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An Interim Institution: Between Ruin and Restoration at St Peter's Seminary

In 1966 the Scottish Brutalist building of St Peter's Seminary (designed by Gillespie, Kidd & Coia) was completed; by the late 1980s it was almost a ruin. The building had been subject to larger processes of change within its commissioning institution, the Roman Catholic Church. St Peter's Seminary has recently become the focus of a new institution, The Invisible College, which imagines how the grounds of Kilmahew, which contain the seminary, can be put to productive use prior to and during its restoration. This paper will examine The Invisible College – formed by a coalition of policy makers, academics, locals and activists – as it provides opportunity to compare the formation of the seminary in the mid-twentieth century with its contemporary redevelopment. The current plans for the seminary building will be considered through the lens of interim use, as part of the newly identified 'civic economy', which signals the emergence of new types of institutions that are constructing a change in contemporary society. By contrasting the two periods, this paper will theorise shifts in the construction of institutions, which moves from top-down delivery to participatory, incremental models. Within this institutional transformation, the interim period between ruin and restoration at Kilmahew also provides an opportunity for architecture to reframe its mode of operation.



Fig. 1 Print of an original photo of the sanctuary in St Peter's Seminary, designed by Gillespie, Kidd & Coia (taken from Gillespie, Kidd & Coia Archive, Glasgow School of Art), taped on the front gates of building during a workshop. Photograph by JK, 1971, www.flickr.com/photos/jkfm/3918673023.

In the interim

St Peter's Seminary stands on the grounds of Kilmahew, 40 kilometres north-west of Glasgow, Scotland, neither as "ruin or icon"¹ but as a building under rapid decay before it even turns 50. Thirty-five years after the seminary was closed, the pure forms of its Brutalist architecture are already vulnerable: "Reinforcement bars are rusting and destroying the concrete from inside, even as it spalls on the outside, and toxic asbestos lurks in walls and in mounds of rubble."² The quick deterioration of the building has been exacerbated by multiple forces: the decline in the Catholic Church's financial fortunes, liturgical changes, a lack of maintenance, poor weatherproofing and the inability of market-based proposals to develop the site after the priesthood vacated the building.³ In the period between cessation of formal ecclesiastical activity and current redevelopment plans, many interim uses have materialised from both the unsanctioned – dog-walking, dance parties, arson – and from the authorised – artistic interventions and university research projects.

Interim use on temporarily vacant land has been extensively documented in architecture and urbanism discourse in the previous decade.⁴ In the context of urban development, the interim is described as the period of time between the termination of the site's previous function and the moment of its redevelopment through new program and building works for its maximal use. The interim site appears as vacant, unoccupied, dormant, on hold. As a number of recent commentators have argued, the interim potentially provides a moment outside of property market cycles when the land has little immediate economic value and alternative uses can be explored.⁵ Interim use may include: a temporary leisure facility, community hub, collective working space, artistic intervention or impermanent cultural platform amongst others. The interim period is celebrated for its ability to be "a radical approach to reinvestment [that] emphasises use over exchange." Interim use values "disinvested space"⁶ – even if only for a limited period of time (because interim use is defined as temporary).

Interim use has emerged as an area of interest and activity in recent years partly due to the increase of vacant properties in wealthy economies. Under neoliberalisation, there has been

an increase in the tying of property to its exchange value (reselling for profit) rather than its use value.⁷ Vacant property can emerge when building stock has lost its capacity to be sold at profit. As a result further maintenance and investment is not undertaken because it cannot be recouped through rental income.⁸ With capital frozen in soil, steel and concrete, properties can lay vacant for a short six months or several years.

The failure of the property market through the persistence of vacant land is one of many by-products that have appeared in the urban environment as it is calibrated as an engine for economic growth under the project of neoliberalisation in the late twentieth century.⁹ Neoliberalisation is an ideology that the market, liberated from state intervention, is the most efficient allocation of resources, including for economic development.¹⁰ There are various interpretations of neoliberalisation, its actualisation and the consequential critique.¹¹ In parallel with this critique is an interest in alternative forms of social and economic organisation in order to “find alternative ways of organising our economy, as well as the institutions and practices that support and sustain it.”¹²

Architect Indy Johar optimistically describes an emerging paradigm to overcome market failures as the new civic economy, “one which is fundamentally both open and social. It’s an economy which is fusing the culture of web 2.0 with civic purpose.”¹³ Johar outlines two factors underpinning this civic economy: a transformation in how humans collaborate and communicate, and a desire for shared and sustainable prosperity. Johar believes these characteristics signify a social move towards the shared enterprise of production and use, one that moves beyond the simplistic duality of market and state. Some new enterprise modes that are of significance to architectural planning and production include:

property management and land stewardship through community land trusts, asset transfers and leases, social enterprises, and community real estate or development cooperatives. It extends to innovative and incremental credit systems, such as peer-to-peer lending, user financing, time banking, local currencies, and forms of venture funding and crowd-funding based on both equity and reward models.¹⁴

These intensely collaborative and distributive models have the potential to expand architecture beyond a design and build focus to the co-creation of its own budget and briefs.

This purported transition to a new type of economy will have a dramatic impact on the built environment claims Johar. In particular, it will impact upon how architecture is created beyond the making of space to its models or organisation, ownership and resourcing.¹⁵ This will require new types of institutions as many of our public institutions were founded in the nineteenth century, and preparing for the twenty-first century requires a different lens.¹⁶ It is important to clarify here that the demand to construct new institutions is not the same as constructing new buildings. “An institution represents a social order or pattern that has attained a certain state or property”¹⁷, which is different to architectural definitions that conflate organisations with certain kinds of building types, architectural symbolism and planning.

The interim period may be a crack from which new ‘civic’ institutions may emerge, which is identified by Indy Johar through several examples in *Compendium for the Civic Economy*. Within these temporal moments, an interim-use project may become a step towards other ways of imagining the urban environment. As a group of interim-use project makers recently observed of projects in the interim:

The advantage of this approach is its ability to test out and prototype ideas in the physical world; act as an interface with the local neighbourhood; open up the process to the wider community; and experiment with new forms of institution building, exploring how governments, developers and citizens might work together better.¹⁸

This potential has seen an increase in the interim period being used for temporary or transitional projects in long-term urban frameworks by planners, developers and citizens as it can become complementary to top-down planning process, including for the restoration of St Peter’s Seminary.

St Peter’s Seminary: cycles of institutional change

The contemporary redevelopment of St Peter’s Seminary must first be understood within the context of its creation as a religious building. A comparison of the two projects – St Peter’s and the Invisible College – reveals the indivisibility of spatial program and institution in both designs. In both projects the timing of decisions, policies and opportunities is significant. In the case of St Peter’s significant changes in its commissioning body occurred whilst the building was under construction, rendering the building partly anachronistic even before completion. On the other hand, the Invisible College project reveals the value of the interim – of an in-between time – as an opportune window in which to experiment with institutional change rather than a moment lost to time.

At the height of the British post-war boom in 1953, the Roman Catholic Archdiocese commissioned Gillespie, Kidd & Coia to design a new seminary for St Peter’s College adjacent to an existing nineteenth-century baronial mansion. After a delay due to financial reasons, the seminary design was revised in 1959 with the first soil turned in 1960.¹⁹ The clergy finally moved in during 1966.²⁰ The process from briefing to completion took approximately a decade. In this interim period, theological students occupied the existing mansion for their studies surrounded by fifteenth-century castle ruins and several centuries-old follies.



Fig. 2 Archbishop Scanlan laying the foundation stone of St Peter’s before the “entire hierarchy of Scotland”, September 8, 1964. © RCAHMS.

The original 1953 brief for the project included accommodation for 115 students, a library, a chapel, some dining facilities, classrooms, a convent block, and a swimming pool (though the pool was later deleted from the brief.). This brief was developed between the technical experts of space (the architects) and the religious leadership (solely with the local archbishop).²¹ In response to the brief, the architects created four connected buildings that wrapped around the existing mansion. The almost-religious faith in the autonomous expertise of the architect and their visionary response²² is represented by every aspect of the facility being planned, right down to the interior colours, furniture layout, and even the light bulbs. "The specification of hard-to-replace lightbulbs from Denmark meant that students would take still functioning bulbs to meals with them, for fear they would be un-Christianly pinched."²³ The design also reflected liturgical spatial organisation of the church that had remained vastly unchanged since the sixteenth century: the new building contained individual cells for each priest, which cantilevered above the communal spaces for Catholic liturgy, placing the public act of worship in the sanctuary chapel and refectory at the building's heart. The liturgy manifests at St Peter's in a semi-monastic manner with these individual bedroom cells along with the isolation of the building distant from Catholic communities.

The design and production of St Peter's occurred during the confluence of dramatic changes in ecclesiastical ideologies.²⁴ During the construction of St Peter's Seminary, the second Vatican council of 1962-65 announced changes to the liturgy that demanded greater lay participation within the ritual of Mass. The priest would no longer be physically separated from the congregation during Mass, nor linguistically separated by the performance of Mass in Latin. Almost immediately in parallel with its design development, parts of the brief and the spatial arrangements became anachronistic. In 1964 the Vatican produced a document *Inter Oecumencici* that included "a chapter on building church altars for active participation."²⁵ The text detailed variations in plan, moving church design beyond the longitudinal crucifix form to other spatial arrangements. Liturgical changes also required a repositioning of the sanctuary and altar to the floor level of the congregation in order that the church was accessible to the community. As St Peter's was formed during these dramatic changes, many of the seminary's programmatic elements were no longer apt for the reforming church.²⁶ The ten-side chapels adjacent to the sanctuary were made redundant as individual worship was discouraged; the raised altar was no longer appropriate as it was spatially distant from the congregation; the monk-like cells kept the trainee priests mentally and physically far from Catholic communities. This is reflected in the words of former lecturer Friar James Foley "There was a false monasticism inherent in the design, a modernisation of the monastic concept. But the diocesan clergy were not meant to be monks!"²⁷ The building was less able to adapt to these liturgical changes.

A number of other factors further contributed to the decline of the seminary and its eventual closure in 1980. In part these could be characterised as significant changes with the economic and social power of the commissioning institution, as the Scottish Catholic Church's financial health declined and the church experienced a decrease in ordinations. There were further technical issues with the building's construction.²⁸ Water penetration was

a concern throughout the occupation of the building, and the occupants reported “a record number of fifty-three leaks in the sanctuary lantern ... after very heavy rain” in 1967.²⁹ After the deconsecration of St Peter’s along with the departure of the seminarians, the church continued to use the collection of buildings for its social services department as a drug detoxification and rehabilitation centre from 1983-87. The building continued to deteriorate without sufficient funds for maintenance. It was closed in 1987.

Market-based approaches to rehabilitate the site were proposed, including the church itself who wished to demolish the buildings and construct 22 private dwellings; another church planning application proposed a conference centre; another a police training college.³⁰ Developer Urban Splash advanced plans with Gareth Hoskins Architects for a mixed-used leisure centre and housing just prior to the Global Financial Crisis.³¹ Many plans were made, including “failed attempts by planners and developers whose focus was to first and foremost preserve the buildings.” The building itself undermined financial viability³² because the seminary’s monofunctionalism seriously hindered alternative programs because its structure and planning was static in juxtaposition to the changing demands of the religious institution (and later the market). The institution had ‘moved on’, but the building could not. Without program or purpose, the building was left as an institutional ruin.



Fig. 3 Oblique aerial view of St Peter’s taken from the east after the demolition of Kilmahew House. From RCAHMS Aerial Photography. © RCAHMS.

Kilmahew/St Peter’s

The interim period between the formal closure of St Peter’s and its future fortunes (whether ruined or restored) has opened up unconventional and unregulated uses of the site by a multitude of users. Suspended in this ambiguous state, St Peter’s Seminary became the scene of many unsanctioned cultural activities (porn films, music video clips, raves) and users (architectural enthusiasts, leisure-seekers, pyromaniacs). By the mid-1990s, “any

clue to its original religious purpose has been almost eroded to nothing, the sacred has long since disappeared under layers of the profane.”³³ In particular, the most divine floating interior space dedicated to liturgy was devoid of its original timber. “The three-flight staircase with most of its treads missing; looking upwards here is one of many Piranesian moments.”³⁴ This ruinous state appealed to one the original design architects Isi Metstein. He stated, “I would enjoy the idea of everything being stripped away except the concrete itself – a purely romantic conception of the building as a beautiful ruin.”³⁵ But not everyone was content to let the building fall into romantic decrepitude.



Fig. 4 A 'Piranesian moment' at St Peter's.
Photograph by Andy Magee,
www.flickr.com/photos/amagee3/6062824805.

Unsanctioned interim-use of the site along with the revision of Brutalism in architectural discourse³⁶ increased the mythology and popularity of the building in Scotland until significant pressure mounted on the property owners and government to rehabilitate the site as the building continued to fall into ruin, which made it unsafe for the uninvited users. In 2009, after failed attempts to resurrect the site under market conditions, public arts organisation NVA³⁷ became involved with Kilmahew when it received a grant to create artwork in the grounds. NVA saw a greater opportunity in the investigation of how the building could be returned to its original condition. In their 2010 Commission Plan³⁸, NVA proposed an iterative process to redevelop the entire site, not just St Peter's. The document stated: “Using a procedural model, each action generates the next idea or intervention ... we wish to create a place that allows people to participate in making their own narratives.”³⁹ The building's recent history now begun to inform ideas about its present use. The Commission Plan document included a desire for the preservation of some ruination rather than an entire restoration of the building to a pristine state. This document outlines three architectural strategies for the rehabilitation of the building: repair (make good), upgrade (improve and replace) and intervention (adapt building to new uses).

In line with a procedural or incremental process, NVA begun occupying the site in the interim. It saw this as a way “to bring a lot of individual smaller decisions to something that was, by its nature, one big decision, one big move.”⁴⁰ Interim activities are part of a broader design strategy to create an iterative design process that decreases the distance between producer and user and engages a wider group of people in the process. It moves from a

classical position on authorial intention to one that encourages difference, local specificity and micro-politics. This is distinctly different to the earlier approach at Kilmahew, which was a top-down approach to design with the organisation of major Catholic rituals and relationships driven by the architects under instruction of the Vatican via the archbishop.

Interdisciplinary research was part of the interim process to investigate the potential of the site in order to connect local participation, academic research and design practice. This project is entitled The Invisible College, which began as a conversation at the 2010 Venice Architecture Biennale as a series of questions about what to do with the building as part of Scotland's entrant To Have and to Hold: Future of a Contested Landscape. The conversations, research and ideas that began in Venice evolved into a funded project in 2012 with the brief to be "a research network linking local people, world-class academics, artists, activists and writers."⁴¹ The intention of making these connections is to not only create stronger links between academic research and design practice, but also to provide a platform where a feedback loop can be created between the fields.

The presumption of The Invisible College events is that they would explore the idea of a future college for the site, like that of St Peter's, but in the broadest sense. The website goes further to state that it would: "envisage Kilmahew St Peters as a field station of the future where active protagonists can undertake all sorts of active landscape experiments where the site itself is the subject matter." This sees academics removed from their traditional context in "a horizontal way of working and learning where no particular expertise was valued higher than another area of expertise."⁴² The intentions of The Invisible College is the antithesis to St Peter's because its function is less defined, its pedagogical approach is fluid and its pupils create their own pathways. Also by functioning in the landscape, it exits the sealed building to the outside world.

Between 2012 and 2013 The Invisible College held three workshops on site (with over 60 participants at each), which explored, mapped and documented the site to begin conversations about what were possible futures at the location. Each workshop was evaluated and the impact measured as a means of informing the next workshop. Also as part of The Invisible College, local volunteers revitalised the Victorian 'walled garden', which was the former kitchen gardens first established in 1866. (Its first harvest was reaped in September 2012). In parallel, writers and academic researchers have been delivering lectures, seminars and papers off-site, assisting in informing debate and opening up opportunities for further funded research focused on the site.

"The best thing that happened was a picnic between activities," remarks Professor Alan Pert, one of the conveners of The Invisible College.⁴³ "Sixty people from various backgrounds sat in the walled garden eating potatoes that were grown there. It was a great experience where different people shared ideas, visions and observations. People stood up in front of the group and said what they felt." The content of The Invisible College – workshops, symposiums, artistic interventions, audio trails, or the picnic – are not revolutionary actions in themselves, but nevertheless, important questions do arise. Pert acknowledges this

observation: "It was the conversations that were happening at the picnic about the future of the site were more important than the actual event itself."⁴⁴ The form of the collegiate event may not be as interesting as the transformation that occurs in the people involved, the processes that are generated or the conversations that take place. "To enable oneself as a researcher to imagine other realities, avoid deterministic theorizing and bring the difference and diversity of social and economic worlds and practices to light could come before the first step to actually change reality."⁴⁵ The interim activity becomes a transitional step in the redesign of conventional or institutionalised ways of thinking for architects and academics alike.

The Invisible College operated, in part, as a strategy to move the 25 year architectural, heritage and social imagining of the site *beyond* the complete reparation of the Brutalist building. "A lot of what we did in first year of The Invisible College was to investigate the site through different lenses," states Pert.⁴⁶ "It suffered from the public perception that the rehabilitation of Kilmahew was about architects fetishising the building. What NVA and The Invisible College managed to do was take the focus away from the building and think about the landscape, and change the perception of the place." This was a significant change as governmental and philanthropic funding bodies were focusing on the rehabilitation of the building rather than the entire landscape.

The interim activity of The Invisible College has become a protagonist in the design process by making the site productive through exploring and expanding the brief and investigating itself as a future client. The Invisible College will continue on site with the assistance of 'Connected Communities' Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funding. Activating the site also generated legitimacy for the stakeholders in raising funds for the project through being a visible prototype of what is to come. It becomes a way to immediately engage the site rather than to work through abstracted and sometimes imprecise claims of the 'public good' or 'community engagement'. As of mid-January 2015, the NVA "has persuaded the Heritage Lottery Fund and other public and private donors to contribute £5m towards rescuing the building."⁴⁷ To rescue something is different to restoration. Restoration implies the return of a building to its former condition. Rescuing signifies to bring the building back from harm or danger.

While raising funds, NVA held a two-round competition to select the architect to work with Avanti Architects and NVA on St Peter's restoration. NORD was the eventual winner, whose director is Alan Pert from The Invisible College. The new design will occur in phases. The first moves are to make the place safe (such as by removing asbestos in March 2015), consolidate the ruin, and minimise the effects of weather. The preference of the architects NORD is to let the rest of the brief to be dictated by the demand of cultural events across the site. "Every event can dictate what happens next. If this requires a wall, then there will be a decision whether the wall becomes permanent or not," comments Pert.⁴⁸ This approach sees the architectural process introduce the accidental and improvisational into the design process rather than a determined and linear pathway.

An incremental approach was not fully embraced by stakeholders. Pert says, "When you

have government money and architectural heritage money they want a five-year business plan. The funding regime needs comfort.⁴⁹ This has forced a business case and design brief for the first phase, which includes various scales of cultural spaces: a 600-seat performance space, educational spaces, a productive garden and pathways across 144 acres.⁵⁰ Events are still triggering the design brief. Scotland celebrates 2016 as the year of architecture, innovation and design, with Kilmahew/St Peter's hosting the launch event in early 2016. This 2016 event is further driving the development of the project brief.

Conclusion

The notion of the civic economy revolves around increased collaboration, communication and co-production that shepherds in new coalitions of organising the economy and society. This is witnessed at Kilmahew/St Peter's. Institutional failure to rehabilitate the building and the surrounding landscape was not overcome by existing market and state institutions. It was driven by a non-profit organisation NVA leading a constellation of individuals and groups. Interim use, an architectural tool aligned with the civic economy, has forged the institution of The Invisible College in parallel with institutionalising incremental design within the architectural process. In the case of Kilmahew/St Peter's, the contemporary design process has re-engaged the local and wider Scottish community with the site while nurturing the emergence of The Invisible College. The archdiocese has recognised the civic gesture of this process and will gift the swathe of land back to the public in 2016. In 2017, 50 years after the original foundation stone was laid at St Peter's, the site will be officially reopened, which includes hosting The Invisible College.

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