

# Exhibiting Maritime Histories: Titanic Belfast in the Post-Conflict City

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**ABSTRACT:** The sinking of the *RMS Titanic* in 1912 represents one of the most infamous maritime disasters in the history of shipping. Yet despite it entering the public imagination in the decades after its sinking, until recently it has all but been erased from the collective memory of the people of Belfast, the city in which it was built. In a post-conflict context, however, Belfast has begun to re-imagine the role of the ship in the city's history, most particularly in the re-development of the docklands area and its designation as the Titanic Quarter, and through its landmark project the Titanic Belfast museum. This paper will trace the economic, social, and political context from which the *Titanic* was built, and the role that this played in silencing any very public commemoration of its sinking until after the signing of the Belfast Agreement. The "story" told in the new museum will be analyzed from this perspective and will illustrate how the wounds of the Troubles continue to inform the interpretation of the city's divided past.

One hundred years after the sinking of the *Royal Mail Ship (R.M.S.) Titanic*, the tragedy continues to captivate the imaginations of millions of people around the globe. Since the loss of over 1,500 lives on the ill-fated night on April 15, 1912, when the ship sank on its maiden voyage about 350 miles from the Newfoundland coast, the *Titanic's* stories have almost continually been rehearsed through books, films, documentaries, and museums. Five weeks after the ship went down, Universal Pictures released the first movie about the tragedy, starring the real-life survivor Dorothy Gibson whose affair with the film studio's founder, Jules Brulatour, brought her on the voyage across the Atlantic in the first place.<sup>1</sup> During the Second World War in 1943, Goebbels's commissioned a propaganda film using the sinking of the *Titanic* as a metaphor for Britain's ill-judged sense of its superior seafaring skills and its arrogant pursuit of profit at the expense of safety.<sup>2</sup> Its sole purpose was to portray Britain in a negative light and hence made no pretense towards accuracy. It was the film adaptation of Walter Lord's 1955 classic book *A Night to Remember* that laid the foundation for all future movie representations of the ship's destiny.<sup>3</sup> Released in 1958, this British film proved a huge commercial success and was followed by several other movie versions, including *The Unsinkable Molly Brown*, starring Debbie Reynolds as the lead as one of the ship's most well-known first-class survivors, and James Cameron's 1997 direction of the multiple academy award-winning epic *Titanic*, grossing over \$2 billion worldwide. Moreover, the ship's sinking has generated a huge number of academic as well as popular texts, many published in 2012 to mark its centenary.<sup>4</sup> Its demise on the eve of the First World War in part may explain its longevity in the collective memory of generations after the war, as a cruel foreboding of the slaughter that took place in the trenches two years after its sinking, and as a salutary symbol of the seeming end of a century of human progress.<sup>5</sup>

Today it is through exhibitions and museums that the story of the *Titanic* has become part of an ever-burgeoning heritage industry. RMS Titanic, Inc., a subsidiary of Premier Exhibitions,

Inc., obtained exclusive rights to the artifacts salvaged from the wreck when it was located and excavated in 1985. Visitors can view the spoils of the wreckage at “*Titanic: The Experience*,” beside Disney World in Orlando, Florida and through the multi-venue “*Titanic: The Artifact Exhibition*,” one of whose locations is the Luxor Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas. The twenty-five million people who have paid to see and who have additionally purchased the myriad of replica artifacts sold at the exhibition confirm the popularity and profitability of this exhibition. Florida and Las Vegas may seem geographically remote from the origin, route, or destination of this ship and its passengers, and suggests that heritage production and reception is sometimes only loosely connected to the spatial settings in which the past takes place. But those places more closely connected to the ship’s history have also incorporated its story into their material and heritage landscape. While Southampton, the port from where the ship began its voyage westward, has a modest display of artifacts in its maritime museum, it is Belfast Northern Ireland – the city in which the ship was built – that has recently invested most heavily in preserving the memory of the city’s role in the ship’s construction, through the opening of the Titanic Belfast museum in April 2012 to mark the centenary of its demise. In a ceremony of remembrance held at the City Hall, to unveil a memorial to those who died and as part of wider efforts to demonstrate the shared history of the people of Northern Ireland, Sinn Féin Lord Mayor, Niall O Donnghaile, claimed that it took so long to erect a memorial because the “memory [was] too painful, the loss too personal.”<sup>6</sup> Others have queried such an interpretation, arguing that the collective amnesia surrounding the ship arose from a sense of failure and shame about the city’s Harland and Wolff shipyard that built the vessel and the sectarian geography of employment at the shipyard in the early twentieth century. But in Northern Ireland’s post-conflict context, *R.M.S. Titanic*’s history and the role of Belfast in that narrative has become part of a wider effort to economically regenerate the city and to positively capitalize on the commercial possibilities of heritage and cultural tourism in achieving that end.<sup>7</sup>

The Titanic Belfast museum, forms part of a larger regeneration of the docklands area of the city where the shipyard is located, re-named the Titanic Quarter, and includes hotels, apartments, and a new building that houses the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland [Figure 1]. The site covers 185 acres, formerly part of the Harland and Wolff shipyard, and the re-development proposal was born in the wake of the Good Friday Agreement. It is, of course, part of the wider global effort of selling cities as cultural capital.<sup>8</sup> The rejuvenation of former docklands areas into retail, housing, and leisure spaces, begun initially in projects in Boston, San Francisco, and Baltimore has diffused much more widely across the globe to historic waterfronts, in what Atkinson refers to as “maritime kitsch.”<sup>9</sup> At the cornerstone of the development in Belfast has been the building of the Titanic Belfast museum, located on Queen’s Island, an area of land beside Belfast Lough where Harland and Wolff constructed slipways and graving docks to build the *R.M.S. Titanic* and other ocean-going luxury liners. On this space lies the new museum, whose angular construction appears as a glittering shard of innovative architecture, clad with several thousand three-dimensional, silver-anodized aluminum plates, and projecting five ship prows in its facade jutting towards the sky and built at the exact same height (126 ft.) as the original ship [Figure 2]. The exterior of the building, designed to reflect the past that is displayed inside, simultaneously represents a future aspiration that the city can be reinvigorated as a center of commercial success and that the one hundred million pounds spent on it will do for Belfast what the Guggenheim did for Bilbao.<sup>10</sup> Inside the building, the exhibition, designed over nine interpretive galleries, charts the history of the city from the late nineteenth century--as a hub of industrial activity--in which shipbuilding formed a significant part, to the ship’s design, construction, fit-out, launch, and ultimate sinking. The use of state-of-the-art techniques to convey the story mirrors the narrative that projects Belfast as a hub of innovative engineering and manufacturing one hundred years earlier. As one of the most expensive buildings in Europe, the museum would have to attract 290,000 visitors per year to break even, and while skeptics

have doubted the possibility of achieving this, 650,000 people visited in the first nine months, making it the most visited heritage attraction in Northern Ireland, outstripping other top tourist attractions like the Giant's Causeway and the Ulster Museum.



**Figure 1.** The Titanic Quarter.



The story of the *R.M.S. Titanic* indicates how a particular moment in the past can enter the collective consciousness and become part of the heritage industry in a postcolonial context. From the heavily segregated city in which the ship was built to the myriad of places from where its passengers/staff originated, this maritime disaster has achieved iconic status and it connects to three areas of inquiry that have particularly animated geographers' approach to investigating the uses of the past in the present. First, it alerts us to the relationship between heritage sites and history, and why some episodes from the past are mobilized for popular consumption. Second, the story of the *R.M.S. Titanic* foregrounds the relationship between space, place, and identity making. Geographers have been particularly interested in the connections between heritage preservation and place-based identity politics, and in the context of Northern Ireland, the disputed geographies of national allegiance are especially significant. Finally, for geographers, understanding the symbolic as well as the material effects of heritage landscapes is of significant import in their interpretation of these places. The remainder of this paper will address these issues, beginning with an overview of the evolution of Belfast as an industrial hub in the nineteenth century and its sectarian social and political geographies. This will be followed by a sketch of the ideas underpinning the re-development of the city's docklands as the Titanic Quarter. And finally the story presented at the Titanic Belfast complex will be analyzed, with a view to situating it within a broader discourse of the post-conflict city and the erasure of any conceptions of the city as one with a distinctly colonial legacy. Yet one of the legacies of the Plantation of Ulster was the replacement of populations from England, Wales, and especially Presbyterian Scotland into what



**Figure 2.** Titanic Belfast — the museum.

Kearns refers to as “the half-emptied nest of Gaelic Ireland,” and with that came religious and political divisions that would leave indelible marks on Ulster’s society in general and in Belfast in particular, that remain to the present day.<sup>11</sup>

### **Booming Belfast: The industrial city that built the *Titanic***

The Belfast that built the *R.M.S. Titanic* was developing as an industrial hub throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, but this city’s growth began a hundred years earlier. From a small town with a population of 8,549 in 1757, the city’s inhabitants numbered 386,946 in 1911 on the eve of the completion of the ship, making it, albeit briefly, larger than Dublin. This growth was largely the product of rural migration from the surrounding countryside, as employment opportunities expanded to correspond with the city’s widening industrial base. Its maritime position in part accounted for this growth. Quays in the eighteenth-century city were largely developed to facilitate trade and the city’s merchant class. Hanover Quay, for instance, was erected in 1720 and this brought the city quays to the banks of the River Lagan for the first time. It marked the beginning of a series of quay-building projects that would facilitate the trading of goods between Belfast and ports around the globe. Moreover, accompanying the expansion of docking facilities were efforts to improve direct access to the city along Belfast Lough. Straightening and deepening the channel into the port would offset the need for larger vessels to offload their cargo onto lighters to the city, and precipitated the development of the Ballast Board, responsible for improving access and docking facilities for the town. In 1837, the board, under the Act for the Formation of a New Cut or Channel and for Otherwise Improving More Effectually the Port and Harbour of Belfast, engaged William Dargan, railway engineer and canal builder, to carry out improvements. The first cut was made in 1839 and the spoil was dumped to form Dargan’s Island, later named Queen’s Island, which although initially designated as pleasure grounds, would eventually become a key site for shipbuilding and for the *R.M.S. Titanic* in particular. The Belfast Harbour Commissioners, the new name for the old Ballast Board, undertook a second cut of the channel in 1847, also under the watchful eye of Dargan, and this Victoria Channel provided straight, deep-water access into the city. Land infill provided the developing port with cargo handling areas, new arterial connections to the city, office space for private companies, and the Harbour Commissioners, and a new Custom’s House erected in 1857. Such infrastructural innovations aided the development of the city as a major trading and shipbuilding center.<sup>12</sup>

But it was not on the harbor’s development and the ensuing shipbuilding industry that Belfast’s industrial might alone depended. Before the deepening of channels into the port, the city had already been developing its textile industry and in particular its linen manufacture and trade that would be exported around the globe. Originally Belfast had traded linen produced in the surrounding countryside, particularly County Antrim. The Brown Linen Halls (1754 and 1773) and the White Linen Hall (1785) were established in the eighteenth century to facilitate this trade in bleached linen. Cloth manufacture in the city itself initially involved the spinning and weaving of cotton and it wasn’t until the enterprising Mulholland brothers began experimenting with the weaving of linen in their new mill built in the late 1820s that the city began to focus on linen manufacture. Steam-powered mills (as opposed to the water-powered mills used in manufacturing cotton) and having investigated the latest innovations used in Leeds’ mills, the Mulhollands step towards linen manufacture meant that others followed suit. The twelve linen mills in existence in 1832 had increased to thirty-two by 1860, while only two cotton mills continued to exist. This expansion into the production of textiles enhanced Belfast’s reputation as a “Linenopolis,” and although it experienced the same fluctuation in market demand as other centers of linen production as the century progressed, the production of high-grade linen from the factories in Belfast ensured that it could retain its place in the international linen trade,

particularly across Britain's empire and the Spanish Americas. The improvement of harbor facilities also contributed to its success. With it came other industries, most notably foundries, ironworks, bleachers, printers, and brick makers.<sup>13</sup>

Moreover, some new industries developed in tandem with the textile and shipbuilding industries. For instance, Belfast's Ropeworks produced ropes for the shipyards and became one of the biggest global manufacturers of its kind, while other major concerns like Gallaher's tobacco factory had two thousand employees at its peak, and developed independently of linen or shipbuilding. The industrialization of Belfast also meant the feminization of much of the industrial labor force. Women worked particularly in the linen mills and tobacco factories and by 1901 women formed 38 percent of the work force compared to 29 percent of Ireland as a whole and 30 percent of Britain. In contrast to national trends only 20 percent of these women were domestic servants, while 40 percent were in Britain. According to Connolly and McIntosh, "women formed the backbone of the city's linen industry, in both spinning and weaving sectors, and were also crucial to other manufacturing enterprises such as Gallaher's giant tobacco factory."<sup>14</sup> These major manufacturing enterprises not only brought Belfast in closer contact with Britain, and enhanced east-west links rather than north-south ones, but also brought the city in much closer direct contact with Britain's imperial markets and its overseas colonies.

While the city industrialized, its religious composition also changed. In 1834 31 percent of the city's population was Catholic, and this rose to 34 percent by 1861, as Catholic rural migrants entered the city in search of employment, although by the beginning of the twentieth century Catholic numbers had fallen again to 24 percent. The nineteenth-century French traveler to Ireland Madame de Bovet wrote in her *Three Months' Tour in Ireland*, published in 1891, "Belfast is the battleground of religions, a Protestant stronghold in the midst of Catholic and apostolic Erin and the zeal of both sides is quickened by contact."<sup>15</sup> While sectarian strife may not have been characteristic of this urban settlement from the outset, particularly when the town was overwhelmingly Protestant, from the nineteenth century onward, religious and political antagonism heightened and openly violent exchanges often rotated around rituals like the Orangemen's Twelfth of July parades. In part, these conflicts were reproductions of animosities between Catholic and Protestant rural societies, like the Defenders and Peep-of-Day Boys, carried to Belfast through rural to urban migration.<sup>16</sup> Although Protestants were numerically denominated by the Church of Ireland (Anglicans) and Presbyterians, there were numerous others smaller groups including Methodists, Baptists, Unitarians, and Congregationalists, so that by 1900 there were only nineteen Catholic churches and over two hundred non-Catholic places of worship. As the nationalist movement gathered pace across nineteenth-century Ireland, antagonism and sometimes-intense violence ensued in the microcosm of divided opinion that Belfast represented.<sup>17</sup>

And this found expression in the social geography of the city itself. Residential and, to a lesser but also significant extent, employment segregation characterized the nineteenth century and has continued into the twenty first century. By 1901 more than 60 percent of families lived in streets where at least 90 percent of the occupants shared the same religion. And Catholic areas tended to be more segregated than Protestant ones, reflecting the class composition of each group, where Catholics worked as domestic servants within wealthy Protestant households. As Stephen Royle has observed "segregation might be seen as a cause and an effect of sectarian strife."<sup>18</sup> Moreover street names became bywords for the religious composition of an area: "Mention of Smithfield, Hercules Street or Pound Street (usually just called the Pound) identified Catholics, whilst Sandy Row was synonymous with Protestants."<sup>19</sup> Overlaying the geographies of residential segregation were divisions in employment, both in terms of particular industries but also with respect to religiously based divisions of labor within specific industries or employers. While Catholics were employed in good numbers in the linen industry, they formed a tiny minority of



employees in the city's shipbuilding sector and, in aggregate terms based on the 1901 Census, "were significantly over-represented in unskilled and poorly paid occupations, while the average ratable valuation of Catholic houses was two-thirds that of Protestant dwellings."<sup>20</sup> Such inequalities, fuelled by periodic purges of Catholics from workplaces, for instance, as took place in 1857, served to fuel the fan of political agitation and sectarian division and mapped onto to a wider discourse across Ireland for Catholic emancipation, land reform, and ultimately moved towards political reform that would rescind the Act of Union (1801) and lead to a path of political independence for Ireland.<sup>21</sup> It is within this context that the *R.M.S. Titanic* was built and would fashion how the legacy of its sinking would be publicly forgotten or remembered within the city.

### **Samson and Goliath: Harland and Wolff**

William Dargan had redeveloped the harbor in the 1840s, providing the deep-water Victoria Channel and making the port accessible to even the largest ships of the day. Traffic to the port increased significantly making it the biggest in Ireland, and creating a 30 percent increase in ships coming into the port from mid-century to 1914. Even into the twentieth century, new docks were erected to accommodate this expansion. These included, for instance, Spencer and Dufferin Docks (1872), York Dock (1876), and Thompson Graving Dock (1911). In the early nineteenth century there were a few shipbuilding enterprises constructing wooden vessels, and the first steam-powered ship, the *Belfast*, left the docks in 1820 on its maiden voyage to Liverpool. These early shipbuilding companies were located in the County Antrim side of the River Lagan, but with the improvements of the 1840s, much shipbuilding activity moved to Victoria Island on the Co Down side. A small company, Thompson and Kirwin established premises adjacent to the patent slip on Queen's Island, followed by Edward Hickson, who wished to extend his foundry and expand his business of building iron ships. He employed Edward Harland from Yorkshire, who had been an engineer on the Tyne and the Clyde and had served an apprenticeship with the notable railway magnate Robert Stephenson. Hickson's business floundered and he offered the shipyard to Harland. In 1858 Harland accepted his invitation, bought the original shipyard on Queen's Island, and extended it by acquiring more land so that the entire enterprise covered 1.4 hectares. And so was born the Edward James Harland and Company shipbuilding firm. He recruited staff from the Tyne shipyards in Newcastle as well as employing the nephew of his friend, the Liverpool ship-owner Gustav Schwabe, Gustav Wolff as his assistant. Within three years, Wolff was elevated to partner in the firm and the company was renamed Harland and Wolff.<sup>22</sup>

From the outset, they specialized in building passenger ships, particularly for the White Star Line shipping company, to coincide with the onset of mass migration especially from Europe to North America. The Harbour Commissioners were also further expanding harbor facilities on the Queen's Island side of the river, opening the Abercorn Basin and Hamilton Graving Dock, both close to Harland and Wolff's premises in 1867. The success of the company continued and by 1870 there were 2,400 men employed in the shipyard. The company continued to expand their works, building new berthing and graving docks gantries to hasten production and re-equipped engine and boiler works. They also hired William Pirrie as chief draughtsman and he became a partner in 1874. Harland died in 1895, an occasion that was marked by a huge funeral in Belfast, and Pirrie took over the Chairmanship of the company. By 1899 the shipyard had built the world's largest ship, the *Oceanic*.<sup>23</sup> This was followed by the erection of the new Thompson Graving Dock in 1911, from where the *Olympic* and the *Titanic* were built, each marking a watershed for being the world's largest ships ever built. The workforce had expanded to around fourteen thousand employees, mainly men and primarily Protestant. And it was from this yard in 1912 that the world's most infamous ocean liner departed. This overview provides the historical framework

from which we can interpret the “story” of the city presented at the Titanic Belfast museum. While the museum’s principal focus is on the making of the ship itself, this cannot be readily separated from the deeper context that made Belfast the heartland of heavy industry in Ireland in the latter decades of the nineteenth century and a hub for shipbuilding. The museum’s account is inflected by this narrative, albeit it selectively.

### **Titanic Quarter and the re-making of Belfast’s Maritime Heritage**

Since the 1970s with the decline of traditional heavy industries, particularly shipbuilding and its associated trades, in the urban centers of the West, developers, city planners, and in some instances conservationists, have seen these spaces as potential nodes for regeneration and gentrification. Derelict dockland areas have been transformed into leisure, retail, and residential areas and, in some instances, centers for new service industries.<sup>24</sup> Early examples in San Francisco and Boston illustrated the potential for these dockland locales to be transformed and revitalized areas of the city, offering waterside vistas, historic building fabric, and a post-industrial chic that would appeal to both to incoming residents and tourists.<sup>25</sup> The success of these early examples prompted other cities to follow suit, in what is sometimes referred to as a “waterfront Renaissance,” and created what some commentators consider a uniform aesthetic of bland consumption.<sup>26</sup>

From the context of a very successful shipbuilding company on the eve of the First World War with the introduction of the Third Home Rule Bill in the House of Commons in April 1912 and an Ulster characterized by heightened political tensions about the constitutional question (leading to the signing of the Ulster Covenant in September 1912), the *R.M.S. Titanic* left Belfast on its maiden voyage. In the intervening decades in Northern Ireland and up until the 1980s, according to John Wilson Foster, the ship had been all but erased from public memory, “given the fact that Harland and Wolff was the biggest single shipyard in the world for some decades, and at the leading edge of passenger ship development and design, very little has been done, even with the major figures involved, let alone the culture they both embodied and inhabited.”<sup>27</sup> A variety of explanations have been offered for this absence, erasure, or omission about the city and shipyard from where the famous ship emanated. Some suggest that Harland and Wolff itself sought to avoid too much additional publicity about the shipyard in the wake of the disaster and thus positively discouraged histories of the company being written. Others claim that the ship’s sinking was a badge of shame for Belfast’s predominantly (but not exclusively) Protestant shipbuilding workforce and consequently silenced the ship’s memory locally. Some also assert that although Catholics might have secretly, at the time, regarded the disaster as a well-deserved punishment for the city’s maritime industries and thus dismissed it, in a post-partition context they increasingly came to see the shipyards in general, and Harland and Wolff in particular, as representations of the sectarian character of employment practices in the industry and one of the sources of their discontent. There is some merit in all these perspectives and the political context of the decade immediately after the ship’s sinking, ultimately resulting in Ireland’s partition in 1921, all eclipsed the significance of *R.M.S. Titanic*’s demise in public’s consciousness.<sup>28</sup> Everybody wanted to forget about the sinking of this ship.

In the late 1990s however, after the signing of the Belfast Agreement, the Titanic Quarter project was conceived. In part facilitated by the declining shipbuilding company’s desire to make profit through land development, Harland and Wolff sold some of its land. The lead purchaser in the transaction with responsibility for development of the Titanic Quarter was the Dublin-based development company, Harcourt Developments. The concept architect appointed was the Texas-born Eric Kuhne who was best known for his company’s development of the Bluewater shopping center in Kent, England. The Northern Ireland Executive, Belfast City Council, and the Northern Irish Tourist Board supported the Belfast project. Phase one of the project, titled “The



Arc” began in 2007 and involved the building, through private financing, of over four hundred seafront apartments, a hotel, and offices near the city’s entertainment venue, the Odyssey arena. Corresponding, however, with the beginning of a substantial global and local downturn in the economy, government-injected support was required to keep the project on track and thus the Public Record Office Northern Ireland and the Belfast Metropolitan College were both relocated to the area, with the state financing the leasing of the buildings from Harcourt Developments for the next thirty years (Figure 3). The second phase of the development received outline planning permission in 2007 and final permission in 2009, for a proposal that included the building of more apartments, shops, restaurants, and offices. Moreover, to mark the then-upcoming centenary, Titanic Belfast (or the Titanic Signature Project as it was called then) formed the epicenter of the plan.<sup>29</sup>



**Figure 3.** Public Record Office of Northern Ireland located in the Titanic Quarter.

Wherever the explanation lies for the collective erasure of the *Titanic's* history in the city of its birth, the rejuvenation of the memory of the ship's homeport has become part of the wider post-conflict "peace" dividend. For some "the simplistic narrative of the 'Titanic story' being promulgated by development interests rides roughshod over the more sensitive and profound cultural imagination which *Titanic* should evoke in the city of its birth."<sup>30</sup> This, it is claimed, accentuates the myth of the *Titanic* by de-coupling its history from debates about the safety provisions on the liner built by Harland and Wolff, ignoring the general hostility of the company's management and owners to the Irish independence movement, and overlooking the fact that the small number of Catholics employed in the shipyard periodically faced sectarianism in the workplace.<sup>31</sup> Examining the promotional literature of those responsible for developing the Titanic Quarter, Etchart concludes that the language of "neutrality" which pervades this policy "can stir the feeling of alienation and marginalization among the local communities."<sup>32</sup> While others, who have observed the broader efforts at normalization projects within the city claim "the geopolitical fault lines of the city are drawn ever tighter today than they were when I was growing up in the upper north side of the city in the 1950s."<sup>33</sup> Moreover, the creation of a brand new building on Queen's Island has attracted criticism because one of the few remaining original structures associated with the building of the ship, the company's drawing offices, have lain derelict. As Neill observes, "Acting as spatial aides to more mature personal and collective reflection and memory work, the Drawing Offices [of Harland and Wolff] in their forlornness, decay and neglect on the eve of the centenary of the *Titanic* disaster still bore visible and authentic witness to past events."<sup>34</sup> While there are some plans to convert the offices into a themed five-star *Titanic* hotel which would involve radically altering the building's interior, it is certainly unfortunate that the planners, government, and private capital did not see the potential of restoring the Drawing Offices and opening them to the public as a museum space that would highlight the conditions under which the ship's design was conceived, planned and executed. However, let's now turn to examine how the new *Titanic* Belfast tells the story of the city's infamous ship.

### **Not dark tourism: *Titanic* Belfast**

*Titanic* Belfast, it is claimed, is designed as a visitor experience rather than as a museum per se, and while the two are certainly not mutually exclusive kinds of space, a focus on experience and the manner in which the space is organized encourages the viewer to take a chronological "journey" through the exhibit where a linear narrative of events is portrayed and communicated.<sup>35</sup> While the building encompasses a total area of 10,000 m<sup>2</sup>, the exhibition galleries themselves cover around 2,500 m<sup>2</sup>, about a quarter of space available, while retail, catering, temporary exhibition, conference space, corporate entertaining, and education/community spaces use the remaining square footage (Figure 4). The exhibition is spread across nine galleries and over three floors, and it spans more than one hundred years, although the main focus of the display centers on the period from the 1890s to the 1910s. Rather than using material artifacts from this period of Belfast's industrial history, this experience-centered museum conveys its story mainly through photographs, film footage, narration, text, reconstructions, music, and the very occasional original artifact. Some authors claim that this approach to museum practice replicates "the current turn away from ideas that particularize objects as the primary element to convey information towards more experience-orientated thinking... The contemporary museum, with its focus on the primacy of performance, sometimes finds itself in danger of adopting manipulative strategies."<sup>36</sup> However, all museums involve processes of selection and interpretation, even those more overtly centered on the display of "authentic" objects and artifacts. Unlike some of the tours provided by black cab operators in the city that bring visitors along the zones of separation and the "peace walls" that separate Catholics and Protestants in certain neighborhoods in the city, the museum is not



attempting to project a “dark tourism” experience.<sup>37</sup> In that sense the museum stands apart from the political tensions that gripped the city during the “Troubles” and continue to reverberate in the post-conflict environment.

The first gallery of the museum, “Boomtown Belfast,” charts the industrial base underpinning the city’s economic success from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. Using projected images including maps and photographs; soundscapes including oral testimony; a few original artifacts; and lots of text, the viewer is introduced to the social and industrial context of the shipbuilding city. Its major industries and their factories--the linen mills, the Sirocco factory, rope making--are presented in an atmosphere that attempts to convey something of the bustle of the busy, industrial city. From the scale of the city, one then moves metaphorically into the Harland and Wolff shipyard itself, some of the original gates to the premises are used, [Figure 5] and into its drawing office, where some of the key players in the shipyard’s staff are introduced. These include Thomas Andrews, the *Titanic*’s designer; Lord Pirrie, the Company Chairman; John Arthurs, a Harland and Wolff cabinet maker; Bruce Ismay, the White Star Line Chairman; and Mary Sloan as one of White Star Line’s stewardesses on board the *Titanic*. Early drawings of the ship are presented. Overall, some flavor of the social composition of industrial Belfast is conveyed, including the numbers of women employed in the linen factories and samples of wage scales of workers employed in industrial labor in general. This section of the museum connects most directly with the history of the industrialization of Belfast highlighted earlier. A time series

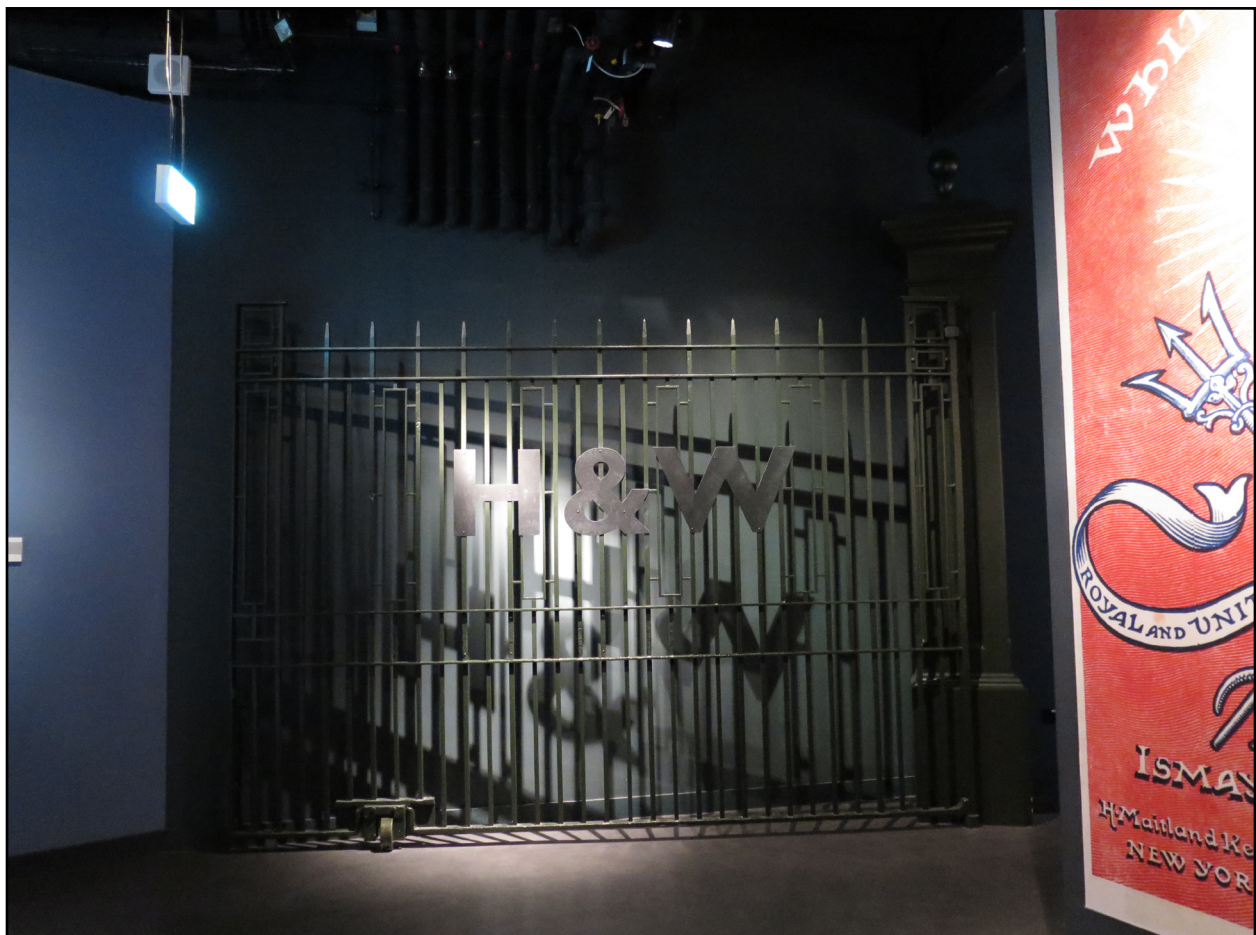


**Figure 4.** Entrance to Titanic Belfast.



of Belfast maps illustrates the city's geographical expansion as its economic base deepens. Moreover, a map of the British Empire with a voice-over commenting on its extent and global influence gestures towards the wider context in which Belfast operated at the height of Britain's overseas empire. Although this links to some of the reasons why shipbuilding and ancillary industries were so successful in Belfast in the second half of the nineteenth century, what is not addressed is the complexity of the city's and Ireland's relationship with that empire.<sup>38</sup> Acknowledging that not all the city's citizens were supporters of the empire or that some saw themselves as existing in a colonial relationship with Britain would have added nuance to the presentation. Thus, while this opening gallery does communicate a sense of a bustling and energetic industrial city and echoes some merits of industrial and popular museums, it does little to translate much about the religious divisions within the city more broadly or within the shipbuilding industry in particular.<sup>39</sup> To that extent, the narrative is generally de-politicized.

The second gallery, "The Shipyard," is focused more directly on the literal nuts and bolts entailed in building a major liner in the second decade of the twentieth century. A scaffolding to replicate a third of the height of the Arrol Gantry, built specifically to aid the construction of the *Olympic* and the *Titanic*, gives something of the scale of the operation. The visitor can then take a "ride" through a re-creation of the ship's hull to try to envisage and imagine the work involved in building the ship. The labor-intensive and grueling nature of the working conditions is conveyed through an explanation and display of the process of riveting. Moreover, this part of the tour is



**Figure 5.** Entrance gates to Harland and Wolff shipyard.

also a soundscape, reproducing the endless clanging of hundreds of hammers constantly hitting iron and the negative effect this had on the workers' hearing. This section of the gallery attempts to immerse the visitor into the intimate environment of building a major ship and the day-to-day working conditions of the labor force involved.

The third gallery, "The Launch," portrays the spring day in May 1911 when the *Titanic* was launched into Belfast Lough, a scene witnessed by one hundred thousand spectators. This part of the museum brings the exterior landscape of Belfast's docklands into the gallery, as a large picture window enables the visitor to view Slipway No. 3 directly from where the ship was released. It also offers a panorama of the current docks and slipways as ships move up and down the channel. Although the city no longer builds any ships, the view does convey the continuing role of the port in the larger Belfast economy and allows the viewer to witness the redevelopment taking place here in the twenty-first century.<sup>40</sup>

The fourth gallery, "The Fit-Out," documents the interior fitting out of the ship. The processes involved in making the ship suitable for voyage are highlighted from the heavy engineering of boiler room and engine fitting, to the trades involved in the interior design of the ship's private and public rooms. This section of the museum, again, connects shipbuilding in Belfast to the other industries in the city and in so doing broadens the narrative from the specifics of the *Titanic* to the wider economic context. From the cabinet makers designing the furniture to the textile workers and seamstresses providing the linen for the ship, the viewer is aided in



**Figure 6.** Titanic Launch – Slipway No. 3.



appreciating that there were many hands involved in the making of the *Titanic* and its economic significance seeped into many different sectors of the city's economy. Over three thousand tradesmen and women were employed in the fit-out process that was completed in under a year. This gallery also contains one-to-one reconstructions of First-, Second- and Third-class cabins, which allow the viewer to observe how the different social classes were accommodated. The display offers both an insight into the quality of the fittings in each class but also the surprising "luxury" of the cabins even for Third Class passengers. There is also a scaled model of the ship as well as a 3-D display that allows a virtual tour from the ship's boiler room to the Captain's bridge. This section of the tour is more intimate in scale, although lots of the photographs used to illustrate the interior decoration are drawn from other White Star liners, rather than the *Titanic* itself. This part of the tour is also more feminine in focus, emphasizing the luxury travel that the White Star Line sought to provide, and how this was translated through its interior design. What this section fails to pay attention to were the safety features deployed in the ship's layout and provisioning. And this type of omission contributes to some of the mythology surrounding the ship's preparedness for any potential accidents.<sup>41</sup>

Gallery five, "The Maiden Voyage," creates a celebratory atmosphere as the ship leaves Belfast and staff/passengers board in Southampton. If the previous gallery focused on the huge task of fitting out the ship to the standards demanded by the White Star Line, this gallery outlines how the ship was provisioned and the quantities of food and beverages taken on board, for instance forty thousand eggs and eight thousand cigars. The class contrasts between different types of passengers are highlighted and one can glean a sense of how the social hierarchies of the ship operated at the micro-scale. Food and supplies provisioning become representations for the class divisions on the ship and serve a symbolic role for the visitor. The photographic images taken by the Irish Jesuit priest, Fr. Frank Browne, who boarded at Southampton and disembarked at Cobh (Queenstown), provide a rich visual record of everyday life on the ship, and the archive of these images has supplied source material for many books and other interpretations of the *Titanic's* story.<sup>42</sup> This section of the museum is upbeat in tone and provides no hint of the impending doom.

"The Sinking," the theme of gallery six, is evoked through a staging of affect that challenges senses other than the visual. A change in light conditions and a lowering of temperature in the gallery, accompanied by a soundscape, presages the ship's sinking. If Gibson's observation that tourism researchers "are now analyzing the other senses and how encounters are experienced in an affective, embodied fashion," is true, it's also the case that museum designers are trying to engage the visitor at a multisensory level.<sup>43</sup> The ship's log lists are reproduced, including weather forecasts, ice warnings, and the Morse SOS messages sent to other ships as the *Titanic* began to falter. There are also audio clips of survivors' oral history of their experience and images of the press reports that surfaced in the immediate aftermath of the tragedy. This montage demonstrates how news was transmitted and the divergent nature of the representation of the ship's sinking in the media's haste to get their reports out into the public sphere. The ship's final sinking is depicted through the use of four hundred life jackets projected onto an image of the ship.

Gallery seven is devoted to "The Aftermath." Two key themes anchor the story in this gallery. Firstly, the two public inquiries into the disaster (one in the US and the other in UK) are portrayed through text panels, voiceovers, and visual evidence, demonstrating the immediate controversy surrounding interpretation of what happened and why the ship sank. Straddled between the representation of the inquiries is a full-size replica of one of *Titanic's* life boats, perhaps suggesting to the reader that the absence of a sufficient number of lifeboats on the ship lay at the heart of the casualty lists produced by the accident. Secondly, there is an online database provided where the visitor can investigate the statistics related to the disaster by searching the passenger list. This is calibrated by gender, age, nationality, port of embarkation, occupation,



and class of travel. This database provides the visitor with a wealth of interesting information about the profile of the passengers and the survival rates of different groups. It is interactive and enables the visitor to make decisions about the type of information they seek to retrieve.

The penultimate gallery, "Myths and Legends," charts how the *Titanic's* demise has entered the public's imagination through fiction, film, poetry, and drama, and allows the public to explore how some myths about the ship have been portrayed and cultivated. The final section of the museum is devoted to the Titanic Beneath, which opens with an introduction to Professor Robert Ballard, the oceanographer and explorer who discovered the ship's wreck in 1985. In a projection theatre with screens 12 m by 9 m, visitors can observe the sunken ship based on the thousands of photographs taken by Ballard and his team during their investigation. The final two galleries are more centered on the ship's afterlife and its role in contemporary academic and fictional studies, and are consequently more removed from the city in which the ship was built.

### **Post-conflict and post-colonial legacies**

The development of the Titanic Quarter in Belfast replicates many of the dockside regeneration projects practiced in port cities across the globe. To that extent, it mirrors some of the same design principles and evocations of a maritime past that literally anchor such waterfront renaissance projects. Historical geographers, sociologists, and planning experts have highlighted some of the shortcomings of such urban projects, particularly in relation to their effect on dockside communities and the history they seek to project. A number of characteristics differentiate Belfast from some of these other quayside developments, however. First, the redevelopment of Belfast's port area hinges on a historical reimagining of a maritime disaster that quickly entered the public's imagination and popular mythology as the most significant ship's sinking in history. Tying the city's shipbuilding past and economic future so closely with what many would consider a failed venture is both ironic and brave. Second, the erasure of the memory of the *Titanic* from the public sphere in Belfast until at least the 1980s reinforces the extent to which this episode in the city's history is so closely tied to the political consequences of nineteenth-century conflict about Home Rule, partition in 1921, and the subsequent Troubles in Northern Ireland. For Protestants and Catholics in the city, the sinking of the *Titanic* represented much more than an engineering failure or an unlucky collision with a North Atlantic iceberg, and thus, albeit for different reasons, memorializing the *Titanic* was neglected. Third, the development of consociational political arrangements under the terms of the Belfast Agreement provided the preconditions to conceive of using the *Titanic's* history as a cornerstone for promoting reconciliation through the regeneration of the docklands. And this is embodied in Titanic Belfast. While the museum shares many of the features of contemporary approaches to museum design, two aspects of the story relayed are worth noting, even in a post-conflict context. At the macro-level although the museum effectively focuses on the wider industrial context of the city from which Harland and Wolff would emerge, the political and cultural framework are too hidden beneath the surface. The links between the industrialization of Belfast, its own colonial history, and its deep connections with Britain's empire could have been highlighted in ways which would have enriched the story and added to its complexity. To ignore the fact that nineteenth-century Belfast was a heavily segregated city, where nationalist and unionist voices came into verbal and at times physical conflict, and where differences over the "national question" often supplanted other points of unity, especially among the city's working class, is an opportunity missed. Like many other post-conflict societies, there is a fine balancing act to be performed between remembering and forgetting in an effort to circumvent any widespread return to violence.<sup>44</sup> In Sierra Leone, for instance, the erasure of Indigenous histories from heritage preservation policies may undermine the fragile peace, while Winter warns in the context of Cambodia that "heritage and tourism risk

Cambodia once again trapping itself in a mono-cultural, mono-ethnic, nationalism.”<sup>45</sup> The story of the *Titanic*, therefore, could have been more critically tackled precisely because it has the potential to embody some of the deep-seated differences of view and experience that have undergirded the conflict, yet not directly resurrect memories of violence between unionist and nationalist. In that sense the museum might have taken the “long view” and treated Belfast’s industrial past as part of a wider debate about its status as kingdom or colony. And at the micro-level of particular industries (especially shipbuilding, and Harland and Wolff in particular) the religious composition of the workforce, sectarianism within the workplace, and political activism among the employees, as well as employers, could have been more explicitly embraced in the narrative that the museum projected. Acknowledging some of the divisive practices at the shipyards and the ideologies underpinning them by those working and living in the docklands at the time of the *Titanic*’s construction could have opened up the conversation and contributed to the dialogue about how the past is dealt within a post-conflict society. The wounds of the Troubles have not been obliterated from the Belfast landscape since the signing of the Belfast Agreement, and the story of the *Titanic* could have been mobilized more explicitly as a vehicle through which highly contested versions of the past could be addressed by the people living and working in the ship’s birthplace.

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