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Culture or Commerce? Exploring the Charm of Drury Street

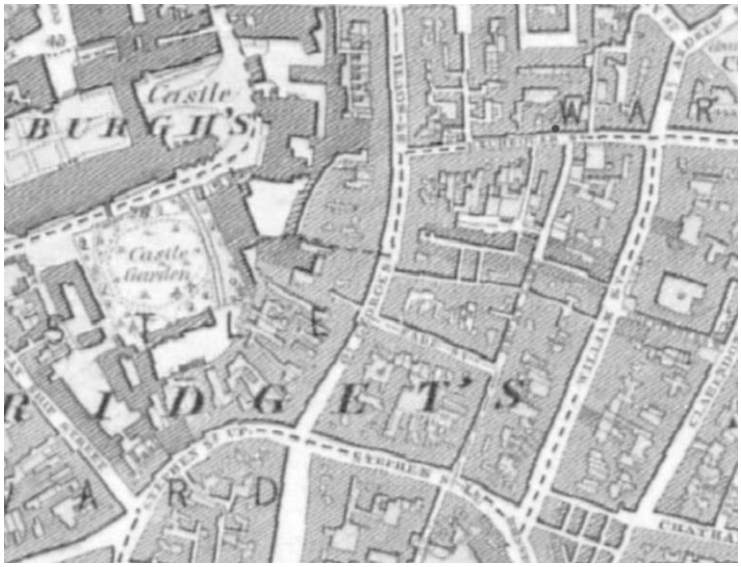
Drury Street, formerly known as 'Little Boater Lane'[1] or 'An Bóthar Beag'[2], has left its mark on historical maps, with the earliest documented appearance dating back to 1673. While its physical footprint might have existed in the 17th century, its architectural identity is often argued as a product of the 19th-century. It's stated that the street in its current form is 'largely a creation of the 19th century and the Victorian era - dominated as it is by the South City Markets and its relationship to Castle Market'[3]. This Victorian influence can still be seen in the shopfronts, which are 'pleasantly detailed, having brick and terracotta pilasters and simple dentillated cornices to the fascia boards – attractively fram(ing) the eastern entrance to the South City market building'[4]. The rise of the South City Markets in 1881, now known as George's Street Arcade, undoubtedly played a pivotal role in transforming the area into the utopia of trade and social activity it is now.

[1] Christopher Teeling M'Cready, *Dublin Street Names, Dated and Explained,* (1892) Hodges, Figgis and Co.

[2] An Bóthar Beag/Drury Street, *logainm.ie*

[3] *The South City Retail Quarter, Architectural Conservation Plan,* (2007) Dublin City Council

[4] *18-27 Drury Street, Dublin 2*, (2015) NBHS



Drury Street Mapped, 1829-41 | Tailte Éireann

The name ‘Drury’ itself carries the heavy weight of our country’s colonial history. It seems of the general agreement that the street is named after Sir William Drury, an English statesman who, in 1576, became President of Munster and consequently Lord Justice of Ireland in 1578. This naming, like many others (e.g. Nassau Street), stays as a miniscule but constant reminder of the British rule we endured.

Today, Drury Street primarily functions as a community space, offering a wide variety of independent shops, pubs, and well, a pedestrianised street to sit on. However, the street also exemplifies Jean Baudrillard's notion of hyperreality, where in which the curated aesthetics of the street mask a deeper reality of gentrification and economic exclusivity. The artisanal interiors, carefully placed outdoor furniture, and hand-painted everything simulate authenticity. One must ask whether this performance is genuine and rooted in locality and culture or constructed to cater to the Instagrammable desires of the global consumer.

'Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal'[5]

Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality refers to a state where representations of reality become more "real" than reality itself. According to Baudrillard, hyperreality emerges when 'the real is no longer what it was,'[6] and instead we are left with nothing but 'a precession of simulacra', that is, copies of things that never actually existed in an original form. In this piece, Baudrillard outlines four stages of the sign's relationship to reality:[7]

1. **It is the reflection of a profound reality:** In the first stage, the image is seen as a truthful representation.
2. **It masks and denatures a profound reality:** Next, the image starts to distort the basic reality.
3. **It masks the absence of a profound reality:** In the third stage, the image pretends to be a representation of something that is no longer there.
4. **It has no relation to any reality whatsoever; It is its own pure simulacrum:** The final stage marks the era of simulation, where the image no longer even attempts to represent reality. This is the stage of hyperreality.

In the context of consumer culture, hyperreality manifests when the aesthetic aspects of a space are elevated above their pure function or history. Urban streets like Drury Street, for example, may simulate the feel of a bohemian hub in order to evoke nostalgia, cultural and communal authenticity. Baudrillard argues that people no longer distinguish between what is real and what

[5] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation,* (1981) Editions Galilee, p. 1
[6] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation,* (1981) Editions Galilee, p. 7
[7] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation,* (1981) Editions Galilee, p. 6

is representation. Instead, they consume the image of culture, as if it were the culture itself. This creates a cycle where simulation replaces substance and becomes much more desirable than any unmediated experience.

'Everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation'[8]

Guy Debord's theory of the spectacle is equally applicable. The street becomes a stage, where the spectacle of culture is commodified and sold. Consumers participate in this spectacle, oftentimes unaware of their role in perpetuating it. In this sense, Drury Street becomes a hyper-commercialised zone hidden in the visuals of community.

The theory argues that 'the spectacle is not a collection of images; it is a social relation between people that is mediated by images.'[9] For Debord, the spectacle is a critical lens through which we can attempt to understand how capitalism turns culture, politics, and most applicably, personal identity into commodities that people consume rather than participate in. This spectacle is perpetuated through advertising, media, entertainment and increasingly, public spaces. The passive acceptance the spectacle demands 'is already effectively imposed by its monopoly of appearances, its manner of appearing without allowing any reply'. This highlights that the spectacle does not require active participation from individuals. Instead, it demands passive acceptance, meaning that people simply consume the images and experiences presented to them without genuine critical engagement. This is the nature of how the spectacle operates. Its power lies in having the masses passively accept the constructed realities created, a concept that can be explored in the context of Drury Street. Visitors of the street experience it through the lens of the

[8] Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle,* (2014) Bureau of Public Secrets, p. 2
[9] Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle,* (2014) Bureau of Public Secrets, p. 2

spectacle, engaging not with the underlying historical or social realities, but with a carefully constructed image.

With Drury Street's recent influx in popularity, the street no longer functions as a mere place for economic exchange, instead, it is part of the spectacle that feeds the consumer culture. This spectacle is now evidently affecting those who work there. Clare Grennan, of Irish Design Shop, a store that has situated itself on the street for over twelve years, was interviewed on 'Moncrieff' recently on the ever-growing problematic nature of the street. She stated 'it just gets unmanageably busy - we have noticed our sales, in particular, will tail off after lunchtime on a Saturday. By about 4PM, it's totally chaotic...'.[10]

Through interviews conducted with local employees, a similar narrative was formed. Loren Crawley, of Heartbreak Social Club, an immensely popular tattoo studio, unfortunately placed directly across from the go-to pub Ciss Maddens, stated that herself and other artists resided there felt 'unsafe'[11] leaving the studio due to the sheer amount of people on their doorstep.

However, another insight was garnered. Multiple other interviewees stated the street's excessive community was 'comforting' as you would never essentially be alone, 'there is always someone around'[12]. The employees at Caribou bar are not bothered by the crowds. One states 'it obviously gets overwhelming now and again, but it's mostly grand. We all know and look after each other. There's perks too. Most businesses here all have discounts for each other, even if they don't, we just make up one – I like it anyway. There's always something going on'[13].

[10] James Wilson, *Shop owner on Dublin's 'unmanageably busy' Drury street considers moving*, (2025) NewsTalk
[11] Loren Crawley (2025) Interview by Eithne Clerkin Murray, 5 April
[12] Ross Quinn (2025) Interview by Eithne Clerkin Murray, 5 April
[13] Eimear Ferry (2025) Interview by Eithne Clerkin Murray, 5 April

'A realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens'[14]

These insights affirm Jürgen Habermas' idea of the public sphere – a space where individuals come together to form a community, even within a commercial context. Drury Street, with its blend of businesses and social spaces, provides a real-world example of how Habermas' theory extends beyond formal settings to everyday public life. As observed in the interviews, Heartbreak Social Club's tattoo artists and Caribou's employees state how their workplace and interactions with those surrounding them creates a sense of community, which Habermas believes is key to the public sphere. These spaces facilitate communication and connections that extend beyond mere consumerism. Even Heartbreak Social Club, despite the artist's concerns about safety, still acts as part of the broader network of businesses that interact through colloquial means. The employees' claims that they 'look after each other' and 'there's always something going on' underlines how the street creates an inclusive environment that brings people together, much like the public sphere Habermas envisioned. This demonstrates how even in spaces that might be primarily commercial, community will still arise.

Drury Street's thriving consumeristic presence could potentially be seen as commercial interests influencing public space. The street's curated businesses may influence how individuals interact. This aligns with the critique that capitalism can divert public spaces, making them less about free speech and more so about consumption. Nevertheless, Drury Street's role as a public space, where people still engage in social interaction despite its overt commercial nature could be seen as a counterexample to this critique. Interaction between the commercial and the social realms on

[14] Jürgen Habermas, *Critical Theory and Society: A Reader,* (1989) New York: Routledge, p. 136-142

Drury Street suggest that while commercialisation impacts the public sphere, it does not entirely erase the room for community, making it a hybrid of sorts.

Dublin's urban landscape is evidently transforming, and with it, Richard Florida's theories on the creative class and urban revitalisation, aid a compelling framework for understanding the evolution of spaces like Drury Street. In 'The Rise of the Creative Class', Florida argues that cities thrive when they attract artistic talent. Florida claims that 'the creative class is a driving force for regional growth, generating innovation and setting high expectations for cultural and urban amenities.'[15] In the case of Drury Street, this influx of creatives has transformed the area from its origins as a meat market into a visually curated space. The street's reputation as a hub for independent, local business and cultural expression has not emerged by accident.

On Drury Street, businesses tailor their spaces to reflect a sense of authenticity, a trait that Florida describes as essential to the creative urban image. He writes, 'the creative economy is not only about producing new goods or ideas; it is also about creating experiences that resonate with what people value about urban life'[16] Yet, as Florida acknowledges, there is a double-edged sword to this revitalisation. While the presence of the creative class can infuse an area with vitality, it simultaneously contributes to the commodification of culture. Drury Street's transformation into an Instagrammable sphere, highlights a critical issue: the very attributes that attract, or are formed by the creative class, are repackaged and sold to a global consumer market.

[15] Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life*. (2002) Basic Books, p. 15

[16] Richard Florida, *Who's Your City? How the Creative Economy is Making Where You Live More Important Than Ever,* (2008) Basic Books, p. 72

Florida warns, 'the creative milieu, if taken to an extreme, risks becoming a self-contained market that no longer reflects the underlying social fabric of the community'[17].

This process, where the rarely authentic cultural essence is repackaged and stitched into a consumable product, aligns with Baudrillard's notion of hyperreality. The effect is a space that feels both lived-in and staged, where every aesthetic is a choice designed to appeal to an audience, even if it eventually alienates the community that once defined the street.

The rise of social media has further accelerated these dynamics. Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter act as digital megaphones. Media of Drury Street circulates widely, constructing a digital image that significantly influences public perception. With every shared image and hashtag (#DublinHiddenGems) the street's curated identity is enforced. Each video becomes a simulacrum, echoing Baudrillard's theory, where the representation becomes more real and desirable, than the street itself. TikTok accelerates this process by favouring repetition and trends. A single viral video can reframe the street's cultural meaning overnight, inviting waves of visitors who engage more with the projected identity than its actuality. In this sense, TikTok doesn't just document Drury Street, it plays a crucial role in designing its hyperreal facade.

On Drury Street, everything matters. The coffee you drink, the tote bag you carry, what part of the street you're on – everything is designed to be both consumed and displayed. While this doesn't erase the possibility of genuine community, it complicates it. Drury Street becomes not merely a place to be, but a place to be witnessed. This digital feedback loop encourages

[17] Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life*. (2002) Basic Books, p. 59

businesses to maintain a particular aesthetic, ensuring that the street remains attractive to both locals and tourists. Unfortunately, when a street becomes a digital commodity, its true nature is often obscured by a facade that prioritises image over substance.

While Drury Street holds a unique position within Dublin, it is not alone in navigating the intersection of cultural and commercial spectacle. Comparing it with other nearby areas, like Temple Bar, Capel Street or Smithfield, helps contextualise the identity Drury Street has cultivated. Temple Bar, for instance, is perhaps the most recognisable example of hyperreality in Dublin. What was once a bohemian utopia, has since transformed into a carefully curated tourist trap. The perfect image of Irish culture displayed for international consumption. Baudrillard's notion of simulation is almost textbook here: visitors consume not Irish culture itself, but a pre-packaged representation designed for the spectacle.

In contrast, Capel Street, though similarly gentrified, maintains more visible traces of its genuine identity. The street has not hidden its discount shops and ever-standing pubs. Meanwhile, Smithfield has embraced Florida's creative class, welcoming contemporary galleries, co-living spaces and drinking alternatives. Drury Street, however, seems to linger in a more ambiguous space. It lacks the obvious tourism branding of Temple Bar but doesn't feel as diverse as Capel Street.

It is increasingly evident the charm of Drury Street lies in its tensions. It is equally cultural and commercial, authentic and performative, historic and hyperreal. Through the lenses of Baudrillard, Debord, and Habermas, and the aid of grounding local voices, it becomes clear that its allure is neither entirely organic nor entirely manufactured – but found in the gripping intersection between culture and commerce.

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