Inheritance and future-making

Loughlin Kealy

Existing built environments have to be adapted to serve new purposes - very substantial elements no longer serve the purposes for which they were created. Many have representational importance and possess cultural and historical values. It is a characteristic of our times that we feel that these are important to maintain, so that finding new uses for them makes cultural as well as ecological sense. The metaphors commonly used to describe intervention to historic buildings are familiar enough - prolonging life, giving new life, etc. But evolving value systems demand reflection on the challenges and on the opportunities involved, not least on their sheer scale, and also on deeper questions that arise when thinking about the best use of inherited environments.

All this forms a bedrock for the initiatives undertaken over recent years at international and national levels, to encourage fresh thinking and stimulate urgent action. It has been long in the making. Thirty years ago, the Green Paper on the Urban Environment published by the European Commission, spoke about the potentials of redundant industrial, transportation and military sites in terms of creating healthier urban environments (Figures 1a, 1b).

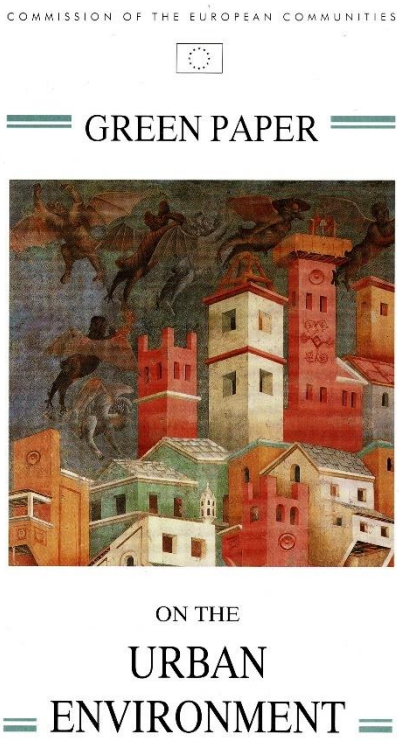

Figure 1a. Green Paper on the Urban Environment. Commission of the European Communities 1990.

Figure 1b. The challenge and opportunity of redundancy, exemplified by the former mining and industrial complex in Zbuch, Republic of Czechia. Photo by author

More recently, during the European Year of Culture 2018, the Leeuwarden Declaration pointed to the potential of redundant industrial, religious and military sites in the regeneration of European cities. Pitched at the level of strategy, the Declaration referred to the cultural, social, environmental and economic benefits to be gained through the dialogue between heritage and contemporary architecture that the adaptation of these environments required. That perspective has become part of establishment thinking throughout the European continent, and there are many examples where this dialogue is articulated, former institutional buildings, decayed town centres, and so on, and of course, the current programme takes its place among them. We can look to many examples of invention, creativity, ingenuity and skill, making significant contribution to material culture into the future.

But deeper questions also arise in the transformation of historic buildings and places, and celebration of achievement is also an opportunity to reflect on the current acceptance of the importance of the inherited environment. There is more involved in realising its potential than utilising available resources or adapting to climate

change. There are specifically human dimensions to the reanimation of inherited environments, dimensions that have historical as well as contemporary resonances.

The aftermaths of the 20th century global conflicts, WWI and WWII, witnessed an accelerated development in consciousness of the value of inherited environments, perhaps through a heightened sense of the fragility of inherited structures and of civilisation itself. Those years saw focussed efforts to create new international mechanisms to avoid future conflicts, first the League of Nations after WWI and then the United Nations after WWII. Both of these initiatives resulted in international efforts to protect historic environments. In all this, one could see the efforts to establish a consensus-based international order. They bore fruit in the renewed Hague *Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict* and a succession of Charters and Conventions aimed at ensuring the survival of inherited environments of cultural value, and at ensuring their place in constructing the environments of the future.

Over the century, there was a progressive extension of the scope and focus of consensus-based standards and practices, from monuments in themselves and their settings, to towns and landscapes, and from strictly material inheritance to immaterial inheritances, their associations and related practices. That trajectory lies behind how we presently understand the built inheritance and its significance. It also serves to remind us that values are not fixed and unchangeable, and that values, besides cultural ones have shaped those environments and continue to influence their futures. The propensity to mimic historic endowments in contemporary developments has also brought into sharp focus, issues of authenticity and meaning – more of that later.

These issues lend weight to an understanding of conservation as an act of critical interpretation, in which the marks of time are maintained. It is that phrase - the maintenance of the marks of time - that captures one of the central tasks to be faced in unlocking the potential for new uses of the environments we have inherited[i]. On the way to elaborating this point, it is useful to step back in time and space and to look at some examples of how inherited environments have been conscripted in shaping futures – looking at processes of memorialisation, recovery and reconstruction.

1 TROPES OF MEMORY

Recent events have reiterated the lessons of history in highlighting the cultural losses incurred by conflict. Of those still prominent in the memory, one can refer to the wars in the Balkans and the Middle East. Here memory and identity were in the frontline, distorted narratives of communal life and traditional values being evoked, weaponised or otherwise conscripted, and physical environments were frequently the theatres for action and propaganda. Those same environments continue to serve in the project of future-making, carrying with them their role as testaments to the achievements and follies of the past, and as expressions of aspirations for the future[ii]. To use Judt's term "memorialisation", one can recognise that process in many post-conflict contexts[iii]. Take for example, that of Fort Loncin near Liège. In WWI, it was a constituent part of a ring of fortifications around the city, built in anticipation of war with Germany and thought to be impregnable (Figures 2a, 2b)[iv].

Figure 2a. Fort at Loncin near Liège, Belgium. General view showing the shattered remains of the protective steel domes. Photo courtesy of Stefano F. Musso.

Figure 2b. Boots cast in concrete: a memorial to the soldiers entombed by the explosion. Photo by author.

Under bombardment from the huge cannon known as Big Bertha, its protective roofs were penetrated leading to an explosion that entombed over 300 soldiers. It was swiftly established as a shrine to the dead. Nowadays it still carries that significance while also serving as a tourist attraction, with all the ambivalences of that juxtaposition.

Above

Figure 3a. Hiroshima Peace Memorial Building (Main Building 1955), Kenzo Tange.

Figure 3b. Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park, established 1950-1964.

Figure 3c. Memorial to those who sought safety in the nearby river.

Figure 3d. Genbaku Dome. Inscribed on UNESCO World Heritage list 1996. Originally named the Product Exhibition Hall 1915, designed by Czech architect Jan Letzel.

All photographs by author.

The annihilation of the city of Hiroshima is the theme of a major museum, the Hiroshima Peace Museum (1955), designed by Kenzo Tange and located in a vast urban park where once the city centre stood[v]. The city has regrown around it. In stark contract to the managed landscape of the park is the ruin known as "the dome" (Figures 3a, 3b, 3c, 3d). The sole standing remnant of the city centre buildings, it is a raw and arresting memorial to the destruction of the city. Its impact is all the more powerful through its juxtaposition with the meticulous exposition in the memorial centre on the site of the experience of the inhabitants in the aftermath of the explosion. Close by is the river

where hundreds of people unsuccessfully sought safety from the conflagration, witnessed by a simple monument.

Evocation of past events, particularly traumatic ones, are complex undertakings, and while the memorialisation of remnants has a long history, contemporary resonances both colour their message and underline the fact that they evoke responses that lie deep in the spirit and that remain relevant in daily life.

In 1998, a monument to the fallen Irish soldiers serving in the British army in WWI, was opened by the President of Ireland in a ceremony that included the Queen of England and the King of Belgium. The project was seen as supporting moves towards reconciliation between communities on the island of Ireland and between Ireland and the United Kingdom (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Memorial, Island of Ireland Peace Park, Mesen (Messines), Belgium.

Photo courtesy of Aidan Mulkeen.

Set within the Island of Ireland Peace Park at Mesen (Messines) in Belgium, its primary feature is a facsimile round tower. In the context of discussion about the use of monuments to influence thought and sentiment, the project deserves a closer look. One appreciates the choice of form, drawn from a building type from the 9-12th centuries, long before the historical events that underlie historical and contemporary divisions. Alongside this, one notes that the stone used to build it was sourced from two partly demolished historic buildings in the Republic. These buildings had divergent significance: a former British army barracks and a former workhouse – buildings that represented a past for which common ground might be harder to find[vi]. While the irony was noted at the time, commentary was muted. Perhaps there was an element

of redemption in the decision, or perhaps the combination of elements captured a kind of ambivalence or uncertainty regarding the cultural ground. Such complexities are not unusual.

One might consider the motivations at play in the reconstruction by the fledgling Free State of the great monumental buildings destroyed during the 1916 uprising and the Civil War, the GPO, Four Courts and the Custom House. Aside from the practicalities, it was wise to provide a degree of reassurance to the unionists within the new state – perhaps even as indications of continuity in the febrile atmosphere of the times. The role of surviving structures in underpinning historic narratives has been visible in the controversies surrounding the future of the four buildings in Moore Street in Dublin, the final headquarters of the rebels of 1916 (Figure 5) [vii].

Figure 5. The four buildings in Moore Street, Dublin, declared Protected Structures by Dublin City Council, focus of a campaign to have the buildings and surrounding area designated as a National Monument.

Photo by author.

And yet, that role of buildings and places as historic witnesses featured less than one might have expected during Decade of Commemorations, perhaps a certain nervousness played a part. Indeed, one could point to encounters with enduring social questions in two projects of the time: one could cite the Richmond Barracks restoration in the context of the regeneration of St. Michael's estate, which replaced Keogh Square, the original barracks buildings adapted as housing by Dublin Corporation, and the continuing work toward the creation of the Tenement Museum

at 14 Henrietta Street, as bearing witness to the determination to learn from the lessons of history. One is struck by the experience of the memorial wall at Glasnevin cemetery. The wall was intended as an act of inclusive commemoration, but misinterpreted as a distortion of history, destroyed by vandals and its purpose in today's world undermined.

In all these cases, one can see the space for interpretation of meaning and for debate about the lessons to be drawn from history. What is beyond debate is the power of the surviving object to evoke such reaction and support the maintenance of communal memory – and it is on this fundamental and universal characteristic that our attention needs to focus. Alongside the ambiguities, the power of the remnant as memorial to elicit and situate the attachment to place, and to evoke the sense of identity is a constant which needs to be recognized in projects that re-utilise and re-purpose inheritance. While in the relatively stable context of most western countries, the connection may seem at times diffuse and its characteristics hard to define, the experiences of societies that have endured sudden loss of their environments, and that have had to find the capacity to recover and reconstruct, bring this facet of human presence on earth into sharp focus.

In today's world, media coverage of the catastrophic destruction of inherited environments in pursuit of dominance or other human purpose is virtually instantaneous. Images of events are presented to us as they happen, but the very speed of visual record and the reiteration of the same images can deaden the impact. The scale of destruction is often difficult to grasp and its effects on populations hard to understand or to imagine. Especially compelling and often under-represented, is the deliberate, targeted destruction of places that are significant to the local population. Such destruction is visited, not only on monuments, dwellings and places with religious meaning, but even on graveyards. The intent goes beyond the suppression of resistance and displacement of populations. Its aim is the obliteration of memory and identity through the erasure of their physical underpinnings[viii].

2 LESSONS FROM THE ANALYSIS OF RECOVERY AND RECONSTRUCTION: NARRATIVES AND TRUTH

These experiences and the responses to them have been the subject of study over recent years. Some studies address organisational factors – how authorities can be better prepared in earthquake-prone zones, for example. Studies also address resources allocation and distribution, and some consider the relationship between donors and recipient communities and the various forms of influence that arise. At this level, perhaps the greatest consensus is the need to integrate top-down and bottom-up strategies, in the recognition that without the latter, social and cultural recovery in any genuine sense is impossible. Most pertinently from the perspective of this essay, analyses of experiences of recovery and reconstruction across the world bear witness to the centrality of places in providing opportunity for healing, regeneration and new life (Figures 6a, 6b)[ix].

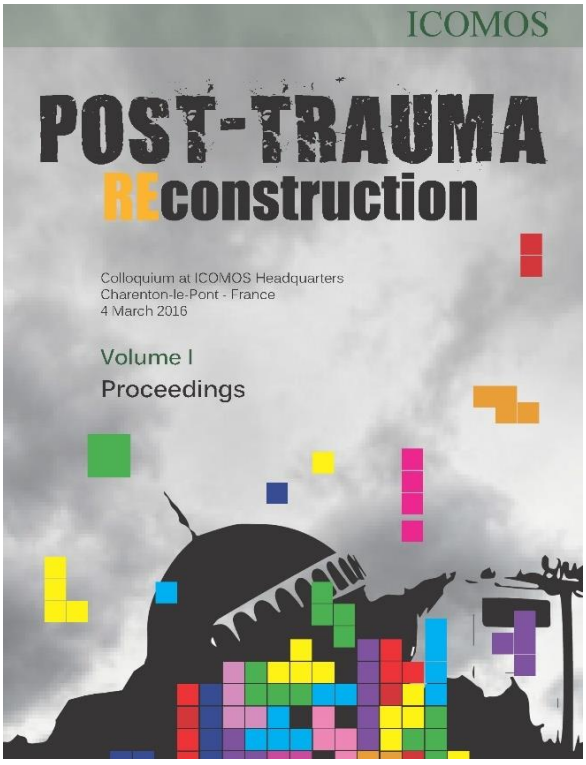

Figure 6a. Cover: Report of the Colloquium on Post Trauma Reconstruction, held by ICOMOS in Paris 2016. That event was to generate sustained examination of case studies of recovery and reconstruction over the following years. Image courtesy of ICOMOS International Secretariat

http://openarchive.icomos.org/1707/.

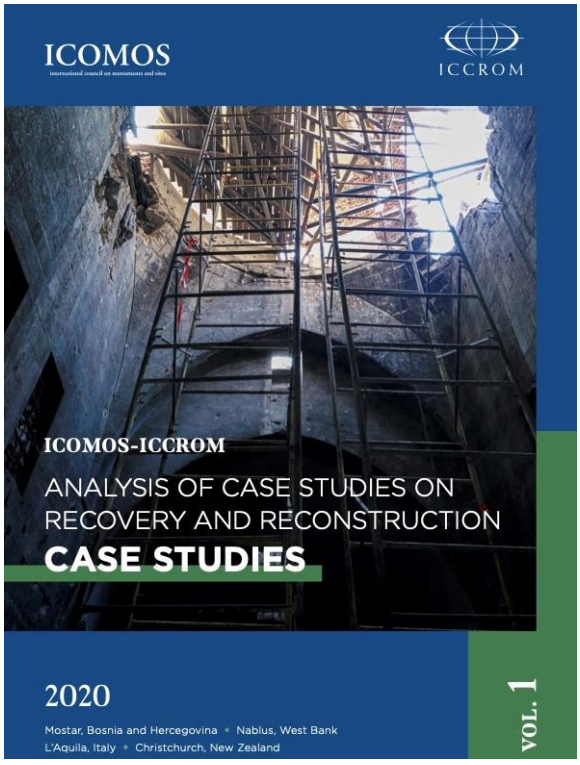

Figure 6b. Cover: Volume 1 of three-volume report of the joint ICOMOS-ICCROM project, Analysis of Case Studies of Recovery and Reconstruction, published 2022. Image courtesy of ICOMOS International Secretariat.

https://www.iccrom.org/publication/analysis-case-studies-recovery-and-reconstruction-volumes-1-and-2-and-reports.

The findings indicate that recovery has characteristics which are relevant to the issue of realising the potential of inherited environments[x].

a. reconstruction of destroyed or damaged environments is central to re-establishing connections between populations, including those displaced by events;
b. of particular importance in re-establishing sense of identity and purpose is the recovery of places and buildings of symbolic value and cultural significance;
c. population engagement is essential for recovery: such engagement is particularly central when what has been lost or damaged has symbolic or cultural value - the immaterial dimensions to significance can be missed entirely without effective involvement of local people in recovery of elements and reconstruction of places.

The centrality of significant places to the sense of identity has often been the bedrock on which recovery has been possible – and has been used successfully as the foundation for projects designed to shape future social realities[xi]. The key point here is that the physical remnants provide an essential anchor – and that their reconstruction offers fresh insights, both into the meaning of authenticity in the particular instance and their role in underpinning cultural continuity. The maintenance of the overlays of meaning and representation embodied in the remains becomes an essential part of the processes of recovery and reconstruction.

With this in mind we can revert to the idea of the building or the place as a document. In general, this idea is not hard to accept. Historic examples such as the historic centre of Lucca in Italy tangibly express what is meant (Figure 7a, 7b).

Figures 7a, 7b. The central area of Lucca, Piazza dell'Anfiteatro, formed by the colonisation of the Roman amphitheatre, whose foundations lie some metres below ground. Photos by author.

In signal cases, such as the farmstead at Mayglass in County Wexford, the importance of maintaining the record has been seen as paramount, because of its folkloric and anthropological significance[xii]. More generally however, within the conservation disciplines the idea of the inherited environment as a document is expressed in the concept of stratigraphy, so that the purpose of intervention becomes that of maintaining the full story - origins, production and evolution. The concept is not without its paradoxes. Most practically challenging are those that arise with landscapes of historic production, where the processes have been overtaken by new technologies or can no longer be maintained in their current form (Figure 8).

Figure 8. The landscape in the region of St. Emillion has been formed by the centuries-old practices of wine production, worked through family-based enterprises. Many vineyards are now worked within larger consortia, with more remote connections to the place and with possible implications for land use patterns. Photo by author.

The question of whether or how a building's historic function should impact its future use is one that arises with particular force where, as well as cultural or aesthetic significance, it has historical connotations that are antithetical to current values. The issue of "dark heritage" has been widely recognized and generates division. Places like Auschwitz and other sites of crimes against humanity can be presented as tourist experiences, and the issues are not easily untangled. On a broader level and as a general proposition, one can accept Rossi's designation of redundant buildings as "containers" - underlining their potential to add to contemporary life while recognizing their cultural role[xiii] . The containers are not empty. They support connection with time and place, even where their former lives carry unwelcome memories. In company with many other places, our own history is full of instances where some aspect of built inheritance, most recently in the case of institutional buildings, has associations that can be troubling (Figures 9a, 9b). The imperative for reuse is to avoid simplistic, binary thinking, to examine accustomed/conventional ideas when thinking about how the multiple embedded narratives can be

maintained rather that discarded or conflated into a simplified, token formulae for intervention.

Figure 9a. Albergo dei Poveri, Genoa, founded 1656. A vast complex, built between 17th and 19th centuries to house (and keep from sight) the city's poor. It lay unused for many years, but is now being recognised for its potential, both in urbanistic terms and in supporting new institutional uses.

Figure 9b. The Albergo is partly used to house functions of Genoa University. Photos by author.

3 WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR UNLOCKING THE POTENTIAL OF INHERITED ENVIRONMENTS?

The reuse of inherited environments forces a reappraisal of ideas and practices – bringing some values into sharper focus in the process. It obliges us to ask why representative buildings in particular, matter. Their role in shaping perceptions of place has long been recognised[xiv].

But there is more to it than that. The connection between the individual, the society and the place inhabited goes to the core of existence, and has been studied from the perspective of its role in establishing and maintaining identity, and indeed, the sense of self. "Place ….is the subjectification of space and time, but a subjectification that has its roots in collective cultural achievements…"[xv] The French philosopher, Chris Younès, writing of the need for structural change in ways of thinking and associating, posits the idea of change through "metamorphoses". She describes such change as a process poised between memory and project, where metamorphoses function as

resilience devices, enabling change and continuity[xvi]. It is an intriguing formulation, and the role of memory is worth looking at as it applies to our relationship to the inherited environment in the project of "future-making". Younès' formulation posits the need for new states of being, new understandings of what it means to be human on earth at this time when it is difficult to maintain faith in inherited models.

4 OBSERVATIONS ON MEMORY AND INHERITANCE: RETROSPECT AND PROSPECT

In his essay, '*Psychology and world heritage. Reflections on time, memory and imagination for a heritage* context', the psychologist Ciarán Benson points out that memory is not a matter of retrieving facts. It involves placing events in relationship - establishing narrative, which he describes as a form of reconstruction through traces[xvii]. He echoes a point made by Richard Kearney in his book *The Poetics of Imagining* – that the past is inaccessible without the imagination. For Benson, memory involves imagination in the creation of narrative, and this essential engagement of imagination points to the necessity for preserving traces. He asks whether, without the preservation of traces, we can imagine a world without material authenticity.

The act of preserving traces is retrospective (maintaining authenticity) but the purpose is prospective, directed towards the future, towards hope and desire (Figure 10). Future-making is an activity with physical and psychological dimensions and a task that requires maintaining narratives/ retaining traces through establishing new uses. It is essential to maintain this duality. The trajectory in conservation focus from monument to immaterial associations does not mean that these associations - including memories - are more important that the object, nor, on the other hand, that associations can be displaced without consequence. Both are essential – the traces support the memory – and maintaining that duality demands creativity at the highest level.

Figure 10. The Duomo di Sant' Andrea Apostolo (Venzone) in Udinese Italy, originally constructed 1261, but substantially from the early 14th century. It was severely damaged by earthquake in 1976. It was reconstructed over 20 years with the active engagement of the local community. The decision was taken to retain evidence of the distortions caused by the earthquake in the reconstructed church, as a reminder of the event and its aftermath, and as a symbol of regeneration within the region. Photo courtesy of Luisa DeMarco.

5 SUMMARY OF KEY ELEMENTS

The values ascribed to the inherited environment change with political, social, cultural and economic developments and over time. They can exhibit cultural appropriation or other agendas, and the present time is one where broader categories of inherited built environment are accorded value as "heritage". One can take this as a kind of social/psychological ownership.

Some parametric issues arise:

- the concept of "heritage" includes material and immaterial attributes – significance encompasses both, and both are affected by intervention. It can be difficult to deal with past immaterial associations
- future-making is what we do now: we choose what inheritance is to be valued into the foreseen future and this can also be seen as a matter of inter-generational justice
- appropriate intervention rests on understanding/ maintaining significance – knowing that one story is rarely enough
- conservation (transmission) usually involves adaptive reuse: adaptive reuse (translation) needs to retain narratives – it is the "how" as well as the "what"

Because these parametric issues apply to adaptive reuse as future-making, they raise the question of the kind of future we create, consciously or otherwise, though our present actions. In this respect the continuing use of inherited environments has the dimensions of a cultural mission. How it is addressed will affect both the survival of material evidence and how embodied cultural memory shapes development. This makes reuse more than an environmental and technical challenge. One is juxtaposing the persistence of the building or place as document, against the desire to over-write the past, to substitute new meanings rather than to overlay. The underlying project is the construction of how we inhabit places, and the quality of the outcome will rest on establishing an ecological perspective in intervention and creation. We are finding out that ecology includes the human mind, first and foremost, and that the type of mind needed is one that avoids binary conceptions in which new insights displace the old. New insights need to add dimension/ overlay, increasing complexity, and as with natural systems, establishing stability through the ability to adapt appropriately.

6 THE LAST WORD

Chris Younès identifies the need for an ecology of thought and action – as she puts it - a state of balance between care and precaution, a state between recollection and recommencement, a delicate balance between retention and renewal, with openness as the prerequisite for continuing life. As she sees it, the fundamental need of our times is for a future-directed ethical vision that can underpin continuing human presence on earth.

The reuse project can be placed in that context.

[i] The idea of critical conservation articulated by Giovanni Carbonara can be applied more widely where intervention brings inherited environments into contemporary use:

"We define restoration as every intervention aiming to conserve and transmit to the future, the works of historic, artistic and environmental value, helping their interpretation but without cancelling their marks of time. The restoration…… to be intended as an act of critical interpretation, not verbal but expressed in a practical process. More precisely, as a critical hypothesis, always capable of amendment, without any irreversible alteration of the original work".

(Giovanni Carbonara, Che cos'è il restauro? Nove studiosi a confronto, (Edit. B. Paolo Torsello), Venezia, Marsilio, 2005)

[ii] In the Epilogue of his book, *Postwar*, the historian Tony Judt talks of "memorialisation", and recounts how, in the victorious countries in particular, the processes of memorialising conflict and sacrifice often obscured the complicities of the ruling parties in the horrors of war. He focuses in particular om the horrors perpetrated through the holocaust.

Judt, T. 2005. "Epilogue: From the House of the Dead. An essay on modern European memory" in *Postwar. A History of Europe since 1945*. William Heinemann, London. p803

[iv] One of the defensive measures of Fort Loncin was the use of steel domes encased in mass concrete in roof structures.

[v] The Museum, known as the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum (Main Building), is linked with the East Building (1994). The park is known as the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park and was constructed between 1955 and 1964. The Genbaku Dome, conserved as a ruin, has been the subject of major repair works over the years, including the insertion of a steel frame to stabilise the structure.

[vi] Workhouses were built mostly in the 19th century, to house the poorest of the poor. They often housed entire families. One of the conditions for entry was the surrender of any land owned by the applicants. In the context where the struggle for land was a continuing social reality, such a demand was difficult for many.

[vii] The buildings fall under the description of "unintentional monuments", a term derived from Alois Riegl, whose book *The Modern Cult of Monuments* is an important contribution to conservation history and theoretical development.

[viii] Studies of the effects of trauma point to impacts on the surviving populations such as loss of faith in social structures, disassociation from society, and more deeply, the loss (or unconscious suppression) of memory.

[ix] The humanitarian response to these catastrophies has engaged a wide range of international bodies, focused on rescue, safeguarding and on supporting recovery. In parallel, organisations such as UNESCO, ICOMOS, ICCROM and the World Bank have published case studies of places affected by disasters resulting from natural events or human causation.

[x] ICOMOS and ICCROM collaborated to draw together the core findings of case studies, in a way that could inform guidance for communities, experts and authorities. The first outcome was the publication in three volumes of *Analysis of Case Studies on Recovery and Reconstruction* in 2022.

This was followed in 2024 by publication of the ICOMOS-ICCROM Guidance on Post-disaster and Post-conflict Recovery and Reconstruction for Heritage Places of Cultural Significance and World Heritage Properties.

[xi] On the other hand, where natural events are concerned, the need for large scale and rapid intervention has often prompted the engagement of external or overseas agencies. In these situations, the risk of loss of the cultural inheritance is high unless special measures are integral to rescue, repair and reconstruction strategies.

[xii] Reeners, R. (Ed.) 2003. A Wexford Farmstead. The Conservation of an 18th-century Farmstead in County Wexford. The Heritage Council, Kilkenny.

[xiii] Rossi, A. 1966 *L'architettura della città*. Padua. English translation 1984: *The Architecture of the City*. Oppositions Books, MIT Press. Chapter 3

[xiv] That role has been the subject of many studies in environmental psychology, most notably in the field of mental mapping. In some ways it could be traced to Kevin Lynch's seminal work, *The Image of the City* (MIT Press 1960). Karsten Harries had a formulation - buildings of the past help ground a shaken identity - that captures the discussion above in a particular context.

[xv] Benson, C. 2001. *The Cultural Psychology of Self. Place, Morality and Art in Human Worlds*. Routledge, London. p7

[xvi] Younès, C. 2016. Proceedings, Colloquium Post Trauma Reconstruction. ICOMOS International Secretariat, Paris.

http://openarchive.icomos.org/1707/.

[xvii] Benson, C. 2020. 'Psychology and world heritage? Reflections on time, memory and imagination for a heritage context' in *International Journal of Cultural Property 27:2* (2020) pp259076, special issue on 'Authenticity and Reconstruction' by guest editor Cornelius Holtorf <https://doi.org/10.101017/s0940739120000168>