

HISTORIC BUILDINGS COUNCIL 2020 - 2023





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**HISTORIC BUILDINGS COUNCIL
for Northern Ireland
2020 - 2023**

Twenty-first Report

Chair and Members 2020 - 2023



Mr Peter Tracey



Dr Connie Gerrow



Mr Graeme Moore



Ms Margaret Edwards



Dr Rosaleen Hickey



Ms Sabine Kalke



Mr Sebastian Graham



Ms Siobhan Brown



Mr Conor Sandford

The following members also contributed during this period:

Mr John Anderson
(01/07/20 - 30/06/22)

Mr Ciaran Andrews
(01/07/20 - 30/06/22)

Mrs Johanna Higgins
(01/07/20 - 30/06/22)

Mr Charles McMurray MBE
(01/07/20 - 30/06/22)

Dr Tanja Poppelreuter
(01/07/20 - 30/06/22)

Ms Elbeth Clarke
(01/07/20 - 30/06/23)

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Functions of the Historic Buildings Council

The Historic Buildings Council is established under Article 198 of the Planning Act (Northern Ireland) 2011. Its function includes:

- to keep under review, and from time-to-time report to the Department on, the general state of preservation of listed buildings; and
- to advise the Department on such matters relating to the preservation of buildings of special architectural or historic interest as the Department may refer to it.

The Council's nature is defined under Schedule 5 of the Planning Act (Northern Ireland) 2011:

- It shall consist of a Chair appointed by the Minister and such number of other members so appointed as the Minister may determine. Members are appointed for a term of three years but are eligible for re-appointment. The Council may appoint sub-committees which may include persons who are not members of the Council, and the Council may regulate its own quorum. It must prepare and submit to the Department a report on its activities and the Department shall lay a copy of every such report before the Assembly.

The Council is required to be consulted

1. under article 80 (3) of the Planning Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 on the compiling or amendment of the list of buildings of special architectural or historic interest;
2. under Article 84 (3) of the Planning Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, before the Department issues any certificate stating that it does not intend to list a building;
3. under Article 104 (5) of the Planning Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 on the making, varying or cancelling the designation of a conservation area.

Chair's Report



Chairman: Peter Tracey

I took up the role of Chair on 22 July 2020. The world had just entered “lockdown” and we were all fumbling our way through an unprecedented period of isolation, restrictions and zoom meetings.

I didn't quite think the end of the world was nigh (for my architectural practice) but I did think that the restrictions would have sufficient detrimental consequences on my business affairs that I would have ample time to devote to my new role as Chair It's strange how wrong one can be.

My first response to the emergency was when the Health Service Executive (HSE) in the Irish republic engaged me to carry out alterations to a building to act as a COVID assessment Centre – statutory applications and tender processes were circumvented/dispensed with as the urgency of the situation took hold - and we drew and the contractor - built all in one stage. It didn't stop and commissions flowed in from both HSE and the De-

partment of Education & Skills (RoI) resulting in one of the busiest periods in all my near 30 years of private practice (unfortunately by contrast government work virtually dried up in the north).

From a historic buildings perspective it has been immensely encouraging with the HSE in particular re-valuating its existing historic buildings portfolio and continuing to repurpose empty buildings and carrying out external fabric upgrades to same.



Refurbishment protected structure Letterkenny

Also in the private sector a client from England sensitively refurbished and extended a period house outside Letterkenny - not Grade 1 listed but as modest 19th century house “of the classic middle size” as the acclaimed architectural historian and author Maurice Craig may have described it.



Refurbishment dwelling Letterkenny

More recently a client is restoring a 5 storey listed Victorian terrace house in Derry city. It has been

lying empty for several years and would qualify as being on the buildings at risk register. The owner is enthusiastically following the principles of best conservation in repairing existing historic fabric where possible. This is encouraging on two fronts- the repair and safe-guarding of a listed structure; and having a young family moving into the city centre to live.

These examples highlight an encouraging change in thinking by members of the public and public bodies in recognising the worth and value of our historic buildings and the significant role it plays and will continue to play in our collective responsibility to climate change and sustainability.

It all points to a greater appreciation generally by the public of the value of the historic built fabric – be it the refurbishment and repair of a single sliding sash window, the use of lime render externally to allow a historic building to breathe, the repair of lead flashings and historic rainwater goods- and that caring for historic buildings is not solely restricted to the iconic grade A and B listed cathedrals, town halls, castles, thatched cottages etc, many of which the general public does not easily relate to – but rather it involves the modest (perhaps not even listed) terrace house, shop front, boundary railing, granite kerb sett, cast iron lamp posts, telephone box, post boxes which although all small individually when taken collectively can significantly enhance an area’s sense of place.



Refurbishment of listed building in Derry



Cast iron lamp post in Conservation Area



Granite kerb sets in Conservation Area



My introduction to historic buildings came initially from Professor Adrian Forty who taught Architectural history at the Bartlett school of architecture, University College London in the early 1980s.

I adapted the content of his lectures to my homeplace in the Derry/Donegal area and undertook a study of clachans and historic houses (of the middle size of course).

My starting point was a visit to the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum and Alan Gailey who provided excellent advice and encouragement.

The museum had useful exhibits in the form of re-creations in a museum setting and these served as sound reference points when I went “out in to the fields” of Inishowen and discovered the remnants of a clachan at Ballymagaraghy in north Inishowen. The old, ruined cottages were one by one being abandoned and left to rot and being replaced with the ubiquitous Donegal bungalow - wholly insensitive to the locale and the historic landscape.

I was delighted therefore to rekindle association with the Museum by having William Blair Director of Collections at the National Museum NI host the 499th Historic Buildings Council meeting at Cultra on 26 April 2024 where he outlined the ambitious “Reawakening” project for the Museum.

Before taking on my current role as Chair, I had previously served 2 terms on the Council as an ordinary member from 2013 to 2019 and enjoyed the discussions with my esteemed peers arising from the listings and planning applications brought forward to Council meetings by HED.

Planning applications brought to our meetings are generally contentious involving works to or contiguous to a listed building or within conservation areas.

HBC has expressed concerns that these schemes are often brought to the meetings too late in the design process and are already well developed thus making it difficult for any suggestions to be implemented at such a late stage.

We therefore encourage HED to involve HBC in the early stage of design development – perhaps even at a PAD stage.

We also at times perceived a conflict between the aspirations of two separate government departments namely Department for the Communities

and the Department of Education.

I remember us debating the merits -or lack of to be more precise - of a scheme involving an extension to a school which was listed. The proposed scheme was ill considered and hurried, and this came through particularly in the poor quality of the measured drawing of the listed building and its lack of attention to detail.

All HBC members were unanimous in condemnation of the proposal.

Yet something was nagging at me, I knew this building - and then it dawned that I had submitted a (ultimately unsuccessful) tender for provision of architectural services for this very job some years previously! Therefore I knew the winning fee bid - which was ludicrously low - but very much in line with the then current trend of the "race to the bottom" approach adopted by architects generally during the recession period - an approach actively encouraged by Central Procurement Directorate (CPD).

I therefore withdrew my objection and recommended that a letter of congratulations be sent to the applicant for getting exactly what it paid for - crap-ola!

The point being that clients should pay a reasonable design team fee if it wishes a quality solution particularly when working with historic structures.

Building Preservation Notices (BPN)

'From 1st April 2015, councils may serve a 'Building Preservation Notice' (BPN), where it appears to a council that a building is of architectural or historic merit and is at risk of demolition or significant alteration. This discretionary power has been transferred from the Department of the

environment, (DOE) to councils, under the Review of Public Administration transfer of functions agreement.'

The contentious issue of BPNs came up during the term.

The "Darjeeling House" just outside Enniskillen was brought to HB Council for listing in October 2020 with a recommendation for Grade B1.

This was unanimously passed by Council members (some members even considered it be a given higher listing status).

However shortly after its recommendation for listing the building was demolished over a weekend. As the building had not been listed ostensibly, no law had been broken.



Darjeeling House, Enniskillen (before demolition)

This action enraged members of the HBC who considered that the listing system is too prolonged (from recommendation that a building be listed to actual listing) and an owner of a building who is against a proposed listing can demolish before the listing takes effect .

It also appears that only local Councils have the power to issue a BPN whereas some HBC members felt that there should be a joint power of both local Councils and DfC to issue a BPN.

It was further felt that local Councils have on occasion been reluctant to exercise their right to issue BPNs for fear of legal action or compensation claims.

Further clarity is required around this emotive issue to clear up any loophole or ambiguity and for fear of losing any more valuable built heritage history due to lack of awareness and points of technicality.

HBC Meetings

Following lifting of COVID restrictions we felt HBC required to present a more visible presence around the Province of what its role was and the support and advice it could give to local Councils and other heritage organisations. The first of these meetings was held in the Guildhall in June 2023 hosted by Derry and Strabane District Council and attended by the head of planning, Maura Fox and her senior team as well as the Chair of the Planning Committee at the time, Sean Mooney.

Anne-Marie Gallagher of St Columb's Hall Trust gave a presentation on the Foyle Civic Trust-led Built Heritage Project which has recently received a grant of circa £147,000.00 from the Heritage Lottery Fund(HLF) . This pilot project involves 5 historic buildings owned by various community cul-



HBC Meeting Derry & Strabane District Council

tural organisations in the city of Derry and seeks to encourage owners to work collaboratively in the repair and upkeep of building fabric using appropriately trained skilled craftsmen/women. The buildings involved include: St Columb's Hall, The Playhouse, The Verbal Arts Centre, The Glassworks (former Gt James Street Presbyterian Church) and the Old School House, Morsraid Sheamais.

We similarly held the 497th meeting of HBC in Newry, Mourne and Down District offices in November 2023 and HBC member Sebastian Graham gave a presentation on the heritage buildings of Newry which was enthusiastically received by local councillors and Head of Planning.

We heard in particular of another community initiative this time the Downpatrick Regeneration Working Group (DRWG) who in conjunction with The Ministerial Advisory Group (MAG) for Architecture and the Built Environment, Department for Communities and Newry, Mourne and Down District Council has produced the framework for Downpatrick with the help of businesses, residents and stakeholders, to develop a vision for the town and put it in the best possible position for funding opportunities.



HBC Meeting Cultra

HMOs

There has been concern raised in the city of Derry over the influx of planning applications by private owners for conversion of buildings in the city to house of Multiple Occupation (HMOs) specifically for vulnerable people from outside the area.

This goes against the recent sterling work of the Foyle Civic Trust- led Walled City Partnership project which involved the refurbishment and repair of over 30 historic buildings within and contiguous to the City Walls to make the city a more attractive place for people to work in, live in and visit.

The influx of vulnerable people from outside the city, away from their own support structure has the potential to have a negative impact and lead to anti-social behaviour and thus diminishing the appeal of the city.

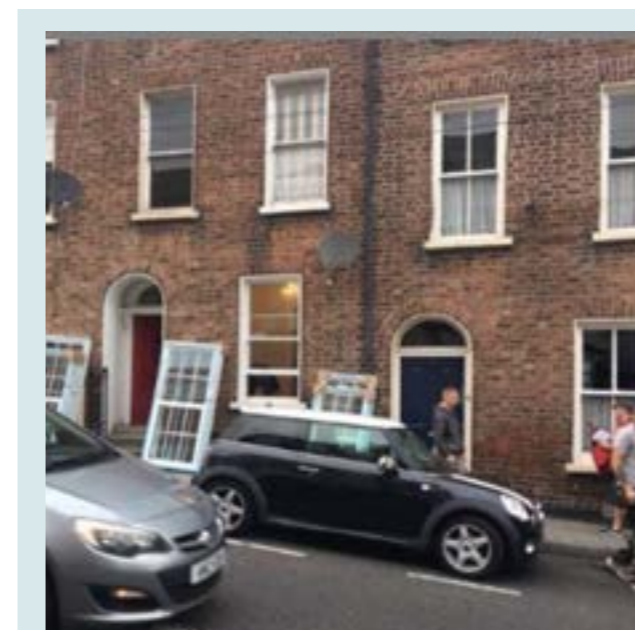
A further negative impact arising from the transfer of powers to local councils was the recent decision by local councillors (against the advice of HED and planners) to permit the use of replacement plastic windows in lieu of traditional timber sliding sash windows in the Clock Tower building on the Ebrington site – allegedly on the developer’s plea of lack of affordability! The Clock Tower building is of course the most prominent building on the Ebrington site, presiding as it does over the former parade ground (now Public Realm square) and over the river Foyle to the west bank of the city.

Allowing such a change on a prominent and historic site has the potential to open the floodgates and encourage the use of plastic windows in other historic buildings and conservation areas within the city and beyond.

I have also noted several examples of plastic windows replacing timber sliding sashes within the

city’s conservation area and raised concerns with both HED and the chief planning officer and received a worrying clarification from the chief planner as follows:

“I note your concerns in relation to permitted development rights within The Planning (General Permitted Development) Order (NI) 2015, for replacing windows in the Conservation Area. As you have concluded below, the current legislation does not prohibit the replacing of windows for dwellings within the Conservation Area unless the building is listed.”



Plastic windows in Conservation Area (just takes one to start it and then others follow suit)

This is again particularly concerning and requires further clarification over what is accepted as permitted development rights in a conservation area if further historic material is to be saved for future generations.

Historic Buildings Council at 50

2024 will mark the 50th anniversary of the first listing in Northern Ireland (answers on a postcard please or look away now if you don’t wish to know)- Portrush Train Station. 2024 will also mark the 500th meeting of the Historic Buildings Council .

The Historic Buildings Council is made up of 15 individuals who come with their own expertise and speciality and who all share a passion for the historic built environment.

I have been privileged to sit with all those individuals over the last 10 years or so who have given their time and expertise with no remuneration and who have contributed to the HBC publications. It never ceases to amaze me the calibre of candidates who apply to be on the Council and I thank and salute them all for their erudite and informative contributions. We do not always agree but arguments are made eloquently and graciously.

Also to former Directors of HED Michael Coulter and Iain Greenway, and their industrious and courteous staff Manus Deery, Anne Menary, Paul McMeekin, Caroline McCavana and Fiona Lundie for managing the meetings process (particularly the scones and tea!). I wish the new Director Paul Price well in his new role and in his lobbying to ensure appropriate levels of funding are available for the care and upkeep of our historic environment for the next 50 years.

Peter Tracey

-Peter Tracey lives in Derry, where he runs his own architectural practice. He has a long-held interest in historic buildings and has worked on a number of conservation projects. He has served as both member and chair of HBC.

Modern Building Conservation: is it all just semantics? – Dr Connie Gerrow

The development of what is known as ‘modern building conservation practice’ has derived from almost three centuries of philosophy, which has been altered and changed throughout this time period, and it likely to change again within the twenty-first century. Due to the changes in philosophical thought over time, the current profession has been populated by a suite of terms that can be interpreted differently by different people (Brimblecombe and Grossi 2006). These terms are equally applicable to a hierarchy of buildings, from prestigious palaces, cathedrals, and castles to more humble vernacular dwellings, as well as stone monuments and statutory, and referred to regularly in architectural conservation practices:

- Conservation vs preservation
- Restoration vs reconstruction
- Authenticity
- Reversibility
- Irreversibility

Preservation versus conservation

At the most basic level is it essential to dispel some of the confusion that has accumulated around the words ‘preservation’ and ‘conservation’ (Earl 2003). The simplest and most basic understanding of these words has been outlined below:

Preservation: the act of maintaining what is there: for instance, the ruins of a castle will always be ruins; nothing new will be added to the historic fabric.

Conservation: the act of conserving something, which may include protective measures and complete restoration: therefore, adding new materials to the historic fabric.

Most dictionaries relate conservation to preservation as indicated in Earl’s text: “to ‘preserve’ is

‘to keep safe from harm...to maintain, keep up... guard against decay. To ‘conserve’ is ‘to preserve, retain, keep entire’” (Earl 2003, 5). Until a relatively short time ago (c.1980s), in common professional usage, historic buildings tended to be preserved and museum objects and artworks conserved. More recently, however, in some contexts, the two terms have changed places. Earl (2003) suggests that a surge in public concern for the better preservation of the past; especially demolition of listed buildings, led to the reform of protective laws in the mid-1960s (Planning Act of 1968) that prompted a great deal of propagandist writing where new distinctions were drawn between the museum preservation of buildings supposedly ‘frozen-in-time’ and the enlightened conservation of imaginatively adapted buildings ‘in the environment’. The former identified as a sterile, negative process, while the latter was viewed as a creative and forward-looking process enabling historic structures to remain in use.

The inter-changeability of these terms is well known. Charters such as the ICOMOS Venice Charter of 1963, the Canadian Code 2000, and the ICOMOS Australian Burra Charter of 2013 have, for their own purposes, proposed more precise definitions for these terms in relation to their context. There is a general assumption that conservation means the prevention of change, so that they will not undergo change in future (Maguire 1997), and perhaps this is the mind-set of the institutions involved where there is a correlation between conservation and no change.

In the twenty-first century, the term conservation is more prevalent in everyday use, and it needs to be highlighted that although the classical philosophy of what we call modern conservation, has had very distinctive separations between the terms to conserve and to preserve, contemporary understanding of the term conservation has led to an un-

intentional polarization of the word conservation in the architectural field. Near the end of the twentieth century, Maguire (1997) explained two examples of how the term conservation is understood; these are:

- “Conservation means retaining, and where necessary, adapting or adding to old environments, in such a way that a fresh entity is created to serve modern life, in which the old is respected and valued for its contribution.
- Conservation means retaining old environments and creating conditions in which they must survive into the future (but essentially unchanged) and the users must accept the limitations on their way of life such restriction of change imposes” (Maguire 1997, 17).

These two meanings relate to what was previously separated as conserve and preserve, and to the historical schools of thought behind those meanings. However, new generation professionals who have been educated to receive parts of both the philosophies use both meanings (conserve and preserve) interchangeably, but as Maguire (1997) argues, have no adequate explanation of the doublethink they are expected to put into practice. This perhaps links to why the debate on how to conserve/preserve in the field today is clouded with terminology, and why it is not apparent what is to be achieved by the outcome of a building conservation project.

Restoration Versus Reconstruction

The term restoration is defined as ‘the action of returning something to a former condition’ (Oxford Dictionaries 2015); this dictionary meaning has been used and expanded upon within some of the most important codes of practice regarding architectural conservation. The Venice Charter of 1964 defined restoration as a process that is a “highly

specialised operation. The aim is to preserve and reveal the aesthetic and historic value of the monument and is based on respect for original material...it must stop at the point where conjecture begins” (Article 9, 2). The later Burra of Charter 2013, however, acknowledges a distinct split between ‘restoration’ and ‘reconstruction’. Restoration means “returning a place to a known earlier state by removing accretions or by reassembling existing elements without the introduction of new material” (The Burra Charter 2013, 2). Reconstruction in this context, although similar, identifies that “reconstruction means returning a place to a known earlier state and is distinguished from restoration by the introduction of a new material into the fabric” (The Burra Charter 2013, 2) but notes explicitly that this new material may include recycled material salvaged from other places, but not [to be] to the detriment of any place of architectural significance. Similar to the Venice Charter, the Canadian Code of Ethics of 2000 defines restoration as “all actions taken to modify the existing material and structure of a cultural property to represent a known earlier state. The aim of restoration is to reveal the culturally significant qualities of a cultural property. Restoration is based on respect for the remaining original material and clear evidence of the earlier state” (Code of Ethics and Guidance for Practice 2000, 15). Yet, the Burra Charter states, reconstruction “is appropriate only where a place is incomplete through damage or alteration, and only where there is sufficient evidence to reproduce an earlier state of the fabric. In some cases, reconstruction may also be appropriate as part of a use or practice that retains the cultural significance of the place” (The Burra Charter 2013, 7). There is a lack of clarity between the terms restoration and reconstruction, which brings to light the implications for misunderstanding whether intervention is appropriate. A practitioner’s conjectural interpretation of what should be revealed as culturally significant, and whether there is sufficient evidence of the

earlier state of the fabric, is circumstantial to his or her own understanding of the terminology.

Authenticity

Authenticity is the quality of being authentic and is related to that of original work. With regards to architectural authenticity, the original material is at the essence of what should be conserved. Matero (2006, 83) comments that authenticity “is perhaps one of the most significant, elusive and debated qualities to be associated with cultural works and their interpretation” and of growing importance to historic structures. The idea of authenticity has become of great importance within the last two decades, which has resulted in the ICOMOS Nara Document 1994. This document has been conceived in the spirit of the Venice Charter 1964, in that it builds upon and suggests that there are no fixed criteria to judge the authenticity of cultural property; rather it must be evaluated within the cultural context to which it belongs. As original materials need replaced or partially replaced, the original authenticity of the building diminishes over time as ever more repairs are undertaken to maintain the premises in functioning use; it is therefore emerging that this is one of the key issues (Jokilehto 1999) that needs to be tackled in the years to come.

The term authenticity can be considered in both a tangible and intangible context. The tangible (building fabric) and the intangible (function of the building), and assessment of what is of most value to the building and the surrounding can all be derived from the term authenticity, which often results in grey areas. When considering authenticity, do we apply it to just the materials (e.g. masonry including mortars) and the architectural style (the tangible context) or is it the function of the building (intangible context), which makes it authentic? Differences in opinion of what authenticity means in context has been clouded by the differing views

of historic architects, some of whom were the first to establish the philosophical thoughts on conservation. For instance, Ruskin’s detestation of restoration and preference for visible and honest interventions (readability), defined and protected the authentic character of age through saving the historic fabric, whereas Viollet-le-Duc favoured a three-part criteria for the basis of preserving authenticity; this included: image (style), form (structure) and material (Matero 2006). Cesare Brandi, in his theory of conservation, placed material conservation at the forefront of conservation’s priorities: thus, the first aim of conservation was to conserve the original material of the work, and the second aim was to re-establish its potential unity, so far as this was possible without creating a fake and without erasing significant traces of its history (Brandi 1963).

In the twentieth century, however, the term authenticity has evolved, and has been encouraging us to acknowledge that all buildings, monuments and statutory have a continuing history; that they are used, damaged, repaired, cleaned and restored, and sometimes destroyed (Matero 2006). All of this becomes a part of their history and therefore their significance. Contemporary conservation must strive to seek a middle ground by acknowledging that these changes become a part of the building’s authentic history, and the perception of the original pristine building would no longer exist as soon as the structure was built. It is this compromise of what is the authentic building that causes much debate in the professional field; but as Warren argues, the element of time is the crucial factor – “before collapse, you may save the fabric, perhaps at the expense of the structural principle. After collapse, the only option is to replace, the structural principle can survive, but the fabric is no more” (Warren 2004, 45). In this statement, the phrase “structural principle” refers to the intangible function of the building, and notes that in some instances the op-

tions open to a conservator can work against each other, where it may be impossible to achieve both objectives and a choice must be made, or the condition/social setting of the building may make the choice for you.

It is clear that the concept of what is authentic, or what makes a building authentic, is ultimately susceptible to different points of view, which is obvious from the interpretations of Ruskin, Viollet-le-Duc and Brandi’s. Even in the twenty-first century, what makes a building authentic is debated, and is often a conjectural response, depending on the person viewing the building. The authenticity of a building therefore has to be considered through several variables, on a case-by-case scenario.

Reversibility

The term reversibility is synonymously linked with the change of a building or structure: change of use, materials or function. Changes or alterations to a building, whether an applied conservation treatment to the stonework, or the addition of a new roof, must be removable in the future without damage to the original structure or fabric. This is an element central to the policies associated with building conservation work.

The Burra Charter (2013) notes that changes that reduce cultural significance should be reversible and be reversed when circumstances permit. Reversible changes should be considered temporary, whereas non-reversible changes should only be used as a last resort and should not prevent future conservation work. The implementation of surface treatments is an area of conservation which should only be considered when the material offers substantial conservation benefits, and only then may be considered appropriate. The Burra Charter openly states, “the use of modern materials and techniques must be supported by firm scientific evidence or by

a body of experience” (The Burra Charter 2013, 4). The Canadian Code of Ethics perhaps gives more detail on the concept of reversibility: “ideally, the conservation professional shall use materials that can be most easily and most completely removed with minimal risk to any original part” (Code of Ethics and Guidance for Practice 2000, 7). The message portrayed unanimously with regards to reversibility is that when non-intervention best serves to promote the preservation of the property, it is appropriate that no action be taken, indicating that careful and thorough consideration must be given to even those alterations or treatments that are reversible.

Irreversibility

Naturally, following from reversibility is the concept of irreversibility. The term irreversibility is a poignant marker in conservation, which has led to much contention within the practice, particularly due to the negative results interventions that were once thought to be reversible, but consequently were not. With regards to building conservation surface treatments, for example water repellents and stone consolidation treatments, it is now widely accepted that it is impossible to remove such a surface treatment once it has been applied (Doehne and Price 2010) to the stonework without dressing back the stone, causing loss of the original architectural surface detail carried out by the original mason. Irreversible treatments of the past have often resulted in accelerated deterioration of stonework and have since resulted in surface treatments being held in a strongly negative view within the UK. Often, we think of large structural changes to buildings being irreversible but remedial actions such as stone surface treatments, and cleaning of stone should certainly also be considered too.

Irreversible treatments are not a new conservation strategy, and as early as 1932 Schaffer (1932) noted

the use of irreversible surface treatments, resulting from Fuchs use of soluble silicates for hardening stone in 1826. Schaffer acknowledged that general preservation processes aim to prevent the access of water or to render the material immune from the action of acidic sulphur gases (Schaffer 1932). Irreversible treatments, such as stone consolidants and water repellents, are usually considered when:

- Stone decay processes have made the stone friable, and the rate of decay has accelerated or become more frequently episodic in mass breakdown.
- When material breakdown is beyond the control of the practitioner and upkeep of remedial daily maintenance is not ensuring stone surface stability.

Issues with the temporary protection (Shaffer 1932; Ashurst 1994) that surface treatments provide has led to more practical problems than just the risk of accelerating the rate of decay. This includes the recognition for periodical renewal of the treatment, as too often in the past failure has occurred because the treatment has been expected to last indefinitely. Although the Canadian Code does not endorse irreversible treatments, it does acknowledge, “the conservation professional shall endeavour to use only techniques and materials which, to the best of current knowledge, meet the objectives of the treatment and have the least adverse effect on the cultural property” (Ethics Code and Guidance for Practice 2000, 7). Although there is a precautionary warning in the most prominent charters with regards to irreversible treatments in architectural conservation, it has been acknowledged there is an importance in understanding new materials and new techniques (Brimblecombe and Grossi 2006), while still remembering the significance of traditional materials and techniques.

Concluding thoughts

For the purposes of this Historic Buildings Council article the terminology here presents the on-going sensitive deliberation needed by the conservation practitioner when working on heritage buildings and structures. The selected terms here form part of the core principles to which a practitioner should aspire to uphold, even when the pressure of client expectations and financial limitations occur and the legislation set out in the Planning Act Northern Ireland 2011 and subsequent Planning Policy Statements. Often plans presented focus on the ‘best cost solution’ if the practitioner has not come from or trained in building conservation practice, which has, in many cases, been to the detriment to the building or its cultural significance. While economic viability is important, the ethos and philosophy around building conservation is certainly not a new topic and without these pillars of knowledge and holistic understanding, the results can be unfavourable. Highlighting that building conservation isn’t all just semantics but rather a series of tried and tested practices of the past which we should continue to uphold and learn, even in difficult scenarios and execute on well informed and considered decisions.

Dr Connie Gerrow

- Connie has a background in building condition assessments, a PhD in building conservation stone surface treatments and is an experienced Heritage Project Officer formerly at Ulster Architectural Heritage. She has provided guidance for historic building owners, community groups and the voluntary sector on how to approach repair projects. Through her consultancy roles, she has worked on a range of projects aimed at heritage education and raising awareness of heritage assets. Connie currently works at Ulster University in the School of Arts and Humanities.

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‘Heritage on the High Street’ - Graeme Moore

The front cover of the HBC Report from the previous term included the alarming image of a rather sorry looking ‘Bank Buildings’ – Primark, in the aftermath of a devastating fire.

I happened to be in Belfast City Centre for a meeting on the day of the fateful fire in August 2018. I walked across High Street and could see a small fire on the roof, fire engines were in attendance, and I assumed that would be it brought under control. I was wrong. Around an hour later I passed again to find a cordoned off Royal Avenue with flames emerging from the front door of the building.

Little did we know then that Royal Avenue and the surrounding streets would be closed for several months whilst the remarkable repair work was undertaken.

The building was occupied at the time by Contractors, and fortunate that there was no injury or loss of life, but an important Listed Building appeared to be lost. It was interesting that what followed, was an outpouring of fondness for the building, which had perhaps been previously taken for granted. Post fire, the building enjoyed notoriety as one of the city’s favourite buildings - a Belfast Icon.

The wider impact was clearly a blow to traditional city centre retailers who had previously dealt with out of town and internet shopping, not to mention the effects of the Covid 19 lock downs still to come.

As part of regular meetings in the Historic Building Council, as well as offering advice, we are updated on the progress of planning applications related to heritage structures. We listened with interest to the regular reports from Historic Environment Division on the encouraging progress that was being made at Bank Buildings to assess the remaining structures and find a way to repair the building and bring it back into active use.

Credit must be given to HED and Belfast City Council for working with the Architects, Hall Black Douglas in coming up with a pragmatic plan to allow the works to occur on the building.

Recognition must also be given to the building owners for ‘doing the right thing’ and fully repairing the building, where it may have been a much easier choice to build a bland new retail structure. Elsewhere, the difficult process and expense could have been used as a cynical excuse to demolish what remained of the building as the repair technique involved the closure of all, and then part, of Royal Avenue to traffic.

Worse still would be to do nothing, as is happening in other parts of the city centre, but our feeling of powerlessness as individuals to watch other heritage assets become further damaged by vacancy, water ingress, fires and inaction on unappreciated gems, is a tale for another day.

It is interesting that the owners of Bank Buildings clearly saw the tangible value in the building itself. Built between 1885 and 1900, to the designs of W.H. Lynn, there is no doubt that this is due in no small part to the building having heritage credentials. Its impressive frontage effortlessly combines Victorian elegance with a turn of the century modernity expressed in huge department store window openings. The location visible from Royal Avenue, Donegall Place and across Castle Place looking west up High Street meant that the ‘rising from the ashes’ became a city centre attraction.

The Council embraced the obstacle of the closed streets and turned this into an opportunity, with activities and events focussed on the pedestrian, particularly around Christmas, which resulted in a call to keep the streets closed to the car.

Perhaps these ‘meanwhile uses’ inspired the City Council towards thoughts of acquiring other strategic heritage buildings along Royal Avenue? It strikes me as particularly clever that as a visitor walks north from the City Hall, the journey is punctuated by the recently acquired 2 Royal Avenue which has become a test bed for what a Listed Building could be on a street traditionally dominated by shopping.

2 Royal Avenue was built c.1869, to the designs of W.J. Barre (who in the same year completed another Icon, The Albert Memorial Clock). It has been the Provincial Bank and latterly a Tesco supermarket.

With no apparent recent appetite for the building as a retail space, it is appropriate that the Council took leadership in acquiring it to test alternatives to shopping with a repurposed heritage building at its heart.

The building houses a café, work pods and spaces to catch your breath from the city, and its impressive flexible spaces hosts markets, talks, tours and a variety of events.

This is not the final use for the Listed Building, but by being open to the public, their ideas can be explored to get a feel for what the building wants to be used for in a more permanent iteration.

This then could be a precursor to the next stage on the journey for the Council, in challenging how city centre heritage buildings are used for the ongoing reinvention of the City Centre.

The Former Bank of Ireland, designed by Joseph Downes in 1930, is a world away in design from the generally Victorian architecture, but is also Listed and another favourite among the city’s people.

Fitting then that the ‘City’ sees this as the cornerstone for ‘Belfast Stories’ – A new city centre attraction, which we will see emerge over the coming years, once again drawing in the community and international visitors, replacing the commerce use with Cultural Heritage...

...Perhaps this approach could be adopted elsewhere on other city centre treasures.

Graeme Moore

- Graeme is in his second three-year term for HBC offering his expertise as an RIBA Accredited Specialist Conservation Architect (SCA) who has worked in the field of Conservation since 2001. His conservation experience includes working on the repair, restoration and extension of a variety of Listed Buildings and Scheduled Monuments ranging from Historic Docks, 18th Century Mills as well as Victorian and Georgian Buildings to Listed Buildings of the modernist era. This work includes finding new sustainable uses for existing historic buildings and clients for these projects include Historic Building Trusts, Government Departments, Local Councils, Universities as well as Private Building Owners. Graeme teaches on the RSUA Conservation course as well as delivering lectures on Conservation at Ulster University and mentoring Part III Students.

Ebrington Derry ~ Londonderry – Margaret Edwards

Where Heritage Informs Regeneration

Background

The Ebrington site in Derry ~ Londonderry is located on the east bank of the river Foyle with fantastic views to the city side and further down river. It was established as a military barracks in 1841 and laid out in the shape of a star fort, with buildings constructed on three sides, many of these buildings survive today. The remaining structure of the star fort is also a historic scheduled monument as recorded by the Historic Environment Division. During the First World War the poet Francis Ledwidge (1887-1916) was stationed here.

The barracks later became an important base for the Allies during the Second World War. It was taken over by the Royal Navy in 1940, known as HMS Ferret and played a vital role in dealing with the threat posed by the German U-boats and victory in the Battle of the Atlantic. Once the war ended it continued as an anti-submarine base and in 1947 was renamed HMS Sea Eagle and became a Joint Anti-Submarine Training Base. This continued until 1970 when the site was returned to the military and remained so until the army left in 2000. The site was then gifted to the city in 2003.

Regeneration

In her book 'The Death and Life of Great American Cities (1961)' Jane Jacobs gave the view that older buildings help to define the character and identity of a place and its community by providing that tangible link to the past that can be preserved for present and future generations. Ebrington can be viewed as a good example of this approach, where the majority of the original buildings on the site have been retained and re-purposed. A site that had been built for a very particular purpose has been given a new lease of life and is now very much part of the city's future.



Star Fort in 1849 © A. Malley Report



Postcard of parade ground during the First World War © Ian Bartlett



Ulster History Circle Blue Plaque for Francis Ledwidge Ebrington 2017 © Roisin Doherty

The site comprises of 29 acres of prime riverfront land and as such is one of the biggest regeneration schemes in Northern Ireland, with the core aim principle of retaining as much of the historic environment as possible. The star fort walls are protected as a scheduled monument alongside fourteen buildings that are now listed and a further nineteen retained as record only. This focus has ensured that much of the historic essence of the site has been retained.

The urban regeneration company Ilex was established in 2003 and given the challenge to oversee the regeneration of the site. However, this wasn't an easy task to undertake given the scale of the site to be managed alongside the very high local and regional expectations. This was especially difficult during time of economic recession when funding for regeneration was limited but the hopes and aspirations for the city were high. Ilex produced a regeneration plan, known as the One Plan, which was built around a strong collaborative approach and needed all the key stakeholders to commit to working together. Ilex, as the company charged with the One Plan and more particularly the successful regeneration of Ebrington, faced sustained criticism due to the lack of physical progress on the Ebrington site. In essence Ilex had been presented with a poisoned chalice; on paper the scale and opportunity offered by the Ebrington site was exciting, but it was also difficult to deliver much on the ground with little or no budget and hampered by a range of bureaucratic hurdles.

However, one of Ilex's biggest successes was securing the funding for the Peace Bridge which opened in 2011. They delivered a transformational project against a backdrop of criticism that the money should have been spent elsewhere on areas such as health, education and perhaps more specifically in the city centre. Along with other partners Ilex also played a key role in having the city recognised as the first UK City of Culture in 2013. During the Year of Culture Ebrington played a key role in

hosting major events such as the Turner Prize and outdoor events in Ebrington Square such as BBC Radio One Big Weekend which drew 40,000 people. This has been viewed by many as a resounding success, drawing global attention to the city and its culture, whilst others would note that the impact was short lived.

There is no doubt that the Peace Bridge has been a major game changer for the city in so many ways. It has truly opened up more opportunities for the Ebrington site and provides the critical connection between both sides of the river. More than 10 years since it opened those who initially opposed the Peace Bridge can acknowledge the positive socio-economic impact it has had for those who live, work and visit here. The average footfall across the Peace Bridge since it opened is 2,500 per day and Ebrington is now firmly recognised as part of the city centre, connecting east and west banks. The city can now celebrate and showcase its rich built heritage with not only the 17th century city walls but also the 19th century star fort walls, each visible on each side of the river.



Peace Bridge © Tony Monaghan

What has been delivered?

In 2014 the Ebrington Development Framework was published in line with the One Plan. “The purpose of the framework is to chart an approach towards the development of Ebrington, which is of a scale and nature to deliver significant and sustainable benefits for the City and the Region.” It also provided a toolkit to assist with further development in terms of “the appropriateness of design, scale, ambition and quality.”

The focus was to provide a plan to allow new developments to sit alongside the historic buildings which are mainly situated around the former parade ground. The objective for urban design was built around creating new opportunities, providing a cultural tourism element, connecting with other spaces such as St Columb’s Park, increasing road linkages in the Waterside area as well as prioritising walking and cycling and working towards creating an integrated city.



Ebrington before 2003 © Derry City & Strabane District Council (DCSDC)

To allow for new developments, several buildings were taken down which were not seen as having historic or architectural merit. Careful consideration was given to this process to ensure the historic fabric of the site was retained but also allowing



Exterior & interior of the Garrison Church on site that was not retained © DCSDC

scope for the site to grow and develop. The images below are of the building which served as the church on site but was viewed as having little architectural merit. However, a photographic record was taken of this and the other buildings which were demolished.

There are numerous examples from around the world where modern and historic architecture come together. Historic buildings add value and a sense of history whereas modern can enliven and transform. Some refer to this as the ‘Bilbao effect’ when the Guggenheim Museum designed by the architect Frank Gehry led to real regeneration in the Spanish city. This is also the potential for Ebrington, which is an ongoing process and will need more time to reach its full potential.

Boosting Business

The heritage led regeneration of Ebrington has enabled a number of significant buildings to be restored and re-purposed to boost business and contribute to the economic growth of the city. Some of this regeneration is focused around the hospitality and tourism industry. A prime example of this is the Walled City Brewery, which was the first hospitality business to open in Ebrington in 2015, long before there was any other development. It started as a place to sample locally brewed beers but has continued to grow and diversify as a business since then with the addition of the new Tap Room and Earhart Gin School.



Image © Walled City Brewery



Image © The Bakery at Ebrington



Enterprise Northwest offices © Your Ebrington

The Ebrington Development Framework outlines that there needs to be development that leads to employment and economic growth, education, help with creating better communities, support health and wellbeing and work towards a more sustainable and connected city and region. At present there are around 200 people working in Ebrington. This can start to be illustrated by the variety of uses already on site from offices, restaurants, a hairdresser, business incubation spaces and a bakery.

The Enterprise Northwest office block opened in 2018, the Atelier hairdressing salon in 2020 and the Ebrington Bakery in 2022. This number will continue to rise with the completion of projects such as new Grade A offices and the new DNA Museum which are not yet operational.

The Ebrington Hotel is another example of this transformation, opening in 2023. The iconic clock tower building and four other buildings have been re-purposed and new additions added to create a 152-bed hotel and spa. This new development will have a significant impact on the growth of the local area's economy over the long term, especially as a vital component of the nighttime economy. It adds value to the city and region as a tourism destination, as well as creating much needed employment.

The hotel joins several other successful hospitality led businesses in Ebrington that are already established, proving that clusters of historic buildings coming together help to boost each other and also generate economic growth and animation.



Clock Tower now the Ebrington Hotel © Ebrington Holdings Ltd.



Interior Ebrington Hotel showcasing the site's heritage © Peter Bruce Photography



Exterior Ebrington Hotel showcasing the site's heritage © Peter Bruce Photography



Restaurant interior © Stitch & Weave

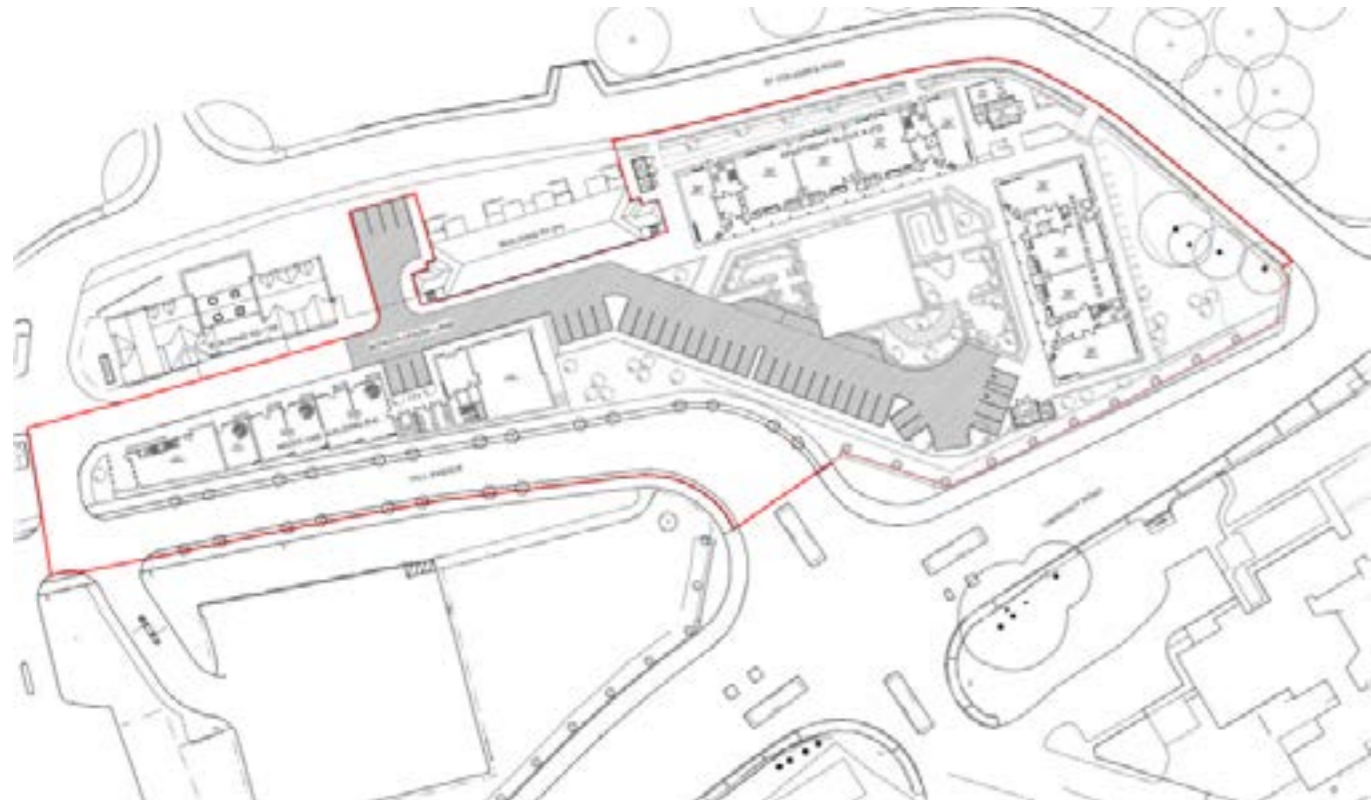
A new restaurant called Stitch and Weave is due to open soon in the former barracks canteen and will add further animation and economic activity to the site and wider city. This will add another thirty jobs to the existing employment already in place and as the name suggests is another link to our impressive shirt factory heritage in the city and wider Northwest.

An interesting example of bringing old and new architecture together was presented to the Historic Buildings Council in December 2023. It would see the re-use of an existing listed building (117) as accommodation alongside a number of new contemporary designed developments, including two new high end residential blocks and new mixed use creative industries/office building with incorporated landscaping as shown in the proposed site plan. However, to enable the scheme the corresponding building (118), which is not listed and is sited very close to a key road on the site, would be

demolished. Whilst the preferred approach is to always save our built heritage, in some case a reasonable argument can be made if, as in this case the new developments will complement the existing historic fabric.



Building 117 one of a pair of married quarters built after 1895 Image ©Ebrington Holdings Ltd.



Site plan of proposed development © Ebrington Holdings Ltd.

In line with the Ebrington Development Framework the building of a suite of new Grade A office facilities are nearing completion on site. The offices will attract investors, provide employment



Image ©Ebrington Holdings Ltd.

opportunities, stimulate economic growth and contribute to the wider regeneration of the Waterside area of the city. The buildings have generated a range of different of competing views in terms of the scale of the development and how they fit in with the existing site. However, it will be important to allow time for the work to be completed and the area fully landscaped and animated to fully appreciate this development within the overall site.

The proposed DNA (Derry~ Londonderry on the North Atlantic) Museum in Ebrington which is being led by Derry City & Strabane District Council will have a new triple height structure added to the end of building 49 and a new structure in the middle to connect 49 with building 45/46. The project has now secured all of the funding and is scheduled to open to the public late summer 2026. Initially planned to be the first major development on the site the DNA Museum will effectively be the last one, adding the final cultural component to Ebrington and a much-needed visitor attraction.



Image of the buildings 45/46 and 49 which will house the new DNA Museum © DCSDC



Drawings showing the new structures to be added to the existing historic buildings for the DNA Museum © Todd Architects

Infrastructure

Work has also been delivered to enhance access to the site from the Limavady Road via the new access road, Hill Avenue. As well as improved pedestrian access from St Columb's Park Road/Browning Drive, leading visitors to the Peace Tree sculpture. This has delivered greater connectivity to St Columb's Park and the Waterside as well as improving the overall visibility and accessibility of the site.

Conclusion

This ongoing transformation of Ebrington is remarkable when we remember that for most of its history it was a site associated with war and conflict. For the greater part of its contemporary history the site was hidden behind high security fortifications, shrouded from view and almost invisible. A site with such a troubled past has the potential to divide communities, but over time and especially as a result of the City of Culture in 2013 the site has

‘Palaces of Pleasure’ – Dr Rosaleen Hickey

now been accepted. The regeneration journey for Ebrington has not always been straightforward or fast moving and there have been many challenges along the way. The urban regeneration company, Ilex, closed in 2016 and the site has since been managed by The Executive Office. There is much about the Ebrington experience that other similar sites such as the former St Lucia military barracks in Omagh can learn from. Sites such as this have enormous socio-economic and cultural potential as Ebrington illustrates.

The former parade ground which is now transformed into Ebrington Square, is an impressive space for events and animation from big music events to more recently hosting the Antiques Roadshow. Linked by the Peace Bridge to the Guildhall Square and the city centre, the regeneration of Ebrington, shaped by its heritage, is making sustained progress and is now a place for business, employment, cultural activity, food, hospitality and tourism. It clearly demonstrates the positive impact that can be achieved by using the built heritage of a once contested urban space to create a place for now and the future.

Margaret Edwards

- Ms Edwards is currently a member of Derry City & Strabane Council's Regeneration Section and has delivered numerous projects where heritage is a key driver for regeneration and prosperity. She is a member of the City Walls Management Group and has served on the board of the Irish Museums Association.

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This essay explores the social and architectural significance of our interwar ‘palaces of pleasure’ and questions their protection and survival in Northern Ireland.

The 1920s and ‘30s were a time of societal, economic and technological change across Britain. An increase in leisure time across society led to the opening up of leisure pursuits to all classes and the development of popular mass entertainment. These decades witnessed a boom in the construction of the cinema and the dance hall, known respectively as the ‘picture palace’ and the ‘palais de danse’. The rapid construction of these novel building types coincided with a popular architectural style. ‘Art Deco’ was representative of ‘modernism’, progress, glamour and luxury, and was therefore an appropriate choice for society’s new ‘palaces of pleasure’. Subsequently, cinemas and dance halls evolved into a distinctive building type, achieved through aesthetic effect and architectural style. And of course, practical requirements – including the creation of expansive, unobstructed spaces – contributed to an established building type.

By 1938 there was estimated to be around 100 million admissions made to dances in the UK every year, with the figure doubling by 1953 (Nott, 2018). And by 1939, UK cinema admissions totalled 990 million, peaking in 1946 with 1.6 billion admissions (Manning, 2020). At the close of the 1930s there were 39 cinemas in Belfast alone, with 113 across Northern Ireland (Kinematograph Yearbook, 1940). Their names alone evoke the glamour of cinema-going: the Amethyst, the Olympic, the Phoenix, the Regal, the Vogue, the Majestic being amongst some of the most evocative. An exploration of the 1940 Kinematograph Yearbook reveals some remarkable figures from this period. For example, The Picture House in Dungiven (with a population of 655) had a seating capacity of 300, whilst Whitehead Cinema (with a population of 1209) had a seating capacity of 500. These figures are testament to the popularity of cinema-going in the 1930s and 1940s, that such small population

centres could sustain – and indeed continually sell out – such venues.

However, changing cultural tastes and pursuits in the 1960s and ‘70s - including the rising popularity of licensed hotel lounges, discotheques and television - signalled a rapid decline of these interwar ‘palaces of pleasure’. And in Northern Ireland this decline was accelerated by the impact of ‘The Troubles’. The closure of many cinemas and dance halls predated the introduction of listing in Northern Ireland or came at a time when listing was in its infancy. Subsequently, the latter years of the twentieth century witnessed the demolition – or transformation beyond recognition - of many of these formerly revered ‘palaces of pleasure’.

Today, numbers have dwindled to such an extent that the Strand Cinema in east Belfast, designed by esteemed local cinema architect John McBride Neill, is the only operational interwar picture house in Northern Ireland. Remarkably, it is not listed, but its survival seems to have been hinged on the support of the local community and specific champions, along with its adaptation over time, becoming in turns a variety theatre, multiplex and arts centre incorporating a cinema. This evolution of the building resulted in noticeable changes to its original interior configuration and external appearance, meaning that, upon survey, it did not meet the criteria to be listed. However, I argue that enough of its historic fabric and features remain that it deserves to be cherished and protected. Indeed, still evident are the building’s distinctive allusions to maritime architecture – including ‘porthole’ windows and lighting sources, and repeated use of curves and banding. The reading of the building as a ship is appropriate for a venue which transported audiences to ‘another world’ of glamour and luxury through architectural effect and the power of film.

Significantly, the building is soon to undergo a further evolution, ensuring its future sustainability, whilst also respecting and promoting its social and

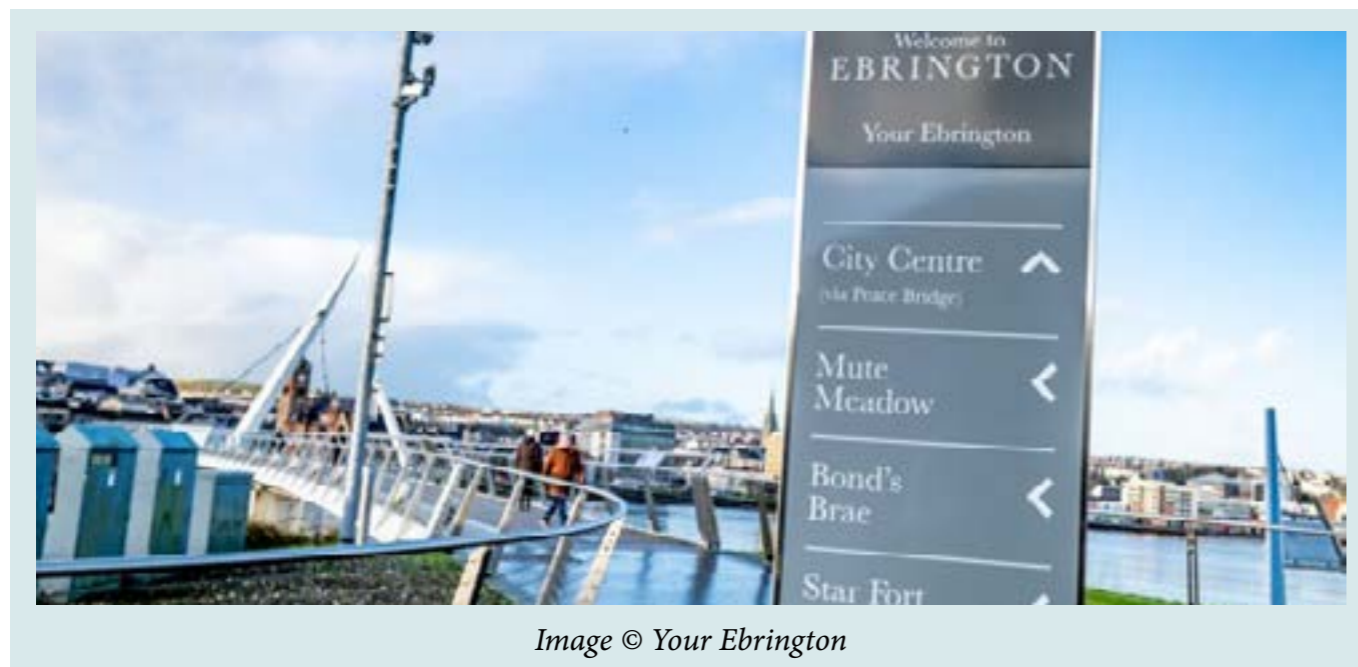
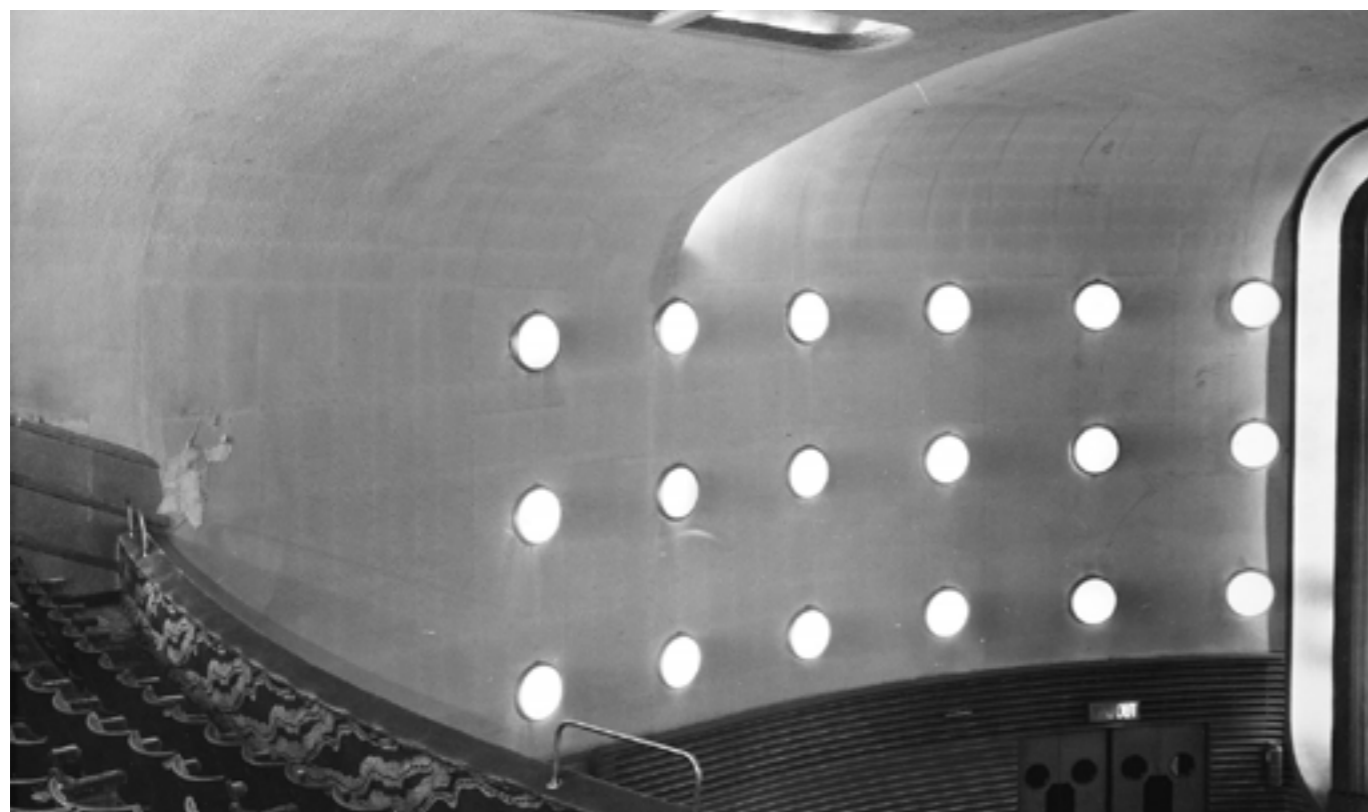


Image © Your Ebrington



Strand Cinema, c. 1935. Courtesy Strand Arts Centre

architectural significance. This upcoming redevelopment - supported by UK 'Levelling Up' Fund, alongside Belfast City Council and The National Lottery Heritage Fund - will help preserve this important building for new generations.

Unfortunately, the Tonic Cinema, Bangor, is a more typical example of an interwar cinema's ultimate fate in Northern Ireland. The Tonic, opened in 1936, was also designed by architect John McBride Neill. At the time of opening, it was the largest cinema in Ireland, with 2250 seats, and it was described as the architect's 'pièce de résistance'. Testament to its social and architectural significance, the Tonic was listed in 1982, prior to its closure as a cinema in 1983. But in 1992, after years of sitting empty, an application was submitted to de-list the building. Before a decision could be made, it was severely damaged by fire in June 1992, demolished soon after and subsequently delisted in 1993.



Strand Arts Centre, 2021. Courtesy Images NI.



Tonic Cinema following major fire damage, 1992. Courtesy Gary Cosby

Perhaps the best known of Northern Ireland's interwar dance halls is the Floral Hall, 1935-36, located in Bellevue Gardens, north Belfast. Although located in 'pleasure gardens' outside the city centre, the venue was on a tram line and thus accessible to members of the community who did not have access to motor car transport. In fact, the public dance halls of the 1920s and '30s were significant egalitarian spaces, symbolic of the democratisation of pleasure (Nott, 2018). The Floral Hall, designed by David W. Boyd, was purpose-built as a dance and concert hall for Belfast Corporation (now known as Belfast City Council).

Externally, the Floral Hall was 'modernist' in style, finished in white painted render, and featuring a semi-circular entrance portico and characteristic Art Deco stepped parapet. Internally, it boasted a ground floor café, large ballroom capable of seating 1,000, with spacious stage and small balcony. A striking colour scheme included tangerine in the

'crush hall', with gold and pale blue in the dome. (Northern Whig and Post, 1936; DFC, 2002). Overall, the venue would have been legible as an 'other world' of luxury, exoticism and escape, aligning it with the city's burgeoning 'picture palaces' (interestingly, the Floral Hall also contained a projection room for cinema or special lighting apparatus.) The reading of the Floral Hall as a place of escape continued during WW2 and the post-war years of austerity, throughout which time the venue was in regular use. In later years, the Floral Hall adapted to changing cultural tastes, hosting showbands – and even roller-skating – in the 1960s, alongside international acts including Pink Floyd (1967) and Roy Orbison (1969). However, it closed in the early 1970s and has remained vacant ever since.

The architectural and social significance of the Floral Hall is well established. It was B1 listed in 1994, with its evaluation stating: "The building was a well-known venue and is the only example of this type of

building in the Art Deco style in the province and one of a very few remaining Art Deco structures of any type” (DFC, 2002). Furthermore, it is valued at both a local and national level, being recently ranked in the top ten of “The UK’s Most Celebrated Music Venues”(Belfast Live, 2023). However, its listed status has not brought it the protection it deserves. Rather, it has been left in a state of decay for over 50 years. Although several regeneration plans have been mooted over the years, none have been brought to fruition, and today the building is in a worrying state of dereliction.

The Orpheus Building, an Art Deco building in the heart of Belfast, was also famed for its ‘Ballroom of Romance’. Designed by John Hamilton Stevenson, it was built in 1932. Significantly, although it changed in function over the years, a lot of the original Art Deco interior did survive into the twenty-first century, including wooden panelling, staircases, stained glass windows and the ballroom



Floral Hall, 2004. Courtesy Ulster Architectural Heritage

on the top floor, complete with stunning plaster moulding and barrel-vaulted ceiling. However, despite the rarity of its interior, it was unlisted. Furthermore, it was not located within either Belfast City Centre or Cathedral Quarter Conservation Areas. Despite a concerted public campaign for its retention - testament to a high level of public affection for the building - and repeated calls from Ulster Architectural Heritage Society for it to be listed, demolition commenced in December 2015.

This case shows the vulnerability of seemingly abiding, ‘landmark’ buildings when they are neither listed nor in a conservation area.

In conclusion, cinemas and dance halls constructed in the 1920s and 30s could be regarded as ‘palaces’ for the people; they were places of escapism and luxury, accessible to all, symbolic of an important period of social and cultural change. However, they were ultimately victim to these same forces of change in the latter part of the twentieth century. Today, regardless of their physical survival, what remains is a powerful emotional attachment to Northern Ireland’s ‘palaces of pleasure’. They are evidently a significant part of our communal social and cultural heritage, and also very much intertwined with people’s personal histories, for example, as a site where their parents first met or ‘courted’.

Although the typical trajectory for these ‘palaces of pleasure’ was a dramatic decline from the late 1960s, followed by dereliction and demolition, the Floral Hall and Strand Cinema are two rare survivors. Happily, the Strand continues to be used and enjoyed today in its current use as an arts centre. And a sympathetic redevelopment is due to commence in Summer 2024 which will secure the future of the building. In contrast, despite its listed status, the Floral Hall continues to sit in vacancy and decay. This essay underlines the need for the Floral Hall to be appreciated and protected, not just as a rare Art Deco building in existence in Northern Ireland, but as a rare survivor of the age of dance halls, a crucial reminder of an important piece of our social history. There is an opportunity for the owners of the building – Belfast City Council – to preserve a building of tremendous social and architectural value for the city; a symbolic ‘palace for the people’. In grasping this opportunity, the council would signal a commitment to the protection of our historic environment, set an important precedent for other owners of listed properties and mark an invaluable endorsement of the HED’s listing process.



Demolition of Orpheus Building, 2016. © Albert Bridge (cc-by-sa/2.0)

The relatively recent loss of the Orpheus Building surely only adds to the preciousness and significance of Northern Ireland’s rapidly disappearing dance halls. The plight of the Orpheus highlights that listing is crucial to avoid inappropriate alteration and the threat of the demolition ball. However, as evidenced by both the Tonic Cinema and the Floral Hall - the latter of which has been listed for almost 30 years - listing is not a ‘silver bullet’. It needs to be accompanied by investment, occupancy and long-term vision.

Dr Rosaleen Hickey

- Dr Rosaleen Hickey is Heritage Officer at Strand Arts Centre, Belfast. Her interests lie in the relationship between the social and architectural, and the intersection of memory, place and identity.

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The importance of (temporary) use in historic buildings - Sabine Kalke

Introduction

Belfast has a wide range of historic buildings from different eras with high heritage value. That's what makes the city so interesting. The architecture of Belfast comprises different styles ranging from Georgian, Victorian and Edwardian buildings through to modernist buildings such as the Waterfront Hall, Ulster Museum, Lyric Theatre and the MAC.

A few examples of Georgian style can still be found most notable in Clifton House and the Assembly Rooms. Victorian landmarks include the Lanyon Building at Queens University, the Palm House in Botanic Gardens and the Ulster Hall among others. The Edwardian era is represented by the City Hall and Belfast has also several Art Deco buildings from the 1930's period.

However, there is a lack of preserving these beautiful and diverse buildings that give evidence of different periods in its history especially when they are not used any longer.

We lost quite a few important buildings to demolition or fire. There was an outcry about buildings that burst into fire – over the last years we saw the listed Bank Building and the Old Cathedral Building going up in flames. It is important that these cases are in the eyes of the public as this can put pressure on public authorities or building owners to protect and restore the heritage asset.

But we also should not forget those buildings that are slowly rotting away because there is no use for them, and they are derelict.

The example of the Bank Building has shown what can be done if there is a will and everybody is pulling together. The Bank Buildings is a Grade B1-listed five-storey building located in the city centre of

Belfast at the intersection of Castle Street and Royal Avenue. It was designed and built between 1899 and 1900 by W. H. Lynn as a department store and warehouse. Since 1979, it has been owned by the Dublin-based company Primark. In August 2018, during a £30 million renovation, the building was gutted by fire, severely damaging most of the internal structure. Primark opted to restore the building to its 1900 appearance and the store reopened in November 2022.



Bank Building on fire (source unknown)

There is obviously also the advantage when you have a commercial owner who can see the benefits of the restoration of an historic building as opposed to demolition and new built.

Other buildings such as the North Street Arcade have not been so lucky. The 1930s Art Deco shopping arcade in the Cathedral Quarter was the only



North Street Arcade

example of a shopping arcade from this decade in Northern Ireland. Since a fire in 2004 it has been left derelict.

And then there is the White Elephant in the Zoo – Floral Hall.



Front entrance of the Floral Hall



Floral Hall signage

Built in the 1930s the art deco ballroom is located in the grounds of the zoo. It was designed by David W. Boyd, built 1934 and is Grade B2 listed. The Listed Buildings Database describes it as: 'a circular shallow domed hall with several angular blocks to north and south and a semicircular portico'.

It was a popular entertainment venue in the area from its opening in the 1930s up to the 1960s, host-

ing dances and concerts from a range of artists including Jimi Hendrix, Pink Floyd and the Small Faces. It later became a roller-disco venue before closing its doors to the public in 1972.

Floral Hall is a Grade B2 listed building and is seen by many as an iconic attraction that holds lots of memories. Over the years there have been many plans such as to restore the building as a wedding venue and restaurant. In March 2018, Liverpool based developer Signature Living submitted a £5 million proposal to revive the hall for use as a "leading entertainment, conference and wedding venue" but nothing was realised, and no new use has been found.

A conditions survey undertaken in 2013 by Belfast City Council's Property & Maintenance Unit, has shown that the building is in very poor condition, both internally and externally. Much of the interior finishes and timber fixtures and fittings have deteriorated very badly. The main concern is in respect of the roof structures and coverings, especially the main domed roof. Damage to this element is the most likely cause of deterioration internally. Due to the sheer size and age of this element, costs for the repair and/or reconstruction of this could be a prohibitive factor for the local authority.



Since then, the building has further deteriorated, and it is unclear which parts of the building can be saved or are beyond saving. What could have been done differently? If even a temporary use would have been found for the building in earlier stages, would it look different now? I wanted to explore how other cities /countries are dealing with their heritage and what the success factors are.

Examples from others

Between 2003 and 2012 I was the project manager of different European Networks with a number of cities such as Stockholm, Dresden, Tallin, Vilnius, Lyon, Dublin, Bristol and Sevilla. Belfast City Council was the Lead Partner and the networks have been established to share experience and collaborate on Brownfield development in Europe. The overall aim was to identify how Brownfield redevelopment can positively impact on urban regeneration in the context of public sector regeneration.

The incorporation of cultural heritage into revitalisation often provides an excellent opportunity to formulate or present a new vision for a site. Refurbishing historic buildings and areas not only offer potential economic benefits but can also increase community ownership as they celebrate the unique culture of the place and a degree of continuity.

Preservation of old (industrial) buildings has a strong social dimension – peoples’ memories and sense of identity. Valuable historic buildings need to be retained/restored and be brought back into productive use.

Belfast hosted a workshop in 2012 with European partners including Vilnius/Lithuania, Dresden/Germany, Oulu/Finland, Sevilla/Spain, Dublin/Ireland and Debrecen/Hungary. The participants were asked to explore:

- How to bring back life in vacant city centre spaces?
- Can temporary uses in vacant places and derelict buildings be part of the solution and become permanent?

Taxation was a topic that was discussed (and used) by several cities and not only as a penalty such as a dereliction tax but also as support tool.

The partners agreed that it is crucial to be creative and flexible in finding new uses, and possibly accept the need to subsidise the redevelopment of historic buildings. The reuse of historical buildings supports the identity of the place within the city and community.

Vilnius, Lithuania

Vilnius uses tax incentives to tackle city centre vacancies. Property tax is reduced by 50% for operators tied to a particular user. This should benefit small producers and is only available for certain sectors. One example for this is Užupis, a part of the city with eclectic juxtaposition of Soviet Bloc architecture and artistic flair. Until Lithuania’s declaration of independence in 1990, it was one of the most neglected areas in the city, containing many run-down houses. The district has been the home of artists and bohemians since Soviet times.

In 1995, a group of local artists erected a statue of US rock icon Frank Zappa as a symbol of freedom and a call to democracy. Two years later, on 1 April 1997, they went a step further, declaring their neighbourhood of Užupis independent from the rest of Lithuania. A lot of well-known people from Vilnius (artists and even a former mayor) moved into the area and restored the historic buildings in the area. Užupis is now well preserved and a tourist attraction in Vilnius.



A sign in front bridge in Vilnius, Lithuania

HafenCity Hamburg

The case study from the German sea port city of Hamburg was the restructuring of derelict docks and waterfront in the inner city. The cycle of dilapidation, blight, neglect, planning, implementation and revitalisation, is part of a complex network involving a lot of protagonists and interests. The masterplan for the area saw important historic buildings as flagship buildings and landmarks that were to be included in the overall development plan. The historic Kaispeicher A (warehouse A) became

Hamburg’s new cultural landmark. Originally designed by Werner Kallmorgen, it was redeveloped by Swiss architects Herzog & de Meuron into the Elbe Philharmonic Concert Hall.

Kaispeicher B (warehouse B) dates back to 1879 and is one of the oldest warehouses in the area. The listed building has been converted to an International Maritime Museum.

Lessons Learned

All these examples show that encouraging temporary uses on derelict sites and buildings can help identifying suitable potential uses while generating financial input and simultaneously raising the profile and public perception of the building. It is also imperative to develop a strong vision for the site from the start with the focus on a limited number of elements - too many elements can dilute and weaken any vision.

Transferable recommendations can be summarised as follows:

- Heritage as an opportunity rather than obstacle/constraint

- Advanced, holistic understanding and assessment of heritage
- An integrated, collaborative approach with well-informed leadership
- The quality of the overall/ultimate design proposals
- Use – identify appropriate uses and opportunities for early temporary uses, economic advantages of retaining existing buildings with minimum intervention.
- Redevelopment of heritage sites as a continuum – an accumulation of histories. This allows for the contemporary layer, which itself will become an historic layer over time.



Vilnius, Lithuania



Sevilla, Spain



Torino, Italy



Dresden, Germany

Example from Belfast -

St Joseph’s Church, Sailortown, Belfast

I wanted to explore another example from Belfast that shows what is possible when a community is taking the lead to bring a historic building back into use – the example of St. Joseph’s Church in Sailortown.



Interior 2024



Interior 2013

The B+ listed building is located in Sailortown in the historic Belfast docks. An area which has been severely neglected for over 50 years. The surrounding areas are undergoing rapid development with new office blocks, hotels, university campus and pending new road infrastructure. Across the river is the Titanic Quarter. The Waterfront is beginning a regeneration process led by the Harbour and the Maritime Trust. Sailortown is one of the oldest communities in Belfast and St Joseph's church, one of the oldest buildings in it. The Chapel on the Quays as it was also known was designed by architect T Hevey and built using relatively soft sandstone from Dungannon and Dundonald, which means the Romanesque-style façade of the building has had to be replaced several times over the years. The church opened in 1880. Sailortown itself came into being in the mid-19th Century and was home to a mix of Protestants and Catholics. Driven by Belfast’s flourishing shipbuilding, engineering and linen manufacturing industries, it became a working-class stronghold and the city’s first waterfront village.

The Sailortown area of Belfast is located on the north bank of the river Lagan adjacent to the Port of Belfast and is roughly bordered by Henry Street, York Street and the dock gate at Whitla Street. Garmoyle Street leading on to Corporation Street serves as the main arterial route through Sailortown.

It is an area and community that has been adversely affected by substantial changes to the urban environment, notably by the construction of major transport infrastructure designed to improve connectivity across Belfast over the past 50 years. In direct contrast to the regeneration of the Titanic Quarter located on the opposite bank of the river Lagan, much of Sailortown has suffered considerable neglect over recent decades.

The residential hinterland around the docks which once served the transient population of merchant seamen has all but disappeared. There is barely any evidence left of a network of small streets featuring rows of vernacular red-brick terraced public housing. The original Sailortown has been lost. Today, just four houses on Garmoyle Street, some buildings repurposed as public houses and St. Joseph's Church remain. The once bustling community of some 5000 inhabitants that lived in the area has been dispersed far and wide.



Aerial photo of St Joseph's Church, Sailortown

The Church and adjoining Parochial House are some of the last historic buildings in the old Sailortown area and are an ideal opportunity to act as an anchor for community led regeneration.

St Joseph's church was closed and deconsecrated in 2001 after the Catholic Church decided there was no longer a sustainable local population in the Docks area of North Belfast, despite a parishioners' campaign to keep it open.

The Sailortown Regeneration Group was formed following the closure and owns the building on a 150-year lease since 2008, after what it described as "a sustained battle" with the Catholic Diocese of Down and Connor. The de-consecration of the church was the catalyst for a high-profile campaign highlighting the plight of the Sailortown community and their opposition to the closure.

In 2017 a column fell from the spire and Belfast City council officials served it with a "dangerous building" notice. Sailortown Regeneration Group started a campaign and managed to secure funding for essential safety work such as fixing the roof.

Much of the nearby land has already been redeveloped, and the late 19th Century church is now surrounded by modern apartment blocks. Its owners aim to redevelop the church as a community venue, which showcases Sailortown's maritime and industrial heritage. The dockland area was once home to hundreds of families, but in the 1970s the area drastically changed with the construction of the Westlink. Many homes were demolished under the Belfast Urban Project initiative, resulting in local families moving away.

Sailortown Regeneration Group reopened St Joseph's church for community use and rescued the church from near dereliction.

Temporary use is secured and essential building work has been carried out. Heating and (temporary) toilets have been installed to ensure the building can be used for community work, classes and events.

Terry McKeown from Sailortown Regeneration Group said it was important to ensure Sailortown is not left behind when it comes to redevelopment work in the wider area.

"There is a large amount of development being carried out in the vicinity of the church such as the UU Campus, the motorway/Westlink under-passes and Harbour City Quays 2.

We must ensure the heritage of the area is included and a historic building is retained for community use in an area with one of the highest levels of multiple deprivation. Businesses and communities in the area have given their

full support to the project as they would like to see the area revitalised by and for the community. The proposed development of the church and parochial house seeks to retain as much of the historic structures as possible but recognises the need to create viable spaces for community activities and organisations.

A restored St Joseph's will greatly benefit the local community by preserving the last historic building in Sailortown and the wider population of Belfast."

The group has managed to bring back life into a derelict building that was in danger to be demolished. Events taking place in the church include: the Maritime Festival, Cathedral Quarter Arts Festival and Sailortown Festival.

Going forward, the restoration and reuse of St Joseph's Church as a community hub is at the heart of Sailortown Regeneration Group's plans and is symbolic of the perseverance and resolve of the local community.

The group is committed to reversing the decline of Sailortown by harnessing the future potential of the church and through activities that will engage the local community and visitors with the complicated layers of history, including:

- The origins of a community and industrial hinterland that supported the operation of the historic Port of Belfast.
- The evolution of the social fabric characterised by families that supported a transient population of merchant seamen & women and dock workers engaged in maritime activities.
- Associations of maritime heritage with local and global affairs, from the slave trade to civil unrest to world wars.

- The impact of the construction of transport infrastructure including the York Street Interchange resulting in the destruction of vernacular urban streetscapes and local population displacement.
- The plight of St Joseph's Church and how it became the catalyst for a high-profile campaign opposing its closure and as a stimulus for debate and discourse over the future of Sailortown and attempts to re-establish a cohesive community.

Examples like this show that it is possible to save our heritage in providing an alternative use. When community groups are getting active and take it in their own hands to give an old derelict building a new lease of life. It gives hope and could act as a catalyst for other derelict, unloved buildings.

Sabine Kalke

- Sabine brings a wealth of knowledge to her role in the HBC from the 10 years she has been Client Manager in Belfast City Council, and her eight years prior to that in the Council where she was project manager for several major EU-funded regeneration projects and networks.

She is particularly interested in industrial heritage; especially coming from previous work in the European networks where she looked specifically at the redevelopment and reuse of former industrial sites.

Heritage at Risk Northern Ireland – Sebastian Graham



Photos of the interior of St. Joseph's Church in early 2024

Since joining Historic Building Council (HBC) in 2020, I have thoroughly enjoyed the debate and discussion amongst architects, historians, engineers and government officials. Heritage has always been a passion of mine and in September 2021 I joined Ulster Architectural Heritage to work on the Heritage at Risk project in partnership with the Historic Environment Division. I was aware of the challenges that faced the sector, but these have somewhat been exacerbated by world and local events, leading to a large increase in additions to the register over the years. Reading through past HBC reports highlights some ever-present topics, including the future of thatched cottages, traditional skills and local policy. Alongside many of these issues the Heritage at Risk project which turned 30 in 2023, has been operating. This is a notable achievement in partnership working and the project aims to quantify the scale of the problem as well as encourage and engage with owners right across the country.

The register currently contains 1098 structures deemed at-risk; the vast majority are listed. The concern is that the trend has shown a marked increase since 2019 onwards, with 9% of listed buildings being at risk now a reality. Of course, it is worth reiterating that 91% of listed buildings are in good repair and credit is due to all the owners for keeping such places in order and contributing to our important streetscapes and rural landscapes. Sitting on the HBC has proved useful to get newly listed buildings, which qualify, added to the register as soon as possible. This ensures that owners can get help and advice they need sooner rather than later.

There have been some rather depressing developments over this first term, notably the demolition of listed buildings in an Area of Townscape Character (ATC) in Court Street Newtownards (at risk since 2003). This terrace was built in the 1840's and each building was equipped with "Ards Doorcases" and fanlights. Hearth Historic Building Trust saw the potential of 37-39 Court Street and restored them in the 1980s showing what could be achieved.

The demolished buildings could have had a similar future, given the chance. This blatant disregard for heritage must be followed by action otherwise we risk future loss of recoverable buildings. Additionally, the Church of the Sacred Heart near Toome, another long-term heritage at risk building, had its slated roof removed without any listed building consent and now lies completely open to the elements. A retrospective planning application was rejected by the Council and while there are discussions ongoing, the building now faces an even more uncertain future. Arson severely damaged the Cathedral Buildings in Donegall Street while a fire nearby in the "Merchants Building" on North Street required a significant proportion of the rear to be demolished.



47-55 and 63-65 Court Street demolished, an unpleasant sight



Church of the Sacred Heart, Staffordstown

In addition to these examples, grants and funding to private owners continue to be at rock bottom. The most a successful applicant can receive is £6,000 or £12,000 for those with a thatched roof. In 2014-2015 the listed building grant aid budget was £4.6 million, whereas in 2021-2022 it was £200,000!^[1] That financial year also saw over 130 buildings added to the heritage at risk register. In fact, since 2019 there have been over 500 additions to the register. The register has therefore doubled in size in four years! Funding and grants do go some way to address the issue, but more than that, it provides some confidence to listed building owners. The current situation means we cannot tackle the issue effectively, but it is better than nothing and there needs to be a significant change in approach to achieve even some modest progress. HED are in an unenviable position here and hampered by the annual cycle of yearly budgets. We cannot tackle the intrinsic difficulties in the sector without a functioning and stable Stormont.

On the subject of funding Councils are in a similar position to central government. They face major financial challenges and protection of the built heritage may not be a top priority in this environment. It is critical that, in the current climate, all parties with statutory responsibility and those with an interest in preserving the built heritage work collaboratively to ensure that restricted funds are used to achieve the best outcomes. Those outcomes may include the funding of apprenticeships in, for example, historic masonry and woodwork and other skills that may have to be imported and the creation of Council-specific heritage funds which could be used to focus on at-risk buildings. Alongside this, Councils must also be more active to use the necessary powers available to ensure that historic buildings are not left for decades without care or attention. Urgent Works Notices (UWN) should be considered by Councils to show that they are serious about the preservation of our built heritage and Conservation Areas.

On a more positive note, the Village Catalyst

scheme is yielding great results in such places as Caledon, Rathfriland, Ederney and Gracehill. The Village Catalyst grant scheme is a partnership initiative between the Department for Communities (DfC), the Department for Agriculture Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) the Architectural Heritage Fund (AHF), and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE). Further projects are in the pipeline, and it is great to see communities find alternative uses and local solutions for their built heritage. Partnerships and collaboration between various partners and departments yield results. Residents in Armagh and Lurgan are witnessing the transformation of vacant and underused buildings as part of the National Lottery Heritage Fund's Townscape Heritage Scheme in partnership with Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon Council.

There is hope! Buildings are still being removed from the register. Since the register started over 300 buildings have been removed from the list, by being saved by their owners. This gives a much-needed boost to the built heritage sector and provides plenty of examples to show that these buildings make material contribution to our streetscapes and rural areas and are worth fighting for and restoring. It hasn't been easy though recently with Covid, the subsequent price rises and material shortages, but it says much about the resilience and tenacity of owners and investors in these buildings.

To effectively tackle heritage at risk there needs to be a wholesale change in our approach to the issue. Councils and government departments must deal with their own built heritage stock to show leadership which can then filter down to society. We can't let such fine buildings such as Loughgall Manor, Wilmont House or the Floral Hall lie vacant and decay any further. Councils and government need to find novel solutions for their at-risk built heritage stock and not hope the problem will go away.

There is also a wider discussion needed on VAT which puts a punishing 20% rate on repairs and works to a building, whereas new buildings are rat-



Wilmont House in the grounds of Sir Thomas and Lady Dixon Park

ed at 0%. To take climate change seriously we need to reuse what is already built first. This in turn can help tackle vacancy on the high street where so many historic buildings lie empty or in partial use. Sadly, the carbon argument and reusing what we have seems to still be in its infancy despite the logic of the argument.

The restoration and reopening of the Bank Buildings has also given some hope to the sector. I am always struck at how private owners simply get on with their restoration projects and make little fuss. When I went to school from Cookstown to Magherafelt our bus stopped off in Moneymore, opposite a boarded up old post office. It would be plastered with neon posters with the latest DJ playing at the Elk or telling us when Duffy's Circus was next in town. The building always looked like a lost cause. Then just before Covid, a new owner began work to change the fate of this humble building. It dates to 1906 and provided the village with electricity in 1927. Its service as a Post Office came to an end in 2005 and it lay derelict until 2019. The owners saw the potential of the building and brought it

back into use as offices, keeping employment in the village and offering future opportunities for local people. Importantly it no longer blights my travels through Moneymore.



Moneymore Post Office, positive development in this Conservation Area

A rather eye-opening moment for me during this term occurred during a trip to Bishops court to see the various Defence Heritage sites still intact there. Dr Jim O'Neill enlightened our knowledge of the wide array of buildings on the site including run-

ways, radar buildings and control towers. This impressive collection can be viewed on the Historic Environment Map Viewer, and it is awe-inspiring to see the different structures that we still have around the country. There are relatively few structures of defence heritage ilk on the at-risk-register, but as we begin to appreciate and recognize their importance and uniqueness, we should expect to see a growing number become listed or scheduled monuments.

When I meet owners, I always highlight that the at-risk register is not a shameful thing to be on. It is one of the best indicators of the health of Northern Ireland's listed building stock. It signposts owners to funding sources, tradespeople and available guidance and support. Each case is somewhat different requiring individual solutions to tackle issues. For private owners who make up 54% of ownership of listed buildings at risk they understand the nature of the building but often do not have the financial means or time to mend guttering or fix windows to keep the elements out. The incentive in the form of grants must be greater, streamlined and flexible. We must win over owners of longstanding buildings at risk to show that their old vernacular cottage can be brought back to life and cherished again.

This must mean however that decision makers must be supportive but also ready to intervene and use their existing powers when engagement is not making progress. Communities also need to take greater ownership of their buildings and heritage to find new sustainable uses, like the Wool Store in Caledon. NGOs within the sector should also dedicate more time and resources to finding out what communities require and encouraging them to be part of the built heritage sector. There needs to be a re-think as to how thatched buildings can be preserved. The conundrum here is that they are the most sustainable building stock we currently have, but we are failing them despite their green credentials. There should be greater incentives for such owners such as a "carbon payment". As for buildings at risk, we cannot simply leave 1098 structures

for future generations to sort out. The climate crisis poses the greatest future risk to built heritage, but vacancy, our inability to maintain buildings and lack of available funding are the current threat that needs to be addressed. We can all do so much better.

Peter Campbell writing in the Twelfth Report for the Historic Building Council 1991-1994[2] likened our built heritage to an endangered species. I concur with this statement, although the tone is now different to that of 1994, where there was a sense of desperation about the number of historic buildings being lost. Heritage at Risk has noted the removal of over 300 buildings from the register, a good indicator that there is progress in the sector. Despite rising additions and the challenges outlined above these finite endangered buildings of potential have a role to play in our efforts to tackle climate change, offer solutions to societal problems and inspire the next generation to cherish what we have.

Sebastian Graham

- Mr Graham is Heritage at Risk Officer for Ulster Architectural Heritage (UAH). He has a keen interest in and knowledge of industrial heritage, particularly mills, across Northern Ireland.



Time to Wake Up - Queen Street Belfast, former children's hospital, later police barracks, deserves so much better!

“FIRE FIRE, FIRE FIRE, POUR ON WATER, POUR ON WATER” - Siobhan Brown



Fined £80K for Health & Safety Breach over Belfast Primark Fire

I'm a singer as well as a Conservation Architect so I thought it apt to start with a rhyme & a fine to catch your attention!

You see I'm now in the business of passive fire protection, specializing in historic buildings and supplying and installing intumescent materials to reduce the spread of fire and prevent loss of lives and loss of historic fabric, so I now see things very differently. Fires affect any building of course but naturally with my HBC hat on my focus is on heritage buildings.

Every time I see tragic news of a fire and see how much loss of historic fabric there has been through a fire, it pains me, and I wonder how much the building owner really invested in making sure the risk of loss was significantly reduced. We've all seen what happened at Notre Dame in Paris and the emotion it has generated, not just in France but around the world. People felt the same about the, not one but two devastating fires within 4 years of each other in the Charles Rennie Mackintosh building in Glasgow and there are many other examples up and down the land when historic properties are burned. These are more than just buildings; they are a

tangible connection to our past and those who have gone before us.

We need to do more to take care of our heritage and to change the way we think about fire risk in old buildings.

There's been too many fires in NI recently (in 2019/2020 there were 782 accidental dwelling fires, (that's two a day) which caused 3 fatalities and so many involving historic buildings. Recent statistics from the NI fire service indicates that 95% of all derelict building fires since 2014 were started deliberately. Why is the loss so great? Why is more not being done to reduce the risk of the spread of fire? Who's responsible?

Who is responsible?

In the case of the Primark Building - two companies were fined £80K each for health and safety failures over the fire and a third company was cautioned. Following the ruling the HSENI team said, "all employers including subcontractors have a legal responsibility ..." and the Public Prosecution Service concluded that, "employees and non-employees were exposed to risks to the health or safety as a result of failings uncovered in the investigation".

In the landmark case of Grenfell, although not a historic building - recent news remarked Michael Gove, Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities said that the government was to blame for the tragic fire that killed 72 people as building regulations were deficient and failed to include the cladding materials as a component, which should have been subject to higher fire safety standards and so could be exploited by developers in a way that was unsafe.

Also in the case of Grenfell the high court judge found that the borough council that owned the

Grenfell tower is legally responsible for the deaths of 5 residents who died because they had failed to ensure the building's fire safety, as they oversaw and managed the refurbishment using a cladding material which enabled the fire to spread.

It's often believed by clients, design team and contractors that the liability in the event of disastrous fire always lies with someone else. However, Grenfell has clearly revealed that the liability lies with those who hold responsibilities and make decisions regarding fire risk and H&S. Under the CDM regulations if a client insists on a certain material specification or design feature then they become the "designer" under the legislation, with all the attached legal obligations and liabilities that role entails. If value engineering exercise is undertaken and a cheaper material or installation process is used, then those responsible for that decision again carry the "designer" moniker under legislation. So, in the event of a fire that ends up in court, the judge will want to know not just who carried out the work, their competencies and insurances, but also who was it that appointed them and how did they ensure they were competent. As we have seen in these two recent examples that building owners, governments, contractors, and sub-contractors all hold legal responsibilities and liabilities when it comes to fire.

Mackintosh building was so badly damaged by 2018 blaze that the cause remains 'undetermined', according to long-awaited report



The 2018 fire at the Glasgow School of Art's Mackintosh building. Photograph: Scottish Fire and Rescue Service/PA

Key areas of failure in historic buildings

This can be summarized into 4 main areas.

1. Economic
2. Testing
3. Installation Failure
4. Design implementation failure

Economic factors

So many larger fire stopping jobs are under priced by a factor of 50 – 100%. For historic buildings this means there is a high risk of compromise to the safety of building users and a risk of increase in loss of historic fabric if there isn't enough money in a job to do it correctly. Increases in tender costs up to 300% are not uncommon and this often forces the contractor to cut costs which often affects the firestopping. Value engineering also often reduces the specification of fire protection products which in turn affects the overall performance that is required. In reducing cost and specification saving lives and reduce risk of loss of fabric is often forgotten about. It's all too late when someone has lost their life, or a historic fabric is forever lost because economic factors and its impact on the lives and the building were not appropriately considered. When it comes to passive fire protection it can't just be about the MONEY!!

Reducing the specialist firestopping by forcing it onto sub-contractors or individuals who are not specialist passive fire protection installers is also another means of reducing costs that has grave consequences to the safety of the building and its user in the event of a fire.

As a building owner it's time to understand the implications of instructing or encouraging such compromises.

Testing

There is often a lack of knowledge on the classification of products e.g a spread of flame classification applied to timber that actually requires 30- or 60-minute integrity and/or insulation rating. There is often a focus on testing of a single product to the detriment of the whole installation, as well as to the detriment of the installation, competence, and experience. Testing and the application of the products being used, needs to be fully understood by designers and installers to ensure the client is given a solution that suits the purpose and specific scenario. Often a test certificate is provided as part of a health and safety document that bears no resemblance to the on-site conditions and often means the building isn't adequately protected and the works are not installed to meet the required building regulations and British standards.



Plaster removed exposes a hole incorrectly firestopped, typically carried out by an inexperienced installer

Installation failure

Firestopping is a specialist job, and a suitably qualified and experienced installer is often not used but rather what is used is a general labourer or subcontractor who is not suitably qualified and does not hold the required insurances to do the specialist firestopping. The specialist should be able to provide you with the right information to ensure the passive protection meets the regulations and is installed properly. Often Intumescent coatings are

incorrectly applied or indeed standard paints used instead of intumescent paints. Inappropriate materials are often used, such as thermal boards, to fire stop gaps instead of correct Fireline boards suitable for the application. Often there is improper use of general intumescent materials and collar and wraps and patressing are not properly installed. Mixing different materials without any evidence that they meet requirements is also common place in passive fire installations. Designers/ project managers and building owners need to understand the extent that installation failure can occur and like CDM they have a duty to ensure the right person is being used to carry out firestopping which is a SPECIALIST JOB. No matter how simple it may look it's important to remember its specialist and Grenfell has made it clear that the installer or the person who appoints the installer become responsible in the event of failure. Remember one weak area in an installation is all a fire needs to spread. If an experienced and competent installer hasn't been used, then the risk of installation failure is significantly increased.

Design Implementation Issues

In my view, a specialist passive fire protection consultant should be part of the design team, appointed at the early stage to ensure passive design is addressed correctly from the start. We have active fire protection specialists designing smoke and Fire alarm systems, but what about the design of the passive fire protection system which is fundamental for all buildings? This is often not thought about at all or thought about in an insufficient way at the last juncture, leaving the building open to the increased risk of the spread of fire in a building, loss of lives and loss of historic fabric. Failure to adequately design the passive fire protection system, to consider integrity & insulation requirements in combination with the manufacture details and building regulations, is a frequent failure

in historic building projects. This failure results in the loss of historic features, such as walls, floors, decorative plaster and doors etc, all of which is preventable with the correct approach to passive fire protection design. There is also failure to design the programme of works to provide the optimal conditions for passive fire protection installations, such as applying intumescent coatings in winter.



Door with surrounding floorboards and plaster removed showing gaps in walls, floors and door frames that need passive fire protection design to adequately firestop them

The above is just a whistle stop tour of the 4 key areas of failure in historic buildings that historic building owners need to understand to prevent disasters such as the Primark buildings from occurring again. Clearly there is much for building owners, designers, building maintenance managers, contractors and our government departments to understand. It's all about both saving lives AND protecting our heritage and the reality is passive fire protection needs to be taken much more seriously than it currently is.

Protection measures and solutions

So, are there good protective measures and solutions out there for historic buildings? Of course there are!! In fact, it's the very reason why I have

moved from mainstream conservation architecture to specializing in fire protection for historic buildings.

Gone are the days of having to use crude solutions for historic buildings such as having to cover up historic features with unattractive modern boards to meet fire regulations. There are now a number of excellent solutions to upgrade various aspects of historic buildings, such as timber paneled doors, decorative lath and plaster walls or ceilings and floors, timber paneling, timber ceilings and walls and services etc. Here are just a few examples.

Doors

There are some excellent Intumescent cards and coatings available to upgrade historic doors, although it depends on the door size and thickness and thickness of the panels to ensure the required rating is achievable. The tests to support the upgrade of the doorset are vital and a specialist will be able to advise if the rating is achievable and advise whether they are able to certify the door. Designers and contractors need to remember that door frames are an integral part of the door and door kits to upgrade a door are often only for the door leaf. Therefore, an appropriate solution for the frames plus the ironmongery must also be considered and this too must be certified by the specialist installer.



Door upgrade at Methodist College, Belfast



Timber door showing intumescent card and coating upgrade in progress

Floor & Walls Solutions

If ceilings or walls are decorative or are delicate lath and plaster, or just too ornate to be disturbed, then there are solutions available.

Floors/ceilings can be upgraded from above using an underfloor barrier system, which prevents the decorative surfaces from being disturbed. Plain ceilings, lathe and plaster or plasterboard structures, can be upgraded using an intumescent coating system, but it's important with whatever solution used to understand first whether this is achievable to the required specification, given the specific make up and condition of the structure to be upgraded.



Cornice detail with intumescent coating applied



Floor rafters with insulation with intumescent coating barrier



Ceiling finish with intumescent coating applied

Services

Electrical faults are a huge concern in historic buildings and in fact were the cause of the fire in Stormont parliament buildings. Competent Passive fire protection specialists will make sure that penetrations through compartmentation walls are all properly fire protected, which will ensure that in the unfortunate event of a fire, rapid spread is significantly reduced and thus loss of lives and historic fabric.

There are numerous gaskets, wraps, collars and sealant solutions for services that must be correctly installed in compartment walls and floors, to effectively prevent the spread of fire. Passive fire protection, using collars and trunking etc need to be well designed in order to achieve industry standards

and the building regulations. Often these fittings are incorrectly fitted, so a specialist should be used who will properly record AND certify the installation, because once it's covered up you won't have a clue if it's been done right. Again, vital reason to ensure you are using the right specialist to do your passive installation.



Double plug socket with intumescent gasket installed



Services with intumescent collars installed at compartment wall

The horrific reality

Working in the passive fire protection business, despite these findings & seeing the devastating loss of lives and heritage, I am often horrified at the amount of building owners, designers engineers, contractors and local authorities who still don't take this subject seriously. The prevalent attitude is:

- “let's do the least necessary (meet the minimum requirements) and keep costs down, even if it means not doing it properly,
- ‘let's just make it look as if it is being done properly’ appearance is more important than substance.
- “We don't really care because we'll be dead and gone by the time anything happens”



Flames burn the roof of Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris on April 15, 2019

So, what do we do about this?

In the UK, the government has introduced new legislation on foot of the Grenfell disaster and investigation findings. The new Building Safety Act and Fire Safety Act introduces new duties for the management of fire and building safety in high-rise residential buildings. As of 1st October 2023,

the new regime of the Act came into law, including changes to the requirements for higher-risk buildings, increased responsibilities for building owners, and changes to the fire safety legislation.

It defines the management responsibilities and liabilities as well as the “golden thread” of information required for high-risk buildings. This is really important legislation as there has been a disconnect between client, design team and contractors/sub-contractors in this area. However, there is an argument that the changes do not go far enough, it's true that the legislation “plugs” some of the holes in communication/responsibility/liability within the team, but it doesn't legislate that only approved/insured/certified installers can carry out installations. We speculate that the reason for this is that the Building Regulations cover this in Technical Booklets B and E.

However, this is problematic not least because Part B - Materials and Workmanship is roundly ignored by everyone in the industry. In summary Part B states that materials must be fit for the purpose intended (independently tested to a standard highlighted in Part B) and whoever installs the materials must be competent and experienced to do so.

One often overlooked fact is that no matter how extensive the testing of a product is, its performance will be affected by several key factors:

- Correct specification and application/installation. For example, we often see coatings applied by brush/roller or spray without reference to a wet film thickness (WFT) gauge. If products are not applied to the stipulated WFT's or are watered down considerably then the correct Dry film thickness (DFT) will not be achieved, and the product, as a result, will not achieve the classification stipulated under the Building Regulations.

- Testing is an imperfect way of establishing performance parameters for a product because testing is carried out to a predefined heat curve in strictly managed laboratory conditions. Real fires do not confirm to those standards and can develop at a higher rate and with a higher heat release rate (HRR) depending on the available fuel.

Understanding that Fire Safety Engineering and product performance is not always an exact science, is important as compartmentation/Fire protection performance should be achieved through a more holistic approach encompassing the following 4 elements:

- Design: for life safety fire/smoke and structure
- Materials Specification: Part B compliant materials
- Installation: Application by certified/3rd party/insured specialists with demonstrable relevant training and experience.
- Inspection: Assessment by an independent competent and experienced Inspector with the relevant specialist insurances

No matter how well products are tested, if they are fitted incorrectly then they will fail in a fire. Installation is key and the recent tightening up on the legislation has totally missed that fact. We have engineers with Masters degrees and PhDs designing the fire safety of buildings for occupation and we have people with little or no qualifications, competence or experience installing life safety critical components and unfortunately, it is the installation and inspection element where a project is most likely to fail. We often see products incorrectly applied/installed and no independent inspection regime implemented. This is usually down to cost

and ultimately this is the next gap legislation will have to plug. We just hope that it doesn't take another Grenfell for this to happen.

If you are reading this and you never want to be the cause of, or to play a part in the tragic loss of lives or heritage, then hopefully my musings will be of interest and motivation to seek for more than just the bare minimum of compliance. There is a misunderstanding that pursuing excellence in this area will be costly, but that is not the case when compared to the loss of precious lives and the loss of historic fabric.

A few key things at the starting point are important:

- Building regulations & Legislation - what do the regs have to say?
- Understanding Passive fire protection - what is it and why is it important?

I mentioned the UK legislation recently introduced because of the investigation into Grenfell, there's no doubt that NI will soon be bringing its own version of these new laws into force in the near future. However, as I mentioned above whilst the new legislation plugs some leaks, the ship is still taking on water and sinking.

Building regulations - Part B Fitness of materials part 23

We mentioned above that whilst Part B tries to establish a framework for material suitability and competency for installation, it is roundly ignored in part or in full by the industry.

For example - we have been asked to supply products and provide testing confirming 120mins protection to pipe penetrations through a fire batt in a compartment wall, however the designer used a fire

batt configuration that could only provide a maximum of 60 minutes fire protection. On one hand the designer was looking for 120-minute test information for a pipe sealer and on the other they were oblivious to the fact their own firestopping batt design could not achieve the specified 120 minutes. In terms of workmanship - the installer must be competent to do the job. We've seen numerous occasions where a contractor uses general labour to install life safety critical products that they have no training experience or competencies in. Think about it; passive fire protection is life /safety critical work - would you use a veterinary surgeon to carry out open heart surgery? No! so why engage a general labourer to do safety critical work? Unfortunately, this happens all the time and unravels the highly skilled work carried by the design team and the clients. Remember fire passive protection is often hidden behind walls and ceilings & floors of a building. All of the work can't be overseen or inspected all of the time, so in reality you are reliant on the care, honesty and integrity of the installer to make sure it has been done correctly.

So, what needs to happen?

It is unlikely that any new legislation is going to close the competency skills gap at the coal face. Building contractors have demonstrated for years that they are slow to adapt and adopt better/safer practices that might influence the bottom line, unless these changes come with a big stick, like legislation, jail, fines etc. In the absence of the big stick, change must be driven top down, i.e. from the client down through the design team and on to site:

- change in mindset - ditching the minimal compliance mindset for a more comprehensive solution that takes into consideration both life safety and the features that make our heritage buildings unique.

- A competency-based framework for appointment of fire consultants and installers
- The use of approved or 3rd party accredited installers with the correct insurances for passive fire protection and design
- Independent inspection and oversight of compartmentation design. As this is often carried out by the contractor on site, they should have PI insurance and the competencies and skills to do this. Most don't and inspection/oversight is vital to ensure quality is maintained.
- Engage a Fire protection specialist QS for value engineering exercises to ensure savings don't compromise compliance/safety.
- Regular reviews and inspections of compartmentation, fire doors etc. in order to maintain protection.
- Regular reviews of fire strategy document
- Training for key staff in the use of reporting forms, evacuation and fire marshals
- Protection of the building when empty



Grenfell Tower on fire in 2017

Conclusion

“It’s all fun and games until someone loses an eye” is a phrase I often heard in my youth, and we could well say something similar for fires - “it’s all fun and games until someone suffers loss due to a fire”. We need to get much more serious and attentive to passive fire protection in historic buildings. We need to always remember the devastation of Grenfell, Primark, Notre Dame, the Mackintosh Building. Fires are devastating and we must learn from the past!! I’ll always remember the relief when a well designed and installed passive fire protection system in an apartment reported minimal damage and the fire was contained to the room where it began and there was no loss of life or historic fabric. When you do passive fire protection installations right, it does work. To know lives and the historic building were saved was worth the care and attention.

I hope this article encourages seeds of long overdue change in how fire protection of our historic buildings is viewed. Like active fire protection, passive fire protective is also a specialised subject that requires a specialist approach, and it needs to be part of the fundamental operational plan when it comes to the design or maintenance of historic buildings. There’s no way of reversing the damage once the fire starts to ravage a building so without a robust well-planned approach, the current statistics and devastation are not set to reduce anytime soon.

Decision makers, clients, building owners, designers, must drive the change in the industry not to permit unqualified, uninsured contractors to work on our buildings. This will ensure that competencies, training, experience & integrity in approved fire protection installation are pursued, as these are key to getting the work done properly and the ultimate protection of lives and the prevention of loss

of fabric through fires. If we put this action in place, we’ll be singing a new and more positive song and seeing more of our past & heritage protected for the future for sure!

Siobhan Brown

- Ms Brown is a registered chartered architect, with over 20 years’ experience working in architecture, specialising in the conservation of the built heritage as well as encouraging the promotion of historic buildings. She is currently the Director of Flamma Ltd and was formerly Assistant Director of Hearth Housing Association.

Pre-emptive demolitions - listing consultee or de facto decision-maker: do our councils have a veto on built heritage? - Conor Sandford

Setting fires in historic buildings to one side, perhaps the second most hotly debated issue which arose during this term of HBC was the pre-emptive demolition, at consultation stage, of at least 2/3 buildings being considered for protection. These known cases, whilst small in number, again raise this long-known issue and a number of related questions in respect of the current listing process. HBC believes there is a wider public interest in examining and learning from these cases and others, to better protect buildings of special interest in NI going forward, as well as the transparency, accountability and actual or perceived fairness of the listing process and to an extent planning process in NI.

The known buildings lost during this term at consultation stage include:

‘Darjeeling’, 120 Coa Road, was brought forward for listing by HED three times in 2011, 2012 and 2020, yet despite listing recommendations HBC understands that no clear account is available for why it was not listed on each of the first two attempts, who took those decisions and why. As such, it is unclear to HBC whether those decisions were based on relevant considerations (i.e. the statutory criteria for listing).

In 2020 HBC supported listing at Grade B+ however the building was demolished after onsite meetings between HED, councillors and the owner, despite the building clearly meeting the statutory criteria for listing. Before the long-proposed listing could take effect, the building was demolished, and planning permission granted for a replacement dwelling which was subsequently built (recent sales particulars indicate the asking price for the replacement dwelling was for offers over £330k).

This case raises concerns around the transparency of decision-making in respect of the 2011 decision not to progress the listing at that time and the rea-

sons for that decision, the further delay in 2012 and indeed failure to list the building on the third attempt in 2020 and before demolition. This also raises questions of fairness in the process given no onsite meetings appear to have been offered to other interested parties. However, that is not to suggest any actual wrongdoing, but this building was clearly listable and at a high grade. Why then was it not listed in 2011, 2012 or indeed 2020? What can we learn from this case to improve heritage protection going forward?



Darjeeling House, Enniskillen

‘Darjeeling’, 120 Coa Road, Enniskillen was a substantial, corrugated iron constructed, hipped roof bungalow with veranda front, built c.1925. It was a highly unusual structure for several reasons, including its rarity as an early 20th century wholly corrugated iron dwelling house, the largest of its kind on the island of Ireland, as well as being an early use of prefabricated ‘kit’ construction, a method that was basically unknown in the sphere of domestic buildings in NI at that time. Due to the use of this technique the dwelling had a formal appearance, distinguishing it from its corrugated contemporaries, whilst its decidedly ‘colonial’ look was also noteworthy. It was believed to have been manufactured as a residence for a British colonial administrator based in India.

41 Kilvergan Road, Aghacommon - this case concerned two attached buildings. The interiors of the larger house were however stripped of architectural features at the listing consultation stage. HED then deemed the buildings not to be listable as a result of the loss of historic fabric. Both buildings were listable prior to the stripping of architectural features at the consultation stage. Subsequently, a planning application was determined / permission given for demolition and a number of building sites. The regrettable reality is that even if the building were to have been listed (in this author's view) it need not have had any significant impact on the then proposed housing development of c. 50 houses in the fields behind / adjacent.

In this case, our planning and listing system has failed to protect a building of special interest and what's worse is that a building of significance could potentially have been secured as a result of more timely listing and indeed planning. This case also raises the question as to whether listing and planning are working in tandem in NI as they really ought to in order to achieve the best possible community outcomes (in heritage and planning terms).



41 Kilvergan Road, Aghacommon

41 Kilvergan Road, Aghacommon - two attached buildings comprising a pre-1830s (and likely 18th century) long, low, semi-formalised vernacular

two-storey farmhouse, with a later Italianate block of c.1880s attached at a right-angle to the western end. In themselves, both buildings are worthy of note in their own right, but forming as they do a highly individual palimpsest, the interest is all the greater, reflecting both changes in architectural styles as well as the growth in rural prosperity in the course of the 19th century. The property had witnessed some mid-20th century alterations, however, the essentials of its vernacular / late Victorian hybrid form remained largely intact and its valuable contribution on the local landscape largely undiminished.

How does demolition happen when listing is supposed to protect our heritage?

For those that don't know, the listing consultation stage follows what can be itself a lengthy process of systematic or ad hoc building surveys, research and ultimately the preparation of the case for listing by HED. When a building reaches HBC it will almost always come with a well-researched proposal to list, and normally the recommendation will be agreed by the members. At the same time HBC are consulted the recommendation also goes to the district council and owners, who may choose to object.

Unfortunately, although the listing procedure is largely confidential up to the point of consultation, once the item is in a council planning committee's agenda it is in the public arena. Indeed, planning committees (as well as HBC) only meet periodically. Regrettably, in a small number of cases this means that some owners choose to take pre-emptive action (such as complete demolition or removal of historic fabric), such that the building under listing assessment no longer meets the criteria for listing or is altogether bulldozed. Given most

buildings which reach this stage are usually listed and thus of "special interest", or at the least worthy of consideration at public expense, many might consider such pre-emptive action a form of cultural vandalism, the opportunity for which is regrettably afforded by the current process. Others might perhaps simply see pre-emptive demolition as the outwitting of the 'Man from the Ministry', the undermining of public value or simply an owner's right. Each perspective is of course valuable and perhaps tells us something about the context in which listing is seen by both communities and building owners here.

Add to this the fact that due to funding cuts for built heritage and resultant listing backlogs, some buildings are now taking nearly a decade from initial survey work (where owner engagement also usually takes place) to being protected by listing. As such, the opportunity for pre-emptive action in the intervening weeks or months or indeed years is clearly there. One might reasonably now ask if the process originally designed to protect the built heritage of NI is now resulting in its systematic destruction and indeed if that is something which elected representatives are happy to contend with or if the current approach is sustainable, fair to owners of buildings already listed, or indeed the communities in which these buildings stand.

This is not to suggest any irregularity in the listing consultation process applied in any case or any actual wrongdoing on behalf of owners, councillors, DfC/HED, HBC or others. Some owners may genuinely not be aware of a proposed listing and for those that are it is perfectly legal for an owner to demolish their private property before a statutory listing takes effect, unless subject to a Building Preservation Notice (BPN) (a form of temporary listing for 6 months and now apparently a sole matter for councils) or if the building stands within a Conservation Area where permission is also required.

DfC/HED apparently no longer has the BPN power (HBC has expressed our concern at this). As such, the only way HED can intervene to protect a building is by listing and even then, under the legislation, they are unable to do so without first consulting both councils and HBC. As such, with both BPNs and listing decisions relying on councils to act fast, this might reasonably lead to the question as to whether councils in NI now have a de facto veto on heritage protection. For example, councils could (in theory!) simply refuse to issue a BPN or drag out the listing consultation period resulting in loss. This would however seem to be at odds with their statutory role as a consultee in listing cases at least and as such may represent a significant risk to councils, DfC and indeed our built heritage.

The somewhat rhetorical question however is whether the current approach - in cases of obvious demolition risk (such as vacancy or known redevelopment proposals) - represents a risk to the preservation of built heritage in NI and thus the wider public interest. The answer for this author is clearly yes, but what is the scale of the problem we may face in context? More on that later...

Why does this all matter?

Whilst it is important to stress that the pre-emptive demolition in listing cases represents a small number of cases in context, the buildings considered and known to be lost this term were nonetheless significant and clearly listable in both HED's and HBC's view. A cursory look at previous HBC reports flags pre-emptive demolitions as a long-running and known 'Achilles Heel' of heritage protection here, yet unresolved. Whilst no system can be perfect, other known cases include significant buildings such as Belfast's Great Victoria Street Baptist Church (and its attached house - often described as Belfast's smallest dwelling and a tourist stop for the black taxi tours), which was bulldozed

as soon as listing appeared to be a possibility. The site is now a car park and it is yet to be seen if this is another case of 'land banking' with some future redevelopment appearing down the line. More blatantly, in November 2016 three buildings in North Street, Belfast, which had been agreed for listing by the HBC the previous month, were demolished without warning. The buildings were vacant and partly derelict. The site was quickly cleared and it is adjacent to other cleared sites in the same block, suggesting a commercial reason for the demolition. Would an ordinary Joe Bloggs get the same opportunity? Or do we have a two-tier listing regime in NI with one rule for private owners and another for the commercial developers?

That the above paragraph was largely taken from a previous HBC report is again an illustration that this is a known and long-standing issue as yet unresolved. Why? That does not make it any less important to flag again. Indeed, HBC as a statutory advisory council on built heritage is duty-bound to report to DfC on such matters and in doing so bring transparency to decision-making (NB: maintaining the status quo is also a decision). It is for DfC and councils to consider (and be accountable for) what, if any, action to take to resolve such known issues insofar as they are able and for the wider public good.

Depressingly, in each of the 2/3 known cases this term HBC flagged the risk of pre-emptive demolition as clearly predictable (HED seemed to agree), yet owners still appear to have been consulted and / or made aware of the possible listing. As a result, the process designed to protect such buildings has resulted in their significant alteration or complete destruction. This is to the detriment of both built heritage and a publicly funded process which seeks to protect such buildings in the wider public interest. In these limited cases the outcomes seem to be at odds with the spirit of the legislation.

Why then should lengthy consultations (c.6 weeks) with district councils and building owners be considered necessary and in the wider public interest in any case of evident pre-emptive demolition risk? Yes, HED must consult with councils (but not owners) and such risk plainly exists in cases where a building is vacant or unused (and so could be demolished quickly) or where it might otherwise be considered 'a site' with a more attractive market value compared to the less lucrative prospect of a vacant listed building often in need of repair. Is the current approach fair to owners of buildings already listed or those that do not take pre-emptive action? Is the current approach serving the wider



An excerpt from HBC's 2013-2016 report showing the pre-emptive demolition of the Baptist Church on Great Victoria Street, Belfast. The site is currently a car park but remains to be seen if a replacement building will appear in due course and if this is in effect another example of 'land banking' facilitated by the current planning / listing process and at the expense of our cultural heritage. Image source: HBC 2016.

public interest? Are we in effect punishing those who do the 'right thing' by local communities and our built heritage? Of course, there may be no one correct answer to these questions, but nonetheless important to consider.

The duty to consult in listing cases - why are both HBC and councils consulted?

It is important to note that as with any accountable decision-making process, robust decisions can only be based on relevant considerations, otherwise they may be subject to costly judicial review brought by any interested party (i.e. not just a building owner). In the context of a listing decision made under the Planning Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 the key question is whether a building is of "special architectural and historic interest" in Northern Ireland. Questions of cost of repair, future plans or whether an owner simply doesn't want a building listed - whilst legitimate concerns and important to address - are irrelevant to the statutory criteria and decision at hand. As such, rarely will either an owner or a district council raise anything that is relevant to the decision. It may be helpful to look at why HBC, district councils and owners are consulted.

What the legislation says about pre-listing consultation

Under Section 80(3) of the Planning Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 before compiling or amending any list under this section, the Department must 'consult with the appropriate council and the Historic Buildings Council'. This duty to consult both HBC and district councils appears in NI's first listing legislation, so this is not a new provision as a result of recent community planning measures.

The Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1972 has similar wording:

(3) Before compiling or amending any list under this Article, the Ministry shall consult with the Historic Buildings Council and with the appropriate district council.

As such, even though HED may be satisfied a building meets the statutory test for listing, despite being the decision-maker (and so bearing the risks of challenge), HED cannot list without first consulting district councils and HBC. As such, much depends on both councils' ability to act fast in cases where there is a risk of pre-emptive demolition.

Why is HBC consulted?

In the absence of an independent commission for built heritage in NI, HBC was established as a sort of (unpaid) 'arms-length' statutory advisory council to carry out this role. The arm's length principle having itself been widely established after the Second World War to help with transparency and accountability in decision-making in matters of the arts, culture, and heritage. HBC is composed of professionals from a range of backgrounds who hold special knowledge of, or interest in, buildings of architectural or historic interest. In short, HBC is a sort of 'critical friend' and helps to bring additional transparency to listing decisions as well as a range of expertise and knowledge regarding the built heritage of NI. It is not the role of HBC to simply agree with HED but to take a balanced view based on what are the relevant considerations as set out in legislation and relevant guidance, as well as its other statutory functions.

Why are councils consulted?

Why this provision exists is not altogether clear, indeed NI is the only place in the UK (where for obvious historic reasons legislation tends to be quite similar) that this duty to consult district

councils currently exists. For example, in Scotland decision-makers are not required to consult local planning authorities but rather before making a decision, “shall consult such persons or bodies of persons as appear to Historic Environment Scotland appropriate as having special knowledge of, or interest in, buildings of architectural or historic interest” (Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) (Scotland) Act 1997).

The position is similar in England and in both cases where the discretionary consultation occurs with local planning authorities (in effect district councils) this appears to be a council planning official / conservation officer rather than a planning committee composed of councillors. Presumably, this is so the decision-makers can act fast, but also to bring a degree of separation (and thus protection) between a listing consultee who may later have a role in determining subsequent, or indeed recent, planning applications affecting the same property. It might also be because a conservation officer may, understandably, be more likely to have specialist knowledge concerning relative “architectural and historic interest” in the local area and also be in a position to act fast where required.

Whereas in Wales interim protection has been introduced whereby all buildings being considered for listing are automatically protected for a set period of 6 months allowing a full assessment and consultation to be undertaken.

In the Republic of Ireland, it is the responsibility of the local council to protect buildings and (presumably) as the decision-maker therefore in their interest to act fast given the risks of challenge or potential reputational damage from public outcry at loss in particular cases.

As such, in other parts of the UK and Ireland the onus and ability to act fast is on the decision-mak-

ers, with some areas able to survey and list a building in as little as a day. In NI councils get 6 weeks and the decision-maker (DfC) cannot list until consultations are undertaken, thus opening a substantial window for preemptive demolition. In addition, owners also tend to be informally consulted during the surveying stage which itself may have taken place as much as a decade earlier.

So, why does the duty to consult councils exist here in NI? Was it simply to inform prioritisation of listing casework to ensure that where development is proposed such cases are given priority as part of an effective planning system? Or was it a measure to give local councillors a say in what heritage is and is not protected? Or to give owners an additional opportunity to demolish their building before listing? These are really questions for others to answer and to satisfy themselves as to whether the current process in NI is both fair to councillors - who sit on planning committees - as well as owners of buildings already listed and indeed the wider public interest generally, but also in terms of protecting the authentic built heritage of NI which is increasingly at risk.

Should an owner not be consulted in every case?

Whilst an owner may have a legitimate expectation that they would be consulted on the listing of their property there is no statutory duty to do so within the 2011 Act. The same is true of the relevant Acts in Scotland, England and Wales (at the point of statutory protection). This is presumably owing to issues with unregistered land (i.e. knowing who owns what) and indeed perhaps originally intended to counter the risks associated with preemptive demolition supporting the wider public interest and fairness in the system as a whole. Otherwise, could an owner simply refuse to engage for exam-

ple or just demolish thus undermining the statutory purpose of heritage protection? However, in NI as a matter of practice the owner and the district council’s planning section are both advised of the HED’s intention at the same time as HBC and Planning Committees. Owners are sent copies of the listing report along with an advisory note to (a) help them to confirm its accuracy and (b) to increase their understanding of the case being made for listing and help alleviate any concerns.

In the vast majority of cases - particularly where a building is in active use or otherwise protected by a caring owner - pre-listing consultation with owners is of course the preferred approach: after all, owners are the key stakeholder when it comes to looking after listed buildings and so important to provide the understanding, support and bring people along with us. However, much of the current approach depends on the good will of owners. Is this a reasonable expectation or fair particularly in cases of evident demolition risk and where commercial factors or private gain may play a significant role?

Hold on, why not just issue a Building Preservation Notice in cases of evident pre-emptive demolition risk? Since 1st April 2015, district councils have had the power to serve a ‘Building Preservation Notice’ (BPN), where it appears to a council that a building is of architectural or historic merit and is at risk of demolition or significant alteration. This provides a 6-month period of protection for the building so it can be considered for listing, consultations undertaken etc. This discretionary power was transferred from the former Department of the Environment (DOE) to district councils, under the Review of Public Administration transfer of functions agreement.

Whilst councils can issue BPNs, they generally don’t. This may be due to the risk of compensation

if DfC doesn’t list or the relatively few cases where a BPN might be justified and as such a lack of corporate knowledge or confidence may impact timely service of BPNs in any case thus undermining their purpose.

The question then comes whether a potential 6-month delay to clarify a building’s listing status (following the service of a BPN) is preferable to a streamlined listing process which would give a degree of certainty to all - including owners and planners - sooner rather than later: time is money. For this author, a streamlined approach to listing consultation to provide protection and certainly to all parties as soon as possible is preferable and reasonably achievable within the current legislative context. This might also place an onus on HED, HBC and district councils to act fast / focus efforts in such cases, whilst also reminding ourselves that cases which reach this stage have already been well researched in terms of what are relevant considerations (i.e. architectural and historic interest, so why delay?).

Take for example the 2018 case of Straid Church where many villagers had been in protest at the church being knocked down for a new church to be built. Despite this campaign it took some locals to physically stand in front of the bulldozers on demolition day to get a BPN issued by the Council. Some confusion in this space because of the Transfers of Functions Order (apparently without DfC taking or holding reserved powers to also issue these BPNs) appears to be hampering the timely service of such notices and HBC would recommend that clarification be given (by statute if needs be) that DfC holds (or frankly should hold) reserved powers to issue BPNs in the event a council has chosen not to act. This may be particularly important where a building is in council ownership or where actual or perceived conflicts of interest may exist or indeed where the heritage asset in question may be

otherwise contested locally. This would seem to be particularly important in the context of NI.



Straid Church, Co. Antrim - local people had to stand in front of the demolition digger before a BPN was served by the Council. The building was later listed however damage had already been done.

What might we reasonably do in cases of evident pre-emptive demolition risk, not only to protect buildings of evident interest but also the integrity and fairness of the listing regime and (where applicable) to ensure planning decision-makers have all the relevant facts?

Often the ability to move fast to protect a building is of critical importance, not least in the digital age where a quick call, email or site visit can unintentionally

get the bulldozers fired up, but also to give all interested parties (including owners) clarity on where they stand. A streamlined consultation process may be particularly advantageous if a development is proposed for example and so that decision-makers in planning applications (planning committees) have all the relevant considerations at hand when determining such applications without significant delay.

A simpler measure might be not notifying the building owner, as it is not actually a legislative requirement. This question is often quickly rebutted with the suggestion that there is no right of appeal in listing cases and so only fair an owner is consulted before a listing takes effect. However, this seems somewhat flawed given that listing is an ongoing statutory duty, meaning the duty to compile lists of buildings of special interest does not end with a listing decision or indeed completion of the Second Survey. As we know, appreciation of built heritage often evolves over time, as do survival rates of various building types (just take a moment to think of how many traditional buildings have gone from our own areas since we were children). If a building is no longer meeting the criteria for listing, as a result of significant new information or frankly poor development management / planning, then it should be removed from the list. Therefore it is within the gift of HED to accept a delisting application at any time or indeed to establish a non-statutory review process for recent listing decisions (outside of the courts) within a set period of time, if it so chooses (particularly if limited to the small number of cases where pre-emptive demolition is a known risk and as such a pre-listing consultation was not reasonably possible or in the public interest). Could we not therefore have a streamlined approach to district council consultation in cases of vacancy or known risk and forgo consultation with owners in these limited cases in the wider public interest?

In the absence of further published guidance from

DfC on councils' role as a consultee (rather than decision maker) it is understandable that much has been left to councils to figure out and there may be no standard approach across the board. This would appear to leave councillors balancing their role as elected representatives of local people whom they represent and the various statutory requirements to which they must adhere in the wider public interest. It does seem however, that there might be benefits to making clearer how the role of a listing consultee differs from that of a (planning) decision-maker in these cases (if at all) and what steps councils might choose to take to close this loophole for the wider public good. For example, this HBC member takes the view that as a 'consultee' - the word must be given its ordinary meaning - it is not within the gift of HBC alone to undertake its own consultations in forming a view based on the statutory criteria, indeed, to do so may put the building under consideration at risk and therefore undermine a statutory process. Is the same true of district councils? Some guidance in this space might be helpful to all concerned.

What 'consultation' with a district council needs to look like is not prescribed by the 2011 Act. However, in NI as things stand, it seems that when a council is consulted on a listing case it goes to full planning committees to consider and so may be unintentionally and considerably delayed to fit in with the next meeting, whilst the proposed listing is in the public arena and so risk of pre-emptive action increased. Why this provision exists is unclear and in HBC's view unnecessary / inefficient. However, where demolition occurs then this can have an impact on public perception of the process and indeed fairness of the listing / planning system generally.

As such, if we are serious about sorting the issue - short of legislative change (which seems unlikely) - then it might seem the starting point would be to

increase our ability to act fast to protect buildings. For example, under Section 7.1 (and other provisions) of the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 2014 the option appears to exist for district councils to consider delegating urgent cases or indeed all listing consultations, byway of Standing Orders or some such, to council officials such as the local conservation planner who may have specialist knowledge of historic buildings and so may be better placed to respond quickly (within a day or two if needs be) to what are relevant considerations, without much delay and proportionate to the urgency / demolition risk in any particular case. Such officials would also be bound by the usual confidentiality / public interest caveats. It may be that planning committees / councils consider such an approach to be in the wider public interest or to provide an additional buffer between "listing consultee" and the same committee which may be a decision-maker on subsequent or recent planning application.

However, in the absence of published guidance from DfC / DfI or others it would appear to be a matter for individual district councils to consider and / or justify both current approaches and / or what (if any) steps can be taken for the wider public good.

Conclusion

Back to the question at hand: do local councils have a de facto veto on heritage? The answer (for this author) should surely be no: in listing cases district councils (and indeed HBC) are statutory consultees, not decision-makers but questions do still remain on how we work together to better preserve historic buildings in NI; how we ensure the listing regime is as fair, transparent and accountable as possible, particularly in cases of special urgency / known pre-emptive demolition risk; and how we ensure the List remains rich, relevant and (perhaps most importantly) representative of the communities which it serves right across NI, in all the colourful, authentic and increasingly diverse hues now found here.

In 2020 this council strongly urged that additional legislation is needed to remove this Achilles Heel and unnecessary district council consultations. We repeat that call and have made several additional recommendations to HED / DfC (see Annex A). However, as an interim measure we call for the formal notice to an owner of an impending listing - seen by some as an invitation to alter or demolish now while the chance remains - is withdrawn from the process for cases of evident pre-emptive demolition risk and council consultations are reviewed in such cases to better serve the wider public interest.

In summary, apart from the loss of 'just some old buildings', as some may see it, time and time again, the result of pre-emptive demolitions is that the public lose out not only in terms of the loss of significant buildings of evident special interest which add so much to the character of our places, but also in terms of sustainable development management as part of an accessible and transparent planning system of which listing is a part. To lose a building during the listing process and then for a develop-

ment proposal to be brought forward afterward or in some cases at the same time means a developer - and to some extent planning committees - do not have to weigh into the balance or justify demolition or alteration of a 'building of special interest'. This means the bar for development is effectively lowered, not only in terms of what might be acceptable on that site, but also in terms of the quality and character of what is in effect a replacement building, not to mention the loss of an historic building itself. Is this really a system we can be proud of, one which reflects wider public interest or justifies the loss - the what, where and why? Is the current approach fair to the private owners of buildings already listed? These questions are really for others to answer but nonetheless important questions to ask of any planning system which seeks to be as fair, consistent, transparent, and accountable as possible. Indeed, the public confidence in - and acceptance of - our planning system and listed building regime, it would seem, relies on these key foundations.

Conor Sandford

- Mr Sandford is an alumnus of the Archaeology Department of Queen's University Belfast. Previously a Senior Heritage Policy Advisor to the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, he has an interest in industrial heritage and has worked in the Northern Ireland Second Survey.

Demolition at consultation stage of three 'nearly listed' buildings on Belfast's North Street (2016)



Three 'nearly listed' buildings on Belfast's North Street in 2016, before demolition



The same buildings after demolition

Annex A

Recommendations of HBC for consideration by the relevant authorities:

1. That in listing cases of pre-emptive demolition risk / special urgency owners are not routinely consulted prior to listing (i.e. where a building is vacant or partially vacant or where re-development is proposed or suspected). That in such cases (relatively few) a non-statutory review process be introduced to allow owners to make the pre-listing representations they might otherwise have made prior to listing, thus providing a credible alternative remedy outside of the courts for this limited number of cases.
2. That in cases of special urgency (i.e. vacancy and / or known proposed development) a shortened council consultation process be considered as standard. This will likely rely on district council schemes of delegation. That the 6-week consultation period is shortened for all listing cases.
3. That DfI / district councils consider schemes of delegation for handling all listing consultations to help ensure DfC can act fast in relation to their overarching statutory duty to list buildings of special interest. This - in our view - would help to protect the wider public interest and confidence in the listing regime and particularly given district councils' role in the listing process is that of a statutory consultee, not a decision maker.
4. That DfI / district councils prioritise listing cases over planning decisions within order papers - given the purpose of listing is to protect buildings of special interest, but also effectively to provide guidance to planning decision-makers (it is a relevant consideration). Indeed, a

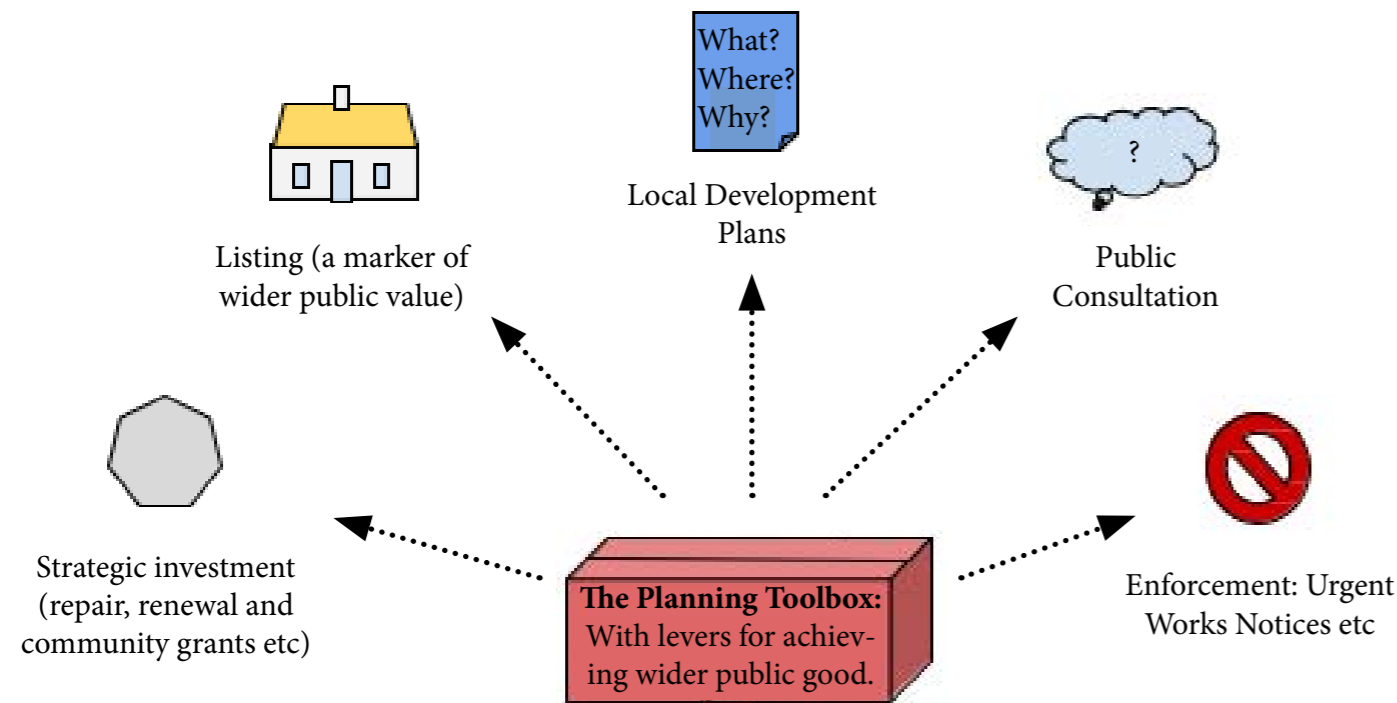
decision to delay providing a consultation response to a listing case may undermine the public value of the listing assessment and / or give rise to actual or perceived conflicts of interest in the planning process.

5. That DfC / DfI publish further guidance to district councils on the role of a listing consultee and the consultation process particularly given DfC's risk as the statutory decision-maker.
6. That a written response be requested from district councils requesting their assessment of how they might address our concerns regarding pre-emptive demolition in listing cases and / or to provide clarification on what if any steps they might take to help streamlining the listing process for the wider public good.
7. That a DfC scheme for underwriting BPNs be considered to support councils with their responsibilities in this space as an interim measure. HED would need to be a consultee prior to underwriting such cases. That DfC holds (or takes) reserve powers to issue BPNs in cases where a district council has chosen not to act.
8. That DfC further considers what steps can be taken to cut down the administrative burden of the listing system in NI with respect of district council and owner consultations particularly given the Second Survey is not yet completed and to help with fairness in the system as a whole, as well as representation in and on the list across NI.

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The planning toolbox and strategic investment - public interest viz private interests - have we forgotten why we list? – Conor Sandford



Perhaps a useful analogy of the wider planning system - of which listing is a part - is that of a toolbox with different tools or levers for achieving wider public good. In effect balancing the rights of property owners with the wider public interest. Such tools include things like: local development plans, setting out the 'what', 'where' and 'why' of development and also planning enforcement measures to ensure we all abide by the same rules which underpins a fair, transparent, accountable and sustainable system. As a result, the planning system is generally accepted by the public. It is a fair assumption that listing is and should be seen as one of those tools where a similar approach is required. Like the planning system and given the potential ramifications of listing for owners (for land value, development rights etc) and of not listing for communities (loss of cultural heritage, tourism potential etc), it is a reasonable assumption that listing decisions are subject to the same principles of procedural fairness given the interest of owners and the wider

public in an open, fair, transparent and accountable listing regime.

Despite this, it is fair to say that (at least anecdotally) listing has a bad reputation in Northern Ireland amongst property owners. No doubt the recent HED listed building owner's survey will shed more light on this but the reasons for that are likely linked to the same old issues of: little-to-no funding for private owners over the last decade; lack of heritage skills and resultant increase in costs; 20% VAT on repair verses 0% VAT on new build; and perceptions around 'oh it's listed and so it cannot be touched' and to an extent inconsistency in decision-making and / or fairness in what is listed and what is not. The suggestion that all works to a listed building require consent is often referred to, but this is not technically correct and suggests a lack of understanding or overbearing control by planning officials, often leading owners to not know where they stand or to walk away from the additional ex-

pense. The result? Our heritage is increasingly at risk, something borne out by the Heritage at Risk stats (c.10%+ of all listed buildings in NI are now crumbling).

Informed, proactive engagement and support, as well as strategic investment is key to turning this around. However, many private owners do love and care for their buildings with little-to-no assistance from the public purse, despite the acknowledged added value such places bring to our townscapes, tourist offer, countryside, and social and economic wellbeing.

What is often forgotten however is that listing is not a total preservation order per se, but rather a planning tool for ascribing wider public value to the preservation of buildings of 'special architectural or historic interest'. Yes, Listed Building Consent must be granted before undertaking works which would affect a listed building's special interest or even demolition, but the purpose is also so planning committees can appropriately consider special interest when performing their planning functions. However, in the case of pre-emptive demolitions for example, if a building is demolished shortly before listing then a relevant consideration concerning a matter of public value is otherwise lost. Is that planning?

Listing is therefore not necessarily a complete blocker to change, nor it is not about asking people to live in the past. Indeed, many of our historic buildings owe their survival to historic adaptive reuse and have evolved to meet the needs of previous and current generations, each with a story to tell of those who came before. This can in many cases also add a degree of interest, enriching lives both now and in the future.

Whilst managed change can be accepted - where this does not impact a building's special interest

(and so the public value therein) - complete demolition ought to be wholly exceptional, but not entirely impossible, where the wider public value argument can be made, considering also the what, where and why of whatever development is proposed (i.e can the proposed development be accommodated elsewhere in the town / area without the loss of historic and statutorily protected built fabric, or can plans be more accommodating of the public value of an historic building?). Such considerations ought to be led by local plans and not individual planning applications. Indeed, that is planning.



The Stump, Cockhill, Drumaphy, County Armagh - built as a windmill in c.1706 and owes its survival to conversion into a dwelling in c.1840. Photo of Mr Bill Totten outside his adapted historic home in c.1900. The building would not have survived had it not been for the acceptance of change but retention of character and a (then) culture of reuse rather than rebuild. Today The Stump consists of three building phases yet we see it as one heritage building, with each part of its narrative adding to its interest (Image source: own).

The long and short of it is that listing is not done (it would seem) to support a private owner's custodianship of our heritage, but to protect a wider public interest in the sustainable management of buildings of "special interest" as part of a sustain-

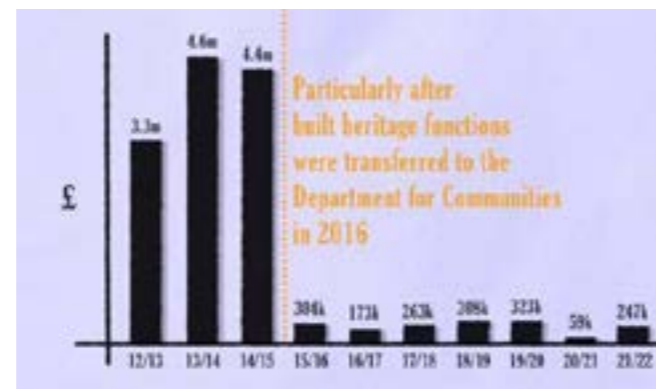
able, effective and transparent planning system. However, in many respects, whilst regrettable, it's not hard to see why some would rather not own a listed building in NI. That might seem strange for HBC to say, but we must be realistic and mindful that our role as a statutory advisory council is not simply to agree with what is placed before us, but to report on the preservation of built heritage and the related issues with which we must be concerned.

No stick, but no carrot - listed building enforcement and grant aid stats - market failure or failure to market?

It is important to recall that listing here was originally not only a planning / development management tool, but also a way of acknowledging wider public value and targeting strategic investment by way of repair grants, with grading an indicator of relative interest and so where grants might best be targeted, but also where change may be more acceptable in terms of planning. With little-to-no funding now available for the private owner (c.60-70% of all listed buildings are privately owned) one might reasonably ask if the current approach is sustainable and what this means for our built heritage across NI. Not only in terms of the increasing number of listed buildings at risk here and as such the snowballing headwater of repairs building up in this space over the last decade or more, but also what it might cost to address that conservation and skills deficit at some future point - if at all - simply to save those buildings already 'protected'. For example, how much more will it now cost to fix a roof which began leaking 10 years ago and what's the added loss in terms of public value (historic fabric lost)? These are hard to quantify but nonetheless important to flag, after all: 'a stitch in time saves nine!'.

In short, because of a lack of investment over a

sustained period and a lack of policy / funding interventions to make these places more attractive prospects, the sustainability of our built heritage sector in NI is in a very precarious position. This is for several reasons. For example, do the maths: in 20/21 the £59k grant pot divided by 9000 listed buildings is £6.50 per building and frankly unlikely to encourage any repair particularly when the additional hurdles (to get a grant) are considered as well as VAT etc.



(Levels of Listed Building Grant Aid in NI - Source: Ulster Architectural Heritage after DOE and DfC data)

The 2019 report 'Heritage at Risk: Review and Recommendations' by Ulster Architectural Heritage, aptly sums up the lamentable decline in investment:

- Until 2015, 'Listed Building Grant Aid', from the DoE, provided funding for eligible works on listed buildings at up to 45%, to a value of £500,000 per building, where applicable. A total value of £4.6 million was provided by central government for Listed Building Grant Aid, 2014-15. Listed Building Grant Aid was suspended in 2015.
- In 2016-17, HED through the Historic Environment Fund, was able to make available a welcome, but significantly reduced level of funding at £500,000 in total with 'at risk' and thatched

as priority categories. £500,000, the allocation which historically might have been afforded to a single building, was then proposed to cover demand from over c.9000 listed buildings. The HEF 2016-17 was heavily oversubscribed. This is particularly relevant to private owners (61%) who, without charitable status, cannot avail of a majority of public funding e.g. NHLF etc.

- For those who can avail of other sources of funding, Historic Environment Fund, (HEF), may be regarded as a source of match funding, thus encouraging the support of other funders for the progression of key regeneration projects. Indeed the provision of grant aid makes economic sense for Northern Ireland. Oversubscription to HED's Historic Environment Fund (HEF), in every year, reflects an important appetite and need for the repair and regeneration of heritage assets, including heritage at risk. Oversubscription also highlights insufficiencies in the required levels of funding to deal with requirements.

Despite this the levels of funding have not returned to their pre- 2015 levels which even of itself was not sufficient to meet demand. This is hard to understand from a strategic investment point of view, but no doubt relates to NI budgetary pressures generally. However, we might recall that for every £1 of listed building grant, £7.65 is leveraged from other sources. Also, even back in 2012 the NI historic environment contributed c.£250 million or more of tourism revenue (Gross Value Add) each year, £135 million of which came from non-domestic visitors. The historic environment (as a whole in NI) was shown to generate an estimated £532 million economic output annually and create and sustain approximately 10,000 jobs. The economic contribution of the historic environment per capita was estimated at £160 in Northern Ireland; £491 in the Republic of Ireland and £943 in Scotland. In NI,

the historic environment accounted for three jobs per thousand of the population compared to 8.1 in the Republic of Ireland and 11.8 in Scotland.

If the NI heritage sector could perform at an equivalent rate to Scotland, it could generate £1.5 billion annually and support 20,000 jobs i.e. three times its 2012 output and twice as many jobs ('Study of the Economic Value of Northern Ireland's Historic Environment, Department of the Environment NI, 2012'). So in short – strategic investment in preservation and reuse of our built heritage, as well as our heritage economy makes economic sense too. However, the continued failure to protect our built heritage (through completion of the Second Survey, strategic investment, and sustainable planning) is negatively impacting the sector's long-term economic potential.



Old Belfast Sick Children's Hospital and former RUC Station has been vacant for years, with buddleia growing out of it. The old hospital is an im-

portant building to the social history of the City of Belfast, representing how society cared for some of our most vulnerable. How many people in NI are here today due to its existence? Indeed, the building is apparently now set to be a facade retention scheme with a large tower block replacing much of the actual hospital itself. If that happens then one wonders why we bothered to list it as 'statutory protection' and indeed the Conservation Area will have done nothing to protect its special interest beyond that of its facade.

(Image source: own)

No stick = missed opportunities

Indeed, many may consider the parallel matter of a lack of listed building enforcement (now the responsibility of district councils) to also be an increasing matter of concern, not only for the preservation of built heritage but also for leveraging community benefits / opportunity and fairness in the system. Take for example cases of fires in vacant listed buildings. How much has dealing with such fires cost the public purse? In cases of long-term vacancy, are those costs being recovered from commercial owners? In Belfast's Cathedral Quarter we have had at least 3- 4 major fires in historic buildings over the last 20 years (North Street Arcade in 2004; Exchange Place in 2017; Cathedral Buildings in 2022 and 166-174 North Street in 2023). Generally speaking, would timely service of Urgent Works Notices not be a better use of public funds to ensure 'protected' vacant listed buildings are kept wind and weatherproof (to safeguard historic fabric i.e. public value) but also to help ensure such buildings are safe from vandalism in the first place? Would that not be a more strategic and better use of public funds and bring additional safeguards in terms of public health and wellbeing?

In addition, and not to detract from some of the great work going on by HED, AHF and others in terms of supporting community groups seeking to address local needs on the stage of our shared built heritage, but not every building can be saved by such groups and such projects can take 5-10 years to deliver, if successful. The worry is that the costs building up in this repair space will soon (if not already) be completely prohibitive for most, particularly outside urban settings, and indeed preclude the ordinary private owner from taking on a listed building in need of repair.

The lack of enforcement also means that even if a group exists with the plan and funding to deliver a scheme of restoration and renewal then - and in the absence of Urgent Works Notices being served and the risk of Compulsory Purchase Order to focus minds on repair - much relies again on the goodwill of owners and communities to leverage good community outcomes, this may also lead to unrealistic purchase prices etc too which can make a community project unviable. Whilst such powers exist and are by all accounts a means of last resort, they are in effect an escalation ratchet in the planner's toolbox whereby a repair notice can be served on a listed building owner and if those repairs are not carried out then they can be carried out by the council who can later recover their costs from the owner. Or the council can simply proceed to compulsory purchase proceedings with the risk for the owner of minimum compensation due to the building's state of repair. Whilst these powers are harsh and not to be used lightly, there are cases where they might well bring about positive change (a sale to a new caring owner rather than allowing 'land banking' to continue for decades whilst our 'protected' heritage crumbles, perhaps to the benefit of some private company controlled from the other side of the planet). For those cases where there is a more compelling public interest case for compulsory acquisition of a listed building in need of repair,

such a move could see real community-led change, benefits, buy-in and investment (social and fiscal).

Whilst use of these powers may seem harsh and a difficult decision to take, so too is the loss of the built heritage of our communities for our social and economic wellbeing. Doing nothing to address long-term vacancy, dereliction and 'land banking' across NI when it concerns listed buildings (i.e. public value) is also a decision with consequences. Councils should not shy away from using these powers in a timely manner and when appropriate to do so for the wider public good. Not using them where there is an interested local group willing to take on such a building, just means communities lose out both in terms of loss of built heritage, as well as potential community projects and indeed investment from other extra-NI funding sources. However, as buildings are allowed to deteriorate the costs associated with reuse increases every day and many may now only be saved through large NHLF grants: timely enforcement in cases of wider public interest is key to better community outcomes and making limited funds go further.



Strand Cinema, East Belfast

The Strand Cinema, East Belfast was opened on 7th December 1935, built for and operated by the English-based Union Cinemas chain. It had one screen with stage and 1,170 seats.

The first film shown was Bright Eyes starring Shirley Temple. In 2013, the Strand ceased trading as a commercial cinema and Strand Arts Centre was established as a not-for-profit charitable venture to ensure the short-term survival of the building. The recent grant award of c.£4m from the UK Government's Levelling Up Fund and further support from the National Lottery Heritage fund and others as part of a c.£6.5m project demonstrates the leverage which listed and unlisted historic buildings can have as a stage for good community outcomes, investment, and long-term sustainable planning.

A culture of vacancy, decay, and demolition – is it time to reset expectations?

Enduring losses in our historic building environment by attrition and facadism might well lead some to now ask whether we have a planning service in NI when it comes to our built heritage, or whether it has now become about development facilitation, at any cost. Also there now appears to be a culture of painting over the cracks our high streets with large murals, but how long will that last and at what long-term cost to both the public purse and the potential of our heritage economy?

Indeed, due to a lack of timely enforcement, it now appears listed buildings are being bought and sold as near-brownfield development sites, well in excess of their true commercial value as listed buildings in need of repair, where enforcement notices should have already been served: the assumption being that even developers may know they can in some cases get away with demolishing in part by way of planning concessions (i.e. subsequent facadism and loss of special interest as a result / completely disproportionate extensions or in some cases tower block extensions to make the 'economic

viability case for reuse'). VAT rules may also have a role to play here, however such concessions are in effect an admission of failure of our planning and listed building system and may again suggest a two-tiered approach.

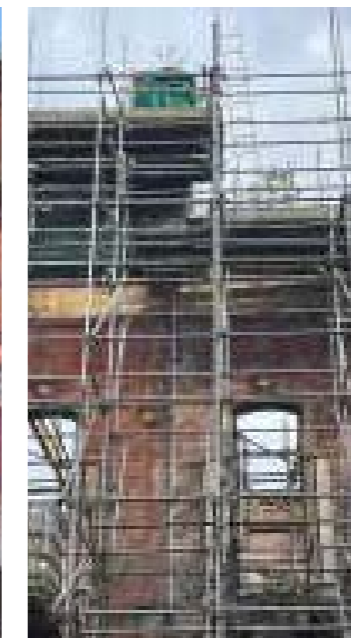
Is it the case in NI - and in the absence of appropriate and proportionate listed building enforcement measures being used by councils - that developers can simply sit on vacant listed buildings (whilst not paying rates), allow them to deteriorate and then use both vacancy and resultant dereliction as a bargaining chip in terms of planning concessions?

The reality is that we may now have to accept that owing to previous (and in some cases snowballing) planning / listed building consent concessions the best we can hope for is little more than facade retention in some cases. Why? Well, we need to manage expectations: the problem seems to be that frankly we as a society / councils / departments have allowed this situation to evolve over many years by not challenging planning applications which would do damage to protected assets, or using enforcement powers early on to draw a line in the sand, encourage meanwhile uses, or the sale of the property to a caring new owner for example. Whilst the legacy of The Troubles no doubt has played a significant role in historic town / city centre vacancies and the resultant loss of historic buildings (and footfall on the high street etc), so too have poor planning decisions which can set a difficult precedent. The obvious time to reset the playing field was when community planning took effect back in c.2016, but now is better than never. Together we need to stand behind our heritage and work with developers early on in their planning to ensure all can prosper from good development led by community planning. Buildings such as North Street Arcade, Belfast (which survived serious bomb damage in the 1970s) are now being gutted by vacancy, poor planning decisions and in some cases fire.

Often 'economically viable' is wheeled out to justify demolition, facade retention schemes or disproportionate 'extensions'. However, in other parts of the UK such schemes would be rejected early on given the clear substantial harm it may do to the special interest of statutorily protected [listed] buildings, but here they are often given planning permission or simply allowed to rot for which might appear to be largely private or commercial gain. We ought really to recall that listing is a legal land charge and many of these buildings are bought with listed status, therefore one wonders why developer-led price inflation is being allowed to happen at the expense of our listed buildings, when the expectation of retaining historic fabric should be there from the outset. Land banking and use of the planning system to increase land value / development potential as a means to draw down funds (without actually implementing schemes) may be a driver here. However, we must take care to ensure poor decisions of the past (in heritage terms) do not bleed into expectation going forward and across NI. Indeed, the powers exist to have better community outcomes as well as manage expectations when it comes to land value / development plans. The 'economic case for reuse' ought to be considered - as most private people would - when purchasing a property, rather than being used as a justification for loss of statutorily protected historic fabric (public value) down the planning line.

Take for example some of the old arcades and 'entries' in Belfast - these would make great arcades of start-ups / pop-up shops for the young creative people of this city - why does the council not serve urgent work notices or pursue compulsory acquisition? Does a group exist that could take forward a case for sustainable reuse and community benefits? These powers exist and are only effective if used. Whilst each case must be considered on its own merits, their use in one case can have public benefits beyond the building in question. Some de-

gree of carrot may however seem somewhat critical to justifying the use of these powers and perhaps that is why we have seen little use of them in recent years, as well as the ongoing decline of many of our well-known listed buildings, conservation areas and heritage economy.



A legacy of our past or dereliction of duty in Belfast City Centre? Would dereliction of this scale be accepted today in any other UK city centre high street area?

The most glaring irrelevant consideration and risk in listing cases: planning permission is not listed building consent. Why then does extant planning permission preclude listing in NI?

In NI there is a policy of not listing a building which has planning permission. As such, a developer can simply get planning permission to in effect evade listing, again suggesting a two-tiered approach to heritage protection. However, in HBC’s view, every decision not to list due to extant planning permission is at a high risk of successful challenge. This is because planning permission is irrelevant to the statutory criteria for listing. Planning permission and listed building consent are by design of legislation two separate processes - why then can it be in the gift of DfC/HED have a policy of not listing when a building has planning permission? Is this not contrary to both the spirit and letter of the 2011 Act in respect of listing and indeed relevant planning considerations?



Former Manse, 36 Glen Hoy Road, Augher

The example of an old manse at 36 Glen Hoy Road, Augher, which this term HED had been made aware of but which had not yet been listed and where planning permission for a replacement dwelling had been granted in 2019 (Mid Ulster Council, 2018: LA09/2018/1538/F). It may be that HED doesn’t want to take the risk of a challenge from an owner, but questions remain as to whether the policy is currently at odds with the legislation or fair to other interested parties. The current approach may become riskier as other interested parties make listing applications (i.e. risk of challenge from others and not just an owner).

Some may see the listing of a building which already has planning permission as unfair to an owner who may have development plans, however, the 2011 Planning Act (Section 84) also provides for Certificates of Immunity from Listing whereby a developer can apply early on in their development plans for a certificate which would preclude DfC/HED from listing a building for a period of 5 years to give them a degree of certainty on where they stand and to deliver on their plans. On application for a COI a building is considered for listing and the outcome may result in a listing decision or a decision to issue a COI. As such, there is an alternative remedy available to developers if they engage with the statutory process early on and there seems to be no clear reason for the current policy of not listing a building which has planning permission. As a result, in cases where there is extant planning permission the listing process could result in pre-emptive demolition in favour of more attractive redevelopment plans. As such, HBC again calls for a review of the listing consultation process to help ensure we can act fast in cases where there is a pre-emptive demolition risk and for the wider public good.

The 36 Glen Hoy Road case may also raise the issue of inflated property prices concerning the

built heritage (listed or not) and what that means for heritage protection generally. Presumably this property was sold essentially as a more lucrative site rather than an historic (and possibly listable) building in need of repair. Would it not have been better to allow development / a new dwelling elsewhere as a means to generate funds to restore this property too (had it been listed), for example? Are there ways in which we can better encourage reuse of such buildings and harness intrinsic value whilst also helping to meet climate and housing demands?

The unknown listing decisions - who is accountable?

A quirk of the listing process in NI is that HBC are only really consulted on cases where HED have more-or-less already determined a building is likely to be of special interest (i.e. we are not routinely consulted on decisions not to list and the reasons why) that’s not to suggest any irregularity and indeed the practicality / public value of having every decision not to list (as a result of the Second Survey) being put before HBC and councils is a relevant consideration. There are however several unknowns in the process such as: what is not being listed (particular building types?), the reasons why and who takes such decisions? For example, in the case of Darjeeling, 120 Coa Road, Enniskillen, the case was brought forward for listing 3 times, yet HBC is told that no clear account exists for why the building was not listed, who took that decision and why. The building was later pre-emptively demolished. As such, HBC has some concern regarding the transparency and accountability of decision-making where buildings are not listed and the reasons why. Is such an approach fair to other interested parties / communities who may not even be aware such decisions are being taken and for what reasons? What opportunity exists for communities to challenge decisions which they are not

aware of and which concerns their built heritage? If and when we complete the Second Survey and as we move to a business-as-usual footing for listing in NI it may be worth considering consulting HBC on every listing case / application which is taken forward from an initial sifting criterion and indeed more transparently publishing decisions not to list (perhaps online). This principle of transparency would seem to be particularly important in the context of heritage in NI.



Image source: ‘Save Havelock House’ (2024), Facebook

Havelock House, located on Belfast's Lower Ormeau Road, was originally built in 1871. It later became the home of Ulster Television (UTV) from 1959 to 2018. Since its construction, it had seen many uses but was demolished in 2024 to make way for housing, despite a public campaign to save the building. As well as a television centre, it had been a handkerchief factory, linen warehouse, WWII troop accommodation and a goods showroom among other things. As a TV centre, Havelock House was arguably one of the most important cultural sites in Northern Ireland during the late 20th century. The building was last considered for listing in 2011 which resulted in a 'record only' list entry. This states: 'A partial record only was taken during the Second Survey as the building is not worthy of a full survey' (DfC 2011: HB26/30/037). This case may suggest a bias towards architectural interest in NI's listing assessments: a building of special historic interest is listable irrespective of its architectural interest. Yes, there must be something in the extant architecture to protect (i.e. sufficient historic fabric to illustrate the valued aspect of history, otherwise what's the point?), but this case may raise questions as to whether in NI we are overly focused on architectural interest over buildings of special historic interest and whether historic events of the 20th century are being given sufficient weighting. In this case, whilst the rendered walling, replacement windows and much of the interior relate to the use of the building as a television centre, most may consider this to illustrate the valued aspect of history, despite not being 'original'. In any respect, the building also continued to retain significant historic fabric relating to its original use with much of the walling still extant, despite rendering. Generally speaking, the use of 'record only' list entries in NI is also unclear and, in some cases, questionable. HBC would recommend that all record only list entries are reviewed to ensure historic interest is being given sufficient weighing in listing assessments in NI and that such cases are not influenced

by irrelevant considerations such as impact on land value or future redevelopment plans. HBC would also recommend that a full list of 'record only' list entries be more discoverable on the published on-line list.

A case for systemic change: are known pre-emptive demolition losses, lack of enforcement and dereliction of our listed buildings just the tip of the iceberg?

The current HBC term saw the proposed listing of 94 buildings as a result of the Second Survey. However, it is important to flag that a number of these were boundary posts, phone boxes and other street furniture. Whilst these are important and certainly vulnerable to change one might reasonably ask why so few larger buildings are being listed in NI? Is it the case that the process designed to protect buildings of 'special interest' for the wider public good may actually be resulting in its systemic destruction given our inability to act fast to protect them and lack of incentives for repair and renewal? Or is it simply down to resourcing? What does this mean for representation on the List in-and-across NI?

- 2020 - 2023 - something over 94 were recommended for listing (albeit there were many boundary posts and 9 historic street signs) and there was 1 de-listing.
- 2016 - 2020 - something over 150 listings were recommended (albeit 22 of them were for post boxes and 14 for historic street signs) and there were 39 de-listings.

The scale loss of buildings of special interest (as yet unprotected in NI) and the true scale of the

problem of pre-emptive demolition may be much larger than the relatively small number of known cases (i.e. HED have had engagement with owners as part of the initial survey work - which may itself have been undertaken some years / a decade previous given delays in Second Survey casework - so there is currently plenty of opportunity for a building to be demolished well before it reaches the consultation stage).

HBC Term	Known pre-emptive demolition cases	Total number of buildings listed during term	% losses
2020 - 2023	3	98	c.3%
2016 - 2020	4	150	c.3%

When the (albeit rudimentary) statistics are applied to the backlog of listing cases in NI the situation is deeply concerning (the backlog is some 1500 buildings which the Department has identified, surveyed often at considerable public expense but not yet been able to list / protect). Taking this as a guide we can expect to lose c. 3 - 4% (c.45 - 60) buildings on the backlog alone during the consultation stage, never mind loss of interest by way of changes to (yet unprotected) built fabric in the intervening years and pre-consultation demolitions. Indeed, the value of completed survey work is being undermined by poor resourcing in this space. 1500 Second Survey records may have cost anywhere between £525,000 - £1.26m (@ £350 - £840 per record) + civil service time (see page 31 of NI Assembly PAC Report on Safeguarding Northern Ireland's Listed Buildings, 2012). As such, the longer the backlog persists, the less public value will be derived from this work and investment in previous years on the survey is being undermined by underinvestment today. That's before considering that it may also take some years to clear this backlog (so many may be lost in the interim) and

that the Second Survey is not yet complete across NI (so who knows what the real losses are?). The statistics applied here are also largely lessened by the high number of public building types / street furniture brought forward in recent years where one might expect less risk or pre-emptive demolition by those with a wider public duty. Is such a situation acceptable for a publicly funded (albeit statutory) process which at its heart seeks to protect such buildings? Should we not be concerned for our built heritage?

Statutory listing of buildings began in Northern Ireland in 1974 (during The Troubles). The first HBC for NI was established at that time and the first survey took over 20 years to complete. The Second Survey started in 1997 and is not yet complete some 27 years later. The English, Scottish and Welsh HBC equivalents were set up much earlier between 1953-4 to draw up post-war salvage 'lists' owing to the mass loss of buildings of special interest during the Second World War Blitz. The First Survey of all buildings in England was completed between 1947-72 (25 years) and the second survey was completed there between 1968-91 (i.e. in NI we are some 33 years behind GB... and counting!).

The 2012 Public Accounts Committee report on Safeguarding Northern Ireland's Listed Buildings noted the Second Survey here was originally due for completion in 2008 but that the new deadline was 2020 and that it was important that no further slippage in the timetable occurred due to loss of built heritage across NI. The continued slip in this strategic programme resultant from under resourcing in this space is a matter of ongoing and considerable concern. Given the wider implications for: communities; sustainable planning; fairness; heritage skills; the heritage economy; and public value. As such, every effort must be made to ensure the Second Survey is completed as soon as possible and with sufficient resourcing.

Are we too picky? Setting the bar for “special interest” - going, going gone...

Add the above to a very brisk (and by no means definitive) comparative analysis of heritage protection across the UK and Ireland, and there is also the suggestion that we may not be keeping up with our neighbours in terms of the baseline level of listed building protection when considered on an area basis. This may suggest that we have unrealistically high expectations of what constitutes a building of ‘special architectural or historic interest’ in the context of what now survives in NI. Indeed, a lot has changed since 1974 when listing began here and indeed since 1997 when the Second Survey began. The below may also indicate that we should be investing proportionately more in the heritage we have already protected.

ing area of the UK when it comes to heritage protection overall. Add this to consideration of Conservation Areas (area-based designations which include / protect many historic buildings in each area) and the difference between NI’s approach to heritage protection and that of other parts of the UK becomes very stark indeed:

	Number of conservation areas	Number of conservation areas divided by km2 (x1000)
NI	c.60	4.2
Scotland	c.600	7.8
Wales	c.500	23.6
England	c.10,000	76.8

For example, there is 18.3 x more density of conservation areas in England than in NI when size of each country is taken into account (i.e. England is 18.3 x better at conservation areas than we are here

	Size (km2)	Number of buildings listed/ list entries	Number of listed buildings per km ²	Population(2021, ONS data)	Listed buildings per capita (per person)	% of listed buildings on the ‘at risk’ register
NI	14,130 km2	9000	0.64	1,905,000	0.0047	1000 (10%)
ROI	70,273 km2	65,000	0.92	5,280,000	0.0123	N/A
Scotland	77,900 km2	47,400	0.61	5,480,000	0.0086	2217 (4.7%)
Wales	21,218 km2	30,055	1.41	3,105,000	0.0097	2646 (8.8%)
England	130,279 km2	400,00	3.10	56,536,000	0.0071	4871 (1.22%)

When we consider Heritage at Risk and that only c.1.22 % of listed buildings in England are on the At Risk Register but c.10% are on the At Risk Register in NI, we begin to see how dire the current situation is for NI’s cultural heritage: dilapidation / dereliction of protected heritage is nearly ten times worse in NI. In general terms NI is the worst perform-

ing area of the UK when it comes to heritage protection overall. Add this to consideration of Conservation Areas (area-based designations which include / protect many historic buildings in each area) and the difference between NI’s approach to heritage protection and that of other parts of the UK becomes very stark indeed: ing area of the UK when it comes to heritage protection overall. Add this to consideration of Conservation Areas (area-based designations which include / protect many historic buildings in each area) and the difference between NI’s approach to heritage protection and that of other parts of the UK becomes very stark indeed:

We also have so few listed buildings which together means those buildings which are left and listed or in conservation areas are:

- a) Likely more expensive / burdensome to maintain for owners as the required knowledge, materials and skills are less readily available in NI.
- b) More at risk than first appears.
- c) Those that are left (and listed or in a conservation area) are proportionately more valuable to our remaining shared cultural heritage.
- d) Our heritage skills sector in NI has completely different needs / challenges to other parts of the UK.

As such, our heritage sector has particular needs / challenges not seen to the same extent in other areas of the UK. This is in part down to our much later statutory protection of heritage, losses during the Troubles and frankly an “as little as possible” approach in terms of protection and investment for decades as well as our ability to raise the per capita funding / investment needed which might boost our heritage economy.

Heritage protection in NI has often been led by individuals and passionate groups to campaign for (had it not been for Ulster Architectural Heritage campaigning for listing to be introduced in the 1970s in NI we would have really nothing left in NI). The case for the wide-spread investment in NI’s listed buildings and conservation areas as part of a new approach for dealing with our past is perhaps more compelling given the comparative importance of listed buildings to our remaining built / cultural heritage here, but also given the increasing number of locally led public campaigns we are seeing to save individual buildings in NI. Given we have lost so many perfectly good buildings to

the replacement dwelling scheme / redevelopment / lack of sustainable planning etc it may now also be worth considering introducing a requirement for planning permission for the demolition of all buildings (listed or not, but over a certain size) as a broad-brush approach to heritage protection here. That would however require legislation and seems unlikely.

VAT on Listed Buildings / versus new build - our heritage needs a level playing field - could NI pilot a way through?

NI’s listed building stock is small enough (c.9000) that one could be forgiven for conceiving of a pilot return to the 0% rate for listed building repairs here perhaps as an evidence gathering exercise for a set period (say 5 years) and also in recognition that listing was introduced in NI a lot later than GB. Also, due to armed conflict we lost a lot of our heritage. For years the UK sector has called for such a change, and never more loudly given the need to utilise the embodied carbon held in existing structures as part of the carbon economy, but what would it cost? Well with only 9000 listed buildings and 1000 or more (10% +) at risk and c. 900 in public sector ownership, we could make the case that in NI for a large number it wouldn’t actually cost anything - as evidently these buildings are not being restored on the whole anyway in favour of knock down and new build or facade retention schemes (i.e. no VAT loss if a replacement building would be 0% after demolition anyway). Add to this the net zero and embodied carbon arguments, as well as the fact NI has comparatively little left of our built heritage - so our listed buildings are proportionately more important to our cultural heritage - and perhaps a compelling case could be compiled.

Indeed, such an approach could well finally see some of our longest vacant and now derelict city

centre buildings and other dilapidated listed landmarks across NI brought back from the brink, turning the tide on decades of underinvestment as well as the ever increasing “economic viability” argument often made at planning stage. It may also boost our heritage economy and make it more self-sustaining in the long run. Should the case not be made to UK ministers responsible for VAT in NI? Has DfC / HED worked up a public value business case yet and if not, why not? We need to make the point that the NI heritage sector is fundamentally different from GB and material costs tend to be more here even before we consider that the NI heritage sector has much more to contend with. For example, due to much lower property values in NI, the conservation deficit for restoring a humble thatched cottage here is now multiple times its end value if placed on the market. This is inadvertently hurting our cultural heritage.

As above, the unintended consequence of this means there is demonstrably a disproportionate impact of the 20% VAT on NI’s historic built environment as fewer buildings are protected by listing or conservation areas etc here (so more may simply be demolished in favour of 0% VAT on new build), we have not yet completed our Second Survey (so listable buildings are being bulldozed daily), we have fewer conservation areas and as such more change / loss of unprotected built heritage is possible. Indeed, properties are listed to target investment / planning etc yet 20% VAT on repair of listed buildings versus 0% on knockdown and rebuild undermines the purpose of listing (as a planning tool and somewhat flies in the face of the ordinary private owner of a listed building whose property carries a land charge for the wider public good). The current situation means owners of listed buildings are additionally disadvantaged (they already pay higher insurance costs etc) and has created a culture of widespread demolition of our heritage here, as well as unsustainable planning practices in

terms of utilising embodied carbon etc. The greenest building overall is more often than not the one that already exists, and even ‘green’ new builds take years to be carbon neutral beyond initial demolition and rebuild carbon costs. It may be that as historic buildings are much fewer comparatively in NI that we are more acutely aware of possible impacts and earlier on than elsewhere. These are however matters for others to consider further.

Do you rate our built heritage?

The public value in listed buildings and the contribution they make to economic and social well-being in NI is widely acknowledged. However, in the absence of a meaningful and sustainable level of listed building repair grant being available to support private owners’ custodianship of our built heritage (and so its continued existence to enrich lives both now and in the future), could we also perhaps look again at rate exemptions for listed buildings? This could be a way of discouraging vacancy and dereliction, but also achieving multi-year investment in listed buildings across NI. This could not and should not replace repair grants (these are often needed as match funding to leverage other extra-NI funding) but a rates relief could be a relatively cheap way of making all listed buildings more attractive prospects and getting the multi-year investment they need whilst making timely enforcement more equitable in cases of disrepair. This might also make listing an easier pill to swallow for the ordinary private owner as a sort of dispensation for the impact of listing on private property rights.

For example:

Average NI domestic rates bill (assume £1000 per year) x 9000 listed buildings = £9m?

This approach would need nothing extra to re-

source in terms of admin funding as the NI Rates system and List already exist. It would simply be a matter of applying for rate relief and perhaps signing up to maintain your listed building in reasonable repair to qualify. Thus, vacant buildings in good repair can get rate relief but those in bad repair would not. Proactive engagement between council planning enforcement, conservation officers, owners and HED would be key and should already be happening. Currently, vacant listed buildings pay no rates irrespective of repair which means there is no incentive to prevent dereliction or land banking where the aim may be to allow a property to deteriorate to achieve planning concessions (and potentially considerable private or commercial gain) down the line. Revenue from rating vacant buildings in poor repair could then be put into enforcement or built heritage grants elsewhere - so at least some public good might come from cases of dereliction! Are there other ways in which we could make these buildings more viable prospects, to encourage their maintenance and reuse leading to better heritage and community outcomes across NI?

Conclusion

Listing is one of a number of planning tools - it’s a marker of public value in buildings of special interest - and should be seen in that light. It is not necessarily a complete blocker to change, but really about managing public value in historic fabric in a sustainable way and making the case for change as part of a planning system which puts public value and communities first. However, in NI c. 10%+ of all listed buildings are now known to be at risk and that’s bearing in mind many have not been re-surveyed in many years. As such, and with a lack of significant strategic investment in this space over decades, both in terms of grants for repair and listed building enforcement (assuming the objective is preservation rather than a managed decline of the

built heritage), as well as 20% VAT on repair versus 0% on new build and it may lead some to ask whether perhaps we have forgotten why we list. Is listing simply now a box-tick / keeping up appearances exercise to satisfy those curious enough to briefly inspect matters, or indeed our international obligations under the Granada convention and suchlike, or is it still a fairly applied, sustainable, community planning tool for achieving wider public good? What can we do to address what appears to be a two-tiered planning / listing system in NI and to make the system work better for all?

The above are really questions for others to answer, but HBC is more concerned than ever about the preservation of the built heritage of NI, a valuable part of our shared cultural heritage, and what this means for communities here as well as the stability of our heritage skills sector: the current situation appears unsustainable and is leaving unrealised economic and social potential untapped. With so many examples of dereliction of ‘protected’ buildings in our countryside, towns, villages and even city centres, set against a backdrop of ‘as little as possible’ heritage protection / investment and snowballing planning concessions, how can we not be concerned? One only needs to take a brief walk around our capital city or a drive down a country lane to see it for yourself, or rather: ‘see where it used to be...’

Conor Sandford

- Mr Sandford is an alumnus of the Archaeology Department of Queen’s University Belfast. Previously a Senior Heritage Policy Advisor to the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, he has an interest in industrial heritage and has worked in the Northern Ireland Second Survey.

Annex A

Recommendations of HBC for consideration by the relevant authorities:

1. That a DfC scheme for underwriting enforcement cases be considered to support District Councils with their responsibilities in this space as an interim measure. HED/HBC would need to be a consultee prior to underwriting such cases.
2. That DfC holds (or takes) reserve powers to undertake enforcement in cases (Urgent Works Notices / Compulsory Purchase Order) in cases where a district council have chosen not to act.
3. That all 'record only' list entries are reviewed to ensure historic interest is being given sufficient weighing in listing assessments in NI and that such cases are not influenced by irrelevant considerations such as impact on land value or future redevelopment plans.
4. That a full list of 'record only' list entries be more discoverable on the published online list.
5. That public value business cases be put regarding:
6. The greatly increasing the level of Listed Building Repair Grants in NI (above 2015 levels) and highlighting the snowballing costs now associated with repair of listed buildings in NI as a legacy of underinvestment, particularly relevant for private owners;
7. Consideration of rates exemptions to both encourage maintenance of listed buildings and drive multi-year investment in statutorily protected listed buildings;
8. Consideration of VAT on listed building repairs in NI and the impacts of the current approach is having on heritage protection in the NI heritage context.

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Northern Irish thatch: are we witnessing an extinction event or just more additions to the ‘critically endangered’ list? – Conor Sandford

If the above language seems emotive, and borne out of some degree of realised disappointment, that is because it is.

Indeed, as we all know, inherent to matters of ‘heritage’ - a values-based definition - are highly individualised and emotive questions of culture, art, identity and the very fabric of who we are, what these places represent, the stories that they tell in all facets and walks of life, and to all communities. That is a concept which will be all too familiar to communities and individuals in-and-across NI which has on occasions been called something of a cultural battleground.



Dan Winter's Cottage, Armagh

Perhaps our relationship with our built heritage might in some quarters be categorised as a legacy issue associated with our Troubled past, to others simply the physical fabric which tells the narrative of this place at the human scale in all of its good, bad and sometimes challenging realities. Maybe this is why built heritage is often allowed to crumble here, to be swept away by new developments, in the pursuit of ‘progress’ and the avoidance of ‘tricky issues’, rather than celebrating its diversity and integrating the same into new schemes or frankly getting the best out of what our authentic past has given us.

One can't help but feel that we are however increasingly, selling something of our soul to the behest of the developer's plunder in many cases and sacrificing places of intrinsic value(s) for relatively short-term financial gains or otherwise. But why can't we stop to consider: that a thing of beauty, is a joy for ever, and for all...



Cottage overlooking the natural landscape

The Kilmore Cottage: a pre-emptive ode to NI thatch

Oh to be beneath that old thatched roof, where countless dreamed of better, would warm my hearth and stay my founds, bog-oak purlins, sod 'n lime.

Three hundred years have past me by and people came and gone:

the apples at the 'half-dure',

the byre down below,

the weaver at his loom, the occasional bride and groom, to grace my fancy papered room.

NI thatch as a critically endangered species

As a [fairly] young person who grew up in NI in the 90s it was with a degree of disbelief that some years ago I read that in 1950 NI had some c.40,000 thatched homes and now only c. 177 or less remain (c.48 are on the At Risk Register and many more could be added). That's not to suggest that we would all want to live in a thatched cottage (let's be realistic), nor is it about asking people to live in the past, but it is nonetheless a fairly remarkable change - and indeed loss of our shared cultural heritage - in less than a lifetime. In fact, the DfC Historic Environment Division's recent and very comprehensive ‘Thatched Building Condition Survey (2021-22)’ states that when listing began in NI in the 1970s c. 600-700 thatched buildings survived here. So how did we get here and how few is too few? Ask anyone of this place and they will invariably mention a thatched cottage, yet in reality that aspect of our identity at home and on the international stage is in fact nearly all but gone, just look:

	Historic number of thatch (year reported)	Number of thatched buildings that survive
NI	40,000 in 1950	c.177 in 2023
ROI	-	c.1300 in 2005
Scotland	-	c.221 in 2015
Wales	-	-
England	c.35,000 (1960)	c.24,000 listed (2016)

Of course, the reality is that heritage and these sorts of places were not a priority in NI for many years and for obvious reasons too. We have often of course had to focus on finding solutions to what can be divisive (religions, politics, murals, languages, symbols etc) rather than what is agreed and as such valuable parts of our shared heritage has often been overlooked, such as our humble vernacular thatched cottages. The assumption being that someone else will look after them or that they are of no consequence. However, is it not incumbent on us as a society to build a future based on an authentic, stable, foundation to ensure future generations have the tools and places to understand our past? What is the current approach denying future generations? These are important questions to ask, particularly in times of fiscal constraint and the impossible decision-making that results.

It might also be important to remember that the vernacular thatched cottage is a vulnerable architecture (i.e. it does not take long for cuts to repair grants to turn into thatched roofs failing or for a roof to go when the dwelling is vacant / unloved). Culture and heritage always seem to be the first things to go and the last to return when there are funding cuts, but for many these are the things that make life worth living and which can transcend generational spending if it survives to be bestowed. As such, thatched cottages might be described as an early indicator species for our heritage sector generally and where the last decade of cuts and historic underinvestment and / or underappreciation have shown up first and most clearly.

The vernacular is also an architecture which was born out of the very physical fabric and universal needs of all our places and people: a common heritage, but soon to fade back into the earth from whence it came, ashes-to-ashes, mud-to-mud. Such narratives however are generally agreed and to be frank therefore often forgotten, underfunded and

at risk of loss. Is this progress and what does this loss mean for our future focus?

As a society - 26 years on from the Belfast / Good Friday Agreement - might we not now reasonably seek to reassess our relationship with our built heritage and save the precious little we have left? To celebrate that heritage in all its diversity as part of the collective and authentic narrative of this place, each part adding to the interest of the collective whole? Of course, as HBC we will invariably be advocates for such buildings and the role they can play in building a sustainable, inclusive, society on the foundation and stage of our shared historic built environment, irrespective of the politics. However, the above are broader questions which we might all ask of ourselves, of our communities and of our leaders.

Certainly, some stories may - to say the least - be difficult to some, but if history is anything to go by then in truth should not be forgotten or rewritten either formally, by attrition or one brick (or straw) at a time. An authentic heritage is a valuable thing: a 3D-printed, curated and / or disneyfied reconstruction less so (I've never been that inspired by a fake - there's nothing quite like seeing the real thing to give perspective on our past and present in all of those colours and sometimes stark realities). However, will we soon see a situation where our thatched heritage is confined to reconstructions in The Ulster Folk Museum? Where will our tourists go or stay then and what would that mean for our heritage economy? Are we really set to lose the few remaining authentic historic thatched buildings still out there and all the added value associated with the same? The unhappy truth is, frankly, as things currently stand for the most-part, yes.



A white thatched cottage with a red door.

Oh the thatcher used to come to me to help me with me hair, but many-a-day has now passed-by with little or indeed no care.

Though the place from which I hath been made was just a field away, times have changed and methods too as ages gone and past, but for now I still remain here: a house of equal halves.

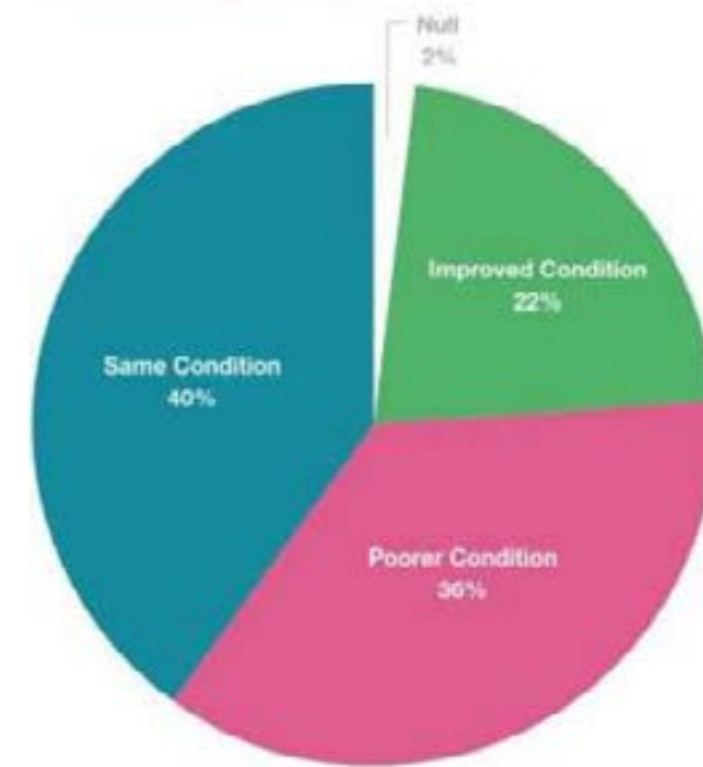
See, my front was one-time gentrified, but my rear remained the same.

No tin, harl or whitewash can my origins profane.

See they put that crinkly tin on me, a hundred years ago, but soon that tin did rust right through, no longer kept me dry.

Alone I stood no heat, nor air and soon the rot set in, whilst those who passed soon forgot what lay beneath my tin.

Overall Condition compared to 2007 Thematic Survey



Deteriorating condition of NI thatched buildings in 2022 compared to a survey undertaken in 2007 (Source: HED 2022)

Some may see the very real possible loss of the iconic thatched cottage from the NI countryside and this island as something of a major contradiction given both the UK and Ireland are each signatories to The Convention for the Protection of the Architectural Heritage of Europe (Granada, 1985). The main purpose of the Granada Convention is to reinforce and promote policies for the conservation and enhancement of Europe's heritage. It also is designed to foster practical cooperation among the Parties. One might reasonably ask if there is an opportunity here for a collaborative approach north-south, east-west, but whichever leaders you look to, a once ubiquitous sight and an iconic part of our shared historic built environment in NI, as well as our international tourism and diplomatic soft power offer, is frankly disappearing like snow off a ditch, or perhaps more appropriately: like butter off a hot tin roof. And, when it's gone it's gone

folks. There's no bringing it back in a way which holds the same sway or value at home and abroad.



The listed family home of the renowned Irish 19th century novelist and writer William Carleton, complete with 'blue plaque'. William Carleton's Cottage, Clougher (HB13/02/004) (Image Source: HED 2022 - one of many such examples of thatch at risk within that eye-opening report)

Why is it that we do not see the value and beauty in these buildings or power they hold when others clearly do? For example, a recent community-led thatched cottage project in County Armagh (in which the author is involved) undertook an online consultation on reuse of one of our thatch-under-tin buildings (The Kilmore Cottage). This received responses from right across the UK and Ireland, as well as the USA and Canada.

One response from The United States of America stated:

“There is a large Irish diaspora in North America who could be enticed to come and experience the lives of their ancestors. Any building of that age should not be allowed to disappear. The cottage is part of the fabric of the community, a complex woven masterpiece that must be maintained to be appreciated by subsequent generations.”

Architecture is in many respects artwork with the aesthetic and often conceptual power to inspire both current and future generations. The vernacular thatch being one woven by generations out of need and place, but rarely seen in the artistic light, despite the skill and artisan craftsmanship required by the thatcher. The sight of a thatch now evokes a somewhat emotional nostalgia given their scarcity and being something of an old friend, can be uplifting, heartwarming, a reminder of a more peaceful / perhaps simpler time as we pass in our cars at speed on our way to work or to do a quick shop.

Conversely, perhaps had we been talking about the immediate loss / export of world-famous painting from the country to another, we might expect swathes of support for holding on to it and at considerable public cost. No doubt, with some major cultural institution taking the lead in gathering philanthropic donations from around the world as match-funding to hold on to it. However, in NI we

have no such publicly funded arm's length body to champion our built heritage and which could take the lead on such things for our thatches free from the daily to-and-fros of political life.

Indeed, many of our forebears here - just a generation or two ago and from all communities - were born under the thatch, yet for my generation you're lucky if you've ever seen one in the wild: the elusive thatch is now something of an endangered species and increasingly at risk. When, then (if ever) will we as a society realise what we have already lost and what we are set to lose altogether in the very near future? And why should we care? Will even the current generation look back and wonder what on earth we were thinking or are we still focused on trying (to a degree) to forget about our past? What will we tell the American / Canadian / Australian cousins when they come to visit and spend their cash seeking out the ancestral homeplace? Perhaps: “oh well that's where the cottage used to be” [insert to mental image the generic replacement concrete bungalow and/or Mc/MaC-Mansion(s) which have so much changed the face of our countryside over the last 30 years under the auspices of the replacement dwelling scheme].

Increasingly, “that's where it used to be” is a phrase we and indeed our tourists seem to be increasingly familiar with. Just take a tour around any part of our countryside and you'll hear it repeatedly, but are we aware of the costs of this loss into the future? Surely we can't be...?

The looming extinction event on the horizon

To be frank, as the survival rates indicate and given c. 10-15 year repair cycles / life spans for thatched roofs in NI (without a major policy intervention now) then in the next 5-10-15 years it seems highly likely to this author that the population of historic

thatched buildings in NI will move from being representative of a critically endangered species to nay on extinct in the wild (outside of a museum setting or third sector ownership). As such, NI is set to lose an iconic part of our heritage. Why? Well, a tin or slate roof is much easier to look after and ours is a growth industry. That is to say that the heritage sector requires a baseline of heritage buildings on which to survive / to keep the relevant skills alive such as thatching, as well as availability of materials etc (did you know that our thatching reed now comes from as far afield as Turkey?).



A thatched roof and gable viewed from inside

Oh my neighbours were once just as I, but they have gone asunder:

a little here, a little there, the occasional developer's blunder...

The last straw I now here must have drawn but yonder is a day, whence tourists from America would want to pay to stay!

Oh I long to see that thatcher here to help me with me hair.

That drip, drip, drip beneath the eaves, a shower for thy head.

But the ground's come up and hedge has too: forgotten here to die.

In NI we have systemic / market failure when it comes to thatched buildings, VAT rules are also set by UK Government ministers and are in effect inadvertently taxing NI thatch out of the picture. Why? Well for example in England a thatched roof may last 30 years, but in NI we are lucky if we get 10 - 15 years and it can be a little as 7 years, due to our weather/ climate and materials. As such, we are paying at least twice as much (plus VAT) on simply keeping a thatched roof over our heads. When we add this to the fact that many of our listed thatched buildings are now well beyond economic restoration as a legacy of under investment, repair and enforcement here and the future might have to be crinkly tin roofs for all, or none at all. This is why thatched buildings can only now survive with sustained and reliable grant support, short of a major systemic change that might see these places become self-sustaining in the long run. In effect our system needs CPR and quite a shock to bring back to life in order to simulate sufficient growth in our heritage economy (skills, tourism, social and economic wellbeing) to make it more sustainable on its own.

Also, when one compares the thatch survival rates with England (having c.35,000 thatches in 1960s and still having c.25,000 listed thatches today) and one begins to see the stark contrast in survival for our built heritage in NI. Indeed, perhaps the obvious case for a major intervention here - if we are serious about preserving our shared iconic heritage - is again all the more obvious.

The heritage skills shortages in NI will be all too familiar to the ordinary listed building owner here, but indeed the specific and particular skills needed to maintain a thatched roof, as well as vernacular buildings generally, are now difficult to find at all and frankly prohibitively expensive, if you can even get a builder willing to do the work. 20% VAT to pay on repairs which are already expensive in comparison to modern materials adds additional bur-

den (a quick internet search reveals that a bag of lime is now c.£14 plus VAT yet cement is c. £7 a bag plus VAT). As such, for the ordinary person just wanting a roof over their head, it's for the most part not viable to live in a thatched cottage in NI anymore, unless you've won the lottery or are frankly handy with a stook, leggett, and thatch stitching hook! (hold that thought!)



A derelict thatched house with a traffic cone between the gateposts.

But along came one day some passers-by who came behind the hedge and said:

'what lies beneath your wrinkly skin our dear old faithful friend'.

They talk of plans, of community, a glint of hope for me, but time it passed and hope seemed slim as the crinkle tin grew thin.

Oh lowly lie my lintels, brows, the rot it has set in, I'd be gone already, I suppose, if it weren't for that old tin!

My aged panes do creek and yawn, my fan-lights gone off yonder, but staunchly standing I do remain despite the developer's plunder.

Repair cycles - how many thatches does a thatcher require to make his trade reliably paid?

Also, there are only a handful of thatchers on this island and who are they handing their skills on to? In 2014 it was reported that only two thatchers were based in NI - now it may well be one but certainly in the single figures. At what stage will the condition of the surviving thatched building stock reach the end game in terms of costs / conservation deficit? Are we already at or past that point? As things currently stand, for those cottages long vacant the answer might well be yes with repair bills now set in the multiple hundreds of thousands of pounds upwards and often the conservation deficit being at least double the value of the property or more.

There is also the plain fact that allowing a thatched property to decay - even if listed - may reap benefits for owners in terms of securing a replacement dwelling or 'a site'. For example, the National Trust's 2017 restoration of Frizzell's Cottage at Address House, Co. Armagh, came in at c.£344k (before recent construction cost highs / inflation) according to its website and as such the annual listed building repair grant in NI in each of the financial years from 2015 would not have been enough to restore one cottage, never mind make any dent in the repair of c.9000 listed buildings in NI or even the 177 thatched cottages now in need of support on a cyclical basis. Indeed 177 divided by 15 years (being average repair cycles for thatched roofs) equals 11.8 thatched roofs needing repaired each year (just under one a month). So do we even have enough roofs left for one thatcher in NI? How then can we suppose this is sustainable? Thatching will need to be a part-time job. The short answer is that it is not sustainable and we need to make a conscious decision on whether we are happy to let the iconic thatch fade into the Annals of Ulster or see a revival

of the skills needed. In the case of Frizzell's Cottage, it appears the building was gifted to the Trust - so presumably cost c.£0 to acquire. Whereas a building site in that location may have been worth c.£50-100k or more. This is where the problem resides: there is no incentive or support for owners to address systemic failure for thatch or incentivise reuse over rebuild. Really, we need to say - well in 10 years our thatched cottages will be no more than a pile of mud bricks and a lucrative building site where 0% VAT for a rebuild will apply anyway. Thus, do we invest at true conservation deficit costs now and forgo VAT, acknowledging the value of these properties before it's too late, rather than see these buildings and their added socioeconomic value go?



Leading by example: The National Trust's recent 2017 restoration of Frizzell's Cottage, County Armagh (before and after) (Source: National Trust 2024)

As such, and short of major funding, difficult decision making and strategic investment happening on a systemic level, we can almost certainly soon say goodbye to the picture-perfect thatched cottage postcard sent from these shores. This is no longer about doing up the odd cottage for 'private gain' but about saving an important and integral part of our shared heritage and indeed a heritage art: thatching. Perhaps today's society is ok with losing these places, but soon will future generations look back with some degree of resentment? For this author, I must confess that I already look back at the last 10-15 years and cannot understand why we are letting so many of these beautiful buildings disappear only for generic concrete bungalows to reappear with slates imported from halfway around the world.

The impact of a decade of under investment as well as the establishment of artificial grant and repair cycles / unrealistic expectations of funders.

As the headwater of repairs builds up, saving these buildings becomes more expensive every day and thus difficult to achieve for private owners or even community groups to be frank. These buildings have particular needs and are best used as homes, tourist accommodation or perhaps the odd cafe, but not museums, village halls etc as they need to pay for themselves somehow in the long run to be sustainable prospects.

Such uses don't always align with expectations of big funders (such as NHLF or others) which are understandably now less about heritage assets and more about wider community value / needs beyond a building itself. As such, private owners are unlikely to get any funding worth talking about and even community groups' plans get much more expensive than simply saving a building, but perhaps

more sustainable / added value in the long run. In short, this is going to be expensive to sort out and it won't happen overnight (we will lose more thatch before it gets better in any event). So, do we have the time and in the absence of a funded arm's length body for heritage in NI, who is going to take the lead?

Could we not do more to capitalise on the soft power of these buildings and the potential for philanthropy at home and abroad? Many around the world have an affinity and / or connection somewhere along the line to the NI thatched cottage. There is yet unrealised value here, perhaps.

How do we create a sustainable workload for the few thatchers left and ensure those skills are not lost? To an extent 1 year Stormont funding budgets / cycles have - it would seem - helped to manufacture problems with NI thatch by creating artificial grant and repair cycles (supply and demand).

What is the succession planning for both skills and indeed these buildings which are so vulnerable to vacancy etc? Unfortunately, it would appear that there is no strategic plan, and we may be too late to turn the tide on this loss. Tourist accommodation as a use may save some, if you've got the money up front and your building is in a good state of repair to begin with (forget about getting a grant to make it happen these days as a private owner). Other cottages will simply fade away quietly. Someday, perhaps after the final collapse event itself and as the mud bricks melt back into the earth, we will wake up and realise there are none left... and indeed the potential of what we have lost.



A white painted thatched building with red doors.

*Oh I long to see that thatcher here to help
me with me hair,*

*Though these wooden pegs are failing fast,
'the cure' might now be costly:*

*a poor man thatch, now a rich man's pre-
serve, how did it come to this?*

*Our 'hair-itage', those skills and sights gone
to the deep abyss?*

Thatching a plan: ok, it is easy to complain, but what's the answer?

The obvious answer for a quick win would be cutting the 20% VAT due on listed thatched building repairs in NI given the inherent cyclical repair needs of such buildings and that they might all soon end up as building sites (were 0% VAT can apply anyway). Indeed, a thatched roof in England may last 30 years, but in NI we might hope for 10-15 years (at best) due to our weather. VAT is however a matter for UK Government ministers to consider and even if we could get traction on this issue that would of itself be unlikely to be enough to turn the tide for the few remaining thatched buildings left (i.e. it would not address the systemic failure). So, we must think even bigger: Substantial, long-term, and reliable strategic investment to address the market / systemic failure is the only answer but the sums may now be eye watering given the headwater of repairs built up over the last 10-15 years or longer. Many cottages will now have to be more patch than cloth, but that need not be unauthentic or useful (systemically) if we get there in time for faithful patchwork. Others may require a tin roof as an interim measure so we don't lose them altogether. This is now about saving an entire historic industry, iconic tangible and intangible aspect of our cultural heritage. To succeed we need to think big, get backing and act fast. Much will likely rely on collaborative working and need support from organisations such as: AHF, NHLF, NHMF, UAH, HED, Tourism NI, Arts Council, InvestNI and all levels of government, as well as potentially international partners. Perhaps it's too much of an ask?

A strategy is also required for longer drip-fed investment to create a sustainable repair and demand cycle (i.e a 15-year project delivery cycle for all thatch in NI might create a more sustainable system overall and make thatching as a job more

reliable). A one-off lump sum might help short term, but this would be unlikely to resolve the systemic issue / market failure or give confidence to those thinking of re-thatching rather than a new tin roof or that more lucrative building site. Coupled with this needs to be a skills training / sharing endeavour for thatched building owners and communities, as well as proactive engagement with current owners and succession planning. A standard quickly implemented intervention (third sector owned scaffolding / temporary corrugated roof etc) when thatched properties become vacant may also be of value.

Leaders! Our thatches need you!

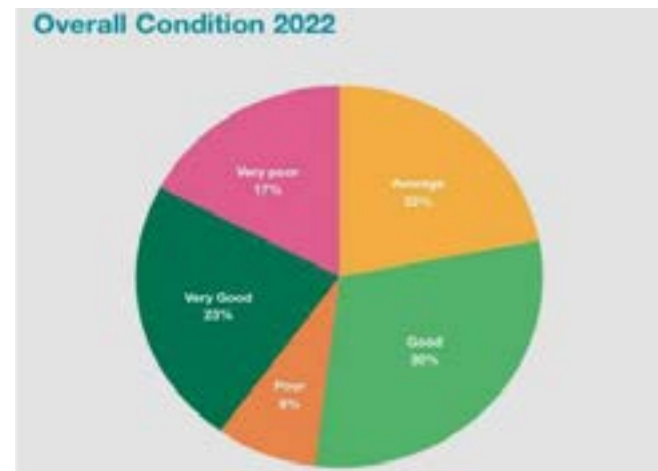
Then, who would fund, champion and deliver it? We don't have a funded arm's length body or major cultural institution in NI to champion heritage or to deliver such strategic investment here. A thatch building owners' group has been established in NI but again who will fund and support? What can we learn from other areas across the UK and Ireland where more thatch survives? Should we have an annual thatch owners survey to look at occupancy, succession planning and skills (i.e. is a property likely to become vacant and so needs temporary support etc?).

What would it cost?

Well the recent report by the Historic Environment Division (HED 2022) indicates that c.177 thatched buildings remain in NI and about half are in good repair (allow c.£50k grants for each of these: being 30k for thatch and 20k for repairs / energy upgrades etc). The other 50% of remaining thatch cottages are said to be in average, poor or very poor condition. As such - and using the NT's Frazell's Cottage as a very rough guide (which cost c.£344k to restore) - we may now need approx. £ 35 - 40 million (or more!) plus any applicable VAT and

admin funding to deliver if we are serious about saving the NI thatches left. This would need to be staggered over a 15-year project delivery cycle to achieve more sustainable outcomes. So in effect we need at least c. £3 million a year for thatched buildings alone and for 15 years. Failing that, then perhaps consideration might be given to the Ulster Folk Museum employing a full-time thatcher to work across NI, sharing skills with owners / communities as a sort of travelling engagement piece using thatched cottages as a stage for community engagement and apprenticeships etc. That said, The All-Ireland Heritage Skills Programme (funded by The King's Foundation, Department for Communities and The Heritage Council) has already begun doing great work in the heritage skills space generally, but more support is needed for the private owners of our remaining thatched buildings, specifically to help with what are huge costs for re-thatching, re-ridging and insurance if we are to avoid widespread losses.

What would a revitalised 'cottage industry' mean for tourism, the rural economy, farm diversification, socioeconomic wellbeing, and heritage skills in NI generally? Alternatively, there may soon be a need to look to funders of last resort and take a select few of these properties into State Care.



Condition of NI thatched buildings in 2022 (Source:HED 2022)

Conclusion - Thatch as an indicator species

Thatched buildings, owing to their particular needs (specialist skills, vulnerability when vacant etc) are - for want of a better analogy - something of an indicator species for our heritage sector in NI generally and most would agree that the picture is now less than idyllic. Are we simply to let the hedges out front of these historic homes grow taller - out of sight out of mind - to leave it to the next generation to sort out, for the odd one that survives? Or is it not time that we finally stopped the rot of our shared cultural heritage?

The truth is that without major interventions, leadership and collaboration in this space we are set to lose a valuable and internationally recognised aspect of our shared cultural heritage and Unique [tourism] Selling Point: the iconic thatched cottage. That's got to be very short-term thinking.

Indeed, due to a lack of skills and the headwater of repairs built up over decades these properties are now prohibitively expensive for the ordinary person to own as a home without support: what was once a poor man's roof is now a rich man's preserve and the unhappy truth is that an iconic part of our silent heritage is all but gone. What's worse and perhaps most shocking is that, despite all the talk and their continual decline, it would seem nobody obvious is coming to the rescue...

Conor Sandford

- Mr Sandford is an alumnus of the Archaeology Department of Queen's University Belfast. Previously a Senior Heritage Policy Advisor to the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, he has an interest in industrial heritage and has worked in the Northern Ireland Second Survey.



A cottage which previously would have had a thatched roof.

The thatcher's fayre, seems is no longer there, to make his trade reliably paid.

Yet 'rite ye be' and 'come, on on in' still here - for now - resides within.

Oh to be beneath that old thatched roof, where countless dreamed of better, would warm my hearth and stay my founds, Bog-oak purlins, sod 'n lime...

CMCS, 2024

Annex A

Recommendations of HBC for consideration by the relevant authorities:

1. That an urgent public value business case immediately be put to UK government ministers regarding what (if any) VAT concessions could be made for NI listed thatch building repairs particularly given the current market failure for these buildings, the importance of thatched buildings to our cultural identity at home and abroad as well as our tourist offer. The particular needs of the NI thatch should be highlighted given the current approach for VAT on thatch repairs in NI is a significant additional burden over-and-above thatched roofs in England (where they can last twice as long) - to note that if our thatched buildings end up being building sites, new build may be 0% VAT anyway.
2. That consideration be given to the rating of all thatched buildings in NI in order to help with current high insurance costs for these buildings, most of which are privately owned.
3. That a call be put out to existing stakeholders such as cultural organisations / third sector organisations / strategic stakeholders to establish a NI thatch steering group and a long-term strategic plan for making NI thatch sustainable, in consultation with thatched building owners.
4. That DfC consider how any unspent HED Repair Grant (due to unrealistic grand deadlines and short c.3-month windows for grant works rather than demand) could be reallocated, rather than handed back to a central DfC pot. Could this be used to support a thatched building owner's group with annual survey returns around condition, vacancy, skills sharing and community engagement, or indeed the establishment of a multi-year emergency repair fund etc?

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