

Preserving the waves of time: The repurposing of Tramore's Coastguard Station

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INTRODUCTION

“Old ideas can sometimes use new buildings. New ideas must use old buildings.”¹

This insightful perspective from urbanist Jane Jacobs resonates profoundly in the context of repurposing maritime heritage buildings in Ireland. Despite the nation's extensive coastline and rich maritime history, this heritage is frequently overlooked and underfunded. This neglect is evident in the absence of a government-funded maritime museum and a shortage of places dedicated to showcasing this history. Yang's research on Dublin's cultural port heritage sheds light on broader challenges facing heritage conservation in Ireland, revealing issues such as frequent changes in organisational structures, underfunding in the museum sector and prioritising development over heritage preservation. These factors interact with an ongoing identity crisis, hindering coherent storytelling about the nation's heritage.² Moreover, the disregard for the maritime history can also be attributed to perceptions associating the fishing industry with poverty and reminders of British Navy influence,

¹ Jane Jacobs, *The death and life of great American cities* (New York: Vintage Books edition, 1992, first published in 1961), 188.

² Zhen Yang, 'The uses of cultural heritage of port cities in post-industrial societies, c.1980-2020: Comparative case studies of Dublin, Lisbon, Rotterdam and Gothenburg,' (PhD diss., Trinity College Dublin, 2022)' 1: 16, 63 and 116-137.

potentially contributing to its marginalised status in Ireland's cultural narrative.

Van Hees, Naldini and Roos describe buildings as evolving organisms through time that can become complex and layered.³ Conservation efforts are important to allow these historical layers to develop. Ireland's history of building conservation dates back to legislative measures like the Irish Church Act of 1869 and the National Monuments Act of 1930, marking the early seeds of the conservation movement that emerged in the mid-20th century.⁴ From the preservation movement onward, architects and historians advocated the preservation of buildings through restoration, rehabilitation and as early as the turn of the century, various projects involving 'adaptive reuse' started to emerge across Europe.⁵ The question arises: can development and heritage preservation coexist? Initiatives like adaptive reuse offer potential solutions, preserving and funding maritime heritage while providing necessary social spaces. Notable examples of repurposing projects in Ireland include the Mariner's Church in Dun Laoghaire, which houses the Maritime Museum, and the CHQ Building, famous for the EPIC Museum.

This essay questions if such repurposing projects are a solution for preserving maritime heritage buildings in a country where financial resources allocated to cultural and heritage preservation are limited. It researches what current debates concerning the management of heritage buildings can provide into society's relationship with its maritime past. To achieve this goal, the essay highlights the repurposing project of the Tramore Coastguard Cultural Centre as a central case study. This heritage site, built on a platform overseeing the ocean waves crashing against the cliffs, serves as an ideal maritime case. To commemorate the building's 150th anniversary, a forthcoming publication by Fitzgerald will delve into the extensive history of the building. Consequently, our examination will offer only a cursory exploration of the architectural history, serving as background context, as our primary focus will be directed towards the repurposing of this site and the extent of its cultural

³ Rob van Hees, Silvia Naldini and Job Roos, *Durable past, sustainable future* (Delft: TU Delft, 2013), 13.

⁴ Yang, 'The uses of cultural heritage,' 1: 63-64.

⁵ Charles Bloszies, *Old buildings, new designs* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2012), 19. And Freek Schmidt, 'Waarachtige architectuur, over authenticiteit en herbestemming,' *Bulletin Knob* 4 (2020): 19.

significance.

To accomplish the outlined research objectives, we analyse secondary literature covering topics such as adaptive reuse, maritime heritage and our designated case study and primary sources such as pictures and newspaper articles. We integrate insights obtained from an interview conducted with Colin O'Brien, the project manager of the centre and member of the Board of Tramore Development



Trust. The essay is structured around three main research topics. First, we delve into the history of the building and the repurposing project, focussing on power dynamics and decision-making processes during the renovations. Second, we analyse the new form and functions of the building and assess to what extent its historical significance is preserved. Last, the essay investigates whether the repurposing initiative aligns with the interests of local communities, examining levels of participation and the project's inclusivity towards diverse audiences. By examining current debates concerning a specific case study of maritime heritage conservation, we gain insights into society's relationship with its past and the potential of adaptive reuse to bridge historical narratives with contemporary needs.

Figure 1. Backyard an rear façade of Tramore coastguard station. Picture by author, March 2024.

The complex layers of the coastguard station in Tramore

The coastguard station in Tramore was built in 1874 to house the coastguard, an institution established in 1822 to replace the preventive water guard, functioning as part of the British military presence in Ireland.⁶ With the establishment of this station, Tramore, known for its expansive beach and popularity as a vacation destination, further underscored its significance of maritime activities.⁷ The building was designed by architect Enoch Trevor Owen and built by John Redmond and it mirrored the architectural style of other coastguard stations across Ireland. The building consisted of a three-story officer's residence and six residential cottages that were equipped with a front door, porch, kitchen, living room, stairs and two bedrooms. The station's strategic importance and its symbol of British occupation made it a likely target for the IRA.⁸ In June 1921, the station endured a violent attack, accompanied by 'bullets that could be heard whizzing in the air' and flame bombs.⁹ This incident was part of a series of coordinated attacks on multiple coastguard stations throughout the week.¹⁰ In 1924, the Garda Síochána moved into the building, with their families living in the six cottages. They continued to occupy the building until 1988, after which the building remained empty.¹¹

In 1997, the Office of Public Works (OPW) presented the building as a gift to the residents of Tramore. The Tramore Development Trust (TDT), a community-led voluntary organisation that was formed in 2000 and would come to be responsible for the occupation, made a proposal for the future use of the old building in which they stated that the building could be used for education and research, environmental-

⁶ Ivan Fitzgerald, *The Tramore coast guard station 1874-1924*, publication forthcoming, 2.

⁷ 'Tramore Coastguard Station,' National Built Heritage Service, accessed 26.03.2024, <https://www.buildingsofireland.ie/buildings-search/building/22816013/tramore-coastguard-station-doneraile-walk-love-lane-tramore-west-tramore-waterford>.

⁸ Fitzgerald, *The Tramore coast guard station*, 4-6 and 36.

⁹ 'Tramore Coastguard Station attacked,' *Munster Express*, 25.06.1921, 5.

¹⁰ Karen de Lacey and Catherine Keane, 'Burning of the Coastguard Stations Exhibition,' Fingal County Council, 2021.

¹¹ 'History of Tramore Coastguard Station,' Tramore Coastguard cultural centre, accessed 8.03.2023, <https://www.coastguardculturalcentre.ie/history/>.

related projects, tourist development, coastal rescue, a maritime museum, etc.¹² Even before a concrete plan could have taken root, the building was destroyed by a fire in October 2000. The roof was destroyed, and all the timber was badly damaged. Nevertheless, the plans continued, and the refurbishment quickly started in 2002 with a budget of 3.2 million euros.¹³

During the meeting of the local town council in October 2003, it became clear that half of the station would be allocated to be used by the Irish Coastguard, with the remaining spaces designated for community use. The utilisation of the three-story station house and two of the six cottages by the Irish Coastguard indicated a return to their original functions predating 1922. The rest of the building was entrusted to the people of Tramore for the development of a community project, facilitated through a lease agreement with Waterford County Council.¹⁴ Upon the presentation of the building by the OPW to Tramore, diverse groups expressed interest in utilising the space for purposes such as housing museums, art collectives, restaurants, etc.¹⁵ This clearly shows the community's need for facilities that could accommodate cultural and tourism initiatives. However, due to the lease agreement between the OPW and Waterford Co. Co. and the cooperation with TDT from the start, the interests of three groups had to align in decision making, leading to occasional debates and tensions between different stakeholders. For example, in 2003, the OPW asked Waterford Co. Co. to coordinate renting the premises, but community groups resisted this proposal as it was not in line with the promises by environmental minister Martin Cullen.¹⁶ In December, the possibility of rents remained uncertain due to ongoing discussions between Waterford Co. Co. and the OPW.¹⁷

¹² Fitzgerald, *The Tramore coast guard station*, 64 and Tramore Development Trust, accessed 2.04.2024, <https://www.tramoredevelopmenttrust.ie/>.

¹³ '€3,2m for coastguard station refurbishment Development Trust welcomes news,' *Munster Express*, 16.11.2001, 11.

¹⁴ 'History of Tramore Coastguard Station.'

¹⁵ 'Tramore coastguard station to be multi-purpose facility,' *Munster Express*, 09.01.1998, 11.

¹⁶ 'Minister Cullen challenged: "keep your promise on coastguard station",' *Munster Express*, 14.11.2003, 11.

¹⁷ 'Coastguard station "unsuitable for many groups",' *Munster Express*, 12.12.2003, 15.

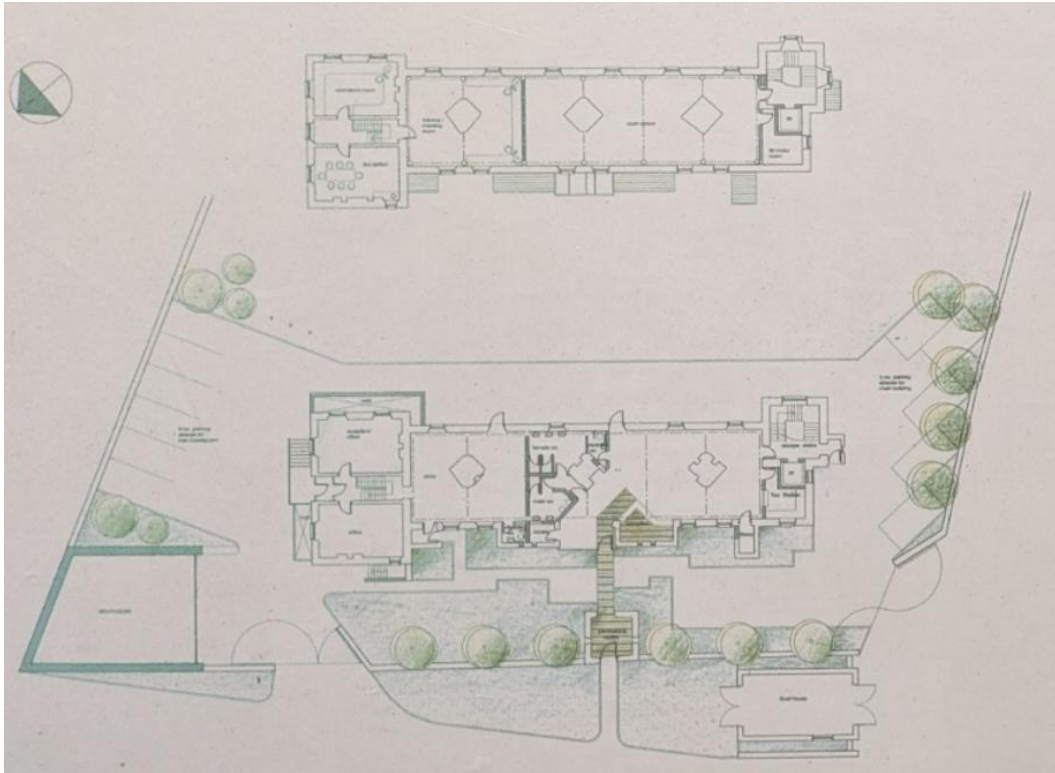


Figure 2. OPW, Ground and first floor plans, 2001. Photographed in Tramore Cultural Centre.

John McMahon became project manager for the renovations and Ciaran O'Connor conservation architect.¹⁸ The OPW tried to rebuild the station as authentically as possible to 'preserve the architectural and historic integrity of the building.'¹⁹ Schmidt defines authenticity in heritage as the truthfulness and individuality of a historically grown building and its environment, both physically and as a carrier of cultural significance.²⁰ In terms of the building, they restored all the wooden fittings, windows, doors, stairs and ornate plasterwork to match the originals.'²¹ The station was officially reopened on May 28, 2004.

¹⁸ Jamie O'Keeffe 'Restored coastguard station: a beacon above Tramore Bay,' *Munster Express*, 4.6.2004, 11.

¹⁹ '€3,2m for coastguard station,' 11.

²⁰ Schmidt, 'Waarachtige architectuur,' 17.

²¹ O'Keeffe 'Restored coastguard station,' 11

New form and functions: gallery, gastronomy, and garden

Within architecture, heritage studies and architectural history research a spectrum of perspectives exists regarding the repurposing of buildings, ranging from enthusiasm to caution. Brand's extensive work on building reuse cheered for the pragmatic approach that prioritises the long-term life of buildings, aligning with preservationist ideals.²² Conversely, architectural historian Schmidt is a little more critical and makes a plea for broad architectural-historical research prior to repurposing, to protect the historical value and cultural significance of buildings. He says that the architectural authenticity of the building is always taken into account, but the value of the building as cultural-historical is rarely mentioned. The experiential value and collective memory of a building must also be cherished.²³ This part examines the way the building was repurposed and evaluates whether Schmidt's principles have been upheld.

An adaptive reuse of a building can encompass a spectrum of approaches, ranging from maintaining the structure without modern alterations to implementing radical changes or merely preserving the façade.²⁴ Brand's work illustrates various methods of repurposing, often contingent upon whether the building serves commercial, domestic, or institutional use. Respectively, the buildings may undergo quick, radical changes, gradual modifications or retain enduring reliability over time.²⁵ The coastguard station exemplifies an institutional building, and its architectural history aligns with Brand's theoretical framework. The exterior has remained largely unaltered for over 200 years. The big renovation efforts during 2002-2004 were aimed at the exact reconstruction of the old building. Furthermore, the utilisation of the building saw minimal changes until 2004; whether occupied by the Coastguard or the

²² Stewart Brand, *How buildings learn: What happens after they're built* (New York: Viking Press, 1994), 102.

²³ Schmidt, 'Waarachtige architectuur,' 17-20.

²⁴ Bloszies, *Old buildings*, 24.

²⁵ Brand, *How buildings learn*, 10-11.

Garda, they used the same areas for identical purposes. While the exterior remained unchanged after 2004, the internal architecture and intended functions of the building underwent significant transformation following the establishment of the Cultural Centre.

Regarding its interior, the Cultural Centre primarily repurposed the cottages. During the renovations, they created expansive spaces on the ground and first floors by removing the walls between the various flats. This facilitated the opening of a spacious cafe on the ground floor, which can serve several tables, and a light-filled gallery on the first floor (figure 3). To conceal the fireplaces that stood in the centre of each cottage, they used diamond-shaped covers. The chimneys remain visible externally (figure 1).



Figure 3. Gallery. Picture by author, March 2024.

In terms of repurposed use, the building was officially licenced by the Waterford Co. Co., acting as lessees under the ownership of the OPW, to TDT in 2007, leading to the establishment of the Coastguard Cultural Centre.²⁶ The centre transitioned into a registered charity, ensuring that all generated money was reinvested into the project. However, due to the chain of ownership, the maintenance

²⁶ Fitzgerald, *The Tramore coast guard station*, 70

responsibility for the building remains with the OPW.²⁷ The centre gradually expanded to include diverse amenities such as the upstairs gallery, a café with tea, coffee, cakes and light lunches, and a shop with craftworks by the ‘Coastguard Creatives’ collective. The gallery exhibits different artworks each month by local artists. The venue also hosts events like book launches, readings, plays, yoga and art classes, children’s activities, musical sessions, and pop-up cinema.²⁸ Additionally, they also repurposed the surrounding buildings, including the entrance area where diverse information boards are installed, and even the little magazine in the garden (figure 4). This little building was originally used for munition storage, which had to be located outside the building due to safety regulations. The magazine has now been repurposed into a garden shed.²⁹



Figure 4. Magazine in backyard. Picture by author, March 2024.

²⁷ Colin O'Brien, interview by Paulien Daelman, own collection, 13.03.2024.

²⁸ Coastguard cultural centre Tramore, accessed 8.03.2024, <https://www.coastguardculturalcentre.ie/>; O'Brien, interview. and 'Despite the challenges posed by Covid-19, all involved with Tramore Coastguard Cultural Centre are looking forward to a bright future,' *The Munster Express*, 3.10.2020, 20.

²⁹ O'Brien, interview.

Moreover, efforts to preserve the historical significance of the site are evident. Information boards detailing maritime history and Tramore's local history are prominently displayed at the entrance, the front yard, and the backyard, serving an educational purpose. Local historians actively participated in this initiative. At the front gate and yard, visitors are guided through the chronological narrative of Tramore's maritime history, with highlighted topics such as sea trade, smuggling, piracy, and rescue missions (figure 5). Additionally, a sign encourages visitors to explore the 'Tramore Heritage Trail'. Moving to the backyard, a couple of specific stories are spotlighted, including local folklore such as tales surrounding the wreck of the Sea Horse and the Lone Tree in the sandhills.³⁰



Figure 5. Entrance with information boards. Picture by author, March 2024.

³⁰ Information boards at Tramore Coastguard Cultural Centre, unknown author, Paul Brent, and Maxine Keoghan.

Empowering the local community through heritage repurposing

When the OPW entrusted the building to the community of Tramore, it was already clear that the heritage site would be repurposed to align with the social and cultural needs of the local community. The progression of the Cultural Centre unfolded gradually, with careful attention to the evolving needs of the community. O'Brien laughed when he thought back to how, initially, a simple kettle served as the foundation of what would eventually grow into a thriving café.³¹ During the pandemic, this sense of community became particularly pronounced, with the project adapting to offer take-away services and providing a gathering space where residents could take a break from a walk, enjoy the scenery of the cliffs and waves, and share a coffee. The centre also fostered a supportive network for increased collaboration among local artists. The shop includes works of jewellery, glassware, ceramics, bags, clothing, etc.³² "Local, local and local" is how O'Brien summarises the centre's initiatives.³³

The project has attracted a diverse audience, reflecting the broad spectrum of communities within Tramore. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, a local Amish community contributed by building a structure around the backyard window, enabling the provision of take-away coffees (Figure 6). The initiative also provides employment opportunities aimed at individuals with diverse backgrounds and abilities. For instance, a café employee with Down syndrome and past cultural projects in the gallery aimed at children with autism demonstrate this commitment to diversity. Furthermore, individuals from Ukraine have found employment opportunities within the centre, with roles ranging from garden maintenance to café staff.³⁴

³¹ O'Brien, interview.

³² 'Despite the challenges posed by Covid-19,' 20.

³³ O'Brien, interview.

³⁴ O'Brien, interview.



Figure 6. Backyard window for take-away service. Picture by author, March 2024.

The significance of the repurposing project extends beyond economic and social dimensions. It addresses a longstanding desire within the community for a place where the community can learn about and remember Tramore's maritime history. Noreen O'Shea, former chairperson of Tramore Tourism, already articulated her hope for the establishment of a permanent maritime museum in Tramore during the opening of the centre in 2004.³⁵ Conversations with both staff members and members of the TDT reaffirm these desires of preserving and celebrating the local maritime history embodied by the coastguard station. O'Brien notes that the community is very engaged with the history of Tramore. To contribute to educating people about this history, information boards were installed in the gardens and Fitzgerald will soon publish an accessible book detailing the story of the coastguard station.³⁶

³⁵ 'Restored coastguard station,' 11.

³⁶ O'Brien, interview.

Conclusion

This essay examined the history and repurposing of the Tramore coastguard station to gain insight into the possibilities and debates surrounding adaptive reuse of maritime heritage and explore society's relationship with its maritime past. In an environment with challenges such as neglect, underfunding, and questions regarding Irish identity, these heritage sites could serve as vital links to the past, fostering a sense of community identity and providing spaces for cultural enrichment. The history of the Tramore Coastguard Cultural Centre, which evolved organically over the years to meet the community's desires, shows that development and heritage preservation can go hand in hand. The centre shows profound commitment to local cultural initiatives, engagement and inclusivity, employment opportunities and a supportive network for collaboration among residents. Moreover, by preserving and showcasing Tramore's maritime history, the project fulfils a community desire for a place of learning and remembrance. The repurposing of the Tramore coastguard station into a cultural centre exemplifies the power of community-driven initiatives to maintain heritage sites and maritime history.

Further research, such as conducting large-scale community survey research or comparative analysis with similar maritime heritage buildings, could further strengthen and broaden the conclusions. Furthermore, investigations following the same lines might even identify possible overlooked maritime sites and explore their potential future trajectories from a historical perspective. By embracing the ethos of Jacobs' quote, Ireland can breathe new life into old maritime heritage buildings, weaving a narrative that honours the past while embracing the future.

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