

## Housing memories: the Dublin Tenements' Museum

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### SUMMARY

The 14 Henrietta Street museum is located in a mid-18th century Georgian townhouse on Henrietta Street. It tells the story of the house from its origins as a residence for Dublin's elite to its incarnation as a tenement house for the city's working poor.

To bring the museum to life, it was necessary to gather and share the stories of people who had first-hand experience of the tenements. So, Dr Fitzgerald and her team conducted a four-year research project to examine the memories of people who lived in tenements on Henrietta Street from the 1930s to the 1970s. The findings enrich the museum experience through the narratives, curated exhibited materials, audio exhibits, and theatre productions.

The core museum exhibit is Mrs. Dowling's Flat, a re-created tenement based on the interviews carried out by Dr Fitzgerald and her team. The museum has been critically successful and hugely popular with the public.

"Without the oral history research undertaken by Dr Fitzgerald and her team for the museum project it would lack the soul necessary for the public to understand a core aspect of urban life in Dublin in the twentieth century."

– Charles Duggan, Heritage Officer, Dublin City Council

### RESEARCH DESCRIPTION

Assistant Professor Kelly Fitzgerald led a team of researchers, including academic researcher Dr Brian Hanley, to create a new way of gathering and using oral histories, and to present the results as parts of a museum exhibition.

This work took place over a four-year period, from 2013-2017, in consultation with Charles Duggan, Heritage Officer at Dublin City Council, who was the museum project manager, and Dr Ellen Rowley, the museum project curator.

Until this research was undertaken, the material culture of Dublin's urban working-class life was not well represented in publicly accessible museums and collections, and there was limited academic work on the subject.

To bring the museum to life, Dr Fitzgerald and her team took a number of steps to build a repository of recorded oral histories. The first step was to identify former residents from the Henrietta Street area, so Dr Fitzgerald launched initiatives to announce the research project, including radio announcements, newspaper advertisements and word of mouth.



*Reminiscence Evening. On the pictured evening residents commented on household items and associated memories to ensure an authenticity in the museum.*

The initial event was a reminiscence evening held in 14 Henrietta Street to begin a process in which people recollect their time in this community. The process also included formal and informal interviews and open days. Before construction work began, Dr Fitzgerald facilitated the first residents' evening in the museum, which allowed memories to come to the fore since most present that evening had not been back in over 40 years. People reconnected with former friends and neighbours they had not seen in decades.

The research project engaged with a core group of around 35 members who attended various reminiscence evenings, participated in individual interviews, and took part in 'Remembering the Tenements Days' engagement events. The culmination of the three types of events yielded audio, video and photographic material that illuminate the late 20th century tenement way of living. This material has been included in the curation and presentation of Mrs. Dowling's Flat.

This research project closed the gap between early 20th century knowledge about tenements gleaned from archival sources and the end of extensive tenement occupancy of the 1970s.



'Remembering the Tenements Day' flyer, 16/04/2016.

## RESEARCH IMPACT

### Cultural impact

The research led to a major shift in the understanding of tenement houses, and led to a new approach to museum curation. Ultimately, the research created a more meaningful approach to the museum's development and to the re-creation and presentation of rooms from different periods reflecting the house's history.

These rooms included a mid-18th century entrance hall, late 18th century piano nobile rooms, an early period basement tenement flat (based on a collection of photographs from 1913), and most importantly, Mrs. Dowling's Flat, where both physical evidence and memory were crucial to its re-creation and sense of authenticity.

The research demonstrated that upkeep of and pride in the home was core to tenement life. At the initial research-gathering event, a former resident was asked what they thought of the house as it then was (abandoned since the 1980s). She replied: "It's a disgrace. We would never have left the place looking like this."

The building conservation strategy and the curatorial approach to the museum were both responsive to such insights, which were gathered through the oral history interviews and group events.

Charles Duggan, Heritage Officer, stated: "Until that point we had interpreted the received condition archaeologically, that is, as evidence of the gradual passing of time, that the peeling paint surfaces were a palimpsest of historical significance."

UCD's underpinning research provided "a true understanding of tenement life much of which is in direct contrast to public perceptions of tenement life prior to engaging with the exhibition. Although times were difficult and poverty was pervasive it was not purely a life of squalor."

The enduring academic and cultural impact of the project, particularly in terms of the tenement flat, is a deeper understanding and awareness of how people actually lived. The interviews conducted by Dr Fitzgerald and her team guided the design of conservation works in the former tenement and are central to the museum exhibition, which opened in September 2018.

The innovative partnership between a local community, a local government agency and members of the academic community created a ground-breaking space and co-operative that authentically presents the personal narrative. The partnership between academia and Dublin City Council has fostered new networks between local voluntary and community groups and their members, totalling another 30-40 key, secondary participants.



## Social and economic impact

The primary social impact of the research lies in the reunion and re-establishment of the community of former residents who contributed material to the research and the museum.

The museum also created economic impact by contributing to employment in the north inner-city in the highly sought-after heritage sector. The Dublin Tenements' Museum is now a key site on Dublin's tourism trail, bringing around 1600 visitors a month. This was a local initiative, yet the underlying research afforded it an international standard of cultural tourism.

The lead architect, Gráinne Shaffrey, told Dr Fitzgerald that the original project brief stated 'the building is the primary artefact'. However, Dr Fitzgerald's exposure to the oral history work showed her the 'primary artefact' was deeper than that – it involved the house, its fabric, and how they represented the memories of former occupants. Her commitment to the 'oral artefacts' was apparent as she volunteered at a 'Remembering the Tenements Day' in December 2016.

In tandem with the exhibition work of the museum, Dr Fitzgerald worked with ANU Productions to develop a play, 'Hentown', based on the oral history material and other testimonials. 'Hentown' was performed a number of times a day, often sold-out, in 14 Henrietta Street during August, September and October of 2017, and won the Audience Choice Award in the 2018 Irish Times Theatre Awards.

## REFERENCES

### The Museum

14 Henrietta Street:  
<https://14henriettastreet.ie/restoring-300-years/>

'Hentown', a Theatre production based on oral histories from the tenements, performed in 14 Henrietta Street in the summer of 2017:  
<https://vimeo.com/288438455>

### Awards

14 Henrietta Street has received numerous awards including the RIAI Conservation Award and Best Overall project in 2018.

The museum project received a Special Mention of the Jury for the European Union Prize for Cultural Heritage, Europa Nostra Awards, 2018.

### Funding

€25,000 grant received from Dublin City Council in 2015.  
 Support-in-kind from the National Folklore Foundation.

### Research references

Duggan C. 'The Making of a Tenement Museum: A Report on 14 Henrietta Street, Dublin 1'. *Béalóideas: The Journal of the Folklore of Ireland Society*. 2016; 84: 133-143.

*Kitchen created from memories, which is now on exhibition in the museum.*

