

2019, Volume 6

Cultural Gateways: The Role of Museums in Cross-Border Relations

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Summary:

This paper looks at the context of cross-border working on the island of Ireland through the lens of its museums. The policy frameworks and breadth of activity are discussed in addition to the challenges posed by Brexit – specifically for partnerships and networks. The author highlights the opportunity that exists for the NI sector to approach Brexit from a position of authority, providing knowledge and expertise from which the regions can draw, taking the role of museums in supporting intercultural dialogue and inclusion from objectivity to activism.

Key words: Museums; Education; Cultural Policy; EU Funding; Brexit; Ireland

Introduction

The role of cultural heritage in peace and reconciliation efforts in Ireland has been a key element of government policies in Northern Ireland (NI) since the 1970s. With museums undergoing deep transformation to become places to explore shared histories and cultures, as well as nurturing valued diversity on the island, this article examines some of the main education and cultural policies that encouraged cross-border partnerships among museums and emphasised the role of museums in supporting intercultural dialogue and inclusion. It looks at the impact of European Union (EU) funding programmes on museum practice across the areas of education, community engagement, exhibitions, and capital investments, bringing together communities from both sides of the Irish border.

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Redefining the museum as vehicle of social change

The Irish Museums Association grew out of the International Council of Museums – Ireland branch in the 1950s as a response to calls to reflect an increased focus on Irish issues and, most importantly, embrace its role as one of a handful of cultural organisations with an all-island remit, encouraging cross-border relations and placing this at the centre of its activities as echoed by its new constitution in 1977, formalising what had already become second nature to museum practitioners in Ireland and Northern Ireland:

To define and support museums; to establish, reinforce and support the museum profession in Ireland, north and south (p. 1).

This signalled a nod towards what was a deep change to take place in museums in the following decades, taking its cue from the international museum sector on what was it that defined a museum: a move from passive repository of collections and temple of retreat to a space where it became an active cultural player and a neutral forum for discussions around identity and place (Witcomb, 2002).

With many of the museums along the Irish border corridor being established or redeveloped in the 1980s and 90s, it is no coincidence that the museum sector in both jurisdictions adopted the wave of change that refocused the museum towards a more audience focused programming, as a tool to promote cultural diversity, cross-community contact, and social inclusion. This embracement of the museum's role as a positive vehicle for social change – while preserving its neutral setting - was advocated by New Labour's government policies, most notably in the seminal policy guidance document *Centres for Social Change: Museums, Galleries and Archives for all* (2000), which did not go unnoticed on the island of Ireland

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Museums, galleries and archives [...] can play a role in generating social change by engaging with and empowering people to determine their place in the world, educate themselves to achieve their own potential, play a full part in society, and contribute to transforming it in the future (p. 8).

The subsequent publication of *A Shared Future Policy and Strategic Framework for Good Relations in Northern Ireland* by the Northern Irish Assembly in 2005 set out among its key aims and objectives to 'encourage understanding of the complexity of our history, through museums and a common school curriculum' (p.10), underlining the role of the museum as a vehicle for informal education and space for exploration of complex and overlapping identities. It stated that museums would contribute to the good relations policy by:

Ensuring that the collections are representative of the diversity which both have been and are present in the geographical area from which local visitors come and those places and domains which represent their interests, affiliations and concerns; ensuring that both permanent and temporary exhibitions represent and examine the interests of all the communities that the museum chiefly serves; devising exhibitions and supporting educational programmes / outreach work which address issues pertinent to the culturally diversity of the geographical area served (p. 33).

The influence of *A Shared Future* was apparent, with increased educational and outreach programmes within our museums reflecting this change in focus, and – with this change in narrative - museums in the border counties embracing the move from spaces that provided escapism from the conflict to spaces where a heightened awareness of the informal learning role of the museum allowed them to follow the lead of formal education curricula in

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providing 'safe spaces for unsafe ideas', a concept coined by Elaine Heumann Guerin, in a keynote at the Museums Australia conference, 1996.

However, this change was still relegated mainly to community engagement projects and temporary exhibitions in museums, such as those promoted by the Community Relations Council and Northern Ireland Museums Council. Yet, discussions around the conflict were still slow to be addressed in the southern part of the border (Todd et al., 2006) and, overall, museums still had some way to go in terms of officially addressing the conflict through their exhibitions, with the Ulster Museum being one of the first museums to address this in 2009 through their Troubles gallery, albeit with some unease and to mixed reviews.

Funding as driver of programming

The influx of EU funding has also been one of the most significant drivers behind the development of cultural heritage as a tool for peace and reconciliation, most significantly through the INTERREG (€1.13 billion from 1991 to date) and PEACE I-V programmes (€2.2 billion from 1995 to date), both funded by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), and managed by the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) since 1999. Funding under these programmes has been used to finance a multitude of projects that support strategic cross-border co-operation in order to create a more prosperous and sustainable region, promote peace and reconciliation, and promote economic and social stability in Northern Ireland and the border counties in Ireland: Donegal, Sligo, Leitrim, Cavan, Monaghan, and Louth.

With their strong emphasis on reconciling communities and contribution to peace, along with building positive relations at a local level and creating shared neutral spaces and services that support this, it is no surprise that these EU funding initiatives have had a substantial impact on the culture and

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heritage sectors and been a strong fit for museums as they repositioned themselves as nonaligned civic spaces (O'Kelly, 2019).

Projects delivered through PEACE-supported programming have been explored by both the Northern Ireland Museums Council (NIMC, 2009) and more recently through the Irish Museums Association-Ulster University collaboration, initiated following the decision of the United Kingdom (UK) to withdraw from the EU in June 2016 and which has been actively researching the potential effect of Brexit on the museum and cultural sectors under the overarching concept of 'Bridge over Brexit' (Crooke and O'Kelly, 2018)

These two bodies of research evidence how museums have invested in supporting and nurturing cross-border programmes in the two decades since the Good Friday Agreement, with one of the first formal partnerships being established in 2002 as a two-year cultural exchange programme between Newry and Mourne Museum and Dundalk County Museum. From the outset, this partnership stated its intent to use education methodology from the museum context to increase cross-border participation at the museums, especially from traditionally protestant areas, and promote and sustain greater mutual understanding between communities on both sides of the border and within local communities.

Primarily delivered through a range of events for schools and community groups, it included joint lecture series, re-enactments, workshops, genealogy courses and an oral history project that saw community groups working with schools, learning from one another and developing a greater understanding of their communities with each contributing to the history of their area. Following on from this programme, both museums were instrumental in developing the *Cross-border Archives Project* (2007-2008), enabling a vast array of archival material on the historical development of the region to be catalogued, interpreted, and placed online.

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In 2007, following an earlier initiative in 2005 by the Tower Museum to explore the role of the museum in building community relations through the establishment of a Good Relations Programme, Derry City Council Heritage and Museum Service launched an education and outreach programme comprised of ten cross-border, cross-community initiatives that focused on the anniversary of the Flight of the Earls. It aimed to raise awareness and understanding of this event - understood by many as the effective end of the old Gaelic order following the exile of its aristocracy in 1607 - as it related to cultural heritage, identity and diversity in the island of Ireland.

Connecting People, Places and Heritage, the partnership between Cavan and Fermanagh county museums, was launched in 2004 and continues today. This saw a number of heritage trails being developed in each county during the first stage of this programme (2004-2006), school and adult partnerships (2006-2008) which encompassed workshops, exhibition making and seminars that enabled participants to explore potentially contentious history, by promoting and facilitating an understanding of the histories, traditions and preconceptions of all those involved. Since 2008, this programme has been delivered by Cavan County museum and has seen its legacy presented in the form of a Peace and reconciliation gallery, the Peace Garden, and expansion works at the museum in 2019 that will provide a new shared space to host this cross border project (Cavan County Museum, n.d.)

Physical manifestations of committed cross-border partnerships have also seen the development of the F.E. McWilliam Gallery & Studio (2008) and the Highlanes Gallery (2006) as capital builds under the East Border Region Arts Partnership, established through the INTERREG-funded local authority cross-border network involving Newry, Mourne & Down District Council, Armagh, Banbridge & Craigavon Borough Council, and Ards and North Down Borough Council in Northern Ireland and Louth, Monaghan and Meath County Councils in the Republic Of Ireland. Over the last decade, museums within this partnership have worked together to curate and tour exhibitions, share

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resources and expertise, and support one another to attract and engage audiences (Highlanes Gallery, n.d.).

Through their exhibitions, research and education programmes, museums have provided powerful evidence of their ability to bring diverse communities together and responded to the growing expectation of alignment between public policy and museum objectives with socially purposeful outcomes, to demonstrate public benefit in the areas of social and economic equality: the museum as a vehicle for social integration and regeneration, as highlighted by the Northern Ireland's policy framework for the development of national and local museums over the period 2011-2021:

Museums can make a very important contribution to a shared and better future for all based on equity, diversity, interdependence and mutual respect. They can reflect and promote understanding of the history, culture and people of the region and beyond. They can be catalysts for bringing communities together both physically and through formal and informal opportunities to explore the complexities of history and culture. Museums can promote access, encourage participation and support the cultural expressions of the people and communities in Northern Ireland and bring diverse and hard-to-reach groups into contact with different aspects of heritage through innovative exhibitions and structured learning programmes (p 6-7).

Making histories

Recent initiatives such as the Decade of Centenaries (2012-2012) which commemorates significant centenary anniversaries in recent Irish history, have also underlined this cross-border approach and encouraged support for joint cross-border events, with a focus on local museums and broader cross-border cultural engagement. Under this initiative, we see border museums again rising to the challenge of addressing our difficult and complex past with

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ambitious projects being carried out by Donegal County Museum, Monaghan County Museum, and Armagh County Museum that explore the lives of servicemen and the impact they had in the communities they served in.

New cross-border cultural programmes such as *Making the Future* (Making the Future, 2018), led by National Museums NI and Linen Hall Library among others, will aim to use museum collections and archives to explore the past and create a powerful vision for future change, to pose challenging questions about the past, and 'take the temperature' of where we are at currently as a society. Also EU-funded, the 'Derry Model' will offer the city's experience in overcoming disputes in a number of areas to other groups. Described as a 'conflict transformation and peacebuilding project' (Museum of Free Derry, 2018), it places the museum as a seminal tool to tell the story of Derry's role in the peace process through a series of breakthrough decisions that have tackled issues of contention since the mid-seventies such as power-sharing, agreements around parades and social justice campaigns.

Despite this wealth of activity, it has become increasingly apparent though that the wider impact of this activity remains largely undocumented and, to a certain extent, under-recognised. Much of the focus on Brexit has been preoccupied with logistical issues such as cultural and regional management, funding, collections and people movement; with less attention given to partnerships and networks and questions of identity, failing to recognise that the impact of Brexit will have a further-reaching effect on museums' activities on the island.

The challenge for the sector is how it will continue to nurture these relationships, particularly when the current drive is towards EU funding partnerships, which may no longer be available, to what once was a natural partner for the Republic of Ireland. In the case of Northern Ireland, are we looking at adding issues of isolation to what is already a highly under-resourced sector or can the NI sector approach Brexit from a position of

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strength, providing a body of expertise and knowledge from which other UK regions can draw?

With museums being seen as places to explore shared histories and cultures, as well as nurturing valued diversity on the island – it remains to be seen whether these principles will be diminished by changed politics or whether they will gain traction and there will be further emphasis on the role of museums in supporting intercultural dialogue and inclusion, taking it further and moving from the idea of neutrality to that of activism.

Gina O'Kelly has been at the helm of the Irish Museums Association (IMA) since 2011, responsible for leading and delivering the association's advocacy work and vision in support of the museum sector. She sits on a range of cultural advisory groups and is a board member of Visual Artists Ireland.

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