

The Irish Museum Landscape

The panorama of the museum sector on the island of Ireland presents a challenge as we have to address two separate jurisdictions. Although similar in origin, provision, legislation, and support of the museum sector can vary vastly between both sides of the border, although it is important to take a cross-border approach.

With shared histories, cultural markers and identity, our museums reflect and interpret an all-island perspective within their collections and remit, particularly in what is known as the 'border county corridor' where museums in many cases share programmes and engage in active collaborations that see sharing of resources, audiences, and professionals who move and work fluidly between each community. It is the case that many of the support organisations in the cultural realm work across the entire island.

One also has to consider that, although most of the Irish national cultural institutions have 19th century origins, the majority of local, regional and independent museums have only been established since the 1980s and 1990s and, as such, respond to an evolving landscape. The operating frameworks have seen huge changes during this period as the island underwent a period of rapid economic growth during the Celtic Tiger years (mid-1990s – late 2000s) and the severe post-2008 economic recession, bringing with it a series of top-down measures that have had a vast impact on the museum profession.

Government structures and frameworks

Within the Northern Ireland Executive, the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure held responsibility for cultural services since the devolution of power in 1999 until mid-2015. A major restructuring following the Stormont House Agreementⁱ in late 2014 resulted in the amalgamation of a number of departments in 2016, leading to these services being encompassed under the more recently established Department for Communities. This macro-department currently holds responsibility for sport, community, regeneration, and cultural activity. However, the Northern Ireland executive team has been vacant since March 2017.

The Department for Communities holds responsibility for two bodies or 'systems', through which they provide services to the museum sector in Northern Ireland. It delivers this support through the Northern Ireland Museums Council, a non-departmental public body established in 1993, who – under an 'arms-length' principle - direct resources, funding and support at different levels to local and regional museums, including support of the professional sector through the provision of training. This body is also responsible for the Accreditation Scheme, operated in partnership with the Arts Council of England.

Museums with national remit are grouped under the National Museums Northern Ireland (NMNI) system, delivering their services through the Ulster Museum, the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum and the Ulster American Folk Park.

When addressing the museum sector in the Republic of Ireland, the historical landscape is slightly more complex. The first Minister with specific responsibility for Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht was appointed in 1993. Since then there has been a succession of nomenclatures under which cultural heritage has featured, each one impacting the framework around the direction of care of our cultural heritage: Department of Arts, Heritage, Gaeltacht and the Islands in 1997; Dept. of Arts, Sport and Tourism in 2002; and Department of Tourism, Culture and Sport in 2010.

One year after this last formation, this was restructured to form the Department of Arts, Heritage, and the Gaeltacht before becoming the Department of Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs in 2016. In July 2017, the new and current department was announced as Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (DAHG).

This Department holds responsibility for funding and policy framework for the national cultural institutions. These are grouped under the Council of National Cultural Institutions (CNCI), a statutory body established under the Heritage Fund Act, 2001ⁱⁱ, created to facilitate ‘the pooling together of talent, experience and vision of the Directors of the National Cultural Institutions in furtherance of the national cultural interest’.

The CNCI functions as a consultative body with particular reference to recommendations on proposed acquisitions using the Heritage Fund in respect of eligible institutions. and include among its members the main museums with national remit such as the National Gallery of Ireland, the Crawford Art Gallery, the Irish Museum of Modern Art, and the National Museum of Ireland, the system of museums organised in accordance to the profile of the collections they hold in trust: Natural History, Archaeology, Country Life, and Decorative Arts and Industry.

The Department for Culture Heritage and the Gaeltacht also provides discretionary funding support to a small number of museums and cultural services, including the Irish Museums Association. It additionally operates a number of schemes providing programme funding for rural and regional museums, collections access initiatives, and cross-border initiatives.

In both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, state agencies in the form of Arts Councils have taken the lead and been mostly responsible for audience development and the commissioning of studies related to participation and education. In both jurisdictions, these councils do not hold responsibility for cultural heritage and, in the Republic of Ireland, it is the Heritage Council of Ireland which provides support and relatively small pockets of funding to a large number and range of regional and local museums.

This Council additionally oversees the accreditation scheme under the Museum Standards Programme of Ireland, administers education and conservation programmes, including a number of fellowships in association with national cultural institutions, and supports – in collaboration with local government – the County Heritage Officers Network, comprised of 28 County Heritage officers who are based in the offices of local authorities.

However, the remit of the Heritage Council is very large and it is severely under resourced. In response to the financial crisis in 2009, a moratorium was imposed on public service recruitment and promotionⁱⁱⁱ lasting until 2015. This operated across all areas of the civil and public sector, including non-commercial state bodies, leaving the position of Museums and Archives Officer within the Heritage Council vacant and not yet reinstated.

Adding further to the complexity of responsibility for museums are those sites, many of which operate museums, held under the historic properties service within the Office of Public Works – a government body that manages state property and historic buildings throughout the country. Not all of the museums on these historic sites have formally appointed curators of the collections though and the same can be said for the museums and historic houses included in the National Trust portfolio within Northern Ireland, although

these have recently developed and doubled their centralised curatorial pool from which responsibility for a number of museums is drawn.

In addition to the direct support by national government or statutory bodies with relegated responsibilities, many of the regional museums across the island are supported - either in their totality or partially - by local authorities (Republic of Ireland) or local councils (Northern Ireland) who extend museum services, resource museums, appoint curatorial roles and provide technical and administrative support. However, in many cases, these museums need to avail of external freelance services or shared services for areas of specialisation such as conservation and research investigators.

In Northern Ireland, there are nine local authority museum services with twenty museums operating under these, and the interests of curators are represented through the Northern Ireland Regional Curators Group who have representation on the board of directors of the Northern Ireland Museums Council.

In the Republic of Ireland, there are seventeen museums operating under the umbrella of local government. Twelve of these, the denominated Local Authority Museums, are grouped under the Local Authority Museums Network (formerly known as the Local Authority Curators Group) who promote cooperation between their museums, advocate for further supports at regional level and have ambitions of shared specialised services^{iv}.

What do we know about our museums?

A consequence of the fragmented nature of the museum landscape in the Republic of Ireland and, to a lesser degree, Northern Ireland, is the lack of consensus around information on the sector.

There is no formal and centralised collection of museum data on an all-island level although to some degree this information is collected – but not made publicly available in its entirety - through the national museums systems such as the Council of National Cultural Institutions and National Museums Northern Ireland and the accreditation programmes^v.

The most extensive of these is the Northern Ireland Museums Council's museum survey^{vi}, carried out as a quinquennial review of the local museum sector in Northern Ireland. The most recent survey of Accredited museums (excluding the national museums) is the fourth undertaken, however the statistics are compromised by the non-participation of some of the smaller and independent museums in what is a voluntary accreditation scheme.

Within the Republic of Ireland, the accreditation scheme is not yet in its teenage years, having been established in 2007 by the Heritage Council of Ireland. Also a voluntary programme, many museums have not yet completed this five-year programme known as the Museums Standards Programme for Ireland, including the National Museum of Ireland, the Irish Museum of Modern Art, and similar relevant institutions. Emphasis on professional development of staff within these programmes is implicit but ultimately mainly concerned with conservation and preservation of the collections.

The most comprehensive recent survey of museums (Irish Museums Survey 2016, Mark-FitzGerald)^{vii} was carried by the Irish Museums Association and University College Dublin under funds awarded through the Irish Research Council under their civic engagement strand. It has been carried out every decade since 2004

and, while less detailed than the survey produced by the Northern Ireland Museums Council, nevertheless gives an interesting timeline and tracks overall trends from an all-island perspective.

There are approximately 65 museums in existence in Northern Ireland and 140 in the Republic of Ireland: 109 formed by national and local government-led museums and those that participate in the accreditation schemes led by the Heritage Council (61) and Northern Ireland Museums Council (42). To this list, one must add independent, university-led and a multitude of local museums which fall outside these parameters yet fulfil requirements of museum definition.

Almost two-thirds of Irish museums were founded since the 1980s, with this and the following decade representing a period of investment in museums, reflecting a period of major investment and of intense growth in tourism. Indeed, it is a feature of local museums in Ireland that many were founded in response to an overseas tourism remit, although we have seen this change in recent years towards a more sustainable and expanded purpose. In 2014 more than six million people visited museums in Ireland with approximately one third representing overseas visitors and two thirds domestic tourism, so the appetite to access our cultural heritage is evidenced among the local population. It is worth noting that many museums do not hold adequate visitor records, partly a result of the funding structures which until recently took a more qualitative rather than quantitative approach, partly because entry to museums is mostly free with many opting for no formal register of visitors at entry point.

As to their size, many of the museums on the Island tend to be small: well over three-quarter of museums have annual expenditure of between 100.000 and 500.000 euros, more than half occupy space of less than 1000 square metres, and almost two-thirds contain collections with less than 5000 artefacts. Archaeology and History are the primary type of collections held in trust (46%), followed by a general or 'mixed' classification (25.3%) and art museums representing 17.2%. Digitisation of our collections is represented in the extremes of the spectrum with 32.2% of collections not yet digitised and 21.1% of museums having digitised more than 80% of their collections. Open access to this is low nevertheless with many museums opting to provide online access to a relatively small selection of artefacts from their collections.

The future of museums – strategies and policies

As to the development of cultural policies, the future of museums on the island of Ireland, and the resulting impact on personnel and professional staff, while it is recognised – as it should – that the primary and fundamental role of the museum profession is the care and interpretation of the collections that protect history in its perpetuity, there is also a 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.

Recent initiatives such as the Decade of Centenaries^{viii}, a programme running from 2012 until 2022 which commemorates significant centenary anniversaries in Irish history, reflect this heritage and have a strong grass-roots and community approach.

In Northern Ireland, the sector takes its cue from the Department for Communities while in the Republic of Ireland the work of the sector is guided by the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht's 'Creative Ireland'^{ix} programme. This programme embeds a series of values such as the right of the citizen to

access and participation in culture, to see all communities reflected in cultural practice, with inclusion as primary principle. It is underlined and supported by a commitment of increased resources at local and national level which was reflected in major capital funding announcements in the most recent government budgets in the Republic.

Even more recently, Project Ireland 2040^x, indicates a further commitment to culture and heritage. Launched as ten-year plan to invest in the infrastructure of the Republic of Ireland, for social, economic and cultural development, it has committed a projected €1.4 billion to be spent enhancing amenities and heritage. The Plan outlines 10 strategic outcomes, one of which is "Enhanced Amenity and Heritage". To deliver this, there will be a welcome expansion of funding schemes for the arts and culture which will provide additional support to museums and galleries, regional art centres, and theatres, and includes an ambitious plan for increased capital investment in many of the cultural institutions.

Nevertheless, despite these positive developments, museums and cultural heritage still have a marginal place within the broader policy announcements in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. In the last decade, many of the debates around the museum and heritage sectors have focused on governance and structural reform within our national cultural institutions, leading to improved transparency and efficiency in terms of governance, administration, and capital investment. Personnel structures have been overhauled more recently with the Irish Museum of Modern Art, National Museums Northern Ireland, and the National Gallery of Ireland all undergoing major personnel restructuring and streamlining in response to the growing expectation of alignment between public policy and museum objectives.

In Northern Ireland, the Central Government policy framework for the development of national and local museums over the period 2011-2021^{xi}, underlines the primary role of museums as custodians and conservers of our heritage and highlights their contribution to education and life-long learning, adding:

“As well as their inherent cultural value and impact, museums can make a major contribution to economic and social regeneration and are a reflection of community confidence and health and well-being. As such, they can help position Northern Ireland as forward-looking and progressive, an attractive place to visit and in which to live, a place for investment, and a place that has a rich past and a positive future.”

The foreword to the National Ireland Museums Council Business Plan 2015-2016^{xii} by former Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL), states in its opening line:

“DCAL is committed to harnessing culture, arts and leisure to promote equality and tackle poverty and social exclusion”.

It follows on to outline key remits and functions that address maintaining and improving standards of collections care and service to the public and to promote a coherent framework of museum provision before again highlighting:

“NIMC plays a unique and fundamental role in the delivery of the Northern Ireland Museums Policy and the Programme for Government Priorities, including those concerned with Promoting Equality, Tackling Poverty and Social Exclusion”.

Also in Northern Ireland, the new strategic plan for National Museums Northern Ireland emphasises the important role that museums play in the heart of their communities, how museums can change lives and positively contribute to the development of a vibrant society.

Meanwhile, in the Republic of Ireland, there is no specific museums policy. Heritage 2030, the proposed new national heritage plan for Ireland omitted museums in its original consultation document. Meanwhile, Culture 2025, the new cultural strategy proposed by the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht^{xiii} is still in draft format having undergone extensive public consultation in 2015-2016. A broad document, if does not specifically address the museum sector, alluding solely to these in one instance, in terms of digitisation of collections held in the national cultural institutions.

In the opening statement, it says “Through this Framework Policy, the Government seeks to nurture creativity, boost citizen participation, help more people to follow a sustainable career in the cultural sector, promote Ireland’s cultural wealth and ensure a cultural contribution to wider social and economic goal. The aim is to put culture at the heart of our lives and develop a more collaborative approach across all sectors”

As one can see, the dialogue at government and policy level is centred around the role of institutions such as museums can play in promoting active participation, health and wellbeing, support and enhance educational curricula, and – in broad terms – the potential of museums in social impact development and integration and the onus on museum staff to deliver this.

These objectives are particularly relevant to the many Northern Ireland and border county museums who run and employ staff through cross-border initiatives that promote peace and reconciliation under the EU funded PEACE Programme, initially created in 1995 as a direct result of the EU's desire to make a positive response to the paramilitary ceasefires of 1994.

However, will this be under threat with the withdrawal of the UK from the European Union in 2019? Since early 2017, the Irish Museums Association and Ulster University have been leading a research project, Bridge over Brexit^{xiv}, aiming to quantify cross-border partnerships and assess the impact of Brexit on museums and the professionals who work in the sector.

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 and the museum professional in supporting intercultural dialogue and inclusion.

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ⁱⁱⁱ Irish Government (2009): *Public Service Agreement 2010-2014 (Croke Park Agreement)*. Retrieved Oct. 2018: <http://www.per.gov.ie/en/croke-park-agreement/>

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- v Emily Mark-FitzGerald (2017): *Known unknowns: research on Irish museums since 2008*. *Cultural Trends*, 26:3, 195-215,
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