

An Investigation of the Processes of Urban Image Construction in Dublin, Ireland.

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Abstract

Contemporary cities are increasingly shaped by rapidly transforming political, social, economic, environmental and cultural processes operating on a global scale. In this dynamic environment, cities are forced to compete for a diminishing pot of available investment. Arguments presented by Tretter (2009), Scott (2006, 2008), Bagaeen (2007) and Kearns and Philo (1993) suggest that cities view attractiveness and competitive advantage as symbiotic processes in an attempt to attract potential funding. The generation and promotion of urban images has become central to the processes of place making, place marketing and branding, discussed by Kavaratzis & Ashworth (2005), Kavaratzis (2004, 2012) and Warnaby and Medway (2008, 2010). Economic competition, the quest for internationalisation, an improvement in quality of life, urban transformation and the commodification of urban landscapes, play an intrinsic part in the production of these images. This paper focuses on what and who are the key driving forces shaping the construction of urban images in Dublin, Ireland? Drawing upon a visual analysis of promotional images of Dublin and a critical discourse analysis of Planning and Development documents, it argues that a disconnected image of the city has been created through the various processes of entrepreneurial urbanism, which questions what is the overall image of Dublin that is being portrayed? The paper concludes by highlighting a number of key findings that may be of relevance to cities more broadly.

Key words: city image, city marketing, urban transformation

Introduction

Global urban transformation in the last three decades has occurred against a backdrop of neoliberal politics promoting international competition among cities. This inter-urban competition in turn has given rise to a culture of creating globally recognisable images as a means of competing for international capital. The combined processes of urban design, planning and architecture produce these images which are presented on the global marketplace for consumption through traditional marketing and branding strategies once reserved for the business domain but now a key characteristic of entrepreneurial urbanism. Hall and Hubbard (1996) outline this business-like manner in North American cities favouring risk taking, profit motivation, inventiveness and increased competition, as examples of entrepreneurial governance in motion.

This paper examines the processes responsible for the construction of urban images in Dublin, hypothesising that a dialectical relationship between urban design and city marketing is central to the understanding of the overall transformation of a city. Drawing on empirical research, the discussion outlines how the activities occurring in Dublin exemplify wider global processes of urban image production and their connections to the urban political economic framework shaping urban transformation.

The politico-economic context of Dublin's Transformation

The Irish economic boom of the late 1980's and 1990's supported by a thriving construction industry fuelled Dublin's most recent urban transformation. David Harvey (2005 [Reprinted 2009]) in his description of Neoliberal ideology below, identifies how urban landscapes simultaneously produce and become a product of the processes occurring on them. Jones and Ward (2002) in addition to Brenner and Theodore (2002, 2005) suggest that a disjuncture exists between the ideology of Neoliberalism and the daily practice of neoliberal policies. Collectively they consider the removal of state intervention from market practices as an empty gesture, suggesting that

in practice central government still has a hand in these activities. This argument is reinforced by McGuirk and MacLaran (2001) suggesting that a strong central influence upon planning and development remains in Ireland. Dublin's transformation throughout the 1990's and early 2000's supports these arguments, highlighted by fiscal and tax incentivised urban regeneration facilitated by central government policies.

Urban Entrepreneurialism

Ward (2003b) discussed how the economic focus of the language used in urban policies from the mid-1990's forward reflects inter-urban competition. One of the most poignant elements at this time was a shift in governance from managerial to entrepreneurial, highlighting the prominence of partnerships which emerged through the privatisation of local government. It is suggested by Ward (ibid) that these coalitions represent the reorganisation of urban politics with responsibility and power residing in the numerous enterprises, a widely utilised example being Public Private Partnerships. For example the introduction of Public Private Partnerships in Dublin including the two responsible for the construction of the Bord Gáis Energy Theatre and the Convention Centre Dublin, resemble those established in London to rejuvenate the London Underground or New York's promotion of sustainable development through privatised networks and PPP's. A recurring theme across these partnerships is the aim and need to attract and secure investment. This process supports Ward's suggestion that "Cities are the economic drivers of the regional and national economy" (Ward, 2003a, p. 123), a belief reiterated by the Department of Environment, Transport and Regions in the UK in their statement that "The renaissance of British cities is essential for the continued economic competitiveness of the nation" (2003b, p. 200), thereby emphasising the importance placed on cities to attract investment. However, what once was considered innovative and new is more aptly ascribed to the homogenisation of cities as a result of globalization (Lawton and Punch, 2014). The widespread adoption of idealized visions for cities can be understood as following what is considered best practice for attaining international capital investment. However, can it be argued that partnerships such as these are not as innovative as they seem if they are to be

found in almost if not all cities which have engaged in this form of new urban politics?

Urban Image Construction

City Marketing and Urban Design are identified by this research as core tools for achieving recent urban transformation, for their ability to apply entrepreneurial strategies on the landscape while simultaneously representing cities on the global marketplace. If all cities are competing for resources then the goal of Urban Design is to produce places where quality matters (Peck, 2005). Urban Design creates spaces for people but not just a physical space rather an all-encompassing approach inclusive of the social processes which will occur there. Carmona and Tiesdell (2007) describe this as an anti-space as it is not necessarily specifically designed; more often it is an outcome of the design of surrounding spaces. The complete product that is created on the landscape manifests as one marketable representation of the patterns that exist between the people and the structures within that space. This research proposes that this image is just one interpretation of city life which has been chosen for its ability to promote characteristics of a competitive global image but questions whether this image selection is an organic evolution or purposefully chosen by key urban actors.

In an attempt to raise city profiles on a global scale one frequently engaged upon tactic is the adoption of a star architect, Los Angeles, South Korea, Bern, and Abu Dhabi are examples of cities following this approach (Bagaen, 2007, Warnaby and Medway, 2008) . The need to acquire international acknowledgement is inferred from the core belief that the future of cities lies in the ability to attract economic investment through inter-urban competition. This in turn is achieved through the adoption of active city marketing strategies. Their origin in the corporate world reinforces the business-like manner engaged upon by cities against a neoliberal political framework. The rise of the star architect including, but not limited to, Cesar Pelli, Frank Gehry, Norman Foster, Zaha Hadid, not to mention Daniel Libeskind and Santiago Calatrava, has become increasingly popular since the rise of the Bilbao Effect, which followed the success of Frank Gehry's design for the Guggenheim in Bilbao. Warnaby and Medway (ibid) take this idea of architect induced tourism in their article on iconic

bridges and discuss the role these international names play in promoting a culturally forward city. Kong (2007) accentuates this point in her discussion on “culture-led” regeneration having a significant impact on place image, which in itself attracts people to the city in question. The combined success of well-designed urban spaces supported by high profile marketing strategies produces and promotes images of cities accessed by commercial and public sectors alike that become central to sustaining economic development.

Methodology and results

A multi-method approach combining visual analysis techniques and critical discourse frameworks is utilised in this research to investigate the driving forces shaping the construction of urban images in Dublin.

Visual Analysis

The visual nature of the two framing disciplines of this research, Geography and Urban Design is emphasised by the use of visual analysis and photo-elicitation methods. One of the intended methodological contributions of this research to existing arguments is to highlight the benefits of utilising visual methodologies in urban and social research. This research further emphasises the value of incorporating visual analysis into traditional sources of qualitative research methods as a means of accessing greater levels of understanding about how images represent experiences and interpretations of urban life. This research aims to go beyond the composition of the image to include analysis of the "context of production and publication" (Christmann, 2008, p. 1)

Kolbe's (2007) similarity of aim to the aims and objectives of this research reinforces the appropriateness of this method of analysis for this research. The focus of visual analysis initially centred on image content. Images of the city of Dublin were taken from a variety of sources, including websites such as the national tourist authority, local authority departments and international corporations in addition to open access websites such as Google Images and Getty images. Kolbe (ibid) suggests looking beyond the language used to promote the city and instead focusing on the description

and how this aligns with the image used for promotion. Working within this framework developed by Kolbe (ibid), Christmann (ibid) and Bohnsack (2008), websites and advertising images were analysed in terms of the gaze of the creator, the pose of the subjects and the experience portrayed. Images were then further analysed to uncover the meaning embedded within the image and its relationship to the overall context of the imagery. To extract this information the images were grouped, first according to the source of the images, and subsequently coded according to various themes that came out of the preliminary phase of analysis. This style of cross-analysis facilitated the comparison of images and themes across various media sources. This process also highlights if images, in terms of content, format and style, differ within or between media types.

Through the dual phase of visual analysis which was undertaken to understand and analyse the image or images which are being projected of Dublin unexpected results pertaining to the common images associated with Dublin were returned. Table 1 below highlights that the top images returned show a preference for traditional architectural styles in addition to urban spaces. Interestingly, despite the investment in high profile buildings and incorporation of world renowned architectural designs images of traditional architectural styles with a long connection to the landscape was returned with higher frequency. One justification for this suggests that buildings and subsequent images take time to settle into their environment and build familiarity with the users of the physical space they occupy. However, greater discussion around the incorporation of images into marketing Dublin will explore this topic further during the interview phase of research.

| Website | Brochure | Online Database | Photograph |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|------------------|------------------|
| River Liffey Bridges | Halfpenny Bridge | Halfpenny Bridge | |
| O'Connell Street | Trinity College Dublin | Temple Bar | |
| Dublin Skyline | Pint of Guinness | IFSC | |
| Spire/ Monument of Light | Christ Church/ Dublin | Georgian | O'Connell Bridge |
| City Centre Spaces | Spire/ Monument of Light | | Four Courts |

Table 1- Recurring Images of Dublin

The appearance of the River Liffey bridges in these results is anticipated given their ability to present a symbolic relationship to the past while ‘bridging’ to the present day in addition to their physical presence on the landscape. Given the widespread competition among cities actively pursuing entrepreneurial agendas and the various strategies they engage upon in doing this, it was poignant to see a preference for more traditional features of the Dublin landscape rather than images projecting some of the contemporary architectural styles and developments that are synonymous with recent urban regeneration strategies.

Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical discourse methods were utilised to establish the influences that government policy has, both directly and indirectly, on the shape and image of Dublin's urban landscape. A pilot content analysis of UK planning and design documents was undertaken to establish any outside influences upon Irish documents due to the frequency and trend for the transfer of ideas amongst key urban and policy actors (McCann, 2002, McCann and Ward, 2010). An extensive list was compiled systematically of the various local and central government urban policies shaping development in urban Dublin since the introduction of the first Urban Renewal Act in 1986. This starting point was chosen as this policy introduced the first phases of development which began reconstructing the city centre and bringing people and businesses back into the city after a period of out migration and urban decay. This form of multi-scalar in-depth analysis not only highlights whether there is a push to adopt particular urban images but where the impetus for using these images originates. If the initial foresight for image selection can be understood then a greater understanding of the outcome of these policies can be reached. The question framework for this analysis included an examination of both the content and language used in the documents to understand the purpose and meaning of the document in question. Utilising this form of analysis facilitates the determination of whether there is a political agenda toward promoting certain types of images.

Discussion: The Processes Creating Dublin's Urban Image

Dublin city centre, bound by the Grand and Royal Canals, has undergone vast transformation physically, socially and politically throughout the last forty years. During this time, the city experienced periods of economic stagnation while also booming during the Celtic Tiger era. The combination of Ireland's accession into the European Union in 1973, the 1986 Urban Renewal Act and subsequent Urban Renewal Act 1989 emphasised the potential the city held for future development. This already changing landscape was further supported by the introduction of the 1987 Finance Act offering lucrative tax incentives in a bid to attract foreign investors. These steps convey an active national attempt to propel the economy and physical structure of the city forward. Dublin is just one example in a global pattern of cities that were actively engaging in an entrepreneurial urban agenda associated with neoliberalisation and the promotion of strong inter-urban competition. A dominant representation of this type of urban regeneration was the vast waterfront redevelopment projects undertaken from Baltimore to London. Knowledge intensive industries as represented by global corporate brands, the following of which are located in Dublin's own Financial Services Centre; KPMG, Price Waterhouse Cooper, AVIVA, Citi Bank, began to replace traditional heavy industrial activities previously associated with dockland and waterfront locations. There has been extensive work published on waterfront and dockland regeneration across the globe with a very detailed insight provided by Moore (2008) on the case of Dublin. However, it is the outputs of the regeneration process which sets this research apart from the vast body of urban regeneration work as it examines the images that are created through the regeneration and transformation of the urban landscape. The Industrial Development Agency (IDA) in Ireland have acknowledged the importance of company logos and signs on the exterior of high-profile buildings as critical to illustrating the success of the city and building confidence, albeit subconsciously, in potential new investors. The landscape is thus directly incorporated as a tool in sending a message about competitiveness and global standing.

The reciprocal nature of the relationship between urban design and city marketing in delivering a neoliberal urban agenda for cities was highlighted during a critical evaluation of the literature framing this research, yet there was little discussion within this field linking the two processes together. In light of this understanding, this paper suggests that both urban design and city marketing are necessary tools for carrying out urban transformation as they embody neoliberal urban strategies that frame current political urban structures. Carmona et. al. define the role of the urban design process in creating a global profile, as the process of "making better places for people than would otherwise be produced" (2003 (Reprinted 2007)), a point which is reinforced by central government outlining a need for higher quality urban design. With the importance of design filtering down from central to local government it possible to understand how urban design has been incorporated as a tool for implementing urban change at a national to local level. During the interview phase of this research it is intended to uncover the reasoning for this prioritisation of urban design as a means of achieving successful urban spaces and who the key actors in this process are. However, it would be negligent to consider this process as an entirely positive process, rather it is spurred by policies that produce social disparity and are aligned with a concept recognised for creating social inequalities. In fact, this discussion shows that current urban design is helping to create a neoliberal landscape encouraging heightened inter-urban competition while responding to local pressures of urban entrepreneurialism (2002).

The results of the critical discourse analysis of policy documents and promotional materials produced four key themes for further investigation, one of which was urban design. A recurring point of emphasis throughout the planning documents was the role urban design plays in delivering a better quality of place for people. In an interview with a local authority representative (April, 2014) it was suggested that the aim of providing a higher quality urban environment was to attract a wider audience to the city. This statement reinforces the entrepreneurial agenda of cities as they compete in a competitive global marketplace to attract people and investment alike. The comments made in this interview further emphasise the symbiotic relationship between urban design and city marketing as the process which projects these images to the target audience. As cities compete with each other for investment and and visitors alike it is important

to circulate vibrant and positive images of what they have to offer while simultaneously creating an attachment to place for the visitors and users of these spaces as they create memories, be it daily routines or holidays, while there.

Considering the overall reach of these constructed urban images, not just the processes creating them, it is possible to understand how these images actively create a global image for the city as they interact on a global platform. Postcards were once the dominant medium through which visitors shared experiences of their travels upon their return along with personal photographs, travel books and TV programmes showed highlights of countries to audiences ready to digest these images but with today's high speed internet access and image databases people have access to a wealth of images of these locations at their fingertips without leaving their home or office. Therefore it is more important than ever for cities to be promoted to as wide an audience or audiences as possible.

Conclusion

The early results presented from the research highlights the interconnectedness of urban design and city marketing as tools of entrepreneurial urbanism and the images which are created as a result of these processes. It is the combined results of these strategies that present the global image of Dublin as it is received on the global competitive market. This paper has presented an overview of the current research and preliminary results arrived at to date. A number of questions have arisen out of the results from both the visual analysis and critical discourse analysis and it is these which will continue to guide the direction and investigation undertaken over the remainder of the research.

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