What’s the story, Buddleia?

DERELICTION AND THE POLITICS OF HOUSING IN DUBLIN’S NORTH INNER CITY.

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Introduction

In early January 2013, following initial work by Stephen Rigney and me, a Google map of derelict sites was made public. We asked people, through social media, to place points on the map where they knew there to be dereliction. Ten people have mapped about 200 places in Dublin that we have defined as derelict.

I want here to explain the motivations for the project as well as some of the difficulties that we came across. I outline the methods used to collect the data and I present a working definition of dereliction for Dublin. The biggest question for me is: why at the end of a sustained property-based boom, there are so many derelict spaces in Dublin’s north inner city? And why are these still considered private space? Finally, I want to explore some meanings of the geographies of dereliction.

Buddleia: “rare but increasing”

_Buddleia davidii_ is a woody, deciduous shrub that grows up to 4m high. According to the Irish species register it is to be found on waste ground, riverbanks and lake-shores. The register’s website says that its distribution is “rare but increasing”. The register probably needs to update its database because if they walk around Dublin it could not surely be classed as rare.

The anthropologist Mary Douglas defined dirt as matter out of place which “implies two conditions: a set of ordered relations and a contravention of that order” (1966: 36). Buddleia is considered to be a weed but is really a plant out of place. It dominates waste ground and the brickwork of older buildings in Dublin. It sprouts from chimney tops and gable ends, from the wall of Mountjoy Prison and on the numerous derelict sites of Dublin city. So what are the set of ordered relations and the contraventions that its classification as a weed implies? I am not going to deal with these relations tonight but I am using buddleia as a marker for the dereliction that we have mapped.

Unlike the classification of buddleia in the Species Register, dereliction in Dublin is not rare. In our short survey of the area between Dublin’s Royal Canal and the river Liffey, we have counted 22 derelict housing units of various sizes. This does not include blocks of unused public housing, vacant sites, vacant industrial premises and derelict retail units. How did we count? Who and what is counted? More importantly what is dereliction anyway?

1 Purity and Danger
In its tally of dereliction, Dublin City Council counts 31 properties on its Derelict Sites Register. 31 properties for an area of 115 square kilometres. For a property to be included on the Derelict Sites Register, it has to meet the following criteria:

- It has accumulated a lot of litter or other waste.
- It contains dangerous or ruined structures.
- It contains land or structures that are in a neglected or unsightly condition.

Our dereliction mapping project has identified almost 200 sites and buildings alone. Why can the council find 31 where we found about 200? I am going to argue here that dereliction, like *buddleia davidii*, is not rare and it is increasingly distributed across more and more of the city area. Buddleia acts as a marker not just for waste ground or dereliction but as a set of relationships between the city’s inhabitants and global flows of speculative capital.

And so a research question that we started out with was: why after the longest cycle of property-based capital accumulation in Ireland’s history were there still so many derelict sites in Dublin’s north inner city?

**The mapping project**

In January, Stephen and I marked a few sites on a google map based on some photography he had done on his walk to work in the south of the city. The map had been the first stage in a larger project that we had been thinking about for about a year. It began by taking photographs and then geotagging the photographs on google plus and then re-placing them on a single google map. While Stephen was doing this on his way to work, I was placing points on the map that I knew were derelict from bus journeys, routine walking into the city from where I live and other routes that I was familiar with. A few days later, we made our map public and within a short time we had managed to enthuse a small number of people around the idea of mapping the derelict sites and houses in the Dublin area. Opening up the map to others of course made it less easy to control the placement and definitions of dereliction.

We invited people, through social media, to take part on the basis that they could drop pins on this map as Collaborators. We set very few criteria other than a general guideline of a building that:

- Had boarded up windows, and / or
- A collapsed roof.

We asked people to take a picture of a site if they could and add that to the map. As people walked around the city and placed pins on the map, it became evident that these simpler criteria would not be enough on their own. For example, would we map closed retail units? These were spaces in temporary abeyance on a far shorter time scale than many of the original two dozen or so housing units we had mapped originally. What about sites with a closed retail ground floor but an active and lived in second and
subsequent floors? What if a site has a planning notice - even if now out of date - attached to it?

Additionally, by releasing the map into the public domain (is Google public?) we could not justify any particular limit to dropping pins. So instead of this being a map of north Dublin city and dereliction it became a project mapping dereliction in Dublin more widely. The initial enthusiasm with which the map was used and the ready availability of phones with coordinating software changed the nature of the project itself. The need to impose some order on the data we had originally collected became greater once we made the map more widely available. Stephen and I had started out looking at banal walking routes and dereliction on areas that we both knew within the north inner city area. Others wished to add their own sites outside of this area. By the end of January, we agreed on a less vague, but not satisfactory, typology based on some online discussion:

- Vacant sites - blue flag (31)
- Boarded up houses – green flag (22)
- Closed commercial - red flag (55)
- Closed commercial ground floor - yellow flag (15)
- Closed institutional or publicly owned - purple flag (13)
- Unclassified - blue pin (50)
- DCC derelict properties list - red pin (31)

While the project still has no definition of what a derelict house or site is, the typology at least made a distinction between vacant sites, housing stock and commercial property. A distinction between closed commercial and closed commercial ground floor arises from the occurrence of many of these spaces in the Dublin city area. Of course we still have not unpacked the Unclassified category because we have not devised a satisfactory definition of dereliction.

So what next for this data? We need to undertake a further analysis of the sites and buildings in their neighbourhoods as well as an unpacking of the classifications used. The project is not, as yet, linked with local political struggles about resource use or the fate of these places. This may be where we pick this up tonight. They continue to exist as places in the absence of any further public information on their ownership or usage. Many of the derelict sites have planning notices, spanning several years, on display and more of them are within the NAMA process. Perhaps a next step should be to systematically organise planning notices and relate them to their duration and distribution.

One of the aspects that needs development for this project is the formal linking of these sites and buildings with local place making, particularly in relation to the local government elections in 2014. Stephen and I have spoken about confining our interest to an area broadly defined by the River Liffey and the Grand Canal, transected by three main streets: Gardiner Street, Capel Street and Church Street, moving east to west.

We would walk systematically through each of these areas in turn, taking in all of the sites adjacent to these three streets and mapping all of the dereliction. Throughout the
time that we can now identify as The Boom, some of these places that we have were transformed by flows of surplus capital and unsustainable credit deals. Many more were left to remain derelict throughout The Boom. Now that the surplus capital has moved elsewhere, what has become of these places? How are these places made and re-made through their non-use by speculative capital but their everyday use by those who live and work and shop and play near these spaces? What is the story behind these sites? In short, a fairly basic question that is central to my understanding of geography: why here and not there?

The spatial politics of walking around Dublin’s north city

In her 2011 project *Pathological Geographies*, Emma Cummins puts forward the idea that

“to really understand the current financial crisis – and by extension, the problems of capitalism itself - one needs to consider capitalism’s erratic, contradictory character in relation to its concrete material effects.”

She examined unfinished estates in Ireland and Spain and suggested that they “offer an opportunity for sustained and radical reflection. …they are thus a tangible reminder of the structural problems of a complex, irrational system.” And while she is looking at unfinished estates more specifically, there is also a spatial politics to these sites that we have identified through our project. Many of the sites are unfinished in the sense that they began as the dream of a speculative process, anchored once by flows of capital through Dublin and the IFSC and anchored again by the Council’s planning process which facilitated the ‘development’ of the city as a European capital city. Many of the sites that we have looked at imply that they too are unfinished, even if they are sites where the existing building remains in place. In a sense they were ‘never started’ by a particular circulation of a vision of Dublin’s as European space. They remained in old Ireland, rooted to a smaller city core which could only dream of sprawling suburbs, still living in the shadow of Victorian tenement life. I am not going to go into how capital flowed across these places, changing them according to the material constraints. I do want to talk about making and re-making these places through the act of walking. Part of this project has been about seeing the city in a different way through walking around the city.

In the first chapter of his book *Rhythmanalysis*, Lefebvre distinguishes between two approaches:

In this second approach to studying space the cyclical and the linear act reciprocally. However, rhythm is always some form of measuring but the unique quality of a rhythm is the binding of the qualitative and the quantitative. The work we did to compile these data had its rhythm. Our footsteps, heart beats, the swinging of arms, the talking about of the sites as we approached them and catalogued them. How are these aspects of the project measured, let alone mapped? What kinds of geographies arise from the process of mapping? How do we engage the parts the city that we walked in a new relationship? On noticing the derelict sites and arranging them on our map, we were conforming to fairly
routinsed mapping techniques and using representations of Dublin that have broad familiarity. Millions know the representation of Dublin on Google maps: the river transecting the north and south sides; the gaping maw of the bay. This is partially why it attracted about 3,000 sets of eyeballs on Broadsheet.ie. Beyond this however, how is the rhythm of the walking captured and mapped?

How do the places that we walked become identified with a larger politics of the places of Dublin? In taking part in democratic processes for the election of local representatives next year, how can we bind the practices and the rhythm of everyday life (the unnoticed and the visceral) on to the places that are themselves the outcomes of larger scalar process of capital flow? I am asking about how these derelict sites, the material outcomes of human labour, are made political spaces. How are they made ours for the purposes of political representation?

These spaces are produced and are often presented to us as spectres of processes seemingly beyond our political control. The phrase 'ghost estates' is hardly accidental, albeit different from the occurrence of longer term dereliction. These derelict sites and buildings that we have mapped are representations of space and are made to be so.

How can we make them spaces of representation, spaces of the everyday? They are kept as spaces of specialised knowledge, of the architect, the planner and the engineer. These are deliberate and productive processes which carry within them specific uses. For the purposes of creating spaces of representation, what can the mapping that we have done achieve other than to contribute to a spatial politics that makes them inaccessible to everyday politics? These sites of dereliction are kept from being lived and remade. So at the end I am left with another question: what kinds of local politics opens them up for daily use by those who live here?