

Winter 2015, Volume 3

SPECIAL ISSUE: *Mapping an Altered Landscape: Cultural Policy and Management in Ireland*

## Organisers' Introduction

PAT COOKE & KERRY MCCALL

*Mapping an Altered Landscape: cultural policy and management in Ireland since 2008* arose out of a need to reflect on changes in cultural policy and practice in Ireland since 2008.

In planning for it, we had a number of specific goals in mind: we wanted to bring together a diverse range of voices to debate the challenges thrown up by retrenchment and change in the cultural sphere during the years of recession; we wanted to facilitate a conversation about culture that ranged wider than the fields of art and heritage, embracing important cultural sectors, such as the media and local government, and other forms of contemporary and emergent cultural practice; and we wanted to provide an opportunity for wide-ranging critical reflection on current cultural policies and management practices. We also hoped to get people thinking about the links and overlaps between the arts and heritage and the wider landscape of cultural experience in the Ireland of 2014 – in other words, the wide range of elements that might conceivably form part of a genuinely comprehensive cultural policy.

The last such conference was convened by the School of Art History and Cultural Policy in UCD in July 2008. The intervening years have witnessed dramatic changes in virtually every dimension of Irish life, including of course the cultural field. Ireland's economy has moved from being a global success story to having one of the highest fiscal deficits in the Eurozone. Back in 2008, four-year-old Facebook had 145m users; today it has over a billion. Two-year-old Twitter had 1.5m monthly users; today it has over 300 million. Apple released its first iPhone in June 2007, and the Irish are now among the most prolific users of the device. Social networking technologies have become vectors of profound cultural change, transforming patterns of communication and cultural consumption in paradigm-shifting ways, all with challenging implications for cultural policy. These years have also been marked by sharp falls in government funding of public services, including culture. In 2008, the Arts Council/ An Chomhairle Ealaíon's government funding amounted to €81m and the Heritage Council/ An Chomhairle Oidhreachta was €18.7m. In 2015, the Arts Council/ An Chomhairle Ealaíon's budget is €56.9 (a fall of 30% since 2008). In 2014, the Heritage Council/ An Chomhairle Oidhreachta received €5.9m (a fall of 29% from 2008).

The steep decline in public funding has compelled cultural managers and practitioners to adapt their skills and practices in dramatic ways. Public funding of cultural projects now comes with much more prescriptive expectations relating to return on public investment. There is now an unprecedented emphasis on developing fundraising skills to match public funding or to compensate for its loss. Despite sharp declines in both resources and capacities, cultural organisations are expected to achieve more ambitious goals for expanding audiences and broadening access to their services, while at the same time demonstrating greater entrepreneurial spirit in generating a diversity of revenue streams.

Given all that has transpired since 2008, those attending the conference had much to reflect on, discuss and consider.

Organisers' Introduction

Pat Cooke &amp; Kerry McCall

**The cultural policy challenge**

The historic record of cultural planning in Ireland is very patchy and possibly more erratic than in many comparable European countries. The attempt to find the right segmented combination of cultural elements seems to have dogged efforts to form a 'department of culture' since it was first inaugurated in 1994 when Michael D. Higgins became the first Minister for Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht. An extraordinary level of turbulence has marked efforts to define what should be put into, or left out of a department of culture ever since. The following terms, shuffled and changed in 1996, 2002, 2010 and 2011, have been used in the five versions the department's title has taken to-date: *arts, culture, heritage, Gaeltacht, islands, sport and tourism*. In contrast, the Department of Culture, Media and Sport in the UK has retained the same title, and broadly the same range of functions, since it was set up in 1997.

What might this turbulent nomenclature signify? It is surely indicative of some uncertainty about how to identify, and then organise, the valid dimensions of a cultural policy within a stable or coherent framework. It stems partly from a political culture that favours pragmatic, incremental and short-term fixes to finding solutions for organisational challenges. Our approach to constitutional and institutional design seems to lack consistent grounding in principles of citizenship, equality and collective purpose, embodying rights of access to certain public goods – including, of course, cultural ones. From this perspective, we might notice how shakily grounded in legislation some of our institutional arrangements for culture are. In terms of domestic legislation, for example, successive Arts Council/ An Chomhairle Ealaíon policy statements have emphasised the centrality of the artist to arts policy – yet there is no explicit reference to the artist in the Arts Act – despite its being amended twice in 1973 and 2004. We also have a lackadaisical attitude to enacting international covenants we signed up to.<sup>1</sup> More philosophically, though we live in a republic, we often fail to take account of republican principles of government in designing institutional structures. In this context, it might be noted that whatever about the merits of creating and sustaining an academy for elite artists, Aosdána has no statutory basis of its own.

Historically, the field of arts and culture has been burdened by rhetorically high expectations in proportion to exceedingly modest inputs. In 1951, Taoiseach John A. Costello wrote a memo on section 2 of the Arts Bill, describing his thoughts on the advisory role of the impending Arts Council. He envisaged that the Council would give 'expert advice on the *wide variety of matters* arising in the course of Government administration'. He then listed the kind of things that advice might cover:

the formulation of plans for the establishment of national academies of music and painting; ancient monuments; town planning; advertising in furtherance of the development of tourism traffic; official publications, posters etc.; photographs and films; State buildings and their furnishing; and the designs of coins, medals, seals, postage stamps and uniforms.<sup>2</sup>

This is a very wide list, covering the fields of arts and heritage - things that weren't separated out until the setting up of the National Heritage Council of 1982, (which led to the inauguration of a statutory Heritage Council under the Heritage Act of 1995). More significantly, Costello's 'wide variety' of functions reveals how, from the outset, an arts policy was expected to bear the weight of a range of expectations. These expectations implicitly belong to a much more comprehensive cultural policy, embracing what would nowadays be recognized, as a cultural industries policy. It was expected to achieve all of this on a budget of £10,000 a year, a part-time unpaid Director and one secretary, working with a voluntary council that met about six times a year.

Thomas Bodkin (the main architect of the 1951 Arts Act), was strongly of the view that the

Organisers' Introduction

Pat Cooke &amp; Kerry McCall

new Arts Council should be directly answerable to the Taoiseach and not to the Department of Education, as Costello intended. The Arts Council, Bodkin insisted, should be linked through the Taoiseach's department to all departments of State. He was drawing, no doubt, from bitter experience, recollecting his time as Director of the National Gallery from 1927-35, when the national cultural institutions were directly answerable to the Department of Education. He was wary of allowing that department any extended scope to determine arts policy. 'The plain historic truth is that the senior officers of that Department have never had the slightest interest in or knowledge of the Fine Arts,' he wrote Costello, 'and were...indifferent or openly hostile to efforts made to further, through Art, the prestige and the material prosperity of our country.'<sup>3</sup>

A weak department, as Bodkin shrewdly recognised when advising Costello, would not provide a vehicle powerful enough to coordinate the complex manifestation of cultural issues across the many functions of government, nor would it be powerful enough to counter the tendency of politicians to treat culture as a marginal field of public policy. It is worth noting, that the department remains one of the weakest in terms of cabinet influence, and the only department recommended for axing in the McCarthy Report on reforming the public service in 2009 (McCarthy, McNally, McLaughlin, O'Connell, Slattery, and Walsh, 2009).

In the field of government, it is the misfortune of culture (notoriously elusive and difficult to define) to be high in complexity and low in political priority. To a greater or lesser extent, this remains true for all governments, but perhaps in Ireland the record is one of finding the means, and the language to deal with this complexity. We tend to settle, instead, for a rhetoric that serves to mask culture's true status as a subject of low political priority.

Exactly how low a prioritisation was illustrated by a controversy that hit the headlines in September 2014. John McNulty, a member of the Fine Gael Party, was appointed to the board of the Irish Museum of Modern Art as a device to qualify him as a member of the Seanad's Culture and Education panel, but had to resign within days due to the controversy aroused by the meretricious nature of the manoeuvre. The episode shone a glaring light on the gap between cultural rhetoric and the *realpolitik* of party-political place-hunting, and brought to mind Belfiore's pungent essay on 'bullshit in cultural policy' (Belfiore, 2009). The essence of bullshit is not deceitfulness or lies, she notes, but insincerity, 'humbug', 'mindlessness', 'hot air' and 'clap-trap'. It arises in the gap between rhetoric and sustained, meaningful support and resourcing of culture, and points towards the increasingly fractured disconnect between policy and practice in the cultural field in Ireland. Commenting on what it revealed about politicians' attitude to national cultural institutions, Fintan O'Toole observed that it was 'precisely because the stakes were so low' that so many fundamental principles of good governance were violated (O'Toole, 2014).

### Is a national cultural policy possible?

Every so often the call goes out for a more 'coordinated' or 'integrated' arts and cultural policy. But it appears only fitfully to be pursued as a priority in its own right.

On 23 June 2014, two days before the conference took place, the Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, Jimmy Deenihan, announced his intention to draw up a 'national cultural policy' for Ireland.<sup>4</sup> This announcement provided a dramatic frame of reference for discussions about policy on the day. Many speakers referred to it, at least in the sense of wondering what it might possibly amount to in the end. For it was clear, that buffeted by the altered circumstances of five years of recession, many were wary that this striking declaration might amount to little more than a grand, rhetorical statement of intent.

Organisers' Introduction

Pat Cooke & Kerry McCall

Heather Humphreys has succeeded Minister Deenihan in this cabinet post and she is progressing the commitment to proceed with 'Culture 2025', a national cultural policy for Ireland. From the perspective of the conversations had on the day of the conference, we can only re-emphasise how seductively tempting it is to talk about arts, heritage and wider culture in a celebratory, uplifting way, without applying hard thinking to the really knotty questions of cultural production, practice, management and engagement. Balanced, integrative thinking about culture is difficult. There is a tendency to talk in a formulaic way about 'arts and culture', which might be best represented as 'ARTS (and culture)'. That is, we fall readily into a default habit of thinking about the arts as a placeholder for culture in a wider sense. This blinds us to major challenges, such as the multi-cultural complexion of Irish society and other forms of cultural change that transcend the boundaries of an arts policy.

Another formidable challenge is to find a more stable administrative architecture for the way national government, local government, cultural agencies, and a host of civil society groups and organisations interact and communicate to make a national cultural policy a functional reality. Not only do we require deep and critical thinking to formulate and deliver on a meaningful cultural policy for Ireland, we also need to change the voices in the room in order bring a variety of perspectives, contributions and experiences to the formulation of the first cultural policy for this country. Providing a platform for just such a wider variety of voices was something we consciously made an effort to achieve with the conference.

As Alan Bloom once remarked, the effort to form a cultural policy is 'collective problem solving, animated by the need and desire to resolve the question of the common situation' (Blum, 2003). That policy should not only clarify the scope and objectives of the main arts and culture department in government but have sufficient traction among other governmental departments with significant cultural dimensions to their activities. It must also provide a compelling basis for engaging the public, and those professionally or vocationally involved in culture, in realising its goals and aspirations.

### ***Mapping an Altered Landscape: cultural policy and management in Ireland since 2008***

It has been noted that opportunities for academics to engage with cultural practitioners and producers on issues of research and collaborative concern were scarce, and that more were needed (Hazelkorn, Ryan, Gibson, and Ward, 2013). In providing such a space by way of this conference, we were kindly supported by seed-funding from both UCD and IADT, along with generous support from the Heritage Council/ An Chomhairle Oidhreacta and the Arts Council/ An Chomhairle Ealaíon, we were able to create a much-needed opportunity to bring together a wide spectrum of voices from across the Irish cultural sector.

There were four plenary sessions during the day. The first focused on how well cultural policies, structures and practices have responded to disruptive change since the economic crash. The second queried the fitness of both national and local government structures for the effective delivery of cultural services. The third sought to identify forms of practice across the cultural field that have emerged in response to economic, social and technological change. In the final session, senior practitioners, including the chairs of both the Arts and Heritage Councils, attempted to distil conclusions from the day's deliberations, and reflect upon where the issues raised and ideas might lead us.<sup>5</sup>

Over 160 people joined us for an open conversation with speakers, moderators and audience members ranging from artists and arts managers, to curators, theatre-makers, cultural managers, social media experts, entrepreneurs, museum/heritage professionals, local authority officers, representatives from the Department, Arts and Heritage Councils, government min-

Organisers' Introduction

Pat Cooke & Kerry McCall

isters, students and academics.

They had plenty to say.

Our overriding hope was that the collective wisdom of the participants would allow us to map the nature and extent of alterations in the Irish cultural landscape since 2008, so that we might begin to address some of the really knotty questions on contemporary cultural production, management and engagement.

This publication captures some of this thought and these ideas.

*Pat Cooke has been director of the MA in Cultural Policy and Arts Management since 2006. Previously, he worked for Ireland's state heritage service for over twenty years, where he was director of both Kilmainham Gaol and the Pearse Museum. As a heritage sector manager, he pioneered the use of museums and historic properties in Ireland as sites for major art projects. His experience in the heritage field includes producing cultural and historical exhibitions and audio-visual presentations, and the management of historic sites in line with best principles of conservation practice. He was Chairman of the Irish Museums Association (2002-06), and chaired a Heritage Council committee charged with developing a Museum Standards programme for Irish museums. Currently he is an assessor on the implementation of that programme. Pat currently sits on the Board of the Hunt Museum, Limerick.*

*Kerry McCall is a Lecturer in the Dept of Humanities and Arts Management, Dun Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design & Technology, Dublin and Affiliate Faculty at Leap Institute of the Arts, Colorado State University, USA. She is a founder of the Cultural Policy Observatory Ireland: an all island research network with Dr. Victoria Durrer of Queen's University, Belfast- an initiative seed funded by the Irish Research Council under the 'New Foundations' scheme, 2014. Along with colleagues in the USA and Germany, Kerry coordinates the Arts Management Research Stream of the European Sociological Association, and with colleagues in University College Dublin and Queen's University Belfast, is a founding editor of the Irish Journal for Arts Management and Cultural Policy. Kerry's research interests centre on cultural participation, cultural project management and cultural entrepreneurship.*

## NOTES

1. Ireland ratified the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in December 1989 and has been examined twice by the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. For the Covenant, please see: <http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/ProfessionalInterest/cescr.pdf>
2. Taoiseach's note on Amendment 4 to section 5 of the Arts Bill, April, 1951, National Archives, Taoiseachs File: S14922c.
3. Thomas Bodkin to John A. Costello, letter of 20 December, 1950. National Archives, Taoiseachs File: S15073a.
4. Ironically, conference organiser, Pat Cooke noted in his introductory remarks to the conference, that of the six people who had held that ministerial post since it was inaugurated in 1994, not one went on to hold another cabinet position subsequently. Minister Deenihan was reshuffled to a junior ministry position on 11 July 2014, adding his name to the following list: Michael D Higgins (Dec 1994 - Jun 1997), Sile de Valera (Jun 1997 - Jun 2002), John O'Donoghue (Jun 2002 - Jun 2007), Seamus Brennan (Jun 2007 - May 2008), Martin Cullen (May 2008 - Mar 2010), Mary Hanafin (Mar 2010 - Mar 2010), Jimmy Deenihan (Mar 2011 - Jul 2014)
5. Full information on all plenaries, videos of each session as well as the programme schedule and background information on the speakers and moderators, is available at: [www.culturalpolicyconference2014.ie](http://www.culturalpolicyconference2014.ie).

Organisers' Introduction

Pat Cooke & Kerry McCall

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Belfiore, Eleonora (2009). On bullshit in cultural policy practice and research: notes from the British case. *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 15(3), 343-359.

Blum, Alan (2003). *The Imaginative Structure of the City*. Montreal: McGill Queens University Press, p.54.

Hazelkorn, Ellen, Ryan, Martin, Gibson, Andrew and Ward, Elaine (2013). Recognising the Value of the Arts and Humanities in a Time of Austerity, *HERAVALUE Ireland Report*. July 2013. Higher Education Policy Research Unit (HEPRU): Dublin Institute of Technology, Ireland.

McCarthy, Colm, McNally, Donal, McLaughlin, Pat, O'Connell, Maurice, Slattery, William and Walsh, Mary (2009). *Report of the Special Group on Public Service Numbers and Expenditure Programmes. Volume II: Detailed Papers (McCarthy Report)*. Published 16 July 2009. Dublin: Department of Finance. Available <http://oldwww.finance.gov.ie/documents/pressreleases/2009/bl100vol2.pdf> (Accessed May 2015).

O'Toole, Fintan (2014). Does appointment of McNulty to board of IMMA meet seven principles of public office? *Irish Times*, 30 September.