**Museum of the Troubles & peace PROCESS**

**From Civil Rights to Conflict Transformation**

**in Northern Ireland**



***Dealing with the Past: Inspiring the Future***

**Project Idea**:

To create an exhibition space in an iconic building that showcases three decades of conflict and survival in the North of Ireland, and the evolution of the Irish peace process. We use the term ‘museum’ for shorthand but what is envisaged is *something more than a museum*. It is an exhibition space, a digital hub, a place of remembrance, a learning centre for peace and inter-community understanding.

This museum would also represent in its exhibition spaces the resilience of the many who struggled to pursue their day-to-day lives during those troubled times.

Much can be learned from the Troubles and its aftermath, and not just for Irish and British audiences. There is the troubled world beyond these islands. The exhibits, story lines and digital simulations present authoritative, multifaceted views of the conflict and the peace process. The aim is to be informative, challenging and educative, while remaining supportive of processes of reconciliation at home and abroad.

**Economic Rationale**: The prelude to the conflict, the conflict itself and the subsequent peace process have commanded world-wide attention. The proposal here is for an imaginative visitor attraction that would make a strategic contribution to the tourism infrastructure of Northern Ireland, generate service sector employment and increase export earnings by attracting tourists from abroad.

While the capital costs would require major funding, this mega-project should generate, as in the case of Titanic Belfast, an annual operating profit.

**Institutional Context**: Northern Ireland has some excellent museums, including the Ulster Museum, the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, the Ulster American Folk Park at Omagh, and a number of smaller museums and exhibition centres. Titanic Belfast is in a class of its own and is one of the major tourism attractions in the capital city. But compared to many major cities, Belfast is still lacking large, ‘must-visit’ centres that compel international attention.

**Synergy**: Both the president of the Belfast Chamber of Commerce and the Lord Mayor of Belfast have stressed ‘the need for one new, great visitor attraction’ (7 Sept 2016). A museum of the Troubles could meet this perceived need and complement Belfast’s existing major attraction – the Titanic story – and it is possible to envisage synergies between the two.

**International Context I**: If Northern Ireland is known for two things internationally, these are surely the Titanic, sadly at the bottom of the sea, and the ‘Troubles’. The ‘Troubles’ was book-ended by the Civil Rights movement which preceded it in the 1960s and the ‘Peace Process’ which brought it to a close. To simplify greatly, there is the long trajectory from John Hume to Senator George Mitchell, and beyond. The most recent phase offers hope to other conflict-ridden parts of the world, so the overall experience need not be one of gloom and macabre fascination with the effects of violence. In that the Troubles did indeed come to an end, this is something of a ‘good news’ story.

**International Context II**: Northern Ireland speaks to a wider world and the wider world speaks to Northern Ireland. Building in a comparative dimension to the Museum that draws on ethnic and national conflicts elsewhere in the world – South Africa, Bosnia, Serbia, Croatia, Kosovo, Ukraine, Palestine, Israel – would further enhance its educative and consciousness-raising value.

In turn, the Northern Ireland conflict, how it is remembered and how its peace process has been advanced, offers a template for dealing with conflicts elsewhere in the word, from Columbia to Iraq and beyond. The Museum acts as a peace centre and peace-building resource for the wider world.

Creativity and the Project: We envisage the museum project as drawing on the expertise not only of architects, designers, historians, political scientists and museum curators but also of software engineers, film makers, writers, artists and musicians. Think, for instance of the exhibitionof Colin Davidson’s work at the Ulster Museum (*Silent Testimony*: portraits of 18 individuals who are only connected by virtue of the loss of loved ones through political violence); think of the rock musician Paul Brady and his haunting lyric, the ‘Island’; think of Van Morrison in so many ways; think of the work of fine poets and novelists, from Heaney to Longley and from Patterson to MacLiam Wilson. All these draw on ‘Troubles’ themes and it is important also to show how ‘ordinary life’, from sport to shopping, against a background of extraordinary division, was maintained before, during and after the period of intense conflict.

**Materials**: The Troubles are incredibly well documented in terms of interviews, television and film footage, radio reports, posters, murals, oral testimonies, autobiographies, drama, novels, poetry, music and the visual arts. Then there is material culture relating to police and army vehicles, prisons, courts, flags and emblems, weaponry, watch towers, ambush sites, uniforms and much else.

Moreover, with digital technology it is now possible to simulate totally immersive experiences ranging from patrolling eerie, darkened terraced streets late at night, to ambush sites and even car-bomb explosions. More constructively, there are the dramatic, late-night negotiations round the Good Friday Agreement and such iconic moments as Prime Minister Blair’s and President Clinton’s visits to Belfast.

**Location**: There are a number of possible sites. Our view is that a commercial criterion should apply. In other words, choose the location that is likely to maximise footfall. This may well be at an interface area, which would confer further benefits.

**Design of building:** Needs to be both spectacular and in keeping with the overall themes embodied in the complex.

**Scale**: if the project is worth doing, it is worth doing on a scale commensurate with the importance of the subject. Ideally, a budget in the region of £75 to £85 million is called for.

**Museum without Walls**: Not literally but with modern information technology it is possible to develop digital mobile devices, perhaps franchised to hotels, tourist offices and other centres across Northern Ireland. These devices would tune in to significant events – civil rights’ demonstrations, killings, bombings, peace demonstrations – associated with a particular street or building and reveal site-specific histories relating to the Troubles or its aftermath. Some of these buildings, such as McGurks Bar (the scene of a notorious mass killing) for example, no longer exist but can be recreated in digital form.

A massive website, with ancillary devices, would make the holdings of the museum accessible to a global audience.

In effect, the holdings of the museum can be widely dispersed in space and time using digital technology.

**Iconic Images: Example: A Room in the museum:** Front parlour of a small terraced house: a huge coffin dominates the room, plastic flowers in red, white and blue, a UVF man is being waked. A photograph of this scene featured in a tabloid newspaper and told so much of the kind of people who joined paramilitary organisations and why.

**The Political Context**: In some societies a museum such as this might be provided by the state. There is, for instance, the massive National Museum of African American History and Culture, currently being completed in Washington which is state funded. Of more recent origin is the House of European History (‘a place to debate, question and reflect on Europe’s history’) in Parc Léopold, Brussels. One thinks also of museums and other institutions devoted to the Holocaust (though it is also the case that private sponsorship has been responsible for many of these initiatives).

**Leadership**: As the Maze Prison project has demonstrated, there is little appetite at a political level for major projects that touch on politically sensitive issues. Thus the vision and the entrepreneurial energy necessary to develop a macro-project of the kind proposed here must come, in the main, from sources other than the Northern Ireland parliament.

**Finance**: there is much goodwill in the international community towards Northern Ireland as evidenced by Peace and Reconciliation funds from the European Union, the International Fund for Ireland, Rowntree Trust and private donors such as Atlantic Philanthropies. This is not to rule out state funding towards some elements of such a venture at a later stage but it is to suggest the bulk of the financing will come from other sources.

**The Market Place**: The trend in tourism numbers in Belfast and the region shows a strong upward trajectory. The existence of the popular Black Taxi tours of West Belfast, various city bus and walking tours, summer schools that draw American and other students to Belfast and Londonderry, as well as history-minded visitors from Ireland, Britain and continental Europe, indicate substantial possibilities that might be expanded further. In effect, this would be an export-oriented services enterprise, aiming to generate a surplus.

But of course there is a thirst for knowledge of the conflict and its resolution within Northern Ireland itself, both on the part of victims of the Troubles and on the part of younger generations who have come of age since the conflict ended. The Museum would help orientate and educate generations of school leavers in Northern Ireland. Thus the project would meet actual and emerging domestic demand as well.

**Integrity**: If the project is to have integrity, and this is fundamental, it is important that a ‘Troubles’ museum is not subject to partisan political pressure. It needs to be a ‘People’s History’ of the conflict and of conflict resolution, not simply elite or partisan perspectives on the past. Hence the importance of a range of sponsors, philanthropic individuals and corporations. Hence also the importance of strong academic and community involvement at all stages of the project, including governance.

**Academic and Professional Expertise**: The project is in a position to call on the expertise of the two universities in Northern Ireland, Queen’s University, Belfast and Ulster University, as well as colleagues internationally. There is expertise in depth at the Senator George J. Mitchell Institute for Global Peace, Security and Justice, the Institute of Irish Studies, QUB, as well as INCORE, based at the Derry campus of Ulster University. There is also a wealth of community and related organisations, including the Community Relations Council.

**Education & Outreach:** The Museum could be shaped into an international hub for discussions, workshops and conferences on themes of pressing contemporary relevance, including cultural diversity, political violence, social cohesion and conflict transformation.

**Education In-House:** For some, the Museum experience will give rise to questions and perhaps a need to comment. The tutorial room, located close to the exit, is a safe space where questions, comments and impromptu discussions can take place, guided by a well-informed facilitator.

**Special or unexpected effects:** There is a need to tune in to the senses and the emotions, as well as engaging intellectually, to ensure an experience that is memorable. These and related issues are dealt with in detail in the document on the content of the museum.

**Ethical and welfare issues:** The tone has to be respectful, while aiming to be both engaging and enlightening. It may be necessary to make provision for visitors who are strongly affected by what they see, hear or feel. Hence the need to provide connections to existing therapeutic services.

**An Adaptive Enterprise:** The work of the Foundation would evolve over time, presenting new exhibitions as thematic opportunities arose. That is, in addition to the core holdings of artefacts and digital experiences.

**Patrons**: A major, international fund-raising appeal is necessary, spearheaded by individuals prominently associated with the peace process in Northern Ireland. These might include one of several Nobel Peace Prize winners from Northern Ireland, a former President of the Republic of Ireland, a former British Prime-Minister, a former President of the United States, as well as some outstanding clergymen from the different denominations.

**Finally**: The Irish Peace Process is a success story available to the wider international community, with a narrative arc that extends from the optimistic, reform-minded 1960s, through the subsequent descent into political violence, and then the upswing into a durable peace process. For all its stops and starts, it is a story that commands international admiration.

**WEBSITE:** <http://museumofthetroubles.org/>

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