Contested Sites; **an introduction**
Fiona Woods, 2018.

FREE*SPACE is a long-term project in the city of Limerick. It is a critical spatial practice that aims to disentangle lived space, as a material condition, from normative representations of space that serve the interests of power. The practice is influenced by the French theorist Henri Lefebvre, whose work on space has become central to understanding the way that spaces are socially constructed. Space is not a container for social life but one of its formative elements (Lefebvre, 1991). The kinds of spaces that are available to us shape the social practices that we engage in, and vice versa. Different ways of defining and controlling space not only mirror social relations and values but actually shape them (Stavrides, 2010). Practices such as urban planning, zoning, regulation, architecture, workspace design and infrastructural development give power and ideology a spatial form. So too do representations of space including maps, plans, public statements, policy documents and promotional materials.

While the political management of space depends on multiple forms of policing, it also relies on the production of a social imaginary (a set of values, institutions, laws, and symbols through which people imagine the social whole). The social order is produced and reproduced through such social imaginaries. In Limerick one of the representations of space that attempts to shape a dominant social imaginary of the city is the vision document *Limerick 2030*: *An Economic and Spatial Plan.* In addition to producing aspirational designs for economically beneficial spaces in the city centre, this document identifies the interests that will be prioritised in reshaping the city.

The first paragraph in the section on the Spatial Plan (fig. 1) uses the term business four times, in the context of the economic potential of the city. There is no mention of publics, users or citizens. The city centre is defined as a 'shop window', a place of consumption rather than public occupation. The second paragraph is even clearer. The city centre must provide quality of life factors that are 'so important to investors, employers and skilled workers'. The needs and desires of this group are prioritised.

Figure 1; *Limerick 2030*, LCCC, 2013: pg vi.

The first paragraph in the section on Marketing (fig. 2) suggests a 'place proposition' for Limerick, a rhetorical device that can function to discipline messages about the city and to inform aspects of the Limerick experience including 'behaviour'. The official message of the city will incorporate and promote a set of desirable 'behaviours'.
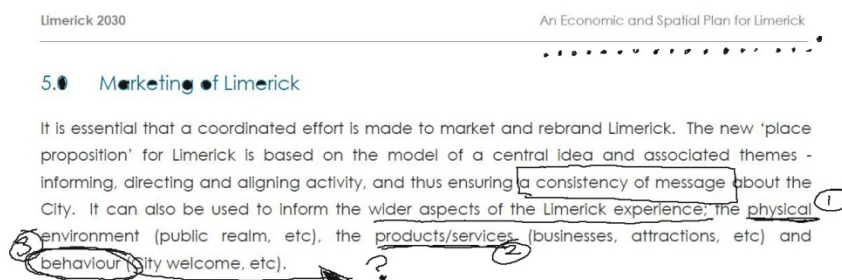

Figure 2; *Limerick 2030*, LCCC, 2013: pg xvi.

The plan arrives at four 'themes' to focus messaging around Limerick (related to the idea of desirable behaviours above) (fig.3): authentic is used twice, innovative four times, progressive twice. These values are 'the promise of what Limerick is'. The people of Limerick should be 'authentic, innovative, genuine, natural, real, welcoming, friendly, leaders and achievers'.

Collectively, the new proposition drives a strategy to attract, identify and/or retain and create focus to focus messaging and communications around Limerick.

This is in essence, a promise of what Limerick is, how it works and what it wants to be famous for. It embodies the cultural essence of Limerick as:

- An authentic place of substance with an impressive industrial and historic heritage;
- A place of authentic and innovative people – genuine, natural, real, welcoming, friendly, leaders and achievers; and
- A place that has an innovative, progressive outlook to knowledge and innovation – look at our education and business assets.
- A place that continues to exploit its natural resources with innovative and progressive ambition – low carbon economy, enhancing its green credentials.
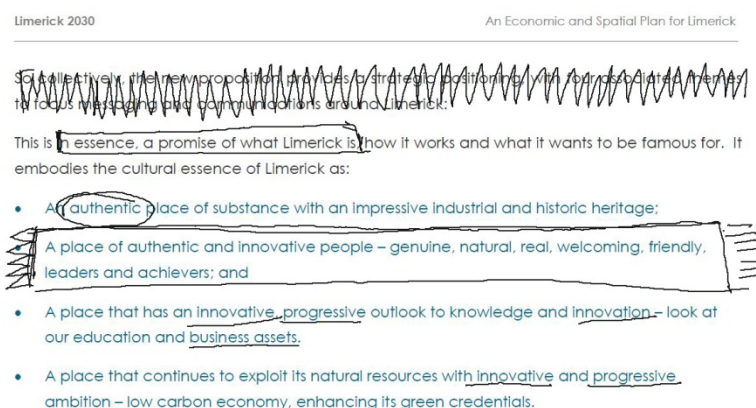
Figure 3; *Limerick 2030*, LCCC, 2013: pg vii.

These statements attempt to legitimate a set of norms about who is a desirable occupant of public space in the city and how they should behave. A vision is promoted that divides people into categories, those with economic or productive power and those without. The poor, the unproductive, the unassimilated, the non-conforming, the feeble – these people are rendered invisible, absent from the desired publics of the city.

Representations 'from above' like this one are highly resourced productions, interest driven and ideologically underpinned. They legitimate the interests of power in highly sophisticated ways that make those interests seem like nothing more than common sense. In contrast to these *Representations of Space* shaped by power, *Spaces of Representation* (the third node on Lefebvre's triad of spatial production, diagram opposite) emerge within the lived experiences of people. These are spaces where people make their own understandings and productions of space, where they occupy space in ways that do not completely conform to the official position, where they create contrary narratives. *Contested Sites* actions seek out fissures and fault-lines in the dominant production of space to generate contrary spaces of representation. Each *Contested Site* action involves another person from the city who identifies a site where spatial conditions are conflicting or contested. Sometimes the social imaginary of the space is in conflict with the material reality, sometimes contradictory logics are operating at the site. We work together to generate a representation of the site that is not necessarily coherent or complete, one that gathers together fragments and moments with which to forge a representation-from below.

Contested Site #4 is a co-production with an activist based in a regeneration area of Limerick. The activist selected the contested site because it exemplifies many of the conflicting logics that characterise discourses of regeneration in general, and of Limerick Regeneration in particular. Having been 'degenerated' over a period of years, 49 houses in Clarina Park were eventually demolished and the population of the estate dispersed, ostensibly to make way for new development. More than 10 years after this area was designated a regeneration area significant development has failed to materialise, a fact attributed to the financial crash of 2008. However, ideological opposition to social housing, as demonstrated by the current government, suggests that other forces may be working on this site. The Fitzgerald report of 2007 advocated 'unlocking the value of lands close to the city centre'. Transforming land into real estate, a shift from concrete space to abstract space in Lefebvre's terms, is a well-recognised strategy of neoliberal governance which seeks to embed market forces in all aspects of social life. The *Limerick Regeneration Framework Implementation Plan* (2014) recommends that private landlordism should be encouraged in regeneration areas, although private rented accommodation is very costly for the state when used as social housing (Hearne, 2017).

The rhetoric of 'community consultation' is a bone of contention with local people. What looks like consultation and participation on paper is a façade, according to the activist, little more than a smokescreen. The Resident's Forums were described by one Ballinacurra Weston resident as 'toothless. . . just a way to keep us quiet and pretend we were involved' (Regeneration Watch, n.d.); in 2013, Limerick Live 95 FM reported that 'a community group in St Mary's Park has resigned en masse in a row with Limerick City Council over the direction of the massive regeneration project. The nine-person group said they have no confidence in the current process as their concerns are being ignored by council officials' (Regeneration Watch, n.d.).

The field of possible experience and expression is structured by a 'regime of visibility', according to Jacques Rancière (2005: 20), which determines what can be seen, what can be heard and what can be said. The very terms by which some things are made visible excludes others which are invisibilized, creating a fragmented residue that struggles to appear in public discourse. However this residue can find unanticipated modes of address to constitute a performative, counter-public sphere (Warner, 2002) that amounts to a 're-framing of the real' (Rancière, 2010: 117). *Contested Sites* is oriented towards such a re-framing.

References

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