The Steady Decline of Club Culture in Dublin: Neoliberal Policy, Touristification and the Pandemic.

Feature Article

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Abstract

The public health restrictions implemented by the Irish government due to Covid-19 resulted in one of the most extensive music industry lockdowns in Europe. Dublin, however, was already experiencing a large scale contraction of club culture. Prior to the pandemic, the physical spaces that dance music and club culture thrived in over the past 40 years had greatly diminished, many being demolished to make way for hotels and upmarket student accommodation. The onset of the pandemic meant this contraction intensified, and 2021 and 2022 saw the permanent closure of a number of high-profile and pivotal venues across the city. In discussing the effects of touristification and the pandemic on dedicated dancing spaces in Dublin, I contend that the underlying neoliberal government policies and outdated restrictive licensing laws have profoundly and detrimentally shaped the current clubbing landscape. The article explores the efforts of activist groups and grassroots campaigns, illustrating how the community has sought to reclaim space and mitigate the looming threat of decline. It specifically highlights campaigns for legislative reform and efforts to persuade policymakers that Dublin needs "No more Hotels" and "clubbing is culture". The concluding section of the article assesses the outlook for Dublin's clubbing community and proposes avenues for future research.

Keywords: clubbing, gentrification, touristification, night-time economy, Dublin

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Ireland went into its first Covid-19 lockdown on 12 March 12 2020. At 120 days, this lockdown was the longest in Europe; however, for the music industry, the lockdown was even more restrictive. Many venues and nightclubs closed their doors entirely until 22 October 2021—a total of 589 days. Some venues were able to remain open during that time, but they faced severe restrictions to trade and were prohibited from having live music, including DJs. All nightclubs and venues were permitted to open in November 2021, but the easing of restrictions lasted for just three weeks before they had their opening hours reduced and were shut down again entirely on 7 December. It would be 22 January 22 2022, before there was a full reopening of the sector.

While assessing the impact that Covid-19 has had on Ireland's dance music culture, this article argues that neoliberal government policy, planning decisions and the changing realities of living in Dublin city in the preceding 20 years had resulted in a scene that was already in a perilous state of contraction. Prior to the pandemic, the physical spaces that club culture had thrived in for the previous four decades had greatly diminished, and a seven-night-a-week club culture in the city is now reminisced about by older clubbers as something that existed in the halcyon days of the late 1990s. This paper conducts historical and policy analysis to elucidate the factors contributing to this decline. Nightclubs, often situated in prime city centre locations coveted by developers and property speculators, have been demolished to accommodate hotels and upscale student housing. Meanwhile, Ireland's antiquated and stringent licensing laws—which mandate some of the earliest club closing times in the EU—coupled with exorbitant insurance costs, render many clubs economically unviable. The paper contends that this contraction has intensified post-pandemic, detailing the impact of policy decisions and evaluating the short-term outlook for Irish dance music culture.

The Particular Circumstances of Clubbing in Dublin

The decade from the early 1990s to the early 2000s could be described as the high point of late night and club culture in Dublin.[1] The Kitchen, a nightclub operating in the basement of the Clarence Hotel, a landmark building famously owned by members of U2, opened in 1994 on Essex St. on the edge of the Temple Bar district. It was one of the first legitimate alcohol licensed venues for dance music in Dublin. Once designated as the site for the central Dublin bus station, Temple Bar had become a de facto cultural quarter by the end of the 1980s because the national transport agency, CIÉ, rented out its properties to artists and musicians while it awaited government funding. A change in government resulted in a change of policy, and in 1991 The Temple Bar Area Renewal and Development Act was enacted, along with special tax reliefs designed to encourage investors to finance the refurbishment program.[2] The Kitchen and the Temple Bar "Cultural Quarter" quickly became a focal point of dance music culture in the city, showcasing international acts and opportunities to young emerging DJ talent. In 1995 the Temple Bar Music Centre, a 650-capacity venue with rehearsal space and digital recording studios, opened on Curved St. The club scene in Dublin mushroomed; soon after, on any given Saturday night in the

mid to late 1990s, a discerning clubber could choose between club nights with top DJs in several locations across Temple Bar including The Funnel, The Furnace and Club So. A short trip across the River Liffey on the north side of the city, there was a cluster of more underground but equally popular clubs including the Temple of Sound, The Asylum and the Ormond Multimedia Centre.[3] While many of the new clubs had a musical linage and had previous incarnations as dance halls or rock music venues such as the Mean Fiddler, Olympic Ballroom or the Tivoli theatre, others such as the POD and the Temple Theatre were purpose built and dedicated to dance music. Meanwhile, catering to more mainstream tastes or less committed club-goers, over 60 nightclubs and venues across both the city centre and Dublin's suburbs offered late-night dancing to mainstream pop or alternative music, often incorporating elements of contemporary dance music.

Legislating Dancing

A behaviour and attitudes survey conducted by *The Irish Times* in 1991 found that close to one in four—23 per cent—of Irish adults went to nightclubs weekly (Pope 2022). In 2021, a similar survey found that figure was 6 per cent (Mullaly 2022). Give Us The Night, the national campaigning body for night life in Ireland, reports that there has been an 84% decline in public spaces for dancing since the year 2000 (2022b: Foreword). A report commissioned by the Irish Nightclub Industry Association in 2009 counted a total of 522 dance venues across Ireland in 2000, with 100 in Dublin alone (Gurdgiev 2009: 8). This compares to just 70 across the entire country in 2024 (Burns 2024).

While the Covid-19 pandemic may have precipitated this decline, to understand fully the context within which clubbing operates in Ireland it is necessary to go back almost 200 years. Ireland's night clubs and late-night venues are governed by two licencing laws: the Intoxicating Liquor Act 1927, amended in 2003 and 2008 (with the latter amending legislation dating back to 1833), and the Public Dance Halls Act 1935. These acts are pivotal to dancing and late-night events in the city. The Intoxicating Liquor Act introduced and regulates Special Exemptions Orders (SEOs); these allow the owner or operator of a licenced premises to apply to their local District Court for an exemption from prohibited hours. That is, they can serve alcohol until a later hour, whereby they are deemed to be holding a special occasion. This special occasion is typically a "dance in a premises, which is licensed for public dancing under the Public Dance Halls Act 1935" (Gurdgiev 2009: 7). A separate SEO from the District Court is required for every night a venue wants to stay open past 12:30am. The almost 90-year-old Public Dance Halls Act was enacted under the heavy influence of the Anti-Jazz movement driven by Catholic clergy and the Gaelic League on the grounds that it was both morally indecent and culturally corrupting (see O'Connor 2005). Its primary motivation was to curb the rise of the emerging jazz movement in the local dance halls and clubs that had opened across the country after Irish independence. The Act states that:

> Subject to the provisions of this Act, any person may apply to the Justice of the District Court exercising jurisdiction in any licensing area for a licence (in this Act referred to as a public dancing licence) to use a particular place, whether licensed or not licensed for the sale of intoxicating liquor, situate in such licensing area for public dancing, and such Justice may, if he so thinks proper, grant such licence to such person. (Irish Statute Book 1935)

The 2008 amendment to the Intoxicating Liquor Act has arguably had the most serious detrimental impact on clubbing in Ireland since its enactment. It almost doubled the fee for special exemption orders from €220 to €410 (comprising a €300 court fee and additional excise duty of €110) for each order. The resulting increased cost of staying open until 2:30am for 6 nights per week became prohibitive for the majority of club owners and venue promoters. The change in law also limited nightclubs to staying open until 1:00am on Sundays, even with an individual extension, leading many clubs to cease operations on Sundays altogether. Additionally, it restricted alcohol sales in premises with theatre licenses to normal licensing hours or during extended hours under a special exemption order. This closed what the government deemed a loophole that had allowed theatres like the Gaiety, Tivoli and Olympia to transform into nightclubs, staying open until 4:00am 2 to 3 nights a week throughout the late '90s and 2000s.

The change in legislation could hardly have come at a more inopportune time, coinciding with the 2008 banking crisis that resulted in a global economic recession and consequently less discretionary income for club goers. Increased costs and restricted opening hours have directly contributed to the decline of a thriving and sustainable club culture in Ireland and especially in Dublin. This is further evidenced by the drastic reduction in the granting of SEOs by District Courts, from 93,247 in 2005 to 34,806 in 2019.[4]

Changing Face of Dublin

After the global financial crisis there has been an increased focus on tourism as a driver of socioeconomic development.[5] Now Ireland and Dublin are frequently marketed as the tech capital of Europe.[6] The Irish government, its agencies and semi-state bodies have adopted the Richard Florida (2002) doctrine of the Creative Class, marketing Ireland's and in particular Dublin's possession of the "three Ts" —technology, talent and tolerance—to cement Dublin's reputation as the cosmopolitan and progressive tech capital of Europe. In fact, Florida himself has used Dublin as a case study in his work to illustrate his creative class theory (2002: 300-2). In an address to the Dublin Regional Authority and the Dublin Employment Pact in 2007, Florida predicted that Dublin was well placed to capitalise on the "creative age" and become a "truly creative sustainable society" (McDonald 2007). Lawton, Murphy and Redmond note that Florida's influence was particularly significant from 2007 to 2010 and that a number of organisations in Dublin, including Dublin Chamber and the Dublin Regional Authority, adopted the Florida rhetoric to the point it became "dominant aspects of policy formation in Dublin" (Lawton, Murphy and Redmond

2014: 36). This policy has remained in place. In a 2018 speech to Moneyconf, a large scale fintech conference spinoff of the Web Summit which originated in Dublin, the then Irish Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Leo Varadkar stated:

> Ireland is in some ways emblematic of the revolutionary changes that have taken place in the world of finance and technology. From being an inward-looking, insular place at the edge of Europe, Ireland is an increasingly multicultural, and globalised country, a melting pot of nationalities which is proud to engage with the world. (Varadker 2018)

What many Irish politicians and policy makers, however, have either failed to acknowledge or tacitly chosen to ignore is that the theory of the "creative city" is based on young multicultural creatives having easy access to spaces and places to live, socialise and create. This includes spaces such as nightclubs. Writing about New York and London, Hae posits that "city governments have been increasingly aware of the significance of cultural amenities and leisure businesses in repositioning their cities as competitive in global/regional markets" (2011: 567). He goes on to argue that this has resulted in a correlating increase in the priority assigned to nightlife policy in Britain. However, in the case of Dublin, it can be argued that the focus on developing the creative city from 2009 to 2019 overlooked vital ingredients of what makes a city attractive to young professionals in the first place. I contend that it has only been since the global pandemic, when tourism came to a standstill and remote working became the norm, that local and national government has had to refocus on the liveability of the city.

Gentrification or Touristification as a Cause for the Diminishing Spaces of Dancing

Dublin is not the only city that has seen its clubbing culture eroded over the past 15 years. Issues of gentrification in clubbing hotspots such as London, Berlin and Amsterdam have become a prevalent theme when identifying the underlying causes for the demise of club scenes.[7] The process of gentrification can be viewed in general terms as broad socio-spatial change which centres on the transformation of working class and industrial neighbourhoods into middle class residential and new commercial spaces (Kelly 2014: 175). While gentrification of this nature is evident across Dublin, undoubtedly impacting the night-time economy, it does not however paint a full picture.

Some scholarship, including Rabiei-Dastjerdi, McArdle and Hynes' (2021) "Which Came First, the Gentrification or the Airbnb" and "Tourism Gentrification" by Cocola-Gant (2018), has argued that another form of gentrification is touristification. Sequera and Nofre (2018), however, identify substantial epistemological differences between touristification and gentrification, since the expansion of urban tourism in a central urban area is not always a pre-condition for gentrification. They argue that gentrification and touristification should be examined as two distinct but complementary (or even simultaneous) processes (Sequera and Nofre 2018: 847). In differentiating the "complex

phenomenon of urban touristification", they identified characteristics such as cross-class displacement, Disneyfication of retail, worsening of community liveability, risk investment funding ownership of property and housing dominated by temporary accommodation (Sequera and Nofre 2018: 850). Many of these characteristics can be clearly evidenced in Dublin particularly over the past decade. Jover and Díaz-Parra identify touristification as a process that encompasses displacement as well as other material and symbolic consequences stemming from mass tourism on a given territory (2020: 5). Meanwhile, Cocola-Gant contends the proliferation of gentrified landscapes creates tourist friendly spaces providing visitors with sanitised areas, consumption opportunities and a middle-class sense of taste (2018: 286). None of this is more evident than in the Liberties, a historically working-class area of Dublin which has become the almost unrecognisable "home of the black stuff", with the Guinness storehouse at its centre. Attracting over 1.5 million visitors a year, the Storehouse is the most popular tourist attraction in Ireland. On the neighbouring streets antique shops have been replaced by souvenir shops and butcher shops replaced by vegan friendly cafés. Clancy's (2020) detailed analysis found that Airbnb penetration here has been particularly significant. This aligns with Nofre's assertion that the touristification of the city is a significant driver of urban and neighbourhood change (2021: 2).

Ireland hosted more than 11 million tourists in 2018, a figure approximately twice Ireland's population.[8] (Irish Times 2020). Dublin is one of the main tourist destinations among European cities, and the principal arrival destination for the majority of tourists visiting the country. A 2019 report by ESTA noted that Dublin had one of the highest visitors to local ratios worldwide, with 427 tourists for every 100 locals.[9] Nofre maintains that "touristification of nightlife is emerging as one of the most aggressive forms of material, symbolic and heritage dispossession of local communities within the central historic neighbourhoods of many European cities" (2021: 1157). In Dublin, Airbnb has monopolised the short-term renting market with listings of almost 10,000 properties including entire houses, apartments and private and shared rooms. Its impact was acknowledged by government in 2019 when they implemented planning legislative reforms to regulate the short-term letting sector by updating the Residential Tenancies act. The amendment required anyone who was renting an entire property for more than 90 days in the year to apply for planning permission to Dublin City council for change of use. The long-term policy of providing social housing via private rather than publicly owned property has also had an impact. From 2010 onwards, the lack of available social housing required Dublin City Council to purchase Bed and Breakfasts and rooms in hotels for emergency homeless accommodation. The use of these resources has increased year on year; over 3,500 adults resided in such accommodations at the end of 2021, compared to 800 in mid-2014 (Baptista et al. 2022: 24).

The ongoing severe housing crisis has resulted in a major brain drain of young professionals and students from the city and an increasing lack of creative talent to drive the music scene forward.[10] In their study of Berlin, Sachse and Raiselis (2020) note that club culture can occupy a complicated position as both accelerator and victim of neighbourhood

gentrification, and as both a commodity and a casualty of creative-city marketing strategies. This is certainly the case in Dublin, and the following section outlines how many pivotal nightclubs and late-night venues in the city have been particularly impacted by the demand for hotel accommodation.

High Profile Club Closures to Make Way for Hotels

As outlined above, 2008 was a turning point for club culture in Dublin. Although the Temple Theatre, the Olympic Ballroom and the Kitchen had already closed prior to the financial crisis, many others shut in the decade preceding the Covid-19 pandemic. While some nightclubs, such as the Hub on Eustace Street—closed in 2018—and Sides on Dame Lane—a nightclub under many guises from the late 1980s until it closed in 2019—are still physically in place behind hoardings soon to emerge as hotels, others have already been demolished to make way for urban redevelopment. Andrews Lane Theatre, which opened in 1989 and closed in 2016, was demolished and redeveloped as the Wren Urban Nest Hotel. The Tivoli Theatre, which had been a nightclub in various incarnations for over half a century from 1964 to 2019, suffered a similar fate and is now a Staycity Aparthotel.

The groundbreaking POD/Redbox/Crawdaddy complex in the old Harcourt St. train station was arguably the most important dance venue in Ireland in the late '90s and early 2000s. Opened firstly with the POD in 1993, it was then extended to the Redbox in 1996. When Crawdaddy, the final part of the expansion was opened in 2004, the entire complex had a capacity of almost 2300. It was shut down in 2013 and sold in 2016. The new owners were granted planning permission to become a "Covent Garden-style district" in Dublin City Centre called "Opera Quarter" *(Woods 2018). The site is* now home to a deli, offices and a Pret a Manger. Rumours—a nightclub attached to the Gresham Hotel on O'Connell St., Dublin's principal thoroughfare—was repurposed into hotel bedrooms during a major refurbishment of the hotel in 2014. Fireworks, a nightclub on Pearse St., suffered the same fate around 2010 when the Trinity City Hotel extended into the old nightclub premises. All of these closures point to evidence of the suburbanisation of the city centre, replacing characterful venues and late-night haunts—sometimes fairly or otherwise associated with anti-social behaviour—with hotels, apartments and up-market cafés and restaurants.

Covid-19: The Final Death Knell for Club Culture?

The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent lengthy lockdown had a significant impact on the remaining nightclubs and venues, and 2020-21 saw further permanent closures of long-standing, high-profile nightclubs. The issue also began to gain public attention. It was announced in November 2020 that RíRá, a nightclub on Dame court which had been open since the early 1990s, would remain permanently shut. Its owners had been granted planning permission for a major expansion of the Central Hotel on South Great George's St. and Dame Court into a new 6,554 sq. m, 5-storey hotel, with 125 bedrooms and a rooftop extension. In objecting to the planning application, Cllr. Daragh Moriarty (Labour

Party) observed that Dublin's "cultural fabric is being eroded one new hotel at a time", and that it was vitally important that the City Council take action to stop and reverse it (2020). In a separate observation, Cllr. Claire Byrne (Green Party) observed that "we have already witnessed an excessive erosion of our club culture in the city in particular over the past few years, mostly to make way for hotels and student accommodation" (2020). Cllr Byrne stated, "we are running out of places to dance" (Byrne 2020).

Jam Park, a 2,800-capacity nightclub in the Dublin suburb of Swords that had previously traded as the Wright Venue, closed its doors permanently in 2021 and is now the European headquarters for Riot Games. They did, however, keep the 3m diameter disco ball which spins over the workers as they livestream games all over the globe, in a grim reminder of the venue's former glory. Commercial venues and nightclubs are not the only spaces that have diminished over the past five years. Community spaces, recording studios and rehearsal spaces which would have housed ad hoc dance events have all suffered from the impact of the shortage of prime real estate. Jigsaw, the community space in Dublin 1 which opened as Seomra Spraoi (Irish for "playroom") in 2004 and had been a thriving hub for a diverse range of dance music cultures over its lengthy existence—including Dublin Digital Radio (DDR) and other collectives—closed in April 2021.

Cultural Activism: Time to Stand Up Fight Back

Previous research conducted before the pandemic identified a downward spiral in music scenes and club culture in Dublin.[11] Some of this was attributed to the decrease in physical spaces for dancing, but also to the emergence of a "networked sociality" that was changing not only the experiences of clubbers in Dublin but also diminishing the need for a regular physical copresence amongst music fans across the city (Wittel 2001: 52). From as early as 2010 it was identified that for many young music fans in the city the emphasis was on connection, not location. Wellman argues for the emergence of networked individualism, wherein social relations are in the process of moving from being completely place-centred, to being completely person-centred and a-spatial (2002: 14).

During the pandemic, however, the experience of being locked down at home or even in their childhood bedrooms began to change the outlook for many. The need for an active physical space for congregating and dancing became a cause that young people mobilised and fought for. This triggered a succession of grassroots "cultural activism" which advocated for an authentic nighttime culture that wasn't just a pastiche put-on for visiting tourists.[12]

Publications such as the Dublin Inquirer, Four Four mag and DJ magazine had already started to shine a light on the issues, encouraging readers to rally and engage with politicians and policy makers around legislative change.[13] Club promoter and entrepreneur Andrea Horan described Dublin as a city that was "losing its late night soul", where too "many cultural hubs in Dublin have been bulldozed to make way for just-for-profit hotels" (Horan 2019). This situation spurred her to create a club night called "No More Hotels" beginning

in June 2019, which ran every couple of months in Wigwam on Middle Abbey Street until February 2020. In collaboration with Thinkhouse and Algorithm—a PR consultancy focussed on youth culture and a creative production studio respectively—No More Hotels produced a documentary and large-scale art project entitled "Clubbing is Culture", which ran on Culture Night (a national celebration of culture) on 28 September 2020.[14] The project projection mapped slogans such as "Where will we dance now" and "Save our Clubs", along with quotes from Dublin clubbers lamenting the demise of the scene, onto the sites of previous clubs around the city. Visually striking, presented on a night that the city was bustling with people who were visiting late night galleries and cultural events and constructed by a public relations company to reach audiences further afield, the project gained traction on social media and in the mainstream media. The documentary featured prominent Dubliners including the sitting Lord Mayor of Dublin and Green Party Councillor Hazel Chu, both of whom championed the concept of Clubbing as Culture. A public statement of support from Dublin's first citizen was seen by many activists as a breakthrough, and one could argue that the Green Party, which has been a minority partner in the ruling coalition of national government since June 2020, began to assert their limited influence in night-time economy policy around this time. Proposed changes in government policy can be attributed to the vision of Catherine Martin TD, who was appointed as Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media in the new government cabinet.

The period of the pandemic also saw the revival of "Give Us The Night", the volunteer group of professionals who work within the nighttime industry. The group had been active around the period of the change in the Intoxicating Liquor Act in 2008, particularly highlighting the change to costs of SEOs, and had made many interventions in the following decade. Over the lockdown they became extremely active, lobbying government to reopen the night-time economy in a safe and sustainable manner. They have become a respected advocacy group, and they have made formal presentations to the national parliament on issues regarding the sector, particularly around licencing laws and music venues. The founders of Dublin Digital Radio (DDR), whose broadcasts by their own admission became a "space of commune and solidarity during crisis", have become critical advocates for DJ culture and electronic music in Dublin (Byrne 2021). In the absence of clubs, the station and its network have become a critical infrastructure and base for DJs in the city. After the permanent closure of Jigsaw, the community venue where they based their radio station and hosted many of their fundraising parties, they spoke openly about the "neoliberal hellscape that is Dublin".[15] Over 2021 and 2022 they worked with the Community Action Tenants Union (CATU) to host a number of novel events to shine a light on gentrification across the city. This included a community-based marathon football match and sound system in Michael Mallin Park in September 2022 that was also broadcast live on DDR to protest the fact that the park was facing demolition to be replaced by an eight-storey hotel (Heyraud 2022).

Dublin is Dying? It's Not Dead Yet.

While unrest and agitating for change was gaining momentum over the period of the Covid-19 lockdown, the real turning point in public consciousness came with the announcement on 1 October 2021 that the Cobblestone would close. A pub in Smithfield on the north side of the city with a famous reputation for supporting the traditional Irish music scene, the Cobblestone was to face a similar fate to so many nightclubs. Smithfield was historically the market area of Dublin with famous wholesale fruit, vegetable, flower and fish markets. A working-class area in the north inner city, it was earmarked for regeneration in the early 1990s by Dublin city council and by the late '90s it was completely transformed. Two storey cottages were demolished and replaced by 6- or 7-storey apartment and office blocks and an art house cinema. Businesses that served the local community and the market traders shut down and were replaced by up-market restaurants and café bars. Smithfield Square, where the Cobblestone is located, is home to the famous the Smithfield Horse Fair which used to be held on the first Sunday of every month. But due to antisocial behaviour and a number of complaints from the new neighbours in the square, it can now only be held twice a year (McCárthaigh 2013). When researching "The Sound Wars", O'Keeffe found Smithfield Square had become a non-place of sound, with no site-specific sounds other than the general sounds of an urban space, traffic and construction (2017:13). It means that there are no sounds defined as belonging.

In 2021 Marron Estates Ltd. sought to continue the trend for regeneration and displacement when they applied to Dublin City Council for planning permission to construct a 9-storey hotel which would demolish a large portion of the live music venue to the rear of the pub, leaving only the front bar of the pub remaining.[16] The plan also proposed to demolish two adjoining buildings which, like the Cobblestone, were sites of architectural, historic and social interest. This news came when pubs were still in partial lockdown and nightclubs and music venues were still completely closed. Soon after, a campaign was started entitled "Dublin is Dying", which rallied protests and céilís (traditional Irish dance events) against the planning application and also mobilised people into submitting planning objections. Over 34,000 people signed the petition to save the pub, and a further 700 people submitted individual objections to the planning.[17] On 29 November 29 2021, Dublin City council refused the planning application. Marron Estates appealed the decision to An Bord Pleanála on 22 December 22 2021, but withdrew the appeal in May after sustained pressure from government and opposition politicians, the Save the Cobblestone group and the Dublin is Dying group. This victory reinvigorated the music community across all genres of music. They recognised that the demolition of their favourite venues to make way for another hotel did not have to be a *fait accompli*, and that there was a point in putting up a fight.

Give Us The Night's (2022) budget submission in made a number of proposals to strengthen and grow the night-time economy in 2023. They focused on venue infrastructure, sound proofing grants, reducing VAT rates and licencing costs, night-time transport and a

first-time venue grant. Their influence was evident in some of the announcements that were made in the run up to the subsequent budget in relation to nightlife and music venues. However, as I will discuss in the next section, many of these announcements have failed to materialise. This is once again demoralising and frustrating for venue owners, promoters and clubbers, for while the advocacy groups have had minor successes as a result of their tireless campaigning, it remains to be seen whether they will affect any change on these substantive issues.

Changing Government Policy?

Caught in the midst of negotiating a government when Covid-19 struck, the incoming coalition government witnessed first-hand the impact the pandemic was having on the night-time economy, and it was included as a specific objective in the "Programme for Government" document published by the three coalition partners, Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil and the Green Party which outlined their vision for the lifetime of the government. The specific objectives on night-time culture were ambitious and far reaching, and all were set out to be achieved within the lifetime of the government. It committed to setting up a Night-Time Economy Task Force within the first 30 days of government, and one was established in July 2020 (Department of Taoiseach 2020: 89). For many within the sector, although faced with continued lockdowns, this, finally, was a noticeable and measurable change in government policy. The multi-disciplinary task force consisted of representatives from government departments including Justice; Environment, Climate and Communications; Enterprise, Trade and Employment; Housing, Local Government and Heritage; Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media and state bodies Fáilte Ireland, the Arts Council and An Garda Síochána and Give Us The Night. The taskforce published its report on 15 September 2021. The report acknowledged how the pandemic utterly changed the operating landscape for the Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media sectors—most of which sustained the night-time economy. It also recognised that these sectors were among the hardest hit by the pandemic; to all extents and purposes they had been closed or experiencing very low levels of activity. This resulted in the bulk of businesses and individuals in these sectors becoming wholly dependent on state supports for most of 2020 and 2021 (Night-Time Economy Taskforce 2021).

The report acknowledged that "many within the industry strongly believe that club culture must now be judged beyond its economic value, like other more established forms of culture". It went further:

> Club culture has traditionally welcomed and brought together various minority groups, and it is commonly recognised that the roots of this culture stem from within the LGBTQI+ community. Safe spaces to congregate, socialise and dance are vital, a sentiment that has been repeatedly expressed by this community and others. (Night-time Economy Taskforce 2021)

These were seismic admissions in terms of supporting advocacy groups' longstanding campaigns to reform Ireland's licencing laws and re-establish a coherent and distinctive club culture. The taskforce called for an immediate review of the SEO process and cost structure to make early and significant reductions in the fees. It recognised the additional costs and bureaucratic burden SEOs caused for sustaining businesses. Its stated strategic objective was that there should be a removal of the SEO process. When the night-time sector partially reopened in October 2021 fees associated with SEOs were waived, however venues still needed to apply for an exemption every night they opened late. The sector went through further lockdowns from October 2021 to January 2022, and the Minister for Justice extended the wavier until April 2022.[18]

On 25 November 2021, the Fine Gael Minister for Justice Helen McEntee announced there would be a review of existing liquor licencing legislation. She invited a public consultation on the "Review of Alcohol Licensing" which was open for two months until 21 January.[19] The consultation received over 5,000 responses from interested groups, organisations and individuals. On 25 October 2022, newspapers and news website all over Ireland ran the story that Irish nightclubs would now be able to stay open under new licencing laws.[20] The Minister for Justice had published the general scheme of the Sale of Alcohol Bill and was presenting it to cabinet on that day. The proposed legislation appeared to have cross party support, and using a normal legislature timetable would have been expected to be enacted by spring or summer in 2023. However, in July 2023 Taoiseach Leo Varadkar announced it would be well into 2024 before the bill would come before the Dáil, and it was unlikely that the bill would be enacted until the second half of the year. Perhaps this was evidence of the government's inconsistent commitment, as in April 2022 it removed the fee waiver for SEOs, reverting to the full cost of €410 per individual extension. More nightclubs announced their permanent closure as a result.

Those venue owners and promoters who are so far managing to remain open have publicly decried the reintroduction of the fees and the impact that they have on the sector, particularly in the context of trying to recover from the economic losses of the pandemic. In the absence of enacting legislation, the government had the opportunity to remove the fee for SEOs in the budget for 2024. It chose not to do so. In response, advocacy groups have mobilised a number of large-scale protests. Dance at the Dáil first became active in December 2021 when lockdowns were selectively eased and certain businesses were allowed to resume trading. It began its protest on 3 December 2021 with a call to action to make the government take responsibility for its hypocritical rules and guidelines, which had left the industry in a perilous state and had played no fair role in getting the industry back on track.[21] The group has regularly played music and protested outside of the Dáil since 2021. Since lockdown restrictions were lifted, it focused its activism on the removal of SEOs, and it has held regular dance protests since the budget was announced in October 2023.

In February 2023, the then Taoiseach Leo Varadkar publicly stated that he supported the proposed legislative reform and the night-time economy. In an address to the Dublin Chamber AGM he spoke of the opportunities that lay ahead for the city.

> Reforming our antiquated licensing laws is an opportunity to boost the experience and night-time economy, and give people and performers more autonomy about how, when and where they socialise. It will also help to build stronger, safer communities. (Varadkar 2023)

However, although it can be argued that there appears to be a genuine intention for reform amongst a small number of members of government, it appears the overall political ambition for the legislative change that would allow for a thriving and sustainable night-time club sector is absent. Willingness to face down other vested and parochial interests and the lobbying groups for licenced vintners means that significant changes are unlikely in the short to medium term.

Give Us The Night's response on X (formerly Twitter) to the budget announcement articulated the sentiment of the constituency it represented.

> Govt had many options to ease pressures on the night-time sector today and have done literally nothing. Needless to say, punitive SEO costs (which should be gone by now) remain intact. Can the Govt say with a straight face that it supports the night-time economy?[22]

Organising and Insuring Dancing

Those venues and promoters that are managing to stay open have been greatly impacted by the cost-of-living crisis, increased and prohibitive insurance costs and ironically the cost of hotel accommodation to host international DJs to play club nights. This is illustrated in an exchange on the website X between two Dublin promoters in September 2023.

> Checking hotel prices before you even check if an act is available to play in one of the remaining clubs that aren't yet a hotel 🙃[23]

> These days I'm like, I'll pay you €200 more if you will stay in my clean, nice, quiet spare room.[24]

> It's crazy, honest to god. Checking flights first used to be the dealbreaker.[25]

The difficulties in accommodating international DJs has resulted in many promotors looking towards Irish based talent to headline nights. International DJs would once have been the mainstay of every mid-sized club night line-up. This is increasingly no longer the case.

Temporary Pleasure is a group of architects and club creatives who describe themselves as "a rave architecture collective generating temporary spaces and moments in time" whose mission is to fight the disappearance of Irish club spaces.[26] They raised €25,781 to build a temporary club which opened in mid-August 2022 for 6 weeks. They hoped to repeat the venture with a more ambitious project in the summer of 2023, and secured a venue in the docklands part of the city which was due to open in July. Two weeks before opening on 23 June they announced on social media they would not be going ahead with the venture as

they could not secure adequate insurance despite having received public funding for their events (Byrne 2023).

The increasing cost of insurance has become untenable for many nightclubs and venue owners. Late-night venues who made it through the pandemic, and who have closed their doors in 2023—such as Dashi on North King St. and Tramline on D'Olier St.—have cited insurance costs as one of the final nails in the coffin for their businesses.

> The pandemic together with the costs now associated with running a business in Ireland in broad terms are the reason for this regrettable decision today. . . . The failure of successive governments to reform both licensing and the insurance industry price gouging practices has made a great business unviable in today's economy.[27]

The Licenced Vintners Association reported that the average insurance premium for late night bars and nightclubs was €92,117.10 (Healy 2023).

The Future of Dublin Clubbing

Nofre posits that the closure of "traditional", historical nightlife venues means not only the material and symbolic dispossession of local communities, but also the loss of the tangible and intangible cultural heritage of our cities (2023: 506).

One could argue the picture that has been painted in this article is one of a managed and deliberate decline of cultural heritage. But Irish DJs, activists, producers and promoters have proven over the past 30 years that they are both resourceful and creative. Despite challenges, they consistently find ways for cultural practices and new musical heritages to evolve and thrive. The grassroots Irish traditional music revival which has captured the imagination of the public, particularly amongst those under 30, has proven an inspiration to many in the club sector. While they appreciate the promise of government support, they are determined to move forward without it, driven by the desire to build a club culture that is uniquely and unapologetically Irish. Although campaigners have been disappointed at the rate of legislative change and have questioned the government's actual commitment to reform, incremental changes have continued to be implemented. In May 2024, Dublin City Council appointed a night-time economy advisor. While such posts have not been successful in every location, there are enough case studies where they have had a positive impact to be hopeful that this is a constructive intervention.[28] Since the pandemic, Dublin has seen a resurgence of grassroots initiatives to activate temporal spaces by music collectives such as Club Comfort, 1815FC and Ecliptic Newsstand. They have been successful in activating digital technologies such as Patreon to finance events, and they have run numerous successful ad hoc events. Another collective named Kirkos Ensemble has taken over an old hairdressing salon on Prussia St. in Stoneybatter as a venue and rehearsal space for contemporary music and performance art.

There has also been a move to more temporary spaces which host once-off events or short series. SILO is a new 3,500 capacity electronic music event space which opened from October 2023 to January 2024. The Arts Council has shown leadership in its administration

of government funding, and it has successfully piloted the use of alternative arts venues for one-off dance music events in several high-profile locations across the city. But this has not been without controversy. The National Concert Hall has hosted two iterations of the "Haunted Dancehall" in association with promoters Foggy Notions. It was reported in *The Irish Times* that the board of the National Concert Hall were concerned about the event being repeated after worrying feedback about the 2022 event due to the nature of the event; minutes of a board meeting recorded staff complaining about "abuse of NCH facilities" (Coyle 2023). The event did proceed in 2023 with a much earlier curfew than its previous iteration. And the inference about who and what type of music was welcome in one of our national institutions was not lost on much of the public.

The Complex, a community arts space in Smithfield which houses Dublin Digital Radio (DDR), has hosted several dance music events in the past two years including "Alternating Current", the 3-day electronic and electroacoustic music festival run by DDR. While these temporary spaces and one-off events are welcome in terms of bringing vibrancy back to the city in the post Covid-19 landscape, the ongoing challenge is best summed up by DJ and Give Us The Night campaigner Robbie Kitt in a 2022 interview with Una Mullally of *The Irish Times*.

> We need physical infrastructure, if we don't have spaces that allow us to create lineage, then whatever the expression of cultural heritage made right now will be too temporary to sustain itself into the future. I think there are chilling implications of that in terms of what that does to our cultural journey. How do we advance our cultural expression if we don't have continuity? (Mullally 2022)

Conclusion

Throughout this article I have identified a number of interrelated factors that have contributed to the ongoing demise of club culture in Dublin. The impact of touristification has been transformative, visibly altering the city's landscape and its night-time activities. Temple Bar, once the bohemian cultural quarter of the city populated by nightclubs, dive bars and illegal afterparties, is now dominated by faux traditional Irish pubs catering entirely to tourists. While there is no doubt that the pandemic and the extended lockdown had a precipitating effect on the permanent closure of some nightclubs, many of these venues were already on their knees. The subsequent cost of living crisis, resulting in unsustainable energy bills, and the ongoing prohibitive and disproportionate cost of insurance became the point of no return. Developers and investment funds who seek planning permission for large numbers of hotels rather than cultural, creative spaces or long-term accommodation make profit-driven decisions. Their aim is to acquire money from the tourist population and from the government for providing emergency accommodation. All these factors have been underpinned by a repeated neoliberal government policy agenda, combined with resistance to updating outdated legislation. The prioritization of economic and commercial interests over cultural vitality and community engagement has resulted in the insidious

undermining the viability of club culture in the city.

While this article has focused on historical and policy analysis, there is space for further research into the lived experiences of club-goers in the city. A spatiotemporal mapping of Dublin and its nightclubs and music venues, as has been conducted in cities such as Liverpool and Manchester, would also be useful to influence policy at both local and national levels. This work could strengthen the recent grassroots cultural activism and the work of national advocacy groups. Although there is some indication of a governmental desire for change, legislative reform to support club culture is unlikely before the next government election in early 2025, and even then it is not guaranteed. Ensuring the survival of club culture and genuine cultural recognition will require a sustained and ongoing effort (Assiter 2022: 5).

Notes

1 For further explorations of music and music scenes in Dublin in the 90s see McLaughlin (2004), O'Flynn (2009) and Nugent (2022).

2 See Powell (1991), O'Hare (2001) and Haughey Family (2020).

3 For a social history of the Dublin Club scene during the 1990s and early 2000s see Wynne-Jones (2022).

4 See <https://www.instagram.com/p/Ccnq3nysu1e/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link>, (accessed 17 October 2024).

5 See Namberger et al. (2019).

6 See for example McDermott (2023).

7 In "From Dancefloors to Tables", Assiter (2022) discusses the issue of gentrification in London. Gentrification in Berlin has been widely analysed, including by Picaud (2019), Feiereisen and Sassin (2021) and Kate Shaw, whose pioneering 2005 work also researched the impact of gentrification in Amsterdam.

8 See <https://www.tourismireland.com/docs/default-source/visitor-facts-and-figures/visitor-facts-and-figures-2018.pdf?sfvrsn=150bb1dd_1>, (accessed 17 October 2024).

9 See the interactive document at <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1vzaqDydGUZh8b1b56me_uuSXI-39Exo9VjbGVBDyZps>, (accessed 17 October 2024).

10 Egan's (2023) excellent analysis of the severe housing crisis in Dublin is important for further context.

11 See O'Sullivan (2020) on the demise of local music scenes in Dublin.

12 For a detailed discussion and definition of cultural activism see Verson (2007).

13 See Thomas (2016), Guest (2019) and Finnan (2021).

14 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pECGnXz6PBc>, (accessed 17 October 2024).

15 See <https://x.com/DublinDigiRadio/status/1386777283189526528>, (accessed 17 October 2024).

16 A full Planning application from Marron estates, and the Dublin City council decision and objections can all be found here: <https://planning.agileapplications.ie/dublincity/application-details/146422>, (accessed (17 October 2024).

17 See the petition here: <https://my.uplift.ie/petitions/save-the-cobblestone>, (accessed (17 October 2024).

18 For further detail see the Department of Justice (2022) press release announcing the measure.

19 See Department of Justice press release published on November 25 2021 <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/9b22e-minister-mcentee-launches-public-consultation-on-reform-of-alcohol-licensing-laws/>, (accessed 17 October 2024).

20 Coverage was extensive and included all national news outlets and specialist press. See for example Lehane (2022), Muk (2022), Pepper (2022), Bray (2022), Blaney (2022), McConnell and Hosford (2022), O'Mahony (2022) and Simpson (2022).

21 See <https://www.instagram.com/p/CXkAkW7oxQu/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFlZA%3D%3D>, (accessed 17 October 2024).

22 See <https://twitter.com/GiveUsTheNight/status/1711819312476922113>, (accessed 17 October 2024).

23 See <https://Twitter.Com/Sam_Greenwood_/Status/1704787217476952295>, (accessed 17 October 2024).

24 See <https://twitter.com/Rob_Rua/status/1704788833219318145>, (accessed 17 October 2024).

25 See <https://twitter.com/Sam_Greenwood_/status/1704789150543589590>, (accessed 17 October 2024).

26 See <https://temporary-pleasure.com/>, (accessed 17 October 2024).

27 See <https://www.instagram.com/p/CuUVRx3Mum3/>, (accessed 17 October 2024).

28 See Seijas and Gelders (2020) for an analysis of Night Mayors across 40 cities.

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