

4.0 ASSESSMENT & STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

General

The Guidelines to the Burra Charter state that: *Cultural Significance is a concept, which helps in estimating the value of places.* The places that are likely to be of significance are those which help an understanding of the past or enrich the present, and which will be of value to future generations. There are a variety of categories generally used to evaluate the level of cultural significance and of those – *Archaeological, Historic, Architectural, Ecological and Social interest* categories will be used to assess the significance of Merrion Square Park. .

The following articles are contained within the ICOMOS Florence Charter (published 21 May 1981) that specifically addresses the conservation of gardens:

Art 1: An historic garden is an architectural and horticultural composition of interest to the public from the historical or artistic point of view. As such, it is to be considered a monument.

Art 2: The historic garden is an architectural composition whose constituents are primarily vegetal and therefore living, which means that they are perishable and renewable.

Art 4: The architectural composition of the historic garden includes:

- *Its plan and topography*
- *Its vegetation, including its species, proportions, colour schemes, spacing and respective heights.*
- *Its structural and decorative features.*
- *Its water, running or still, reflecting the sky.*

Art 5: As the expression of the direct affinity between civilisation and nature, and as a place of enjoyment suited to meditation or repose, the garden thus acquires the cosmic significance.

Art 10: In any work of maintenance, conservation, restoration or reconstruction of an historic garden, or any part of it, all its constituent features must be dealt



Fig. 62 Aerial photograph of south Dublin city with garden squares.

with simultaneously. To isolate the various operations would damage the unity of the whole.

Art 11: Continuous maintenance of historic gardens is of paramount importance. Since the principal material is vegetal, the preservation of the garden in an unchanged condition requires both prompt replacements when required and a long-term programme of periodic renewal (clear felling and replanting with mature specimens).

Art: 19: By reason of its nature and purpose, an historic garden is a peaceful place conducive to human contacts, silence and awareness of nature. This conception of its everyday use must contrast its role on those rare occasions when it accommodates festivity.

Art 20: While historic gardens may be suitable for quiet games as a daily occurrence, separate areas appropriate for active and lively games and sports should also be laid out adjacent to the historic garden, so that the needs of the public may be satisfied in this respect without prejudice to the conservation of the gardens and landscapes.

Art 21: The work of maintenance and conservation, the timing of which is determined by season, and brief operations, which serve to restore the garden's authenticity, must always take precedence over the requirements of public use.

Art 22: If a garden is walled, its walls may not be removed without prior examination of all the possible consequences liable to lead to changes in its atmosphere and to affect its preservation.

Art 25: Interest in historic garden should be stimulated by every kind of activity capable of emphasising their true value as part of the natural heritage.

Historical Significance

Merrion Square and its garden are amongst the highest architectural achievements found in Georgian Dublin. This period that extended from 1714-1830 was the most important phase of the city's development and provides its distinctive architectural and historic character.

Georgian Dublin compares favourably to the other planned cities of the Enlightenment that have been designated UNESCO World Heritage Sites such as are found in Edinburgh, London, Bath and Bordeaux.

Although altered by the developments of recent decades, its mature trees original boundary and most of the original path layout dating from the late-eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, all survive intact.

The special character of Merrion Square garden is enhanced further by the well-preserved terraces that surround it, both in the square and its adjoining streets.

The severe facades of the buildings, enriched only with their elaborate entrances, masked richly decorated interiors that looked onto the perimeter planting that protected the privacy within their shared private garden. This reflects the social structure of the period; where the aristocratic and wealthy resided in large townhouses, with private gardens from which others were rigorously excluded. Reflecting the many social changes that have taken place since them, the townhouses are now used almost exclusively as offices or cultural institutions, while the park has



Fig. 63 Undated photograph of Merrion Square South held in IAA.

been opened for free public use. Notwithstanding the radical nature of these changes, the architectural and historic garden heritage survives in a very good state of preservation.

Architectural Significance

Merrion Square Park is the centrepiece of one of the finest and most intact examples of Georgian urban design in the city. It complements the nearby parks at St. Stephen's Green and Fitzwilliam Square, all of which contribute significantly to the architectural character of the city.

The character of Georgian garden squares in Dublin consists of red-brick residential townhouses with elaborate decorative entrances and interiors, forming terraces along broad, granite footpaths and cobbled streets, at the centre of which was an enclosed garden created for the exclusive use of the residents.

In accounts from the early nineteenth-century, Merrion Square is praised as being the most impressive of its kind in Dublin, comparing it to the best in Britain and Europe. Many garden squares of similar age were either paved over, built on or altered irreversibly in other Georgian cities in Britain during the last century.

The architectural setting of the park has not altered significantly since its inception in the late eighteenth century. When compared with the other Georgian squares in the city, only Fitzwilliam Square has retained its setting and architectural character so completely.

The pathway layout has evolved over the last two centuries, reflecting changes in taste and ownership. The garden has evolved from the Georgian taste for natural style landscaping and planting, through to the present day by which time a number of different landscape approaches have been accommodated.

It is the second largest of the garden squares in the city and one of the most intact, having avoided subdivision, change of use or significant alteration in the twentieth century. Although no longer a private park, it retains its original character of a discrete, enclosed, verdant recreational place in the midst of a splendid historic architectural setting.

Artistic Significance

Since its inception, the park has accommodated a number of memorials, from the ornamental fountain of the Duke of Rutland to the statues of, and commemorating, cultural figures with associations with the square. Some of these works are by renowned artists - such as Jerome Connor, Andrew O'Connor and Elizabeth Frink.

Social Significance

Since opening to the public to much popular acclaim, Merrion Square Park has become an important part of the social fabric of the city as well as being a valuable amenity for all. Due to alterations to some of the other Georgian Squares in Dublin, and the private nature of Fitzwilliam Square, Merrion Square is the best place to present the garden heritage of the Georgian period to both visitors and locals.



Fig. 64 View towards Irish Architectural Archive through east entrance.



Fig. 65 View of interior to Irish Architectural Archive.

A number of world-famous individuals, who lived close by are associated with the area and would have enjoyed its amenity when it remained a private park including –Daniel O’Connell, Oscar Wilde, W.B. Yeats, George AE Russell.

The square is the setting for some national cultural institutions- the National Gallery, the Natural History Museum and the Houses of the Oireachtas. There are also important cultural institutions located around the square including - the Irish Architectural Archive; the Irish Manuscripts Commission; the Georgian House Museum; the headquarters of the Royal Institute of Architects of Ireland; the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland; the Institute of Archaeologists of Ireland; the Discovery Programme; the Goethe-Institute; the Irish Traditional Music Archive; and the Irish College of Anaesthetists.

Merrion Square was recognised as a place of cultural significance by the Roman Catholic Archdiocese when it bought the park as a site for a cathedral.

Archaeological Significance

The north-western corner of the park is located within the city centre Zone of Archaeological Interest that corresponds to the known extent of the city at the end of the seventeenth century.

The buried remains of structures such as the air raid shelter; the fountain and some of the smaller features visible on nineteenth-century maps are of archaeological interest.



Fig. 66 View of *The Victims* by Andrew O’Connor.



Fig. 67 Plaque to W.B. Yeats at 82 Merrion Square South.

Natural and Ecological Significance

Merrion Square Park provides a substantial green area freely available to the public in the midst of the city. It is of particular importance in containing a variety of habitats within a small area.

The habitats include mature forest trees, shrubberies, lawns and flowerbeds. These represent an important variety of natural habitats, namely forest, forest edge, grassland and open soil. Each of these supports a wide range of birds, plants and insects.

The natural and horticultural heritage to be found in the park makes it highly suitable for school excursions. The existing predominance of exotic garden plants may be greatly enhanced by the introduction of many native species that are not only very attractive, widen the biodiversity of the park, and help to educate the public on native and foreign species.

Statement of Significance

Merrion Square is an historic place of national significance, as the most intact, coherent and one of the most ambitious urban squares created in the Georgian city. It makes a major contribution to the European significance of Georgian Dublin, with its fulfillment of Enlightenment urban planning ideas that flourished throughout the continent during the eighteenth century. In 2010, *The Historic City of Dublin* was included onto the UNESCO World Heritage Tentative List, with specific reference to the Georgian city. The key characteristics of the park remain, and their significance and purpose is outlined below:



Fig. 68 View of commemorative door to The Arts Council HQ at no.70.

Views

The garden was established to provide a private shared amenity for the residents a natural planted focus viewed from the house, and also to enhance the vistas along the square's broad cobbled streets and granite flagged footpaths. While the townhouses remain remarkably intact, the streetscape has been largely modernized with concrete and tarmac, and the original wrought iron railings replaced. Within the garden, key holders could enjoy the full impact of the architecture of the square across the natural topography of the central lawn. In the Victorian era, the centre was planted out with trees and planting beds to create more focused views across the lawn and around the square. Visibility within the park is now restricted by overgrowth, making it difficult to appreciate the scale of the garden within and the architecture of the square beyond. While the garden remains enclosed, it has lost some historic character due to the overgrown to planting, although the architecture of the square remains in a well-preserved state.

Paths

The perimeter path installed as part of the original layout was intended to form a promenade to be used by the residents and their families, providing opportunities to exercise and socialize in a relatively informal setting. The path running along the northern side of the 800 metre-long circuit was constructed to be wider being the most popular south-facing promenade, as described in a number of contemporary accounts. In most cases paths have been added rather than removed, so that the original layout is mostly intact, if obscured and currently difficult to interpret. Over the course of the nineteenth century, the entrance gates were linked by the addition of two new curved paths across the central lawn to create short cuts along established desire lines leading to the central space an primary focus of the garden. The installation of a fountain in the late-nineteenth century to the west side of the central space has led to the addition of a short stretch of path, and in more recent times the perimeter circuit was interrupted by the installation of the depot in the south east corner.

Planting

The original planting scheme was intended to give the impression of the countryside within the city. Trees included both natural and imported species to create a restrained aesthetic of broadleaf greenery. Victorian taste favoured more ornamental planting, and at this time, the central lawn was sub-divided by planting beds used for flowering plants and shrubs. The most mature trees in the park probably date from the earliest planting plan, and with some judicious thinning of over-dense understorey provide opportunities to reinstate the distinctive characteristics of mature specimen trees.