

## INNER-CITY LIFE

# Temple Bar

## UNCOVERED

After 20 years of regeneration, the legacy of Dublin's "cultural quarter" is street drinking and noise pollution, writes long-term resident **Frank McDonald**, but tourists and others living and working in Temple Bar tell **Kitty Holland** the area's reputational difficulties are far outweighed by its vibrancy and creativity

**T**EMPLE BAR TODAY is nothing at all like the run-down, laid-back, "left bank" bohemian area it once was. Nor does it, by any yardstick, measure up to the official aspirations of 20 years ago to create a "bustling cultural, residential and small-business precinct that will attract visitors in significant numbers".

It's a sham. There's a branch of Tesco installed in the former ESB showrooms on Fleet Street, the Bad Ass Cafe on Crown Alley – an authentic Temple Bar pit-stop since 1983 – is in danger of being turned into a "traditional Irish bar" and the big burger chains are eyeing Frankie's in Temple Bar Square. The sell-out is nearly complete.

The huge hole in the middle of Meeting House Square is not just archaeological, it's a symbol of the hollowness at the heart of Temple Bar. Everything that was said about it when Charles J Haughey inaugurated this *grand projet* in 1991 has turned out to be untrue. And they are still lying, or deluding themselves, to this day.

During the St Patrick's Day festivities this year, every alcove, alley and doorway in the area was used as a *pissoir*. The scenes were disgusting beyond belief. On every street, men with far too many pints on board were urinating in public, and some were also vomiting – although that's usually done by the vodka spritzer-laden girls.

Throughout the year, and particularly in summer, Temple Bar is trashed on a nightly basis by drunken louts, drug addicts, graffiti vandals and indifferent bands of buskers with portable amplifiers. The primary culture of Dublin's designated "cultural quarter" is a street-drinking culture, catered for by many of its 30 bars or nightclubs.

Turning the area into the "Temple of Bars", as former An Taisce chairman Michael Smith once dubbed it, was never part of the official agenda; indeed, the word "pubs" was barely mentioned back in 1991. Neither did the city planners have any hesitation in granting permission for new pubs and extensions to existing licensed premises.

Nearly an acre of extra licensed space was shovelled into the area in the first five years of the Temple Bar project. Small neighbourhood bars were turned into mega-pubs and "hotels" materialised out of nowhere, purely as vehicles to get licences for large public bars at ground-

floor level and a "function room" (nightclub) in their basements.

When Group 91 Architects won the 1991 competition for the Temple Bar Architectural Framework Plan, they gathered in Flannery's pub to celebrate. At that time, it consisted of a single room. Now, as the much-photographed Temple Bar pub, it extends to 929sq m (10,000sq ft) and teems with tourists.

Its massive expansion was facilitated by Temple Bar Properties (TBP), the State agency set up to oversee the development of the area, and approved to benefit from highly-lucrative tax incentives by Temple Bar Renewal (TBR), a separate agency that was supposed to ensure there would be a balanced mix of uses in redeveloping the area.

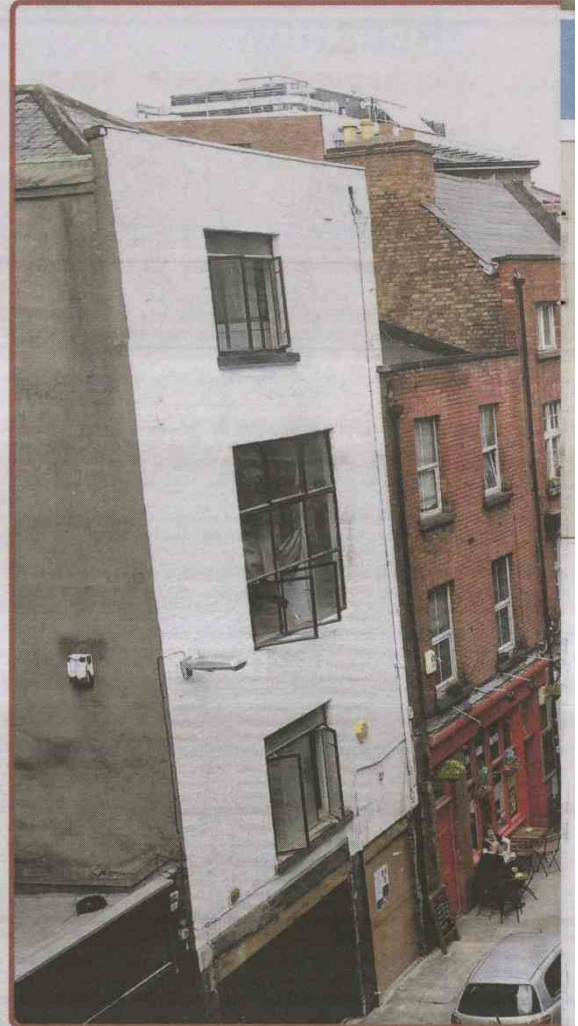
But the senior Department of the Environment official on TBR's board, Finian Matthews, insisted that it had no power to control the extent of any use, including pubs – so it became a rubber stamp. It was not until 1998 that the High Court ruled that it was "mandatory" for TBR to refuse approval for uses that would be "detrimental" to the area.

Delusion has been at the core of the Temple Bar project since its inception, when Paddy Teahon – then assistant secretary of the Taoiseach's Department – was TBP's first managing director. But hype reached new heights after his hand-picked successor, Laura Magahy, took over in 1992, ably assisted by Patricia Quinn as cultural director.

Dubbed "the linen and lipstick sisters", this pushy pair were "driven by a vision; we know what we want and we are going to get it", as Quinn said in 1993. "We make no apologies." They also played their cards close to the chest. "That's the dark side of our good qualities. We give the necessary information to the right people at the right time."

Three years later, before moving on to become director of the Arts Council, Quinn edited a lavishly-illustrated book to celebrate TBP's achievements – already garlanded by a raft of architectural, planning and urban design awards. Titled *Temple Bar: The Power of an Idea*, some said it should have been sub-titled *The Idea of the Power*.

TBP's role, as Magahy said, was to "make interventions" in the area to secure its objectives.



These included developing Fitzsimons Hotel in partnership with its operators, two builder brothers from Cavan. It now bills itself as a "party venue with roof terrace... live on five floors... seven nights a week... live acts/bands and DJs... late-night bar and club".

TBP was directly involved in the creation of three other large new pubs – the Porterhouse, the Front Lounge and the Czech Inn – and in facilitating the extension of three more. So even as wonderful cultural facilities such as The Ark were being planned, TBP was collaborating with the licensed trade in giving it "critical mass".

A culture of entitlement is pervasive. Pubs, nightclubs and venues feel entitled to blast the neighbourhood with noise from heavily-amplified music or live bands. Only after time-consuming and expensive legal actions by residents – including me – have some had to put limits on this "entertainment noise breakout"; others carry on regardless.

Venues take no responsibility for the

“Policing is of the 'light touch' variety, like the lack of regulation of the financial sector during the boom



**Willie White**  
director of the  
Project Arts Centre

"I remember Temple Bar back in 1990, when it was pretty run-down and shabby, with a lot of derelict buildings. It was kind of exciting too. Clearly now a lot has changed and for the better mostly."

"There are proper venues and spaces now for artists and performers and that cultural aspect has been the durable, lasting piece of Temple Bar."

"The perception that it is all tourists here is easy and wrong. At least 50 per cent of the people coming into Temple Bar are Dubliners or Irish. People forget there are a lot of venues, like ourselves, the IFI, gigs which bring people into the area. It's not just full of stag parties. Like anywhere there are nice bars and not nice bars."

"I think there are further opportunities to do interesting, enlightened things in the area, like the Exchange on Essex Street, which is a collective arts centre run by 16 to 23-year-olds. There are opportunities to do interesting things that may not work in other areas and that is down to the cultural infrastructure we have here." **KH**

PHOTOGRAPH: BRENDA FITZSIMONS

behaviour of their patrons after they leave the premises, even for a smoke. As a result, and particularly at weekends, raucous crowds gather outside pubs and nightclubs or maraud around the streets, roaring and shouting until they finally drift off. A couple of hours later, noisy cleansing vehicles pick up after them.

Policing is of the "light touch" variety, like the lack of regulation of the financial sector during the boom. Gardai on the beat regard it as "normal" that intolerable levels of noise emanate from licensed premises, or from buskers in the streets. "It's an entertainment zone - what do you expect?" they would say.

Temple Bar has also become the graffiti capital of Dublin. Where I live, we have to paint our front door several times a year and clean it even more often because of persistent "tagging" by teenage vandals. TBP's successor, Temple Bar Cultural Trust (TBCT), doesn't bother cleaning the buildings it owns any more, because the problem is so endemic.

Contrast this with the nearly graffiti-free status of both the northside and southside retail cores, which are covered by the **Dublin City Business Improvement District (BID)**. Established in 2008, the **BID** is funded by a levy on commercial ratepayers in the area that raises €3 million a year to deliver a "cleaner, green and safer city".

A year later, after employing specialised

## HIGH HOPES: What they said then

"The redevelopment of the Temple Bar area will make history in the life of this city. It is a distinctive part of Dublin frequented by young people, attracted by the unique ambience of the area, where art and cultural activities have begun to flourish spontaneously... This old and well-loved part of Dublin will be restored to prime condition, which it deserves."

**Charles J Haughey**  
then taoiseach, introducing the Temple Bar Renewal and Development Bill on July 2nd, 1991

"The Taoiseach seems to want to leave some sort of monument to himself when he moves off stage, like Ceausescu in Romania, to leave some kind of city landmarks with the words 'Charles J Haughey was the man who thought of this, ran this or organised that'."

**Tomás MacGiolla**  
then leader of the Workers' Party, speaking in the Dáil debate

"The mission we have set ourselves in Temple Bar Properties Ltd [TBP] is to create Dublin's Cultural Quarter in Temple Bar, building on what has already taken place spontaneously in the area... The result will be a bustling cultural, residential and small business precinct of charm and distinction that will attract visitors in significant numbers."

**Paddy Teahon**  
TBP's first managing director and then assistant secretary in the Taoiseach's Department, on October 4th, 1991

"I have personally great hopes for the Temple Bar area. I want it to be a hustling-bustling quarter teeming with bistros and bars, cafes and counters, art and artefacts of every sort. Dublin needs an ambience where young people can identify as their own, whether in terms of music, fashion, art, dancing, food or fun."

**Bertie Ahern**  
then finance minister

"Temple Bar is Dublin's cultural quarter. One of Europe's most innovative and successful urban renewal projects, it is a vibrant, living community in which residents, artists, visitors, cultural organisations and small businesses co-exist..."

"Temple Bar encapsulates all the reasons why people are moving back into the city centre... an interesting and congenial environment with shops, restaurants and entertainment close at hand... a model for city-living principles."

**TBP's development programme review, 1996**

"Temple Bar is a working model of sustainable development in an urban context... a tremendous success... [and] a key contributor to making Dublin what it is today: one of the most exciting cities in Europe."

**Brendan Howlin**  
then minister for the environment, on July 5th, 1996

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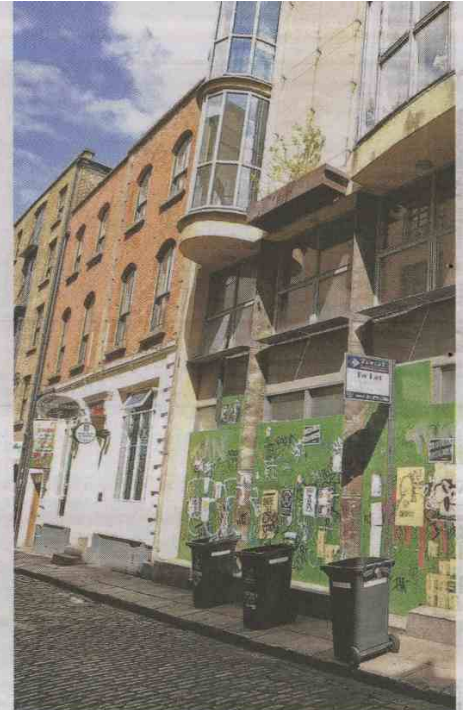
**Mary Harkin owner of Rory's Fishing Tackle the area's oldest shop**

"Well we have been open for 52 years so I worked here as a child and have been working day-to-day here for four years.

"It was my grandfather who opened it. He used to work in the ESB on Fleet Street and he was mad about fishing. He had worked in every fishing shop in town. He spotted a vacant shop and decided to open one of his own.

"Business is going well, all things considered. It's an advantage being in an area with a lot of tourists, you'd be surprised. A lot see the shop and come in and want to buy presents for people that are a bit different. We have trout and salmon flies that are different to those used in the States.

"There's a great community atmosphere among the business owners here too, which I don't think you'd get as much in other parts of the city. We look out for each other."



contractors with power-hoses, **the** chief executive **Richard Criney** was able to say that graffiti had almost entirely vanished. "We've removed more than 5,000sq m to date. It really has been a great success and it's when you walk outside of the **the** area that you really become aware of it," he said in 2009.

Most of the publicans in Temple Bar are paid-up members of Traders in the Area Supporting the Cultural Quarter, known as TASCQ. It has an annual budget of €300,000 – chickenfeed in the context of their aggregate profits – which is spent on marketing, extra street cleaning, environmental initiatives, cultural events and business services.

TBCT campaigned against the **the** when it was first mooted in 2007 and then ensured that Temple Bar was excluded from its remit. The trust argued that, by working with its pals in TASCQ, it was already doing the same thing. Sure hadn't Temple Bar won the **Dublin City** Neighbourhood of the Year award?

But several of its "flagship" cultural projects didn't survive. Arthouse, a "multimedia centre for the arts", was the first to go, followed by the Viking Adventure in the former church of SS Michael and John, which TBP had gutted, and Designyard, a gallery featuring the best of Irish design – it is now TBCT's headquarters.

The shop windows of the Green Building have been boarded up since Haus moved out some two years ago, while its wind turbines rust away on the roof. There have been rows over rent with high-profile TBCT tenants such as Eden and the Button Factory, and neither it nor FilmBase (formerly Arthouse) have been re-painted since 1996.

TBCT has a policy of "sweating the assets" it owns or controls; that's why nearly half of the groundplane of Temple Bar Square has been privatised, carved up between the restaurants and cafes around it. Now it's in the process of installing a rainscreen in Meeting House Square, supported by four pylons, to make more use of this space.

Last August, TBCT staged Funky Seomra in

the square. Billed as "an alcohol and drug-free festival nightclub", it ran over a whole weekend and was one of the noisiest gigs ever in Temple Bar. The company itself estimates that 20 to 30 "commercial hires" per year would be needed to make the €2 million rainscreen project viable.

A public singing and dancing licence (the one that covers nightclubs) has already been obtained for the square, which would allow events to be run there until 2.30am. And even TBCT's own acoustic consultant admits – not in these words, of course – that heavy bass noise will leak out all over the place, up to a level of 96 decibels.

To put this in context and bearing in mind that the decibel scale is logarithmic, the ambient sound level in Temple Bar (without amplified buskers) has been put at 60db – below the level of other city centre streets, due to the absence of traffic. And the city council's noise control unit says any increase above 5db constitutes noise pollution.

But TBCT may not be long for this world. The city council, which is now its "parent", has commissioned an independent review of the organisation focusing on issues such as corporate governance, board representation, the economic

**ABOVE RIGHT**  
**The boarded-up retail space of the Green Building**

PHOTOGRAPH: DAVE MEEHAN.  
PORTRAIT PHOTOGRAPHS:  
BRENDA FITZSIMONS,  
DAVE MEEHAN

model underpinning its activities, and whether the trust is fulfilling its brief as a cultural promoter and enabler.

Laura Magahy – "Ms Temple Bar", as she was called – has long since re-established herself in the private sector, with a consultancy company (MCO) specialising in sustainable design and project management. She remains a "mover and shaker" as chair of the Crafts Council and past president of the Institute of Directors in Ireland.

After leaving Temple Bar in 2000, she won a lucrative contract to provide executive services for the ill-fated "Bertie Bowl" and Sports Campus Ireland at Abbotstown, then headed by her old friend Paddy Teahon, and a similar contract for the equally ill-fated Digital Hub development in Dublin's Liberties, which was also overseen by Teahon.

Given that there is so little to show for the sports campus and even less physical evidence of the Digital Hub, the Jekyll and Hyde character of Temple Bar must be regarded as Magahy and Teahon's lasting legacy to Dublin. Yes, it was saved from being blitzed for a bus station and transportation centre. But at what price?

Owen Hickey, who looked after CIE's low-rent portfolio before becoming TBP's property director, says: "The 'mini-bohemia' everyone recognised as worth saving – colourful, edgy, rough-grained and utterly benign – was destroyed by the initiative because grittiness wasn't part of the agenda." As a result, it was a "total failure".

"We made mistakes with the bars and hotels, but what happened was an accident. A great Dublin version of the English Market in Cork could have been done in Fleet Street, where a multi-storey carpark is today, but the Department of Finance's insistence on a minimum 5 per cent return on commercial projects was the real killer," Hickey says.

That's what turned Temple Bar into the boisterous changeling it is today. Apart from its loss-leader cultural centres, he believes TBP's ambitious residential programme – which raised the bar for city centre living – was one of the "good things" that happened. "Out of the ashes of our dreams came some sort of redemption," he says wistfully.

**Zvezdana Drasner from Croatia**

"It's nice here. I came because I read in a book it is a nice place to come and visit, like a place where there are artists and people doing performances. I like how it looks, I like the architecture and the old buildings. The only thing I don't like is the pigeons. I don't like pigeons."



**Steven Collins from Dún Laoghaire**

"I think of it primarily as a tourist destination but I think it has been tarnished a bit by the stag and hen party label. It is making progress on the cultural front and the Saturday market is very good in Meeting House Square – though I think that has been moved to Cow's Lane for a while.

"I work in a software company in Temple Bar so I walk through every day. I like the vibe of the place and there are great restaurants and coffee shops for lunch.

"I would bring visitors here though I'd probably also tell them to go to other parts of Dublin. It's good here, not as bad as Disneyland."



**Leo Enright broadcaster and Temple Bar resident**

"There have always been people living in Temple Bar of course, but we were among the new colonisers. We've been here about 20 years. I never had any misgivings and have always loved it here.

"The thing is if you want peace and quiet you should move to the suburbs or the country.

"The artistic side of Temple Bar has been very successful and there are aspects which are often overlooked – like the Ark children's theatre which is a wonderful resource, and the other theatres, the IFI, the live music venues, the gallery of photography and other galleries. The markets are wonderful.

"Yes, some of the pubs are ghastly, but there are the lovely Palace and the Ha'penny Bridge Inn. There are also a lot of little treasures, little shops which I think a lot of Dublin people don't actually realise are there.

"The noise at night is a real issue for residents. That does lead to tensions. You learn more about the physics



of noise production living here than you would care to.

"There are other negatives – the constant road works, the fact people wandering through the area tend to walk very slowly, which is maddening if you are in a hurry behind a gang of them.

"And people give out about the drug addicts and the homeless in the area, but I am desperately conscious that these are human beings too and the vast majority of them are harmless souls living desperate lives."

**Allain Guilherme from Brazil**

"I am studying English here and I pass through Temple Bar every day. I haven't been in Dublin long, about five weeks, but I like Temple Bar yes. It has a good atmosphere.

"I like some of the pubs – the Temple Bar and the Garage – it plays good music and the beer is not too expensive. I like it. I would tell friends to come and spend time here."



**Frank Jacoby from Philadelphia, US. Living in Dublin since 1986**

"What do I think of Temple Bar? Not much. Maybe it's the age bracket I am in that I am not attracted to this area.

"It is nice to see businesses doing well and the cultural and artistic side seems to be doing well, but the common reputation is that it is an area full of hen and stag nights and excessive drinking.

"I think it is probably a nice place for young people to meet up, but it's not much of a culinary venue. I wouldn't rate the restaurants. I would bring visitors here but I'd also bring them to lots of other places in Dublin. Places I do like are the more quiet spots – the Palace bar or the Porterhouse."



**Joseph Raymond and Tabatha Lynch from Boston, US**

"We've been in Dublin two days. I just heard from my clients – I'm a hairdresser – that Temple Bar would be an area we would find interesting," says Lynch. "They said I would be interested in the artists and the atmosphere and the things going on here."

"It is great here. It's so quaint and such a change from the Boston area," adds Raymond

"We just arrived last night and we wandered down here quite late and well, it's fantastic. We had a lot of fun in one of the bars. They were playing traditional music. The drinks were a bit expensive though. We're talking €8 for a couple of drinks.

The shops are lovely and there is a nice Irish feel about the place. We'd definitely tell people from home to come here to Temple Bar. We'll probably be back here ourselves tonight."

**Michael and Joyce Seabrook from Derbyshire, UK**

