A NEW LANDSCAPE OF ARTS-BASED BUILDINGS AND COMPARATIVE CULTURAL POLICIES ON THE ISLAND OF IRELAND: THE CURSE OF JOCASTA’S NECKLACE

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Abstract
Much current cultural policy research focuses on activity traditionally viewed as arts practice: visual arts, music, literature and dance. Architecture’s role in the discussion of cultural policy is, however, less certain and thus less frequently interrogated. The study presented here both addresses this dearth of in-depth research while also contributing to the interdisciplinary discussion of cultural policy in wider terms. In seeking to better understand how architectural culture is regulated and administered in a specific case study, it unpacks how the complicated relationships of nominal and explicit policies on both sides of the Irish/Northern Irish border contributed to the significant expansion of arts-based buildings 1995-2008. It contrasts political and cultural motivations behind these projects during a period of significant economic growth, investment and inward immigration. Data has been gathered from both official published policies as well as interviews with elite actors in the decision-making field and architects who produced the buildings of interest in both countries. With the sizeable number of arts-based buildings now completed in both Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, one must wonder if this necklace of buildings is, like Jocasta’s, a thing of both beauty and redolent with a potential future curse. It is the goal of this project to contribute to the larger applied and critical discussion of these issues and to engage with future policy design, administration and, certainly, evaluation.

Keywords
Comparative cultural policy, architecture, Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland.

Introduction
Much current cultural policy research focuses on activity traditionally viewed as arts practice: visual arts, music, literature and dance. Architecture’s role in the discussion of cultural policy is, however, less certain and thus less frequently interrogated. Since the early 1990s, the process and product of architects has been increasingly considered by policy makers as ‘culture.’ However, little current research work in the area interrogates links of policy to architecture in areas beyond the much-discussed and widely criticized use of flagship buildings as cultural planning. Likewise, while scholars such as Scullion and García list a myriad of disciplines in which research in cultural policy research is based, including communication science, media studies, human geography, urban studies, sociology, history and public policy (2005:123), methodologies...
and perspectives developed in the discipline in architecture are rarely deployed.

This study, approached from the perspective of architectural history and practice, seeks to both address this dearth of in-depth research while contributing to the interdisciplinary discussion of cultural policy in wider terms. In seeking to better understand how architectural culture is regulated and administered, it unpacks the complicated relationships of nominal and explicit policies on both sides of the Irish/Northern Irish border contributed to the significant expansion of arts-based buildings 1995-2008. It compares and contrasts the political and cultural motivations for the procurement and development of these buildings during a period of significant economic growth and stability, investment and inward immigration. In so doing, it acts as a means to interrogate, in a specific comparison, the principles and strategies of policy as it relates to the appointment of significant architectural commissions. Data has been gathered from both official published policies as well as interviews with elite actors in the decision-making field and architects who produced the buildings of interest in both countries.

Clearly, this study requires many limitations to its scope. The comparison here is limited to the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland; contrasts and similarities are not being drawn here between Great Britain. Likewise, the definition of ‘arts-based building’ is here limited to those which provide a location for the practice, display and/or performance of theatre, visual arts, music, dance and workspaces for both professionals and amateurs. In addition, the buildings considered here are those that have been funded through public sources. Some initial attempts have been made to catalogue the depth and breadth of these buildings. For instance, Gemma Tipton’s book Space Architecture for Art includes a directory, though privately-funded projects, such as the Glucksman Gallery, Cork by Dublin architects O’Donnell + Tuomey are also included in that volume (Tipton, 2005). This paper, while recognizing these efforts, does not seek to exhaustively list these buildings.

These questions grow out of two previous major studies by the author which examined links between cultural policy and national identities. The first, a three-year research project investigated relationships between cultural policy and architecture centres, (organisations which promote issues of the built environment amongst the ‘general’ public) (Lappin, 2008), while the second, the author’s book Full Irish: New Architecture in Ireland (Lappin, 2009) explored the connections of the built realm and cultural identity in both the Republic of Ireland (RoI) and Northern Ireland (NI) from the late 1990s-2008, during the so-called Celtic Tiger boom period.

Gibson and Stevenson note that there is little evidence ‘other than certain consultants ‘say so,’ that the massive public expenditure required for ... [arts-based] redevelopment and re-imaging strategies actually produces outcomes that are in the public interest’ (2004: 2). With the sizeable number of arts-based buildings now completed in both RoI and NI, one must wonder if this necklace of buildings is, like Jocasta’s, a thing of both beauty and redolent with a potential future curse. Will these buildings contribute to the ‘culture for
all’ ethos embodied since the 1940s by many governments while simultaneously helping to cure social ills, (including considerable economic problems), as demanded by more recent cultural policies? Through this specific lens, this paper will begin to address an area of research considerably overdue concerted focus.

Background: Architecture Named in Policies

Since its beginnings, the RoI has used particular art forms to help mold its national identity, from painting to literature to architecture. However, these practitioners were encouraged to locate themselves as much in the Irish context as possible, much of their focus, particularly that of architects, was placed on the use of the Modernist idiom in the early decades of the Republic.

The first major cultural legislation in Ireland, the Arts Act of 1951, sets out the definition of culture for the RoI including architecture. In its definition section, the Act states ‘the expression “the arts” means painting, sculpture, architecture, music, the drama, literature, design in industry and the fine arts and applied arts generally.’

This early inclusion of architecture in the definition in cultural legislation appears to be singular -- architecture is not considered part of culture officially until late in the 20th century in most European countries. In the succeeding versions of the Arts Act, including the most recent edition of 2003, architecture remains as part of that foundation. Fitzgibbon, who has both studied the swathe of Irish cultural policy and worked in arts councils on both sides of the border, notes that though the nomenclature of ‘arts’ to ‘culture’ has been an issue in Irish governmental policy and legislation, the inclusion of architecture was not a significant source of debate (Fitzgibbon 2010a, Fitzgibbon 2010b).

Unlike the RoI, the UK government has never applied a specific definition to culture or the arts, and architecture was not seen as a policy priority for most of the second half of the twentieth century for UK governments. However, in 1995, the Arts Council Northern Ireland (ACNI) underwent a reformation as a public body and included in its remit for the first time an explicit reference to architecture and the built environment. The policy documents demand that ACNI raise ‘awareness in the quality of architecture and the built environment’ (Arts Council Northern Ireland, 2001a: Aims section) by the ‘public,’ not simply provide a shell building to host other forms of art. Similarly, in the RoI, this language is reflected in their published plans and strategies; both ACNI and the Arts Council Ireland also appointed an architecture officer for the first time in the late 1990s.

In 2002, the Irish government Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht published its first architecture policy Action of Architecture, a Government Policy on Architecture for the period of 2002-2005; in 2006, Northern Ireland followed suit. In 2009, the RoI policy was expanded considerably as the Government Policy on Architecture 2009-2015, published this time by the newly formed Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government. In 2002, the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht was dissolved, and most of its responsibilities were transferred
to the new Department of Culture, Sports and Tourism, though some issues were given to the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (DOEHLG). One of these was the consultation and writing of the new architecture policy, undertaken with DOEHLG staff in cooperation with the Irish Architecture Foundation, the Republic of Ireland’s equivalent of PLACE, Northern Ireland’s architecture centre. Architecture has continued as a priority on both sides of the border, named as a specific policy area in such documents as the Partnership for the Arts 2006-2010, the Arts Council/An Chomhairle Ealaíon’s main policy document for the current period and in the ACNI’s Creative Connections: a five-year plan for developing the arts 2007-2012.

Why specific focus on architecture and the built environment appears in cultural policies in this period is not yet completely understood. We know that architecture policies became increasingly employed after 1991 in Europe, and the European Forum for Architecture Policies was established in 2000. Likewise, the period in which architecture policies are coming to life is the same period in which in the UK methods of procurement such as Public Private Partnerships, Public Finance Initiatives and Design and Build came to the fore as well, methods in which design is often relegated to a secondary or tertiary role in deference to profit or timescale for delivery. Certainly one can point to the growing trend by governments at the time of the espousal of the creative industries as a means to encourage economic growth and inward investment.

However, one might also postulate that the focus on architecture, particularly as more than a product, is part of what Edensor calls ‘the utility of cultural forms’ (2002:16) (author emphasis). Architecture as culture may fill the role of what Edensor sees as a ‘practical application of particular forms’ (2002:16). This can be read as an effort on the part of governments to see architecture as more than symbolic edifices of national values and identities, but also as a place in which wider publics can ascribe many meanings, including a role in understanding the making of buildings and public spaces.

Certainly, policies on architecture must be seen as part of an international desire of cities, regions and nations to act more competitively in global markets. In these policies, we can see governments attempting to strengthen national uniqueness through architecture, a medium which has, in the past 10-15 years, become more easily consumed as part of popular and visually-based culture through internet-based communication and particularly through mass tourism of architectural sites. Funding research and promotion of national architectures through architecture policies is part of the imperative need of governments to attract capital and ongoing investment in post-industrial contexts.

**Arts-based Buildings Prior to 1990s**

Despite the recognition in 1940s and 1950s of the importance of culture by both UK and RoI governments, provision of centrally planned arts-based buildings prior to the early 1990s was nearly non-existent in the RoI. This appears to have been due to two main causes – serious deficiency of funding to the arts and lack of a dedicated arts body to administer any funds available. Though the Arts Council/An Chomhairle Ealaíon had been founded in 1951
with the original Arts Act, the body had neither control of funds required for buildings nor the remit to look after capital expenditure. Any buildings provided for performance, display or making of cultural artifacts were deployed not by central government, but by local councils.

Buildings specifically designed for arts activities in the RoI thus began to develop in a piecemeal fashion rather than being overseen by a centralized plan or policy, with a slow increase beginning in the 1980s. These included Belltable Centre Limerick, Garter Lane Arts Centre Waterford, Triskel Arts Centre Cork, Nun’s Island Theatre Galway and others, though these were mainly renovations of often listed buildings. In this period, local councils determined local need and provided funding themselves, often in cooperation with local businesses. (Some of these early buildings have been replaced in the period of 1991-2008 with new buildings.) Similarly, in NI, localized support of arts-based buildings depended largely on regional councils.

A ‘necklace’ of provision: new arts centers throughout the island of Ireland

Procurement of arts centers RoI 1991-2008
In the early 1990s, the RoI was supported as an Objective One nation under the Structural Funding of the EU, specifically targeted for development in ‘less prosperous regions.’ Ireland received one of the highest amounts of structural funding in the entire EU – between 1973, the date Ireland joined the EEC, and 2009, the country received more than €17 billion, a significant portion of the nation’s GNP (Clancy, 2009). In the list for consideration as an Objective One region is ‘poor basic infrastructure’; in the 1990s, a lack of arts-based buildings was identified as a lack of infrastructure under the aegis of the provision of culture for all tradition.

These structural funds were deployed for a series of arts-based buildings in the Temple Bar region of Dublin beginning in the early 1990s when Dublin City Council held a competition to revitalize the area. Until 1990, the City Council had planned to create a vast bus station/transport hub in this area of dense urban fabric which included small streets with three and four-storey buildings. Like many inner city areas, the built environment of Temple Bar had deteriorated significantly. And like many similar areas in large cities throughout Europe, the low rents of Temple Bar had become popular with art and music-based communities.

The competition was awarded to an association of eight, small Irish-based firms, Group 91. Their master plan was not ‘one single solution, rather a flexible series of integrated responses’ (Group 91, 1991:16). The scheme based its proposal around keeping the informally-grown cultural life of the area while designing new streets, new outdoor public areas and several new cultural buildings and spaces. These new buildings included the Ark Creative Centre for children, the Irish Film Centre, the Contemporary Music Centre and the Gallery of Photography among others; these were to be supported by outdoors spaces for public displays and performances. Supported through EU Structural Funds, the six new cultural institution buildings were required to act as umbrellas programmatically – gallery or performance spaces were to be complimented with work spaces and archives in each case. This method of funding also delineated the size of the buildings; this, in
combination to the Group 91 masterplan which called for height restrictions to the buildings, had significant impact on the buildings’ scale, internal planning and even their materials.

Figure 1: Irish Film Centre by O’Donnell + Tuomey Architects, Dublin, 1992 (Source: Author).
As the economy improved and most of the RoI was removed from the Objective One list, funding and procurement of cultural buildings thus became the direct responsibility of centralized Irish government. (At this writing, some regions remain part of the Objective One strategy including the border areas between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland). In 1993, the Department of Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht (DoACG) was founded creating a single body in government with the remit for capital funding including arts buildings. In 1995, the department established priority areas, and architecture, particularly the public appreciation and understanding of architecture, was listed as one of these areas of concern.

Following the perceived success of the Temple Bar project, in the period of 1994-2008 scores of new arts-based buildings and considerable renovations to others were implemented by the country's central government. These buildings were overseen under two funding schemes – first approximately 20 million Irish punts (before conversion to the Euro) from 1994-2000 was provide to the Cultural Development Incentive Scheme overseen by the DoACG. This scheme, which was targeted specifically at infrastructural development, was still aided with some EU funds. The second main funding mechanism, at a value of approximately €80 million was deployed in two phases -- ACCESS I (2000-2007) and ACCESS II (2007-2010,) overseen by the Department of Culture, Sports and Tourism, though local authorities also provided funds for the capital projects.

In both phases, projects included new build, refurbishment and additions to existing buildings, though ACCESS II aimed to deliver a strategy of sustainability with more refurbishment of buildings. In a major change of policy, local councils were required by law to invest in cultural provision for their residents; the capital investment by centralized government’s ACCESS was, in the second phase, in some way matched by local councils. This has manifested itself in both capital spend as well as ongoing
support for programming in the buildings; arts officers were also appointed for each county council as part of this push for increased cultural ‘infrastructure.’

Though the three phases of funding have resulted in arts centers in every county, there is no evidence that this was ever the explicit policy of the Arts Council/An Chomhairle Ealaíon or of the various incarnations of the Department of Culture for this to occur. In the development of these buildings, Arts Council/An Chomhairle Ealaíon were consulted both in terms of the potential programming and use of the buildings by cultural organizations and in their built form. However, any unofficial policy, if it existed, was overseen by the central DoACG, and, (after 2002,) by the Department of Culture Sport and Tourism. This remarkable lack of strategic planning, with no long term understanding of the sustainability of this number of organizations to support post-capital spend has already begun to be seen -- several centers forced into partial or total closure, such as Temple Bar’s Art House and Design Yard. How they manage or fail to survive, particularly in a period of sustained economic downturn is a subject of anxiety and dismay both amongst those involved with the centers as well as in the popular press and general public. Criticism of the multitude of centres and the problems facing their funding in future has surfaced in the popular press and amongst the arts community (Tipton, 2010).

Procurement of arts centers Northern Ireland 1995-2009 via ACNI

The building of arts-based buildings in NI in this period was backed by two different organizations – the ACNI and Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL). ACNI began life as the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts NI, (CEMA NI) founded in 1943 as an organization related to, but separate from, CEMA GB, itself founded in 1939. The Arts Council of Great Britain (ACGB) was founded in 1946, and CEMA NI continued in its separate identity, changing its name in 1962 to the Arts Council Northern Ireland. Like the earlier government cultural organizations in the UK, ACNI began its life rooted in the ‘access for all’ credo espoused by many early arts policies. Local councils did not support culture to a large degree, though national legislation, passed in 1948, gave local councils the legal authority to support local arts.

As discussed above, in the early 1990s, ACNI was given, for the first time, the remit to examine and support architecture in its strategies and policies. In the past, ACNI had concentrated on visual arts, as well as literature, music and dance, but had not, in any concerted way, acted as proponents for good design in the built environment. At the same time, ACNI established a key new strategy, to ensure that an arts centre of some significance was provided within 20 miles of each resident of NI. Until that time, the Recreation and Youth Service Order of 1986 may have called for ‘each district council [to] secure the provision for its area of adequate facilities for recreational, social, physical and cultural activities’ (Recreation and Youth Service Order, 1986: Section 10) for all residents, but the legislation had not been tested. In the words of Walker in her extensive research into arts policy in NI from 1960-1995, ‘the lack of any official visual art infrastructure across most of Northern Ireland until 1985 is obvious’ (Walker, 2008a:71, Walker, 2008b). Similarly, Myerscough reported in his key evaluation of the impact of
the economic impact of the arts in Northern Ireland, (a study considered a turning point in the understanding of cultural policy in the region), that there ‘is no cultural policy for the Government of Northern Ireland as a whole’ (1996:11).

To these two major developments coincided the announcement on a national basis that Lottery Funding was to be made accessible to arm’s length organizations for capital projects. While arts provision which had been provided by government was to remain uninterrupted, the new Lottery funds could be used for the commissioning of new buildings. This was to act, in part, as significant support to architects, increasingly understood by policy makers as cultural practitioners themselves.

While scholars such as Walker identify that considerable arts activity had occurred for decades in informal spaces throughout the region, ACNI thus set out on a decade-long process of providing a series of arts centers for NI. The project was especially concerned with provision west of the River Bann, an area, much of which is rural, particularly underserved at the outset of the project in 1995. Facilities built under Lottery Funding in this part of Northern Ireland include, but aren’t limited to the Burnavon Centre, Cookstown, Omagh’s Strule Arts Centre and Strabane Arts Center.

In each case, these projects were built in cooperation with local councils and other funders; indeed, ACNI’s policy in the development of these buildings included the requirement that local councils identify a need for the centre and, usually, with other funders, financially co-sponsor each project.

Each centre was developed for its context in terms of programme – some centres provided theatres, while others concentrated on work spaces for the creation, by both professionals and local amateur artists – in combination with income generating elements such as cafes or shops.
With Lottery funding diminishing since the inception of the project, the capital spending for these projects, totaling approximately £28 million, came to an end – the completion of the Belfast’s Metropolitan Arts Centre (formerly the Old Museum Arts Centre) in 2012 saw the final capital spending for ACNI for the foreseeable future. In 2009, an ACNI study confirmed that the arts centre within 20 miles of all residents had been met with a few exceptions in the sparsely populated area in the Sperrin Mountains.

**Procurement of arts centers Northern Ireland 1995-2009 via DCAL**

With the ceasefires in place by 1994 and the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement of 1998 came the devolution of government responsibilities to the new local Northern Irish Assembly. One of the ten departments to evolve from the Northern Ireland Act 1998 was DCAL. Its remit includes overseeing Lottery funds and a diversity policy, arts and culture, film, museums, libraries, archives, sports and leisure as well as the bewilderingly boundless category of ‘creativity.’

DCAL grew out of its infancy during the very period of building activity vigorously pursued under the remit of ACNI. In 2005-2008, DCAL began its first three-year funding period under the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland (ISNI,) and 2008-2011 saw the second phase of this process, in both cases part of the Arts Infrastructure Program. Within the large NI block grant from Westminster, DCAL identified two mainly urban areas for specific investment, again in the form of significant arts-based buildings – the northwest, (London/derry in particular,) and Belfast. However, in spite of this commitment to capital spending on the arts, seen as part of an overall investment plan for NI, there does not appear to have been any corresponding published policy.

These projects represent, for the first time, a bespoke capital line of funding for the arts; this was, significantly, the first time culture had been specifically named in the NI budget. DCAL thus provided funds for London/derry buildings such as the Playhouse, Waterside Arts Centre and the Irish language center Cultúrlann Uí Chanáin. In summer 2010, it was announced that London/derry would act as the first UK City of Culture for 2013; much of the success of that bid has been ascribed to the presence of these new buildings, in combination with the city’s intact medieval city walls and active cultural community. These buildings were joined by three major refurbishment and new build projects for cultural buildings in Belfast – the Lyric Theatre, the Crescent Arts Centre and the Metropolitan Arts Centre. In their review of provision after the first six years of the major building project, ACNI also identified the Grand Opera House and Ulster Hall as buildings in need of significant refurbishment; these buildings were completed without DCAL cooperation, though the Lyric, MAC and Crescent were all joint projects between the two departments.

The targeting of Belfast by DCAL must be examined in light of a failure in 2003 by the City Council to secure the bid for UK Capital for Culture 2008. Belfast was eliminated in the first round; the evaluation of its bid at the time was that the city simply did not have the arts infrastructure to act as a legitimate city of culture. The excoriating evaluation, in addition to readily available funding from Westminster via the ISNI block grants, spurred DCAL and
ACNI implement the most significant investment in cultural buildings in Belfast in decades that would be key to any future bids of a similar nature. These buildings, labeled by DCAL as ‘Legacy Projects,’ offer a significant combination of projects. The Lyric, an existing theatre of long standing in the south Belfast community was the object of considerable debate about its siting; many argued that it should be moved to the city centre. The Crescent Arts Centre, in contrast, is

Figure 4: The Lyric Theatre, O’Donnell + Tuomey, Belfast, 2011 (Source: Author).
largely a renovation project for a listed Victorian girls’ school building, which had been used for decades as a community arts building focusing mainly on classes in dance, music and the visual arts. The MAC is the only one of the three with a new building and a new site with significantly increased space and thus programming ability. It was seen by both DCAL and ACNI as a critical piece of cultural infrastructure for the city centre. The Lyric and MAC were objects of international design competitions, the former won by O’Donnell + Tuomey, Dublin, and the latter by Hackett Hall McNight, Belfast.

In each of these projects, DCAL reviewed proposals and provided funding with other arm’s length bodies, including ACNI and the Heritage Lottery Fund. They saw ACNI as the ‘expert delivery arm;’ unlike ACNI, DCAL provided funding for the capital expenditure, but they do not, to any great degree, provide any core or project funding for the buildings past their completion. Then, as now, DCAL saw itself as the policy maker and the arm’s length bodies as deliverers, but the relationships were clearly far more complicated than that oversimplification represents. The relationships between these various bodies and the specific roles of local councils was not concretized in major policy but has instead developed on an ad hoc basis, not dissimilar to what Lewis and Miller assert if a common occurrence – ‘much of what constitutes cultural policy is somewhat inadvertent.’ (2003a:4)

Contrasts and Similarities Between the Two Regions

Thus, several key points exemplify the development of architecture in relation to cultural policy (and vice versa) in these two regions. While architecture was named in early arts policies in RoI, it took until 1995 for a similar gesture in NI; in both regions, however, the shift in focus from architecture as an object to the appreciation and the participation with architecture by a wider public as a main aim of government occurred at a similar period, in the late 1990s. EU funding was relied upon heavily on the RoI in this period, whereas in NI, funding was, for the most part, allocated from national sources. The maintenance of centralized control over funding through the RoI ACCESS schemes differed considerably from the regional development with local council control.
in the North. Finally, in both RoI and NI, official policies for the procurement of building of this scale corresponded to new funding becoming available – in the case of RoI, though nationally-driven tax base (as opposed to supranational funds in the early 1900s) and via the National Lottery in NI.

This analysis of the differing policies and procurement methods on either side of the border does begin to reveal one particularly significant parallel when looking at the larger landscape of comparative cultural policy studies. Both the RoI and NI entered ‘boom’ periods for new capital projects at the same time, basically in the mid-1990s. The RoI had been mired in economic doldrums essentially since its beginnings as an independent nation in 1922, while NI had, of course, been corralled in a period of violence and civil unrest, a development desert, since at least 1969. Political stability in the North beginning in 1994, albeit delicate, was matched by availability of funding from government, though the Lottery, while the RoI’s economic boom was finally able to support its long-standing cultural policies, including architecture.

The motives for cultural provision are often cited as oppositional in the literature – access for all versus cultural planning as cure for larger social problems, including economic challenges. Significantly, and perhaps singularly, these are conflated in this period for both of these regions. Because neither RoI nor NI had had significant arts-based buildings built until 1990s, the argument, amongst scholars and policy makers alike, did not have room to evolve. The differing reasoning – the more traditional ‘access for all,’ the use of architectural projects as cultural commodification to attract creative class or cultural tourists à la Richard Florida, and the New Labour-esque desire for cultural projects to act as centers for social change – can all be read throughout this period for both regions. Both the RoI and NI have, in this period, policies aimed at the economic importance of the so-called ‘creative industries’ including funding mechanisms specifically designed to impact upon ‘creatives’ (DKM Economic Consultants, 2009, Department of Culture Arts and Leisure, Northern Ireland, 2008, Department of Culture Media and Sport, 2001). Architecture was listed as a ‘creative industry’ in all of these documents. However, the examining of cultural policies as both an elitist-generated list of objects or values to be preserved versus Raymond Williams’s wider anthropological definition can both be seen in the jargon that supported the building of these projects on both sides of the border at the same time.

The Future for these Buildings?

It is understood that ‘a full arts infrastructure’ is now, more or less, in place in both regions. Some in the Arts Council/An Chomhairle Ealaíon understand that arts is now part of the ‘overall societal infrastructure’ – that cultural provision is now seen as instrumental as roads or sewerage. Whether or not this is the belief of central government will be sorely tested in coming years as economic cuts continue to rage across all sectors of public services in the RoI. The notion of a network of centers working together may indeed be required in future – one can envision, with the plethora of centers having been built – that some will need to stand empty for periods when programming, touring
or otherwise, is not available due to lack of funding.

Indeed, officials on both sides of the border are now concerned with the sustainability of the necklace of centers which are strung along the countryside. This concern is understandable, particularly in light of the fact that in the ROL, there appears that no overarching policy calling for a centre in every area of the country existed. In NI, DCAL’s focus for the foreseeable future will be the ‘product’ that these centers now make, including their financial sustainability in a period of considerable cutbacks. For ACNI, the reduction in funds for the whole of NI from Westminster effects a reduction in core funding for venues; income generation by the centers overseen by ACNI becomes an increasing issue throughout the region. Any future cultural projects for the region will most likely be funded via branches such the Department of Social Development rather than through one of the cultural departments or arm’s length bodies.

Further Questions

Now that these buildings have been afforded in both regions in such multiplicity, it is an excellent time to catalog, with analysis, exactly what has been provided. To this might come an evaluation of any oversights – as impossible as this may seem considering the amount of funds expended on both sides of the border. However, three major cultural buildings were finished in Belfast in 2012; there still exists no major ‘national’ gallery for the region, for example. The high modernist Ulster Museum extension, hotly debated due to its recent controversial renovation by Hamilton Architects, displays historical and scientific artifacts in addition to its arts collection.

A coincidental body of research, which could run alongside the post-project evaluation of the ACNI 10 year building program, could critically examine the use of these buildings as objects of cultural planning – have these buildings begun to cope with larger societal ‘ills’ such as unemployment, de-industrialization and social inclusion? Have the arts councils embodied their vision for a greater public awareness of architecture in the buildings they’ve built, or have they, as per the years prior to 1995, simply commissioned containers for other arts activity? Such interrogation may also contribute to the growing criticality of the espousal of the whole notion of ‘creative class’ (Edensor et al, 2010:1-16).

It will be important, too, to examine how the lack of planning on the part of ROL government will compare to the NI published strategy in terms of the long-term viability of these organizations. The lack of an overarching strategy at a national level for the buildings in ROL found during this research can surely be criticized and points to that ‘mismatch between research and decision making’ (Madden, 2005:130) which is so often the basis of cultural policy studies. It may be that the economic situation is so dire that organizations on both sides of the border will fail, but one might predict the better forward planning in NI will be reflected in a longer sustainability. Here is a moment when this research can be part of a larger applied and critical discussion and engage with future policy design, administration and, certainly, evaluation.

Final Reflections

This paper has thus delineated the history and process of the procurement of arts buildings
on either side of the Irish border for the period 1998-2005. These processes have not, to date, been examined in this level of detail, but as many questions have been raised as answered. Among these, perhaps the most significant question remaining to be unpacked is this: why did governments in both regions determine that the building of arts centres, usually by highly esteemed regionally trained and based architects was a germane approach to cultural provision in this period? The espousal by governments of the Bilbao effect and Florida’s exhortations of the benefits of a creative economy don’t entirely answer the question. Certainly much of the impetus for the development of arts centers in every county could be ascribed to competitiveness amongst local or county governments wishing to appear as wealthy and as forward thinking as their neighbors. Perhaps one might see this growth of arts-based buildings as government playing at Medici, expressing their longed for economic
and political stability. It’s perhaps unsurprising that governments in both regions would wish to do so in the long tradition of using architecture as a ‘national badges of high culture’, a means to express national identity (Edensor, 2002:15).

However, with an understanding of the current anxieties and priorities of architects and their critics from this part of the world, we can also begin to understand this necklace as an effort on the part of government and architects alike to explore and express what has been for centuries a confused and often denigrated architectural identity on the island of Ireland. Architecture in this ‘peripheral’ part of Europe has always been perceived as diluted versions of that produced in other parts of the world, from Rhennish decorative traits to Palladian geometries to English Georgian rules of proportion. This significant and unprecedented investment in an architecture based in RoI and NI can be seen as an attempt to address this perceived lack of architectural identity expression in local terms, an exorcism, on an enormous and unprecedented scale, of the ghosts of other architectures developed on the island over centuries at the edge of Europe. Whether or not this is possible, or necessary in a world globalised in cultural terms, deserves further scrutiny.

In any deliberation of cultural identity, particularly which structured along national lines, one must consider if these arts-based buildings were aimed to reproduce cultural dependency or institute cultural hegemony. If, as Edensor suggests, national identities are formed increasingly through popular culture, then the efficacy of these buildings as top-down producers of some kind of codified artistic and architectural similarity can begin to be questioned, if not dismissed. On the other hand, one might interpret the profligacy of building at this time as a means to increase cultural choice, if not necessarily access, amongst multiple publics. Certainly, what this research has unearthed is the need for policy to work in tandem with more theoretical understandings of culture.
Architecture sits uncomfortably within accepted definitions of culture – it both provides fundamental shelter and is the site of considerable symbolic communication; it is seen by some as a science, by others as art. Its products are sometimes viewed as cultural ‘texts’ but also as massings of capital, of sites of national identity while its process is seldom understood. Architects create objects and spaces that, on the one hand, are vital to life in a physical sense, but also create culture far more complex terms: architecture is both necessary and acts as a means of signification. Lewis and Miller point to a similarly profound contradiction that they see in arts provision – ‘between a democratic spirit (the desire to make art economically accessible and to place it in the public rather than the private realm) and a class-bound aesthetics’ (2003b:175). As architecture is largely public and thus physically accessible, how does this availability correspond to any perceived requirement for Bourdieu-ian cultural capital to ‘understand’ it? Can cultural policies devoted to architecture ever overcome these significant contradictions? Should they?

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A New Landscape of Arts-Based Buildings and Comparative Cultural Policies on the Island of Ireland: The Curse of Jocasta’s Necklace

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