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Negotiating a negative past in the reuse of historic prisons

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Negotiating a negative past in the reuse of historic prisons.

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Negotiating a negative past in the reuse of historic prisons.

This article investigates the reuse of historic former prisons and the effect of their past connotations on that redevelopment and adaptation. It examines, through stakeholder interviews at two former prison sites, how the history is remembered through the redevelopment. It uses the sites of Northallerton Prison and Oxford Prison in the UK to explore how the different stakeholders of the site perceived them and the effect this had on their redevelopment. The research explored the question of what happens when a historic site being redeveloped is one with a negative past and how this affects that adaptation and reuse. Through the two sites, the article examines how the history of these sites was employed, treated and dealt with by the different stakeholders working in the redevelopment and successor uses. This approach considers the role of practitioners involved in negatively perceived heritage sites and what this means for heritage redevelopment more widely.

Keywords: historic prisons, redevelopment, perceptions, negative past, heritage

Introduction

As the original uses of historic sites and buildings are no longer required or are modernised and relocated, places such as former asylums and prisons are increasingly being adapted, reused and regenerated. These sites form part of the nation's collective history and memory and many become the subject of heated debates regarding their future[1] as people argue about what should and should not be preserved. Historic places are often seen as belonging to future generations[2] and therefore worthy of preservation. These sites are usually positively experienced by those seeking their protection with a focus on their positive history and aesthetic qualities[3]. However, not all historic sites and places have positive histories; sites such as former asylums, prisons, factories and bunkers with more negative histories are now being adapted and reused. What happens however when the heritage site in question is perceived as being negative or one with a challenging and difficult history? How does the past history of a site influence its redevelopment then?

This article will explore the adaptation and reuse of two historic prison sites, those of Northallerton Prison where a planning application with a proposal for residential use has been submitted, and Oxford Prison, now a luxury hotel. Prisons were chosen for this study because there is limited research on the redevelopment of negative or stigmatised historic property types and the concept of value is not generally discussed because of this. There has been an increased trend in developers purchasing former prisons for redevelopment into a new use and the two prisons offer a perspective

to assess the impact of their history at different points in that process of redevelopment. The article will discuss how the history of these two sites was employed, treated and dealt with through their redevelopments. In doing so it will do two things; firstly, begin to tackle the gap in scholarship identified by Pendlebury et al[4] who suggest that limited attention has been paid to "uncomfortable" heritage sites and their reuse. Secondly, it will further strengthen Gibbeson's argument that practitioners need to pay attention to which parts of history are employed by whom and for what purpose in the redevelopment process of historic buildings and to learn the language of the different stakeholders involved.

There has been an increasing trend of redeveloping historic prisons that have closed in recent years as they are seen as being no longer fit for purpose[5] however in terms of this reuse process, they have had limited scholarly and professional attention paid to them. Prisons are often associated with negative connotations and memories which have been seen as being hard to overcome or forget[6]. And yet many historic prisons have long histories, important architecture and can therefore considered to be "heritage" buildings. Historic prisons have been argued as being dark or "uncomfortable"[7] as they have become "the repository of negative memory in the collective imaginary"[8]. The question for practitioners therefore is how these difficult and challenging histories affect the adaptation and reuse of these sites, how these histories are treated, dealt with, ignored or recognised and what our role in that process is and ought to be.

The adaptation of the two former prisons on which this article is based followed different paths. Northallerton Prison was built in the 1880s and during its operation it was home to the largest Treadmill punishment machine in the world. Following its closure the non-listed parts of the site were demolished with the Grade II listed sections being retained and these were included in a planning application to convert the site into residential use. Northallerton is not a site that has any particularly famous individuals or events attributed to it.
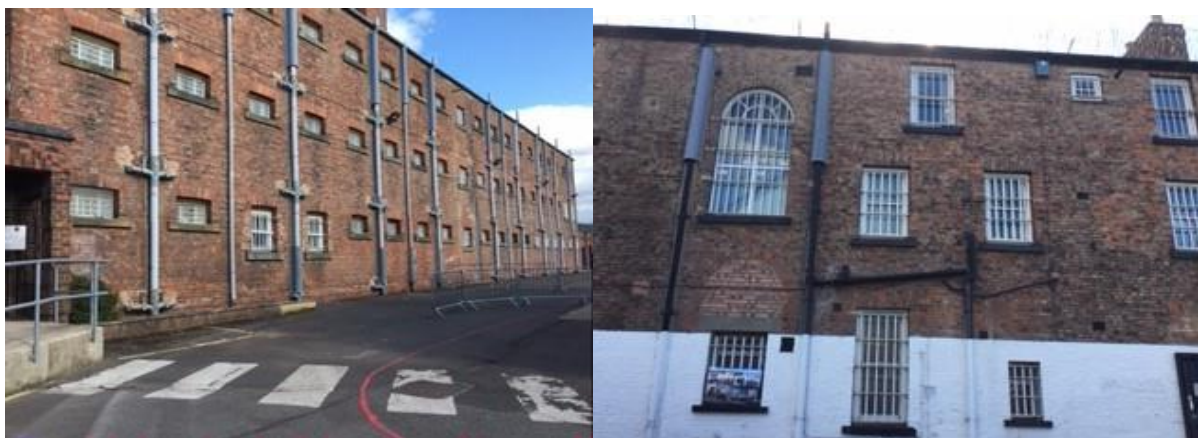
Northallerton Prison interior and exterior images, all Fortuna (2018)

Oxford Prison dates back to 1071 when it was originally part of Oxford Castle and is both a Scheduled Ancient Monument and Grade 1 listed.[1] Since its closure it has been converted into a luxury hotel with elements of its former history being displayed through the retention of some cells and a small museum. The room that was used for hangings has however been closed off with no access.
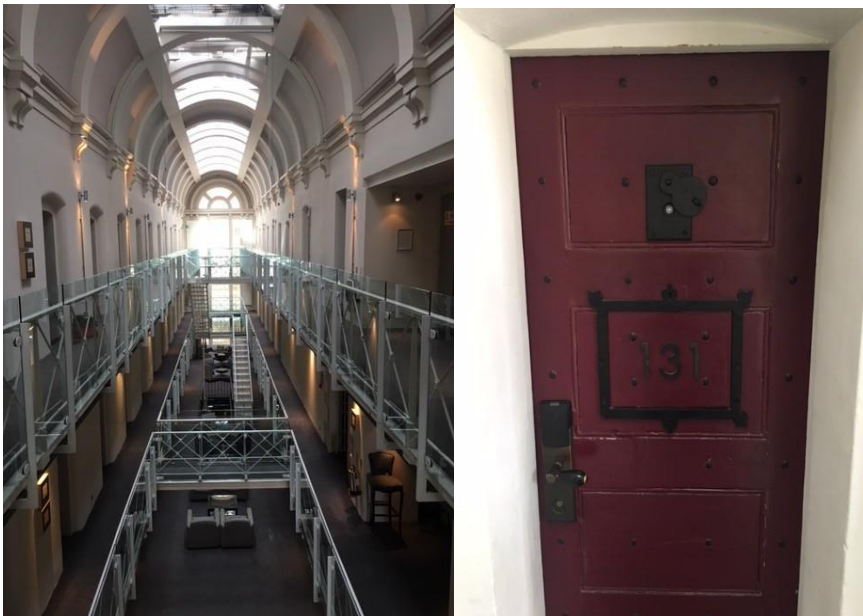
Oxford Prison, now the Malmaison Hotel by Gill (2018)

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[1] Listing is the term given to the practice of listing buildings, scheduling monuments, registering parks, gardens and battlefields, and protecting wreck sites" (www.historicengland.org.uk)

This article makes use of semi-structured interview data conducted by Gill[9] with different stakeholders at each of the two sites to examine how these stakeholders viewed the sites during (in the case of Northallerton) and after (for Oxford prison) the redevelopment to a successor use. The data was collected through semi-structured interviews, allowing for key themes from the research to be explored as well as enabling participants to express their views in their own words. This allowed their words to reveal how they approached, dealt with and felt about their respective sites. Analysis of the interviews was conducted on a thematic basis, identifying recurring themes. Quotes are presented in this article in the participants' own words from the interview transcripts but have been rendered anonymous to prevent identification.

Difficult, negative or uncomfortable heritage

There are several terms that have been applied to heritage or historic buildings which are seen as having difficult pasts; "difficult heritage"[10], "uncomfortable heritage"[11] and "negative heritage"[12]. MacDonald[13] defines difficult heritage as being "a past that is recognised as meaningful in the present but that is also contested and awkward for public reconciliation with a positive, self affirming contemporary identity" whereas negative heritage is seen as being something that is associated with violence or tragic events[14]. Difficult heritage can therefore be seen as something more "awkward" and disconcerting whereas negative heritage is something darker. Pendlebury et al's use of "uncomfortable heritage" takes a place or site that is from the everyday, though one that has a dark or difficult past where its "uncomfortable" nature is manifested during the process of reuse. Pendlebury et al suggest that buildings such as schools, asylums, prisons, hospitals and abattoirs fall under the banner of "uncomfortable" heritage as they were designed for a specific purpose, particularly during the Victorian era, where control and reform was embedded within the function and use of this building[15]. Whilst these buildings appear in everyday life, these authors would argue that prisons, asylums and abattoirs were not really part of everyday life as they were only experienced by those who were patients, inmates or staff, and not the wider population as a whole.

Given that places have been seen as "mnemonic containers"[16] where a place becomes intertwined with the events that took place there, and prisons, particularly those of the Victorian era, have been associated with the idea of hard labour, it is possible to accept that the idea of prisons and violent behaviour goes hand in hand and therefore can be considered difficult, dark heritage sites according to above definitions. They are awkward in terms of the function of their past use, the unease it causes and at a particular (and difficult to define) moment in their history the buildings themselves take on those perceptions and the stigma from the negative events that are seen to have taken

place there. Prisons have been seen, alongside slave houses, battlefields and asylums[17] but are now also considered heritage sites, "associated within the popular memory with at least one specific tragic historical circumstance"[18]. Reeves and Nichols[19] also argue that "clearly in some cases the recycling of a heritage structure for a new use requires an understanding on the part of those who would reconfigure the buildings and those who would use it in its altered form of the buildings former uses and history". This article would agree with this statement but suggest that it is for all stakeholders involved in that process to be part of that negotiation.

Before this article turns its attention to the reuse of the two sites in this study, it is important to ask how useful the distinction between "difficult" and "good", "positive" and "negative" heritage is. Heritage is often seen as a positive thing, and yet, as Howard[20] stated it is difficult to say anything about heritage without upsetting someone. It inherently involves risk and loss[21] and has been seen as being "nationalistic, exclusive, sexist, elitist and backward looking[22]; benefiting someone at the expense of someone else. Heritage is seen as something innately valuable, aesthetically pleasing and representing all that is good about the past to be passed onto future generations[23] and therefore negative aspects of the past are not permitted or are strategically forgotten. This has been illustrated by Pendlebury[24] who argued that nineteenth century buildings have become "symbols of Victorian invention and enterprise rather than the misery of squalor of those who worked in them". In privileging the "feel good" qualities of heritage, Smith[25] contended that this goes against official versions of what heritage is; she argues that this is exacerbated by the construction of heritage lists which are constructed to "tell the story not simply of nostalgic yearnings for "better" times but rather a version of history and the past that privileges certain historic experiences or perceptions"[26] (Smith et al, 2011:87)[27]. Under definitions of heritage that focus on the positive or "feel good" qualities, buildings such as prisons and asylums would not be considered to be heritage; whilst they are historic and can be aesthetically pleasing, they are unlikely to be argued to represent "good" heritage or a past that we would necessarily want to remember and this is from where accusations towards developers particularly about choosing to strategically forget the history of these sites stems.

Privileging a particular focus on a place implies that all places have fixed or one meaning and interpretation and that all people view and perceive particular types of places in the same way. It suggests that we all find the same places positive and negative, dark and light. MacDonald[28] contended that it is through the process of preservation that memories are imprinted onto places however that suggests that places do not hold meanings except when we are seeking to remember them for something. Barber (2013) stated that in most heritage literature, physical buildings are

seen as having ontological status, as being real objects whereas meanings are socially constructed. Seeing buildings as having ontological status is problematic as King[29] argues "buildings […] are essentially social and cultural products. Buildings result from cultural needs and accommodate a variety of functions"; as Hayden[30] has argued, place is fluid. Meanings are socially constructed entities and are therefore subjective, subject to change and can be challenged. The idea of heritage as having ontological status, of being something "real" implies that there is consensus over what this "real" heritage is. Heritage is therefore constructed on the basis of these meanings. This implies a consensus on that meaning has been reached. Consequently, the idea of their being "difficult" or "good" heritage is problematic as it suggests that particular places are only interpreted in one particular way and people interpret different places in different ways at different points in that building's lifespan as Gibbeson[31] has demonstrated.

Negative connotations and stigma

Buildings and sites with negative histories have been perceived as being difficult to redevelop because of those negative connotations[32]. The taint of their former reputations and former use are said to transfer to the buildings themselves resulting in a stigma[33]. Stigma is a very difficult concept to define[34]. In property terms "stigma" is usually employed to denote contamination of a site as a result of the previous use, usually in the form of some type of chemical or hazard that must be remedied before the site can be redeveloped, usually at great cost. More often, stigma is used to describe a person rather than a place with Oxford English Dictionaries Online (n.d) defining it as "a mark of disgrace associated with a particular circumstance, quality or person". The word "disgrace" would suggest a history of dishonourable action or loss of reputation associated with that individual. Building stigma is related to buildings which have suffered an environmental disaster or contamination[35] however stigma can attach to a building beyond physical damage and can be associated with buildings that have experienced negative histories, such as "murder houses"[36] and severely disadvantaged housing estates[37].

In a regeneration and property context stigma, and the loss of value or additional cost in remediation of it is generally seen as being the result of natural disaster or environmental contamination[38]. Stigma in this sense is related to the physical integrity of the buildings however Johnson[39] believes that stigma may still be present even if the physical integrity of the building is not affected. He argues that once a property is perceived to be contaminated or damaged by the public, even rectifying the problem cannot undo those perceptions. Bell[40] however, also looks beyond the physical in determining the market value of a property and argues that "needs, tastes, fears, sensitivities, desires and anticipations of buyers and sellers" must also be considered. The property

market is therefore seen to be influenced by people's feelings towards an area, building or site. Emotions or intangible aspects of sites are not usually considered by real estate professionals (though intangible elements of buildings are by heritage professionals) and yet they may play an important role in the public perception of a site or buildings which consequently influences the future of a particular site through the practical decisions taken and management of it[41].

People's perception of stigma and place has predominantly been considered in studies of housing estates[42]. Wacquant[43] takes Goffman's[44] definition of stigma to apply it to place and argues for a "territorial stigma" or "blemish of place". Wacquant stated that places are stigmatised and suffer from blemishes connected with existing stigmas such as poverty and suggests that this leads to individuals being "discredited" or "disqualified" from certain areas of life[45]. The notoriety of a place or building can therefore influence the perceptions of that place or building which leads to it becoming stigmatised. Hastings[46] has suggested that "there is an association between the social pathologies of a neighbourhood's residents and its degree of stigma"; people within these estates have been viewed as "scumbags" or "problem families"[47], the reputation of the estate affects the view of people living there and vice versa. This perceived stigma persists even through redevelopment as Hastings[48] found that even in the face of a major regeneration, an area retains its image, estates were seen as still being stigmatised even after regeneration had taken place. Whilst these studies[49] have added to the discussion on stigma of place, they focus largely on housing estates and renewal areas, not on places with historic stigmas. Certain stigmata are not fixed to individuals but to spaces[50] and can retain a sense of guilt[51], they carry the traces of their past and this can be argued to be true of prisons.

Prison reuse

The perceptions of a place and the emotional response to a place affects the decisions that are taken about them[52]. Practitioners need to be aware of this; decisions by any stakeholder or interested party can be affected by how they interpret that building and how they think others will interpret that site. How people view a place's history can have important implications for the practical decisions taken in its reuse and redevelopment. In the proposed redevelopment of Northallerton prison and the completed development of Oxford prison, the history was treated in different ways by those involved in their reuse and the question of whether a stigma from that past use existed was a complicated one. For both prisons there was a balance to be achieved between the consideration as their pasts as something negative and stigmatised and between the distinctiveness of their history and heritage as a unique selling point. This materialised in a number of different ways across both Northallerton and Oxford prisons.

The symbolism of dark versus light and welcoming versus oppressive was evident in the descriptions of Oxford prison by members of the public who felt they were going to be "dower and oppressive" but were surprised to see the hotel as "bright and welcoming". The redevelopment of Oxford changed the atmosphere and consequently the perceptions of visitors and this was desired at Northallerton where an opportunity to create natural light and to remove "the oppressive nature of the building" was seen. The previous use as functioning prisons was seen in both cases to be "oppressive" whereas the new development at Northallerton and the conversion of the Oxford prison provided the opportunity to open up the buildings, to bring in more light and make them more appealing. The redevelopment provided the opportunity for a symbolic change from the past to the present and future through the adaptive reuse and change in perceptions and perceived atmosphere at the two sites.

Atmospheres have been seen to come from shared ground[53] and capture the emotional feel of place as well as storing the "action-potential"[54] of a particular place. The past use of the prison is seen as limiting, as being dark and oppressive but by changing and adapting the two sites this enabled a reimagining and an "opening up" of the sites to both physically and metaphorically bring more light to these buildings. Human participation in and reaction to buildings is complex and involves many processes, physically, socially and culturally[55]; we act subjectively and as a result, emotionally, towards the built environment and these reactions can and do produce particular reactions or effects on the world[56]. Our perceptions and preconceptions of places across time and the individual and collective memories of these places are emotional and intersect[57]. In the case of difficult heritage, they evoke particularly powerful memories and emotions for people[58]. As practitioners, we are trained in our specific discipline which dictates how we see and approach sites however, as shown through the above quotes, we also hold individual, personal opinions about the sites upon which we work because of their collective histories and resultant meanings for us. How we as individuals perceive and feel about these sites is likely to affect our approach to them and the process of conversion.

The physical architecture was also discussed by the participants. They identified that Northallerton possessed "some aspects of beauty and character" but that the prison could not be considered in the same light as a country house in terms of its architecture. In Oxford interesting features were seen to have been preserved but the developers had done so in a luxurious and stylish way, again using the positive physical architecture to enhance and change the atmosphere of the building. Conflicting views of the two sites were therefore presented; views of prisons as being harsh, oppressive places versus the buildings having beauty and character. The redevelopment of

Northallerton was seen as being an opportunity to adapt the site and change it into something new. Through a "tasteful" development this was seen to offer the ability to "soften" the site, to turn it into a trendy place to live and give the development something new and different. The redevelopment provided a way to reverse the past or to ameliorate the previous connotations and to in fact turn it into somewhere people would consider fashionable through that quirkiness or originality of building type. The prison changes from being somewhere where people were incarcerated to somewhere people actively choose to reside.

Despite the opportunity to create something new and change the atmosphere of the former prison through its redevelopment, an element of stigma or negativity towards its past used did persist. The word "prison" was omitted from the name of the development however the choice of "The Treadmills" was seen to offer a nod to the past history. This choice of name demonstrates the complexities at play in the redevelopment of difficult heritage sites. The word "prison" was not chosen because of its connotations however some of the history was reflected in the development. The naming of the site "Treadmills" is however fascinating as it refers to a specific form of punishment that was employed in the prison, not something that would necessarily be considered as a positive image. What this does demonstrate however is that reference to the history was made, it was not simply ignored or covered up by the redevelopment. A name that bore no reference to the past use of the site could have been chosen thereby erasing the site's history; here the history itself is being used to temper any negative connotations that may persist, something that would be unlikely at a "positive" heritage site.

Unlike Northallerton Prison where there were no known significant events or criminals, Oxford Prison, during its long history, not only incarcerated prisoners but also executed them and within the hotel itself there was a small museum dedicated to the history of the site. The museum onsite focuses on the more distant past, particularly the treatment of prisoners during the Victorian era. By focusing on the more distant past, the history presented was seen as being troubling but not recent enough to affect the present. The more modern history was viewed by respondents as more problematic and more recent prisoners were viewed with minimal sympathy. The more distant past presented in the museum evokes sympathy rather than horror, a particular version of history is being presented here, one that asks us to feel empathy with previous inmates and thereby corresponding with the many heritage critiques that argue the presentation of history and heritage is always selective[59]. In presenting a more distant version or story from the past, the history is not able to hurt us in the present[60]. More distant past is safe, it cannot hurt us in the present and therefore could be seen as being easier to deal with. Virilio[61] has argued, in respect of the Atlantic

Wall, that these monuments were "not yet historical" for local people and therefore not enough time had passed to enable them to be considered heritage and therefore worthy of preservation. Sites can be read as "moral contaminants" where the history is seen as something that "must be contained lest the contagion otherwise escape"[62]. Some historic sites are therefore too recent or too traumatic for us to reuse or preserve and memorialise as heritage.

Whilst the museum presented the more "safe" or digestible parts of the long history of the site, the execution room was not accessible and was seen to have very negative connotations by participants. The "morbid history" of that room and knowing that people had been hung there were seen as being unappealing for visitors. History and heritage provides a unique character to a building however in the case of Oxford prison, an element of this history was seen to be too much, too negative to be incorporated into the new use as a hotel. The more distant history can be used "safely" to show the story of a site however certain parts, such as the execution room above are considered to be "too much" and not able to be reused. For the hotel, the past becomes something interesting, a "novelty" whereas for the proposed residential development at Northallerton, the history is present but is largely played down or "softened" into something to be seen as unique and quirky. A prison becomes a place where you can temporarily stay and experience a small part of the history but you are able to leave at the end, unlike the former prisoners. Creative reuse of historic buildings enables a certain form of preservation and prevents elements of the building environment from otherwise being destroyed[63]. Overall, both Northallerton and Oxford prisons have, or are being converted, their pasts are not so negative to prevent this.

Stromberg suggests that the way sites such as military bunkers, or here prisons, are reused tells us a lot about how a country deals with its past but they also challenge the prevailing heritage industry as they test existing ways of relating and reusing these spaces. From this research, former prisons, like former asylums [64] retain their connotations from their past use and history but they do not engender heritage protests to prevent or limit their reuse. This is important for all stakeholders involved in the reuse, adaptation and redevelopment process because different types of heritage building and sites behave in different ways through that reuse as a consequence of how the different stakeholders and people connected with these places perceive and interpret them. Dark and difficult sites are as much part of our built heritage as more positive sites and therefore are as key in terms of significance and preservation. It appears firstly that the reuse of dark heritage sites is less confrontational as there were no observed objections to these redevelopments but secondly that there is equally no automatic erasure of their history; both sites had elements of their past use remembered in their redevelopments albeit in a different manner depending on the successor use.

Gibbeson [65] argued that the heritage frame of a place is selective and ignores or foregrounds certain moments of history to create a sense of identity and belonging and that practitioners involved in urban development involved heritage buildings particularly need to be aware of which parts of that history are being valorised in the redevelopment process and for what purpose. At Northallerton the main focus was the preservation of the architecture with the specific history being a secondary factor supporting Lagenbach's idea that it is the "historical impact" of an event which enhances the significance of the property and therefore sites that elicit a greater level of emotion are more likely to be valued historically, something demonstrated by Gibbeson. Within the redevelopment process there is therefore clearly a delicate balance to be made between the use of a heritage site as a unique selling point for a development and the careful consideration of its past use and any potential stigma that remains from this.

In the case of Oxford prison however, the history of the site was part of what made visitors want to stay there as it provided a novelty value. Here the history was also a unique selling point of the development but one that made the building special and of interest. The history and potential stigma, (in terms of famous "guests" and the ability to see what it was like), was a draw for the site, promising a haunting experience as one of Oxford prison's inmates for a night for visitors. However even here there were certain elements of the history, the execution room, that were deemed to be too stigmatised to be reused demonstrating an example of a specific traumatic event have a negative effect on redevelopment potential. Difficult heritage sites that are particularly challenging because of specific events are more likely to be kept as monuments to that history whereas many difficult or uncomfortable sites that do not have specific traumatic or famous events retain a low level stigma associated with their past use that fades over time as the sites and this is accelerated by the adaptation and reuse of the site.

Conclusion

This article has explored two former prison sites, Northallerton and Oxford prisons with two different use types, that of a hotel and a proposed conversion to residential use to examine how the past history of an historic site influences its redevelopment when the historic site is perceived as being negative and one with a challenging and difficult history. In both cases there was a focus and interest in the architecture and physical aspects of the sites; in particular in the proposed redevelopment of Northallerton where the physical architecture was seen as an important part of

the building's previous function and therefore worthy of preservation but it was not necessarily considered something to be celebrated. At both sites there was a selective focus on the history; through the choice of name at Northallerton and through the museum at Oxford. Whilst this privileged certain aspects of the sites' past over others, a charge that could be levelled at any heritage site, it demonstrated however that the past was not completely erased or forgotten, something that might have been expected for a site with a negative past[66]. How this was done and which parts of that history were focused on depended on the use of the site and the length of residence. There was a limited or minimal level of stigma associated with the past use except where a significant negative event had taken place.

For practitioners involved in the urban regeneration process, sites with difficult or negative histories pose the same challenges as those heritage sites that have more positive histories and this article would suggest that making the distinction in terms of their redevelopment and reuse process is not helpful. The same decisions over the physical elements of the buildings must be made; what is kept and what is retained, and the same decisions over which parts of the history are focused on and which are not remain. What is different is the level of emotional response to these places; their redevelopments appear less controversial and emotionally invested unlike other, more positively perceived heritage sites[67]. Practitioners involved in the reuse of heritage sites therefore need to be aware firstly of the connotations and history of each site that they deal with but also the level to which they and others within that process will be invested in that history. As Winters[68] argues in the discipline of critical heritage studies, "to grapple with the complexities of heritage, we need to move beyond the traditional disciplines and the fragmentation of knowledge practices, which typically create isolated and competing investigations of these issues". The authors would agree and suggest that engagement with the practical and academic disciplines such as Real Estate and Planning would also contribute and benefit from these discussions, particularly around the issue of heritage building and site reuse in order to widen the conversation about what happens to our historic built environment. Equally, further research into other types of heritage building redevelopment could continue to be undertaken to assesses how redevelopment of these compare to that of prisons and whether a negative past has particular effects on that redevelopment. Additionally, other prison redevelopments should be examined to see if the results are similar in order to further built environment research and theory thereby contributing to both theory and practice.

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