

ARMAGH. Urban renewal through PPP schemes

Armagh Masterplan Implementation

Urban renovation in Armagh

THIS SOLUTION STORY IS FOCUSED ON THE PPP SCHEMES SET UP BY THE MUNICIPALITY TO REVITALIZE ARMAGH HISTORICAL BUILDING IN THE CITY CENTRE. IT ADDRESSES THE CHALLENGES OF COLLABORATIVE WORKING BETWEEN THE PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SECTORS.

The city of Armagh has had a recent administrative reorganisation which has resulted in the grouping of several municipalities, leading to the creation of the "Armagh City, Banbridge & Craigavon Borough Council". This adds a component of territorial cooperation that represents a new common challenge to many small and medium European cities at the present moment of territorial readjustments, occurring as a result of the economic crisis. Armagh City, Banbridge & Craigavon Borough are looking to promote development by implementing a tourism strategy across their territory.

The city of Armagh focuses its strategy on the restoration of historic buildings as part of a Masterplan developed for the city centre, an instrument of spatial planning of the urban city centre, in order to ensure the character of the historic city, thus making it attractive to live, work and be visited. The Masterplan intend to promote economic growth and territorial integration through development of tourism and catalyse and spread the strategy towards the other communities. The Masterplan was originally developed in 2009 and has been refreshed in 2015 in order to reflect the changing economic, social and political circumstances. The Masterplan relates to the period up to 2030.



Armagh is a City, like most Northern Ireland cities and towns, that suffered through the troubles from a damaged reputation and an outflow of people from city centre residential and it appears that this trend is starting to reverse. We are also anticipating that the project will have a fundamental impact on our

tourism statistics by increasing not only the number of overnight stays but also the average spend of our visitors which can create new opportunities for prospective entrepreneurs.

A significant tourism opportunity lies in wait for Armagh and our ongoing research informs us that the provision of high quality tourism accommodation is absolutely required to enable the city to completely take advantage and capitalize on this opportunity. Armagh has been recently recognized for excellence in the evening and night time economy and is regarded as the religious and ecclesiastical capital of Ireland, drawing significant influences from its Georgian heritage. This is a product that people will want to see and travel to witness and the provision of a suitable quality of facilities for the city is critical to the continued development of Armagh's tourism offer and its evening economy.

The GAOL and Country Club rehabilitation projects

Within INT-HERIT, the city selected two ongoing projects as the main focus. The objective was to monitor advances in the project and extract lessons for future initiatives.

- **Armagh Gaol Jail:** the jail was established in the late 18th and early 19th century by the former Archbishop of Armagh and primate of Ireland, Richard Robinson. It sits on one end of Armagh's historic mall and faces another important and rather austere institutional building of the Court House. The court house is still in active use and was designed by local boy Francis Johnston, opening in 1809.



The Gaol, designed initially by Thomas Cooley, was much extended in the 1840s by William Murray, but closed in 1988 and has lain vacant ever since. It has been described as a "handsome three-storey fourteen-bay building of coursed conglomerate with rusticated limestone quoins".



The building is owned by the local municipality and what will hopefully emerge over the coming years is a mixed-use conservation scheme including sympathetically designed new buildings, with hotel, residential and heritage interpretation uses, and guaranteed public access.

The Osbourne Group, who have previously refurbished the former prison in Oxford England, have been selected through a competitive process to work collectively with the municipality and the Princes Regeneration Trust, to convert the building into a tourism and accommodation facility that will offer a high quality experience in the city, which currently isn't on offer.

The project's budget is in excess of £25m with about 80% of that already in place from various private and public sources. The challenge, in the absence of a functioning Government in Northern Ireland, is in finding the remaining 20% that is needed to realise the project.

The City Council and its partners have agreed to fund up to 80% of the costs of the project. Without the funding associated with the project, and the PPP approach championed by the Council, this property will continue to decline with little prospect of securing sustainable and viable uses for it, thus increasing the risk of them eventually being removed from the streetscape.

- **Armagh Country Club**, a centenary institution established in 1869 was an important social recreation spot of city that uses a building currently in very poor conditions. The club couldn't raise the necessary funds to undertake works and therefore the municipality setup and agreement with the club direction board in order to co-manage its restauration.



Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council have been working with the organisation for over 2 years and have proposed a funding and financial assistance package from a common fund that will enable this project to go ahead with a small obligation against the property owner.

This scheme puts together municipality technicians with the owner of the building, the club committee, to raise funds for the rehabilitation actions. Restoration of this property will bring multiple benefits to the historic core of Armagh City Centre. Not only will the project address the continued decline of an important Georgian property, the project will create a multifunctional space that will be utilised to host functions (including conferences, seminars and weddings) and play an important role in bringing footfall to this part of the city.



The project, once completed, will create sustainable income streams for the owner and enable them to invest resources in their charitable activities. Although this project is still in its design and planning stage, we feel as a team that we have learnt some valuable lessons to date.

This project is a good example of a PPP approach to regeneration although the private partner is quite unlike any of the other private partners that we as a municipality usually work with as they are governed by a Committee and are a voluntary organisation. A more patient iterative approach is required when dealing with this type of group although the end goal has to continue to remain in sharp focus.



Building public-private partnerships

Establish balanced and fair PPP's become a central policy of this council and the current era of austerity increases this importance. Pressure on public finances ensures that public bodies cannot afford to undertake the interventions required in order to preserve the built heritage of the City. Nor can the private sector in isolation meet the significant costs of doing so. New collaborative delivery and funding models are therefore necessary in order to ensure that the resources necessary to protect the heritage of the city are made available and that the private and public sector can come together to make this happen.



The challenges have been significant and varied in the case of the country club building restoration project. The property itself is in a poor state of repair with evidence of cracking in the render, inappropriate repointing work having been carried out and poor condition of rainwater goods. Additionally, the Armagh County Club is run by a committee and ascertaining the appropriate authorisation to proceed with the work has been a challenge and this process of agreeing the way forward with the Committee has taken over 2 years. The Committee is a very conservative



group and have required a considerable amount of support to arrive at a positive decision to proceed with this project.

The restoration of heritage buildings is extremely expensive and, although the city had sourced and secured a substantial pot of funding for these purposes in the past, the future of funding looks increasingly bleak as public funding comes under increasing pressure thus turning the city more keen to explore alternative funding models to achieve its goals. There's

an ongoing struggle between local and central government in terms of where resources are best prioritised.

Central Government control the main financial resources for heritage management and urban regeneration, as well as having responsibility for infrastructural issues such as roads etc. To tackle these problems the city has established a townscape heritage partnership which will guide the development of a scheme to restore key heritage properties within the City Centre. This consists of partners from central government with specific remits in urban development and the historic environment, the business sector and community representatives with specific interests in the tourism and educational aspects of heritage. The City continues to engage with these key partners hoping that their dedication and commitment will help to devise the best solutions of the city cultural heritage rehabilitation.



"We want to really make the kids in primary schools aware of the built environment in Armagh quite unique in Northern Ireland because of the Georgian influence. We can see from their enthusiasm from the pupils that they are now noticing and asking questions; it makes them aware of the environment which we live and enjoy the beautiful city that we have here"
Mr. Peter McNeill (ULG Member - Director of Armagh City Townscape

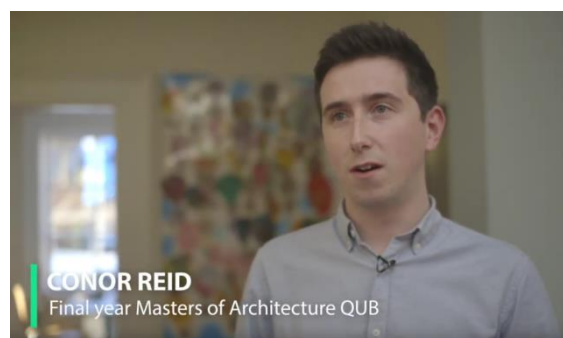
"The premise of the project, when we started here at Street Studio in Armagh, was to look really at what is heritage but I think in today's concept we have to look at how we reframe that and it's about how are we going to occupy these buildings, how we do it with alternative means so that they're sustainable in the future and how everyone can enjoy these spaces in a modern day society"

Mr. Ralf Alwani (ULG Member - Tutor QUB Street Studio)



"The INT-HERIT project was an interesting opportunity for us to get involved and work on what's going on the Council. We've got different community groups involved from all Armagh, from all sides of the community, all age groups including the local schools and from that research we're hoping that we can generate talking points about the work that's going on in Armagh through the Heritage Scheme, how we can look at alternative ways of thinking heritage"

Mr. Conor Reid (ULG Member - Finalist of Master of Architecture QUB)



. What's Next?

The city has a detailed and up to date Masterplan which contains commitments to restoring and reusing the heritage buildings within the city. Having also secured financial support for the proposed work in the heritage arena, it will be seeking to move to delivery of support to owners of heritage buildings. As the city looks into the future, it is evident that there is the potential that more heritage buildings will lose their current function (e.g. old courthouse) and we will be seeking to ensure that these buildings don't fall into disrepair by delivering alternative usages. PPP schemes will be one of most important strategies to accelerate the project and will help to put Armagh in the bucket list for all that visit Northern Ireland.

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By Pedro Soutinho, INT-HERIT LE

Videos

Armagh Vox pop video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0QzKbB2YjTU>

The Country Club Video case: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FX7niKC-UNU>

Armagh Transnational Meeting: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wg_Xnqt6NrU

About the INT-HERIT Project

The INT-HERIT project is an Implementation Network under the Urbact Programme that identifies, collects and exchanges knowledge across nine small to medium-size cities sharing similar challenges when tackling cultural heritage protection, conservation or valorisation. Implementation has all sorts of constraints and variables that may influence the final results. New smart, low cost initiatives are being implemented to overcome these constraints by adopting an integrative and participative approach towards stakeholders aiming to increase the value created for the community through heritage conservation projects. This article provides an overview of some of the initiatives currently taking place in the city in order to contribute for a knowledge base of solutions that will be hopefully useful for other cities across Europe while managing their cultural heritage.

