

Stones In Water by Loughlin Kealy - how our inherited built environment is understood and valued

Updated / Thursday, 6 Jul 2023 10:00



Royal Hospital Kilmainham (Pic: National Photographic Archive)

We present an extract from *Stones In Water*, the new collection of essays by UCD Professor Loughlin Kealy.

Subtitled Essays on Inheritance in the Built Environment, Stones in Water explores how the inherited built environment is understood and valued. This inheritance, created by the forebears of communities worldwide, is central to cultural identity everywhere. It is variously protected, exploited and at times weaponised, used to celebrate human achievement and also to undermine it.

This curated collection, written over a period of years, reflects on persistent themes in heritage protection. These range from the implications of tourism for the cultural heritage of buildings and landscapes, to supporting recovery from the impacts of catastrophic events affecting historic places.

The need to maintain the useful lives of inherited environments brings new demands and, also, fresh opportunities. *Stones in Water: Inheritance in the Built Environment* draws on the author's work, nationally and internationally, to interrogate how current and emerging challenges are changing perceptions of this endowment, and how new understandings can contribute positively to constructing a sustainable future.

Lineaments of change

Within living memory, Irish society has been transformed, sometimes in paradoxical ways. It is no longer a society based predominantly on rural settlements and small towns, but is instead a first-generation urban society with a discernible urban/rural divide. From being almost a confessional state, it has become deeply secularised, although underlying religious affiliations exercise continuing influence. It has become focused on Europe rather than on the United Kingdom and United States, where most of its expatriate people dwell. Above all, it has 'modernised', pursuing the idea of development through economic growth and generating a transition from a culture of tradition to a culture of progress. The persistence of traditional interests in music, literature and sport has to be seen against these underlying transformations.

Recent experiences of violence and social and political dissonance has made it difficult to put faith in traditional versions of the past, and there has been a progressive elaboration in the understanding of history. It is symptomatic of the changes taking place that propositions such as this, representing a determinedly optimistic viewpoint and finding merit in the fragmentation of an inherited consensus, would command fairly wide acceptance. They merit scrutiny if only because they minimise discordant factors.

Given this new complexity in our obsession with history, what then do we expect of the buildings inherited from the past? They are popular in a way that few modern buildings could hope to be. It has been remarked that the buildings of the past help us to 'ground a shaken identity'. This implies that historic buildings are a force for cohesion: in the appreciation of their historical, architectural and cultural importance, there is a factor that draws society together in the face of the fragmenting dynamics of present-day living. As the final quarter of the twentieth century unfolded, interest in the architectural heritage deepened and resources devoted to its conservation substantially increased. Has the built heritage been a force for cohesion? Was it not Oscar Wilde who said that the truth is rarely pure and never simple?

Over the past generation, the way in which the architectural heritage has been treated provides an insight into shifting social consciousness and is, perhaps, a parable of value to the future. Some 50 years ago, one would find that the great pre-Reformation and pre-Plantation monuments, early Christian churches, monasteries and castles were maintained as ruins by the State, respected in their antiquity as somehow representing the pre-colonial past. Low-key maintenance and repair meant that the ruin remained a ruin, with its place in the physical and mental landscape intact. In contrast, buildings of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were often seen as the remnants of a colonising power and as obstacles to progress. They were accorded ineffectual protection under the planning acts and, for the most part, were not regarded as national monuments nor seen as the responsibility of the State. Public funds were not available to support their maintenance or repair. In urban development throughout the 1960s and 1970s, their destruction was defended on the grounds that the buildings were

redundant and unsound, and that their removal made way for modern buildings – by definition, and despite their frequent shoddiness, the architecture of progress.

Today the situation is different. New legislation for the protection of the architectural heritage has been enacted, although anomalies remain and the degree of protection under planning laws is still uncertain.⁶ Deficiencies in the regulatory environment are being recognised and debated, and are the focus of revision within departments of government. Important buildings of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries have been conserved by state action, while at local level, historic buildings are routinely recycled for new uses. Deficiencies in knowledge and skill are becoming recognised, and moves are underway to tackle shortcomings through training institutions and industry initiatives.



Holycross Abbey (Pic: National Photographic Archive)

A tale of two projects

Some of the lineaments of deeper change can be illustrated by reference to two major projects: Holycross Abbey and the Royal Hospital, Kilmainham

The Abbey, a fifteenth-century reconstruction of a late twelfth century foundation, was re-roofed in the 1970s and returned to use as a church. It had survived for 300 years as a ruin. A decade later, the Royal Hospital was restored. This building, Ireland's most important seventeenth century secular building, had been unused for years, its future undecided. Both restorations were welcomed at the time that work was being carried out, although the passage of time has seen a more qualified response. But beyond the question of correctness of approach or detail, there are points of similarity and difference in these projects that illustrate the changing times.

The effect of the restoration of these two buildings has been similar in two respects: their restoration helped to establish the architectural heritage as a resource for the present, and they offered a clean-cut completeness as the models for such undertakings. The second, the model for restoration, is an important issue but beyond the scope of this essay. The essay is concerned with the first, with what one might call the utility principle. Providing new and compatible uses for historic buildings is one of the key requirements for successful conservation and was not revolutionary in itself as far as this country was concerned. The fledgling Free State had repaired the great eighteenth-century monumental buildings of the Capital damaged during the rebellion of 1916 and the later civil war and restored them to use in the service of state institutions, albeit with a vigour that would be challenged today. The motivation then was complex – the need to retain the southern unionist population would have been apparent to the wiser heads, and the restorations could be taken as evidence of continuity.

The dominance of this utility principle today rests on different grounds. The Abbey and Hospital projects each extended the utility principle in different ways, ways that point to a change in social consciousness and in cultural values.

The Abbey: The return of the dispossessed

The impetus to restore the Abbey had its roots in the previous century, at a time when the works of the past became a means of underwriting cultural identity. The Enlightenment of the eighteenth century had laid the foundation for the development of antiquarian interest in the built relics of the past, an interest later overlaid with aesthetic sensibility towards the picturesque. Medieval buildings acquired a quasi-moral status, representing an age to which the aspirations for social and religious cohesion could be ascribed. This status was expressed by the adoption – by the newly disestablished Church of Ireland – of the medieval style for new church-building, as well as in the restoration of existing churches, most notably the great Dublin cathedrals: St Patrick's and Christchurch. For its part, the Catholic majority celebrated its emancipation in the triumphal adoption of the architecture of the Roman Renaissance. With the passage of time and the political order, priorities changed. Perhaps the simplistic and romantic nationalism that came to dominate political discourse in the Free State had something to do with it. The restoration of Holycross had been preceded by the restoration of Ballintubber Abbey in the 1960s and was followed by the restoration of Graiguenamanagh. These projects were seen as repossessions, resumptions of occupancy that had been interrupted by alien intervention. In the case of Ballintubber, the continuity of worship was explicitly invoked. The ecclesiastical restoration projects, nineteenth and twentieth century alike, had in common the fact that they fitted into a comprehensible narrative, one which was underpinned by opposing understandings of history, but united by the imperatives of establishing continuity and identity. Thus, the symbolism of restoration was clear and immediate, whether one belonged to one side or to the other.

The Hospital: The emergence of high culture

With the restoration of the Royal Hospital at Kilmainham, one enters different territory. Although furnished with a chapel, this was a secular building, constructed circa 1684 to cater for soldiers of the English crown, and built at a time of immense turbulence in Irish society. It bears no clear and unambiguous political message. Its patron, James Butler, 1st Duke of Ormond, occupies an uncertain position in popular history, and appreciation of his contribution has never fully taken hold of the public imagination. He is credited with the impetus for major civic works to the Capital, notably the creation of the quays along Dublin's riverbanks and of the Phoenix Park. But understanding the man and his political position requires a grasp of the complex relationship between the ruling elites of this country and those of England and the continent in the seventeenth century. Allegiances and loyalties were already complex before the religious upheaval of the Reformation. The young James was reared a Protestant in the English court, although the rest of his family in Ireland were Catholic. The least one can say is that the story of those relationships undermines simplistic narratives of conquest, religion and the unremitting struggle for freedom. The building itself was the largest and earliest of the purpose-built secular institutions that, by virtue of their very existence, expressed the demise of the medieval way of life in Ireland. Its architecture announces the participation of its patron and the society he represented in the wider scene of the Renaissance in Europe. It is a complex 'high culture' icon.

But these complexities played little part in public debate about its conservation. The building has been subject to two restoration campaigns. In the 1970s, the decision to restore this building rested on the grounds of its importance in Irish architectural history, and the interventions undertaken were justified by reference to its state of repair. Any reservations that might have been felt were subordinated to the fact that the building had been saved from becoming a ruin. In the 1980s, it was adapted for use as the Museum of Modern Art. Again, the arguments were fought on altered conceptual grounds. The protagonists were, on the one side, those who argued against the new adaptations on the grounds of the building's architectural importance, and those on the other who argued that the new use would provide life to an otherwise dead building – one whose previous alterations reduced its claim to be preserved as it then was. The claims of the building itself as a historical document were seen as inconclusive, and its historical context hardly entered public argument.

Over the past generation, the way in which the architectural heritage has been treated provides an insight into shifting social consciousness and is, perhaps, a parable of value to the future.

The restoration of the Abbey rested on its place in cultural consciousness; the restoration of the Hospital rested firstly on its place in Irish architectural history and then on opportunistic inspiration. In neither case have the technical decisions taken with respect to the building fabric been subject to serious critical review. To do so might have led to discussion of the competing values to be addressed in the process of intervention. The answer to the question posed above as to what we expect of historic buildings is that we expect them to earn their

keep while maintaining a representational value, even if that value is sometimes at variance with the building's history. For a long time, this sentiment was underlined by the fact that the assistance given by the State for the repair of historic buildings in private ownership came in the form of tax relief against income rather than as a grant. That position has also changed. But consistent with that sentiment, modifications are frequently introduced in order to comply with consequent functional requirements. While the principle that the best protection for a historic building lies in its being used for purposes that are compatible both with its fabric and its significance is accepted, reuse is becoming the dominant goal of conservation.

One consequence has been a pervasive sloppiness in the language used to describe interventions in historic buildings: terms such as 'restoration' and 'refurbishment' are used to describe projects that amount to reconstruction.

Resources, evaluation and critical interpretation

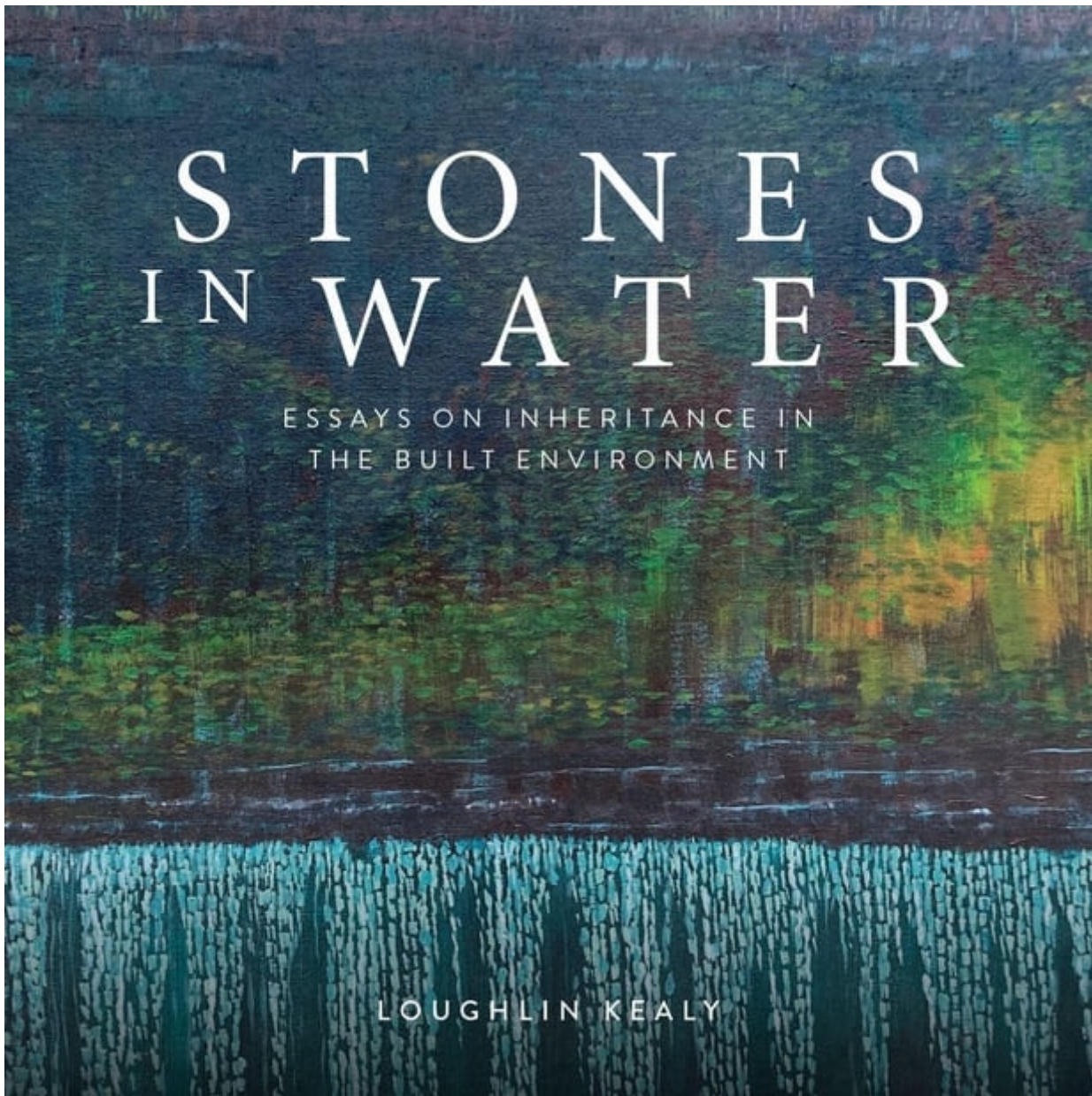
In the years since the Royal Hospital project, there has been almost a golden age for the conservation of buildings in this country. The flowering of interest extends beyond buildings of major architectural importance to include redundant churches, schools, almshouses, gatehouses and early industrial buildings such as mills and warehouses; hardly a small town or village has not attempted to bring some redundant building back into community use. There has been a continuing development in the skill and expertise brought to bear in major undertakings, and projects such as the repair of the Custom House facade, the conservation of Cormac's Chapel at Cashel and the restoration of the Casino at Marino demonstrate the advances. But there are clear shortcomings in expertise and skill when one looks at the broader picture.

There are questions of judgement to be answered as to how far the utility principle extends. The culture of progress rests predominantly on economic criteria, and much of the impetus for the conservation of the built heritage derives from commercial considerations, such as the creation of a tourism 'product'. But conserving heritage on the basis of its importance for us and undertaking work in order to present it to tourists may present conflicting priorities. We should beware of being over-enthusiastic restorers rather than conservators, lest the economic argument becomes self-defeating.

There has been little published critical evaluation in the area of conservation, despite the extensive activity. But the resurgence of interest in historic buildings is striking, nonetheless. The State has committed substantial resources to the conservation and reuse of the great set pieces. And the conservation of other aspects of architectural heritage such as vernacular buildings, buildings whose significance is primarily historical, or industrial heritage, is developing. But unevenly across the country. Some years ago the contrast was marked: Dr William Nolan, writing about the use of heritage, contrasted the fate of two buildings in Tipperary: the Swiss Cottage in Cahir and the Widow McCormack's house in Farranrory. The Swiss Cottage is an early nineteenth-century cottage orné, attributed to John Nash, and a

building of charm as well as architectural interest. Widow McCormack's house was the scene of an armed confrontation between a force of police and a band of local miners and tenant farmers led by the United Irishmen organisation, including some of the leading protagonists in the struggle for reform of the system of landholding at that time. Its importance lies in its historical significance. Both buildings were the focus of public campaigns. At the time of Dr Nolan's writing, the Swiss Cottage had been made a national monument, restored using a combination of state and private resources, and was a major attraction in the locality. The house was entered on the Monuments Register and was almost derelict, unoccupied and for sale. It is a mark of the progress made that this building has now been restored by the State and opened to the public.

Part of the ideology of conservation is the use of monuments as 'instruments of knowledge and cultural development'. Juxtaposing concepts of 'knowledge', 'culture' and 'historic monument' means that the basis for conservation and interpretation is critical. If not adequately conceived, interpretative programmes are threats to the intellectual integrity of ongoing research and to the monuments themselves. In Ireland, where the experience of struggle for political, economic and intellectual independence was so close to the public psyche, there is a particular need for thought about the concepts implicitly presented by the acts of conservation and interpretation. The correlation between power, wealth and cultural importance has been the subject of some attention in the critical literature on the preservation of heritage. Hoepfner, Leone and Potter assert that the fact that this correlation is usually unstated suggests an ideological position that should be addressed. Few conservation projects succeed in tackling this issue well; at the time of its first restoration in the 1980's, Strokestown House, with the simple juxtaposition of the furnished family house with the Famine Museum in the stables, provided an experience that was unique in its capacity to "empower" the visitor in the exploration of these issues. That challenge still remains today. The role of the conservator and interpreter, whose choices may reflect a value system not familiar to the visitor, emerges centre stage.



Stones In Water is published by University College Dublin Press

A Privacy [ted from RTE.ie](#)