

The Politics of Conflict Archaeology: HMP Maze as a 'Dark Heritage' Case Study

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MARTIN DUFFY, FEB 16 2022

In Northern Ireland, the former high-security prison, HMP Maze, known euphemistically as “Long Kesh,” is politically idiomatic of the province’s torturous conflict archaeology. It is symbolic of unresolved issues many see as a crypto peace process. The spectacular failure of the site’s re-purposing points to reluctance to confront the ghosts of a tragic past and historical specters in the day-to-day life of the province. Northern Ireland exudes “dark heritage” and few sites are as iconic as this prison which witnessed sectarian murders, mass protests, hunger strikes, prisoner escapes, and alleged state misuse of battle-grade CR gas, all in barely thirty short years of life. These events are forensically chronicled by Laura McAntaney and bolster the argument for active community participation in post-conflict heritage.

The post-conflict heritage of Long Kesh/Maze is a microcosm of the polarization exposed by the burdening decades of “the troubles”. The sensitivity of “dark heritage” of this era is over-powering. The 1998 Good Friday Agreement provided for the advance release of prisoners on conflict-related charges. As the prison emptied, the contested nature of the heritage of Long Kesh/Maze effectively tarnished its future. Indeed, it split the power-sharing government and the future of the former prison is tied to resolution of the endgame of conflict itself. Current theories of heritage certainly favor “participative heritage” whether tangible or intangible. As Laurajane Smith has argued, ‘Heritage is not a thing, site or place, nor is it ‘found’, rather heritage is the multiple processes of meaning making that occur as material heritage places or intangible heritage events are identified, defined, managed, exhibited and visited’. If Smith’s argument is taken seriously, the heritage of Long Kesh/Maze has hardly begun because access is closed. Its heritage could be permitted to unfold through forms of participation; its histories revealed by people connected to the site i.e., “participatory heritage practice”. The global heritage project, Sites of Conscience, has supported many such dialogues about the relationship between past and present at sites across the world. All are dependent upon the genuine participation that should be encouraged for Long Kesh/Maze

Nationalists regarded the re-named “HMP Maze” as whitewashing a site which had become notorious due to years of murder, hunger strike and protest. It closed in 2000 after the Good Friday Agreement. In the early years, suspects were held indefinitely, in conditions of internment without trial under the Special Powers Act. Another term of nomenclature conflict archaeologists will come across (“H Blocks”) is apparent from aerial photographs revealing the newer prison buildings designed in an H-shape. Earlier prison accommodation had been a combination of Nissen Huts and for a brief period after a prisoner-instigated fire, some prisoners were held for a period in tents. Despite state preservation orders, the fabric of these historic buildings is in natural decay.

In April 2013 the government again announced that the remaining penitentiary buildings would be redeveloped into a Peace Centre. Extensive consultation on these re-purposing plans stalled over concerns that the remaining buildings could become a variety of “political shrine”. The complex had become idiomatically important to the protest cultures of both loyalists and republicans, but the greatest sensitivity arose over a belief that far from metamorphosing into a neutral space for cross-community conflict resolution, parts of the site (notably the cell of prominent Republican Bobby Sands MP; the prison hospital which had been the site of the tertiary stages of hunger strikes; and a zone where secretive chemical weapons such as CR Gas had allegedly been deployed against a prison escape) would constitute a permanent “resistance memorial”.

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The status of "internment without trial" and its disproportionate effect on the nationalist psyche was an open sore, and this permeates discussion today. Initially, the internees were housed, with different paramilitary groups separated from each other, in Nissen huts. For a brief period, Special Category Status was granted, "free association between prisoners, civilian clothing etc.) However, from March 1976 those convicted of "scheduled terrorist offences" were housed in eight new "H-Blocks" now officially named HM Prison Maze. Prisoners without Special Status began protesting immediately after they were transferred to the H-Blocks. Their first acts of defiance included wearing "blankets" instead of prison uniforms, a "dirty" protest", and eventually hunger strikes which have painful roots in Irish historical memory.

In 1978, the UK Government was censured by the European Court of Human Rights for "cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment". The prisoners organized a hunger strike. Bobby Sands, the leader of the Provisional IRA prisoners, and an elected MP, began a second action on 1 March 1981. Sands and nine other hunger strikers died. On 25 September 1983, the Maze saw a massive breakout, many of the prisoners never being re-captured. The Maze prisoners also played a significant role in brokering the peace process. Having been a place of internment and then of imprisonment, efforts were made to refashion this conflict site in the context of peace. A group was set up in January 2003 to debate its future. In October 2006, demolition work started in preparation for construction. In January 2009, plans to build the new "multi-purpose stadium" on the site of The Maze were cancelled, citing a "lack of cross-party support". Discussion is still ongoing as to the listed status of sections of the old prison. The hospital and part of the H-Blocks are currently protected buildings and would remain as part of the proposed site redevelopment as a "conflict transformation Centre" with support from republicans and opposition from unionists, who consider that these risks creating "a shrine to the IRA".

In August 2012 it was announced that the architect, Daniel Libeskind would collaborate with Belfast's McAdam Design on a conflict resolution initiative funded by the EU. Under the Maze Consultation Panel, the project echoed a trend of heritage management of reconciliation through economic regeneration. By August 2013, the Executive stopped the project amidst local political divisions thus terminating state management of post-conflict heritage and losing EU support. Constraints on access to the site reflected the ossification of political positions about its past and future. In October 2019, the EU formally withdrew £18 million offered to develop a peace Centre, due to local political disagreements. There is (however) optimism that if the imbroglio concerning alleged aggrandizement of the cells most associated with republican struggle can be resolved, EU finance is still an option. For that to happen all sides must be prepared to confront the idiosyncratic resonance of a "dark heritage" which was intimately shared, and to de-weaponize an atavistic past.

Assessment as to the future of this site is as archaic as the conflict itself. Issues ostensibly about cultural heritage readily disintegrate into protracted political debate. Events for the agricultural community, the embryonic Ulster Aviation Museum and an Air Ambulance service are on-going. The future of cross-community sports stadiums and of a Conflict Centre is currently unresolvable. Northern Ireland has little in the way of shared sports facilities so the idea that a notorious former prison could be the catalyst for one may be a stretch of the imagination. The parties who wished to see certain key buildings at the prison preserved (nationalists) secured this, but a much greater political transformation of the whole community would be needed to create a genuine Centre for Conflict Transformation.

Fortuitously, fragments of Maze cultural heritage are preserved in a Prisons Memory Archive. One might hope that the political sensitivity of this conflict site may fade with progress in the peace process. Can the shared experience of a penitentiary and its symbolic importance to republican and loyalist communities, ever be reconciliatory? Visitors to this conflict-related site today will find a multi-purpose venue which houses an aviation museum, emergency ambulance station and event venue/stadium, alongside significant conflict-era physical heritage. They remark how beautifully the ugly grey lines of the penitentiary have naturally merged into the countryside. It is unclear whether the same might ever be said for the emotional legacy of this controversial place.

The material culture of the prison had been preserved by a prison officer immortalized in the film, *Billy's Museum*. Billy was a prison officer who wisely perceived its artefacts as historically significant. A former Republican prisoner also created artwork from his experience. Raymond Watson's *Hands of History* (2003) sculpture is an example of a living heritage. In January 2003, a public consultation on *A New Future for Maze/Long Kesh* was launched seeking

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to balance aspirations and repugnance towards the site. The Maze Consultation Panel published its Final Report in February 2005 seeking again to juggle these interests with plans for sports and agricultural stadia, commercial businesses, and an International Centre of Conflict Transformation, all of which suggested a narrative of post-conflict heritage. Demolition began but had hardly started when unionists voice fears of architecting a “shrine to terrorism”.

As heritage favors grassroots participation with such objects of physical heritage, this is still a project in transition. For the moment it looks as if politics will stymie this iconoclastic example of conflict archaeology and its undoubted potential as a functioning “dark heritage” site. If Northern Ireland is to emulate other post-conflict societies, genuine civic engagement with its “dark heritage” is integral both to economic regeneration and perhaps also to future reconciliation. The success of the former HMP Belfast, “The Crum” as a “dark tourism” attraction, augers well. However, the environment for such dialogue could scarcely be less austere than post-Brexit Northern Ireland. Somehow also, “The Kesh” is enveloped in a time-warp as mutually repugnant as it is also hagiographical. Such is the realpolitik of conflict archeology in a divided society. Northern Ireland must make radical choices about its sacred cows, and find a way to re-purpose but not to sanitize a “dark heritage” which fascinates outsiders, exudes learning for future generations, and contains resonance for peace processes across the world.

About the author:

Martin Duffy has participated in more than two hundred international election and human rights assignments since beginning his career in Africa and Asia in the 1980s. He has served with a wide range of international organizations and has frequently been decorated for field service, among them UN (United Nations) Peacekeeping Citations and the Badge of Honour of the International Red Cross Movement. He has also held several academic positions in Ireland, UK, USA and elsewhere. He is a proponent of experiential learning. He holds awards from Dublin, Oxford, Harvard, and several other institutions including the Diploma in International Relations at the University of Cambridge.