

World-Class City or Dirty Old Town? Images of Dublin in the Context of Dockland Regeneration

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Introduction

As places where networks are formed and cargo and people are concentrated, international port cities have been strongly affected by transformation processes. In the context of globalisation, technological and economic developments have fundamentally restructured ports all over the world, thus changing the relations between port and city as well as their images and forms of representation.

Based on empirical social anthropological research in Dublin in 2002 and 2003 this paper focuses on the current dockland regeneration in Ireland's capital and its impact on images and forms of representation of the city.

This study is part of a larger research programme "Port Cities as Areas in Transition" carried out at the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, Hamburg University, which focuses on selected international port cities in Europe and Latin America. It analyses mutual effects between transformation processes on a global level and ways of life and strategies of action on a local level.

In Dublin, the transformation of the old dock area started in the 1980s. However, it was not until the late 1990s that plans were made to rejuvenate almost the entire former port area, and this development will not be finished until 2012. Therefore, Dublin is a good case study to present and analyse the consequences of global transformation processes on urban myths, images and public representation. Differing perceptions and views on the city of Dublin and its port area reflect underlying social and cultural conflicts between urban developers, middle-class employees, working-class local communities, visitors and the Dublin Tourist Board, each of whom try to preserve or enforce their own ideas of "their" Dublin.

This paper presents and analyses these - mostly contradictory - images of Dublin and their supporters. It will show how current transformation processes affect images and forms of representation of this port city, perceived and constructed by local communities, developers and the tourist industry. Is Dublin to become a modern "world-class city" or to remain the well-known "dirty old town"?

Background

The end of the 18th century brought the first major changes to the port city of Dublin: With the erection of the new Custom House east of the city centre, the port activities were also transferred downriver, away from the city centre. The close connection between the city and the port, which had characterised Dublin from its foundation in the Middle Ages until then, began to dissolve. However, the port continued to grow. New docks and quays were built, deep-sea basins established and new land was filled in to further enlarge the port. New industries brought new imports, such as gas or oil. Thus, the 19th and first half of the 20th century witnessed thriving port activities, lots of employment on the docks. Another characteristic was the establishment of a number of port-related communities, who depended on port-related jobs and gradually developed a specific dock or port culture. Dublin's docklands became a typical working-class area.¹

Global transformation processes in the form of international mechanisation and containerisation brought new, crucial changes to Dublin and its port in the late 1960s. Dock-

¹ See in detail Gilligan, 1989², who deals with the history of the port of Dublin.

related professions, particularly casual and manual forms of labour which the dock communities depended on, became increasingly redundant. Being no longer dependent on the proximity of the port due to better transportation, many factories moved out to the suburbs, where it was easier to expand. Mass unemployment was one consequence, dereliction of the old docks, warehouses, stacks etc. another. The area faced a general decline.

The situation of the former dock areas and their residents began again to change in 1986, when the redevelopment of the port area began with the foundation of the Custom House Docks Development Authority (CHDDA). Based on the models of other port cities, whose docklands had already been or were still in the - obviously global - process of transformation², the former docks site east of the Custom House was transformed into a modern International Financial Services Centre (IFSC), which included not only banks and other finance companies, but also luxury apartments. Today, this area is one of Dublin's most important business centres, which employs about 15,000 people.³

However, the CHD development was only the beginning of the redevelopment of the entire former port area: In 1997, the Dublin Docklands Development Authority (DDDA) was set up. Their objective is to secure the social and economic regeneration of the area, the improvement of the physical environment of the Dublin Docklands Area and the continued development in the Custom House Docks Area of services of, for, in support of, or ancillary to the financial sector of the economy.⁴ The 13,000 acre site covers almost the entire former docks including five of the former dock communities. The development period is from 1997 to 2012.

Due to this plan, the entire area is currently under reconstruction: Apart from a few, selected listed buildings, the old warehouses, flats, dock buildings, factories have been or are still being demolished to give way to new housing, hotels, retail, offices (an estimated 40,000 new jobs will be created), amenities (campshires, parks), tourist attractions. The plan also includes training and education programmes as well as work schemes for the local communities. The 7,000,000 Euro project will also result in a population increase of 25,000 residents in the area (from 17,500 in 1997 to 42,000 in 2012).⁵

The current redevelopment of the former port area of Dublin does not only bring structural and architectural changes to this traditionally working-class area. It is also accompanied by new images that are heavily debated by developers and inhabitants, who see their old Dublin disappear. However, before taking a closer look at these debates, I shall give an overview over different images by which Dublin was and is represented by different actors and in different contexts until today.

Contradictory images of the city

Until the middle of the 1980s, before the redevelopment of the port area began to take its course, Ireland's capital was mainly viewed and represented by two different images, both of which can still be found today: One is the image of *Georgian Dublin*, which is mainly created and propagated by the Dublin Tourism industry and thus aims at and influences the visitors' perception of the city. Bus tours and walks around the city usually include the most prominent Georgian buildings of a time when Dublin was considered to be "the second city of the Empire" after London, e.g. the City Hall, Leinster House, Parliament House (now the Bank of Ireland) and beautiful squares around Merrion Square and Fitzwilliam Square. Travel guides

² Schubert (ed.), 2001, deals in detail with the process of revitalisation of derelict port areas all over the world.

³ Malone, 1993; 1996; C13

⁴ DDDA, Masterplan 1997:2

⁵ DDDA, Masterplan 1997, C13

and brochures present the same image. Thus, the Dublin Tourist Board creates a very positive and rich image of Ireland's capital, which is mostly dominated by Anglo-Irish culture, prestigious buildings and vibrant streets, and it is not surprising that this picture dominates visitors' perceptions of the city.

The second image is based on the working-class history of the city and reflects a view which is held by a lot of Dublin's inhabitants. One aspect of this image is also used by the local tourist industry, and pubs themselves, to attract visitors: The image of an authentic, traditional, cosy pub - often a reinvented traditional pub decorated with sewing machines and old mechanical instruments, which remind of Dublin working-class background.⁶ This pub image belongs to the image of the "dirty old town" which is also represented in famous Dublin ballads and equally popular with tourists.

Apart from traditional pubs and Dublin ballads, Dublin's working-class past and areas, including the docklands, do not play any significant role when it comes to present Dublin to visitors. The decline of the areas and their inner-city poverty is rather hidden from the visitors' view.⁷ Dublin docklands still play only a marginal role for Dublin tourism, even though the DDDA try to change this in the course of redevelopment (see below).

However, Dublin's working-class heritage is very important for Dubliners themselves, in particular in areas with a long working-class history, which includes the former dockside. Their working-class self-image, which is revealed in folkloristic local publications, interviews, as well as other forms of self-representations of the various communities, conjures Dublin as a working-class city formed by many small local communities, which are characterised by a sense of neighbourhood. Though considered rough areas by the rest of Dublin, the people who live in these areas were and are typically poor, but honest, with a good sense of humour, wit and a love and pride for their community and their city. The former port areas, the docks, are viewed as part of the real and old Dublin or "the true spirit of Dublin"⁸.

This is also often accompanied by a sense of loss and pity. Unfortunately for many residents, the "good old times", hard but happy as they were, are finally over and nothing will ever bring them back.⁹

This image of a working-class Dublin, the dirty old town, is very important for the self-image of the dockland communities. Although the era of thriving docks and dock-related communities has been over since the 1960s and 1970s, when containerisation and mechanisation were brought in, the old docks with hard, dirty, manual labour, a variety of dock-related professions, horse carts and coal boats, timber yards and sailors from all over the world, warehouses and dock-related industries are still considered to be a crucial part of the history, tradition and cultural heritage of the dockland communities today, and thus form an integral part of their identity. Therefore, memories and visible reminiscences must be preserved¹⁰.

This self-image is now challenged by the current redevelopment of the dockland areas, which brings in a third image, the image of a world-class city.

The creation of the image of Dublin as a young, modern, vibrant, cosmopolitan European metropole can be traced back to the 1980s, when Temple Bar, an area situated on

⁶ See also Slattery, 2003:140-143.

⁷ See also Slattery, 2003:150.

⁸ Farrington, 1994:235

⁹ e.g. C5, C11, C31, C20, C52; see also various poems by Theresa Farrington, 1992.

¹⁰ This happens for instance in the form of folkloristic local publications (e.g. by the North Inner City Folklore Project or St. Andrew's Heritage Project) or by local initiatives to preserve old machines or structures, such as the Liffey Bell, an old diving bell which had been disused for years, until it was restored and put onto the campshires by St. Andrew's Resource Centre in the year 2001 (C3).

the south side of the river Liffey, which had suffered severely from decay, was restored, modernised, gentrified and made the centre for different cultural activities. This redevelopment was partly due to the election of Dublin as European City of Culture in 1991.

Based on the Celtic Tiger boom, new economies and new wealth, the developers of the dockland regeneration, in particular the DDDA, are now promoting and creating a completely new image for the former dock areas. Their vision of the new docklands and the new Dublin consists of "first class business, communications, sporting, lifestyle, cultural and leisure facilities of a major capital city in a uniquely attractive waterfront location"¹¹. Their advertisement slogans, such as "developing a world-class city quarter", which can be found on building fences all over the dockland area, along with a series of pictures which show young, middle-class, business people, also demonstrate this.

Thus, the DDDA promotes an image of Dublin as a world-class, cosmopolitan city, instead of the old working-class "dirty old town".

In this context, the "dirty-old-town image", in the form of old dock-related architecture and buildings, is merely tolerated as local colouring and decoration. With the economic shift away from manual labour and towards the service industry, most of the old structures have already been demolished or will be in the near future. Only a few selected listed buildings are left in the area, most of which are completely refurbished and designed for new purposes, such as shopping malls (Stack A), ice rinks (Inner Dock and St. George's Dock) or restaurants (The Harbour Master Office, Excise Bar).

This new image of Dublin as a world-class city is not only directed towards investors and future residents and companies, but also towards tourists. Events organised by the DDDA in order to attract people to the area, such as the annual Dockland Festival, demonstrate this as well as new hotels, a museum, the newly developed moorings, a heritage walk and other amenities that were or are planned in order to make the area more attractive to tourists.¹² Whereas tourist maps prior to 1997 rarely showed Dublin east of Talbot Memorial Bridge, the DDDA docklands are now included in the official Dublin Visitor Map and Guide and presented as a special place of interest.

Thus, the former working-class area, whose image had for a long time been dominated by the docks, by a working-class population which depended on manual forms of labour, and then later by unemployment and dereliction, is now transformed to a middle-class area, with an economy based on social services, with new modern buildings, luxury apartments, expensive shops and hotels.

Conflicts

The redevelopment of the Dublin docklands along with the change of image which is intended for the area causes a series of debates and conflicts between developers and new residents on the one side and a large proportion of the old-established communities on the other. Although the idea of redeveloping the area is generally welcomed by the local communities, many residents are not happy with certain aspects of the plans. Uneasiness, discontent, criticism and open rejection of the development plans take place on different levels: the level of images, perception and identity on the one hand and the level of practice on the other.

Criticism against the redevelopment is partly motivated by a certain sense of nostalgia, which is directly connected to the image level:

In the perception of many local residents, as well as other Dubliners who used to work in the area, the new construction destroys the "old, authentic" Dublin. Except a few listed buildings which are taken out of the original context and are just left as decoration, everything

¹¹ DDDA, Grand Canal Harbour, no year given:2

¹² DDDA, 1997:64; DDDA website, 6.5.2002

that used to characterise the area as the old docks, such as warehouses, the docks themselves, even the old gasometer on the former gas site, an important landmark of the area, is demolished. With this goes a sense of place, because in their opinion the new buildings have no connection to the old Dublin.

On the other hand, the communities reject many plans for very practical reasons. All in all, they feel neglected by the planners, who - in their perception - did all the planning without taking their opinion and needs into consideration. Furthermore, the entire plan was designed for business and private enterprise, for middle-class people, and not for the local working-class communities, who do not profit from the newly created jobs, houses, shops and amenities, because they cannot afford them.¹³ Therefore, they set up various community groups and protested - partly successfully - against some of the plans, such as specific high-rise buildings, bridges which will increase the traffic in the area or the construction of apartment blocks which are gated and thus separate the new residents from the old established communities. Other issues the communities fight over include housing in general, education, training, employment, amenities and many more.

What is important in this context is that the Dublin docklands are currently an urban area that is fought over, and contradictory urban images are an essential part of this debate.

Conclusion

This article explored different images of Dublin in the context of urban restructuring and place marketing amidst globalisation. Like many other port cities in the world, the process of restructuring the city away from manufacturing to the service sector is an attempt to reinvent the waterfront and former port area for postindustrial activities of consumption and tourism. Old forms of representation and self-representation are currently being challenged by developers who bring in completely new elements. Thus, Dublin's docklands are not only transformed on an economic and architectural level, but also on the level of images. This new image of Dublin as a world-class city instead of the old working-class dirty old town, clearly contradicts old-established self-images of dockland residents. Along with a series of practice-oriented criticism, this new image is one reason why many of the communities' residents feel to be excluded from the new developments. Conflicts between developers and locals are the consequence.

These conflicts concerning the demolition of old port-related structures and the construction of modern buildings, along with new purposes of the few listed buildings that are left, show how important the image of certain areas and a city as a whole is for the construction of local identities on the one side and marketing and selling an area on the other. Planners, developers, the tourist industry, middle-class new residents and old-established communities all fight for their vision of their Dublin.

In many respects, Dublin can be seen as an example of urban waterfront renewal which takes place in many port cities all over the world. However, it is also unique in many features which can only be understood on the local level and in the local context.

The development of the docklands has not been completed. The fight for images is still an ongoing process. Therefore, it remains to be seen which elements of the old images will prevail and whether the city will in future be perceived merely as a modern world-class city instead of the well-known "dirty old town", a romanticised image of the past, which only survives in the facades of alienated buildings and old people's memories.

¹³ Almost every interviewee from the dockland communities mentioned at least one of these aspects which he or she did not like about the redevelopment. Particularly clear were the statements of the chairpersons of the different residents' associations, e.g. C35, C3, C53.

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