more inclusive alternative to expert-defined priorities. Based on interviews, it is suggested that a ‘cultural distance’ can exist between local citizens and the colonial architectural legacy; however, to some extent past negative interpretations of colonial era architecture and townscapes have been displaced by personal experiences and a collected memory of place to redefine the meaning of the historic built environment.

To examine these themes, first the paper is located within a discussion of built heritage in its urban design context, and its interrelationships with place identity and memory. It then discusses the empirical material in detail, organized under a series of key thematic headings. Finally, the paper concludes on the implications of colonial era architecture and townscape legacies for place-making in Ireland.

**Built heritage, identity and memory**

While built heritage conservation is central to contemporary planning policy and practice, the built environment generally, and built heritage in particular, plays a key role in the formation of identity (Waterton 2005; Moore and Whelan 2007; Graham and Howard 2008). However, Pendlebury, Townshend, and Gilroy (2004) argue that the relationship between heritage and local place identity is in competition with conservation professionals’ traditional conception of built heritage. This can lead to conflict in place-making strategies, and in urban design, in which ‘official’ representations of heritage may tend to displace identity. With regard to the specific relationship between built heritage and identity, this is often formally recognized in policy, for example, in Ireland ‘social’ interest is one of eight categories which act as a basis on which structures and areas can be protected (Government of Ireland 2000). The Architectural Heritage Protection Guidelines for Planning Authorities explain ‘social’
interest as a structure (or area) that can form “an essential reference point for that community’s identity” (DAHG 2011, 30), implying that protection on the basis of social interest can stem from local identity.

In broader terms than the field of heritage, Dixon and Durrheim (2000), Whelan (2002), Neill (2004) and Kincaid (2006), amongst others, argue that people’s sense of place identity is reflected in how they interact with and shape their physical environment (see also Twigger-Ross and Uzzell 1996; Devine-Wright and Lyons 1997; Devine-Wright and Clayton 2010). Connected with the construction of place identity is the symbolism of the physical environment, which can be shaped by collective memory (Halbwachs 1950). However, O’Keeffe (2007) argues that the concept of an intuitive collective memory,

… is dangerously essentialist, since it burdens the individual with a store of memory over which he or she has no control, and potentially ensnares the individual in a web of collective responsibility. (6)

Instead, he prefers the term ‘collected’ memory, which he argues is, first, always “narratological” (constructed in subjective narrative accounts) (5) and, second, it is “the product of collective programming” (6). In other words, it is “always the product of some programme of being reminded” (5). Dixon and Durrheim (2000) also highlight that the relationship between the built environment and identity is not fixed, but constantly shifting (see also Graham 1994; Pearce 1998; Robertson and Hall 2007), and is rhetorically contested (see also Neill 2005). This is notable in post-colonial contexts, where the built environment can be represented in radically different ways by different groups who subscribe to different narrative accounts of colonial legacies in the built environment (Kincaid 2006; Porter 2010), which can thereby become the focus of power struggles between competing interest groups (Whelan 2001, 2002; Kincaid 2006; Scott 2012).

These relationships need to be further unpacked to clarify the concepts so that they are of utility in this paper. For example, in the field of environmental psychology, Devine-Wright and Lyons (1997, 35) contend that places can become “repositories of specific meanings, memories, values and emotions which are shared by members of a particular group”. They argue that these meanings, memories and so on can be used by a group to define its identity through ‘identity process theory’. According to this perspective, identity is constituted of gathered personal and social information that makes a person (or a group) unique. Two processes govern this information. First, ‘assimilation/accommodation’ allows an individual to absorb new information and to restructure their existing identity to accommodate the new information. Second, ‘evaluation’ leads the individual to evaluate the socially constructed world around them according to their identity. According to Devine-Wright and Lyons, these two processes are guided by four principles: distinctiveness, continuity, self-esteem and self-efficacy, which they contend can guide the maintenance and reconstruction of social memories. Furthermore, within the context of contested heritage, Bakshi (2014) argues that urban spaces mediate historic events and their translation into memory, a relationship very much influenced by the perceived stability of space, thus place supports and frames memories. Yet the relationship between memory, identity and place is not static; as Agnew (1991, 53) argues, spatial identities are developed through particular cultures constituted by a “set of practices, interests and ideas subject to collective revision, changing or persisting, as places and their population change or persist in response to locally and externally generated challenges”.
This perspective is of particular pertinence to this research for three reasons: first, the centrality of the concept of character (related to place distinctiveness) in heritage policy and urban design; second, the important role that heritage plays in the construction of identity, particularly in post-colonial contexts; and third, its utility in developing a greater understanding of (a) why identity is a root cause of heritage conflict, and (b) the importance of identity in built heritage policy and, in turn, shaping urban design outcomes. In the field of social psychology, Dixon and Durrheim (2000, 41–42) highlight four related key points that help to define the relevance of identity process theory to the research approach in this paper, as follows:

- The relationship between place and identity (as above): “… place-identity is bound up with people’s bodied transactions with material settings, including their attempts to manipulate them so as to reveal their selves” (41);
- This relationship may result in manipulation of the local physical (including built) environment within that individual’s actual or group’s perceived territory: “collective identities may be concretely signalled, for example, through practices of territorial personalization … involving usage of architectural styles, layouts or forms of ornamentation” (42);
- Practices of inclusion and exclusion can become physically embodied in the physical (including built) environment: “… the division between the established (those who belong) and the foreign (those who do not belong) may become embodied in the material organization of places” (42);
- Place-identity is not formed only “through individuals’ transactions with their [physical] environments” [added emphasis], but “constructed, produced and modified through human dialogue”, i.e. via discourse, through which a group makes sense of its social and physical environment (40).

To explore these themes, the study explores colonial era architecture and townscapes to examine local level discourses surrounding built heritage in contemporary urban design processes. Undoubtedly, in the Irish context the experience of English/British domination and imperialism provides a key framework for the construction of collected memories since achieving effective independence in 1922 (see Ferriter 2005). Independence was achieved through a violent campaign against colonial power, ended by the Anglo-Irish Treaty that enabled Northern Ireland to remain within the UK. However, the treaty caused the Irish republican movement to split, swiftly leading to civil war. In this context, post-colonial narratives perform a role in shaping shared norms and culture, which may explain how and why actors develop different mental maps that affect how they perceive other actors. As Kearns (2006, 177) outlines, post-colonial perspectives on Ireland rest upon three main claims. First, that for much of its history, Ireland was a British colony. Second, that colonial subjects have constricted agency and hybrid identities; what they can do is limited by the colonial power and what they aspire to is formed in part by that same power. Finally, to adopt a post-colonial perspective is to search for the ways post-independence Ireland was shaped by the legacies of colonialism. Although vigorously debated within academic literature, ‘colonialism’ and ‘post-colonialism’ are frequently cited within the popular discourse and political debates in Ireland, from the continuing use of British symbols to debates on sovereignty, European influences on policy and Northern Ireland (see Howe 2000). Although the limitations of post-colonial perspectives have been recognized (see for example, Young 2001), the focus
of this paper is to examine the extent to which post-colonial narratives exist to frame contemporary conservation and place-making debates. Specifically, four interrelated key themes are examined in the empirical material:

- **The shifting meaning of the built environment**: to examine the way in which the meaning of the built environment shifts, and how newer ‘embracive’ representations can come to displace older colonial ones.
- **Local collected memory and personal experience**: to explore the role of collected memory and personal experience in defining the meaning of the built environment, and how this manifests itself in narratives around the colonial architectural legacy.
- **Post-colonial ambivalence**: examining cultural distance, and the notion of a shared cultural patrimony, and what this means for embracive notions of shared heritage.
- **The contested representation of architectural heritage**: a reminder of past oppression, a legacy of poverty, or the epitome of Ireland? To appraise the contemporary use and significance of dissonant representations of colonial buildings and of older buildings.

### Research approach

While a range of different settings may be legitimate subjects for examination of the themes outlined above, smaller towns in Ireland are under-researched as sites of conflict in place-making resulting from a colonial legacy of domination expressed through the built environment (see for example Kincaid 2006), and therefore form the subject of the research presented in this paper. Three criteria were used to select towns where the above themes are likely to have been mobilized through conservation and place-making processes. First, towns must have been subject to a substantial amount of development over the last two census periods, evidenced through a search of planning and newspaper archives, and inspection of census population statistics (Central Statistics Office 2007, 2012). Second, substantial areas of historic townscape must be subject to statutory protection, evidenced through the number of protected structures, and through designation of architectural conservation areas (ACAs). Third, and finally, between them case study towns should feature buildings originating in different historical periods, i.e. Norman, plantation, Georgian, post-Georgian. This is determined through evidence in the National Inventory of Architectural Heritage (DAHG 2012) and the Lewis Topographical Dictionary (Lewis 1837). This does not mean that each selected town is entirely different from the others; indeed, the townscape of small Irish towns tends to date predominantly from the nineteenth century, regardless of the contrasting origins of different settlements. Twenty towns were shortlisted, all of which were likely to have yielded interesting results. However, in order to maintain a feasible scale of research project, whilst still providing the full range of characteristics outlined, and providing sufficient data for analysis, only three towns have been selected: Abbeyleix (population 1827), Ardee (population 4927), and Monasterevin (population 3710). Although these three towns possess contrasts in their origins and their historical townscape, they also possess many similarities. However, the differences between the towns are not the principal focus of the discussion, but, rather, the broader informant-generated themes that arise from the analysis of all of the interview material, which includes discussion of buildings and townscapes originating in particular eras.
Each of the selected towns has had substantial applications for development made in their historic centres in recent years, and all three have also been subject to significant population growth in one or both of the last two census periods. Each town also has a considerable number of protected structures for its size. Furthermore, both Abbeyleix and Ardee have ACAs applicable to much of their centres, and the current development plan proposes an ACA in the centre of Monasterevin.

More specifically, Ardee owes much to its medieval origins, having been a settlement of some importance during the Norman period (Gowen et al. 2010). A number of substantial medieval structures survive, and contribute significantly to the character of both its principal thoroughfare and of the town more generally. However, like most small towns in Ireland, the majority of buildings in Ardee’s historic core date from the nineteenth century. Ardee also possesses one principal former Anglo-Irish ‘big house’, Ardee House, built in 1780, and in use as a hospital since 1922 (Gowen et al. 2010). This building is not as large, as architecturally significant or as important in the town’s development as the estate houses in either of the other two case study towns. Ardee also features a number of memorials to republicans dating from the War of Independence (1919–1921), and an earlier statue commemorating a local Anglo-Irish landlord.

In contrast, Abbeyleix is a planned landlord estate town, and features a number of distinctively designed nineteenth-century buildings in its centre and a planned crescent-shaped frontage to Market Square on the main street, features that are both a direct result of the landlord’s involvement in the town. Although construction of the estate house commenced in 1773 (DAHG 2015a), and the earliest buildings in the town date from this time, the vast majority of buildings date from the nineteenth century. The town also features a number of memorials connected with the local Anglo-Irish family responsible for the town’s construction, who sold Abbeyleix House in 1995 (De Vesci et al. 2006, 8) although they maintain a presence and involvement in the town.

The third case study town, Monasterevin, is also a planned estate town, featuring a small gridiron of two principal streets, laid out in the late eighteenth century (Aalen, Whelan, and Stout 1997), and a series of gardens that run along one side of its main street. The town centre has a significant number of surviving Georgian buildings, although a greater number of buildings are Victorian or later. However, the town is also notable for the large, redundant industrial buildings that dominate its centre, and its strong railway and canal links. The principal industry in the town was whiskey distilling, although a brewery was also opened later before both closed in 1921 (Mulryan 2002, 60). A substantial eighteenth-century landlord estate house, Mooreabbey House, stands in close proximity to the town’s main street, built in 1767 on the site of a medieval abbey (DAHG 2015b). This house was the seat of the Earls of Drogheda before becoming a convent in the mid-twentieth century. The streetscape of Monasterevin features one prominent republican memorial in its main square dating from the 1798 Rebellion, and another related but less prominent memorial plaque.

Forty-five semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with local policy actors and stakeholders in the above towns to allow detailed exploration of conflicting or alternative priorities or values relating to the historic built environment in each town, or descriptions of specific instances of conflict in conservation and place-making. The interviews also employ photographs and photo-montages, selected and created by the researcher, to help elicit informant responses – a technique which has been under-used to examine public values in relation to the historic built environment (Tweed and Sutherland 2007). Rather than selecting
informants according to their roles or perceived ‘stake’, the paper draws on the approach of Collier and Scott (2009), identifying key areas of relevant knowledge, and selecting individuals to meet these. This ensures that as complete as possible a range of relevant stakeholder perspectives are considered. Interview material was coded according to informant-generated themes, on the basis of both the frequency of their occurrence across all interviews, and in cases where individuals dissented from the rest of the group. Critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 1989; Waterton, Smith, and Campbell 2006) of the coded material facilitated examination of the power relationships at play, and identification of how language tended to shape heritage meaning, memory, identity and, thereby, priorities in place-making.

In the following sections, the discussion of the empirical material is organized around the four interrelated key themes already outlined earlier in this paper. Each section therefore includes relevant quotations from each of the case study towns. The broad role of each informant quoted is generally included (e.g. heritage professional, political representative, local resident), as is the town or building under discussion in particular quotations. However, in order to protect individuals’ anonymity, it has occasionally been necessary to omit this information.

The shifting meaning of the built environment

In the interviews, most informants held a benign and embracive attitude towards the colonial architectural legacy, which is in contrast with the more dissonant way that colonial townscape legacies have tended to be represented in the past. Interestingly, an embracive view of colonial legacies is weakest in Abbeyleix and strongest in Ardee. The difference between Ardee and Abbeyleix may arise in part from the fact that the ‘big house’ in Ardee was vacated by the Ruxton family in 1896, and has been in an alternative public use since 1922. This has perhaps affected the public’s experience, and thereby hastened the displacement of earlier colonial dissonance and a shift in perception. In contrast, Abbeyleix House was sold on by the De Vesci family only as recently as 1995 and remains in private ownership. Despite these observed differences, it is not possible to definitively determine the extent to which they might have led to the predominant narratives that featured in interviews, and it would be over-simplistic to suggest that these are the only reasons for the differences.

Informants who embraced the colonial architectural legacy as their own heritage suggested that the colonial history of buildings is not in people’s consciousness or, at least, is not important in how people see these buildings. For example:

... they see them [colonial architecture] as their buildings and they think it’s very important ... They don’t look at these [and see the fact that they] were owned by people that came into our country many years ago. No, people don’t look at it like that at all — thank God they don’t. (L39)

Informant L39, based in Monasterevin, was one of a number of political representatives who were interviewed in this research. In each case, their role means that they have a duty to promote their town’s social, economic and physical development, for example, through tourism (cf. English Heritage 1999; Heritage Council 2012). Nevertheless, tourism potential was not mentioned at any point during the interview. Instead, informant L39 tended to focus on what the public’s feelings are and aesthetic concerns, rather than economic, social or other similarly tangible benefits.

If many stakeholders do not define the colonial architectural legacy by the society that created it, how do they perceive it? A recurrent theme in the interviews was the way in which
collected memory and meaning shift – and therefore so does the way in which the built environment is valued. This view was expressed clearly by informant L31, a non-expert who represents community interests in Monasterevin. L31 talked about the potential importance of the built environment in the present and in the future – and not just the past. Instead of focusing on history, the informant stressed that subsequent uses – or ‘stories’, to use their own language – can have an importance that eclipses past dissonance, and that today’s ‘story’ can become tomorrow’s heritage. Informant L31 repeatedly came back to this point in the interview, each time placing prime importance on a building’s ‘story’, in other words, focusing on shifts in how it is represented through time, influenced by a shifting social, economic and political context:

And actually what people forget like is that today is tomorrow’s history and that, eh, just because, what do you say, it doesn’t fit in with the story of the building in the past [referring to the traditional dissonance of colonial history], maybe in a couple of hundred years’ time, you know, the evolution of [the] building will be just as important as the story from 200 years ago. (L31)

This perspective might be described as an example of a non-expert discourse of heritage, dependent on different kinds of non-expert experiential knowledge (see Fazey et al. 2006), varying according to the experience and perspective of different groups or individuals.

Informant L14, a local resident, was quite open about the influence of the British or the Ascendancy on many of Monasterevin’s buildings, but suggested that the wider public may be unaware of this. This narrative complements the narrative of informant L31, above, in that later uses and associations can come to eclipse earlier dissonances:

I think a lot of people would be surprised about Monasterevin if they understood the history of Monasterevin is more Loyalist than Republican. So we have a lot of, em, British influenced buildings, uses, things like that. (L14)

Related to the examples above, informants L45 and L29 both gave the specific example of St Joseph’s Hospital, formerly Ardee House, built around 1780 as the residence of the Anglo-Irish Ruxton family:

I think most people don’t actually realise, you know, St Joseph’s Hospital was the home of the Ruxton family who were the local landlords but the fact that it’s now a nursing home, and has been for a long time, and there’s a campaign at the moment to try and save it, etc. … Yea, I mean it’s, I think it’s a hundred years as a hospital or maybe longer … (L45)

I think it would have much more association and there’s a massive campaign to keep it open as an old folk’s home as elderly care. … and the town are very attached to it for that reason, so I think that has kind of overruled the colonial big house attitude. (L29)

At Ardee House, the use of the building as a hospital has led to a natural drift in symbolic meaning, substantially displacing collected memory of its dissonant colonial resonances. On the basis of the interviews, it seems that a natural drift in symbolic meaning can lead to a revalorization and embrace of a built environment whose origin and aesthetic nevertheless remains rooted in the colonial. While this change perhaps implies that colonial memory has faded, it has not entirely disappeared, as further discussed later in this paper.

Local collected memory and personal experience

In addition to the embracive representations of the colonial built legacy discussed above, a discourse emerged which implies that personal experience, cemented in local collected memory, has a central role in shaping how landlords, their estates and buildings are regarded...
by the residents of particular towns today, often displacing more dissonant representations of colonial townscape legacies. Overall, 15 informants expressed positive views of their local Ascendancy-era landlord families, compared with only four who expressed more negative views. The following four extracts illustrate the existence of a benign representation of Ascendancy landlords, including Sir Frederick G. Foster in Ardee (see Figure 1), in stark contrast to the antipathy in national political discourse for decades following independence. That historical antipathy was given violent expression in the early 1920s, when as many as 275 houses of the elite Anglo-Irish Ascendancy were burned, often by the Irish Republican Army (IRA) (Bielenberg 2013). This equates to approximately 4% of the ‘big houses’ in Ireland. Even as late as 1966, Nelson’s Pillar, a monument erected in memory of Horatio Nelson, located in the centre of O’Connell Street, Dublin’s principal thoroughfare, and one of the tallest structures in the area, was blown up by former members of the IRA on the fiftieth anniversary of the 1916 Easter Rising (English 2003).

Frederick Foster was considered a most benign and good landlord, so … nobody is ever go to blow this [statue] up, you know. (L10, local political representative, Ardee)

I’d give my life now if that [statue of Sir Frederick Foster] was being taken away. (L8, local political representative and resident, Ardee)

The Earls of Drogheda were … improving landlords so that’s very much the way they’re seen and remembered. The nuns that came after them mightn’t have been so progressive. [Laughs] The first thing they did was, em, evict most of the tenants around the estate, yeah. (L14, local resident, Monasterevin)
Although embracive of colonial townscape legacies, the discourse illustrated in each of these excerpts can have the effect of protecting particular interests. In another example, through a role as a heritage professional, informant L37 has a professional duty to promote heritage interests. This informant argued that the local experience of colonialism in Ardee was different to elsewhere in Ireland, and that contemporary antagonism to the legacy of colonialism is comparatively absent as a result:

The whole antagonism thing doesn’t seem to be as strong in Louth as in some other counties. … There doesn’t seem to have been the same antagonism between landlords and tenants because the tenantry … [had] come in as tenants and they accepted that status and it wasn’t their ancestral land that had been stolen from their hands. (L37)

By comparison, the narrative of informant L27 (a built environment professional) strikes another different emphasis, again emphasizing the role of personal experience and local collected memory in shaping public attitudes to heritage. Asked whether an historical association with Monasterevin’s Anglo-Irish landlords still shapes the attitudes of the local public, informant L27 suggested that it may no longer:

… because it’s [Mooreabbey House] very accessible to people and I think people go to mass there. … And also the fact that such a high level of the population work in Mooreabbey, so that again, is, you know, there’s always people driving through the gates or walking through the gates. It’s very much open, you know … it’s basically free for all. (L27)

Although this suggests that local experience of the landlord estate in Monasterevin is positive, deliberately or otherwise, the discourse has the effect of diverting attention from potentially contentious debates around dissonant or ambivalent attitudes to colonial townscape legacies that may to an extent still persist, intertwined with a sense of local and national identity. While this may raise questions over the extent to which some informants were genuine, their intent cannot be determined definitively. Despite this, and regardless of informant motivations or intent, the discourse of the various informants creates a predominantly positive and embracive representation of colonial architectural and townscape legacies.

If, as Kearns (2006) argues, post-independence Ireland has been shaped by legacies of colonialism, built heritage is potentially shaped by this as much as any other field. This may be through local experience and associated collected memory, which may manifest itself in different ways. For example, in contrast with the generally embracive narratives of colonial legacies discussed above, informant L17 cited experience of negative public attitudes to statutory protection of built heritage, but downplayed the possibility that this may be borne out of the colonial experience:

In the county as a whole you’d, em, I suppose one of the sort of attitudes that I would have come across [relating to statutory heritage protection] – and not overtly stated but it’s very much there – the kind of, eh, ‘nobody is going to tell me what I can do with my property’ scenario, which I think may harp back to earlier times, but not necessarily colonial. I mean I think it’s just an anti-authoritarian kind of feeling that you would get, but it’s not specific to Ardee, and it wouldn’t have been predominantly in Ardee … that attitude was highly to the fore. … A grievance and annoyance there, against ‘them’ and authority, whoever ‘they’ were [Laughs]. (L17)

As a heritage professional, informant L17 may have tended to downplay identity debates which threaten their control of heritage decision making (arising from their expert knowledge), and may instead have tended to focus on expert knowledge and skills, universal value, a hierarchy of significance and protecting the authenticity of tangible assets. However, as in other examples, whether or not this tendency is deliberate cannot be determined definitively.
In any case, the effect of the discourse in diverting attention from identity debates, and thereby from non-expert values, is the same. Furthermore, contrary to the opinion of informant L17, the literature suggests that disrespect for authority in Ireland, as elsewhere, can be a consequence of the post-colonial experience (Martin 2005; Keating and Martin 2007). This, alongside evidence in the interviews, suggests that despite other personal experiences that may tend to displace collected memory of the colonial experience, dissonant post-colonial collected memory can persist to an extent, although in subtle and nuanced ways, as discussed in the next section.

Post-colonial ambivalence: cultural distance, and the notion of a shared cultural patrimony

Despite the argument made by informant L27, historically, most of the public did not have access to the estates and houses of the landed classes in Ireland. The obvious exception to this is where local people worked on the estate, or in some other way had positive experience of the ruling Ascendancy. However, this is arguably distinct from the strong collected sense of ownership that the public have developed over time for the former Ardee House. In the interviews, informants’ discourses indicate that while antipathy may have faded, a cultural distance exists between the wider public and architectural legacies of the colonial era, which effectively dates from the commencement of large-scale land-confiscation and colonization known as plantation in the mid-sixteenth century until independence in 1922. The very few buildings which survive from before this period have little perceived association with Protestant Ascendancy landlords, land confiscation, poverty and famine. This cultural distance in small towns may also be framed by their rural context. These towns were, and are, an urban exception in a rural landscape, and the urban has been represented as foreign in Irish nationalist discourse (see Graham 1994). At a superficial level, this is evident in the way in which two informants referred to their towns, in a matter-of-fact fashion, as ‘English’:

Well I suppose why Abbeyleix has so much character here; it’s an old, it’s an English town … you’d know by looking at the buildings, they’re designed by the English architects, and part of that I suppose it was [the landlord’s] way of putting a stamp on the town. (L33, local political representative)

Informant L43 made similar comments in relation to Ardee:

… we’ve some fine, fine houses surrounding Ardee and within the town itself, and lovely architecture in them. If people just studied them for a while, they’d see it. And we got that from Ardee was an English town from the Norman period right down to the 1800s and up until 1922 we’d large English families and they’re still here. (L43)

The discourse represents Ardee’s townscape as ‘English’, and thereby distinguishes these buildings from others more readily associated with a perceived Irish national identity, although these informants do not give examples of what might constitute an example of ‘Irish’ townscape. A cultural heritage ‘distance’ is thereby created between the wider public and their built environment.

In this regard, informants L15 (from Ardee), L9 (from Monasterevin) and L14 (from Monasterevin) each argued that buildings which the public have little experience of simply do not have a local sense of meaning. In these cases, collected memories of colonialism remain. The quotes imply ambivalence rather than antipathy: townscape is embraced as part of a shared cultural patrimony whilst being perceived as belonging to a different
(and perhaps unfamiliar, or even foreign) historical tradition. This view is also mirrored in the comments of informant L13, another local political representative from Ardee. Whilst acknowledging the contentious history of the ‘big house’ and similar colonial buildings, their discourse portrays the former Ascendancy elite as the difficulty rather than the buildings, which are portrayed as historically important. Throughout the interview, informant L13 repeatedly emphasized the built colonial legacy as an important aspect of a shared history and as something to be embraced for that reason.

I know there was a history in the twenties when a lot of these buildings were burnt down in the War of Independence, but I don’t think these buildings generally do any harm in terms of bricks and mortar. Probably the people who lived in them may have been the problem, but those buildings are your history and where you came from and where you’re going. (L13)
It is notable that informant L13 did not mention design or craftsmanship, upon which heritage professionals tend to dwell. Further, their representation is not impassioned, and the collective public embrace is implied to be recent. Once again this suggests a cultural distance and ambivalence. While the buildings are now embraced, and newer representations may eclipse past dissonances, the sense of ownership may be distinct from that afforded to buildings perceived to originate from an ‘indigenous’ Irish people according to traditional Irish nationalist discourse (Graham 1994), for example, medieval ecclesiastical buildings and tower houses, or ancient sites such as the Brú na Bóinne Neolithic sites in County Meath or the Iron Age fort of Dun Aengus in County Galway.

The contested representation of architectural heritage: a reminder of past oppression, a legacy of poverty or the epitome of Ireland?

While a generally embracive discourse was predominant, there were exceptions to this picture. Across all three towns, eight informants used narratives that were antipathetic towards the legacy of colonialism, or had experience of others who took this view. In Ardee, the number of informants in this category was greater, although this was also the location where more informants used inclusive language. For example, informant L31, who represents the community in Monasterevin, talked about a visit to Dublin with an acquaintance, and voiced disagreement with views that reflected the Irish nationalist narrative of Dublin as the centre of colonial power:

I remember going to Dublin with a guy from [outside the town] and we went into Government Buildings … his association was, you know, ‘look at all these buildings that were built, you know, in Colonial times, you know, by the British and they’ve spent millions on this and we don’t spend money on …’ And he kind of took it from what should be the opposite association: the [independent] government of the day working out of [a colonial building] … I think you’ll have a percentage of people looking at it both ways, you know. (L31)

In the context of a discussion about Abbeyleix, the narrative of informant L5 also represents landlord estates and their buildings in a starkly negative way:

Like stone walls have a bad reputation. They were built, a lot of them were built during the Famine by the landlords as way of keeping control of the poor … I think they were often to keep stuff out. Keep the people out. (L5)

This is reminiscent of the traditional Irish nationalist narrative of the rural idyll as the essence of native Ireland, but also of landlords’ estates – and the urban more generally – as a foreign imposition, associated with famine and past oppression. Informant L5 is a built environment professional, and dealing with buildings subject to statutory heritage protection is a recurrent feature of their work. Furthermore, in the interview, L5 described first-hand experience of negative views on statutory conservation designation from building owners.

In the context of a discussion of Ireland in general, rather than specifically relating to just one of the case study towns, informant L37 was quite clear that a cultural distance exists between the colonial architectural legacy and the wider public. This informant also portrayed the public as having a greater sense of attachment to buildings they consider to be more ‘intrinsically Irish’ or perhaps ‘native’ in origin. Informant L37 countered this with a narrative which has the effect of bolstering the argument in favour of conservation of the colonial legacy:
The Irish Georgian Society had to be founded because everybody hated Georgian stuff, but it was founded by the Anglo-Irish gentry … the old stuff, the really old stuff, the dolmens and the passage tombs everybody likes that. That’s okay. The Celtic Christian Church is great; everybody loves the Celtic Christian Church. And the Vikings came here. The Roman Catholic imperial European medieval church, the Cistercians and so on, everybody seems to be pretty cool about that. It’s not, it’s not perceived as being Irish in the same way, but it’s Catholic, so it’s okay. And then you get the big, you get the break and then you have this stuff built in the eighteenth century and it is built by the colonial class. I do think people resent it and maybe in some cases tolerate it as being a tourism resource, but I don’t think they warm to it. Now I’ve sort of, I’ve mentioned the case, say those Irish craftsmen, you know, they were designed by Irishmen in many cases. The stairs were made by Irish people. The windows were created by Irish people so you should take a pride in it but I still think there isn’t a great pride in Georgian, Anglo-Irish colonial culture. (l37)

Informant L37 is a heritage professional and, therefore, has a professional duty in seeking support for heritage and conservation. However, despite this, L37 admitted that the colonial legacy is seen differently, although may be used where it holds the potential to generate a tourism or other wider benefit. Although this view relates specifically to colonial architecture and townscape, three informants used narratives that indicated a cultural aversion to older buildings more generally. Informants L37 and L29 (both heritage professionals) explicitly argued that this is the norm in Ireland:

… there is a general attitude [in Ireland] that old is crap because maybe for most people in the nineteenth century, old was crap. … [Older buildings] have survived because Ireland was broke in the sixties and seventies … So most of our architectural heritage is not here because we love it and value it and care for it. It’s just that we didn’t have enough money to knock it down. (L37)

The colonial legacy can also be seen in the contrasting ways in which memorials, both republican and colonial, are negotiated by different actors. Whelan (2002) argues that the symbolic meaning of the built environment can be actively changed, particularly as a tool in political struggle. For example, following Irish independence in 1922, colonial-era memorials were removed, but the new political administration also sought to memorialize the nationalist and republican ideology that had given rise to the independent nation. The erection of these tangible ideological markers effectively laid claim to a built environment still often imbued with a colonial symbolism. Within the three case study towns in this paper, memorials were erected in different eras, influenced by the political climate of the time, to lay claim to the built environment in which they were situated. However, the people and causes they represented have shifted, as have public attitudes. This is reflected in the narratives featured in the interviews.

While the other examples discussed above are explicitly animus to colonial buildings and built heritage more generally, monuments which commemorate specific events related to the struggle for independence can still occasionally evoke starkly contrasting views amongst the public. Irish society has historically been divided over the legacy of past military campaigns, long seen by many with a “prolonged commemorative embarrassment” (Beiner 2007, 366), particularly in the shadow of more recent conflict in Northern Ireland. Few informants had much to say about Republican memorials in the interviews, other than commenting on their appearance or giving a factual account of the historical events that they represent. However, the comments of three informants are of note. Informant L29 (a heritage professional) noted that a memorial in Ardee to a historical Anglo-Irish landlord is protected but a republican memorial is not, despite a local campaign for its protection (see Figures 2-4).
However, in stark contrast, informant L42 (a local political representative) was dismissive of the historical and/or social significance of a republican memorial in Monasterevin:

L42: You see, I can really – in terms of this [republican memorial] – speak only for myself. You see, I don’t have a huge sentiment around those types of things. I like things for their special value and, em, now, the only thing that is, is a significant landmark from a practical point of view.

Q: … and obviously this other little one [republican memorial] on the main street as well.

L42: I doubt if people ever noticed it to be honest.

Similarly, informant L9 (another heritage professional) was very reluctant to discuss the republican memorials in Monasterevin, responding, “No, no, that’s all in the past” before immediately shifting the focus of the conversation to a less politically contentious subject. It is perhaps notable that, of the three case study towns, Ardee has the most diverse set of prominently-sited memorials, separately commemorating an Ascendancy landlord and republican deaths. Furthermore, since the interviews were carried out, a memorial has also been erected in Ardee to people from the district who were members of the British Army and lost their lives in World War I (Dundalk Democrat 2014). Such a memorial would not have been possible even just a few years ago. However, the Northern Ireland peace process and recent relationship-building between Ireland and the UK (including reciprocal first state visits in 2011 and 2014, respectively) have changed the political climate. This has helped facilitate a willingness to reconsider issues of heritage and identity that have been long ignored or sidestepped because of their perceived intractability. Moreover, Ireland has embarked upon decade-long period of centenaries, including those of 1916 Easter Rising, the War of Independence, Civil War and the achievement of Independence in 1922. These are likely to further shift representations of architectural legacies from the colonial era and, in turn, impact upon urban planning and place-making processes relating to historic townscapes in Ireland.

Conclusion

Although the architectural legacy of colonialism in Ireland was often held in contempt in the recent past, the case study material discussed in this paper suggests that attitudes have shifted. This change is substantially underpinned by local collected memory, which informs the symbolism and meanings attached to particular places, and which the public uses to construct its sense of place identity (cf. Devine-Wright and Lyons 1997). While the meanings ascribed to particular types of buildings or townscapes varies to an extent between the towns, dependent on local circumstances and experiences, the more general trends are broadly the same in all three towns.

Attitudes to the post-colonial architectural legacy in the three case study towns examined are therefore generally characterized by their inclusiveness. Many informants seem to view the colonial built legacy positively, particularly where colonial memory has been displaced by newer representations. The more detailed analysis of coded responses indicates that this inclusive trend is characterized by three views – first, by a view that many of the negatives associated with colonialism are now gone; second, a view that that the modernity initially brought by imperialism is now an integral part of the richness of Irish society; and, third, often by an awareness of the economic benefits the buildings can bring, particularly through
tourism. However, perhaps more significant is the gradual drift, and occasional active shift, in the symbolic meaning of the built environment.

While the colonial built legacy is now rarely the focus of antipathy or political struggle (see Whelan 2002), neither has it been revalorized to the extent of becoming a proud legacy, as suggested by others (Kearns 1982; Negussie 2001; Ahern 2003). Despite the inclusive shift described above, colonial legacies in the built environment are still often perceived in a subtly different manner in the shadow of history, characterized by a cultural distance and ambivalence arising from the complexity and endurance of historical and cultural relationships in Ireland. The case study material therefore indicates that Ireland’s post-colonial experience still plays a role in shaping discourses of heritage, albeit in a considerably more nuanced way than in previous generations, defining public attitudes to different types of building and townscape, and impacting on efforts at place-making.

This picture contrasts starkly with the occasionally essentialized simplification of public heritage values in policy. Nevertheless, it is clear that shifts in wider political discourse, and in Ireland’s relationship with the UK in particular, are leading to a continued revalorization of the colonial legacy that cannot be ignored. In this context, it is also clear that professionals involved in management of the historic built environment have a responsibility to actively broaden the horizons of heritage meaning to embrace place identity, collected memory and symbolic meaning within statutory heritage protection, and in place-making strategies for historic contexts.

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