

giving sirocco a fair wind?

tales from the riverbank in belfast

William JV Neill looks at proposals and alternative visions for the large Sirocco brownfield site on the eastern edge of Belfast, and considers how they exemplify the tensions between entrepreneurial privatisation of the urban realm and a more civic and collective approach to planning and development

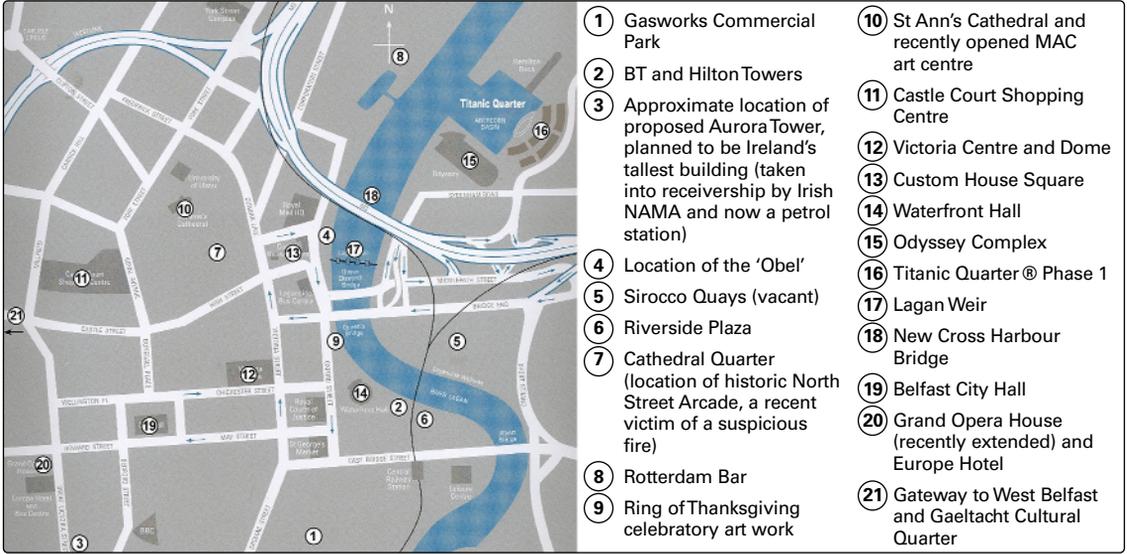


William Neill

The Sirocco site, looking west to the city centre, with an original chimney from the former engineering works visible

Two years ago, significant planning and development powers were restored to council level in Northern Ireland, reversing 40 years of centralisation going back to the heyday of civil unrest. The opportunity for bottom-up creative thinking to give voice to local public aspirations has thus been significantly enhanced. With planning permission presently being sought for a massive 16 acre brownfield site on the

eastern edge of Belfast city centre, the city council will shortly face a land use decision that will shape the character of the urban landscape for many decades to come. The stark choice is between an office and retail park and perhaps a greater visionary leap in the form of a fully fledged riverfront park, giving Belfast the added bonus of a much needed new civic and gathering space.



Location of the Sirocco site (site '5' on the map) in relation to Belfast city centre

Industrial history

The site in question, known locally as Sirocco and bordering Belfast's River Lagan, has lain in forlorn dilapidation for many years while a new post-conflict Belfast skyline has taken shape around it in the form of new office blocks, hotels, retail emporiums and visitor attractions – most notably the Titanic visitor centre signature attraction, in whose name a vast swathe of the former derelict land of the east Belfast shipyard has been rebranded for mixed commercial and residential use. With closer accessibility to the city centre, the Sirocco potentially now stands in competitive tension with Titanic developer ambitions.

The Sirocco site was a unique place in Belfast, taking its name from the Sirocco wind that blows across the North African desert. Founded by the Scottish Irish engineer Samuel Cleland Davidson in 1881,¹ the Sirocco Engineering Works was home to world-class engineering achievement, making its stamp on industrial history through fan and air conditioning technology, ship ventilation, state-of-the-art tea drying, and much else besides. The *Titanic* was fitted with 75 Sirocco-branded ventilation fans, and it is a compliment of sorts that nearly every ship in the German fleet scuttled at Scapa Flow in 1919 had been fitted with fans designed pre-war by Sirocco in conjunction with an Austrian partner. More enduringly, the Sirocco works installed at Belfast's Royal Victoria Hospital the world's first air conditioning system.

Those halcyon days are gone, with no phoenix arising. Rather as the site history reveals, the confident mastery of global reach symbolised by Sirocco in a previous era has fallen prey to a different avian form.

Recent site history – enter the vulture

Manufacturing ended on the Sirocco site in the 1980s, with the land switching hands between local speculative property developers at an escalating price. With no development having taken place, the cleared plot and its 'hope value' exchanged ownership for £40 million in 2006, which at the time was a record price per acre for any development site in Belfast.²

Proposals by the purchaser, the Northern Ireland-based Carvill Group, were subsequently submitted for outline planning consent. This involved, inter alia, no less than 2,400 apartments, a four-star hotel, a supermarket, additional retail and commercial space of over 25,500 square metres, leisure facilities, and 1,770 basement parking spaces. The planning application for the rebranded 'Sirocco Quays' masterplan was approved by Department of the Environment (NI) Planning in March 2011, but the future of the site passed into limbo when the Carvill Group entered into administration in May 2011, adding to the local 'victims' of the property crash and its dashed speculative value.³

Sirocco was repossessed by the primary lender Ulster Bank later that year, with the defaulted loan passing into its internal property boom time 'bad bank' before being sold off in 2015 at a knockdown price to the huge US-based vulture capitalist asset management firm Cerberus, named after the mythological three-headed dog that guarded the gates of Hades.

More prosaically, as a constituent part of Royal Bank of Scotland, Ulster Bank was bailed out from Celtic Tiger excesses by the British taxpayer rather than the Irish bad bank of the National Assets Management Agency (NAMA). Cerberus has wasted little time in passing on the taxpayer-



Western boundary of the Sirocco site along the River Lagan, with a chimney from the former engineering works visible – a footbridge is proposed to link to Waterfront Hall on the western bank



A gated community close to the Sirocco site

subsidised depreciated asset to a British-based development consortium Swinford (Sirocco) Ltd (owned by the St Francis Group, Graftongate and Gulf Resources Development and Investment). The new developer acquired the Sirocco site in August 2016 (completing in January 2017). The sale was subject to a non-disclosure legal agreement, but in any case the price is most likely to have been a fraction of what it was previously sold for.⁴ Increasingly, the lubricant of such property deal formation in Belfast has been facilitated by public

and private sector attendance at the MIPIM (*Le marché international des professionnels de l'immobilier*) annual international property exhibition in Cannes.

The City of Belfast Council's ideas for the future of Sirocco have also been gathering momentum with the appointment of consultants during autumn 2016 to prepare a strategy for the east bank of the Lagan, incorporating Sirocco. The future of the site is now poised to enter a crucial phase, with a public petition launched in March 2017 by Friends of the Earth (NI) to assert the case for the development of Sirocco as a public riverside park in a city short on urban greenery, with ample land available courtesy of the adjusted balance sheet of the still largely publicly owned Royal Bank of Scotland. This is a point of view less represented at Cannes.

Current developer proposals

The Swinford (Sirocco) Ltd proposals were announced in March of 2017 and are a variant on what has been put forward before. Artist's impressions published in the local press convey a landscape of glass boxes interspersed with trees and shrubs and a jostling populace enjoying the new urban ambience. Billed as one of the most ambitious inner-city transformation projects in Europe, the scheme proposes a mix of new homes and apartments, high-specification offices, a hotel and retail outlets connecting across to the west



Mural at George Best Belfast City Airport

bank of the river via a new footbridge to the city's Waterfront Hall. The development projects thousands of new jobs but with a completion frame extending over 20 years.⁵ Community consultation by the developer over the next few months will culminate in a full planning application to the city council.

The scheme, despite environmental opportunity costs highlighted by Friends of the Earth, will likely be difficult to oppose. It chimes in resonance with a unity around market values, which is the 'accepted order of the sensible' in a city that politically remains deeply divided, thus potentially foreclosing more imaginative approaches to place-making. Nothing presently symbolises the hegemony of private sector appeal to local aspiration seeking visionary unity beyond the turf of entrenched identity politics more than a mosaic confronting passengers arriving and departing from George Best Belfast City Airport. Observers are assailed not by images of this deservedly famous Belfast footballer, personifying his home town, but by a large mural with the corporate logo of KPMG planted atop a giant-sized city montage, as shown in the photo above.

Towering above Belfast's City Hall, potent fragments of the urban landscape and hinterland are gathered into a corporate embrace, where one of the big beasts of the asset management universe is reassuringly in control. Positioning within a powerful network of flows is demonstrated by symbolic references to financial services in Dublin, London and New York. While it is all too easy to dismiss such casual vulgarity as part of the inevitable background of the thrusting entrepreneurial city, the effect on urban possibility, consciousness and the right to the city can be corrosive to the conjuring of a more expansive civic imaginary.

Subverting the 'order of the sensible' – the Friends of the Earth petition to Belfast City Council

A recent petition to Belfast City Council by the pressure group Friends of the Earth (NI) attempts to prise open a crack in the office park constricting vision for Sirocco which presently has considerable momentum.⁶ Much will depend on the ability to capture public imagination and convince councillors that there is in fact an alternative to the continued privatisation of the urban realm.

The move is a departure for Friends of the Earth (NI), which more usually reacts to objectionable environmental practices (fracking, agricultural pollution, destruction of historic landscapes, etc.). The petition asserts the right to the city in the form of a civic collective stake in a Sirocco riverside park. An alternative vision of a greener city which people want to live in, invest in, visit and enjoy is presented as a challenge and provocation to the stifling prevailing 'order of the sensible'.

The legacy footprint, it is argued, on this potential jewel in the city's crown should not be the presently proposed tedious and myopic mixed use of further retail/office/hotel and apartment developments. The Titanic Quarter⁷ already has a masterplan in place for that, and other planned developments will significantly increase downtown apartment and office capacity. Rather than replicating this by needlessly over-zoning and privatising the ground of Sirocco, the petition endorses the idea of a Sirocco Riverside Park linking across the river to Central Belfast.

With Belfast badly needing a green, open civic space, an appropriately crafted downtown park could, it is suggested, better enhance the unique attractiveness of Belfast as a city carving a new niche in the 21st century. Reference is made to



Artist's impression of the development proposed for the Sirocco site

Belfast's unique signature Botanical Gardens in the south of the city, which showed historical vision by its city guardians and set Belfast apart at the beginning of the last century. Similar vision, the petition asserts, is required now. As James Orr, Director of Friends of the Earth (NI), puts it in interview:

'An international landscape design competition could showcase the best ideas on offer. Extensive opportunity for imaginative planting, water features, art and sculpture, new wildlife and bird habitats, urban gardening, food generation and forestry, and a Belfast garden festival are all realizable and preferable to seeing the city only as a money tree for real estate harvesting. Wealth also consists of developing Belfast as a healthy city. We ask the City Council with some urgency to take the key opportunity for a rebranded Sirocco Park on board in its Belfast Agenda in which an environmentally friendly public realm is strongly endorsed.'

In positively reimagining the city in this way, Orr argues, the goals of job creation and greening the city can work in tandem. He points to the recent success of the Big Lottery assisted linear Connswater Community Greenway, threading through previously under-used brown space and eyesores, and the appetite for beautification which has been exhibited already. He suggests that a template for a new pedestrian bridge straddling the Lagan already exists in recent plans for a London 'Garden Bridge', envisaging a lush parkland sweeping over the River Thames. Boldness of aspiration on the Lagan could deliver such inspiration to Belfast, he claims.

The way forward

Over the next few months consultants acting for the putative developer Swinford (Sirocco) Ltd have promised public exhibitions to showcase the mixed commercial proposals on offer. This is one of a number of post-property-collapse, taxpayer-triaged Lazarus resurrections coming forward before the city's planning and regeneration committees and full

council. It remains to be seen what a countervailing challenge can achieve.

Nevertheless, with its newly augmented powers it is to be hoped that the city will demonstrate civic wisdom in its agenda for Belfast and give Sirocco a fair wind. Belfast has already seen examples where transparency in the public interest has been sacrificed to elite interactionism hiding behind commercial sensitivities. As the narrator of the 'Watch with Mother' *Tales from the Riverbank* TV programme used to sign off many years ago, 'but that is another story'.

● **William J V Neill** is Emeritus Professor of Spatial Planning at the University of Aberdeen. His latest book, *Future Directions for the European Shrinking City* (edited with Hans Schlappa), was published by Routledge (RTPI Library Series) in 2016. The views expressed are personal.

Notes

- 1 See Samuel Cleland Davidson, 1846-1921, *Founder of the Firm Davidson & Co. Belfast*, available at www.hevac-heritage.org/victorian_engineers/davidson/Samuel_C_Davidson-1.pdf
- 2 See the discussion on Sirocco Quays on the SkyscraperCity message board at www.skyscrapercity.com/showthread.php?t=713284
- 3 J. Mulgrew: 'Sirocco Quays, once set for £600 m revamp before the downturn, back on the market'. *Belfast Telegraph*, 18 Feb. 2016. www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/business/news/sirocco-quays-once-set-for-600m-revamp-before-the-downturn-back-on-the-market-34462961.html
- 4 See Future Belfast's 'Sirocco Quays' webpage, at www.futurebelfast.com/property/sirocco-quays/
- 5 G. McDonald: 'Plans unveiled for £400 m housing, office and retail scheme on former Sirocco ropeworks site in Belfast'. *The Irish News*, 1 Mar. 2017. www.irishnews.com/business/2017/03/01/news/plans-unveiled-for-400m-housing-office-and-retail-scheme-on-former-sirocco-ropeworks-site-in-belfast-947615/
- 6 The 'Belfast and Proud: Give a Sirocco Park a Fair Wind' petition is available through the Change.org website, at www.change.org/p/belfast-and-proud-give-a-sirocco-park-a-fair-wind
- 7 WJV Neill, B Grist and M Murray: *Relaunching Titanic: Memory and Marketing in the New Belfast*. Routledge, 2014