NO MORE LEPRECHAUNS
‘Contemporary Souvenir’ a multi disciplinary collaborative project

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1. INTRODUCTION
This paper explores the relationship and connection to the souvenir within the context of Northern Ireland, academia, industry and craft. The souvenir has a bad press in the design world, most designers would run a mile from the sentimental kitsch tourist stereotypes, the development of ‘contemporary souvenir’ is a ‘real’ project borne out of The University of Ulster, acting as a model for collaboration in craft, design and tourism, developing a concept for an aesthetic alternative to the existing offer of souvenirs.

The Wallpaper article authored by Jane Withers’ No more straw donkeys” stating that it ‘was time souvenirs were sexy and sophisticated, rather than tacky and cliché’ prompted the multidisciplinary series of workshop events at held Interface, Research centre for Art Technologies and Design. Utilising high and low technologies, these workshops were designed to be a practical way to address the attitudes and positive benefits from multidisciplinary thinking and process, the ultimate outcome being a commercial vision, but arrived at through collaborative play followed by strategy.

2. BACKGROUND
Northern Ireland has over the last 10 years emerged as a good value place to visit, coupled with an emerging and stable environment the country is in an excellent position to capitalize on the growth of regeneration in tourism and craft. Visitor figures for 2008 were 2076.00 only down -1.5% on the previous year, but also showing differing country swings; + 14% ROI, +24% Spain, -36% Canada, -32% Germany.

This paper questions can tourism and craft/design work together taking advantage of the emerging landscape, designing and producing original products, positioning Northern Ireland as a country offering aesthetic mementos, shining brightly, not lost amongst the leprechauns

Market research carried out at The University of Ulster indicates that souvenirs are still firmly rooted in the ‘traditional’ the most popular gift being Grow your own Irish Shamrock gifts! Thus raising the question, can we develop the continuing notion of familiar ideas of national identity and tourist iconography into valued design led craft based objects?

Discussion around the concept of the souvenir as an aesthetic memento is not new. In the 1970’s Andrea Peach wrote on ‘Craft, Souvenirs and the Commodification of National Identity in 1970’s Scotland” exploring the relationship between craft, national identity and the souvenir in Scotland.

Peach illustrated that even with organisations such as the Highlands & Islands development Board (HIDB), to promote a more contemporary identity; trying to sustain craft, it did little to support a more contemporary craft aesthetic. Craftwork magazine” funded from The Joint Crafts Committee for Scotland, attempted to make a distinction between what was described as ‘the folk artist/craftsman’ and the ‘contemporary designer craftsman’. The former being
described as using materials accessible to the maker from their environment in which they worked, and the latter as working with imported materials. This differential is important in the thinking behind the concept for ‘Contemporary Souvenir’ i.e. manufacturer ‘home or away’ Craftwork ‘provided the proof of the increasingly uncomfortable but expedient relationship between crafts and tourism that was being experienced in 1970’s Scotland’

And of course the tartan thistles sell (God how they sell!) But where’s the real thing—where’s the true craft?"\textsuperscript{viii}

Looking around the souvenir and tourist centres’ it is not evident we have moved on except to replace tartan for shamrocks, shillelaghs and leprechauns. The contemporary souvenir project’s vision is for a souvenir that’s ‘sexy and sophisticated, rather than tacky and clichéd’\textsuperscript{vii}

The final outcome of the solution may be that this does not sit within the tourist industry and perhaps the visitor desires the leprechaun and shamrock. The project was practical rather that theoretical creating small steps towards the larger picture gradually bringing the necessary funding bodies on board, during a staged programme. If we can learn from the Scottish outcomes we may have to reconsider our thinking

…It’s a case of educating the general public so they will want more than the hackneyed cairngorm, thistle. The tourist will expect to see these old clichés, which is bound to restrict the designer and inhibit his creative field.'\textsuperscript{viii}.

3. THE PROCESS OF PLAY

The process of exploration was initiated by running workshops at the University of Ulster. The first of these taking place in October 2006. Five candidates were invited to initially spend two days exploring through the process of ‘making’ the notion of ‘what is Irish’? Designers were selected to make up an interesting multi disciplinary group from a variety of backgrounds.

- Peter Ting – International design consultant (Asprey, Watts Contemporaries, Craft Council of Ireland).
- Deidre Nelson – Textile material practise
- Clare Grennan – Jewellery designer
- Terese Kiernan – Invest NI design department
- Anne Tomlin – Milliner.

The chosen five knew they were coming together with other design disciplines to respond to the theme; ‘Contemporary Souvenir’ There was a time restriction allowing just 2 days to discuss, debate, decide and make. Due to the relative simple nature of the shape of a shamrock and its iconic kitsch value this was a chosen motif, the themes of food/drink and craft were also selected by the group to run alongside the shamrock. The results were a combination of laser cutting shamrocks from potato bread, printing aran motifs on potatoes, Perspex printed postcard, printed peat, reimaging of ‘wee mary’s embroidery, printed tea bags making a mockery of gossip around a cup of Irish tea.

Figure 1: sugar & taste - heat transferred sugar laser cut out of linen
The process of play before product was an important step to gather information around the understanding or question.

Can kitsch become a desirable product?

It was decided after the first session that a second more focused play session was required with a research and seminar gap in between.

The seminar on October 10th 2006, invited speakers from Tourism and Design to broaden the discussion, reflecting on their own practise in the context of the souvenir debate. Jane Withers lead the debate with her insight that ‘most of us relish the occasional kitsch object, but it’s a fine line between the amusing and depressing’.

Freelance designer Peter Ting, product designer Tim Denton of Electricwig and Ian Bennington, a Northern Irish design and marketing specialist, demonstrated the importance of good design in any product and how best to engage indigenous influences without being bound to the past.

Northern Ireland is not creating new territory with the notion of contemporary souvenir workshops. The first exploratory step may in fact be the easiest to take, and certainly the most fun!

The contemporary souvenir was the subject of a workshop staged by The British Council in Moscow in 2006, as in the case of the Ulster project it is not the official souvenir that carries the most personal significance for designers but small things harvested from memorable travels. In the 2006 Milan furniture fair, Casa da Abitare magazine and Alessi mounted a show where 23 designers presented their ideas for an Italian souvenir. Naturally, pasta
cropped up, Patricia Urquiola made pasta tongs in the emblematic form of a gondola prow (clever and witty) ‘A successful souvenir should be about triggering personal memories, for example Marco Ferreri’s ‘Macchie’ white table cloth stained with blotches of red wine, invoking subtle images of long Italian lunches,’ however as summarized by Withers ‘most of the designers at the show were content to work within the parameters of existing souvenirs and play on corny emblematic images rather than redefining the souvenir.’ This outcome combined with the challenges faced in the 1970’s in Scotland leaves a mixed message about how to really get the play, design, manufacturer, and branding of ‘new’ into the market place.

4. THE OUTCOME OF PLAY

Contemporary Souvenir held a successful exhibition at The Smithsonian Institute in Washington in 2007, this work toured NI showing at OBG and the Millennium gallery in Portadown. A common question was ‘can these objects be purchased’ leading the project to areas beyond ideas, exhibitions and seminars; in the main towards the commercial market, while at the same time holding onto the ethos of the project. The commissioned market survey report still depressingly focused on the ‘giftware’ market, the top selling products ranging from grow your own shamrocks to shillelaghs and leprechauns. To develop the project beyond the workshops it has been important to look beyond the stereotype exhibition, where plaintive requests for product are not actually making the tills ring, and if the product was available would it hold its own as part of sustaining the tourist market?

The results from the initial workshops were a response to wit and humour and a method to deliver a 3D sketchbook of ideas. This was achieved embraced and discussed on television and radio, but the question still to be addressed is how can we continue to develop the notion of familiar ideas of national identity into valued design led craft based objects, and at the same time raising awareness of cultural heritage. It is tempting to throw away the marketing reports, this is what we do not want. An analysis of what worked before led back to the ‘making or process’ this will be developed further and culminated in a successful application to the Creative Industries Innovation fund (CIIF) to develop and refine the cross discipline manner of practical processes and manufacture of product.

4a – The CIIF concept

In discussion with Craft NI and NITB (Northern Ireland Tourist Board) the University of Ulster will be making a call for five concepts to go forward through workshops to further develop and prototype product as a souvenir that can sit within a branded group. Branding of the products will be key as the products could easily get lost amongst the leprechauns, and not shine brightly as the must have memento. This concept is different in that we are asking makers from a craft discipline to conceive an idea; it is not the intention that it is a smaller version of their main practise but a clever twist. To finally be able to sell a sustainable story the vision is to capture local manufacturing into the loop, this could possible drive the development of the final product. This diversification would have an additional spin off beyond the souvenir, e.g. if a digital stitch company manufactures stitched robins for school berets there is no reason for them not to stitch a ‘wee mary image’ onto linen. This combined thinking concept is difficult to communicate to the lone craftsperson, we are asking them to alter their thinking but use the same skills, to develop a prototype to be locally manufactured, each separate product having to sit within a branded group hitting the correct price point. The chosen designers will be paid a fee plus a royalty on sales. Some of the questions raised to date have been.

1. Find the designs, and mass produce in the Far East? – Will this really be any better? We are not aiming at the cheap end of the market and it will not help and develop a
sustainable and viable business, but it may hit in between, by connecting with local manufacturer we will maintain contact with the process.

2. What the tourist wants is the cheap tat on offer. – Therefore concluding that this project’s target industry cannot be tourism, but a somehow defeatist attitude and the next few months may hopefully dispell this. The tourist board are supportive but the proof will be in the outcome. As the project is still underway this is not yet a known.

5. CONCLUSION / NEXT STEPS
This paper is timely as during the next few months the project will move towards a commercialising phase and will therefore encounter a new criteria

Cost
Branding
Manufacturing
Deliverability
Public response

The whole exercise is a reminder of the Irish Government’s pioneering post-war report Design in Ireland (1962), which commissioned six top Scandinavian architects and designers to make recommendations to help reinvigorate Irish Design and secure a place for it at the forefront of contemporary international design. Not least among the manifestations of this report was the foundation of the now famous Kilkenny Design Workshop, where the re-invention of Irish souvenirs first began. The progression of the work from the Contemporary Souvenir workshops to a total display of ideas is only a small part of its development. From the steps taken so far we are hoping to stimulate new ways of thinking about the souvenir and would like to see an industrial design collaboration to bring some elements to the marketplace. While at the same time considering the view point of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board ‘to remind freethinkers that in this field, no matter what, products must have an appeal to the mass market if they are to be commercially viable’

We are hopeful that the next few months and future development will raise the profile of the ‘Contemporary Souvenir’ creating a more aesthetic interest in the unique nature of Northern Ireland.

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i J.Withers, Wallpaper, December/January 2006, issue 84,pp63.64
ii Northern Ireland Tourist Board http://www.nitb.com/
iii Dr M Brennan, Contemporary Souvenir market research report commissioned by UU Tech
v Craftwork – Scotland’s Craft Magazine 1972 funded by Joint Crafts Committee for Scotland
vi B.Williams, ‘Editorial, Craftwork-Scotland’s Craft magazine, no. 1, summer 1972,p.2
vii J.Withers, Wallpaper, December/January 2006, issue 84,pp63.64
ix J.Withers, Making Changes, Craft Northern Ireland 2007, pp43,44
xi Radio Ulster and UTV live interview 10 October 2006
Arts Council of Northern Ireland Creative Industries Innovation fund
http://www.artscouncil-ni.org/subpages/funding.htm

Craft NI http://www.craftni.org/

NITB http://www.nitb.com/