

Field Trip to St.Fagans National History Museum and Cardiff Bay

Context and Mobility

The aim of this field trip was to experience Heritage Buildings in different contexts within a short distance of each other. Significantly St Fagans is located next to the Ely river which is one of two major waterways which feeds into the artificial lagoon created by the barrage at Cardiff Bay. At both sites the buildings are located in very visible locations with very high visitor numbers especially during weekends and holidays. In each case the buildings are curated (presented, looked after) and consciously used to project ideas about the past, identity, heritage and culture. The big difference between the two sites is that St.Fagans is a publicly owned museum with all the educational and cultural responsibilities which that entails whereas Cardiff Bay is dominated by private enterprise although the presence of the National Assembly within the bay gives added cultural and national significance.

St Fagans National History Museum

The majority of buildings in the museum were moved from other locations- a complex and expensive operation which can take many years to complete. In addition the museum also contains a few buildings such as Lys Llewelyn which are new re-constructions based on excavated remains (the iron Age Village was also based on excavated house plans).

Questions relating to the building at St Fagans include

- 1) What is the main purpose of dis-mantling and reconstructing buildings at the site? Preservation of the physical fabric, preservation of building skills, the creation of a heritage park as a microcosm of pre-modern Wales, building/re-enforcing a national identity, presenting a rural idyl etc
- 2) Are the building authentic? How is authenticity measured? Does the appearance of the building matter? For example the reconstructed stonework may appear different from the original stonework- does this matter and why?
- 3) How important is the context of historic buildings in relation to the built environment, the natural environment and the human/social environment. For example the Merchants House from Haverfordwest had to be re-constructed next to rock face to replicate its original position near the river front /quay in Haverfordwest.

Cardiff Bay

Cardiff Bay is the new name for the area formerly occupied by Cardiff Docks- a small part of this area is still owned and operated as sea freight terminal by Port of Cardiff. The area started being re-built during the 1980's following decades of neglect. The main aim of the re-development was to create a waterfront residential and leisure area which would lead the economic regeneration of Cardiff. Most of the pre-1980's buildings in the area were demolished although some of the more impressive older buildings were retained to lend an aura of authenticity to the redevelopment. The most famous listed building in the Bay area is the Pierhead Building (1897) now owned by the National Assembly and used as an exhibition centre for the history and culture of Wales. Two of the best known historic buildings in the area are the Norwegian Church and the Customs House. Both

of these buildings have been moved from their original locations to fit in with the Cardiff Bay redevelopment plan. In consequence neither of these buildings are listed and in both cases large extensions have been added to the original structures..

There are a number of questions which arise from the presentation of heritage buildings in Cardiff Bay

1) Visibility. What is the role of historic buildings within the Bay? Many of the historic buildings have been adapted for commercial re-use, is this a valid use of heritage or does it obscure and confuse the history of the area

2) The original context of the historic buildings has changed and the majority of the buildings in are recent structures 1980'-2000's, Does this make the surviving nineteenth and early twentieth century buildings more or less valuable in cultural terms.

3) The major change to the Cardiff Bay area is the construction of the Cardiff Bay Barrage which fundamentally altered the natural environment. Does this change enhance or devalue the historic built heritage of the area.

Concluding Thoughts

1. Both sites (St Fagans and Cardiff Bay) contain buildings out of their original context- in the case of St Fagans the buildings have been removed from their original context whilst in Cardiff Bay the built and natural context has been radically altered.

2. Both sites have national significance for Wales- what role do the buildings have in defining or projecting national identity.

3. Ethnic and cultural diversity- how do the heritage buildings at both locations present ethnic and cultural diversity? (N.B. Butetown which is next to the Bay historically had the most diverse population in the UK prior to WWII. In building terms this was represented by structures such as the Peel Street Mosque and the Greek Orthodox Church).