

FEATURE

Shipquay Street can become Derry's very own Regent Street

MARY KERRIGAN, of the Walled City Partnership, argues that Shipquay Street can become the Derry equivalent of Grafton Street or Regent Street - but, at the minute, she says, much of it is as "dead as a dodo".

The Peace Bridge signalled Derry's transformation since the devastation of the Troubles. Less dramatic, but just as transformative, has been the repair of twenty five old buildings, under the Walled City Partnership's Townscape Heritage Initiative [THI].

Buildings, like the former Northern Counties Hotel, and clusters in Waterloo Street, whose commercial pulse had slowed almost to the point of death, have been revitalised.

Back in 2002, before UK City of Culture 2013 was a glint in anyone's

eye, Foyle Civic Trust, Derry City Council, and City Centre Initiative formed Walled City Partnership, delivering an overall investment of circa €6.5 million into the walled

city's north-eastern quarter.

This work has grown steadily from tiny roots to become Northern Ireland's largest, most successful THI. Approximately one quarter of the funding comes from Heritage Lottery Fund, another 25% from Derry City Council, NIHE, NIEA, DSD, and Planning NI, and the final 50% from

the property owners themselves.

The €6.5 million investment translates into twenty five plus retail units, many occupied by locally owned independents, 1,500 sq. m. of office accommodation with 95% occupancy rates.

Funding from the Housing Executive's LOTS scheme ('Living Over The Shop') brought empty floors above shops into use as 22 fully occupied apartments.

The Coyle building, on the corner of Castle Street, is on site, bringing the scheme to 26 buildings.

In contrast to Walled City Partnership's robust, sustainable heritage-led regeneration success story, at least 26 ground floor retail/commercial outlets inside the walled city lie empty, and as many as circa 112 in the inner city.

This ignores large areas of empty space on upper floors. The true picture is much worse. Owners of twenty five THI eligible buildings have not submitted an application for this attractive grant in more than twelve years.

A look at where these buildings are tells a worrying tale. Mostly empty and at risk, the majority occur on Foyle Street, Shipquay Place, and Shipquay Street - all prominent, city centre streets.

Shipquay Street should be Derry's Grafton Street or Regent Street, but almost all of the south side of the street is closed morning, noon and night. By anyone's reckoning, these are among this city's most important historic streets and building groupings. Yet the pattern of chronic vacancy begs the question: why aren't they buzzing?

When Richmond and Foyle-side Shopping Centres opened, shoppers moved away from Waterloo Street, Strand Road and Shipquay Street. Out of town retail parks drew shoppers away in even larger numbers. Seeing the trend, city centre banks upped sticks and moved to join them. This, and the fact that several Shipquay Street buildings were caught up in the economic crash, leaves one side of the street as dead as a dodo.

Yet only a stone's throw



The Coyle Building, the twenty sixth building to receive THI grant aid.



Numbers 23 and 25 Waterloo Street - completed THI buildings.