

## 5.0 DEFINING ISSUES & ASSESSING VULNERABILITY

### General

Merrion Square Park is located within a Conservation Area in the Dublin City Development Plan 2011-2017. Conservation Areas are designated *in recognition of their unique architectural character and important contribution to the heritage of the city*. Designated conservation areas include extensive groupings of buildings or streetscapes and associated open spaces, and include the Georgian Core area *in recognition of Dublin's international importance as a Georgian city*. Within these areas Dublin City Council seek to ensure that *development proposals within all conservation areas complement the character of the area, including the setting of protected structures*.

The townhouses that surround the square have Z8 zoning that has the objective- *to protect the existing architectural and civic design character, to allow only for limited expansion consistent with the conservation objective*. This zoning is shared by areas of the city where Georgian character and fabric have been preserved. A range of uses is permitted in such zones, primarily residential, office and industrial uses that do not impact negatively on the architectural

character and setting of the area. Further protection is provided through a number of policies:

- Protection and enhancement of the character and historic fabric of conservation areas in the control of development.
- Consideration to any new signage erected in order to preserve the character of the area.
- New buildings in conservation areas to complement the character of the existing architecture in design, materials and scale.

The park itself is zoned Z9 with the objective- *to preserve, provide and improve recreational amenity and open space & green networks*, a zoning shared with all of the historic parks in the city. In general the only new development allowed in these areas are those associated with public and private open space and privately owned sports facilities. The Development Plan goes on to state that a number of uses are open to consideration in public parks including - community facilities, craft shops, creches, cultural and or recreational buildings, kiosks or tea rooms.



Fig. 69 Extract from DCC Development Plan 2011-2017 map showing zoning and protections to square.

The north-west corner of the park is included within a Zone of Archaeological Interest associated with the city pre-1700 stretching into the north west corner of the site. Any developments in this part of the site will require consultation with the National Monuments Service, and will include an archaeological assessment of the site.

Under the Planning and Development Acts 2000-2010, local authorities are obliged to include a Record of Protected Structures in their Development Plans that list structures or parts of structures that are of *special architectural, historical, archaeological, artistic, cultural, scientific, social or technical interest*. All of the townhouses in the square are listed as protected structures in the Dublin City Development Plan 2011-2017, making Merrion Square and Fitzwilliam Square the most intact examples of Georgian urban design in the city. The Rutland Memorial is also a protected structure (ref 5194). Only the National Maternity Hospital that replaced Antrim House in the 1930s, is not under protection.



Fig. 70 View of interpretative panel at east entrance with map and guide.

### Interpretation

Merrion Square Park is one of the finest urban squares in the country, that will benefit from a long term management plan that will preserve its importance as a place of historic cultural significance with a program of contemporary development to accommodate its relatively recent change of use to a very popular, public amenity.

The planted areas having grown into the central area of the park, have altered its original character and affecting its appearance and reducing the amenity area available. This is due to the original tree belts being extended either by the growth of dense shrubberies, or by newly planted or self-seeded trees. Fortunately, many of the mature specimen trees survive, albeit largely hidden by the dense understory. Dublin City Council have initiated a programme of selective clearance and tree surgery that is being carried out during the winter months. Recent clearances have re-established the prominence of the specimen trees, as well as opening up historic views across the park and towards surrounding buildings.

Nearby the park in St. Stephen's Green has a well-defined character, which is a major focal point to the main shopping streets of the south inner city. To accommodate the larger numbers of visitors on a daily basis, St Stephen's Green has wider footpaths, ornamental water features and a collection of park structures installed as a gift of Lord Ardilaun when the park was opened to the public in 1880. Merrion Square retains the narrow paths and entrance gates that readily accommodated a much lighter footfall when in private use. It could be argued that the Corporation could have taken a more radical design approach in the 1970s when establishing Merrion Square as a public park, however, this would likely have been detrimental to its distinctive historic character in the long term.

Central to the restoration of the park should be a clear definition and re-emphasis of its identity as an important historic garden surrounded by some of the finest examples of architectural and cultural heritage to be found in the country. An estimated 1.6 million people visit the institutions that surround the square annually, many of whom might enjoy a visit to the garden to discover another aspect of this heritage or simply the sylvan atmosphere. As the level of residential use in the square is very low, DCC have taken the opportunity to use the surrounding streets to accommodate large crowds for special festivals and public holidays, in a historic setting, close to the political and cultural centres.

## Ownership

Due to the demise of the large landed estates in the city following independence, many of the garden squares were acquired or gifted to the state whereas in Britain they often remain the property of the descendants of their original owners. Merrion Square's private use by a privileged few to the exclusion of the general public, despite being owned by the Catholic archdiocese, became a cause celebre in the early 1970s. The church was lobbied by politicians such as Garrett Fitzgerald, Ruairi Quinn and the park occupied in protest by the Sinn Fein party, so that the park be opened for use by the public. When Dublin Corporation took over the park in the mid-1970s, its potential as a public amenity, providing a setting for the national institutions that surround it, could finally be realised after decades of inertia.

A legacy of private ownership of the square is the lack of a grand public entrance, such as the Fusiliers Arch at St. Stephen's Green, which was erected after the establishment of the public park. Entrances to private city parks were deliberately discreet and anonymous and relatively numerous to ensure that key holders did not have far to walk from their front doors. Under stated, discreet entrances of this nature tend to inhibit use by large numbers of people, however, this characteristic is integral to the original design intention and should be preserved, notwithstanding the change of use. While the square is home to an impressive range of diverse organisations and institutions, office use predominates. As a result of this the square lacks vibrancy after dark and on weekends. However, the gardens can play a role in increasing its footfall as an amenity and cultural space.

The Merrion Square Innovation Network (MSIN) was created by a diverse group of local stakeholders, including cultural institutions and private property owners, to promote the square and its park as a



Fig. 71 Logo of the Merrion Square Innovation Network (MSIN).

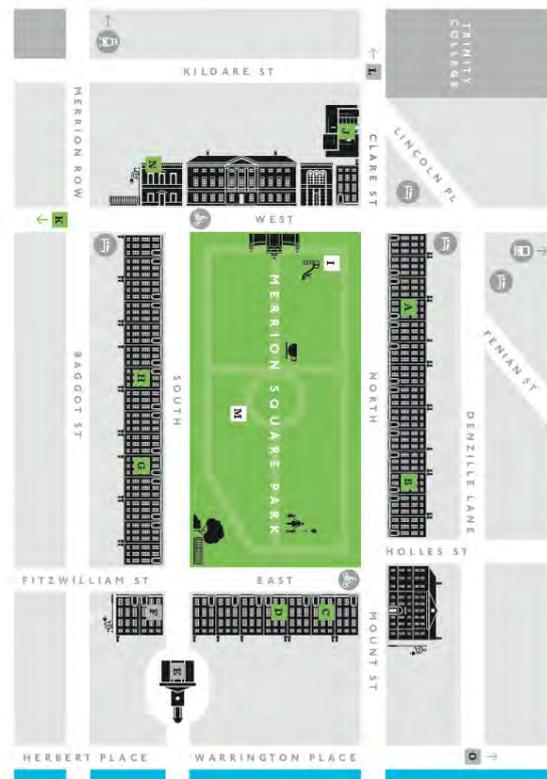


Fig. 72 Pictorial map prepared by MSIN.

cultural attraction. The initiative is facilitated and supported by Fáilte Ireland and Temple Bar Cultural Trust. Their activities to date have included the setting up of a website, hosting seminars and events on the history of the square. In September 2011, a series of workshops were held with the stakeholders to devise strategies on how best to proceed. They produced a booklet illustrating their ambition to install a café in the park to stimulate a more intense use of the square, and as a focal, meeting point for the various institutions. This idea was presented at a launch event at the National Concert Hall in December of that year.

## Condition & Use

Currently Dublin City Council Parks department staff maintain the open areas of the park, keep them free from litter, and also replenish and manage the trees and shrubberies. The pathways and open areas are a popular amenity, and in recent times the park has been used to host large festivals such as the Giro d'Italia, the World Street Performing Championships or the St. Patrick's Day Festival, where up to 100,000



Fig. 73 Detail view of encroachment of ivy causing damage to plinths.



Fig. 74 View of buses parked along Merrion Square South.

people might attend events held within the park and along Merrion Square West over a long weekend. The use of the railings to hang artwork means that they will require frequent re-decoration as at present the paint is badly flaking in these areas.

The use of the streets that form the square as a daytime terminus by Dublin Bus detracts from the setting of the square and park. Double-decker buses parked along the south side of the park restrict views through the gates, out of the park towards the terraces. Walking along the footpath between buses and railings is unpleasant and they present not only a visual, but also an aural and odorous intrusion into this architecturally sensitive area. At present, the park is only open during daylight hours. Should it be considered desirable that the park remain open after dark, public lighting would be required.

### Access & Settings

Any decisions about improving or extending access to the park will need to be balanced with matters concerning preservation, conservation, efficient management and public safety. Access for people with disabilities, or children in buggies can be improved in a number of ways. The pathways are level and wide along most of their length, however, due to the existing topography, most of the entrances do not comply with universal access regulations. The park entrances do not have traffic calming measures or pedestrian crossings opposite but are entered off broad, level footpaths. A key consideration in the improvement of the park must be its permeability. Despite having eight entrances open during daylight hours, access to the park is inhibited by the narrowness of the gates, the stone steps leading down to footpath level and their lack of visibility. Entrances do not correspond



Fig. 75 View of crowds enjoying a concert in the park.



Fig. 76 View of balustrade to granite steps to south-east corner gate.



Fig. 77 View of dublinbikes stand to Merrion Square West.



Fig. 78 View of vehicular entrance gate and pedestrian gate to east side.

to the most desirable locations directly opposite the main thoroughfares or main tourist attractions. Wheelchair accessible entrances are to be found on three sides of the square, but there are none on Merrion Square South due to the significant changes in level along this side of the square.

The installation of *dublinbike* scheme stands to the east and west sides of the square has not detracted significantly from the historic character of the square. Their location should attract visitors using the bicycles to the square and the surrounding institutions,

### Public Safety

In a public space such as Merrion Square Park, a reasonable balance is required between the need for adequate health and safety considerations and the need to conserve and present the natural and built

heritage, while maintaining access to a popular public amenity. Should the park be used for large groups of people, an important consideration would be the safe access and egress into the park mostly through narrow gates and stone steps and vehicular access for emergency services. Periodic inspections of the condition of the trees can determine whether tree surgery is required to reduce the risk to the public from fallen boughs. A handrail has been installed to the steps at the entrance to the south eastern corner. This should be replaced with handrails that are more sympathetic to the historic character of the park and they should also be installed to the other entrance steps around the park perimeter.

### Vulnerabilities

In relation to the issues outlined above, the vulnerability of the natural and built heritage can be summarised as follows:

#### Preservation

- Generally the park is very well maintained, however, some areas would benefit from more robust and strategic management and are now overgrown and putting historic fabric at risk.
- Over time, the legibility of the original planting and path layout has been obscured by a considerable increase in mid height planting, and unsympathetic alterations to the path network. This has led to the park losing some of its original historical character, by creating heavily shaded areas linking a number of outdoor spaces where once there was a more open parkland with a tree belt around the perimeter and smaller clumps of planting to create variety within.
- Planting when not managed can spread rapidly obscuring form and detail and diminishing original qualities that can only be preserved by a regime of regular, on-going maintenance.
- Interventions may be necessary to provide improved access, or to repair or stabilise existing structures, or to create new amenities. This work should be - informed by current best practice in conservation, easily reversible and should be sensitively designed so as not to detract from the setting of this important historic place.



Fig. 79 View across central lawn.

### Understanding

- Although Merrion Square Park is now well-known to the current generations of Dubliners and visitors to the city, the historical significance of the park, its original design and use, and its connections to famous individuals who lived around it, could be much better presented.
- There is a general lack of appreciation of - the value of Georgian Dublin; the extent of its contribution to European culture; and the importance of conserving the well-preserved, built and landscape heritage of the place.
- As the garden at present is heavily overgrown and includes a number of unsatisfactory interventions, it is generally not well-known that the structure of much of the original Georgian park remains. Failure to recognise the significance of this underlying structure could lead to inappropriate and ill-informed interventions that risk further compromising the historic landscape.

### **General Approach to Built Structures**

The general approach to the conservation of the original design structure of the park will be to do – as little as possible and as much as is necessary to ensure its continued survival. Original layouts and surviving historical fabric, should always be treated with respect, and should be retained and repaired wherever possible. There should be a general presumption against the loss of existing fabric, unless a compelling and well-argued case is put forward.

Repairs to the historic building fabric should be conservative in nature – to avoid the appearance of over-restoration – but should be carried out to the highest conservation standards using good quality, durable materials of suitable or matching quality. The concept of local distinctiveness of materials is a key component of most historic buildings and places, as they were for the most part constructed from building materials sourced in the immediate area. This is particularly important in path and pavement finishes that were traditionally finished in stone sets or flags. When exotic imported stone is used this important sense of local distinctiveness is often lost.

New interventions should be designed sensitively, respect their setting and express their own era. At Merrion Square, former sites of buildings that have been removed could be re-used for new facilities. Where existing design interventions, such as additions to the original path network are found to be necessary, they should be designed and finished in such a way as to make them easily distinguishable.

### **Public Sculpture**

The public sculpture currently located in the park enhances its visual and cultural amenity. However, the settings could be improved and others added to provide focal points along the walking routes running through the park.

### **Landscape & Planting**

Many mature trees have survived, some possibly dating from the original planting plan. The retention of these trees and the enhancement of their setting is crucial for the understanding of the initial design intention. Where shrubberies and the understorey planting obscure desirable views from within the park and between it and the square beyond, they should be pruned back. In some instances, limited pruning of trees may also be necessary. A long-term strategy should be put in place to manage existing trees and plan for their eventual replacement in order to conserve the form of the planting scheme. Another consideration would be to increase the range of species, to avoid the risk of larger losses from diseases such as those threatening ash trees currently and elm trees historically.