

III 1916 then and now: reflections on the spatiality of the Rising's urban legacies

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The months prior to the Easter 2016 commemoration of the 1916 Rising were marked by a plethora of comment on the legacy of the insurrection. This discourse was dominated by the political legacy – the impact of the Rising on constitutionalism, political violence and the ultimate aims of Irish independence. By contrast, there was scant focus on the material impact of the Rising on Dublin and its citizens. How was the immediate legacy of large-scale destruction addressed and to what effect? What impact did this have on urban planning? Should the post-Rising development of Dublin inform contemporaneous campaigns to preserve the heritage of the Rising in the shape of surviving buildings on Moore Street? Should the government be held to account for its weak attempts to develop robust conservation guidelines that complement rather than frustrate urban development policy?

Concerns about destruction and the shaping of the urban environment, so evident in 1916, manifested themselves in a very different way a century later. In the immediate aftermath of the Rising, many buildings were entirely or partially destroyed, congregational spaces in the city such as the General Post Office and Clery's Department Store were badly damaged, and livelihoods were jeopardised as many workplaces and tools of work were damaged or looted. The most pressing concern a century ago was restitution to repair the damage and erase the material and visual legacy of the Rising so that the O'Connell Street area could be reopened for business as swiftly as possible. A campaign to this end transcended all political divisions as the British government underwrote the property losses occasioned by the Rising. In 2016, 'destruction' is still an important motif as heritage campaigners vigorously oppose redevelopment plans for the greater O'Connell Street area – including Moore Street, Moore Lane, and Henry Lane – lest they imperil buildings that they claim are central to the history and commemoration of the 1916 Rising. These campaigns operate in a politically fragmented context. The role of government – so straight forward in 1916 at a central and local level – is more complex today. There is no clear blueprint for what the future of this part of the city should be. The governmental response has been fitful and reactive as various interest groups vie with one another to have their voices and positions privileged. Even the production of a Moore Street Battlefield Site Plan in September 2016 by the Lord Mayor's Forum on Moore Street has no standing until the legal appeal against the battlefield designation is heard in December 2017. The shifting allegiances between and priorities of, different urban actors is one of the key reasons why urban governance is so complex and explains the relative stasis that characterises Moore Street today, when compared with the immediate aftermath of 1916 or indeed the post-Civil War 1920s.

In an uneasy consensus in 1916, the triumvirate of British government, Dublin business community and Dublin Corporation shaped redevelopment in the general vicinity of O'Connell Street but not as equals. The government was the dominant player as it decided on the scale of compensation; the business community had little choice but to accept the terms offered which were on the same basis as insurance. The weakest position was occupied by Dublin Corporation. Although it secured a loan on favourable terms (a commendable achievement in the middle of the First World War), it was largely unable to shape the provisions of the Dublin Reconstruction (Emergency Provisions) Act which reflected the priorities of a business community generally opposed to town planning regulations. Plans for a more uniform redevelopment of the main thoroughfare foundered due to legal difficulties and commercial pressures. Its town planning powers were modest and could be circumvented by property owners if they were so minded.

In the debates about the future of the O'Connell Street and Moore Street areas a century later, the most vocal stakeholders have been the developers, campaigners and central government. While Dublin City Council plays a role in providing the planning framework for the area, other agents have become the key protagonists in the ongoing and contentious disputes around how best to shape the future of this part of the city. Considerations beyond normal planning and development guidelines and policies have become paramount in determining the future shape and pace of development in this district. For example, the decision by the Minister to appeal a court judgment designating Moore Street and the surrounding laneways as a 'battlefield site' that requires protection under the National Monuments Act has been taken because of the potential implications for planning and development at a national level. Some observers maintain that the government's appeal is designed to protect the interests of developers and business in the area. If a court ruling limited the freedom of action of the state, this would send out the 'wrong' signal to international investors. As an area that has struggled with issues of disinvestment for many decades, there may be some merit to this argument.

Whatever the relationship between government, business and heritage campaigners, the extent to which traders have been excluded from the debate about the future of the area is clearly evident. This contrasts sharply with the concern exhibited by the British government and the Dublin business community for the 'small man' in 1916 and the negative impact of the Rising on ordinary livelihoods. Much of the compensation paid by PLIC related to items belonging to those employed in the areas affected by the destruction. Without compensation, many of them – domestic servants and tradesmen, for example – would not have been able to afford to buy a new uniform or tools and acquire a new job. While there has been considerable media attention and debate around the future of Moore Street today, consideration of the livelihoods of traditional traders and new migrant entrepreneurs on Moore Street has been conspicuously lacking. Their position has become increasingly precarious as disinvestment, lack of clarity on development plans and the manifold delays to the redevelopment process

have created continued uncertainty and marginalisation, leading many of them to believe that change of any kind is preferable to continued indecision. The recent appeal by government against the High Court judgment in relation to the 'battlefield site' will only prolong this vacillation. One long-term trader on the street captured the essence of the predicament: 'the market will probably be dead ... Unless something is done. Honest to God, unless there's something done ... We're not even coming into it. It's all about this building and everything else. They don't even know what they're arguing over. It's just one group trying to get at another group' (Interview with market trader, 26 August 2016).

The present Moore Street saga focuses attention on how the past is contested in the contemporary city and how the goals of heritage and future development should be balanced. Moore Street represents the significant complexities that underpin contemporary urban transformations and their governance, yet it is not the first time that this challenge has arisen in Dublin or Ireland. Previous disputes about appropriate protection for Wood Quay (an area of significant Viking heritage), Carrickmines Castle, or the Hill of Tara which was threatened by the proposed route of the M3 motorway, serve to highlight the weaknesses of Irish planning law and the need to clarify the relationship between heritage and economic development, as has taken place in other jurisdictions such as the UK. Ultimately, this is not just about the legacy of 1916, but about how society balances the protection of heritage with the need for future development. Arguably, it has been government inaction that has produced this 'limbo-land' for traders, campaigners, developers and government itself. On one hand, at a local government level, there has been repeated revision of plans for Moore Street with the result that none have been implemented properly. On the other, central government has failed to engage meaningfully with the complex issues around the legacies of 1916 as they emerged in Moore Street. One wonders if the Save Moore Street campaign would have transpired had the government seized the initiative in 2006 at the time of the 90th anniversary by opening a museum dedicated to the Rising in the GPO or in another appropriate space.

The High Court's ruling has generated significant challenges for current redevelopment plans in the area. Irrespective of the outcome of the appeal, urban planning and development in Dublin has been judicialised. Legal argument is determining the future of the city. A battlefield site has been designated of an area that, ironically in 1916, contemporaries rushed to erase from the cityscape in a bid to return to normal life and trading conditions. A more glaring irony (or perhaps absurdity) is the *exclusion* of the GPO. The physical privileging of particular spaces of the city as the 1916 Battlefield Site is a political action because boundaries are social constructions and 'boundary delineation is a process embedded within power relations that simultaneously silence particular interests and highlights others' (Moore-Cherry *et al.*, 2015, p 2143). In the context of the Easter Rising, it could reasonably be argued that the GPO, Four Courts and other locations within the city are far more integral to the 'battlefield of 1916'. The notion of designating *one particular* battlefield site, or more accurately one portion of one action site,

has raised apprehension not just for those concerned about its wider implications for planning law, but also for broader understandings of the impact of the 1916 Rising and other pre-1916 historic battles within the city. The designation is also questionable given the evidence of the spatiality of the 1916 Rising. Figure 2 compares the distribution of buildings requiring full reconstruction after the Rising (a proxy for the area which saw the most intense artillery fire by the British army as it quelled the Rising), with the court-designated 1916 Battlefield Site. There are clear discrepancies between the arena in which the most significant action took place and that which has been legally designated. While numbers 14-17 Moore Street are ‘authentic’, in that they have survived in their current form since 1916, there has been limited discussion of the extent to which most of the designated battlefield site has survived or subsequently been rebuilt.

Figure 2: ‘Battlefield site’ contextualised with the areas of most significant military action (represented by buildings requiring full reconstruction after the Rising)



Conclusion

This commentary has been ambitious in attempting to chart some of the multiple urban legacies of the Easter 1916 Rising. The complementary perspectives of geography and history facilitate the proper contextualisation of those legacies. They have allowed us to highlight the parallels and discontinuities in terms of

urban politics and planning as well as destruction and reconstruction in the city. The story of Moore Street highlights the importance of considering the city both as physical and lived space; while much energy has been expended on preventing the destruction of buildings and reconstructing the memory of 1916 (the distant past), the destruction being caused to livelihoods rooted in the more recent past has gone virtually unnoticed. The inter-disciplinary approach taken in this reflective commentary has also opened up fruitful grounds for new research, questioning the assumptions upon which arguments are made and decisions taken. Our discussion of Figure 2 highlights the importance of an evidence-based approach to policy-making for the future of the city, and the importance of properly informed geographical and historical expertise in these debates. This is fundamental if a coherent strategy is to be devised to preserve the broader legacies of the Easter Rising and other major events in the urban history of Dublin. Temporality is crucial to understanding the evolution of spaces, but the urban must be understood ‘not as a singular abstract temporality but as the site where multiple temporalities collide’ (Crang, 2001, pp 189-90). These temporalities are productive in their capacity, with varying degrees of success and impact on different urban actors.

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