

STANDING ON TRIAL: *CONVICTIONS*, THE CRUMLIN ROAD COURTHOUSE AND THE ROLE OF URBAN DEVELOPMENT IN HISTORICAL SITES OF VIOLENCE

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Abstract

The Crumlin Road Courthouse straddles an interesting interface area, between the neighbourhoods of Ardoyne, New Lodge, and the Shankill. Situated on the Crumlin Road across from the Gaol, this building has inherited a multiplicity of meanings since its construction and design by architect Sir Charles Lanyon in 1850. This imposing building frames this analysis. In this paper the author will outline the historic uses of the courthouse, a performance of a site-specific play by Tinderbox Theatre Company called *Convictions* (2000) which took place inside the court after its closure, as well as a look at the current site and the role that urban redevelopment has had on the courthouse and Belfast in general. This building impacts the built fabric of the city in the ways that it has affected the past, its current abandoned state, and the potential, yet stagnant, redevelopment plans for the future. This interdisciplinary paper will combine performance theory and urban planning in order to assess how the arts and culture sector in Northern Ireland can be used as a peace building tool after the legacy of the Troubles. This paper seeks to critique the piecemeal urban planning regeneration zones around the courthouse and assess how these urban spaces perform on the identity of the divided populations.

KEY WORDS: *Site-specific theatre, urban regeneration, public space, Northern Ireland, good friday agreement*

Introduction

The Crumlin Road Courthouse straddles an interesting interface area, between the neighbourhoods of Ardoyne, New Lodge, and the Shankill. Situated on the Crumlin Road across from the Gaol, this building has inherited a multiplicity of meanings since its construction and design by architect Sir Charles Lanyon in 1850. This imposing building frames this analysis. In this paper, the author intends to outline the historic uses of the courthouse, a performance of a site-specific play by Tinderbox Theatre Company called *Convictions* (2000) which took place inside the court after its closure. The courthouse impacts the built fabric of the city in the ways that it has affected the past, its current abandoned state, and the potential, yet stagnant, redevelopment plans for the future. This paper will conclude with a look at the current site and the role that urban redevelopment has had on the courthouse and Belfast in general. By looking at methods of co-creating in performance, we can find potential ways to create cohesion between divided communities who have experienced violence, which differs from the

neoliberalist intentions of creating unity through economic gains.

Drawing on performance scholars such as Gay McAuley, Joanna Tompkins, Michael McKinnie and Kathleen Irwin, we can see how site-specific performance allows space to speak and commune with the audience in a particular way. The author will examine these themes which will be expanded upon throughout the text. Supplementing these ideas on the urban sphere, we turn to Jenny Muir to localise sites in Belfast and probe the role of urban redevelopment in Belfast. Of course, spatiality of Belfast and Northern Ireland as a whole would be incomplete without building on the works of Shirlow and Murtagh (2006 2004) and Scott Bollens (2018) who have provided the basis of this paper. This interdisciplinary paper seeks to combine performance theory and urban planning in order to assess how the arts and culture sector in Northern Ireland can be used as a peace building tool after the legacy of the Troubles.



Fig 1. Crumlin Road Courthouse, 2019. Photograph taken by author.

History:

Site-specific theatre commonly makes use of non-traditional performance venues in order to engage the public sphere to some degree in their performances. McAuley notes that traditional theatre buildings '[...] are the places that our society has set aside where the magic can be wrought without risk of disruption to other public spaces and the activities they house' (McAuley 2005, 27). In the 1960s, there was a rise of radical performance that began to seek new ways of expressing itself outside of these theatres. By moving away from the proscenium arch space was allowed to tell its own stories, instead of living as a representation on stage¹. This radical departure allows for a different narrative to be revealed to audience members that goes beyond the performer/ audience binary. The site becomes a central theme to the performance, allowing a

1. The proscenium arch refers to the traditional mode of viewing theatre. The arch separates the audience from the stage and frames the performance.

deeper level of engagement to be presented to the spectator. McAuley continues that:

‘Site-based performance engages more or less deeply with its chosen site and as a result tends to be drawn into engagement with the social and political issues that seem inseparable from place’ (2005, 30).

To borrow a pertinent definition of site-specific theatre from Tompkins, ‘[a] basic aim in site-specific work is to encourage audiences to see and experience more of their surroundings, and/or to see their surroundings differently’ (Tompkins 2012, 11). In the years following the signing of the Good Friday Agreement (GFA²), we can observe very intuitive theatre workers employing site-specific theatre in the post-conflict city of Belfast to help renegotiate sites of violence. By using abandoned or ‘found³’ spaces, site-specific theatre highlights prior uses and forgotten histories of the city. Site-specific performance also allows for renegotiation and questioning of the roles of ownership and control in urban areas, as the performance has the capacity to conceal and reveal certain historical aspects of neighbourhoods and buildings that previously went unnoticed.

‘Ownership brings with it power, authority, rights, boundaries, the policing of boundaries, rights of exclusion, rights of inclusion. Our sense of who we are and other people’s sense of who we are is deeply bound up with where we are, and where we come from, so place is implicated in profound ways with both individual and group identity’ (McAuley 2005, 30–31).

These questions of ownership can be seen through the analysis of the site-specific performance of *Convictions* (2000), that took place in Belfast in the post-GFA era. This section analyses *Convictions* and how it engages with public spaces, providing information on how cross-community relations can be improved using theatre, as well as calling into question the role of urban redevelopment in historical sites of violence.

Convictions:

What makes *Convictions* so potent, is the use of contested urban spaces in a peaceful manner. It provides a platform to study how co-creation and performance have the power to reduce tensions between conflicting communities. In the case of *Convictions*, the space of the Crumlin Road Courthouse is paramount. As mentioned, the building

2. In 1998 the international peace treaty, the GFA was signed, heralding in a new era of peace in Northern Ireland, after 30 years of conflict. This introduced a power-sharing executive into the Northern Irish Assembly (Bollens, 2018, 129). With new political representation, as well as a slew of promises for desegregating the population of Northern Ireland, the GFA also allowed for an increased use of public space, which was previously inaccessible to certain populations within Northern Ireland.

3. Spaces not traditionally used for performance.

rests on an interface area located between the neighbourhoods of Ardoyne, New Lodge, and the Shankill. Situated on the Crumlin Road across from the Gaol, this building has inherited a multiplicity of meanings since its construction and design by architect Sir Charles Lanyon in 1850⁴. The imposing Victorian-style structures reminiscent of conventional representations of authority 'was designed to impress all who entered with the power and status of the law. Justice herself stands astride the central pediment with sword and scales ready to pass judgment and dispense the verdict' (Stelfox 2000, 50). The Crumlin Road Courthouse was an active court from 1850 until its closure in 1998. The Crumlin Road Courthouse issued sentences to offenders, who were then ushered to the Gaol across the street by an underground tunnel. It has been estimated that 'as many as 25,000 [loyalist] and [republican] prisoners are believed to have trekked through the tunnel during the course of the Troubles' (Bowcott 2006 quoted in Urban 2011, 76). Many of these prisoners being tried in the Diplock Courts, which 'became one of the most controversial parts of the British judicial system in Northern Ireland because of their reliance on anonymous 'supergrass' testimony and their abandonment of trial by jury' (McKinnie 2003, 583). It is apparent that this building weighed heavily on the psyche of the population of Belfast. Just as the Troubles touched every fabric of life in Belfast, this courthouse became a central symbol in the violence, as a place where final judgment would be enacted upon perpetrators of violence as well as being an active symbol of the law.

Two years after its official closure, Tinderbox Theatre Company used the space to stage *Convictions*. At the time of the play it was slated to be redeveloped into a luxury hotel, yet it still sits empty, and in a serious state of decay⁵, 20 years on from the performance. This liminal state allowed it to become a representation of the transition in Northern Irish society between a dark past and a promising future. According to Michael McKinnie 'the focus of *Convictions* was the historically contingent and authoritative place that its staging practice allowed the audience to encounter: the courthouse itself' (2003, 583). The audience entered the building and were divided up and ushered off into different rooms. The audience were able to explore the history of the courthouse, engaging with the embedded nature of memories of the building through stories regarding the past, present, and future redevelopment. The performance structure brought in playwrights to write seven short 'playlets', supplemented with art installations 'all under the common themes of justice, the act of passing judgment, the notion of laying to rest the past, and the anticipation of the future' (Urban 2011, 75). The audience then converged at the end for Martin Lynch's playlet, where a ghost of a hanged man harangues the audience for participating in such a voyeuristic performance of pain embodied by the courthouse.

4. Sir Charles Lanyon, 1813-1889, was the architect behind building many of Belfast's historical landmarks, such as Queen's University Belfast, the Palm House in the Botanic Gardens, the Customs House and the Crumlin Road Gaol, to name a few.

5. During the writing of this paper, on June 1, 2020 at 3:00 a.m. the Courthouse was subjected to yet another arson attack. The first arson attack occurred in 2009.

Two of these 'playlets' provide insight into urban redevelopment anxieties in the year 2000. This also provides us with a salient point in which to reflect, as the courthouse still remains unused and has fallen into a state of disrepair. In *Court No. 2* by Marie Jones, we are faced with three characters who are hired to turn the courthouse into a heritage centre. There is a disagreement in how the dramatic re-enactment of a trial should be portrayed, leading to most of the characters walking out of the discussions. This playlet ends with the audience stuck in a limbo, unaware if the plans to turn the courthouse into a heritage centre will be realised, or if it is even a possibility, given the complicated narratives surrounding the courthouse itself.

Male Toilets by Daragh Carville takes place in the basement of the courthouse, where the two characters, the Photographer and the Words Man, debate the future of the building. The Words Man has a proposal to turn the courthouse into a Tourist Information Centre. The photographer jokes, stating that 'Well we never used to have them, did we? Back in the old days, like [...] I mean, we used to have TERRORIST information Centres, I'll grant you that, we had the Terrorist Information Centres. But now it's all TOURIST Information Centres. Tourist Information Centres all over the shop. It's not the same. It's fucked up' (Carville 2000, 34). After some back and forth the Words Man explains 'I say it's not JUST gonna be a Tourist Information Centre. There's gonna be a whole heritage complex here, a whole heritage park. Tourists Information Centre's only a part of it' (ibid). They discuss the implications of tourist centres, voicing a worry that now that the Troubles are over, Northern Ireland will not be in the news so much, therefore creating less tourism. The two discuss the idea of setting off the 'occasional bomb' in the winter time, away from the peak tourist season. The Photographer insists that 'The yanks! Yanks'll lap it up. Look at the Troubles tours and all that. They fucking love it' (ibid, 37). The two discuss the idea further, with the Words Man saying that he would think about it, and the playlet ends with them exiting the male toilets, the Photographer's arm around the Words Man's shoulder. This action insinuates that they have reached a conclusion that keeping the Troubles alive in some aspect would be beneficial for the courthouse as a heritage centre, Tourist Information Centre, as well as broader aspects of urban regeneration and economic development in the form of 'Terror-Tourism' in Northern Ireland.

Urban regeneration:

The Courthouse still remains empty twenty years on from its closure, while the Gaol across the street has flourished into a tourist hotspot. Visitors can tour the gaol, learning about its history, as well as attending conferences, concerts and other events that are held on the premises year-round. The courthouse was excluded from this redevelopment project due to its private developer ownership (Muir 2014). While multiple plans have been proposed to turn the courthouse into a hotel, there has been no movement on these plans. On the other hand, the Crumlin Road Gaol falls in line with other urban redevelopment projects in Belfast, which have achieved various levels of success, such

as the Titanic Quarter, Castle Court Shopping Centre and Victoria Square, which will be expanded upon below.

In reality, while GFA was intended to create peace and cross-community collaboration between the divided communities, Jenny Muir who writes on urban regeneration in Belfast states that:

‘The settlement has ended over thirty years of violence but has not been able to alter the long-standing territorial nature of the region’s social relations, with implications for all aspects of public policy. [...] the territorial nature of the conflict continues to impact on many aspects of life in Northern Ireland, and much residential segregation between Protestant and Catholic areas remains’ (2014, 53).

This is a failure of the GFA’s aim to bring the two communities together to create a lasting peace. While Northern Ireland adopts a more neoliberalist agenda, focusing on creating new spaces in the city for the ‘Creative Class’ we can see more divides opening up in areas of the city that are blighted by multiple deprivation factors, such poverty, low literacy rates and access to services.

Therefore, urban redevelopment concerns voiced in *Convictions* were unfounded, but also raises the question: would a Tourist Information Centre be worse than an abandoned building? The role of site-specific theatre to bring attention to these spaces in the public sphere is important, not only for the arts sectors, but also highlights misuse of the urban sphere carried out by private developers. Gaffikin, Morrissey and Sterrett called for a ‘Creative City’ ‘in which networks of innovation and fresh-thinking are nurtured through multi-agency and cross-sectoral partnerships’ (2001, 156). While the Creative City concept would soon spiral out of control, homogenising and damaging cities which employed these measures (Wainwright 2017), Gaffikin et al., did highlight that Crumlin Road Courthouse and Gaol would have been perfect to launch new urban regeneration ideas in Belfast, as ‘there would be two clear advantages to this siting. The road embraces both communities on either side of it and also contains empty space for the provision of new cultural facilities’ (2001, 154). Since changing hands from being a quasi-public governmental building to being owned by private developers, ‘a series of fires have led to the loss of important interiors and rendered what remains of the building highly vulnerable’ (Harkin 2015, 155). Rita Harkin continues with:

‘In August 2013, Minister for Social Development, Nelson McCausland MLA, announced that consultants had begun work on a development study, guided by a steering group consisting of DSD, the Strategic Investment Board, the Office of First Minister and Deputy First Minister, Northern Ireland Environment Agency and Belfast City Council. The study aims to identify potential uses for the courthouse that are deliverable, sustainable and make a contribution to the wider social, economic and physical regeneration of the area’ (2015, 156).

It is then surprising, that after all this time, with multiple organisations calling out for redesign and reuse of the Courthouse that it still sits empty. While the Gaol was more successful than the Courthouse in its redevelopment, it cannot be denied that the spaces of these places speak volumes about the liminality of the peace process through their states of regeneration. One fully involved in the post-conflict North, offering up a multitude of tours based on dark history to visitors, the other in a complete state of disrepair, reflecting the ignored past which continues to impact Northern Irish society today.

Conclusion

Performance scholar, Kathleen Irwin writes, 'Where the performed site and the city mesh, the structures and institutions, buildings and monuments that provide the visual frame also provide the aesthetic, social, political and historical context within which event, spectator and place are situated' (2007, 30–31). The performance does not end with the metaphorical 'final curtain'. The performance becomes embedded in the history of the site. The lived experience of co-creating a work of art changes the view of the building of those involved, either as writers, artists, or audience members. By highlighting issues within urban regeneration in a post-conflict society, we can glean profound knowledge of these spaces through the use of performance which creates a holistic approach to urban planning, which has the capacity to include more voices. The use of co-creation has the capacity to open up public spaces as it engages communities surrounding the neighbourhood and provides a use for these buildings. By engaging with the built form, theatre companies such as Tinderbox, are able to bring the past and future of these non-places to the forefront of the public eye, thereby calling into question the role of urban redevelopment in a 'post-conflict' city and questioning who really benefits from these policy implications. Areas of urban redevelopment such as the Titanic Quarter, the Castle Court Shopping Centre and Victoria Square are all examples of spaces in the city which have been usurped by private developers with the intention of creating jobs, and economic activity for the city of Belfast, yet do not actively engage with cross-community relations or desegregation. In a scathing article written by Phil Ramsey regarding urban redevelopment of the Titanic Quarter, Ramsey outlines that private developers are set to gain massive sums of money under the guise of redeveloping an area using public funds. Ramsey's tongue in cheek commentary regarding creative industries as outlined above states that:

'Following the GFA [...], the setting up of power-sharing institutions and relative peace, there is an agreed interpretation: peace has come; it is time to have a normal society; today, normal societies spend money. The best way to reach conflict resolution is to turn the antagonists into consumers. Rather than fighting on the streets, Northern Ireland's people ought to be fighting for the best bargains in the aisles' (Ramsey 2013, 175).

As seen in this paper, performances were able to open up violent spaces created by the courthouse and create a new narrative of this space by reflecting thoughtfully on its past, through many voices. By shifting from an economic-centric mode of urban regeneration to an arts-based practice it is possible to see a new narrative for urban redevelopment, and perhaps a more tenable peace in Northern Ireland. This new future depends on the arts sector highlighting voices that are often overlooked in planning processes, and to help engage the communities which still remain at high levels of segregation twenty years on from the signing of the GFA.

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