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Planning for historic urban environments under austerity conditions: Insights from post-crash Ireland

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1. Introduction

In the aftermath of the great financial crisis of 2007/08, global housing, property and financial markets experienced one of the greatest periods of volatility in modern history (Scanlon, Lunde, & Whitehead, 2011). By now the causes of the crisis are well-rehearsed – initially, the crisis was centred on the banking sector and the so-called credit crunch, with its roots in the sub-prime mortgage lending practices in the US leading to bank failures and plummeting stock markets (Gotham, 2009). This was swiftly followed by a series of sovereign debt crises across nation states (primarily in Europe) on a scale that has distinguished the current recession from its predecessors (Meegan et al., 2014). In its wake, a new politics of austerity (Kitson, Martin, & Tyler, 2011) emerged as a response to the crisis, focusing on fiscal discipline through (mainly) reductions in the level of public services and a retraction of welfare state measures. In effect, a crisis centred on neoliberal governance was addressed through a reframed neoliberal fix, as austerity politics fundamentally shaped the terms of the debate about the way society, the state and the market should interact (Fraser, Murphy, & Kelly, 2013).

Rather than re-examining the causes of the financial crisis, in this paper we seek to focus on the responses to the crisis within planning and regeneration processes for historic city environments. As Tonkiss (2013) observes, given the downturn in speculative property investment and the ‘turning screws of government austerity’ (p. 312), many cities (including historic downtowns) are bearing the physical scars of disinvestment, disuse and decline, and in vacant and abandoned spaces of stalled urban development and public retreat (Pendlebury et al., 2020). Drawing on the conceptual development of austerity urbanism (Peck, 2012), we explore how austerity has reshaped spatial policy and planning practices examined through the lens of conservation-planning and regeneration initiatives in historic urban cores. Austerity refers to the imposition of strict fiscal discipline and government spending cuts as a means to restore budgetary integrity following the sovereign debt crisis and more specifically the transfer of private debt (following banking collapses) to public debt. As outlined by Peck (2012), neoliberalism suggests that public austerity is a necessary response to market conditions and that the state has responded by inaugurating new rounds of fiscal retrenchment, often at the urban scale and on the most vulnerable.

In this paper, we examine how conservation-planning and local regeneration in historic urban cores have been re-shaped under austerity conditions and how local planners and local government more generally have negotiated or navigated this emerging austerity terrain.
Within this context, we aim to make two key contributions to the international literature. Firstly, while an extensive literature has emerged examining the role of planning as a form of neoliberal governance (e.g. Allmendinger, 2016; Allmendinger & Haughton, 2013; Waterhout, Othengrafen, & Sykes, 2013) and various neoliberal planning repertoires (McGuirk & Dowling, 2009; Sager, 2011, 2016), limited research has explicitly explored planning responses to austerity conditions. We seek to contribute to wider debates on austerity urbanism, albeit from a narrower perspective of planning and urban development (rather than the impact of wider welfare reforms) by examining the impacts of austerity on local planning and how planning officials have attempted to moderate austerity largely imposed by central government (entrenched roll-back neoliberalism) but often through the further roll-out of neoliberalism in local growth strategies. We therefore examine local authority coping strategies for dealing with cut backs and loss of institutional capacity, while at the same time how local authorities were faced with promoting local growth and regeneration plans that addressed declining economic conditions. Secondly, we contribute to the literature in relation to built heritage management, specifically how heritage is revalorised under austerity conditions as a pathway for local growth, while simultaneously conservation practice is undermined by a loss of capacity, resources and financing through austerity measures. While the global economy has, to some extent, recovered from the financial crisis, the Covid-19 crisis of 2020 is likely to stimulate increased familiar debates surrounding austerity, the future of retail and property investment as governments across the globe are faced with a rapidly contracted economy. Thus this paper provides a timely reflection on coping with an economic crisis at the urban scale.

Empirically, the paper is based on qualitative case studies in three Irish urban centres. Ireland’s ‘monumental property boom’ (Byrne, 2016, p. 899) is well documented alongside its subsequent banking collapse and bailout from the International Monetary Fund, European Commission and European Central Bank. The last decade has been characterised by deep austerity across the public sector (further discussed below), earning Ireland the ‘accolade’ of the ‘poster child for fiscal austerity’ (Kinsella, 2012, p. 223), and referenced as a role model for the imposition of austerity in other countries. While studies have analysed the nature of austerity measures at a national level (see for example Mercille & Murphy, 2015), a lacuna exists in examining the implications for and responses of local government or urban scale policy-making. Local government has limited functions in Ireland (among the weakest in western Europe), which are generally focused on planning, development and the physical environment and no role in welfare provision beyond social housing – therefore, focusing on planning and regeneration is appropriate in the Irish context. Moreover, our focus on heritage and historic urban cores reveals the ways that not only were new processes enacted to respond to the crisis, but the built fabric was often revalorised as a crisis response, providing a useful lens to understanding both austerity measures and local responses. Within the Irish context, conservation planning only came into law in 1999, very late in comparison with most European countries (Parkinson, Scott, & Redmond, 2018); however, policy legislation is comprehensive, and over the last two decades practice has increasingly shifted from the protection of individual buildings towards ensemble scale built heritage conservation (Matthews & Grant-Smith, 2017). However, the planning system in Ireland has been generally pro-development since its establishment in 1963, reflecting political priorities of enabling economic development, resulting in heritage protection and the holistic management of historic urban cores receiving limited attention from policymakers.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: firstly, we examine the emerging literature on austerity urbanism to provide a conceptual understanding of downstream consequences of austerity on cities. Secondly, we outline the research approach and case study context, followed by a brief review of the Irish boom, bust and austerity condition. We then examine how heritage moved centre stage within local growth strategies, specifically within place branding and marketing. However, we argue that this focus on promoting a heritage ‘narrative’ was often paralleled by the adoption of ‘flexible’, pro-development planning responses to built heritage protection and loss of institutional capacity under austerity conditions.

2. Austerity urbanism

The political-economic ideas of neoliberalism have become deeply entrenched within public administration in most parts of the world (Sager, 2011) with profound sociospatial consequences as increasingly the belief that the market should discipline politics at a variety of spatial scales has become adopted as orthodoxy (Jessop, 2002). While in danger of becoming a ‘rascical concept’ (Brenner, Peck, & Theodore, 2010a), neoliberalism has also become dominant within social sciences as a powerful lens to examine regulatory transformation and sociospatial change processes. The extensive literature on neoliberalism seeks to explore the shifting relations and balance between the state and market, as market ideology has become increasingly dominant within spheres of action traditionally led by government. This shifting balance has been characterised as both ‘roll-back’ and ‘roll-out’ neoliberalism (Peck and Tickell, 2002), combining both a commitment to extending markets while also deploying state power in the pursuit of market interests as a form of meta-regulation. In summary, Brenner et al. (2010b, p. 330) define the characteristics of neoliberalism as follows:

Neoliberalism represents an historically specific, unevenly developed, hybrid, patterned tendency of market-disciplinary regulatory restructuring (emphasis in original).

Over the last decade or more, spatial planning literature has also witnessed widespread accounts of the application of neoliberal ideas to understanding both spatial governance processes and development outcomes. Allmendinger (2016) in a detailed critique of the neoliberalisation of planning argues convincingly that planning [in England] has ‘shifted incrementally but perceptively away from an area of public policy that was an arena where [urban development] issues could be determined in the public interest to one that legitimises state-led facilitation of growth and development by superficially involving a wide range of interests and issues’ (p. 1), and that planners are themselves directly complicit in these shifts and changes. Extensive studies demonstrate that planning has been both the subject of neoliberalism (specifically deregulation and privatisation tendencies) and a method of neoliberalism as planning reforms provide an enabling agenda for business friendly policies. In this regard, planning policy and practice has developed a wide ranging repertoire of neoliberal toolkits including entrepreneurial governance (e.g. McGuirk & MacLaran, 2001), fast-track planning legislation (Fox-Rogers, Murphy, & Grist, 2011), introduction of business-friendly zones and flexible zoning (e.g. Sager, 2011), emergence of new ‘soft spaces’ and governance arrangements for planning (Allmendinger & Haughton, 2013), privatisation of urban space (e.g. Biddulph, 2011), market-based instruments and urban renewal (e.g. Williams, 2006), and increased use of planning gain within development management (e.g. Fox-Rogers & Murphy, 2015).

While in the immediate aftermath of the great financial crisis neoliberal hegemony was increasingly questioned, policy elites successfully reframed the debate as a crisis of the state rather than of neoliberalisation, ‘refracting crisis pressures back onto the state itself’ (Peck, 2012, p. 628), whereby austerity ‘reforms’ represent a new and deepening phase of neoliberalisation. Indeed, austerity has become a key feature of western countries since the 2008 crisis, as manifest in the reduction and scope of the state activity (Fuller, 2017). As private debt arising from the banking crisis was increasingly nationalised into public debt, a new austerity urgency emerged, first in more vulnerable smaller economies (such as Greece, Ireland, and Portugal), followed by larger European economies embarking on ‘austerity measures’ in response to perceived market concerns over public debt (Murphy & Scott, 2013).
The debate on contemporary austerity tends to highlight that fiscal retrenchment goes beyond the immediate management of a global financial crisis and is rather part of a longer term neoliberal project to reshape and redefine the state at a national and local level – a justification mantra to attack welfare and social protection (Hastings, Bailey, Bramley, & Gannon, 2017).

Addressing the ways in which central governments ‘devolved austerity’, Peck (2012) posits the conceptual framework of austerity urbanism to define and understand a new operational matrix for urban politics within this phase of neoliberalism. Developed from an analysis of US cities, Peck traces an emergent austerity urbanism as cities have been hit hard through: (1) the housing slump; (2) a parallel wave of mortgage foreclosures; (3) through a disproportionate reliance on public services in urban areas; and (4) cities as the location of many of the ‘preferred targets’ of austerity – for Peck, ‘cities are therefore where austerity bites’ (p. 629). In effect, the impacts and costs of macro-economic mismanagement, property speculation and short term profiteering are devolved to the urban scale and onto the most vulnerable in society. The key features of austerity urbanism identified by Peck are summarized in Table 1 below, highlighting how deepening austerity conditions frames the responses of city administrations to address the wider economic crisis.

Peck’s austerity urbanism thesis has been increasingly examined in the urban studies literature (see for example: Fuller, 2017; Hackworth, 2015; Hastings et al., 2017; Meegan et al., 2014; Pill and Guarneros-Meza, 2018). This literature often provides case studies of specific cities dealing and coping with the consequences of the economic crisis and devolved austerity to the urban scale, thus helping to situate national differences (Hastings et al., 2017). As outlined by Davies and Blanco (2017), these local studies are essential as they call for an understanding of austerity urbanism that recognises differentiated local practices, the multiple logics at play, and spatially variegated neoliberalism. Moreover, Davies and Blanco argue that local studies also reveal how different city administrations may seek to moderate and navigate neoliberalism and austerity in different ways.

We seek to contribute further to these debates by examining spatial planning and regeneration for historic urban cores under austerity conditions in Ireland. As discussed below, the fall-out from the global financial crisis and the bursting of a high risk speculative property bubble has been severe in Ireland with stringent austerity measures adopted by a succession of governments and also imposed following a bailout from the EU-ECB-IMF. Ireland is a highly centralised state with local government undertaking a limited range of functions. Therefore, in contrast with the analysis of austerity urbanism in the US or the UK, Irish local authorities have little control over welfare or social protection policies with the exception of social housing. Issues surrounding heritage and historic urban cores also provide an illustrative example of how policy-makers have responded to the crisis. As will be outlined in relation to the case studies, built heritage funding has been subjected to extensive cutbacks and funding that survived has been reoriented towards a focus on economic outcomes. At a local level, despite diminishing capacity across the planning and heritage sectors, heritage has moved centre stage as a strategy for urban regeneration – however, the emphasis is on place-branding, selling the city, and growth, through more flexible approaches to managing tangible heritage assets.

### 2.1. Ireland’s boom, bust and austerity

From the early 1990s to 2008, Ireland was held up by many neoliberal champions as a place that gained from deregulation, privatisation, openness to inward investment and low corporation taxes (Fraser et al., 2013). As Counsell et al. (2014, p.48) observe:

‘With a low corporate tax regime and light touch regulation of development and the banking sector, Ireland became a textbook example of the rewards that might come from adopting a neoliberal pro-business, pro-growth agenda. Or so it seemed to many during the boom years.’

Ireland’s initial economic growth in the 1990s was swiftly followed by a housing and construction boom, characterised by rapidly increasing house prices, a massive increase in house building, and a concentration of the economy in the construction sector. Throughout the so-called Celtic Tiger years, the Irish economy had become increasingly focused and reliant on property, facilitated by neoliberal tendencies within the deregulation and re-regulation of the financial/banking sector and within the land-use planning regime. This boom was later described by the Governor of the Central Bank (Ireland) as ‘bank-led’ (rather than demand-led) as mortgage brokers competed to stimulate consumption through ‘innovative’ high risk mortgage products (Honohan, 2009).

While the housing and property boom were primarily driven by the banking and financial sector, the speculative property sector had also been facilitated by neoliberalising tendencies within the land-use planning regime in Ireland. The neoliberalisation of planning in Ireland can be identified at a range of spatial scales, whereby the central and local state may be viewed as an active supporter and enabler of development interests (Scott, Redmond, & Russell, 2012). At a national level, Fox-Rogers et al. (2011) have illustrated the gradual ‘entrepreneurial shift’ in the legislative framework for Irish planning, leading to an increasingly overt facilitation of development interests and indirectly encouraging speculation in the property development sector. At the local scale, a number of authors have also traced the emergence and entrenchment of an entrepreneurial approach to local planning in Ireland since the mid 1980s, especially as it relates to urban development processes. McGuirk (1994, 1995, 2000), for example, illustrates that planners themselves became increasingly facilitative of development goals and began to assume a more entrepreneurial attitude to development proposals as the scale and pace of economic shrinkage increased.

| Emerging feature of austerity urbanism | Characteristic examples |
|----------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Leaner budgets                         | • Resulting from public sector cut backs |
| Roll-back redux                        | • Impacts on service rationalization, downsizing of workforces, and frontline service cut back |
| Austerity reaches more deeply into ‘hard to reform’ fields |
| Earliest waves of ‘roll-out’ neoliberalisation are themselves the subject of ‘roll-back’ initiatives |
| Fire-sale privatisation                 | • A continuing effort to sell-off public sector assets, including land and property sales |
| Placebo dependency                      | • New private-public partnerships to manage and profit from infrastructure provision |
| The reliability of city administrations on symbolic, market-oriented and low cost initiatives |
| Risk shifting rationalities             | • A mismatch between capacity to act (following cut backs) and a political imperative ‘to be seen to be acting locally’ |
| Tournament financing                    | • Devolving costs from central to local government leading to service cutbacks or service withdrawal |
| Enables central government budget holders to prioritise favoured interests |
| For city administrations, applying for external sources of funding or ‘grant hustling’ becomes a fiscal necessity |
| Austerity governance                    | • Extended forms of management by audit and rule by accountancy |

Table 1

Summary of austerity urbanism’s key characteristics (adapted from Peck, 2012).
growth in Ireland placed local authorities under immense pressure to permit rapid development of housing and associated development. Consequently, local development plans have become more flexible and pro-development. Similarly, within the development control process, planners increasingly facilitated development to lever developer contributions, increasingly needed to support wider local planning objectives (Fox-Rogers & Murphy, 2015).

The fall-out from the financial crisis has been dramatic in Ireland, particularly in relation to a boom and bust within the housing and property sector, and by now the rise and demise of Ireland’s economy has been well documented (e.g. Donovan & Murphy, 2014; Ó Riain, 2014). As Kitchin, O’Callaghan, Boyle, Gleeson, and Keaveney (2012) observe the collapse of the property and banking sectors in 2008 led to a contraction in the wider economy, with the drying up of credit, markets and tax revenue, leading to severe pressure on the public finances. In response, the Irish State introduced an exceptionally broad public guarantee of the banks private liabilities (€485bn), while also recapitalising their decimated balance sheets with taxpayer funds (€64bn). Furthermore, the Government established a public ‘bad bank,’ the National Assets Management Agency (NAMA), to purchase the banks’ distressed property loans in exchange for public bonds (Cardiff, 2016). In effect, NAMA became a repository for Ireland’s failed development-finance sector as 11,000 loans secured against 60,000 properties with an initial loan value of €74bn were transferred to NAMA at a cost of €32bn (Williams, 2014). The extent of these interventions proved too much to bear and in 2010 the Irish State was forced into a sovereign bailout (€67bn) by the troika of the IMF, European Commission and European Central Bank as well as the introduction of severe austerity measures across the public sector (Drudy & Collins, 2011).

Many of these austerity measures were aimed at welfare, however, relevant to this paper, measures also included: public sector employment reductions and constraints, deferring of capital projects, introduction of ‘efficiency’ measures across the public sector, and public asset sales. Additional local government cuts related to a reduction in central government direct funding along with a dramatic decrease in development sector related fees (further discussed below).

3. Research approach and context

Empirically, the paper is based on undertaking qualitative research in three case study urban centres in Ireland. The purpose of the case studies is to examine both the impacts of austerity at the urban scale and also to examine how local policy-makers have responded to austerity conditions, particularly attempts to promote growth within the context of diminished resources and capacity. Therefore, the empirical findings presented below are structured under two headings: (1) promoting local growth strategies through heritage, and (2) austerity and heritage capacity. While much research has been undertaken into the economic crisis in Dublin (see for example, O’Callaghan & Lawton, 2016; Waldron & Redmond, 2015), this paper examines the experiences of Ireland’s second and third tier urban centres to examine the impacts and responses to austerity conditions. Dublin is Ireland’s only globally connected city with an economy of critical mass that has enabled the city to attract alternative sources of investment following the economic crisis, especially foreign direct investment from tech companies – therefore, our research focused on smaller cities to examine the impacts of a more prolonged and deep-seated recession. The cities of Waterford and Limerick and the town of Drogheda (Fig. 1) were selected on the basis that they are considered to be historically and architecturally important locations, but also because they are three of the most economically deprived urban centres in Ireland experiencing significant challenges emerging from the economic crisis.

Limerick is Ireland’s third largest city with a population of 91,454, but is also one of the most disadvantaged centres with an unemployment rate of nearly 30% at the height of the recession (Indecon, 2013). Having developed as a large scale medieval town, Limerick consists of two districts, divided by the River Shannon; Enisltown, encompassing the Norman settlement on King’s Island, and Irishtown to the south east of the mainland. The City expanded significantly from the 18th century as a new Georgian quarter was built to the south west of the city at Newtown Perry (Hill, 1991). The crash of 2008 has markedly affected Limerick, with a vacancy rate of 32% in its historic core (Indecon, 2013). In response, the City Council have prioritised built heritage conservation as a means of improving and promoting economic recovery. There are almost 700 buildings on the Record of Protected Structures in Limerick City and six Architectural Conservation Areas, two of which are in the historic core.

Waterford has a current population of 54,540 and was one of the most important towns during the Anglo-Norman period and is unique in the extent to which its medieval walls and many of its medieval and Georgian structures are in good repair (NIAH, 2003). However, Waterford is also considered a disadvantaged city, with an unemployment rate of approximately 25% at the height of the recession (and remaining at just below 20% a decade after the crash) and a vacancy rate of 26% in the historic core (Indecon, 2013). The City Council are attempting to “…utilise the area’s heritage to maximum advantage in kick-starting regeneration of the medieval core” (Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (DAHG), 2012, p. 44). Additionally, a ‘Heritage Plan’ (2009) outlines specific objectives to improve public access to and knowledge regarding the city’s built heritage and a specific regeneration initiative in the ‘Viking Triangle’ heritage quarter is underway to create a new cultural identity for the city and generate economic opportunities (Waterford City Council, 2011). There are 922 structures in Waterford City included on the Record of Protected Structures along with two Architectural Conservations Areas, while a general conservation area is applied to the areas combining the Viking, Norman and Georgian elements of the city.

Drogheda, in County Louth, has a population of 38,578 and had an
unemployment rate of 24.5% at the height of the recession (CSO, various). Drogheda was founded in 911 and became a strategic defensive point during the thirteenth century. The town retains parts of its historic urban form, including sections of the town wall and street-pattern. However, recent decades witnessed a marked deterioration in the historic core through road widening schemes, fabric decay, vacancy and large-scale retail development. In response, the local authority is promoting economic growth through the regeneration of its built heritage, particularly through encouraging the reuse and rehabilitation of historic buildings, applying additional development controls within Architectural Conservation Areas (ACAs) and restricting development in the vicinity of the medieval walls. In recent years much of historic core and some of the area surrounding the core has been designated the ‘Heritage Quarter’ in the Drogheda Borough Development Plan 2011–2017 (Drogheda Borough Council, 2011). It is policy to encourage the appropriate reuse, renovation and rehabilitation of older buildings which are not protected but have some architectural, historic or heritage merit. It is also an objective to retain existing street layout, building lines and plot widths where they have medieval or earlier origins, while conservation of the medieval town walls has been prioritised including to integrate medieval walls within new development. Within the town, there are 401 protected structures and 18 Architectural Conservation Areas, 13 of which are within the defined boundary of the Heritage Quarter.

Three key methods were employed to explore narratives and discourses of heritage. Firstly, documentary analysis was used to examine official policy representations of heritage and conservation within wider urban policy. The analysis focuses solely upon documents, events and initiatives relating to the post-crisis period, until 2015. Documents were also selected on the basis that they have relevance for the planning, regeneration, and conservation of the historic core in each case study location. In each case study, key documents were selected and examined to determine the ways in which they seek to shape built heritage priorities in relation to its instrumental use or potential. In the three locations, the local development plan and relevant local economic heritage priorities in relation to its instrumental use or potential. In the three locations, the local development plan and relevant local economic strategies have been examined. Beyond these key planning documents, where other post-crisis local policy or guidance documents are relevant, these have also been analysed. These documents, often focused on regeneration and growth strategies, reflect the growing use of ‘soft space planning arrangements’ in Ireland identified by Counsell et al. (2014). For example, in the case of Waterford, the City Heritage Plan, and the Waterford City Centre report (2009b) are both non-statutory, but are key in the setting of planning and development priorities in the post-crisis period. In Drogheda, the Urban Design Framework Plan for the Heritage Quarter, and retail strategy for Co. Louth have both also been examined for similar reasons. In total, 13 documents published between 2009 and 2014 were analysed (see Table 2) and a content analysis was undertaken relating to heritage, conservation, regeneration, and the public realm.

Secondly, interviews were undertaken with key informants and stakeholders in each case study area. The interviewees were selected on the basis of playing a key role in either conservation or local regeneration practice in the case study urban areas. In total seventeen interviews were conducted, which reflects the limited size of the built heritage community in Ireland’s regional urban centres. Six interviews were conducted in Waterford, six in Limerick and five in Drogheda. In terms of respondent profile, eight interviewees were sourced from the policy making arena and a further six interviewees were representatives of a range of voluntary sector heritage groups, while three interviewees came from a private practice background with experience of architectural conservation and development project management. All local authority heritage officers were included for interview, with one heritage officer located in each case study authority (typically Irish local authorities have only 1 heritage officer, reflecting limited capacity in this specialism). Interviews were conducted as face-to-face interviews, 60–90 min in duration and were conducted in 2014–2015 capturing the period of the financial crisis and the policy response. In some cases, interviews were supplemented with site visits as a form of mobile interview. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed for analysis. Initial coding of interview data was undertaken independently by two of the authors, generating a rich set of codes relating to aspects relating to austerity, built heritage and conservation-planning. A further review of these initial codes by a third author informed the development of a coding matrix which was iteratively recalibrated in a second round of coding. A final round of coding was undertaken to further refine and produce a dataset of categories relating to the how conservation-planning was perceived and conceived within the context of austerity conditions. Thirdly, a day-long workshop was undertaken attended by representatives of both local authorities, national heritage actors and the research team to further explore and compare the approaches adopted in each city. The workshop (in September 2015) was attended by planning and heritage local authority officers from across the three case studies (3 representatives from each, n = 9), plus private sector conservation architects (n = 2) and a private sector planning consultant (regeneration specialist), a representative from Heritage Europe (an international heritage body) and three members of the research team. Each participant provided a presentation of their work (which was recorded) and extensive notes were taken and analysed. The research team also presented initial research findings. Each presentation was followed by a roundtable discussion, and the workshop concluded with a further opportunity for a final roundtable discussion. Notes were taken throughout each discussion. The workshop enabled practitioners to reflect on initial research findings, providing a forum for verifying results and adding to or correcting any aspects of the discussion. It also provided an opportunity for practitioner peer-to-peer reflective learning as practitioners discussed various approaches taken across the local authorities. Together, the documentary analysis, stakeholder interviews and workshop provided a framework for triangulating results, enabling the team to verify findings, to probe further when issues were not fully explored by one method only, and allowed

Table 2
Key documents for content analysis across the 3 case studies.

| Location    | Documents                                                                 |
|-------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Drogheda    | RPS (2007) Planning Strategy for the Greater Drogheda Area. Drogheda: Drogheda Borough Council. Drogheda Borough Council (2011). Drogheda Borough Council Development Plan 2011–2017. Drogheda: Drogheda Borough Council. Louth County Council (2015) Louth County Development Plan 2015–2021. Dundalk: Louth County Council. Louth County Council (2014) Draft Louth Retail Strategy. Dundalk: Louth County Council. Louth County Council (2013) Urban Design Framework Plan for the Heritage Quarter. Dundalk: Louth County Council |
| Limerick    | Limerick City Council and Limerick County Council (2014). Limerick 2030: An Economic and Spatial Plan for Limerick. Limerick: Limerick City Council and Limerick County Council. |
| Waterford   | Indecon (2013) Indecon Ex Ante Evaluation of the Living City Initiative for Urban Regeneration. Dublin: The Department of Finance. Waterford City Council (2009a). Waterford City Heritage Plan. Waterford: Waterford City Council. Waterford City Council (2009b). Waterford City Centre Report. Waterford: Waterford City Council. Waterford City Council (2011). The Viking Triangle. Waterford City Centre. Waterford: Waterford City Council and Failte Ireland. Waterford City Council (2013). Waterford City Development Plan 2013–2019. Waterford: Waterford City Council. Dkm Economic Consultants (2013) Economic Strategy for Waterford City and County - Final Report. Dublin: DKM Economic Consultants. |
critical practitioner reflection as a form of practitioner peer review and to enable peer-to-peer learning.

4. Promoting local growth strategies through heritage

Both nationally and within the three case study areas, a common overarching theme was evident in the initial post-crisis response to urban development: an emphasis on utilising heritage as a potential economic regeneration pathway. However, while drawing on intangible heritage and heritage narratives for place-branding, the actual protection of tangible built heritage assets was undermined through a greater emphasis on ‘flexible’ planning responses.

At a national level, within the immediate post crisis years, built heritage was increasingly positioned by Government as a means to enhance the character of Irish cities, facilitate economic growth by improving Ireland’s tourism offering, attract inward investment and stimulate the construction sector to promote recovery. As outlined in the Department of Arts, Heritage and Gaeltacht’s publication, ‘Shaping the Future: Case Studies in Adaptation and Reuse in Historic Urban Environments’:

\[
\text{The protection and enhancement of our built heritage plays a major role in increasing Ireland’s attractiveness as a tourism destination. Utilising this resource will assist in underpinning and advancing economic activity at a local level...} \quad \text{(DAHG, 2012, p. 2).}
\]

The aim, in part, appears to be to improve the quality of the public realm to act as a ‘soft locational factor’ to attract knowledge-based industries, creative workforces and enhance tourism potential and the retail offering within historic urban cores.

These themes were reflected within the three case studies, where heritage and specifically historic urban cores emerged as a central element in urban recovery strategies. In Limerick, for example, the instrumental use of heritage was evident in both the statutory development plan and also non-statutory regeneration strategies. The city’s development plan moved beyond its statutory obligation in relation to protecting architecturally important structures to explicitly link the ‘protection and enhancement’ of ‘cultural amenities’ (including built heritage) with tourism benefits:

\[
\text{It is the policy of Limerick City Council through land use zoning, policies and objectives, to protect and enhance the Tourism and Cultural amenities of the City including the conservation, protection and enhancement of Limerick City’s natural, built and cultural heritage. Limerick City Council will seek to protect the natural and built environment which forms the basis of the City’s attractiveness for tourists.} \quad \text{(Limerick City Development Plan, 2010, p.76, added emphasis)}
\]

The effect is to create a strong and explicit link between built heritage and its instrumental economic potential as a key justification for conservation measures, repositioning heritage as potential tourism assets. This theme was further emphasised in Limerick 2030, published in 2014, which serves as a non-statutory ‘flexible’ framework for the economic, social and physical regeneration of Limerick city. The plan sets out nine key development zones and a series of seven ‘transformational projects’, which form the city council’s key flagship projects for urban regeneration. One of these transformative projects is located within the ‘Opera’ site within the historic urban core, and is illustrative of how local authorities have responded to the crisis by risk-taking and framing the crisis as an opportunity with previously underutilised heritage assets recast as ‘opportunity sites’. In this case, the city council purchased a large site as a catalyst to develop part of the medieval core, specifically to attract local higher education institutions to relocate some functions there alongside cultural and artistic uses to stimulate the wider cultural economy. This purchase was opportunistic, in the sense that they acquired it relatively cheaply as a developer had gone into bankruptcy during the property market collapse.

A further transformative project relates to the city’s Georgian Quarter, framed as key to differentiate the city internationally, and to assist the city in achieving its economic potential (pp. 69–70). In relation to the Georgian Quarter transformational project, the strategy proposes the “renewal” of the city’s Georgian Quarter through a “concentrated programme to restore the Georgian part of the City to its former glory”.

While framed as ‘heritage-led’, the plan text explicitly calls for greater flexibility in modifying protected buildings in order to make re-use financially viable, and goes as far as to list internal building elements which it advocates be subject to this greater level of flexibility, revealing a tension between heritage as consumption framed within the strategy and conservation as the preservation of authenticity:

\[
\text{External renovation and interior reconfiguration will retain essential character while providing the flexibility needed to accommodate new uses and occupiers and support essential viability} \quad \text{(Waterford 2030, 2014, p.105).}
\]

\[
\text{A flexible approach to internal features and configuration, allowing creation of larger entrance and lobby spaces; consolidation of floors between units to create larger floor spaces; reorganisation of walls to create a range of residential room spaces; and reorganisation of stair cores to allow elevators to be installed} \quad \text{(Waterford 2030, 2014, p.106) (emphasis added)}
\]

Although the document does not state it in so many words, it is referring to statutory heritage protection, managed as an integrated element of the development planning process. The text is therefore directed at the planning and conservation officials within the local authority who advise and make recommendations on the nature and extent of protection that is appropriate. However, there is at the same time no recognition that a greater level of flexibility may often not be possible in relation to the protected houses and other buildings within the Georgian quarter, many of which contain features of considerable architectural significance.

Within the Waterford case study, the city’s flagship regeneration project focused on promoting the ‘Viking Triangle’ within the historic urban centre as a cultural and heritage quarter, as set out in the Waterford City Centre Report (Waterford City Council, 2009b). Similar to the Economic and Spatial Plan for Limerick, the Waterford City Centre Report is not concerned with ensuring that built heritage conservation is assessed objectively and conserved in accordance with best conservation practice. Rather, the discourse throughout the report establishes a link between heritage and its instrumental tourism/economic potential, for example noting in relation to the Viking Triangle that: “This area has not been fully harnessed in terms of its development as the character identifier of the city or as a visitor attractor” (p.24). However, “architectural/archaeological heritage” is represented within the document as both a strength and a weakness (and as a “constraint”) (Waterford City Council, 2009b, p.31). Although not explicitly stated within the SWOT analysis, the discourse implies that statutory heritage protection (and its management within the planning process) is what constitutes the identified constraint and weakness. In this context, the report indirectly addresses this tension by including indicative conceptual development proposals for a number of sites in the city centre, as well as calling for planning policies to, “allow more flexibility/expansion or creation of bigger spaces to accommodate retail floor space demand.” (Waterford City Council, 2009b, p.48). However, the parallel issue of a lack of local authority resources in assessing historic buildings, clearly evident in interviews in the case study locations, remains unaddressed.

These themes are continued in the follow-on post-crisis policy document pertaining to Waterford’s historic core – the Economic Strategy for Waterford City and County (DKM Economic Consultants Ltd., 2013). This strategy identifies tourism as one of a series of ‘high-level interventions’ marked out to assist in securing economic growth, and specifically cites the Viking Triangle as an initiative that can be built on as
a catalyst for further tourist activity” (p. v). In this regard, the report is explicit that “Heritage and culture should continue to form the backbone of the tourist strategy for Waterford” (p. 42), and goes on to make a case for the importance of a process of enhancing built heritage assets, and continued financial investment in this, to achieve an attractive tourist offer. In this document, heritage forms the crucial element of the strategy, highlighting the centrality of heritage to the city’s tourism and place-making strategies to “…attract visitors of a ‘Cosmopolitan’ nature that are the highest spenders.... [thereby] creating jobs and business opportunities” (DMK Economic Consultants, 2013, p. 44). Waterford City Council (2011) have invested almost €30 million in the physical regeneration of the Viking Triangle, generating a cultural and heritage quarter to generate economic and tourism potential, as well as creating a new cultural identity for the city. The initiative aims to reinforce the medieval urban grain, conserve monuments, improve existing route ways and public spaces, promote increased residential occupancy and develop a more comprehensive commercial tourism and retail offering.

Organisationally, the initiative was managed by a special purpose Viking Triangle public-private partnership with a designated manager to implement the strategic vision and provide a special purpose vehicle which incorporates public sector (e.g. property assets, regeneration projects and public sector powers) and private sector inputs (e.g. capital and asset/development management skills). Almost all the board members represent business interests alongside one representative from a local higher education institute and the CEO of the local authority, and no elected representatives. This is a typical mode of governance identified within the austerity urbanism literature, with public-private partnerships established to circumvent local democratic channels and promote business interests and agendas (Peck & Whiteside, 2016). Interviews also suggested that the perceived advantages of this new institutional arrangement was also to overcome the ‘constraints’ of working solely within the local government system. As stated by a member the Viking Triangle initiative:

> We as I say, exert pressure, persuasion whatever way you want to put it. … The [Council leadership] needed a body that was that, was a little bit independent if you like. So not within the public sector framework and the constraints that are exercised within the regime. A group that were interested, willing to give their time and experience…. … We will do everything possible to help incentivise development of the Viking Triangle (interview with member of Viking Triangle Partnership).

Interviews also revealed that this focus on heritage-led regeneration emerged from within a small leadership group within the city council and was promoted in the face of local opposition:

> INTERVIEWER: What kind of opposition?  
> REPRESENTATIVE FROM LOCAL HERITAGE GROUP: Opposition that in a post-industrial city you were spending hundreds of millions in the development of an area [Viking Triangle] far removed from the working class housing estates.

This brief interview extract perhaps goes to heart of the key criticism of planning practices during the economic recovery, whereby the enhancement of the city’s image is paramount with flagship projects more readily experienced by tourists than by those who live in a city with over 25% unemployment. The initiative is also illustrative of the intersection between historic environments (providing authenticity and identity) and the wider promotion of cultural enterprises. For example, the promotional website of the Viking Triangle promotes artisan producers, local farmers’ markets, galleries and craft beer tours in the re-imaging of the city.

Drogheda differs from the other two cases in the sense that the town is not the administrative centre of its local authority and therefore competes with a neighbouring urban centre (Dundalk) in terms of resources and attention from local authority officials and management. As a result, there has been less emphasis on flagship regeneration projects in Drogheda than in Limerick and Waterford, with many interviewees also noting a risk adverse management culture within the local authority. Nevertheless, similar themes concerning the use of heritage narratives to stimulate development are also identifiable in Drogheda, alongside the contradictory view that conservation protection remains a barrier to development. Given the smaller scale of Drogheda compared to the other two cases, efforts to promote tourism are positioned to exploit its location within the Boyne Valley, which contains the UNESCO World Heritage Site, Bru na Boinne. However, as noted in an interview with a heritage professional, efforts to capitalise on heritage for local regeneration have largely focused on top-down marketing strategies, rather than any shifts in practice for managing the historic urban environment in Drogheda or strategies to encourage the reuse of heritage assets. This has resulted in some local cynicism (particularly among heritage interests) about whether national and local policy discourses to promote heritage are genuine. As one heritage stakeholder noted:

> I'm not a hundred percent sure that it is really genuine [that heritage is genuinely emphasised by policymakers]. I think there might be an element of paying lip service to it. … There's also an element of it being a busted flush that they've tried everything else and it hasn't worked so this is the last card that they have to play. But it appears to me and it seems to me as a heritage professional that there is very little personal commitment and indeed little personal understanding and people have heard that these things are being done, that its worthwhile and its worth looking at but they have no real understanding of it and no commitment to it (interview with local heritage stakeholder).

This interviewee suggests that heritage-led regeneration has been (re)discovered during the crisis as other development pathways fail. However, critically in Drogheda, for both local economic actors and indeed local authority officials, conservation and protection is viewed largely as an impediment to development. As one senior planning official noted:

> For us historic buildings is a huge problem [for development] because they're all protected and the conservation issues with them and we are constantly being pushed [to protect more structures]… the amount of submissions that came in from the Department of Arts, Heritage and with regards to … this building should go on the [record of] protected structure[s].

Indeed, conservation as a cost has prevented the local authority management and elected councillors from formally adopting design guidelines for the historic core (commissioned by the local authority), as they were perceived as potentially a barrier to comprehensive development. In this context, conservation of the built environment remains framed as a cost, rather than as an opportunity to develop a coherent local development strategy, a view shared by local property developers: ‘ultimately you imagine the hoops … heritage compliance and planning compliance’.

Again, as with Limerick and Waterford, the key tension emerges between using heritage as a marketing device to brand local growth strategies and the actual protection of tangible heritage assets. This balance most often favours development interests, with calls for greater flexibility in managing conservation in practice. The interview extract below with a senior planning official highlights the pro-development tendency within local government planning which focuses on an enabling agenda for redevelopment:

> Yeah, em, there's a lot of the built heritage within the town that is not being used at the moment so, em, we have to be flexible with allowing development to take place through planning and that comes down to, em, having a flexible approach to conservation and also given the incentive for people to develop the built heritage within the town (interview with senior planner).

Across the three case studies, the newfound interest in promoting heritage raised dilemmas for heritage professionals and interest groups.
The Irish planning and political system has traditionally been pro-development and prioritised individual property rights (Parkinson et al., 2018), while the 2000s witnessed the deep entrenchment of neoliberal and entrepreneurial planning practices as an enabler of development and property speculation. Therefore, conservation has been marginalised within planning practice and development tended to take precedence over conservation concerns. However, the economic crisis halted the high level of development pressure which existed at the time, with interviewees suggesting that in the absence of high-level development pressure, conservation concerns are getting much greater consideration for the first time. And the inclusion of an emphasis on heritage within post-2008 initiatives focused on regeneration indicates that heritage conservation has been thrust centre-stage in a way not previously seen in Ireland.

For conservation stakeholders, while the use of heritage for regeneration has provided a much needed spotlight for previously neglected aspects of the city, the mobilization of heritage representations for tourism also tends to tensions with traditional conservation practices, with interviewees expressing concerns that heritage is being viewed as a narrow market commodity. For example:

You've got Tourism Ireland and Fáilte Ireland recognising the value of tourism and the importance that our heritage plays in that whole market. … That's one aspect of it that I entertain but I would much prefer that, you know, the buildings are used and lived in and that they're sustained really only by or sustained primarily by a local population, you know, because I fear designating areas that might just become like Disneyland, you know, that it's just about visiting from nine to five (interview with heritage stakeholder).

So I think there's a danger in the sudden sort of obsession with the economic value of heritage that it will push heritage into a particular silo and that seems to be happening, the draft national tourism policy would seem to suggest that all future supports for heritage in terms of its financial supports will come under the auspices of tourism which then raises a lot of questions about say if something is, do you know, if you have a post box down some back street, is that worth saving because a tourist won't see it … there are just some things that mightn't be valuable from a tourist point of view (interview with heritage stakeholder).

5. Austerity and heritage capacity

While heritage-led regeneration emerged as a key response to the economic crisis, in this section we address the capacity and resources within the heritage sector and local authorities to effectively manage or (re)use heritage assets to stimulate local development under austerity conditions. As noted above, while heritage narratives were widely mobilized within local growth strategies, this was also mirrored by calls for greater flexibility for protecting built heritage – this approach was further consolidated by resource issues and the impacts of austerity in relation to conservation practices.

At a national level, the impact of austerity was severe on the already underfunded heritage sector. As recorded by Lagerqvist (2016), in 2013, the budget of the Heritage Council (state body responsible for promoting and protecting heritage) declined by two-thirds from its 2008 level, and the spending of the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (DAHG) on heritage was reduced similarly. With specific regard to built heritage management, most grant aids for heritage conservation were suspended or substantially reduced as austerity was rolled-out across the public sector. As recorded in the Expert Advisory Committee Report (2016) on the operation of built heritage protection, between 1999 and 2010 the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (and its forerunner) allocated sums to each city and county council on an annual basis to disburse to protected structure grant applicants. In total €40.3 m was allocated through the Local Authority Conservation Grant Scheme between 2003 and 2010 and €7.7 m to the Civic Structures Scheme between 2007 and 2010. The Local Authority Conservation Grants Scheme and the Civic Structures Grants Scheme, which had offered grant assistance of €3.7 million and €1.4 million respectively in 2010, were both suspended from 2011. These schemes have been replaced by a centrally-operated ‘Structures at Risk Fund’, which only assists about 30 structures annually nationwide, which must also demonstrate a direct job creation impact.

Tax relief schemes were also introduced to encourage the adaptive reuse of historic properties; however, the potential impact of these initiatives has been reduced due to poor resourcing at local authority level to support projects. For example, one of the Government's main built heritage initiatives has been the Living Cities Initiative which is a targeted pilot tax incentive to encourage people to live in historic buildings in Irish urban centres and encourage regeneration of central business districts. The Finance Act 2013 offered tax relief to owner occupiers on expenditure for the refurbishment of Georgian houses within identified areas, initially in Waterford and Limerick, where the value of the work represented at least 10% of the property's value. Eligible properties had to be constructed in the period 1714 to 1830 for use as a dwelling, comprise at least 2 storeys and have a total floor area between 38 and 210m². The pilot scheme was focused in Waterford and Limerick based on unemployment figures and measures of deprivation, and the scheme was specifically aimed at generating employment, particularly within the construction sector, and regenerating the urban cores of these cities. However, the scheme has had minimal impact due to poor resourcing and management, and that the level of tax relief on offer is too low given the expense involved in converting and conserving the often large-scale historic buildings at which it is targeted (Indecon, 2013). Furthermore, few individuals have the financial and practical capacity to take on this scale of conservation project.

Local authorities have experienced austerity through direct and direct impacts, which have impacted on their capacity to manage historic urban environments. On one level, local government was initially buffeted from the economic crisis as core funding for local authorities were derived from a central government grant (approximately 40% of local authority income). However, this general-purpose grant was reduced by over 22% between 2008 and 2012. Moreover, local sources of direct income, related to fees for planning applications, development levies and business rates collapsed in the wake of the property and economic crisis. For example, fees related income declined by 20% over the same period (Turley & Flannery, 2013).

Further cutbacks to local government funding also followed focused on reducing the number of city and county authorities from 34 to 22, and the abolition of lower tier authorities, such as town/borough councils. This rationalization had direct impacts on the three case study locations. In Limerick, Limerick City and County Councils were amalgamated, Waterford City and County Councils were similarly merged and Drogheda lost its town council status and was amalgamated with Louth County Council in 2014. Built heritage resourcing continued to be weak within these new structures, evident in the fact that Limerick City Council had no conservation or heritage officers for a number of years, and the new Waterford local authority has only one heritage officer. The loss of Drogheda Borough Council led to a loss of visibility and physical presence of a planning function in the town. Public sector cutbacks across Ireland was one of the most visible impacts of austerity, with staff reductions of 15,000 between 2008 and 2010, largely achieved through a recruitment embargo in the public service and incentivised early retirement scheme. Indeed, local government was harder hit than other public bodies, with an almost 20% reduction in staff numbers in local government for the five-year period of 2008–12 (compared with 7% in the total public sector) (Turley & Flannery, 2013), contributing to a loss of capacity and knowledge within planning authorities across the country, particularly as senior or specialist staff left and were not replaced. Interviewees within the three local authorities suggested that due to a lack of resources, basic tasks were left unaddressed:
Actually putting buildings onto the RPS (recorded protected structures list) is I understand extremely onerous and difficult and time demanding and it just doesn’t happen. We did a survey of all of the abandoned rail infrastructure in the county in 2008 and there’s a listing of its fifty-six recommendations for adding to the record of protective structures. It hasn’t been done yet. Even with the economy and construction and building at the level that it is at the moment which is maybe a quarter or a fifth of what it was five years ago, there still isn’t time to do it all properly (interview with local authority official).

In relation to protecting and conserving built heritage, this loss of technical capacity (from a low base) is reinforced by a negative perception of conservation from local authority management, keen to enable development within a recessionary context.

**QUESTION:** Do you find that there is resistance to; if you’re trying to add structures to the RPS…?

**LOCAL PLANNER:** ‘From management… its maybe the values … of say management and the way they look at something…. … Protected structures are holding up development. … I think it’s a lack of imagination and education. … Not (amongst) management, but developers and people involved because…. if you’re an investor you want the quickest, cheapest return on the patch of land that you’ve bought. If there’s a building there, renovation versus knocking it down and rebuidl… The bottom line is that they’ll say it’s cheaper to knock a building rather than renovate a building … and they’re looking at that cost wise and they’re kind of going ah this is really holding us up and stopping development and sometimes management would agree with them on this, you know.

Similarly, the government’s Expert Advisory Committee’s report on built heritage (2016), noted that local authority managers are reported to be less willing to enforce protection by prosecuting owners for endangerment as they recognise that many owners are struggling financially, particularly with the cutbacks in funding to support protection and repair of endangered properties from central government, resulting in increased dereliction of historic properties. This has been compounded where developers/property owners have gone bankrupt and tangible heritage assets may be in a receiver, bank or NAMA, which has made it more difficult for local authorities to take enforcement proceedings against dereliction of protected properties. Indeed, the issue of NAMA’s ownership of large numbers of properties was raised in each of the case studies. The setting up of the state’s ‘bad bank’ has emerged as one of the most significant urban interventions following the crisis (Byrne, 2016). As outlined by Byrne (2016, p. 900), NAMA was established by the government in 2009 to acquire and resolve “troubled” assets linked to real estate, essentially removing toxic assets from the banking sector’s balance sheets, but becoming ‘increasingly involved in managing urban development through its control over vast amounts of distressed financial assets linked to real estate’ (2016, p. 900). Operationally, NAMA has been criticized for its opacity in relation to acquired assets, often leading to confusion in relation to the legal ownership of properties. For some of the interviewees, this resulted in isolating NAMA controlled sites from the conservation system, with ownership of properties. For some of the interviewees, this resulted in confusion in relation to the legal ownership of properties. For some of the interviewees, this resulted in confusion in relation to the legal ownership of properties.

In the three case studies, similar themes were identified. Firstly, historic urban cores were deeply affected by the economic crisis, primarily through increased rates of vacancy and subsequent dereliction and disrepair. Secondly, with the collapse of the economy and rapidly increasing unemployment rates, heritage was mobilized at both national and local levels as a potential pathway towards recovery, particularly orientated towards promoting tourism and as a ‘soft locational’ factor in competing for inward investment and external capital. Under these conditions, heritage narratives are mobilized as a form of place-branding or marketing to differentiate cities in the competition for tourism and external capital. Moreover, in two of our case studies, heritage narratives also underpinned new so-called cultural or creative economies.

**Table 3** Characteristics of ‘austerity conservation’.

| Characteristics of ‘austerity conservation’. |
|-----------------------------------------------|
| Increased heritage at risk through vacancy and disrepair |
| Mobilization of heritage narratives for place branding |
| Emphasis on external capital – tourists, investors |
| Increased use of established neoliberal planning tools: ‘soft spaces’ for governance, flexible approaches for conservation-planning and regulation, market-based tools |
| Diminished capacity for conservation-planning interventions through staff cutbacks |
| Reduced financial resources for heritage protection |

6. Conclusion

The instrumental use of heritage for economic regeneration is not new. Pendlebury (2009, 2013), for example, provides an extensive review of the ways that built heritage has been revalorized for its economic potential and how the reuse of historic buildings or environments have provided a foundation for wider local regeneration efforts. Moreover, Pendlebury also highlights how heritage actors themselves have incorporated these values into official heritage discourses as a means of positioning heritage vis-à-vis wider government objectives regarding the economy, citing the example of the ‘heritage dividend’ promoted by English Heritage throughout the 1990s. Thus, in countries with mature regulatory systems governing conservation practice (e.g. the UK and the Netherlands), ‘conservation as heritage’ sits alongside (rather than displacing) more traditional curatorial approaches to practice (Pendlebury et al., 2020).

Drawing on the Irish experience, in this paper we seek to contribute to these themes by exploring how heritage is mobilized under austerity conditions to redefine the relationship between built heritage and urban regeneration, in what might be termed ‘austerity conservation’ (see Table 3 for key characteristics). Drawing on Peck’s austerity urbanism thesis, austerity conservation refers to the reshaping of urban heritage practices within local development arenas, whereby heritage narratives become central to local growth strategies, but the actual means of protecting heritage is weakened through ‘flexible approaches’ and reduced resources and capacity. The case studies outlined in the paper reveal how cities are dealing and coping with the consequences of the economic crisis and devolved austerity, and how local authorities navigate entrenched neoliberalism, more often than not by deploying a neoliberal repertoire of policy responses.

In the three case studies, similar themes were identified. Firstly, historic urban cores were deeply affected by the economic crisis, primarily through increased rates of vacancy and subsequent dereliction and disrepair. Secondly, with the collapse of the economy and rapidly increasing unemployment rates, heritage was mobilized at both national and local levels as a potential pathway towards recovery, particularly orientated towards promoting tourism and as a ‘soft locational’ factor in competing for inward investment and external capital. Under these conditions, heritage narratives are mobilized as a form of place-branding or marketing to differentiate cities in the competition for tourism and external capital. Moreover, in two of our case studies, heritage narratives also underpinned new so-called cultural or creative economies.
businesses, helping to promote the city through artisanal/craft products or new cultural activities prevalent in vacant pop-up venues as a means of rebranding the city (Scott, Parkinson, Redmond, & Waldron, 2018).

However, heritage-led regeneration as branding also challenges the authenticity of tangible built heritage and conservation practice. This is particularly the case when heritage branding is tied with key characteristics of austerity conservation identified in our case studies. This included less resources and diminished institutional capacity to address heritage protection, leading to a greater emphasis on intangible heritage narratives rather than protecting tangible assets. In this context, the linking of heritage and tourism became increasingly institutionalized through planning’s ‘soft spaces’ – newly established local partnerships or non-statutory growth strategies. Similarly, austerity conservation was defined by key emphasis on ‘flexible’ approaches to managing built heritage whereby conservation practice would not provide a barrier to development, through additional ‘red-tape’ or by preventing redevelopment of key sites. Finally, the emphasis on selling the city, while developing flexible heritage management approaches, undermines the potential contribution of built heritage to local place-making, and can erode local sense of place or identity as unique place-based attributes linked to an identikit cultural economy, which mobilizes familiar tropes to market local businesses and products.

In terms of policy and practice implications, this paper identifies a number of key challenges for heritage conservation practice. While heritage professionals have often mobilized a narrative of a heritage dividend to provide a rationale for heritage protection and restoration, the renewed vigor for pursuing heritage-led regeneration opens new challenges for practice. Firstly, as highlighted by Lagerqvist (2016), there is a danger that only tangible heritage assets that can demonstrate measurable revenues (e.g. employment, tourism) will be supported or protected, while more ‘ordinary’ or diverse heritage may be neglected. Secondly (and related), for more traditional conservation planning approaches, this raises concerns surrounding wider cultural values or diminishing importance attached to cultural significance in heritage management. Thirdly, associating ‘heritage’ with place-branding also negates opportunities to foster a meaningful engagement between local citizens and a city’s heritage. In the case studies heritage protection and management reflected dominant economic interests within each urban area and the means of exploiting heritage were often through business-friendly agencies. In this context, a bottom-up approach may have provided opportunities for place-making or community building, by developing new networks, building civic pride, building on local identity, and reaching across generations to explore heritage values. This approach also recognises that heritage and traditional approaches to conservation are not themselves unproblematic or neutral, but that a more inclusive or bottom-up process enables a wider debate about values, priorities and alternative development pathways.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Mark Scott: Investigation, Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Writing - original draft, Writing - review & editing. Arthur Parkinson: Investigation, Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Writing - original draft, Writing - review & editing. Richard Waldron: Investigation, Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Writing - original draft, Writing - review & editing. Declan Redmond: Investigation, Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Writing - original draft, Writing - review & editing.

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