
Negotiating a negative past in the reuse of historic prisons

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Abstract This paper 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 UK prison sites, Northallerton and Oxford, how their history is incorporated into the redevelopment. It explores how the different stakeholders of each site perceived the sites and the effect these perceptions had on their redevelopment. The research explored what happens when a historic site being redeveloped is one with a negative past and how this affects its adaptation and reuse. The paper examines how the history of these two prison 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 their original purpose is no longer required or the institutions that used them relocate to more modern premises, historic sites and buildings such as former asylums and prisons are increasingly being adapted, reused and regenerated. These sites form part of the UK's collective history and memory, and many become the subject of heated debates about their

future,¹ as people argue about what should and should not be preserved.

Historic places are often seen as belonging to future generations² and therefore worthy of preservation. People seeking to protect these sites usually experience them positively, focusing on their positive history and aesthetic qualities.³ Not all historic sites and places have positive histories, however; sites with

more negative histories, such as former asylums, prisons, factories and bunkers, are now being adapted and reused. What happens when the heritage site in question is perceived as being negative or as having a challenging and difficult history? How does the past history of a site influence its redevelopment in such a case?

This paper will explore the adaptation and reuse of two historic prison sites: 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 because the concept of value is not generally discussed in relation to such properties. There has been an increased trend in developers purchasing former prisons for redevelopment into new uses, and the two prisons offer a perspective from which to assess the impact of their history at different points in that process of redevelopment.

The paper will discuss how the history of these two sites was employed, treated and dealt with through their redevelopments. In doing so, it will first 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 need to learn the language of the different stakeholders involved.

There has been an increasing trend in recent years of redeveloping historic prisons that are seen as being no longer fit for purpose and have subsequently closed;⁵ however, limited scholarly and professional attention has been paid to

this reuse process. Prisons often have negative connotations and are associated with memories that are seen as being hard to overcome or forget,⁶ yet many have long histories and important architecture and can therefore be considered 'heritage' buildings. Historic prisons have been described 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 discussed in this paper followed different paths. Northallerton prison was built in the 1880s (see Figure 1) and at the time of its operation was home to the largest treadmill punishment machine in the world. Following its closure, the non-listed parts of the site were demolished, while the Grade II listed sections⁹ were retained and were included in a planning application to convert the site into residential use. Northallerton is not associated with any particularly famous individuals or events.

Oxford prison dates back to 1071 (see Figure 2), when it was originally part of Oxford Castle, and is both a Scheduled Ancient Monument and Grade I listed. Since its closure it has been converted into a luxury hotel, although some elements of its history are displayed: some cells have been retained and it has a small museum. The room that was used for hangings has, however, been closed off with no access.

This paper makes use of data from semi-structured interviews conducted by Gill¹⁰ 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



Figure 1: Northallerton prison interior and exterior images

Source: B. Fortuna in S. Gill¹¹

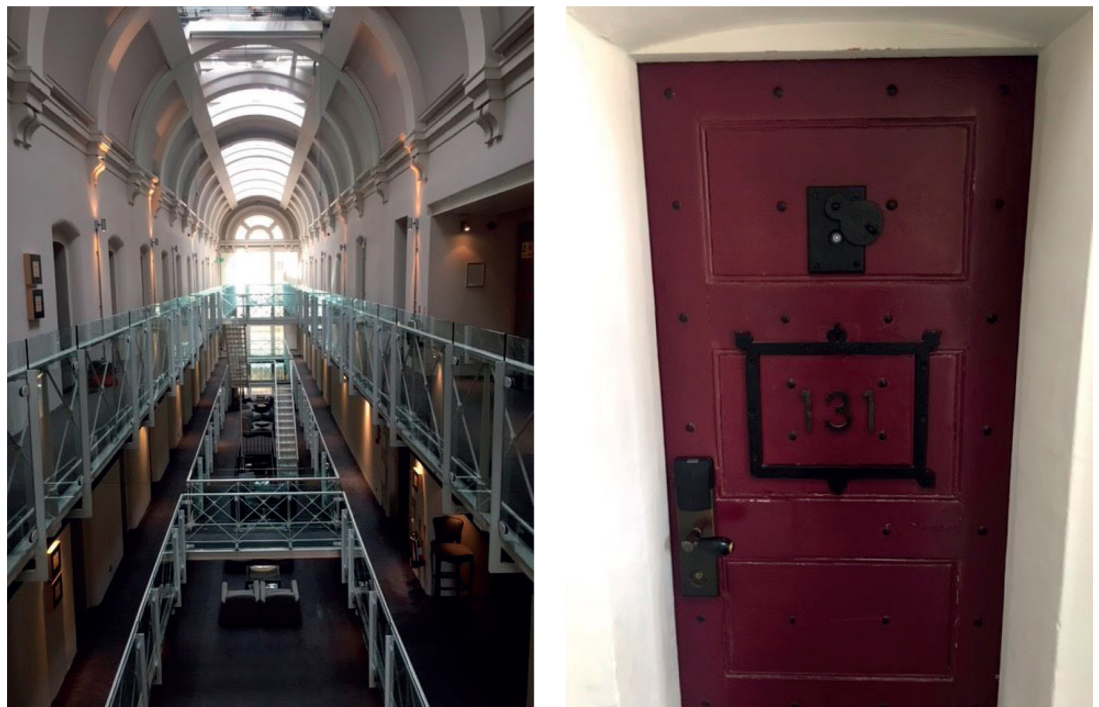


Figure 2: Oxford prison, now the Malmaison Hotel

Source: S. Gill¹²

to a successor use. The semi-structured interviews allowed for key themes from the research to be explored as well as enabling participants to express their views in their own words. Their words could therefore reveal how they approached, dealt with and felt about their respective

sites. Analysis of the interviews was conducted on a thematic basis, with recurring themes identified. Quotes are presented in this paper in the participants' own words from the interview transcripts but have been anonymised to prevent the identification of participants.

DIFFICULT, NEGATIVE OR UNCOMFORTABLE HERITAGE

Several terms have been applied to heritage or historic buildings that are seen as having difficult pasts: 'difficult heritage',¹³ 'uncomfortable heritage'¹⁴ and 'negative heritage'.¹⁵ MacDonald¹⁶ 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 applies to something that is associated with violence or tragic events.¹⁷ Difficult heritage can therefore be seen as more 'awkward' and disconcerting, whereas negative heritage is something darker. Pendlebury *et al.* use 'uncomfortable heritage' for a place or site that is from the everyday, but that has a dark or difficult past, so that 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 with control and reform embedded within the function and use of the building, particularly during the Victorian era.¹⁸ Although 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 experienced only by the patients or inmates and staff, and not the wider population as a whole.

If places are seen as 'mnemonic containers',¹⁹ meaning that a place becomes intertwined with the events that took place there, and given that prisons — particularly Victorian-era ones — may be associated with hard labour, it is possible to accept the idea that prisons and violent behaviour go hand in hand and that prisons therefore can be considered difficult, dark heritage sites according to the above definitions.

They are awkward in terms of the function of their past use and 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 understood to have taken place there.

Prisons have been viewed in the same light as slave houses, battlefields and asylums,²⁰ but are now also considered heritage sites 'associated within the popular memory with at least one specific tragic historical circumstance'.²¹ Reeves and Nichols²² 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 building's former uses and history'. This paper would agree with this statement, but suggest that it is for all stakeholders involved in that process to be part of that negotiation.

Before turning attention to the reuse of the two sites in this study, it is important to ask how useful is the distinction between 'difficult' and 'good', 'positive' and 'negative' heritage. Heritage is often seen as a positive thing, and yet, as Howard²³ stated, it is difficult to say anything about heritage without upsetting someone. It inherently involves risk and loss²⁴ and can also be seen as 'nationalistic, exclusive, sexist, elitist and backward looking',²⁵ benefiting someone at the expense of someone else.

Heritage is viewed as something innately valuable and aesthetically pleasing, representing all that is good about the past to be passed on to future generations,²⁶ and therefore negative aspects of the past are not permitted or are strategically forgotten. This has been illustrated by Pendlebury *et al.*,²⁷ 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'. Smith²⁸ contended that privileging the 'feel-good' qualities of heritage goes against official versions of what heritage is; she argued that this distortion is exacerbated by the construction of heritage lists that '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'.²⁹

Under definitions of heritage that focus on the positive or 'feel-good' qualities,³⁰ buildings such as prisons and asylums would not be considered to be heritage; while they are historic and may be aesthetically pleasing, they are unlikely to be argued to represent 'good' heritage or a past that we would necessarily want to remember. It is this contradiction that gives rise to accusations that developers are choosing to strategically forget the history of these sites.

Privileging a particular focus on a place implies that all places have one fixed 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 or negative, dark or light. MacDonald³¹ contended that it is through the process of preservation that memories are imprinted onto places; however, this suggests that places do not hold meanings except when we are trying to remember them for something. Barber³² 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. King³³ has argued that 'buildings [...] are essentially social and cultural products. Buildings result from cultural needs and accommodate a variety of functions'; Hayden³⁴ has argued that 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, as being something 'real', implies that there is consensus as to what this 'real' heritage is. Heritage is therefore constructed on the basis of these meanings. This implies that a consensus on that meaning has been reached. Consequently, the idea of there being 'difficult' or 'good' heritage is also problematic, as it suggests that particular places are only interpreted in one particular way, whereas, as Gibbeson³⁵ has demonstrated, people interpret places in different ways at different points in that building's lifespan.

NEGATIVE CONNOTATIONS AND STIGMA

Buildings and sites with negative histories have been perceived as being difficult to redevelop because of those negative connotations.³⁶ The taint of their former reputations and former use is said to transfer to the buildings themselves, resulting in a stigma.³⁷ Stigma is a very difficult concept to define.³⁸ In the context of property, 'stigma' usually denotes the contamination of a site as a result of its previous use, usually in the form of a chemical or some other type of hazard that must be rectified before the site can be redeveloped, typically at great cost. In most other contexts, stigma is used to describe a person rather than a place; Oxford English Dictionaries Online defines it as 'a mark of disgrace associated with a particular circumstance, quality, or person'.³⁹ The word 'disgrace' would suggest a history of dishonourable action or loss of reputation associated with that individual. Building stigma is related to buildings that have suffered an environmental disaster or contamination;⁴⁰ however, stigma does not always entail physical damage but can attach to

buildings that have experienced negative histories, such as ‘murder houses’⁴¹ or severely disadvantaged housing estates.⁴²

In a regeneration and property context, stigma, with its concomitant loss of value or the additional cost of remediating it, is generally seen as being the result of natural disaster or environmental contamination.⁴³ Stigma in this sense is related to the physical integrity of the buildings, although Johnson⁴⁴ believes that stigma may still be present even if the physical integrity of the building is not affected. He argued that once a property is perceived by the public to be contaminated or damaged, even rectifying the problem cannot undo those perceptions. Bell⁴⁵ also looked beyond the physical in determining the market value of a property and argued 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 (although intangible elements of buildings are considered by heritage professionals), and yet they may play an important role in the public perception of a particular site or building, which consequently influences its future through the practical decisions taken and management of it.⁴⁶

People’s perception of stigma and place has been considered predominantly in studies of housing estates.⁴⁷ Wacquant⁴⁸ applied Goffman’s⁴⁹ definition of stigma to place, arguing 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 suggested that individuals are, as a result, ‘discredited’ or ‘disqualified’ from certain areas of life.⁵⁰ The notoriety of a place or building can therefore influence the perceptions of

that place or building, which leads to it becoming stigmatised.

Hastings⁵¹ 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 labelled as ‘scumbags’ or ‘problem families’,⁵² the reputation of the estate affects how its residents are viewed and vice versa. This perceived stigma persists even through redevelopment; Hastings⁵³ found that an area retains its image, with estates seen as still being stigmatised even after major regeneration had taken place. While these studies⁵⁴ 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 stigmas are fixed not to individuals but to spaces⁵⁵ and can retain a sense of guilt;⁵⁶ they carry the traces of their past. Arguably, this is true of prisons.

PRISON REUSE

The perceptions of a place and the emotional response to it affect the decisions that are taken about that place.⁵⁷ Practitioners need to be aware of this; decisions by any stakeholder or interested party can be influenced by how they interpret a building and how they think others will interpret it. People’s view of a place’s history can have important implications for its reuse and redevelopment. Those involved in the proposed redevelopment of Northallerton prison and in the completed development of Oxford prison have approached their respective histories in different ways, but in both cases the question of whether the stigma of past use existed was a complicated one. For both prisons there was a balance to be achieved between the consideration of their pasts as something negative and stigmatised and the distinctiveness of their history and heritage as a unique selling point.

The symbolism of dark versus light, welcoming versus oppressive, was evident in the descriptions of Oxford prison by members of the public, who expected it to be 'dour and oppressive' but were surprised to find the hotel 'bright and welcoming'. The redevelopment changed the building's atmosphere and consequently the perceptions of visitors. The developers hoped for the same effect at Northallerton, having spotted an opportunity to create natural light and to remove 'the oppressive nature of the building'. 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 made possible a symbolic change from the past to the present and future through the adaptive reuse and the change in perceptions and perceived atmosphere at the two sites.

Atmospheres have been seen to come from shared ground⁵⁸ and to capture the emotional feel of a place, as well as storing the 'action-potential'⁵⁹ of a particular place. The past use as a prison is seen as limiting and as being dark and oppressive, but changing and adapting the two sites enabled a reimagining and an 'opening up' of the sites to bring more light to these buildings — both physically and metaphorically. Human participation in and reaction to buildings is complex and involves many processes, physical, social and cultural;⁶⁰ we act subjectively and, as a result, emotionally towards the built environment, and these actions can and do produce particular reactions or effects on the world.⁶¹ Our perceptions and preconceptions of places across time and the individual and collective memories of these places are emotional, and they intersect.⁶² Places with a difficult heritage

evoke particularly powerful memories and emotions in people.⁶³ As practitioners, we are trained in our specific discipline, and that training dictates how we see and approach sites; however, as the above quotes indicate, we also hold individual, personal opinions about the sites on which we work, because of their collective histories and the 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 felt 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. As for Oxford, there were comments that interesting features had been preserved but that the preservation had been done in a luxurious and stylish way, with the positive physical architecture enhancing and changing 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 prison was seen as an opportunity to adapt the site and change it into something new. A 'tasteful' development could 'soften' the site, turn it into a trendy place to live and give it a different role. The redevelopment provided a way to reverse the past or to ameliorate the previous connotations — in fact, to turn it into a place people would consider fashionable because of the quirkiness or originality of the building type. The prison changes from being somewhere people were incarcerated to somewhere people actively choose to reside in.

Despite promising to create something new and change the atmosphere of the former prison through its redevelopment,

an element of stigma or negativity towards its past use did persist. The word 'prison' was omitted from the name of the development, but the choice of 'the treadmills' was seen as offering a nod to the past history. This choice of name demonstrates the complexities at play in the redevelopment of difficult heritage sites. Because of its connotations, the word 'prison' was not chosen; nevertheless, some of the history was reflected in the development. The use of the name 'treadmills' is, however, fascinating, as it refers to a specific form of punishment employed in the prison — not something that would necessarily be considered a positive image. What this does demonstrate, however, is that reference to the building's 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 its 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 significant events or criminals now known of, Oxford prison, during its long history, not only incarcerated prisoners but also executed them. Within the hotel is a small museum dedicated to the history of the site. The museum focuses on the more distant past, particularly the treatment of prisoners during the Victorian era. Because of this more distant focus, the history presented was seen as troubling but not recent enough to resonate with modern visitors. The more recent 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.

The presentation of a particular version of history here — one that

asks us to feel empathy for previous inmates — corresponds with the many critiques that argue history and heritage is always presented selectively.⁶⁴ The more distant past is safe: it cannot hurt us in the present⁶⁵ and therefore could be considered easier to deal with. Virilio⁶⁶ has argued, in the context of the Atlantic Wall, that these monuments were 'not yet historical' for local people; not enough time had passed for them to be considered heritage and therefore worthy of preservation. Sites can be read as 'moral contaminants', whereby history is seen as something that 'must be contained lest the contagion otherwise escape'.⁶⁷ Some historic sites are therefore too recent or too traumatic for us to reuse or preserve and memorialise as heritage.

While the Oxford museum presents the more 'safe' or digestible parts of the long history of the site, the execution room, which participants saw as having very negative connotations, is not accessible. The 'morbid history' of that room and the knowledge that people had been hanged there were seen as being unappealing for visitors. History and heritage give a building a unique character, but in the case of Oxford prison, an element of this history was seen as being too much, too negative to be incorporated into the new use as a hotel.

For the hotel guests, the past has become 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 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 will, 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.⁶⁸ Overall, both

Northallerton and Oxford prisons have been, or are being, converted; their pasts are not so negative as to prevent that.

Stromberg suggested that the way sites such as military bunkers — or, as 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. This research shows that former prisons, like former asylums,⁶⁹ retain the connotations from their past use and history but 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 buildings 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 that the reuse of dark heritage sites is less confrontational, as there were no observed objections to the Oxford and Northallerton redevelopments, but, equally, that there is no automatic erasure of their history; both sites had elements of their past use remembered in their redevelopments, albeit in different manners, depending on the successor use.

Gibbeson⁷⁰ 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 in urban development, particularly when it involves heritage buildings, 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. This focus supports Lagenbach's idea that it is the 'historical impact' of an event that 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.

In the case of Oxford prison, 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 interesting. The history and potential stigma (relating to famous 'guests' and the possibility of seeing what life was like for them) were a draw for the site, promising visitors a haunting experience as one of Oxford prison's inmates for a night. Even here, however, there were certain elements of the history, notably the execution room, that were deemed too stigmatised to be reused, providing an example of a specific traumatic event having 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 are not connected with specific traumatic or notorious events retain a low-level stigma associated with their past use that fades over time — a diminishment that is accelerated by the site's adaptation and reuse.

CONCLUSION

This paper has explored two former prison sites, Northallerton and Oxford prisons, with two different use types, a hotel and

a proposed conversion to residential use, to examine how the past history of a historic site influences its redevelopment when this history is perceived as negative, challenging or difficult. In both cases there was a focus on and interest in the architecture and physical aspects of the sites. This was particularly the case in the proposed redevelopment of Northallerton; 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, as demonstrated by the choice of name at Northallerton and by the museum at Oxford. While this focus privileged certain aspects of the sites' past over others — a charge that could be levelled against any heritage site — it also demonstrated that the past was not completely erased or forgotten, as might have been expected for a site with a negative history.⁷¹ How this was realised and which parts of that history were commemorated 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.

Sites with difficult or negative histories pose the same challenges for practitioners involved in the urban regeneration process as those with more positive histories, and this paper would suggest that making such a distinction is not helpful for the redevelopment and reuse process. The same decisions must be made about the physical elements of the buildings — what is and what is not retained — and the same decisions remain about which parts of the history are focused on and which are not. What is different is the level of emotional response to these places; their redevelopments appear to be less controversial and to entail less emotional

investment than those of other, more positively perceived heritage sites.⁷²

Practitioners involved in the reuse of heritage sites therefore need to be aware, first, of the connotations and history of each site that they deal with, and then of the level to which they and others within that process will be invested in that history. As Winter⁷³ argued, 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 practical and academic disciplines such as real estate and planning would also contribute to 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 assess how such redevelopment compares 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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