Streets of Glass

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The poet and critic John Betjeman once wrote of Dublin in terms of its colour: brown dirt and 'brownish-red bricks', granite that 'washes whiter by contrast'. [1] Betjeman's writing appeared in a special issue of the *Architect's Journal* alongside editorial notes that commented on the luminosity of the weather in 'a countryside which is never abrupt… an atmosphere which is never clear…' It was the summer of 1939. In a liminal space between conflicts and a delicate political situation, there must have been a certain fragility in the air. The world – and not just Dublin – was looking into the unknown.

My Dublin is not a city of absolutes. But I suspect that no two people have the same Dublin. Dublin, for me, lies in its latency: its in-betweens and its viscerality. The sky above Dublin fluxes in delicate undertones of purples, blues, greens, and grey. The bricks may be brownish-red, but they flash to gold and amber, champagne and almost-black as the weather shifts, and the shadows change. The granite may once have been white, but more often it is variants of grisele, streaked and softened by the atmosphere and the particles it carries, sometimes glinting when the sun catches the tiny flakes of mica. The light flickers in a way that I haven't seen in other cities.

The sun sets slowly in the northern latitude. Light scatters, colours linger, and darkness in summer is never quite absolute. The sun stays low in winter. It hovers close to the horizon, not golden but pale: a day-long, stretched-out dawn that casts long dark shadows.

The purples, blues, greens and grey of the sky are recreated underfoot in the iron grids and glass pavement lights that are set into the central city streets. Some are stamped with the names of Irish foundries, others with tradenames from London. They are familiar underfoot

and exquisitely beautiful. The glass prisms have developed differing degrees of opacity, and colours modulated by time and exposure to the elements. Manganese oxidised to purple with UV exposure. Green and yellows becoming prominent according to the thickness of the glass and the chemical composition of the sand. Some have silvery grids of fine wire mesh to stop them shattering or allowing fire to spread to the street.

Whether gently luminous or blazing with light from beneath, the glass blocks hint at another world beneath the streets – spaces that extend beyond the perimeters indicated by the above-ground façades. I have loved them since I was a child, when I walked over them on trips to town with my mother, imagining the stories and secret lives of the spaces beneath. A generation later, my own child and I invented adventure stories set in the imaginary sub-street worlds they framed. We kept a notebook of magical happenings in a parallel Dublin suffused with coloured light and moving shadows. And over and above the spaces they enclose – both real and imagined - those pavement lights themselves, those individual blocks in their metal grids, are archives full of meaning and a city's history.

The earliest pavement lights were installed in the streets surrounding the south city markets. Drapers, department stores, and milliners on Dame Street, Sackville Street and Westmoreland Street followed suit. By the late 1890s, the steam packet companies had lodged applications for pavement lights outside their commercial premises on Abbey Street, Great Brunswick Street, and Eden Quay. Travellers to and from Dublin walked over them to collect their tickets.

The colours of the glass and the names of the foundries hint at Dublin's social and political history. Amongst the insurance claims lodged in the summer of 1916 are requests for funding to replace pavement glass damaged by bombs and rifle fire in the Easter Rising. In the reconstruction of Dublin afterwards - funded by the British Treasury - most of the new pavement lights were supplied by Hayward of London. After the War of Independence – and during Ireland's economic war with Britain - the suppliers changed. While the predominant foundries shifted from British to Irish in the fraught political and economic context of the early twentieth century, the colours of the glass reflect stories that go beyond Dublin, tinted

by sand from different parts of the world and additives that changed as the result both of shortages and innovations catalysed by the world wars.

In 1939 while Betjeman was writing about Dublin, my grandmother lived in a house on St Stephen's Green. The granite architrave there is not white, but tawny. The stonework and the bricks bear the scars of bullet holes from 1916. In the laneway to the side of the house is a metal grid. In the years since my grandmother lived there, the iron casing has been rubbed smooth. The voids that once held glass prisms have been filled in with concrete, a rough aggregate tinged with moss. Wells have formed in the concrete, filled with miniature puddles of rainwater that reflect the sky and the passersby. My Dublin is a city of memories and imaginings. It is a city of many lives etched in the marks of materials, lines softened or obliterated by the salt in the air and the particles of daily life. It is a city of colours modulated by time and exposure to the elements.

It is a city built from its atmosphere.

References

[1] Betjeman, J. *Dublin 1: The Past*. *Architect's Journal* **89**, 1074–1078 (1939).

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