

## **“New twists in old sites, fresh ingredients in a historical melting pot” Tourism Development and Marketing Strategy and Action Plan till 2022**



George Festival Pictures

This is an article produced after the celebration of a transnational meeting hosted by the city of Armagh in the framework of activities developed in the INT-HERIT Project. Public & private partnership, pilgrims, prisoners, paths...are some PPP words, situated at the core of a living lab in which participants at the meeting were invited to interact with local stakeholders. All of that surrounded by the atmosphere of the Georgian Festival, an annual event that celebrates the foundational sense of place, with the ubiquitous Archbishop Robinson as a witness.

### **Armagh, an microcosm of Ireland**

At his arrival the visitor can feel a bit disoriented with the generous presence of monuments and sites - two Cathedrals, Palace, Library, Observatory, Court House, Gaol ...- Besides, they are in some way diluted between roads that section this small city in many fragments. A city which contains much of the history of Northern Ireland.

The first thing that a traveller could aspire to find would be an unequivocal sign about his position and probably a pedestrian path to walk while enjoying a large number of prominent buildings, not only monuments, but also houses built in the Georgian era. An old map and a relevant guide - The buildings of Armagh. Ulster Architectural Heritage Society- can help visitors to satisfactory find their way in the city.



The urban challenge faced by the city of Armagh, recently grouped in a new administrative format - Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council - is precisely maintaining the historical fabric built in the center, preserving and rescuing its identity and character, truly original. The city is trying to recover the compact character of the urban area, sewing the fragmented parts after the construction of various roads in the 1960s. Together with the private buildings whose conservation and recovery is being undertaken through a Master Plan, a specific space is attracting the attention of the city's political and technical leaders. This is the old prison, closed since the year 1986, owned by the city and the object of a proposal for rehabilitation with a double use as a hotel and a residential area. This is the topic that focused the recent work visit from the partners of the INT-HERIT project.

In a deep sense, in Armagh one finds the weight of a centre of power, acting as developer of churches, houses, civil and social sites, prisons, all of them considered as drivers of the city and all structuring the territorial economy as it was in times past. That investment period moved the city to a central position, and even today the story and the history, the beauty of the place, the artistic and philosophical meaning, continue showing this capacity to appeal the new generations. However, how can these sites be preserved, renovated and used? How can they negotiate and with whom the recovery of the lost centrality?

## **Armagh Gaol**



Armagh Jail inside

The [Gaol](#) which is Grade B+ listed, was largely designed by two of Ireland's most renowned architects, Francis Cooley and William Murray. The construction of the prison began in the 1780's and it was the primary women's prison in Northern Ireland until its closure. Armagh Gaol consisted of three prisons - one for women, one for debtors and one for felons. Executions were common, taking place in the Gaol square, but were later moved behind the prison walls. In the latter half of the 20th century, the Gaol accommodated high-profile political prisoners. It closed in 1986 and now the impressive site is on the Built Heritage at Risk list.

A [process](#) aimed to ensure the safeguarding and the reuse of the prison was started around ten years ago. A cross-sector partnership was created and was very active from 2009 to 2011 when Armagh city also collaborated with The Prince's Regeneration Trust. They held a community consultation event to present different ideas to key stakeholders and the local community. The attendees provided several suggestions that were incorporated into the plans. At the end of the process the partnership had completed a conservation management plan, an action plan for the project and started to work on a business plan to create a Heritage Centre at the site, according to the information provided by the [Prince's Regeneration Trust website](#).



Armagh Gaol

The redevelopment of the site by the private actor involved, the Osborne Group, proposed a mixed use development that would bring economic benefits to Armagh and the wider Borough - employment, training and increased visitor numbers and spending. Osborne Group has a proven track record in heritage regeneration schemes, including the rehabilitation of [the Castle and the old Gaol in Oxford](#), this one transformed later into a

luxury Hotel.

The developer's proposal contains the following key features: 4 star hotel with 80 rooms; Spa and treatment rooms, restaurant, conference and banqueting with facilities for 250 people; Heritage Centre and attraction space; 22 residential apartments and 10,000 square feet retail space.

The estimated total cost of the project is circa £ 25m and the estimated private sector funding circa £ 11m, it being therefore necessary to explore and secure public investment options close to 14 million pounds.



Oxford Complex

### **Challenges in the implementation process**

Such a complex project contains in itself elements that hinder its implementation and sometimes may even prevent it if there are not the necessary plans that help to address these difficulties in such large projects that require cooperation between actors, important investments and a long time for their execution. Among the risks found in the renovation project of the site, we can mention in a first approach:

- The difficulties of ensuring a public, social and private partnership structure that shares common objectives, in equal conditions when carrying out negotiations and subsequent agreements.
- The absence of technical teams in small municipalities with the necessary multidisciplinary skills and specially trained in the art of negotiation
- The financial inability of small cities to address the financing of projects of this magnitude
- The ever-present conflict between the priorities of preservation and the use of heritage sites
- The difficulties of integrating the solutions with other needs, plans and related services: traffic, parking, social and private housing...
- The adjustment to the times marked for the implementation
- The lack of flexibility in the renewal plans of the sites subject to a single and exclusive intervention
- The very dynamics of abandonment and almost ruin in which abandoned buildings fall
- The complex constellation of existing risks
- The irruption of many external and collateral effects with unforeseeable impacts such as the economic crisis, the administrative reorganisation that has affected the

municipalities, Brexit, etc...

Meanwhile, the poor state of the site can be certified, and what is more serious, it can lead to the loss of centrality of the topic and the exhaustion of the actors who are interested in providing solutions.

At first glance it seems necessary to bring to the scene an emergency plan that includes a readjustment of the possible solutions in which flexible and alternative plans and phased measures can be considered. A proposal of actions in successive and interdependent phases developed under public leadership but where local actors - entrepreneurs and community - are committed parts in this re-launching of the old plans. A new updated scenario based on the external situations that have been experienced in recent years but that, even in a scenario of uncertainty, do not prevent being attractive to investors and committed to the Northern Irish public sector and therefore British.

### **Abandoned prisons, risks and opportunities in new political and social contexts**



The project of renovation and redevelopment of the Armagh prison is not unique in a context where the closing of prisons that automatically demand their conservation and reuse is frequent.

Many of them share common challenges linked to the heritage element of buildings, their large dimensions and high investment costs, the need to involve mixed interests and uses or the general connection with the urban ecosystem and other cultural and social resources of the city, without however having a connection with the historical past and the identity of the site.

The way in which these challenges are being addressed shows how, in [some cases](#), social, community and entrepreneurial development proposals are at the forefront of redefining plans and consequent uses, while [in others](#) privatization and exclusive transformation into luxury hotels comes to represent another model about how cities face politically the opportunity to reuse common heritage assets. This is a debate that is very present in contemporary urban development.

This type of antagonistic options is reflected again in a case that is being news in the media during these days, in relation to the reuse of an old prison, in the city of Jaén (Spain). The case presents some interesting conclusions to link with the readjustment that the proposal around Armagh prison seems to require. Indeed, in the city of Jaén, after its closure in 1991,

the prison building will at least partially host the headquarters of a [Museum dedicated to Iberian art](#). It is an old aspiration of some social groups and institutions of the city. The process has lasted for twenty years and has required the successive intervention of a different team of architects, based on an investment of 27 million euros exclusively public, with a partial opening -500 square meters for a temporary exhibition compared with the 11,152 square meters built - and without a clear management plan at least known to accommodate other possible uses and actors. This vision and its subsequent implementation seem to be in conflict with the privatization proposal that dominates the renovating scenario in Armagh. One case and another do not avoid the questions about sustainability and equity in the sharing of efforts and benefits in one or other proposal, the degree of commitment to the preservation of the real estate, the presence of a clear and public economic management plan or the public and social uses that awaits the site. Looking at both initiatives, we asked ourselves about the opportunity to discover a middle path as an open solution to the desired implementation of a defined strategy and management plan.

We are definitely facing a challenge to which the INT-HERIT network wants to offer its small contribution, in particular by bringing new ideas and suggestions that may gradually and sustainably help to bring answers to the different needs associated with the implementation of the renovation plans of these sites, once places of forced isolation that can now let light pass freely through its bars and windows.