



Revisiting the City, Revising Nationalism

Michael Rubenstein

Postcolonial Dublin: Imperial Legacies and the Built Environment

Andrew Kincaid

Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006. 296 pages. ISBN 0-8166-4345-8

There's a famous joke in the 'Aeolus' episode in *Ulysses*, where Professor MacHugh cracks wise at the plebeian pragmatism of the old Roman Empire: 'It is meet to be here,' he has his Romans announce upon planting their flag in their newly conquered territory, 'let us construct a watercloset.'

Let's pass over for the moment the comical reduction of monumental Roman aqueducts and baths to a humble toilet. This is not what we imagine the Celt might announce in a similar situation. The Celts might very likely announce the having of a few drinks to fête their arrival before they ever thought of building a toilet, a project whose urgency might, *might*, finally be felt only after the having of a few drinks. Assbackwards, this is, from the Roman point of view: *the* Arnoldian difference between the races, the conquerors and the conquered. It is, in any case, hard to envision a toilet designed and constructed by Matthew Arnold's Celtic Imagination, except to say abstractly that it would probably be less functional than it would be funny (or witty, if a toilet can be called witty), a romantic whimsy of a toilet, not built to last except in the music of its scatological poetry, in the memory of the people, in folktale and ballad all across the land, etcetera. But as it happens, MacHugh makes his joke neither from the public house nor the watercloset, but from a printer's office. And this is his point: the Roman Empire, and by extension the British Empire, are stupidly interested in infrastructure at the expense of culture, in the pragmatics of building everyday life

instead of the transcendent experience of literature and the arts. The latter are the domain of the Celt, his relegated sphere of excellence, and though the entire distinction may be born of the colonial relationship — an arbitrary division of labour imposed by British cultural élites through the work of the stereotype — MacHugh comically turns it into a point of Irish pride.

MacHugh's author might laugh along with him, but he would not agree at all with the joke's import. Joyce's well-known boast, that if Dublin were ever destroyed, it could be rebuilt from the pages of his works, shows how little he respected the division between fact and fancy. He was interested in the built environment, in itself and as a crucial aspect of his own literary vision. *Ulysses* did not so much attempt to transcend Dublin as it attempted to transcribe it, to remember it, memorialize it, memorize it, mesmerize it, all at once. Joyce's literary map of Dublin makes a mockery of Arnold's binary between the industrious Saxon and the poetic Celt, because it collapses the distinction between textual building and the built environment, a kind of Borgesian conundrum that de-emphasizes the boundary between reality and representation: an attempted three-

O'Connell Street, Dublin,
c. 1950. Photograph:
George Pickow/Three
Lions/Getty Images.

dimensional, one-to-one scaled map of the city, which, trying to represent it wholly, instead swallows it whole. In 1916 large parts of Dublin were destroyed, mostly by British bombardment. Joyce's Dublin had already outlasted parts of 'real' Dublin even before *Ulysses* was published. And soon after, even more of the city was destroyed in the Civil War. But the point is that in *Ulysses* Joyce revalued the built environment of the city, placed it at the very centre of his literary work. I say this because Andrew Kincaid claims that so much of the critical energy of Irish Studies goes into Irish literature that, say, urban planning and the built environment go criminally understudied:

The field of Irish Studies has long been dominated by a literary paradigm ... one of the pitfalls that literary approaches to Dublin has led us into is that the textual city has come to take on a greater degree of reality and importance than the physical city ... A city is more than language, more than the pages of a book. My work seeks to bring the material city back into focus.¹

Kincaid goes on to show that literary critics provided the basic paradigm for Irish Studies. He is also a professor of English, so to read him arguing against a literary paradigm is startling. His position is difficult, it seems to me, but it is backed up by other critics outside literary studies. Patrick Carroll-Burke, a sociologist at the University of California, Davis, has made a similar plea. 'Books have been written,' he charges, 'on "Representing Ireland", "Writing Ireland", and "Inventing Ireland", but in every case the focus has been literary.' From an interdisciplinary perspective, book titles like these seem to beg the question of whether their authors think 'Ireland' as such is wholly a literary 'invention', like, say, Wilde's 'Japan' in *The Decay of Lying* — 'In fact the whole of Japan is a pure invention'. It leaves practically untouched the question of 'invention' as a techno-

scientific domain of building, architecture, law, the state, public services, and all that physically and institutionally constructs the fabric of everyday life. The reasons for this neglect of what Carroll-Burke calls the 'engineering cultures' of the state have partly to do with Irish shame, since so much of Ireland's architecture was built by Ireland's erstwhile British masters, and because so much of it simply passed over into the Free State's jurisdiction in 1922 without — or with only symbolic — modification. As a matter of fact, there is at least one example of an Irish toilet — not so much a toilet of Irish design as one designed for the Irish, though whether it was ever constructed or not is unclear. In 1855 John Grey presented the Royal Dublin Society with a design for a more efficient, less private version of the standard apparatus for use in Irish workhouses. Grey designed his toilet to seat four people at a time, and integrated a 'self-acting flusher', because he did not believe 'that domestics could be trusted to operate the device.' That shame would last a long time. 'Only in the past couple of decades,' says Carroll-Burke, 'has Ireland forgotten the past sufficiently to rediscover and to embrace its engineering culture.'²

Kincaid wants, now, to account for some aspects of Ireland's engineering culture through a focus on Irish architecture in Dublin from the late nineteenth century to the present. Beginning from the premise that British colonialism in Ireland was characterized by a general tendency to urbanization, Kincaid concentrates on Ireland's capital city to observe how the nation's architectural projects embodied the social ideas and ideals of the empowered. In the mid-nineteenth century, a paradigm shifted in civic planning. The city stopped being a fortress, and became a modern metropolis. Instead of thinking about how to protect themselves by force, urban élites began to think about the 'public good' — both as a form of social control and of social improvement — as the most important consideration in urban planning, and

- 1 Andrew Kincaid, *Postcolonial Dublin: Imperial Legacies and the Built Environment* (Minneapolis, 2006), xiv–xv
- 2 Patrick Carroll-Burke, 'Material Designs: Engineering Cultures and Engineering States — Ireland 1650–1900', *Theory and Society*, 31 (2002), 25–114, 97, 103, 106

Beat Klein and Hendrikje
Kühne
Property
1998
newsprint on card,
dimensions vary
Irish Museum of Modern Art



- 3 Kincaid, *Postcolonial Dublin*, xxix
4 Kincaid, *Postcolonial Dublin*, 80, 83

began to form ‘trusts’ to implement their schemes and improvements. ‘Public Health’ and ‘Town Planning’ became the new buzzwords. In 1890 the Guinness Trust was formed and started on the building of six hundred dwellings for the poor in the centre of Dublin, in order, as the trust’s founder put it, to ameliorate ‘the condition of the poorer of the working classes’.³ But the new discourses of town planning and public health could not quell the revolutionary feeling in Ireland, and in the early twentieth century the very buildings that represented improvement, progress and rationality — the General Post Office, the Custom House, and the Four Courts, among them — were occupied, razed, or burned, and generally heavily contested as power changed hands.

This is the preamble to Kincaid’s main argument, which is a revision of the revisionists’ disdain for Irish nationalism. We get a very different picture of the Free State when we look at town planning instead of, say, censorship. The first decade of the Free State’s existence saw the construction of four thousand new dwellings. Kincaid points out: ‘This number is not as insignificant as contemporary commentators would have us believe; it represents a quarter of all the buildings that had ever before been built by Dublin Corporation.’ Slum clearance in Dublin was one of the state’s main priorities, both to

improve the lives of the slums’ inhabitants and to guard against social unrest. In 1924 W. T. Cosgrave made the stakes clear: ‘no populace housed as so many of the people of Dublin are, can be good citizens, or loyal and devoted subjects of the State, no matter what the State may be’.⁴ The solution was suburbanization, which in those years was carried out on a small scale. Cosgrave’s government initiated the Shannon Scheme in 1925, which dammed the country’s largest river to create a hydro-electric power station. When the station opened in 1929 it produced — though only for a short time, until demand caught up with supply — three times the amount of electricity then consumed in all of Ireland. The scheme effectively relocated the sources of electrical power in Dublin from local coal-fired plants to the mythical West, nationalizing Dublin’s power, reducing the dependence on British coal, and setting the stage for wholesale rural electrification in the decades to follow. In 1932 Eamon de Valera’s Housing Act attempted to raise the standard of accommodation. The Newfoundland Street Scheme was particularly ‘ambitious in its reach and hopeful in its aims ... providing each new apartment with hot and cold water and electric light’. House-building stepped up considerably after Fianna Fáil’s victory in 1932, from 2,000 a year between 1923 and 1931 to 12,000 a year during de Valera’s tenure.

All these facts add up to a real revelation about the Free State: it did more, much more, to win consent and to service the population than has been previously asserted by most critics. As Kincaid puts it: ‘The vast majority of contemporary commentators on postcolonial Ireland have got it wrong. Fresh, creative, and energetic discussions about the legacy and future of urbanism were taking place in Ireland during the 1920s and 30s.’⁵ His point is well taken; the stereotype of the censorious, protectionist, narrowly nationalist Free State has prevented the acknowledgement, and therefore the critical analysis, of its substantial achievements in town planning — achievements that effectively spatialized a curious mixture of nationalist ideology, international architectural theories, and technological transformation.

In the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, the Republic slowly awoke from its pipe dream of economic self-sufficiency; nationalism lost some of its grip and Keynesian common sense won the day. Or so the revisionist story goes. Kincaid shows a confluence between the discourse of urban planning, the new architectural projects that emerged from it, and the emergent popularity of historical revisionism amongst the Irish intelligentsia. In 1961 Ireland applied for membership in the European community; in 1962 ‘television became nationally available’; and in 1966, fifty years after the revolution, Ireland built its first truly modern residential housing project in Dublin. Ballymun was made up of seven fifteen-storey buildings and, like most such projects in cities like London and New York, was a massive social failure. That version of the modernist experiment proved untenable, and the country, with Sean Lemass at the helm, veered away from ‘social investment’ in things like housing and hospitals towards ‘productive investment’ in things like factories and offices. Housing, once the single most salient issue for the Free State — in so far as it made a population of ‘devoted subjects of the state’ possible

— was given up as an urban planning priority, shoved aside by new mandates for office parks, financial complexes, and malls, all designed to encourage industry and lure foreign investment:

In 1960, Ireland had only one large modern office block — Michael Scott’s Busáras. By the mid-1970s, there were over three hundred, providing over ten million square feet of bureaucratic space to a still shabby and quite provincial city, a city still in the process of constructing its own middle class.⁶

Among these new urban monoliths was the Electricity Supply Board’s new headquarters in Fitzwilliam Street, whose construction in 1963 required razing ‘the longest complete Georgian streetscape in Europe’. Ireland’s first glass-façaded skyscraper, the rebuilt Liberty Hall headquarters of the Irish Transport and General Workers’ Union, signified ‘the arrival of labor as a neo-corporate player willing to compromise with the free-trade tendencies of the state’.⁷ All this — and Kincaid offers many more examples — signified, in the realm of the built environment, a shift from cultural nationalism to economic nationalism, from an identification with the colonial world to an identification with the European economic core: an ideological shift — almost on the order of a reversal — in which the contours of historical revisionism were manifest in the streets, just as they were gaining popular momentum in scholarship.

In his fourth and final chapter, Kincaid examines the Dublin cityscape in the era of the Celtic Tiger. If in the Lemass years Ireland renounced nationalism in favour of modernization, in the 1990s nationalism was declawed, repackaged and auctioned off to the tourists. Meanwhile, Dublin was becoming a financial hub and a world city. Kincaid focuses on a few central sites and their transformations: the gentrification of Temple Bar, the construction in 1991

5 Kincaid, *Postcolonial Dublin*, 77, 93

6 Kincaid, *Postcolonial Dublin*, 119, 145

7 Kincaid, *Postcolonial Dublin*, 152, 156

8 Kincaid, *Postcolonial Dublin*, 224

of the International Financial Services Centre, and Rowan Gillespie's bronze sculptural monument to the Great Famine, which has stood since 1997 at the entry to the above-mentioned IFSC. He observes Dublin's built environment embroiled in a furious dialectic of remembering and forgetting. The IFSC has to install netting to protect its façade from the rocks thrown by denizens of the surrounding working-class neighbourhood, and so we come full circle: from the pre-'urban planning' fortress Dublin of the nineteenth century to the high-tech securitized cities of the twenty-first. The Famine monument is a bad sign that forgetting is winning the day, as corporate interests pose as custodians of collective memory. And so finally, Kincaid turns to literary analysis of a burgeoning genre, the Dublin memoir, to make a provocative claim: 'an altered and altering landscape necessitates its own literary form, the urban memoir', a form that is 'rooted in the physical environment'.⁸

Despite that, strange to say, Kincaid's readings of the memoirs — very brief, in any case — are perhaps the least compelling aspect of his book. And I worry about the loose ends left in the last chapter concerning the 'disappearance' of nationalism. While Kincaid cites the 1998 revision of the Irish Constitution — which renounces the Republic's absolute claim to the six counties of the North — as evidence of nationalism's retreat, the more recent debates over whether to revoke the constitutional guarantee to Irish citizenship — granted to any child born on Irish soil — make it clear that nationalism may not stay down much longer. Of course these debates may not have occurred by the time Kincaid's book went to press, but it is also true that Ireland's recent waves of immigration are conspicuously absent from the Celtic Tiger chapter. The recent

popularity of the Dublin memoir may be as much about a growing Irish xenophobia — about a nostalgic, racialized geography — as it is about the new built environment. And there is evidence from all over the globe that nationalism can and does come back from the dead, often in its ugliest incarnations.

The real argumentative strength of Kincaid's work lies in the emphasis on the built environment. The book is a goldmine of research into some of the more important and controversial construction projects undertaken since Ireland became a nation-state in 1922. Deliberately discarding the literary paradigm allows him to speculate on what Irish history would look like if we took urban planning and state planning to be the measure of the state's success or failure. And it does look different; the state comes out looking a little better than it did before. Further, *Postcolonial Dublin* demonstrates that the cultural phenomenon calling itself 'revisionism' was anticipated, if only minutely and only in its popular manifestation, by urban planning discourse and by urban development projects. We are left with a rare vantage point from which to see how Dublin's urban environment impressed the ideas it embodied on the intellectual climate of the time. It becomes possible, that is, to see revisionism as an effect of urban planning projects, rather than seeing it as the cause of reforms in urban planning. Although such a reversal of perspective is probably no more accurate than its mirror image, it is a perspective that would be very hard to see from within the literary paradigm. Kincaid's thesis makes for an interesting and timely corrective to the dominant paradigm in Irish Studies. He launches a promising beginning to the pressing work of investigating the multiple aspects of Ireland's engineering cultures, too long neglected. ■