

AREA

ADAPTIVE REUSE
OF EXISTING ASSETS



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Foreword: Maximising the Potential of Public Assets in Northern Ireland

These stories are intended to help Northern Ireland's public sector make better use of its estate. They provide a series of examples that show how organisations have made good use of abandoned sites, derelict infrastructure, and disused buildings, transforming them for the benefit of the communities in which they are located.



These transformations have not simply benefitted the occupants; they have revitalised towns, villages, and neighbourhoods, strengthened local regeneration and nurtured cohesion.

The individuals and teams who identified the potential of these sites and the people who brought new life to these overlooked or underappreciated places have made a

significant contribution to the region and deserve our thanks. I hope that others will take inspiration from their work and go on to develop the further potential of our existing estate, benefitting the people of Northern Ireland and generations to come.

Brett Hannam

Chief Executive, Strategic Investment Board

Introduction

Maximising our existing resources, reducing carbon emissions and building community cohesion are central tenets of the NI Executive's plan for Northern Ireland. These core objectives are outlined in the Draft Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland (ISNI) and the Adaptive Re-Use of Existing Assets aligns perfectly with this strategic framework, as well as several regulatory commitments, strategic frameworks and environmental benchmarks set by both the NI government and key professional entities.

These include:

- The Draft Investment Strategy for NI
- NI draft Emissions Reductions Targets & Carbon Budgets
- The Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022
- The Draft Green Growth Strategy
- The journey towards 'Net Zero' in NI
- Draft Circular Economy Strategy for NI
- RICS's Whole Life Carbon Assessment Standard
- RIBA's innovative strides towards repurposing, as evident in their 'Reinvention' awards
- Net Zero Carbon Buildings Standards (in development)

There are, of course, resources available featuring similar inspirational regeneration projects from across the globe. However, Northern Ireland's particular mix of assets is unique to our industrial past, the legacy of the recent conflict and the post-conflict regeneration of city and town centres. This mix of assets and infrastructure makes for a unique set of circumstances, complexities and challenges that deserve examination - and recognition for the individuals who have steered a course through them.

We've tried to represent projects from across Northern Ireland and focussed on the common types of infrastructure that many council teams and other local stakeholders will be familiar with. From disused courthouses and bank buildings to surplus parts of the health or education estate, as well as many, many more.

In showcasing their stories, we hope to inspire asset owners to think differently about what the future of these buildings or sites could be and how they can answer the needs of local councils and communities.

We also have tried to highlight some of the challenges the project owners have overcome along the way. Regenerating old buildings, particularly those with 'listed' status adds additional risk and often, cost. Many of the projects featured have steered a course through these challenges and their stories highlight some important lessons and inventive approaches that have led to their success.

As we compiled these case studies a few recurring themes emerged:

- The importance of experienced contractor/partners
- The importance of (appropriate) flexibility in the planning process
- The competing priorities of Heritage vs. Warranties vs. Building Control
- The value of GIS mapping in linking public sector projects together
- The difficulty of securing funding and the reporting requirements of funding partners

- Issues around VAT (new build being a more VAT-efficient route currently)
- The disincentive to regenerate unused property in our current approach to rates
- The difficulty of demonstrating and quantifying carbon reduction
- The importance of community involvement in creating the innovative thinking that instigates the project
- The importance of commercial viability
- How projects can contribute to wider programmes such as 'Living High Streets'

It is worth noting that all of these issues are within the remit of either local or central government organisations with the support of those groups established for the benefit of the built environment in general. For those keen on further exploration, a comprehensive list, complete with contact details of project managers, accompanies these case studies. I'd encourage readers to reach out to the named contacts for advice or guidance if they have a similar project in mind.

In conclusion, this document hopes to show that our built heritage is an asset rather than a liability and to allow council teams and other stakeholders to connect with the expertise created through the projects highlighted here. By offering tangible examples of the beauty of adaptive reuse, we hope to instil the ethos of 'doing more with what we have' as a standard practice. In doing so, we can protect our built heritage, reduce carbon emissions and build stronger, more connected communities.

Colin McCrossan & Gerry Millar
Strategic Advisers, Strategic Investment Board

A symphony of culture on Bangor's Seafront



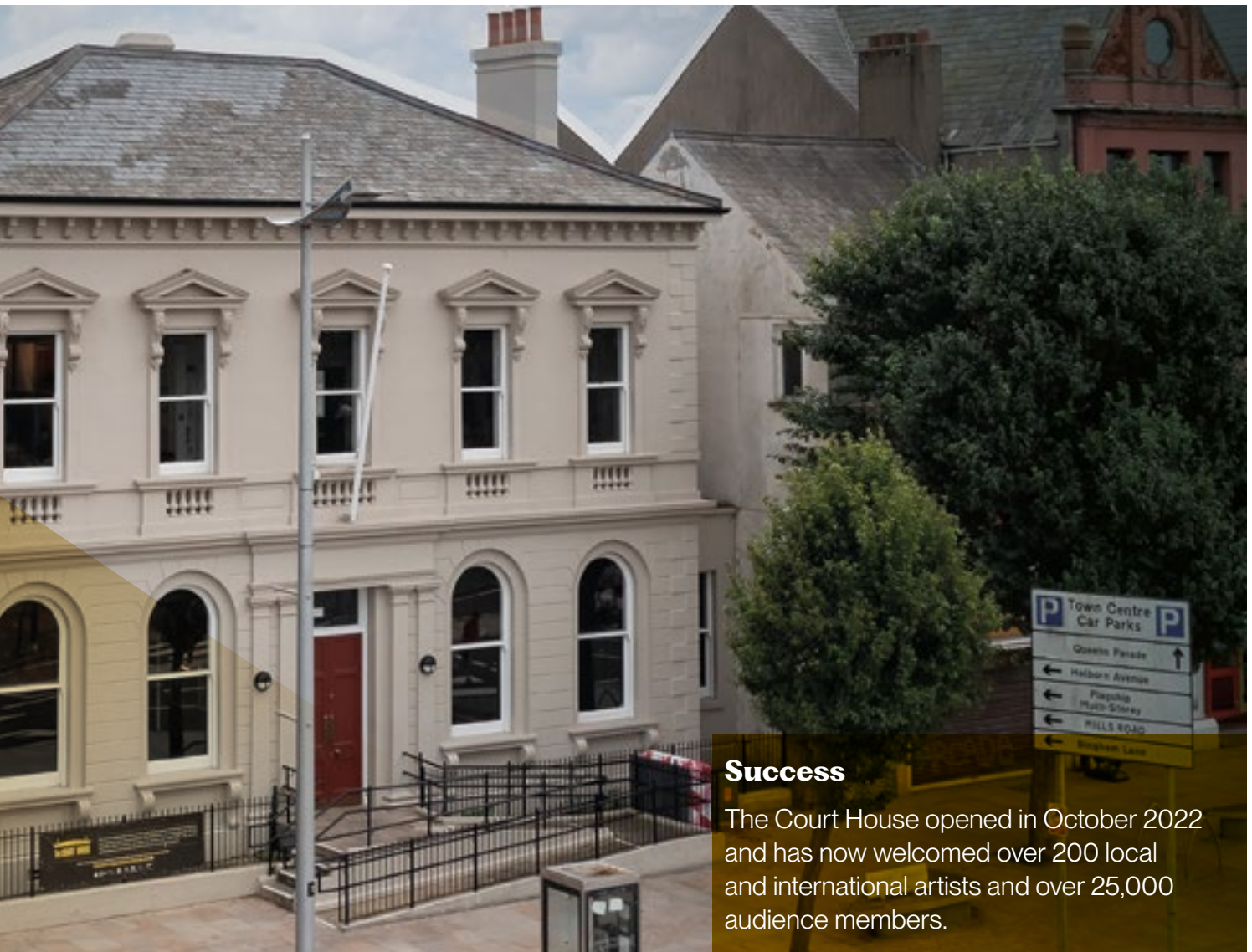
The Court House, Bangor

Facing the North Down coastline, right in the heart of Bangor, The Court House has transformed from a centre of justice to a hub for arts and culture. The Victorian B1 listed building was built as a bank in 1866 and was converted to a magistrate's court in 1954.

Decommissioned in 2013, The Court House lay empty until Open House, a local music and arts charity took ownership in December 2020 via Northern Ireland's first-ever Community Asset Transfer. It now hosts a year-round programme of live music, comedy and cinema, placing Bangor on the map as a centre for arts and culture.

INSPIRATION

Charlie Fisher from Development Trusts NI spotted the opportunity for The Court House when it was publicised by the Department of Justice as a potential asset disposal. Knowing that the arts charity was looking for a base of operations in central Bangor, he approached Open House to help them develop a proposal.



Success

The Court House opened in October 2022 and has now welcomed over 200 local and international artists and over 25,000 audience members.

CHALLENGES

The proposal process was far from straightforward as Open House faced the challenge of transforming itself from an arts charity with an annual festival to a year-round hospitality business with the capability to oversee a significant listed-building redevelopment.

To ensure success, Open House recruited a broad spectrum of highly experienced professionals for their volunteer board - ensuring they could call upon expertise in asset management, quantity surveying, finance and hospitality management.

The board provided was therefore a very convincing prospect for sponsor bodies and funders including Heritage Lottery Fund.

Additional support was realised through crowdfunding, salvaging fixtures from nearby buildings and creating a trading company to maximise tax efficiencies.



A Growing Community



Donegall Pass Community Garden, Belfast

Donegall Pass Community Garden, at the corner of Conduit Street and Donegall Pass, transformed an area of derelict land into a thriving horticultural space and community hub.

This corner site was once occupied by a building owned by Belfast Education and Library Board, but throughout the 1990s, it fell into disuse and disrepair, eventually becoming a hazard.

INSPIRATION

The Donegall Pass Community Forum lobbied Belfast Education and Library Board for the building's demolition, which was carried out in 2010. After the land was cleared, hoardings were erected around the site but were poorly maintained, leaving the space open to fly-tipping and anti-social behaviour.

Elaine Mansfield, Managing Director of Donegall Pass Community Forum, explains,

“This derelict site was highly visible to passing traffic but even more importantly, it became emblematic of the lack of investment in the area for residents.”



Success

Since opening in 2015, the Donegall Pass Community Garden has received multiple awards and gained local and national news coverage.

The garden frequently hosts events, welcoming thousands of visitors to the area. Events include nutrition workshops, helping local residents learn more about healthy eating and redistributing the fresh seasonal fruits and vegetables grown in the garden. The garden regularly hosts 'grow your own' classes for kitchen garden enthusiasts and hanging basket workshops which help the community look after their well-being and further improve the visual appeal of the neighbourhood.

Elaine Mansfield concludes, "A community garden is more than just a tranquil space in a busy urban location. This garden offers a hub for local people to meet, connect, and work together, literally and figuratively, to create something beautiful and beneficial for the community."

CHALLENGES

The proposed redevelopment wasn't without its challenges. Initial expectations included a replacement building for community use to include the Youth Club which had once been hosted on this site. However, the cost of construction and ongoing management liabilities ruled this out.

The Community Forum engaged with key stakeholders, hosting several community engagement events to discuss the challenges and create a shared vision for the space. Through this process, multiple stakeholders and potential user groups identified themselves, and the Forum began to see the huge potential a Community Garden could offer.

With the help of a City Councillor, the Forum was able to secure funding from Belfast City Council's Local Investment Fund and a lease from the Department for Social Development (now Department for Communities), and work commenced to create the garden in 2014.

Bringing Local History to Life

Áras Uí Chonghaile, Belfast

Housing a contemporary museum, library, event space, and coffee shop, Áras Uí Chonghaile (James Connolly Visitor Centre) has given new life to a twin Victorian terrace house while celebrating the story of one of Belfast's most famous political activists who campaigned for workers' rights in Ireland, Britain and the USA.



INSPIRATION

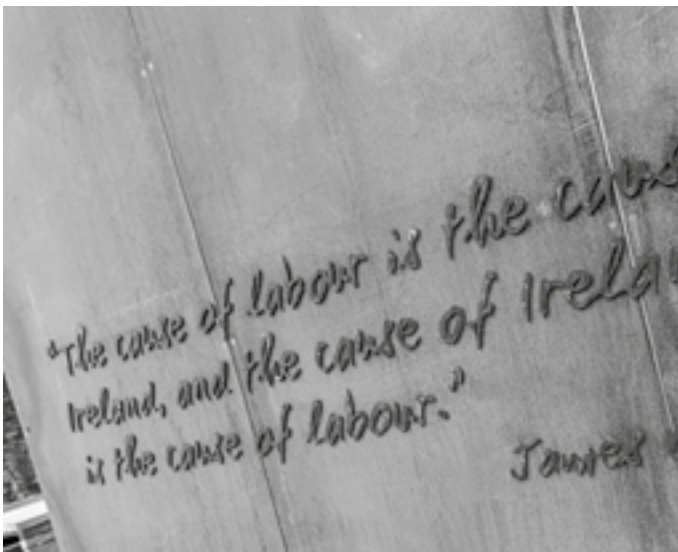
A visitor centre that would explore Connolly's entire life and work was proposed by a local historical society, supported by Fáilte Feirste Thiar, the West Belfast Tourism Development organisation. The idea gained support from West Belfast political representatives on Belfast City Council and from a delegation of American Trade Unionists who had attended events marking the centenary of the 1916 Rising.

Harry Connolly, Director of Fáilte Feirste Thiar, remembers those early discussions.

“Speaking with our stakeholders, we realised there was an opportunity to create something significant that would attract visitors from around the world and become a focal point for understanding the history and impact of Connolly's work.”

CHALLENGES

The project faced several challenges, including securing funding for the restoration and renovation of the twin terrace houses, as well as developing a contemporary design that would complement the historic character of the buildings. Another key challenge was ensuring that the building's design and features were accessible to all visitors, including those with additional mobility needs. This required careful planning and collaboration with experts in accessibility design.



Success

Áras Uí Chonghaile opened its doors in 2019 and has become a significant cultural and historical attraction in Belfast. The contemporary museum and library offer visitors a deep dive into Connolly's life and legacy, while the event space and coffee shop provide a vibrant hub for community engagement and discussion.

The project has received recognition and awards for its innovative design, historical preservation, and contribution to Belfast's cultural landscape including the RSUA Design Award Building of the Year.

A Rising Star in the West



Springfield Star FC

A disused plot of land in the Upper Shankill area had become a magnet for anti-social behaviour and a significant eyesore for local residents. Attempts to secure the site to prevent vandalism and fly-tipping had been unsuccessful, but the local community saw the opportunity to turn this derelict space into a thriving community hub.

INSPIRATION

Helped by city councillors, a new community group was formed, which incorporated local residents, youth projects, schools, and a nearby football club to look at ways of transforming the future of this space at the heart of the Shankill community.

As there was significant under-provision of amenities for young people in the immediate area, Springfield Star FC was training and using facilities elsewhere - making it difficult for local young people to engage with the positive aspects of sport.



Success

By all metrics, Springfield FC's new home has been a resounding success, turning what was a blot on the community into a point of civic pride.

The grounds are a busy hub for young people, in use every day throughout the week and have been used to host social programmes from Belfast City Council and the PSNI, amongst others. The community has marked a significant downturn in anti-social behaviour in the area which community leaders have attributed to the positive benefits of the new facilities.

CHALLENGES

The community group formed to take advantage of this opportunity did not have experience with funding applications and the ongoing business processes required to manage a sporting facility all year round. As an organisation run entirely by volunteers, the committee were helped by experienced local councillors on how to identify funding opportunities and the requirements of the application process.

With the necessary guidance in place, £150,000 was secured through the Local Investment Fund with a further £111,000 supplied by the NI Executive.



Enniskillen Workhouse

Enniskillen Workhouse was built in 1841 to house up to 1,000 people made destitute by the Potato Famine of the 1840s. Workhouses represent a dark period in Ireland's history, where men, women, and children were forced to work in appalling conditions. It is estimated that more than 2,000 people died in Enniskillen Workhouse during the Famine.

Enniskillen Workhouse remained in operation until the 1940s when it became part of the new NHS, housing the Erne Hospital. The majority of the site was demolished in 1964, leaving only the 'entrance block' in place, which continued to be used as part of the hospital until 2015.

When the hospital vacated the site, ownership was transferred to the council. With no immediate use for the building, the already crumbling workhouse fell into further disrepair until 2021 when a partnership between Fermanagh and Omagh District Council and South West Regional College spotted the opportunity for a new multi-purpose facility.



INSPIRATION

Enniskillen's workhouse is a site of significant historical interest, and its connection to the Irish famine is an important legacy to maintain. The local community was therefore keen to preserve the stories of the many people who lived and died on the grounds.

As one of Northern Ireland's more remote urban centres, Enniskillen suffers from a lack of indigenous businesses compared to many parts of the country. Therefore, an entrepreneurship hub for local high-growth potential businesses was proposed and became a central part of the proposals for the revitalised building.

Honouring the past



Success

Enniskillen Workhouse re-opened in March 2023 and is now operating as both a museum and an innovation hub - successfully balancing the past and the present. Throughout the restoration works, a dedicated heritage skills and education programme enabled more than 100 local craftspeople and contractors to benefit from accredited training in heritage skills.

CHALLENGES

The project team - a collaboration between Fermanagh and Omagh District Council and South West Regional College - delicately balanced the competing needs of protecting the building's emotive past and creating something that would have a positive impact on local people beyond the obvious positives of a heritage tourism site.

The new business and innovation hub on the upper floor of the entrance block provides modern meeting rooms, co-working spaces, and private offices with all the necessary modern conveniences.

Meanwhile, the downstairs historical interpretation centre is part of a heritage trail telling the story of this tumultuous period of history and the many people who lived and died within the walls of this important building.

Funding was secured in 2021 through the National Lottery Heritage Fund which offered 72% of the total budget. The remaining 28% came equally from Fermanagh and Omagh District Council and South West College who continue to be involved in the building as co-operators.

Downpatrick's New Horizon



Downe Hospital, Downpatrick

The site of the former Downe Hospital occupies a prominent elevated position in the small town of Downpatrick and is being transformed from a derelict part of the Health Estate to a much-needed social housing project.

INSPIRATION

The site, which includes former hospital and residential care buildings and adjacent fields, takes up significant acreage within a few minutes walk of the town's main street.

Following an arson attack in 2012, the site was vacated, and its increasingly derelict buildings were highly visible from the town centre. As the site fell further into disrepair, the area became a magnet for anti-social behaviour, leaving the town with a significant eyesore in the heart of their community.

The district of Downpatrick is also an area of high housing stress, with over 1,300 people classified as being in urgent need across the Newry and Mourne Council area (Feb 2023).

As a large space close to the town centre, the site makes an ideal place for social housing - meeting growing housing need and strengthening the local community. The new development's proximity to the centre will also help to revitalise Downpatrick's centre as the neighbourhood welcomes families back to town centre living.

CHALLENGES

Clanmill Housing Association started redevelopment work in 2018 following an archaeological dig at the site. Work proceeded apace on a mix of semi-detached homes and apartments on the site.

Unfortunately, while work was proceeding on the housing units, the site continued to attract anti-social behaviour with a significant fire in the main 'infirmery' block causing substantial damage to this listed building in 2021.

The resulting damage set the project completion date back and led to increased costs, in materials, labour and additional site security.



Success

Phase 1, comprising 31 houses, 2 complex needs bungalows and 4 apartments, was completed in August 2021 and all units are occupied.

Work is continuing on phase 2 of the project which includes 66 new homes - a mix of units designed for families and as homes for active older people. In the first half of 2023, 25 phase two homes have been handed over to tenants.

Due to increasing material costs, work on the listed infirmary block has slowed. Clanmil is working closely with the developer to ensure the completion of the entire development in 2024.



Championing Community Re-Use

Clonard Boxing Club, Belfast

Described as ‘an anonymous brick box’, many of the people who lived on Gortfin Street had no idea what the purpose of the structure at the end of their street was before it became the home of a popular amateur boxing club.



INSPIRATION

The red brick structure at the bottom of this quiet West Belfast street was a former electricity substation built by Northern Ireland Electricity but had been used only for storage for many years before its reuse was considered.

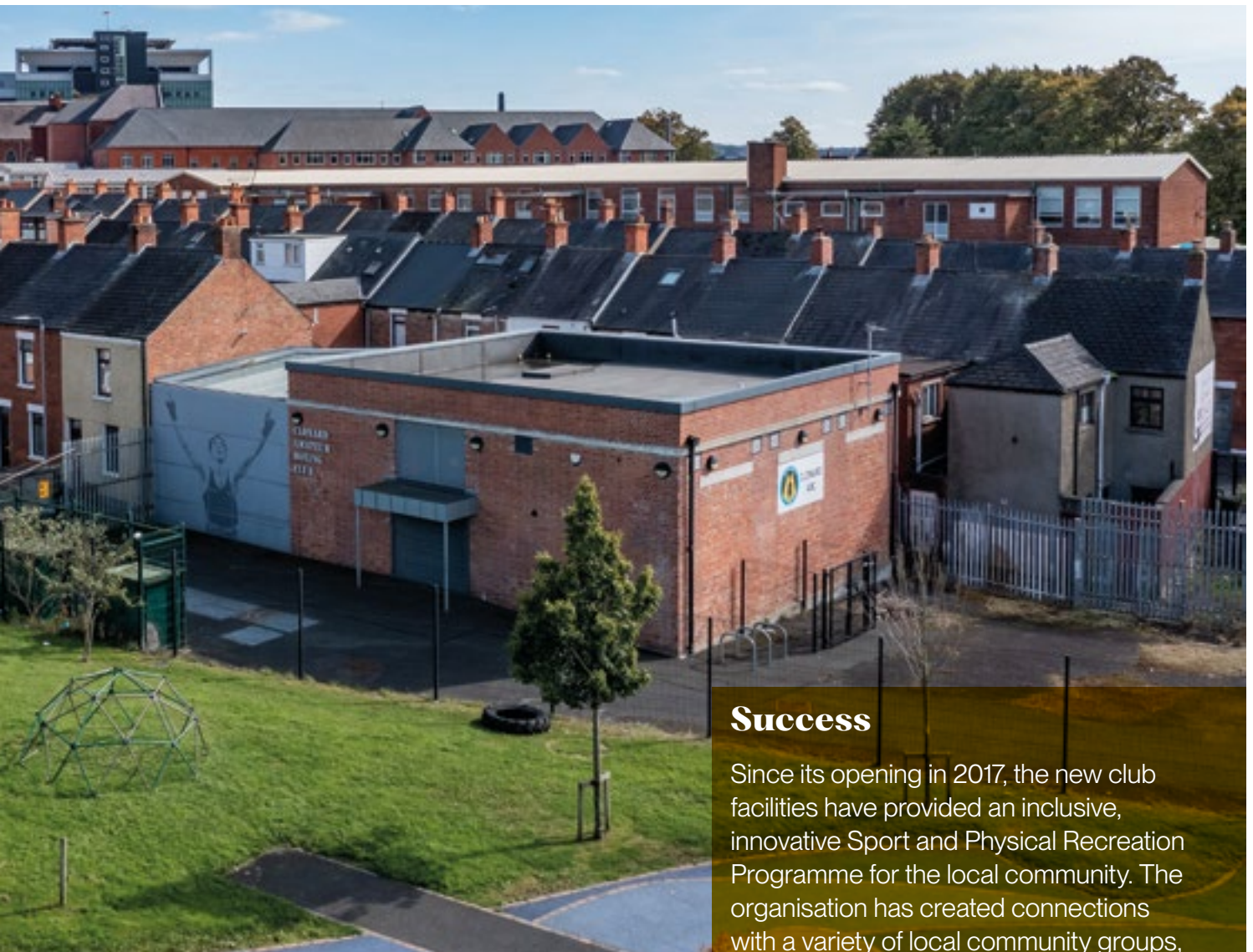
Clonard Amateur Boxing Club traces its roots back to the 1970s but had operated in various temporary facilities before finding provision in the former mill building known as the Blackstaff Complex on the Springfield Road. The building however had serious limitations and numerous repair and safety issues.

The experience of similarly disadvantaged areas showed the massive impact sports groups such as boxing clubs can have on anti-social behaviour, and as demand was growing for Clonard ABC at the time, a new home was sought for the club, and the lesser-known structure on Gortfin Street made an ideal match.

CHALLENGES

One of the main challenges faced by Clonard ABC and Belfast City Council, who supported the project through the Local Investment Fund, was transferring the ownership of the site to community ownership. Despite no longer being in use, the property was within a busy residential area and close to the city centre.

Additional funding was secured through SportNI to purchase the building outright to allow works to begin in 2016.



Success

Since its opening in 2017, the new club facilities have provided an inclusive, innovative Sport and Physical Recreation Programme for the local community. The organisation has created connections with a variety of local community groups, cross-community organisations, and education providers, becoming a lynchpin of a more connected and cohesive sporting community.

The club welcomed back Olympic Boxer Michael Conlon, who started and completed his amateur career with Clonard. The club continues to develop a new generation of exceptional national and international talent.



Protecting the Past, Investing in the Future

Hawkin Street Fire Station, Derry~Londonderry

The Hawkin Street Fire Station, located just inside the historic walls of Derry, dates back to the early 1890s and is the only example of a Victorian Fire Station existing in Northern Ireland. Centrally located in a conservation area and of significant historical importance, the station had ceased to be usable as a home for the local fire service when it fell into disuse in 1961.

The building continued to deteriorate and was subject to minor acts of vandalism over the years. In 2006, an arson attack left the building structurally unsound and earmarked for demolition.

INSPIRATION

In 2007, Derry City Council saw the potential for this building in such a prime location within the city walls and launched plans to adapt the old fire station for modern use and took the unusual step of applying for protected status from the NIEA.

“While this placed some restrictions on the project, we saw the character of this part of the city being slowly erased and we felt it was important to lead by example.” Tony Monaghan

With the aim of supporting entrepreneurship and city centre working, balanced with protecting the heritage of the area, the old Fire Station was given a new lease of life as an economic development and social enterprise hub.





Success

Opened in May 2008, the building has been in operation as a hub for small businesses and social enterprises and is now home to a broad spectrum of community groups, arts organisations, and start-up businesses.

CHALLENGES

As a B1-listed building, the work required to renovate the property while protecting the architectural features of the building was complex. The total budget of £1.1m was supplied by the then Derry City Council and European Regional Development Fund, and as the funding was contingent on a project delivery date, the project team were under pressure to deliver.

As well as significant delays, an arson attack in 2006 added approximately £80,000 to the project budget, requiring the project team to rework their initial plans and seek additional funding. Being a compact building, a two-storey modern extension was added on one side, increasing the floor space to approximately 3,000 sq ft - allowing the location to appeal to a broader spectrum of businesses and improving accessibility. This required the project team to work with Northern Ireland Electricity to purchase and relocate an electricity substation that stood in the way of the planned extension. To achieve this, architects worked with NIE on a novel approach that saw the construction of a 'building within a building' that housed a smaller, modern substation within the Hawkin Street extension.

Lost At Sea

Berne Road Public Toilets, Portstewart

An uninspiring derelict toilet block might not be the most obvious location for a trendy coastal coffee shop. However, council officers spotted the opportunity to offer an incredible location to the town's burgeoning coffee culture when the disused toilet block at Berne Road was highlighted as a target for disposal.



INSPIRATION

Berne Road is a quiet seafront road adjacent to Portstewart Strand and was a fairly popular spot with dog walkers, hikers, and runners. The old toilet block and the sewage pumping station below had been classified as surplus to requirements and closed in 2005. The facilities remained boarded up and in disrepair until 2014 when local council officers spotted the opportunity the location presented. The property was then renovated to a finished shell standard and launched to the market as a potential hospitality venue.

CHALLENGES

Demand for seafront property is at an all-time high on this beautiful stretch of the Causeway Coast, and undoubtedly the valuation of the site might have been an attractive prospect for the asset owners. However, the rise of buy-to-let and short-term let properties in the area was increasing property prices for local residents and negatively affecting the area's ability to sustain its economy outside of the tourist season.

Creating an asset that would support the local economy, generate an income from rates and turn an eyesore into a hub for the community required novel thinking from the asset owners. Some concern from nearby residents about a tourism or hospitality venue on the site was heard ahead of planning permission being granted for the renovation. However, concerns about unsafe levels of traffic, congestion, or litter have been allayed, and the new coffee shop has become a popular destination for visitors to the area and local residents.



Success

The current tenants of the property are Lost & Found, a coffee shop. The venue is a popular spot for dog walkers, local residents and tourists walking the Ulster Way.



An Education in Adaptation

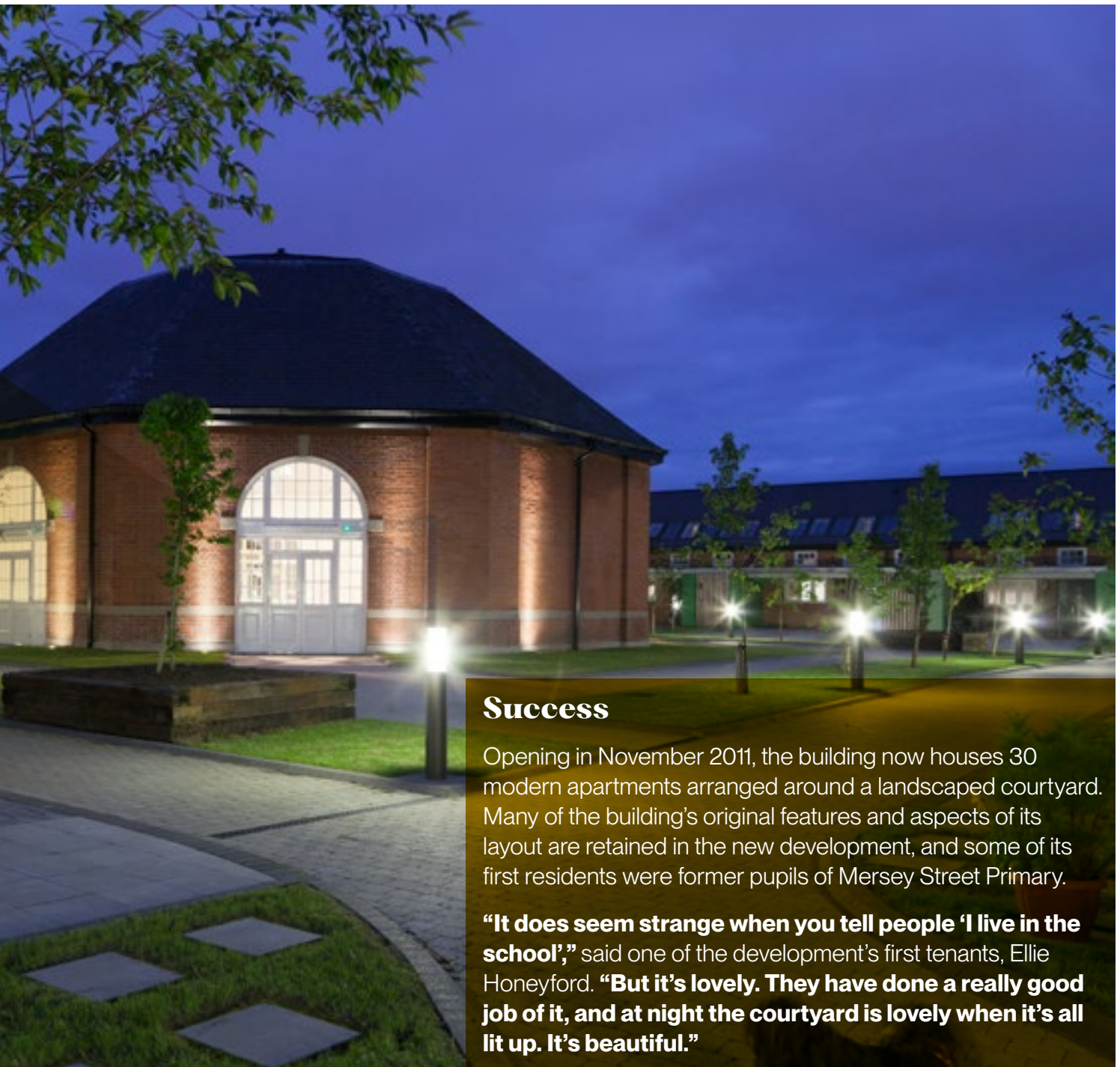
Mersey Street School, Belfast

For over 80 years, the single-storey Mersey Street School educated the children of shipyard workers and other residents of this densely populated area of East Belfast. With housing redevelopment and other demographic changes, the number of children attending this Victorian redbrick school steadily reduced. After closing in 2006, the building lay empty and inevitably began to deteriorate.



INSPIRATION

The Department of Education and local residents with fond memories of their time at the school wanted to see the building preserved. Less than 1% of properties in East Belfast were designated as 'affordable' in a Housing Executive report released in 2006. The right-to-buy scheme also saw further attrition of social housing stock, and by the mid-2000s, East was designated as an area of acute housing stress. A local housing association, now known as Connswater, identified the former school building as an ideal site for redevelopment and repurposing and started the process of acquiring the site in 2010.



Success

Opening in November 2011, the building now houses 30 modern apartments arranged around a landscaped courtyard. Many of the building's original features and aspects of its layout are retained in the new development, and some of its first residents were former pupils of Mersey Street Primary.

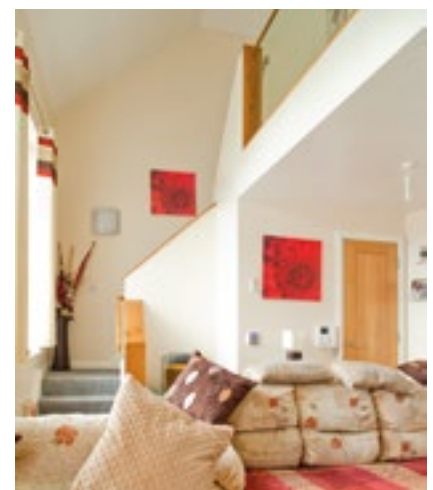
“It does seem strange when you tell people ‘I live in the school’,” said one of the development's first tenants, Ellie Honeyford. **“But it's lovely. They have done a really good job of it, and at night the courtyard is lovely when it's all lit up. It's beautiful.”**

CHALLENGES

The process of transferring ownership and renovating this building was a long and difficult process, with the building's B1 listed status and the significant change of use throwing up numerous hurdles for Connswater. The requirement to use sympathetic building materials, preserve key architectural features, and reuse and restore existing aspects of the structure proved challenging for the design team and required additional investment.

The site's proximity to George Best Belfast City Airport meant the project was subject to further restrictions due to the area's designation as a Public Safety Zone. The zone is designed to reduce the number of people 'on the ground' in this area and is a barrier to high-density housing in the area.

The redevelopment project however was found to not be in breach of guidance in this area, and work proceeded in 2010.



St Comgalls School, Belfast

This building, on a prominent site on Divis Street, Belfast, has a proud history dating back to 1855 when it was the first home of The Belfast Model School until a fire damaged the building in the 1920s. The building was returned to use as an educational institution when St Comgalls Public Elementary School established itself here in the 1930s. St Comgalls remained in operation on this site for the next 60 years and was a central hub for the community. The building was closed in 2000 and unfortunately left to deteriorate over the coming 22 years.



INSPIRATION

Being only a few minutes walk from Belfast City Centre, Divis Street is often referred to as the 'gateway' to West Belfast. The increasingly overgrown and derelict building on Divis Street was, therefore, a poor first impression of the area and one which community development organisation Falls Community Council hoped to rectify by proposing the building's redevelopment.

First Impressions Matter



Success

The revitalised St Comgalls opened its doors in June 2022 as a multipurpose business centre, event space, and community hub. The building is home to a cafe and will soon host an exhibition space that tells the story of the building and the local community, while the modern, high-spec office accommodation and co-working space hopes to boost employment and entrepreneurship in this historically disadvantaged part of Belfast.

“It is great to see the magnificent restoration of St Comgall’s/Ionad Eileen Howell, which has been brought back to community use. The centre will bring economic and social opportunities to the area and indeed Belfast as a whole. The newly opened facilities have the community at its heart and are a symbol of a local community with a vision for a bright future.”

Director of Falls Community Council,
Gerry McConville

CHALLENGES

FCC purchased the school, with assistance from Atlantic Philanthropies in 2002 and campaigned tirelessly for funding to restore the building to its former glory which Falls Community Council subsequently completed in 2022. The requirement to preserve the architectural features of the building while converting it for use as a modern office workspace, community centre, and events venue also required a large investment.

The ambitious redevelopment plan attracted £3.5 million in funding from Belfast City Council’s Belfast Investment Fund, with £3.65m funding from the Executive Office’s Social Investment Fund.

Work began in March 2020, but due to Covid-19-related lockdowns throughout 2020, faced delays, which pushed back the completion of works into 2022.



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The Line of Beauty

NW Transport Hub, Derry

By the end of the 2010s, the need for an enhanced multi-modal transport hub for the Northwest was becoming acute. With its existing linkages to the rail network, the former Waterside Station in Derry was an ideal candidate for a new facility.

The late-Victorian Waterside station was one of the finest examples of railway architecture in Northern Ireland with a distinctive Italianate-style clock tower, designed by renowned architect, John Lanyon.

After suffering catastrophic bomb damage in 1975, services continued from a diminished building until 1980. The site was briefly used as office space and warehousing, before falling into disuse and disrepair, eventually being placed on the Buildings At Risk Register (BARNI).

The site's proximity to the border and the regional significance of the project, allowed it to receive funding from EU INTERREG VA programme which helped alleviate some of the expense of the restoration work involved in a project of this nature. The site's location as a hub for onward cross-border travel also attracted funding and support from the Special EU Programmes



Body, the Irish Department for Transport and Donegal County Council.

Completed in 2020, the NW Transport Hub is now one of Northern Ireland's busiest multi-modal transport hubs with figures released in 2023 showing a "phenomenal" 723,776 passengers travelling by rail alone through the station. The revitalised station has also won several awards including a European Commission Award for 'Best Cohesion Project' and 'Best Overall Entry' at the National Railway Heritage Awards in London.



On Home Ground

Davitts GAC, Belfast

Since the club's foundation in 1912, Davitts GAC has had no place to call home. The historic club, situated in the heart of West Belfast has provided the local community with sporting experiences for more than a century - impressively, without a field of their own.



To help the club continue serving the communities of Divis, Beechmount and Clonard, they needed to find suitable premises. But finding an appropriate piece of land in such a densely populated area was considerably difficult.

The club's organisers were aware of a vacant site nearby in a state of significant disrepair and which had become a focal point for anti-social behaviour. The site was acquired with the support of the Department for Communities and purchased by Davitts GAC.

The club received £1.15m from Belfast City Council's Local Investment Fund and Schools Enhancement Fund and a further £345,000 from The Space and Place Programme, through the National Lottery Community Fund.

The new community and sports recreation facilities opened in February 2019 and include: a full Gaelic pitch with a spectator stand, changing rooms, hurling wall, 4G training pitch with floodlights, car park, children's playground, outdoor gym and a 'highway to health' walkway/ TRIM trail.

Weaving a Brighter Future

Brookfield Mill, Belfast

The housing crisis in the Ardoyne area of North Belfast had reached crisis levels when the opportunity to re-develop the former Brookfield Mill first emerged.

The disused mill was essential for linen manufacturing in the region. However, following the collapse of the industry in the first half of the 20th century, the building closed in the 1960s, falling into disuse shortly after.

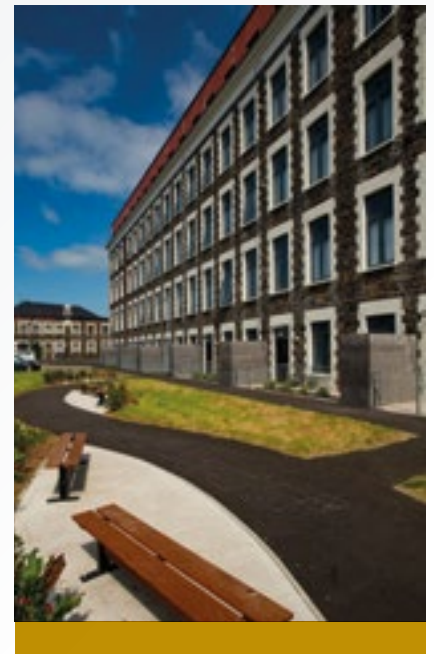
Adapting the building to social housing was proposed as a way to provide much-needed regeneration for this disadvantaged area, alleviating pressure on social housing waiting lists and reconnecting the area to its industrial past.

Given the age of the building, the project was complex. A roof removal, full strip-out, demolition and asbestos removal were required before work could even begin. In addition, Clanmil

felt it was important to reflect the heritage of the building through sensitive redevelopment that retained important features.

The total investment in Brookfield Mill was £13.1m with £7.1m grant support from the Department for Communities via the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and £6m investment from Clanmil Housing Association.

In December 2022, 77 social-residential units - a mix of two-bedroom apartments and two and three-bedroom duplex units, complete with parking, were handed over to families - just in time for Christmas.





Connecting Through Nature...

Springfield Park, Belfast

Located in an interface area of West Belfast, Springfield Dam had a contentious past throughout The Troubles which resulted in the area being fenced off from public use. In 2015 in an effort to improve cross-community cohesion, multi-modal transport and improve recreational facilities, Belfast City Council undertook a project to integrate the disused dam and surrounding grounds into the Forth Meadow Community Greenway project.

In 2015, landscape architects were engaged by Belfast City Council to develop options for the dam and the adjacent Springfield Park. The £1.2 million project was delivered with funding from the EU's PEACE IV Programme, as well as the Department for Communities, which also provided 10 acres of land for the scheme.

Accessibility of the space has greatly improved and the development of the new pedestrian

bridge crossing the dam has helped to integrate the site by providing access to the new pathways and recreational facilities along the east bank.

The revitalised Springfield Park opened in December 2020 and since opening there have been no reports of anti-social behaviour at the site - a hopeful sign of how valued the new space has already become by the communities who use it.



A Victorian Revival...

The Tropical Ravine, Belfast

The Tropical Ravine in Belfast's Botanic Gardens is a Victorian building of local and national significance, dating back to 1887. Given the building's age and the deliberately warm and humid climate it is designed to maintain, it had fallen into disrepair and an extensive restoration project was required to preserve it.

In 2016, the Heritage Lottery Fund supported the project alongside Belfast City Council. A Conservation Management Plan was implemented with work starting the same year.

As a listed building, materials were chosen carefully and significant structural work was undertaken sensitively, ensuring the finished building could withstand the aggressive tropical environment.

Environmental charity, The Eden Project was enlisted to help the project leaders establish the historical value of The Tropical Ravine's extensive plant collection

(which includes several rare and protected species). The need to protect the diversity of plant life held at the ravine was balanced alongside the need to protect the architectural heritage of a significant Victorian building and create a modern, fit-for-purpose learning facility and visitor attraction.

The restored building enjoys improved visibility and better accessibility for disabled visitors and continues to highlight Belfast's rich Victorian history while providing opportunities to learn more about global ecology.





A Highway to Happiness

Elevation Community Garden, Randalstown

Today in the heart of Randalstown, Elevation Community Garden stands as a testament to the power of community-driven revitalisation. Once a disused railway viaduct, the historic structure faded into obscurity following the closure of the railway line in 1959. Forty years later, thanks to significant community engagement and generous grants, the viaduct became functional again, this time as a footpath and cycleway. Although initially a great success, over the coming two decades it began to decline in its use and appeal.

In February 2022, Community organisation Tidy Randalstown saw an opportunity to apply for funding from the Royal Horticultural Society's Community Grants Scheme. The ambition was to build a new garden and seating area that would provide a novel and much-needed open-air gathering space for residents and visitors alike.

After successfully securing the RHS grant of £50,000 (plus additional funding for three years of ongoing maintenance) the group had just six weeks to complete the project and open the garden to the public.

Johnny Knox Garden Design was commissioned by the RHS to work on the design and build of the garden, with input at all stages from Tidy Randalstown.

Opened on May 2nd 2022, the benefits of Elevation extend well beyond its contributions to the town's natural environment. The inclusive design, featuring seating areas and workshop spaces, has strengthened community cohesion, encouraging social interaction and creative skill building. Additionally, the garden's emergence as a tourist attraction which has gained



nationwide media attention has brought economic benefits to the town.

Elevation Community Garden's successful transformation of a disused viaduct has revitalised the town's heritage, nurtured bio-diversity, and fostered a more vibrant and connected community. Most heartening of all, however, is the distinct feeling of town pride the Tidy Randalstown volunteers have managed to establish through their ongoing work on Elevation.

St Joseph's Church, Belfast

In the heart of Belfast's historic docks area, St. Joseph's Church is now the focal point for a community's renaissance thanks to the efforts of the Sailortown Regeneration Group. Since the church was deconsecrated and left empty in 2001, the community group has been working to save the 'Church on the Quay' and turn it into a thriving community hub.

On Hallowed Ground

In 2008, the SRG was granted a 150-year lease on the rapidly deteriorating building and the attached parochial house to the rear. However, as the building continued to deteriorate, a 'dangerous building' order was imposed in 2017 which endangered the project's future.

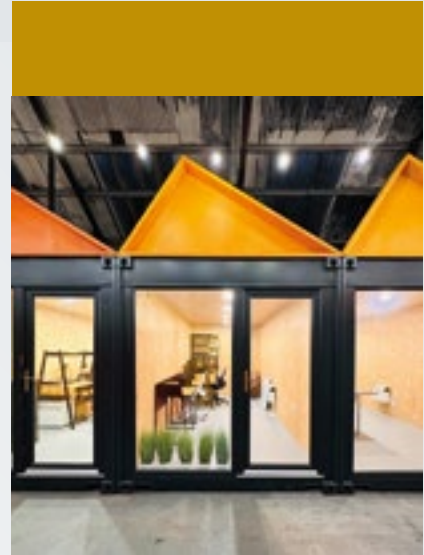
A £185,000 grant from the National Lottery Community Fund allowed the Sailortown Regeneration Group to save the building from demolition and further professionalise their organisation, allowing SRG to pursue the third and final phase of the project - the full restoration of the church and house. The cost of this final phase has been estimated at anywhere between £2-3 million

and work is ongoing to secure this vital funding.

The project has faced numerous challenges but has successfully demonstrated the community need and the commercial viability of the building as a self-sustaining event space. The building is already the focal point for the Sailortown Gathering Festival and has quickly become a symbol of the community's resilience and progress.

Looking ahead, the Sailortown Regeneration Group envisions St Joseph's acting as an 'anchor institution' to drive forward a community-led regeneration of the area.





A Green Future in Royal Hillsborough

23LR, Hillsborough

Sitting on the outskirts of Hillsborough, a disused motorcycle showroom cast a negative impression on visitors leaving this otherwise charming setting. However, a local Civil Engineering firm recognised the potential within the unassuming building and saw an opportunity to create a space that would accommodate their growing business and benefit the community.



The process of transforming the former showroom into a modern office and co-working space was not without its challenges. The building's uninspiring appearance and the need for extensive renovations posed initial hurdles. Additionally, securing funding became a concern, especially with the escalating costs of construction materials.

A grant of £30,000 from Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council's Rural Investment Fund helped overcome some of the unexpected costs uncovered during the renovation project.

Despite these challenges, the project owners saw the possibilities in the building's wide-open floor plan and vaulted ceiling and remained driven by their passion for sustainability.

Drawing on their expertise in the construction industry, project owners Design ID used their proprietary tools to estimate the carbon savings made possible through the building's reuse. Their reuse of the full structure has allowed them to offset 8,000 tonnes of structurally embodied carbon (carbon that would have been created in the

manufacture of materials and during the construction process).

The refurbished building holds an A++ SCORS rating (Structural Carbon Rating Scheme) - the highest level possible.

The co-working space which opened in November 2022 as '23LR' not only showcases environmentally conscious construction but provides Design ID with ample room for growth. The space also provides a valuable community asset that fosters entrepreneurship and creativity in this semi-rural setting.

Banking on Rathfriland's Future

Chandler's House, Rathfriland

Chandler's House, a B1-listed former bank building in the heart of Rathfriland has been transformed by a local community regeneration charity. The new space, which offers an Arts and Cultural centre, along with four affordable housing units, was thoughtfully restored to inject life back into the County Down village.

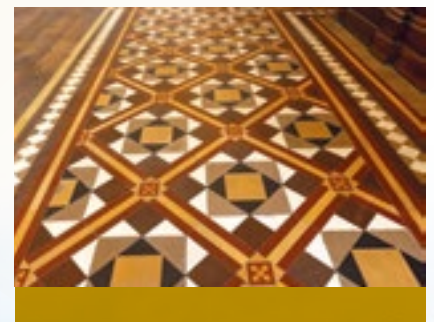
Once a candle-making and soap factory, Chandler's House has had various incarnations over the years including as a pair of houses in the mid 19th century and perhaps most famously as a bank, which was in operation until 2013.

Local regeneration organisation Rathfriland and District Regeneration Company already had a successful track record in returning local buildings to community use when they acquired Chandler's House in 2014. They used their own funds to purchase the property and to adapt the ground floor for use as a coffee shop. However, the full potential of this substantial building was a missed opportunity for Rathfriland. In the intervening years, RDRC worked to secure additional funding to bring the upper floors of the building into use and to open the ground floor up for wider community benefit.

After securing additional funding from the Architectural Heritage Fund, The Garfield Weston Foundation, Ulster Garden Villages and NI Housing Executive, work commenced in 2020 to create a new Arts and Cultural Centre and four affordable housing units in the building.

The building officially re-opened in January 2023 and has already hosted several sold-out arts events. All four residential units are now occupied, bringing more people into the town centre and further boosting the local economy.

With its distinctive stucco façade and rich history, Chandler's House now stands as a proud symbol of a community leading its own regeneration.



Bringing Out The Beauty of an Old Bank

Beauty Bank, Dromore

In the mid-2010s, many villages and small towns across Northern Ireland felt the negative effects of the Internet age as multiple bank chains began to close their doors. As pillars of their local business communities and significant contributors to a town's footfall, the closure of retail banks in town centres was another blow to high street retail and the town of Dromore, Co. Down was no different.

Over the course of a few years, Dromore had seen multiple bank buildings of significant size and in prime locations close their doors. However, the local business community has rallied and taken on the challenge of revitalising their town centre. Local businesswoman, Allison Savage bought the disused Ulster Bank on the town's Church Street in 2022 and immediately set about sensitively adapting the building to house her independent beauty salon.

As a B1-listed building, work to convert the building to its new use required sensitivity and significant private investment but Allison was undaunted by the challenge. Since opening, Allison has successfully leased the upper floors and other units within the building to nine independent small businesses ranging from a haberdashery to a food manufacturing company.

The owners have kept rents low to entice more businesses to join this thriving hub for entrepreneurship and as a result, the Old Bank Building has once again become a centre for commerce and a driver of footfall for this small town.



Conclusions:

Navigating the Complexities of Adaptive Reuse

We ardently champion the adaptive reuse of existing buildings but also recognise the many challenges involved. One of the many lessons we've learned in compiling these stories is that a multi-faceted strategy (new approach) is necessary to further our Adaptive Reuse agenda in a meaningful way.

Any future strategy (new approach) must consider these elements to ensure a successful outcome.

- **Heritage Obligations:** Heritage is important in conserving (not preserving) the past in the form of existing older buildings. However, we must strike a better balance between the need to protect the character of existing buildings and modern-day requirements regarding commerciality, building codes, accessibility, fire safety, etc. The mandate of heritage authorities may need to be re-evaluated to achieve this. Pragmatically, balancing heritage considerations with the requirements of modern facilities is vital to prevent further building deterioration and the anti-social behaviour issues that often go hand-in-hand with derelict spaces.
- **Enforcement Dynamics:** The system is rife with complications due to complex building ownership and the ability of property owners to transfer ownership through various companies with limited assets.
- **Financial Viability:** Even when an agreement is reached for adaptation, incorporating older structural elements may compromise a project's financial feasibility. Both developers and Heritage authorities acknowledge inconsistencies in decision-making, exacerbating this issue.
- **Funding Constraints:** The limited governmental budget for building adaptation necessitates alternative financial strategies. However there are a number of grants and funds that are continually being made available to community organisations and councils.
- **Developers:** Whilst developers are primarily commercial, our conversations revealed more nuance to their relationship with heritage assets. More ways to showcase good practice that demonstrates the benefits of responsible development and heritage preservation, should be found.
- Further empowerment of local councils and communities with respect to rate reduction for vacant buildings, ease of vesting, enhancement of incentives for town centre living/regeneration of urban centres and carbon reduction and should be considered to make adaptation of older buildings more viable.
- **Establishing Purpose for Adaption:** Uncertainty around the viability of projects often hampers adaptive reuse. As we've learned through many of the stories presented here, community involvement and planning can be critical in establishing a purpose for these projects.

By addressing these key points, we can move closer to a harmonious relationship between heritage preservation and urban development. The role of Councils, and the recently formed Councils Estates Forum, in conjunction with revamped financial strategies and a more precise regulatory framework, could well pave the way for a new era of adaptive building reuse in Northern Ireland.

Finally, we would like to thank everyone who shared their stories with us, including those not featured individually.

This is just a sample of the many stories we heard but hope this gives you a sense of the possible.

Contacts

Hero Projects

Bangor Courthouse

Johnny Moore SIB

✉ jonathan.moore@sibni.org

James Connolly House

Michael Collins BCC

✉ collinsm@belfastcity.gov.uk

Martin Doherty BCC

✉ dohertymartin@belfastcity.gov.uk

Garden of Eatin'

Michael Collins BCC

✉ collinsm@belfastcity.gov.uk

Springmartin 3G Pitch

Esther Waugh BCC

✉ waughe@belfastcity.gov.uk

Martin Doherty BCC

✉ dohertymartin@belfastcity.gov.uk

Mersey Street School

Nadine McMahon Connswater HA

✉ n.mcmahon@connswater.org.uk

St Comgalls School

Gerry McConville Falls Community Council

✉ info@fallscouncil.com

Clonard Boxing Club

Michael Collins BCC

✉ collinsm@belfastcity.gov.uk

Martin Doherty BCC

✉ dohertymartin@belfastcity.gov.uk

Lost & Found Portstewart

John Richardson CC&GBC

✉ john.richardson@causewaycoastandglens.gov.uk

Hawkin St Fire Station

Karen Phillips DSDC

✉ karen.phillips@derrystrabane.com

Enniskillen Workhouse

Geraldine Graham FODC

✉ geraldine.graham@fermanaghmagh.com

Downe Hospital

Gary Potter Clanmil

✉ gary.potter@clanmil.org.uk

Summary Projects

Tropical Ravine

Frankie Smyth BCC

✉ smithf@belfastcity.gov.uk

Martin Doherty BCC

✉ dohertymartin@belfastcity.gov.uk

Brookfield Mill

Gary Potter Clanmil

✉ gary.potter@clanmil.org.uk

Derry Strabane Transport Hub

Graeme Smyth Translink

✉ graeme.smyth@translink.co.uk

Springfield Dam

Kirsten Mullan BCC

✉ mullenk@belfastcity.gov.uk

Martin Doherty BCC

✉ dohertymartin@belfastcity.gov.uk

St Joseph's Church, Community Centre

Sabine Kalke BCC

✉ kalkes@belfastcity.gov.uk

Martin Doherty BCC

✉ dohertymartin@belfastcity.gov.uk

Davitts GAA

David Logan BCC

✉ logand@belfastcity.gov.uk

Martin Doherty BCC

✉ dohertymartin@belfastcity.gov.uk

Randalstown Aqueduct

Helen Boyd Tidy Randalstown

✉ info@randalstownarches.com

Hillsborough Co-Working

Jonathan McCauley ID Design

✉ jonathan.macauley@designid.co.uk

Dromore Bank - retail / offices

Allison Savage

✉ beautybank11@icloud.com

Chandlers House

Andy Peters Rathriland Regeneration

✉ andyfrontier@gmail.com

General Enquiries

Strategic Investment Board

Colin McCrossan RIBA Strategic Advisor

✉ colin.mccrossan@sibni.org

Gerry Millar Strategic Advisor

✉ gmillarbelfast@gmail.com

5th Floor, 9 Lanyon Place
Belfast BT1 3LP

T +44 (0)28 9025 0900
E contact@sibni.org

