EVERYDAY SHOPS

ANNA SKOURA

DEPARTMENT OF ARCHITECTURE, SCHOOL OF NATURAL AND BUILT ENVIRONMENT, QUEEN’S UNIVERSITY BELFAST

This paper stems from my doctoral research project ‘The cultural heritage of everyday streets’, carried out at the department of Architecture of Queen’s University Belfast. Part of the project aims to investigate the role of local, independently owned shops in the production of cultural heritage of inner city streets.

Contrary to the belief that heritage is a cultural construct designed to serve the interests of the elite (Lowenthal 1985; Smith 2006), my work follows the idea of everyday heritage, or heritage from below; a concept linked to wider processes of democratization addressing the everyday for ‘ordinary people’ (Samuel 1994; Robertson 2012). This type of heritage values places and practices that play an important role in people’s everyday lives and routines, while contributing to their sense of place (Silva and Mota Santos 2012) and sense of past (Robertson 2012).

Tim Ingold highlighted the layering effect this process has over time, conceptualising place as

\[an\text{ }enduring\text{ }record\text{ }of\text{ }–\text{ }and\text{ }testimony\text{ }to\text{ }–\text{ }the\text{ }lives\text{ }and\text{ }works\text{ }of\text{ }past\text{ }generations\text{ }who\text{ }have\text{ }dwelt\text{ }in\text{ }it,\text{ }and\text{ }in\text{ }so\text{ }doing,\text{ }have\text{ }left\text{ }there\text{ }something\text{ }of\text{ }themselves\text{ }\](1993: 152).

Furthermore, in terms of heritage, Robertson considered ‘performed repetitions…as a key way in which people articulate and construct their sense of their pasts and historical identities’ (2012: 17). Heritage places, then, take meaning through the practices performed in them. Following this train of thought, local shops can be seen as records of those who have worked and visited them over the years, becoming carriers and enablers of everyday heritage.

Methods from architecture and urban history were combined with ethnographic observations to analyze and understand the character of selected shops. Inspired by the ethnographic practices of Suzanne Hall (2012) and Sarah Pink (2012), I used a combination of drawing and text to take notes during fieldwork carried out between October 2017 and December 2018. Measuring and drawing on site served as my introduction to the field, while reworking the drawings off site became part of the reflection and analysis of the fieldwork.

Drawing is a native practice to architecture, widely used both as a method of analysis and representation. Following the phenomenological thinking of Pallasmaa (2009), drawing can be seen as a synchronous ‘process of observation and expression’. Conceptualising drawing as a way of embodied thinking (Merleau-Ponty 1945: 2013), the selection process involved in drawing a place became a way of both analyzing and synthesizing the sensory information experienced by being in place (Lucas 2016; Dutoit 2008). This became a particularly useful tool to communicate observations and tacit knowledge (Polyani 1966) obtained after repeated site visits and ethnographic observations. Thus, the process of careful observation, measurements, and decisions between what should and what should not be included in a drawing helped and guided the analysis. The emerging field of Graphic Anthropology (Lucas 2017), closely connected to ethnographic drawing (Azevedo and Ramos 2016; Kuschnir 2016), provided a framework to allow drawing to respond to and reflect ethnographic knowledge acquired in the field.
Three shops are presented in this paper: all of them independently owned and located within the commercial core of Belfast city centre, but off the main shopping thoroughfares. The short descriptions that follow are meant to accompany the drawings in offering an interpretation of the places and people encountered. All the drawings originated as measured pencil drawings of the interior elevations of the shops. They were then scanned, traced, and redrawn off site using pencil, pen, or watercolour, after consulting the fieldwork notes and photographs. The careful plotting of people and objects in space offered a glimpse of the practices taking place in the shop, and revealed the atmosphere and character of the shop.

Tivoli (Figures 1 and 2)

Tivoli is a small barber shop with a continuous presence in the area of North Street for over one hundred years, owned by the same family since the 1930s. Currently located in No. 15 North Street, it is arguably one of the oldest barbershops in Belfast. Formica counters, traditional barber chairs fixed to the wooden floor, plain mirrors, and a wooden leather-covered bench all contribute to the old-fashioned interior of Tivoli. In lieu of a price list, a plain piece of paper propped up on two of the mirrors lists the price for the only thing on the menu: a haircut. The most striking feature of the shop is the innumerable posters, photographs, and other memorabilia covering every available inch of the walls, and even parts of the ceiling. Will, the current owner, started displaying things on the walls to ‘brighten up the place’ and to mask the decay of the previous premises. Gradually, barbers and customers alike contributed to a rich collection of movie posters, boxing advertisements, and pieces related to Tivoli’s as well as Belfast’s history. Notable is the absence of any symbols that would show the barbershop’s allegiance to either the Protestant or Catholic community.

Will promotes Tivoli at every opportunity, whether by commissioning artists to draw it or by being active in the local business group. Although not a barber himself, he has helped in the barbershop since he was a boy, initially sweeping floors and later taking care of finances. Three barbers are employed in Tivoli, two of whom are in their 50s and have been working in the barbershop for almost twenty years. Mike, the manager, in a mixture of pride and embarrassment, told me that ‘The location is good, the price is right and the standards of haircut are high, if I may say so’. Occupying the inner corner station of the counter, Mike keeps a watchful eye over the entrance and acknowledges every new customer with a friendly nod. While the area of North Street has been steadily facing dereliction and lack of maintenance for over twenty years, Tivoli remains a popular barbershop for an all-male clientele, spanning different age groups: from toddlers accompanied by their mothers, to people in their golden years, most of who have being regular clients for decades.

Café Red (Figures 3 and 4)

Café Red, located at No. 94 Castle Street, is a typical caff, or a ‘greasy spoon’. No. 94 has housed a café since c.1905, and was for over sixty years owned by the Forte family. One of the few Italian families residing in Belfast, the Fortes operated caffs amidst the Catholic west areas of the city. Louis Forte and his sister ran Forte’s Café while living above the shop between the 1950s and 1990s. The décor at the time followed the typical look of a caff with Formica counters, mosaic tiles, and leather booths, serving coffee and sandwiches. After Forte’s café closed, the premises changed hands a couple of times, offering versions of breakfast and quick bites until Café Red opened in 2015.
Run by Mary and her daughter Niamh, Café Red’s decor tries to evoke the atmosphere of a Parisian café, while serving hearty ‘Ulster frys’ under the sounds of a local pop radio station. The ‘Ulster fry’ is the local version of what is internationally known as an ‘English breakfast’: a meal popular with the working-class, typically consumed before lunch. This traditional ‘fry up’ includes any combination of bacon, sausage, eggs (fried, poached, or scrambled), soda bread, beans, tomato, and mushrooms, accompanied by tea or coffee. Mary is in charge of the kitchen, whose door is always open to regular customers for a quick exchange of the latest news. And with Mary busy cooking, Niamh swiftly takes orders and serves the tables. Despite the constant smell of fried oil, the café feels clean and tidy. Whether lonely shoppers stopping for a cup of tea, groups of workers from the neighbouring building site having breakfast, or people working on Castle Street popping in for a takeaway, Mary and Niamh’s warm smiles and affordable prices keep Café Red busy.

Atomic Collectables (Figure 5)

Atomic Collectables is a second-hand shop selling books, comic books, music, and other trinkets, based in No. 76 North Street. Open for about thirty-five years, it has frequently changed premises before settling along North Street in the early 2000s. Leslie, the owner, studied art and worked as an artist for a few years before opening Atomic Collectables. A collector of comic books and memorabilia himself, he projected his personality onto his shop. A long, narrow space overstocked with merchandise, Atomic sustains a stale smell mixed with a lingering cigarette smoke. Amongst the lines of shelves and rows of cardboard boxes one can discover anything from Star Trek Barbie dolls to a collection of hardbacks of nineteenth-century poetry or an LP of the Smiths. The opening hours depend heavily on Leslie’s mood, much like the music he plays on his LP player.

Atomic is one of a handful of shops catering for comic-book enthusiasts in Belfast. Its customer base consists of regulars who are looking for very particular things, passers-by as well as frequent visitors ‘killing time’. As Leslie is not the kind of shopkeeper who will welcome you in with a smile and offer to help, some customers come in and out of the shop without acknowledging him, while others will engage in long debates about the recent take on a Marvel superhero.

Closing Remarks

The everyday shops examined in this paper are all in their different ways significant parts of the streets on which they are based. By being places of repetitive practices and routine visits, they become fixed points (in both time and space) in the lives of the people running and visiting them, promoting their sense of place and sense of past. Shopkeepers in these independently run shops play a very important role in the character and atmosphere of the shop: through their personal and long-term involvement, they project their personality, taste, and attitude onto their shop. At the same time, regular visitors either having a haircut in Tivoli by the same barber every month, eating breakfast at the same table in Café Red every week, or hanging out in Atomic browsing comic books, are also leaving their trace on the shops, adding layers of meaning and importance. In this way, local, everyday shops can be seen both as carriers and enablers of everyday heritage, contributing to the urban landscape of the inner city streets they are located in. The use of drawing provided an alternative way to respond to and synthesize the diverse information acquired during fieldwork, as well as offer a rendering of the life of the shop.
Figure 1: Tivoli Barbershop: Barbers’ Station. Drawn by the author.

Figure 2: Tivoli Barbershop: Waiting Area. Drawn by the author.

Figure 3: Café Red: The Kitchen. Drawn by the author.
Figure 4: Café Red. Drawn by the author.

Figure 5: Atomic Collectables. Drawn by the author.
References


Acknowledgments

This paper stems from my doctoral research project funded by the Department of the Economy (DfE) of Northern Ireland.