Class, Heritage, Space and their Configuration in the Belfast Titanic Experience and Stewart Parker’s Iceberg

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The story of the City of Belfast, and how it came to be, is really the story of East Belfast (Northern Visions, “East Belfast: Past, Present and Future”).

There’s a maxim in the world of urban planning that if you let your city be designed by bakers you will end up with a city full of bakeries. If you live in a culture that’s brains are planned by books you’re gonna end up with a citizenry that is book-like. If you have citizens whose brains are planned by browsing and Internet culture you’re gonna have a citizenry that want their lives to be simultaneous, fluid, jump from link to link. A society who assumes that all needed knowledge is just there for the asking (Douglas Copeland, “This is Not a Cloud”).

Far across the distance
And spaces between us
You have come to show you go on
Near...
Far...
Where ever you are
I believe that
The heart does go on (Celine Dion, “My Heart Will Go On”).

Stewart Parker sits strongly amid a line of Protestant Belfast playwrights committed to dramatically exploring the complexity of northern Irish identity, history, and heritage. His work is usefully positioned in relation to early twentieth century Protestant playwrights like St John Ervine and Thomas Carnduff, in recognition that he shares their concern to explore the everyday experiences of Belfast’s working class communities in his work. In this manner his plays can also be conceived of as anticipating latter twentieth and twenty-first century northern Irish playwrights such as Christina Reid, Martin Lynch, and Marie Jones. His admiration for the work of mid-twentieth century, and fellow Protestant working class writer, Sam Thompson is well known. He
eventually paid homage to Thompson by archiving his papers after his death. His recollection of attending the premiere of Thompson’s controversial play about the Belfast shipyard, *Over the Bridge*, with his shipwright Uncle in 1960, documents his sense of recognition at seeing Thompson’s powerfully honest portrait of a contemporary East Belfast Protestant working class community theatrically rendered:

> It would be hard to say which of us was more shattered by it. We were like members of a lost tribe, thrust before a mirror for the first time, scared and yet delighted at our images, sensing even then that they were much more than a mere reflection ("The Tribe and Thompson" 50).

Parker’s interest in Protestant working class history and heritage is well documented.¹ His early radio play *Iceberg*, considered here, exemplifies a significant strand in his work where Protestant working class identity and Belfast’s urban cityscape are centrally featured. The sociopolitical contexts of Parker’s upbringing, the accidents and impact of geography, and a growing awareness of the complexity of his working class heritage animate both his journalism and his early radio broadcasts.

In the following analysis, class will be theorized within a distinctly post-Marxist framework. To that end, the processes underpinning class identity are considered alive to the instabilities of spatial and heritage practices. Here class is not conceived in terms that seek to measure the revolutionary presence or absence of political discourse in working class communities. While the political moods of working class communities in Northern Ireland are acknowledged as significant, they are also conceived of as existing in a web of everyday practices that contribute to the formation of class identity. In that sense, class identity is considered as much to do with the performance of that identity in the everyday
as much as it is to do with pay packets and politics. Like many contemporary feminist sociologists currently reimagining the impact of class in Britain - Beverly Skeggs or Alison Stemming, for example – the analysis here proceeds from a critical vantage point that acknowledges our assessments of class have shifted to different locations and different activities:

The shift away from the formal spaces of workplaces and unions as the primary sites of the economic, social and political construction of the working class calls for new ways of studying and representing working-class lives, cultures and politics. These new ways incorporate a focus on processes of both representation and the more material processes of everyday life (and the interrelationship between the two); a recognition of the ways in which the experience and meanings of being working class is grounded in everyday life, human interactions and the relationship between work, place and community (Stemming 993).

In Iceberg the means by which a community fashions its daily expressions and constructs its commonsense certainties are represented as the significant subject matter of history and dramatization, not the spectacle of industrial hubris more usually associated with the sinking of the Titanic. In this sense, Parker’s interest mirrors what heritage scholars refer to as ‘intangible heritage’:

“a form of social memory that is grounded in the ‘everyday’ practices such as speaking, walking, gesturing and communicating, and in more specialized ceremonial or ritual concepts” (Rodney and Rose 240). In contrast to this account of intangible heritage, Laurajane Smith offers the term ‘the Authorative Heritage Discourse’ (AHD) to describe the multifarious processes that operate on a national plane to underpin commonalities of identity through heritage practices. The AHD, Benton and Ceil suggest, describes “the various ways in which dominant groups in society impose certain values and methods on the practice of conservation” (7). Since the 1970s UNESCO has become increasingly
vocal in its support for the preservation of intangible heritage all over the world, publishing the Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2003. Generally, as Benton notes:

... it is increasingly recognized that the driving force in motivating heritage conservation comes from what people think, feel and do (intangible heritage) rather than from the tangible remains of the past (1).

However, in Northern Ireland recent high profile developments in the heritage sector suggest we remain locked into models of heritage management that support national/state agendas and top down models of practice. This is seen in particular in the development of a number of signature heritage projects, which in effect establish a new tone in Northern Ireland’s emergent AHD.3 These include the Causeway Coast and Glen Tourism Plan, Derry Walled City Signature project, and the building of the Titanic Experience in East Belfast. The Titanic Experience, located in Belfast’s newly constructed Titanic Quarter, will serve here as a useful foil to read Iceberg against. Both the landmark building and Parker’s play use the era of the Titanic’s construction to offer comment on contemporary Belfast. The Titanic Experience is read as a central tenet in a more extensive emerging AHD and representative of how “governments see heritage as a means of boosting tourist revenue” which tends to lead to “a consumer-orientated approach to heritage management” (Benton 1). In opposition, Parker’s dramatic rendering of Protestant working class intangible heritage throws the Titanic Experience’s obsessive concern with scale, speed, and statistics into welcome relief.

The redevelopment of the shipyard in East Belfast, it will be argued, is indicative of a network of redevelopment projects currently being rolled out
across the province. Northern Ireland is undergoing an intense period of spatial rearrangement. In particular, a significant number of high profile spatial interventions have been developed that are now marketed as images of internal stability and the tangible benefits of peace after the Good Friday Agreement (GFA). This accelerated period of spatial realignment since the GFA is, presently, most visible in: heritage sites, the border regions, and culturally led urban regeneration projects. In addition to sites like the shipyard in Belfast, in Derry, for example, the redevelopment of the former military barracks at Ebrington and the Peace Bridge are potent architectural symbols of aspirant post-conflict state. Notably, both developments, though managed by the independent urban regeneration company ILEX, are ultimately controlled by the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM). Post-GFA utopian aspirations find form in our most contemporary architectural interventions.

These perspectives on class, heritage, and space critically coalesce in this paper to illuminate some of the complex ways Northern Irish class identity is both represented and practiced. Each set of practices exists in dialogue with the others. When we say that space enables heritage and class practices, we must also acknowledge so too the practices of heritage and class will determine the character of spaces (forming places). The various performances of class, heritage, and place in Northern Ireland are clearly embodied sets of practices. As such, these performances not only reflect identity, place, or heritage, they also enact class identity, have place-making functions, and can be deployed to secure historical discourse.

On his return to Northern Ireland in 1969, Parker committed himself to dealing with his “almost Oedipal obsession with Belfast” ("Buntus Belfast” 33).
It was a decision that meant he would inevitably, like Thompson and Carnduff before him, find his attention turning to the most iconic urban location in the northern Protestant working class psychogeography: the Belfast shipyard. At its height in 1951 ‘the Yard” employed over 21,000 workers (the overwhelming majority of whom were Protestant) and was the defining symbol of Belfast’s industrial strengthen in the 1900s. For Unionists it stood as a visible edifice and defence against Home Rule and ‘Rome Rule’. The Yard’s size and stature was taken as evidence that the economic Union with Great Britain was just and profitable. Bew et al suggest that the decade between 1860-1870 was a seminal period in the development of Belfast as a city. During this time the establishment of the Harland and Wolff shipyard in 1861 was accompanied by a massive period of population growth in Belfast, rising by 40% in this decade, and a growing confidence in the City’s place as an industrial capital at the centre of Great Britain’s industrial revolution and thriving capitalist economy.

East Belfast expanded with the success of the shipyard. Working class communities settled on the east bank of the River Lagan, with generations of families engaged in the service of the Yard and other ancillary industries. Parker’s childhood neighbourhood, Sydenham, borders the Harland and Wolff shipyard. He recalled gazing past the train tracks as a child in Sydenham and taking in “the inevitable gantries of Queen’s Island” (“Green Light” 64). The shipyard was a crucible of both sectarian and class-based politics in Belfast. While many of Northern Ireland’s historians have focused critical attention on the dynamics between unionism, the state, and nationalism/republicanism, key labour historians have also provided a rigorous account and analysis of the emergence and development of the Labour Movement on the island of Ireland.6
At moments of crisis in the evolution of the northern state, labourite politics often become most pronounced in industrial Belfast and stratify otherwise obscured allegiances. Collectively the work of these historians provide historical evidence for McAuley’s succinct observation that the complexity of contemporary working class Protestant consciousness is:

... best understood as a dual consciousness where sectarianism, labourism and collectivism co-exist, none is drawn on in pure form, but often they are intermeshed to form the contemporary political consciousness and political identity of the protestant working class (52).

In Parker’s childhood the shipyard had enjoyed the prosperity brought to Belfast by the demand for ships and munitions during WW2. When Harland and Wolff had reached the record high of 21,000 workers in their yard, Parker was ten years old. However, by the time he was twenty Harland and Wolff had laid-off 10,000 of these workers. By 1964 the Wilson Plan officially declared the twin pillars of Belfast’s industrial strength, linen and shipbuilding, to be in terminal decline (Bew et al 120). Parker’s entry into adulthood was coterminous with the demise of Lord Brookborough’s term as the longest serving Prime Minister in the northern state’s then short history. Rising discontent at the worsening economic situation is evident in the results of the 1958 Stormont elections, where for the first time in over a decade the Northern Irish Labour Party had shown a significant increase in their share of the vote and took four seats in the process. By 1962 they not only held these four seats but also achieved their highest ever return of the vote, 76,842; a total of 26% of the entire protestant votes registered for that election (Morgan 324).

Like Thompson and Carnduff, Parker’s work shows an intimate awareness of the complex interplay, and co-existence of, class-consciousness and
sectarian identification involved in the structuring processes underpinning the ideology of Protestant working class communities in Northern Ireland. For all three writers this sense of complex class and ethnoreligious identity coalesces around the shipyard and East Belfast. Parker’s sense of class identity gathered form as an incidental soundtrack of “industrial noise” and ‘the distant clanging of the shipyard and the sudden roar from the test bench at Shorts” (“Green Light” 65) played out daily across Sydenham. His emergent awareness of class cleavages perhaps made more acute when his family left the working class streets of Sydenham for the more “semi-detached and suburban” surroundings of the Hollywood Road, just outside of East Belfast (“Green Light” 69). The move certainly did not dull his sense of class difference, though he was far from nostalgic about his roots. As Richtarik notes, he strongly identified with Thompson’s sense of being a critical voice of and for the Protestant working class ‘tribe’ (84). When confronted with a Protestant sectarian mob in the early 1970s his frustration and sense of his own complex position are clear:

For it was not hatred that had swept through the herd but panic, the atavistic panic of the Northern prod, the panic, very like drowning, of a man heavily gravid with brawling emotions and thoughts which he has not the fluency to deliver, a panic that still crawls around in there underneath the weighty luggage of my education (“Belfast Buntus” 32).

Parker felt a need to respond to the complexity of the Protestant experience in the north. Unlike Thompson or Carnduff, however, who had similarly responded to this issue in their work, he escaped the shipyard. The terminal decline of the industry, coupled with his own personal physical challenges, meant he would avoid the full impact of the Yard’s demise by taking the less traditional option for young working class Protestants leaving school at that time by enrolling at
Queen's University in 1960. Like many working class Catholics during this period, working class Protestants benefitted from the implementation of the Butler Education Act of 1945, which allowed many students with working class backgrounds to become the first in their families to reach university and, eventually, the emancipated greenery of Belfast's middle class suburbs. As part of this generation, the range of influences acting on Parker, from Beat poetry to forms of the anti-novel, civil rights politics and anti-war demonstrations, furnished him with alternative ways to contextualize and understand problems in the north of Ireland at the beginning of the 1970s.

Richtarik's biography of Parker recounts his experimentations with form, genre, and artistic practice while at Queens. The demythologizing winds of early postmodernism were sweeping through Belfast the same as everywhere else in the latter 60s and early 70s. To Parker, skeptical of the old dramatic forms, realism seemed redundant: an inadequate container to hold the full range of experiences of life in contemporary Belfast. Crude agit-prop would be dangerous and un-usefully simplistic in such complex circumstances. His search for “a unifying dramatic metaphor for the Northern Irish human condition” (“Dramatis Personae” 104) left him suspicious of directly engaging with the troubles as subject matter. In his 1973 radio play, Requiem, his dramaturgical strategy for dealing with the impact of a bomb blast in Belfast was to disperse the moment into a poetic and polyphonic soundscape. In that same year he began exploring the possibilities of the history play as a form that might disrupt the narratives of sectarian certainties being proffered in Belfast during the same period. The benefits of the form were largely those of displacement: historical distance enabled him to dramatically comment on contemporary issues from the
relative safety of the past relocated to a dramatic present. In *Northern Star* Parker would execute this technique with the flare and skill of a writer at the height of his powers; deploying the form to explore the republican character of his Protestant heritage. *Iceberg*, written a decade earlier, in large part invokes the events of the sinking of the Titanic to unpack the ideological certainties of the loyal, Protestant Ulsterman and to get at his seemingly ever-nascent labourite consciousness. Parker’s central concern in *Iceberg* is never the spectacle of the giant sinking boat. It is in the chat, thoughts, craic, and experiences of his two dead workmen, Hughie and Danny, and their picaresque ‘dander’ through the excesses and absurdities of the doomed liner that Parker finds a space for reflection on contemporaneous events in the north.

In the year Parker began writing *Iceberg*, a significant portion of Protestant working class Belfast felt itself under threat. The Sunningdale power sharing agreement of 1973 was generally perceived within that community to weaken the union, undermine unionist control of Northern Ireland, and remove any sense of, both real and imagined, Protestant privilege. The Ulster Workers’ Council Strike (UWCS) in 1974 forced the government to retire the Sunningdale agreement and reinstate direct rule from Westminster. Mass Protestant working class direct action had been deployed to ensure the success of the UWCS and the breaking of Sunningdale. It was a model Protestant working class communities had used before and would use again. In the Home Rule crisis, which came to a head in 1912, direct action culminated in a monster rally outside City Hall in that year to support the signing of the Solemn League and Covenant. So the events of 1912 provided Parker with a useful set of parallel circumstances to reflect the current crisis in Northern Ireland in the early 1970s.
The strength of the Protestant working class, particularly in the shipyard districts, made them a powerful force for direct action. Official Unionism, under Carson and later Craig, recognized the strength of the working classes when mobilized as a show of popular, militant support. A heady mix of jingoism and Belfast pride proved an effective way to pull the classes together to resist the perceived threat of the erosion of Protestant heritage and potential assimilation into the Irish Republic. Ian Paisley and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) called on such support to fend off the reformist agenda of the Anglo-Irish Agreement in the 1980s with their 'Ulster Says No!' campaign. The GFA arguably marked a point when neither the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), who supported the GFA, nor the DUP, who opposed it, could effectively draw support from the entire Protestant working class community. The Progressive Unionist Party's (PUP) support for the GFA, whose membership at this point in time was drawn almost exclusively from Protestant working class communities in Belfast, should not be underestimated.15

The mixed response of Protestant working class communities to the GFA has meant feelings of alienation and exclusion from the implementation of the Peace Process and its dividends, exacerbated by persistent social and economic malaise in these communities, threatens to significantly undermine the Agreement. In addition, the current development of Northern Ireland’s post-GFA infrastructure is an anomaly in the climate of the United Kingdom’s otherwise double-dip recession, public spending efficiency savings, and non-Keynesian economic policies under the Conservative-Liberal government. This not to suggest that Northern Ireland has not felt the impact of the economic crisis, far from it, but this period has also seen massive inward investment. Our tourist
industry and heritage sector have benefitted from strong public-private investment during the same period. So that, the ordinary Protestant working class citizen of Belfast may find herself in the frustrating and paradoxical position of living through the architectural transformation of the city, with grand buildings celebrating Belfast’s new found confidence and global identity, but also find herself with no job and without the qualifications to get a job in any of the new buildings erected. This, coupled with a palpable sense of the erosion of working class Protestant heritage, has seen violence return to the streets of Belfast in recent years. The highly publicized ‘flags protests’\(^{16}\) in 2012/13, and the more recent riots on Royal Avenue in Belfast’s city centre, are evidence of growing discontent. Billy Hutchinson, leader of the PUP, has espoused ‘unarmed resistance’ and ‘de-Britification’ in recent media interviews and protest rallies (Edwards n.pag.).\(^{17}\) In many ways, the flags protests and other similar demonstrations are in part protests against the seeming exclusivity of the emergent AHD; a dark indicator that many in Protestant working class communities feel they have been excluded from Brand NI and other recent attempts to retune the tone of Northern Ireland’s contemporary heritage discourse.\(^{18}\)

*Iceberg*, clearly, grapples with issues that remain all too live and contentious in the present day City. Parker’s own comments on the difficulties of engaging with this complexity feel fresh enough to repeat here:

> Nearly everyday now in the North, the plea goes out to ‘forget the past’. Such advice is both impracticable and pernicious. On the one hand, you can’t forget a nightmare while you are still dreaming it. On the other, it is survival through comprehension that is healthy, not survival through amnesia (“An Ulster Volunteer” 38).
Recent heritage initiatives have been supported by high profile marketing campaigns such as “Our Place, Our Time” in 2012, delivered at a cost of 4.7 million pounds, and an extensive series of reports and advice guides produced by the Northern Irish Tourist Board (NITB). The metadiscourse within NITB, evident in both their marketing strategies and in the copious amounts of documentation they produce, stresses their desire to engender civic pride, places emphasis on common/shared heritage, advocates the use of urban brownfield sites (such as the Titanic Quarter and the site of the former Maze prison), and is near fanatical about the need to “entrench the brand at every stage of the visitor journey” (Northern Irish Tourist Board 3). The extent of the saturation of this strategy in Northern Ireland and the near moral force it has attracted can be measured each time there is a negative event in Belfast. At the mere hint of a riot media commentators will ask – how will this impact on Brand NI? NITB offer practical advice for making Northern Irish food, music, and culture more ‘authentic.’ And it has been working. Statistics from Mintel show, without even a sniff of irony, “our authenticity rating has improved” (Northern Irish Tourist Board 3).

In lieu of the ever-suspended redevelopment of the Maze site, the Titanic Quarter development is the most significant of these recent spatial interventions. Managed by Dublin-based Harcourt Developments, the 185-acre site is aiming to deliver 5,000 apartments, 180,000 square metres of business space and 41,000 square meters of leisure space along 1 mile of waterside development. Estimates suggest this will represent a £1 billion pound-plus investment in the next fifteen years. The Titanic Signature Project is a public-private initiative and costing more than £100 million pounds is Northern
Ireland's most expensive heritage development project in the State's history. The rhetoric surrounding this project is convincing. It espouses a celebratory pride in the City's industrial past coupled with a sense of the City's return to greatness in the new climate of accommodation, peace, and stability. However, this rhetoric requires scrutiny. Marc Auge's work on space and place provides a usefully nuanced and complex set of observations on the workings and aspirations of the supermodern state that can be invoked to buffer the extremely persuasive simplicity of the rhetoric in this case. His work has particular saliency at this point in Northern Ireland's history, as we align ourselves for entry into the hotly anticipated global economic marketplace.

Auge suggests:

> Leading architects have become international stars, and when a town aspires to feature in the world network it commissions one of them to produce an edifice that will stand as a monument, a testimony providing its presence in the world, in the sense of being wired into the system (XV).

Northern Ireland is keen to get wired, connected to global markets, and so it came as no real surprise that the building of Northern Ireland's very own Bilbao would attract the sort of figure Auge describes – Eric Khune of Eric Khune Associates and Civic Arts. Speaking at the Creative Services Summit in the UK in July 2012, Khune suggests:

> Leisure and entertainment is now the core of everything we do around the world. And if architecture is the new diplomacy, then leisure is the new currency.

> ... The thing that we talk about – we're working with heads of state around the world – is that leisure can no longer be seen as singularly as a commercial enterprise. Leisure today, for us, is the new infrastructure. It changes the way you think about cities. You want to invest in a city, you invest in the qualities of the experiences of people who are coming to visit and do business ("Creative Services Summit" n.pag.).
The concept of the visitor ‘experience’ is crucial here. It echoes, from an opposite perspective, Auge’s caution that in the supermodern/postmodern consciousness we are searching for meaning by collecting experiences. He suggests, after Pierre Nova, that our Lieux de Memoire (loss of memory) has left us hungry for connections (23). Travel is no longer concerned with adventure, in this sense, but with a desire for live experiences that will authenticate our existence. This, Nova and Auge suggest, replaces our earlier consumerist need to buy objects. Tourism provides a platform for the supermodern global traveller to experience an abundance of events; to connect with other human experiences and feel de-alienated, re-historised, Auge might suggest. For Khune and associates, this is a business opportunity; a market:

This collection of experiences that can be conveyed to friends and family and even strangers is what changes everything (“Creative Services Summit n.pag.”).

The ‘experience’ market opens location and site to commodification:

Our job, better than any other industry, is to restore the storytelling quality – not just of our displays or our museums, but our cities. And as we build around the world, we tell this story to heads of state. We tell these stories to all of our captains of industry that we work with. And we tell it to the children on all these continents. And that is – do not forsake the genius of your own culture to be modern. Do not buy western culture to feel you’ve got a pass into the country club. Tell the story of your civilization... (“Creative Services Summit n.pag.”).

So says the logic that raised the Titanic Experience to become one of Northern Ireland’s most important contemporary buildings. It is the lynchpin in NITB’s Brand NI strategy, a global story and reason tourists would actually visit Northern Ireland at all. Moreover, applying Khune’s terms, as part of the new diplomacy, it may attract inward business investment. The Titanic Quarter, supported by the installation of Project Kelvin – a ‘fast link’ fibre optic
bandwidth internet connection set to revolutionize remote client business activity here – is the premiere symbol of new Northern Ireland and all its aspirations. Citibank have now located in the Titanic Quarter, others will follow. However, there is also concern that the benefits of this development will not be felt by all. Mark Hackett, architect and founder of Forum for Alternative Belfast warns “that the Titanic Quarter could turn into a rich ‘parallel city’ cut off from the City’s poorer residents” (Hackett qtd. in “Titanic Quarter and East Belfast n. pag.).

Contemporary Northern Ireland is notable not just because of the transitional political climate here, but also because this transitional period is, in very real ways, spatially enacted. The rhetoric of affluence associated with the Titanic Quarter stands in complete opposition to the experiences of poverty and exclusion in East Belfast communities just a stone’s throw away from our most polished images of modernity. Street protests are forms of residual spatial practices that, in part at least, articulate the class tensions implicit in this discourse. There is a lack of working class narrative in the Titanic Experience, which needs to be highlighted. Reading this alongside Parker’s detailed attempt to humanize the spectacle of the sinking of the Titanic is an especially productive strategy. In doing so we not only underscore the absence of class in such exhibits, but also the strength of Parker’s dramatic portrait of a community that is in danger of being officially forgotten.

While Parker’s concerns are those of the everyman and understanding the moments of humanity in the events he depicts, the Titanic Experience’s narrative is one of industry, scale, and, ultimately, spectacle. The Titanic Experience’s exhibitions are arranged into a series of galleries. These begin with
‘Boomtown Belfast’, which visually and textually establishes the broad economic and social contexts of the city’s creation (linen, shipbuilding, rope, and tobacco industries draw migrants to the town). From here visitors walk through a staged area reminiscent of an arrol gantry, the giant metal skeletal frame that hung over the Titanic during its construction, and take a ‘work lift’ to an upper floor where there is an opportunity to board a cable car-style ride. Billed as a ‘flying theatre’, this impressive ride takes you on a six or so minute tour of a reconstructed shipyard during the building of the Titanic. Following this a gallery depicts the final stages of the ship’s construction and launch. In the ‘Fit-Out’ exhibition first, second, and third class cabins have been reconstructed, and visitors can take a 360-degree virtual tour of the ship in its entire splendor. The exhibition continues in chronological format to depict the maiden voyage, the sinking of the ship, and issues arising in the aftermath of the disaster. Closing galleries consider how the Titanic has been depicted in myths and legends since it sank and document the story of the raising of the Titanic. As part of this, visitors can stand above a hugely impressive 3-D image of the sunken ruin as it glides below their feet under a glass ceiling.

Jon Price’s survey of models for interpreting industrial heritage identifies a useful set of common features that can be used for the sake of comparison in evaluating these experiences (111-112). Price finds it is common for sites of industrial heritage to stage historic narratives of industry in their particular region and for this to be accompanied by lots of technical information. The Titanic Experience does not frustrate this expectation. The attempt to establish the basis for the emergence of shipbuilding in Belfast and the immediate contexts of the Home Rule era are, however, thinly drawn. The gallery
pays lip service, but never probes the issue, and does not engage in political issues that had electrified the shipyard during the construction of the Titanic. Moreover, the lives of the workers and conditions of their employment are limited to one small group of information panels that offer only generalized statements about poor living standards and the frequency of fatal accidents at work. In a large-scale gallery space little room is given to the story of the community building this ship. What emerges instead is the story of the White Star Line and Belfast's engineering prowess. Price suggests that this drive to document and display industrial processes is common in such exhibitions, commenting:

> At its best the process can be used to interpret the human aspects of the industry, at its worst it simply becomes a method of mesmerizing visitors for a few minutes (114-15).

The cable-car ride through the working shipyard is illustrative in this instance. Though the ride touches on the actual work carried out by the riveting squads, it never successfully establishes a feel for working life in the Yard. The narrative drive to establish the scale of the Titanic's construction ultimately leaves little room for reflection on the human beings carrying out the actual work. In the gallery following the immersive ride, a near obsessive concern with statistics emerges in the narrative – 3 million rivets were used in the construction of the ship, etc. etc. etc. The statistical litany continues – 8,000 cigars were carried on board – in the Fit-Out and Launch galleries. The effect is dehumanizing. It's an oddly masculine staging – size, scale, and spectacle the key values in play. This feels all the more unfortunately ironic given that the de-industrialization of East Belfast has meant the loss of traditional male labour roles:
... the traditional labour market was replaced by social fatalism, low wage employment, insecure casualised work, feminized labour and benefit dependency. Within that group, education remains both under-valued and under-appreciated. A new and deep-rooted approach is needed to bring about the scale of change that is required (Working Group on Educational Disadvantage and the Protestant Working Class 11).25

The building ostensibly built to celebrate the contribution of their fathers and grandfathers to the City, visible perhaps from their homes, a reminder for the young men of East Belfast of their own social disadvantage.

Foster suggests during the industrial age:

Size and speed became highly conscious cultural values. They became cultural imperatives and not just technical ambitions; they were functions of the new cultural engagement with time and space that was a portion of what later became known as Modernism (18).

By-passing any narratives of social or economic dynamic, Titanic Experience chooses, as its galleries develop their themes, to reinstate the industrial age’s own fascination with ‘Titanism’, size, and speed. This is a story of industrial capacity: Belfast’s industrial capacity. Exhibition panels at the end of the ‘story’ announce:

Belfast today. The underlying strengths that made Belfast so successful in the early 1900s are still present today.

Caught between serving the needs of an emergent AHD, providing an image that might aid in attracting inward investment, and the expectations of a tourist clientele rich with their own sense of mediatized images of the sinking of the Titanic, there is little room for the Titanic Experience to include the working class experience. Price suggests:

Official interpretation is concerned with the development of the visitor, and concepts of historical validity. It has a general didactic intent, and is concerned to place its subjects in context in a perceived and social continuum (111-112).
In contrast, he adds, community-led heritage models are “concerned with the validation of recent experience” (Price 112). The Titanic Experience is what Alison Hems identifies as a ‘positivist’ model of heritage narrative (1). It offers a fixed, linear (chronological) account of events. It aims to establish facts over feelings and so opts to concentrate on mechanized processes and objects over human processes and memories. This strategy serves the AHD, it establishes Belfast’s credentials for entry (or re-entry) into global economic markets by announcing the once great engineering prowess of the City, interrupted from the point of the Home Rule crisis in 1912 until the signing of the GFA, has returned. 

The poverty and rising discontent of the Titanic Experience’s neighbours are not considered.

In contrast, Iceberg gently teases out the complexity of Protestant working class political positions in the City as they are experienced at the community level, while also systematically dismantling local variations on the rhetoric of ‘the gilded age.’ As Richtarik points out, the title of the play is a deliberate elision of the more familiar narrative of spectacle associated with the sinking of the Titanic (134-135). Iceberg keeps the focus of the drama on human events rather than on over-worked accounts of the scale of the disaster. Hughie and Danny, have strong Belfast working class accents. Their unauthorized presence undercuts the well-managed performance of luxury and spectacle of the doomed liner’s maiden voyage. They roam around the ship relatively freely, pose for photographs for the press while using expensive state-of-the-art gym equipment and attempt to commandeer a first class cabin for their own use. That they are in fact ghosts only adds to this effect, with the smell of working class toil
refusing exclusion no matter how steep the ticket price. The matter of the Titanic’s luxury is debunked by Iceberg’s structural playfulness. Longer scenes with Hughie and Danny are intercut with snatches from a tour being given interchangeably by a Lady Guide or a Male Guide. Their descriptions of luxury grow increasingly ridiculous in the richness of detail provided and are undercut, for example, with the sounds of foghorns interrupting their corporate boasting. On one occasion, following the Lady Guide’s particularly highfalutin description of grandeur in which she alludes to “a higher standard of toilet luxury and comfort at sea,” her speech is immediately followed by the sound of the ship’s orchestra playing “the concluding line of Rule Britannia” in a mock ceremonial style (Iceberg 23). The satiric bite of Parker’s juxtaposition is unmissable. Foster’s extensive study of the story of the Titanic suggests that luxury associated with the ship was a source of anxiety in the late Victorian/early Edwardian period, where “culture was preoccupied with a universe of chance from which a jealous God seemed to be withdrawing” (28). For some, the sunken liner represented a warning against the “perils of prosperity” (Foster 98), while for others, like the left-wing American magazine The Masses, it was “a model of the exploitative capitalist state driven by the ‘insanity of luxury’ and the ‘insanity of speed’” (Foster 106).

The facade of the Titanic Experience includes frosted glass with key slogans etched in black text onto a gray background. One of these slogans is “Loyal Workers”. The phrase is repeated a few times on the windows, which wrap around the entire building, and are accompanied by silhouettes of archetypal images of craftsmen and labourers at work. This forms part of the narrative arc in the building. “Made in Belfast” by “Loyal Workers” is a very
investable image. *Iceberg*, however, includes a sense of the latent class-consciousness at the heart of the shipyard workforce. Danny, the younger and more acquiescent of Parker's duo, despite being dead, is humbled by the attention of Mr. Andrews’ – the ‘workman’s friend’ and designer of the Titanic (*Iceberg* 43). Danny's depiction bears comparison to Parker's description of his grandfather, James Lynas:

> I imagine my grandfather and his cronies to have been earnest young men, full of certainties and zeal, readers of books like *Thrift* and *Self-Help* by Samuel Smiles, not wishing to ape the gentry but respecting its superiority, wishing merely to elevate their family's station from a kitchen house to one with a parlour, scullery and pantry too, and an inside lavatory; which my grandfather did ... (“An Ulster Volunteer” 39)

However, Hughie's commonsense analysis of events carefully disassembles Danny's sense of unconditional loyalty. Hughie is representative of the Yard's labourite traditions:

> No, I’m what they call a malcontent. I just can’t take orders. It runs in the family, the son’s as bad. One word from me and he does what he likes. (*Iceberg* 43)

His challenge to Danny's stereotyping of their fellow working class travellers boarding at Cork is indicative of his sense of class solidarity. Danny suggests:

> “Belfast-built, that means something, you know id does, Hughie” (*Iceberg* 46).

But Hughie’s rebuttal to this stereotypical Protestant Belfast chauvinism is leveling “one set of skivvies is just the same as another” (*Iceberg* 45). He continues:

> HUGH: To hear you talk, you’d think this tub belonged to Belfast. Who footed the bill for it? DANNY: The White Star Line did. HUGH: Right. English magnates. Who was it built for? DANNY: Anybody who wants to sail in it. HUGH: Don’t be soft it was build [sic] for John Jacob Astor and his
millionaire Yankee cronies. I didn't notice them inviting the mayor of Belfast on the maiden voyage. *(Iceberg 46)*

*Iceberg*'s strengths are its humanizing effects, which allow for complexity and contradiction of character. In 1970s Belfast, in a mood darkened by the false certainties of bigotry, this complexity had the potential to disturb sectarian agendas. The *Titanic Experience* is, of course, one of Northern Ireland’s most mature and sophisticated visitor attractions. It feels a very grown up, global enterprise indeed. It *is* a Bilbao for Northern Ireland. It does provide a striking image for marketing campaigns, and it is easy to see the carefully conceived iconicity of the building gives it an immediate ‘tweetability’. It offers a snapshot account of the Titanic digestible between business meetings. In global tourist terms it markets Northern Ireland as part of the ‘Bleisure Trip’ circuit. But, to borrow Douglas Copeland’s thinking on how the demands of social media, the cloud, and the Internet in general mean, “the narrative flow of our life has been sort of stripped away in the process,” the effect of this on working class communities associated with the shipyards is to “de-narrate” their experiences and heritage (“This is Not a Cloud”, n. pag.).

The effects of the current trend of spatial interventions in Northern Ireland are various. East Belfast, to deploy Auge’s terms, can be theorized as part “anthropological space”: an organic and social space borne of generations of families creating “concrete and symbolic constructions of space” (42). Running parallel/around/between this are what we can call examples of Auge much-cited “non-place”: places of “circulation, consumption and communication” (VIII). Auge’s description of interventions into anthropological spaces as they are
redrawn for the supermodern age highlights the tensions between residual and emergent spatial practices in such locations:

These refurbishments cause a few perplexed smiles and a certain amount of retrospective musing among the older locales: for what they see projected at a distance is the place where they used to believe they lived from day to day, but which they are now being invited to see as a fragment of history. Spectators of themselves, tourists of the private, they can hardly be expected to blame nostalgia or ticks of memory for objectively evident changes to the space in which they still live, which is no longer the place where they used to love (45).

For the indigenous communities of East Belfast the effect is disorientating. The spatial rules have changed quicker than they can be expected to adapt to: “As anthropological spaces create the organically social, so non-places create solitary contractuality” (Auge 76).

The absence of class in such important historical locations is not a workable or sustainable situation. In a Northern Irish context, Elizabeth Crooke cautions: “where culture and identity is highly contested, exclusion from the canon of the established notion of history can be interpreted as a deliberate act of suppression” (135). Rather Irish President Michael D. Higgins’ call for us to “renovate our narratives” with an awareness of “the ethics of memory,” 30 in a manner redolent of Parker’s own insistence on “survival through comprehension,” seems to offer suitable grounds for the establishment of more expansive models of preservation and remembrance. We require what Corinn Perkin terms an “appropriate museology” (112), where our cultural practices are maintained through locally sensitive models. Communities need to be fully engaged, especially those communities, like the working class citizens of East Belfast, who have the most at stake in these interventions.
Older connections need to be acknowledged, 're-narrated' as it were, and the everyday practices of our working class communities documented. Constructivist models of engagement, to draw on Hems once again (1), allow for more fluid, dialogical, and reflective experiences offering alternatives to over-packaged, non-reflective positivist modes of delivery. In addition, or even beyond, the polish and package of the mega-museum ‘experience’ we are currently offering, we might also provide more nourishing ‘encounters’ for both our international visitors and ourselves:

> Encounters with the reality of ‘the other’ can seed recognition, empathy and new senses of ‘we.’ In this way heritage spaces are not just *lieux*, but *milieu de memoire*, where our abstracted, homogenizing national stories are called into question through the daily telling and living of our unique and overlapping individual stories. Thus, the possibility of pluralistic publics may depend on nurturing public spaces that that draw estranged groups together to do the hard work of practicing conciliatory heritage (Lehrer, 283).

Parker, with others, has left us a fictional legacy of the experiences of working class communities in Northern Ireland. Such accounts provide us with a rich and imaginative resource for our considerations of the complexities of everyday life here. We are wise to value them deeply. But we need to formalize this archive and expand it. We require a centre for the study of working class lives in Northern Ireland. 31 Perhaps Parker’s work –rigorously researched, poetic, playful and political – can be our model there.
nobody has managed to evolve a style or a form of writing that will adequately strikes one: the kind of crazy insanity of the juxtaposition of events. And so far nobody has managed to evolve a style or a form of writing that will adequately

Alongside the seismic events of the WW1 and the partition of Ireland, the history early twentieth century Belfast is peppered with such moments: the National Union of Dock Labourers Strike in 1907, lead by Larkin (prefiguring the events of the Dublin Lockout in 1913); the 1919 Forty-Four hour strike; the 1932 Outdoor Relief Riots and the formation of the Revolutionary Workers’ Group in Belfast; and the 1935 Railway Workers strike. Post-WW2, though the Northern Irish Labour Party continued to provide a working class voice in Belfast, British Labour Party reforms and relative affluence in Northern Ireland led to a period of quietism. In the later 1950s, with industrial activity at an all-time low, labour unrest was visible once again. However, sectarian politics in the build up to the imposition of Direct Rule in the 1970s disarticulated areas of potential working class solidarity. The formation of the Progressive Unionist Party in the late 1970s signaled, alongside the activities of a myriad of other groups, a rising sense of class identity was once again resurfacing in the political arenas of Northern Ireland.

Likewise, when as a boy Parker was moved from his comprehensive School to the seemingly more advantageous surroundings of Sullivan Grammar School, the differences in class positions in his native city were impressed upon him.

Both Carnduff and Thompson had spent time working in the Yard.

Implemented in Northern Ireland from 1947.

Ricktarik’s biography covers this extensively.

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There are a significant number of these signature projects, each with a specific set of aims and objectives. For full details see:

http://www.nitb.com/Destinations/SignatureProjects.aspx

Consider, for example, the ‘performance’ of the demilitarization of the border between the north and the south; we could also consider the huge investment that has been made to refurbish Derry and the redevelopment of contentious sites like Fort George or Ebrington Barracks. And, of course, we are still waiting on the redevelopment of the Maze to finally begin.

Richtarik’s comprehensive account of Parker’s life provides a detailed account of Parker’s internal dilemmas about committing his writing to Belfast and Northern Ireland.

For useful accounts of the emergence of the Labour Movement and militant class-based forms of Independent Orange Order activity see Patterson and Morgan. Munck and Rolston provide an illuminating account of the more revolutionary labour politics in Belfast during the hungry 1930s, which is made more complete when read alongside Mike Milotte’s analysis of communism in Ireland in the same period.

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contain that. And this is something that I personally am involved seeking” (qtd. in Richtarik 126).

14 Gladstone’s first Home Rule Bill of 1886 was defeated in the House of Commons because of the strength of the Conservative Party at Westminster. A second Home Rule Bill in 1893 proved successful in the House of Commons but was rejected in the House of Lords and effectively blocked. An Act of Parliament in 1911 removed Lords’ veto on future Bills passed through Parliament, meaning they could now only delay a Bill’s enactment by a maximum of two years. Asquith introduced the third Home Rule Bill in April 1912, which meant it was guaranteed to come into Law in April 1914. Ulster unionists, therefore, hugely escalated their anti-Home Rule campaign in 1912. Under Lord Carson’s leadership, and organized by James Craig - Carson’s ‘First Lieutenant’ on the Ulster Unionist Council - on the 28th September 1912, ‘Ulster Day.’ Anti-Home Rule demonstrators assembled outside Belfast’s City Hall in a massive show of unionist strength. A total of 237,368 men signed the Solemn League and Covenant, with 234,046 women signing a parallel Declaration, pledging to resist the implementation of Home Rule in Ulster.

Following this, in December 1912, the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) formed as a Northern Protestant army sworn to resist Home Rule in Ulster by whatever means necessary. In April of 1914 the UVF infamously succeeded in smuggling 25,000 German rifles and 3 million rounds of ammunition into the province via Larne Harbour. In the south, in response to events in the north, the Irish Volunteers formed and a significant shipment of arms were also smuggled into the country through Howth. Arguably, impending Civil War was only prevented because of the beginning of the First World War, when all plans to enact Home Rule in Ireland were put into abeyance for the duration of the conflict.

15 An enduring image from the media circus that accompanied the signing of the Agreement was an incident in a improvised press conference in a shabby portacabin held on the grounds of Stormont, where Ian Paisley, who had attempted to mobilize popular support and march on the discussions taking place, was heckled by Party members from the PUP. Mr. Paisley was uncharacteristically flummoxed as the PUP asked him ‘what’s the alternative, Ian? What’s the alternative?’

16 The flags protest broke out after Belfast City Council voted to change their policy on flying the Union flag at City Hall.

17 The riots took place the 9th August 2013. The observations here are gleaned from Aaron Edward’s “PUP Back to GFA Levels.” Edwards suggests we are witnessing “our very own loyalist spring” and that “As the Protestant working class feel more and more out of sorts with the ‘peace process', these mantras will take on a new urgency.” (n.pag)

18 See Smith's seminal Uses of Heritage.

19 NITB is the northern end of a tripartite tourist management group on the island of Ireland. Failte Ireland provide a similar service in the Republic, while Tourism Ireland acts as a third organization that offers both sister organizations statistical data and markets Ireland on the global stage. The many, many reports produced by NITB can be found here: www.nitb.com
For example, the morning following the first of the major flag protests in Belfast, David Ford of the Alliance Party appeared on the popular Nolan radio show. Although the previous night had seen the homes of Alliance Councilors attacked and hundreds of thousands of pounds of damage, Stephen Nolan’s single insistent question was – “but what about Brand NI? How will this effect Brand NI?” More recently, following riots in Royal Avenue, media pundits anxiously speculated on the impact of the images of rioters in the affluent City centre being “beamed out around the world” and the negative consequences for Brand NI.

The Maze is increasingly becoming the acid test for the post-GFA spatial redesign of Northern Ireland. The point at which the proof of concept for sharing space in the agreed state must be delivered. However, debate still rages around the proposed peace and reconciliation centre to be developed there. After a considerable time, politicians did recently seem to reach agreement on the issue. However, in the days I have been editing this article, First Minister Peter Robinson, under mounting pressure, has rescinded his support for the development of the site. For further details and background see my own: “Restaging Violence: H-Block as Abu-Graib”; and Rutherford’s "Maze: Twists and Turns of a Tortuous Saga.”

Note also that the brilliant Daniel Libeskind, architect of the Jewish Museum in Berlin and Ground Zero in New York, is now associated with the redevelopment of the site of the former Maze prison.

His fascination with the medieval play Everyman is well known. For an account of this see his lecture “Dramatis Personae.”

For example, sectarian violence in the shipyards associated with the Home Rule crisis saw 2,000 workers forcibly ejected from their work in the same year as the launch of the Titanic (Patterson, Class Conflict, 89). In fact, Austen Morgan puts this figure at 3,000 and says that 600 of these were protestant socialists, or “rotten prods’, as they were known.

The full document is available here: http://www.nicva.org/sites/default/files/A-Call-to-Action-FINAL-March2011.pdf See also the University of Ulster’s Centre for Young Men Studies for a collection of useful papers, archived here: http://www.socsi.ulster.ac.uk/sociology/research/young/html

References here are to the original 1975 BBC transmission of Parker’s play, in which Joe McPartland played Hughie and Stephen Rea played Danny. Later quotations from the play are taken from Phelan.

Foster suggests the maiden voyage of the Titanic was “a quasi-theatrical event” (176).

Hughie’s observation is astute. On the millionaire American futurologist John Jacob Astor, Foster observes: “Astor was of the fellowship of American millionaires who turned first cabin on Titanic into the semblance of an exclusive club or board room of a global super-corporation” (32). The Titanic Experience, in part, mirrors this structure by leaving the top floor and banqueting suite for corporate business. The site is also used by the OFMDFM to host important international visitors. Hilary Clinton took the tour in December 2012 and her banquet lunch in the grand replica dinning room took place within shouting distance of flag protestor’s near-by in East Belfast. Madame Liu Yangdong, the
Vice President of the People's Republic of China and seemingly a huge fan of James Cameron's film *Titanic*, also spent time in the building during her economically significant visit to Northern Ireland in April 2012. This was followed by a rendition of the theme tune to Cameron's film, “My Heart Will Go On”, sung to Madame Yangdong in Mandarin Chinese by the University of Ulster’s Choir as part of her official opening of the Confucius Institute.

29 This is a real term that is common in the global tourist industry discourse. Note, when announcing the G8 was to assemble in Enniskillen in Northern Ireland in the Summer of 2013, Prime Minister David Cameron said he wanted the world to know Northern Ireland is a “great place for business, a great place for investment ... And I also [he said] want to show the world what a beautiful place Northern Ireland is.” Business first, pleasure second.

30 President Higgins made these comments as part of his Address to the British Council, “Of Migrants and Memory,” at Queen’s University Belfast, October 30th, 2012. The full text of this address is available at: [http://www.britishcouncil.org/british-council-lecture-michael-d-higgins-web.pdf](http://www.britishcouncil.org/british-council-lecture-michael-d-higgins-web.pdf)

31 Suitable models include: Centre for Working Class Studies, Youngstown State University; and the Working Lives Institute, London Metropolitan University.
Bibliography


