H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Christine Casey, ed. *The Eighteenth-Century Dublin Townhouse: Form, Function and Finance.* Dublin: Four Courts, 2010. Illustrations. 336 pp. $65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-84682-187-5.

Reviewed by Craig Bailey (Villanova University)

Published on H-Urban (October, 2012)

Commissioned by Alexander Vari

History and the Irish House

While Dublin is a city of many layers, the Georgian period is often celebrated as the Irish capital's golden age. In the eighteenth century, Dublin became the second city of the British Empire and the eleventh most populous place in Europe. The construction of magnificent new buildings, streets, and squares, and the general improvement of the built environment reflected the growing confidence of this burgeoning cosmopolitan center. Unfortunately, the surviving material fabric of the Georgian landscape, which itself constitutes a unique historical record, is now threatened by redevelopment. This timely book is in part a call for preservation, and the editor and authors adopt a novel strategy to generate awareness of what is at stake.

As Niall McCullough tells us in the opening chapter, eighteenth-century Dublin is rightly celebrated for its public edifices, but it was the private house that gave the city its "legibility, integrity and unity" (p. 14). This statement marks a deliberate shift away from the sometimes distant and impersonal concerns of high politics that have been the focus of much Irish scholarship, to the more immediate and personal themes of social and cultural history. McCullough goes on to highlight the striking amount of diversity that lay behind the apparently monolithic and uniform façade of the Georgian city. Probing beneath the surface exposes subtle differences in style, form, and function; and offers the promise of new discoveries that defy expectation. Toby Barnard picks up on this idea in his introductory essay, by pointing out how recent research has overturned previous assumptions that a small but powerful elite controlled the city's development. Patrons played their role, but a range of other people, including artists, builders, writers, and laborers, contributed to the multifaceted processes of design, production, and consumption. In short, studies of housing provide an alternative way of reading the city's past, expanding the possibilities of who that history belongs to and thereby creating the potential to attract new readerships.

There is plenty to spark interest among new readers in the nineteen essays in this book. Menus for private dinner parties with Badger Flambé and cauliflower as a main course, for example, will undoubtedly whet the reader's appetite. In general, the analyses incorporate multidisciplinary approaches and use a wide range of source materials to cover an impressive number of topics. Essays on floor plans in London and townhouses in Edinburgh add a useful comparative dimension, while several authors discuss the movement of artists, materials, and ideas to place things in a larger European context. Furthermore, the book is striking visually. While most presses tend to avoid the costs of reproducing images, Four Courts is to be commended for turning out a lavishly illustrated volume. The dizzying array of 113 figures and 32 color plates bring the subjects discussed to life and open up points of access for the nonspecialist. The beautiful map of Edinburgh in Alistair Rowan's chapter, which immediately conveys the legibility, integrity, and unity of that city to the reader, is a case in point. Oddly enough, there is no comparable map of Dublin in the book. There are numerous images of particular houses, streets, and districts, but nothing to show how these various places related to each other. This is a curious exception for a volume that aims to encourage interest among new readers who may not be familiar with the eighteenth-century city, and it is symptomatic of a more

significant problem with integration.

As is common for an edited volume based on conference proceedings, the essays tend to focus on very specific topics. There is a chapter on the production of bricks, one on stone, several on particular houses, and others on domestic interiors, stable lanes, and financing speculative property development. Each chapter is engaging enough to stand on its own, and together they support the argument about the diversity of the eighteenth-century cityscape, but the broader connections between them are not always readily apparent. Barnard does a good job of situating the essays within the scholarship on eighteenth-century Dublin and Ireland more generally in the introduction, but the themes, issues, and arguments that he exposes do not always emerge in individual essays. Occasionally, I found myself at sea and unable to assemble the large amount of detailed information presented into larger, overarching ideas. The organizational principle guiding the placement of chapters is not evident and at times the reader is left wondering what all of this research adds up to.

A more rigorous implementation of the thematic structure hinted at in the subtitle–form, function, and finance–might have been one way to solve this problem. Perhaps a separate section for each theme, prefaced by a brief introduction, would have helped in teasing out the importance of form, function, and finance, and the relationships between them. The volume does contain a few standout essays that manage to bridge some of these gaps to provide integrated discussions of multiple themes. Alison Fitzgerald's fascinating piece on dining in the townhouse analyzes dinner books to push beyond an account of what was served and how, to investigate the significance of hospitality, and in doing so reveals divergent foodscapes and the ways that print (in the form of cookery books) shaped practice. Jacinta Prunty examines the "form, fabric and function of the town-house as tenement, and the difficulties inherent in its regulation" (p. 151). This essay focuses on later periods, but traces the widespread conversion of the townhouse to multiple occupancy that began in the eighteenth century. The author provides us with familiar aspects of European urban development, such as changing social geographies, elite flight to the suburbs, and the financial and legal obstacles that stymied the efforts of municipal authorities to effect change. At the same time, we discover factors that made the Irish capital distinct. Dublin had the most poorly housed population of any city in the British Isles by 1914. While the transformation of townhouse into tenement was not unique to Ireland, the material fabric of Dublin's houses posed particular problems. Irish houses proved less durable than their European equivalents, in part because of the extensive use of timber in the original construction, which rotted over time and was rarely replaced. By developing these various points, Prunty shows how the issues of form, function, and finance related to one another, and why they mattered.

In general though, form is the dominant theme running throughout the book, while discussions of function and finance remain marginal. How forms translated into practices and what those practices meant for the people who designed, built, lived, and worked in eighteenth-century Dublin could be teased out more effectively for the reader. This criticism aside, the book does achieve a great deal and is worth reading. The essays add to the growing body of work on sociability, luxury, consumption, and material culture in Ireland, and highlight where further research could be done. The volume also succeeds in demonstrating the diverse nature of Irish history in the eighteenth century, and it should prove successful in its aim of attracting a new audience for a new age.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-urban

Citation: Craig Bailey. Review of Casey, Christine, ed., *The Eighteenth-Century Dublin Townhouse: Form, Function and Finance.* H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. October, 2012.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=33829

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.