Challenges in the Museological Heritagization of the Troubles in Northern Ireland

From the late 1960s until the signing of the Good Friday Peace Agreement in 1998, Northern Ireland experienced some of the worst politically motivated violence of any part of the world. While the UK government envisages a state-commissioned official history, which (itself) is likely to be controversial, this article discuss the challenges facing the museological heritagization of the Troubles. Agreeing on a shared narrative is the very first of those elementary stages in heritagization. Yet, that the script is so fractious and contentious indicates that this will be a historiographical and political process full of epistemological and phenomenological challenges. Some societies have shown that it can be prudent to try to forget a conflictual past. Others have created exhibits only of their good times. However, there has been a belief in a need for a place where Northern Irish, Irish, and British people, can critically engage about a fractured past. It would allow visitors from other conflict zones to apply the lessons of our peace process to their own turbulent situation. What the planners of Museum of the Troubles and Peace Process (MOFT) envisage is an entity that addresses the conflict in all its complexity, celebrates resilience, and provides passageways into a shared future for the region.

"The Troubles" touched every aspect of life. The peace process has brought major gains, not least demilitarization, and a more peaceful society. Northern Ireland already has some relevant museums, heritage sites and attractions. Yet, more than twenty years after the Good Friday Agreement brought the conflict to an end, there is no dedicated space exhibiting shared history. What would such a museum look like? There is a wealth of material available of tangible and intangible heritage. The Ulster Museum is constrained by space from delivering the range of exhibits that would truly reflect the complexity of the subject. With digital technology we can create immersive experiences that evoke the darkest days of the Troubles. Archive television clips re-create "ordinary life". The museum would liaise with private collectors and the curators of existing collections to exhibit rarely seen or obscure Troubles memorabilia. An acquisitions budget would enable the museum to purchase relevant artefacts. Drama, music, and the visual arts would have a presence. In addition to the permanent displays, special exhibitions would highlight prominent themes and anniversaries. An events programme would add public workshops. The museum would contextualize us with other ethnic conflicts, serving as a template for societies transitioning from conflict. This initiative seeks to encourage major potential stakeholders, including National Museums Northern Ireland (NMNI), Belfast City Council, Northern Ireland Assembly, Queen's University Belfast, Ulster University, Co-operation Ireland, and other charitable foundations to create a Museum of the Troubles and the Peace Process.

The Board for the initiative is likely to include representatives from stakeholders and international experts. This will ensure that the museum's governance model is solidly predicated on the values of inclusion, objectivity, and independence. Such a museum might be a multi-platform hub, connecting and displaying work which is already in the public domain. The aim is to complement existing initiatives before birthing an ambitious stand-alone museum. Belfast and Derry/Londonderry are obvious candidate sites while a destination museum outside an urban area is also a possibility. The Maze site, controversial because of loyalist fears of republican beatification of the hunger strike period, is not off the agenda. The museum must be located where people from all communities feel welcome and should be reachable by public transport.

Evidence suggests that international visitors are increasingly interested in the Troubles and seek a major museum to

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complement existing offerings. For some years now we have had the Black Taxi history tours, the Ulster Museum's Troubles and Beyond exhibition, the Museum of Free Derry, the Siege Museum and Visitors Centre in Derry/Londonderry as well as the Museum of Orange Heritage at Schomberg House in Belfast. The Linen Memorial by the artist Lycia Trouton is a funerary record in the form of a Names List, hand-sewn on 400 linen handkerchiefs of the human lives lost during the Troubles. Persons are listed chronologically, and without bias. Linen is the choice of textile because of the historic connection with Irish Linen production. Also, linen has been used for centuries to shroud the dead, and its use here allows us to reflect upon rituals of grief, mourning and, arguably, reparation. The Linen Memorial has now spanned over 20 years as a static and peripatetic exhibition. It has travelled to multiple countries, and has been installed in art spaces, libraries, churches, community halls and a world-renowned museum in China. The artist created it as an ongoing site-conscious memorial. It is funereal but also subliminally creative. It impressively seeks to re-narrate the canon of almost 4,000 deaths. As Benedict Anderson observed,

The dead, far from being gone, remain as a powerful part of the community. How we think about the dead, and the stories we tell about the relationship between the dead and the living, are central to imagining new forms of community and narratives of nationhood.

The artwork has evolved with global audiences and provokes thoughts about other kindred conflict zones and attempts at reconciliation. Trouton was born in Belfast in 1967 and emigrated with her parents to Canada in 1970. She conceptualized her creation in late 1999 after taking her first trip to Belfast as a working adult, as part of an international sculpture exhibition. In early 2000, upon her return to Canada, Trouton was moved by the mid-1990s Peace Processes and by traumatized individuals in Northern Ireland. Thus, with examples like this, we already have great conceptualizations and artefacts for a future Peace Museum.

In 2021, the Institute of Irish Studies at Queen's University, Belfast organized a forum discussing the question, "Do we need a Museum of the Troubles and Peace in Northern Ireland?" Katie McClurkin's article, "A Sacred Mission: Envisioning a Troubles Museum" crystallizes the symbolic burden such a facility would inherit in a divided society. This forum took discussion a stage further with a panel which included Board members and convenors of the "Museum of the Troubles and Peace" (MoTaP) project, and more than a hundred academics, community activists, artists, writers, politicians, museum specialists and members of the public. This momentum reflects a drive in recent years to metamorphose what in earlier centuries might have been seen as museums of conflict into institutions which embrace concepts of peace. An example of such a transformation is London's Imperial War Museum with its renewed focus on peace.

There can be said to be four main categorizations in the territory of peace museums, namely:

- self-described peace museums.
- museums whose issues were centrally concerned with peace.
- museums devoted to personalities or subjects such as law and human rights and thus strongly associated with peace.
- museums of diverse disciplines, such as holocaust or genocide museums, which may be implicitly held to exhibit peace.

These categorizations should be widened to assert that all museums have a genuine potential to serve as museums of peace. One hopes that the Troubles museum envisaged will possess precisely this eclecticism and dynamism. Nowadays we have a resilient network of museums across the world whose collections are directly or indirectly concerned with exhibiting peace. In certain countries, Japan and Costa Rica being notable, there are also municipalities for peace, where local government formally enshrines peace in its work. My personal interpretation has been to offer an inclusive definition of the concept of peace museum so that we incorporate under the "umbrella heading" the widest possible range of institutions committed in some way to sustaining peace culture. This would incorporate the collective efforts of national museums everywhere. As in the aspirational words of the UNESCO Constitution, "building peace in the minds of men and women." The common denominator of the peace museum tradition is its grounding in local efforts for peace. Thus, theoretically all museums have the potential to be museums of peace.

Challenges in the Museological Heritagization of the Troubles in Northern Ireland

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As Mark Carruthers has shown, there has been a growth of partisan museums in both North Irish communities preserving and telling the story of the conflict. This phenomenon is increasingly labelled "dark tourism". However, what the MoTaP Board envisages is something much more independent, challenging, and transformative. Part of the momentum comes from the well-established 3R Museum Network. Their narrative involves stepping outside the safe, conventional explanations of divided communities. It is a vision,

that addresses the conflict in all its complexity; that celebrates the resilience of people during the conflict and pays tribute to the courage and creativity of those who delivered the peace.

Peace museums are not just about collecting or exhibiting artefacts of peace, but about constructive conflict resolution and actively making peace. Such museums draw on a divided past to construct alternatives and encourage accord. They involve fashioning narratives of peaceful struggle and protest and creating a veritable smorgasbord of images as visions of peace. In a divided society not all these conceptions translate well or with equanimity. For example, the descriptors "disappeared", "troubles" and "victims" all conjure up diverse tragedies in different countries, meaning there is a cultural specificity to memory and human rights, and a consequent danger of being leaden-footed when we translate narratives undigested from abroad.

Peace museologists have pondered whether "museum" is too "time-bound" a word to capture the very Zeitgeist of peace culture. Peace museums are dynamic interpretative places, inclusive enough to garner genuine cross-community support and yet controversial enough to challenge common perceptions and interpretations of a politically tangled past. Thanks to the obvious enthusiasm of the MoTaP convenors and public interest, this writer hopes for the gestation of an authentic peace museum for Northern Ireland. Few could decry the dreams of those campaigning for such a potentially valuable community asset in a society still recovering from conflict. Like all projects there is a stark bifurcation of vision which needs to be resolved. For example, Liam Kennedy wants to trace a long narrative arc stretching from the 1960s to the present day, taking in both the descent into violence of the 1970s and the achievements of the Belfast Agreement. However, one of the most impassioned opponents of this plan for a Troubles Museum is John Wilson Foster who believes Northern Ireland is still scarcely able to instruct anyone "about harmony". Obviously, there is still division as to whether the time is right to "exhibit peace" in Northern Ireland.

Encouragingly, a new Troubles display recently opened at the Ulster Museum to widespread public acclaim. It was ground breaking in that it exhibited together a number of sacred cows and political shibboleths from both traditions, and none. To see portraits such as IRA revolutionary Michael Collins hung alongside Protestant politicians such as Ian Paisley was transformational. William Blair, director of collections at National Museums Northern Ireland, admits that the previous display, which were tentative, text-heavy and contained no artefacts, had been characterized by a "strategy of avoidance…the monochrome uniformity meant that there was no sense of being on a journey." Kathryn Thomson, the chief executive of National Museums Northern Ireland, says that the new "Troubles and Beyond" display is "a safe place to explore subjective questions and engage with that conversation." It is likely that any proposed new museum will have to reconcile all those exhibiting and museological conundrums and will be both hated and loved. But, Northern Ireland is ready to talk about the previously unspeakable tragedy which eventually birthed the territory's painful but, nevertheless, sacred peace.

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Challenges in the Museological Heritagization of the Troubles in Northern Ireland
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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.