

Temple Bar: An Evaluation

So can the redevelopment of Temple Bar be seen as a success, both in purely architectural terms and in more broadly social, urban design terms? Were any mistakes made and if so what lessons do we learn from them? Within the context of Europe, the project was meant to steer the continent towards a more responsible attitude to its historic urban fabric and lead by example, has it succeeded in this regard?

Architecture

Set against purely architectural criteria, Temple Bar should be and is lauded as a resounding success. The mere presence of so many groundbreaking and award-winning buildings attests to its undeniable quality. Projects such as the Irish Film Centre, the buildings of Meeting House Square and the Green Building are woven into the historical fabric of the quarter yet are unafraid to challenge and create something wholly contemporary in the process. Throughout Temple Bar we see examples of new architecture that respects history without yielding to an over-literal contextualisation and conservation for the sake of itself. Context was a part of the design equation but not to the expense of common sense nor innovation.

Residential Quality

The sheer quality of Temple Bar's residential developments demands to be mentioned, from loft living in The Granary, through the mixed-use marvel that is the Printworks, to the 'West End' complex, replete with a green combined power and heat system - each firmly places 'people' at the heart of its concerns. The latter notably includes 30 % social housing - the residents are mainly middle-aged tenants who agreed to surrender houses in the suburbs. Needless to say, they are ecstatic about their new abodes. Nearly 2,000 residents make Temple Bar their home now as opposed to 200 before the transformation.

Group 91

Many of the successes of Temple Bar can be attributed to the character of Group 91 both as a collective and as a collection of hugely talented, individual architects. They had, as Thomas Forget has said, 'the vision to understand the city as a work in perpetual flux' rather than attempting to render it in period stasis. Crucially they had a single coherent vision that not only incorporated but embraced diversity. This attitude was perfect for an area such as Temple Bar, which contained a wide range of architectural styles within its boundaries. It was within these varying buildings and the gap sites between them that they conducted their dazzling acts of urban dentistry.

Their framework plan had a faith in architectural design and intervention to complement and mould an economic and social transformation and this faith has proved well founded in Temple Bar. An area previously in decline has been rescued from its fate as an Americanised transport depot and reinstated at the heart of the city, as an important link between the too often dichotomised 'north' and 'south' cities.

Temple Bar Properties

This process was undoubtedly furthered by the establishment of a state development company, in the form of Temple Bar Properties, to guide the process in the right

direction. Left solely to the private sector the profit motive may have eclipsed the more admirable goal of culture. TBP was in turn helped by the fact that much of the land was in state hands already so it could acquire its new property portfolio with ease. Indeed the fortunes of Temple Bar owe much to the responsible attitude CIE showed its tenants and its reluctance to 'railroad' plans for the monolithic bus centre. Originally TBP was run on behalf of the Department of the Taoiseach (now it is the Department of the Environment) and the special interest and patronage of the Taoiseach of the time, Charles Haughey, added impetus to the early stages of its growth.

Public Funding

The availability of public funding, both Irish and European, for various flagship cultural projects such as the Ark helped enormously in ensuring in the first place that they would actually be finished and secondly that precedents were established as to how exactly development should progress. Temple Bar received over £41 million in state money, half of it from the European coffers, on top of £60 million from TBP's property portfolio and a further £100 million in private sector investment.

The importance of leaders

From the outset TBP was staffed by highly motivated people and was led from 1991 onwards by the charismatic and persuasive Laura Magahy. Her unflagging commitment to the cultural project was highly instrumental in its overall success but she was by no means alone. Significant others such as Paddy Teahon, her predecessor, or Michael Gough and Dick Gleeson in Dublin Corporation's planning department bolstered innovation and initiated creative solutions to the problems encountered over the 10 years of renewal.

Temple Bar Renewal

Unfortunately, the same praise cannot be afforded to TBP's sister company Temple Bar Renewal Ltd. Established alongside TBP in 1991, its remit was to administer and issue tax incentives for the area to ensure a balance of varying uses. This it has failed to do, to the extent that Michael Smith commented that Temple Bar was fast turning itself into the 'Temple of Bars'. It would be hard to argue that the quarter did not have an excess of licensed premises. Not only the number but the size of these mega-pubs has increased exponentially - previously traditional bars such as the Norseman have succumbed to the profit incentive and created vast drinking sheds devoid of atmosphere.

When pressurised on this issue during the mid-1990s, when this issue reared its head, TBR claimed it did not have the authority to refuse such applications and that it was Dublin Corporation that had granted permission for all the new pubs. Yet this was shown to be patently false when publican Louis Fitzgerald (of the Quays pub) sued the company on the basis that it had exceeded its powers when it had refused to approve tax incentives for his pub extension. The High Court ruled that TBR always had the statutory power to control the spread of pubs within the area. By 1997, when TBR adopted what amounted to a ban on further tax incentives to licensed premises, it was too late as 'Temple Bar' had already become a firm favourite with 'stag party' tourists. Such low-grade tourism was found to be costing the area £57 million in lost higher-spending revenue streams.

Urban Design

Such problems point towards difficulties in practically implementing Group 91's broader urban design and social agenda. Other criticisms finger the quality of the urban design itself. For example, one of the most lauded parts of Temple Bar, Meeting House Square, has conversely attracted much criticism as well. While there is a broad consensus on the quality of the architecture surrounding the square, a few commentators have suggested that the space does not work as, what Richard Rogers would term, an 'open-minded space' full of human spontaneity. It must be admitted that for the first few years, at least, it was grossly underused as an outdoor performance venue, its supposed function. But lately, owing to a full summer schedule of 'diversions' in the square, coupled with the weekly organic food market, it has become a living public space proper. Less successful it seems have been attempts to create a market on Cow's Lane in the west end. Indeed this area should have had a market square of its own but this remained a sketch on Group 91's ideas board.

Poddle Bridge

The lack of people visiting MHS in the past may have been caused by the absence of the proposed Poddle Bridge, which was to create a linear pedestrian path over the Liffey through MHS into the quarter. The bridge was refused planning permission, yet this imbalance has been somewhat tweaked by the recent addition of the Millennium Bridge.

Other Spaces

Other spaces, such as Temple Bar Square have been more successful in attracting crowds but in this case it has more to with location rather than better design. Other spaces like Curved Street have surprises us by maturing into 'open-minded' outdoor rooms, populated by an alternative youth culture that harks back to Temple Bar's days before the transformation.

Art in Temple Bar

Indeed some long-term residents have said that they find themselves yearning for these days before the transformation when they found things edgier, more creative and with a true community spirit. And while it may be true that the environment before the renewal was more in tune with the bohemian and artistic temperament, Temple Bar was then very much an area in decline. Such decline cannot be sustained and as Hugh Pearman put it 'no city of world-class pretensions can capitalise on a culture of decline'. To go forward Temple Bar had to institutionalise, to some extent at least, that which was previously ad hoc and spontaneous. And as Colm Ó Brian, of the Project Arts Centre has said, this is what the various arts bodies of the area have lobbied for and it is up to them to retain a sharper focus and continue to produce good work.

Conclusion

What has happened in Temple bar, despite its flaws, is a wholly original way of doing things to the extent that it combines cultural development with urban renewal and furthermore this development is totally organic, not 'artificially inseminated' from without. It is this that marks it from other European urban renewal schemes and therein lies the lessons to be learnt for other cities within Europe and other areas within the city of Dublin. Indeed it was Temple Bar's successful development guided by an area-based management committee that prompted other inner-city areas to do likewise in the form of area-action plans that are examined in the other sections.