



2. HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND MORPHOLOGY

2.1 Urban Morphology and the historic context of the Courthouse Block.

Any development in the city centre should have regard to the urban morphology of the area. The term urban morphology refers to the tracing of historical development of form, such as street pattern, block form, plot shape and dimensions (width and depth) and the building fabric. Urban morphology is a unique tool for tracing the inherent character of an area, which may not be readily recognizable to the average eye.

The over-riding influence on the block structure of Sligo is Norman. According to Dowd (1998), Sligo was never a planned town, however by the 1680s its street pattern had been developed. Although the town was not a formally laid out town, its street pattern is consistent with other Norman towns, many of which had been laid out by surveyors. The urban morphology of the town centre would indicate that one of the oldest parts of the town is Old Market Street, given its more irregular block structure, defined by curved streets. This perhaps reflects the presence of an earlier enclosure that hints of an old Gaelic presence. The curved nature of Old Market Street contrasts with the typically straighter street patterns elsewhere in the town (occasionally revealing more gentle curves or slight deflections in the street) that is more consistent with Norman 'planning'. These typically straighter streets define, for example, the more regular block structure of West Gardens-Harmony Hill-Grattan Street-Market Street.

According to Dowd (1998) Sligo town flourished under the Gaelic revival of the fourteenth century. It is known that the fifteenth century, Sligo was a prosperous trading port, exporting fish, wool, cow hide, and timber, while wine and salt were some of its imports. The name 'Old Market Street' suggests that this street most probably derived its name from the location of an early market here. As trade increased, so did prosperity and large merchant houses resembling castles or tower houses were built and are assumed to have given Castle Street its name. However, the only building remaining from this period is the Abbey (a Dominican Friary) a short distance away.

Since the origin of the street system and its associated urban blocks, there has been progressive building over of the principal plots within medieval towns and their ultimate clearance prior to redevelopment. Therefore, while the current buildings on the block edges may predominately date to the nineteenth century, we can be sure that these buildings represent just one of many 'redevelopment cycles' on the plots and it is possible that the fabric of previous periods exist in some form, however minimal. Development patterns which evolve within the constraints or the parameter of the plot have proven to be adaptable to various uses over time.

In examining the block today, it is clear that the plot pattern is denser on the southern end of the block, in the High Street - Old Market Street area, whereas broader plots are evident along Castle Street and Market Street and in the immediate vicinity of the Courthouse. This was not always the case, as revealed in the earlier Ordnance Survey Maps (with the exception of the Courthouse). The broader plots that exist today in the northern part of the block, particularly on Castle Street, reveals a greater intensity of commercial and retail activity over the past several decades, through the process of plot amalgamation, extensions and redevelopments which culminated in greater site coverage associated with more intensive commercial development.

Previous studies suggest that the process of plot amalgamation (of one plot with an adjoining plot) on fairly vibrant shopping streets in an Irish town, typically occurs at a rate of just one amalgamation every decade or two (though exceptions to this are likely to exist and particularly in areas in need of renewal). However, the cumulative impact of this has been shown to be quite significant, with six or more properties being amalgamated over a century or more and the original number of retail units being significantly reduced to less than half of what originally existed. If left unchecked, the process can reduce the number and variety of individual retail units on any given street (frequently being replaced by larger national chains and international multiples). While this may not have any impact on the footfall on any given street, it is likely to erode some of the individuality and character of a street. This has not reached a critical level in Sligo, though should be considered on any policy on plot amalgamation.



1. Castle Street - early 1900s



2. Castle Street - 2004