Main Street? Creating a digital oral history of urban decline.
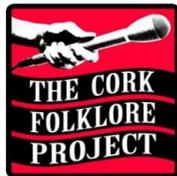
Penny Johnston

Béaloideas/ Digital Arts and Humanities, University College Cork

Image © J. Sunderland

Cork Folklore Project

- Public oral history/folklore archive since 1996
- Supported by community enterprise/UCC/FÁS
- Focus on everyday life
- Over 550 interviews
- Collection is ongoing

Image © J. Sunderland/Cork Folklore Project

Medieval origins

See image at
http://www.corkpastandpresent.ie/mapsimages/corkinoldmaps/pacatahiberniamap1585-1600/

Map of medieval Cork, from the Pacata Hibernica, 1585–1600, image from the Cork Past and Present website

- Medieval city first built on islands
- Old main streets the "historic spine"
- Herringbone pattern of lanes (many now gone)
- Commercial focus of the city shifted in the 18th & 19th centuries
- Decline a recurring theme today

Why digital oral history?

- Initially an oral history – part of a multi-disciplinary academic project
- CFP researchers very committed to the project
- A desire to preserve an archive of how things were
- Also to get ideas about how things could change in the future
- Collection chosen as a pilot for developing a new digital oral history project

Image © P. Johnston

The only light on South Main Street.

The Other Place burns down.

Southsiders shop on the South Main Street.

There was every type of

Current status

- Omeka & Neatline – open source (compatibility & sustainability)
- Neatline – built to display interpretative, subjective stories
- Method as "a path to argument" (Nowviskie et al. 2013, 693)
- An ongoing process

Response

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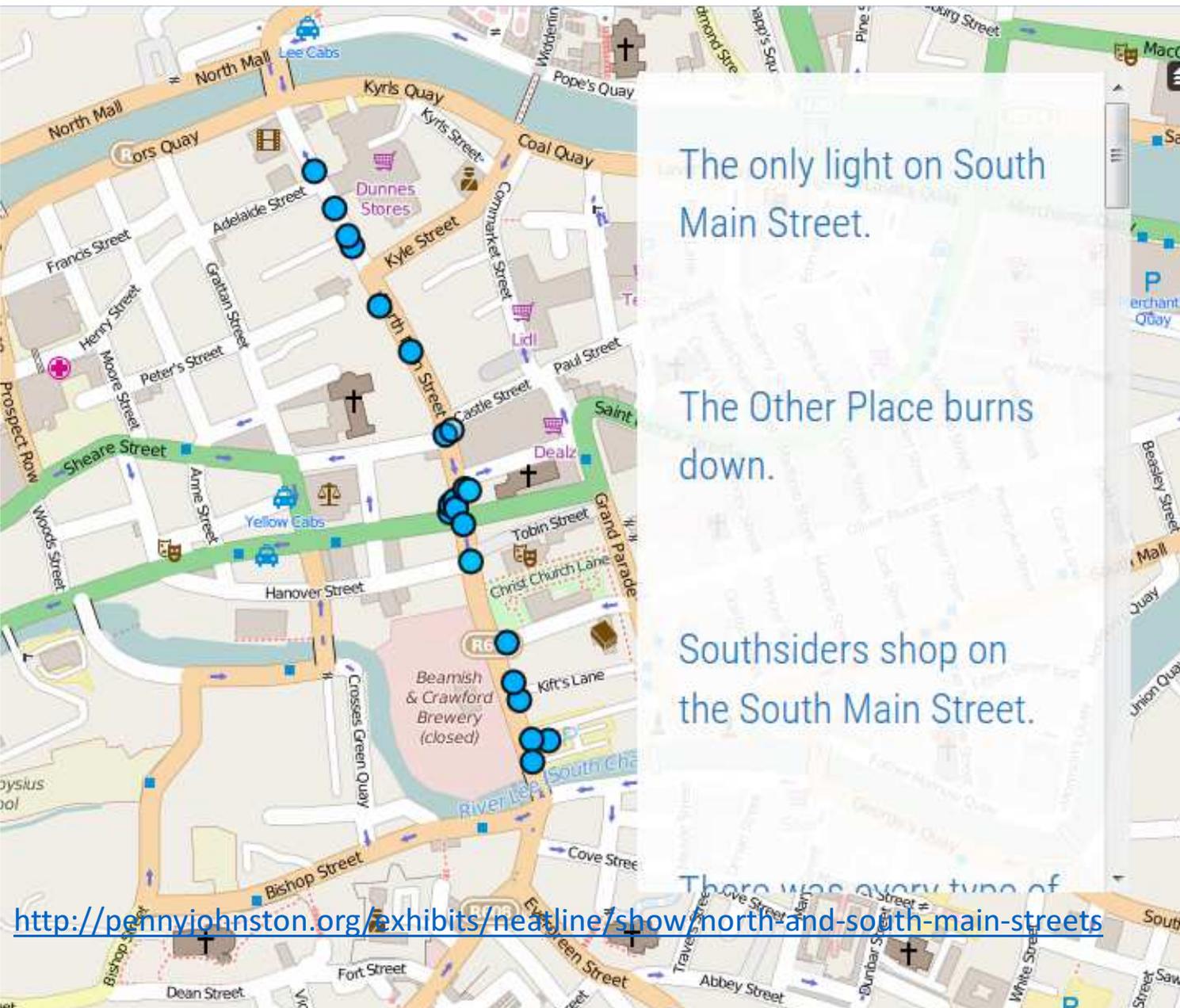
"Straight off though my general sense is that I really like it, it's, like both of us have done a good number of the interviews that are here….and, seeing it this way I'm going, '**God there's loads of really good stuff there**,' so it's obviously bringing out good stuff about the material cos it's striking me even though I'm already familiar with it, so that seems like a strength." (MS)

"And it's such a different way of accessing it, like, d'you know like when I was reading the excerpts this morning it was very much like in a book, which is nice as well but **this just gives it a whole different perspective**." (DC)

Image © P. Johnston

Wider benefits?

- Digital oral history – just an exercise in preservation through archiving?
- Narrating stories about the past is one of the ways that people cope with transformation.
- Can become "nostalgic utopianism" (Hoberman 2001).
- But can also be a "powerful imaginative construct" that can galvanise action for the future.
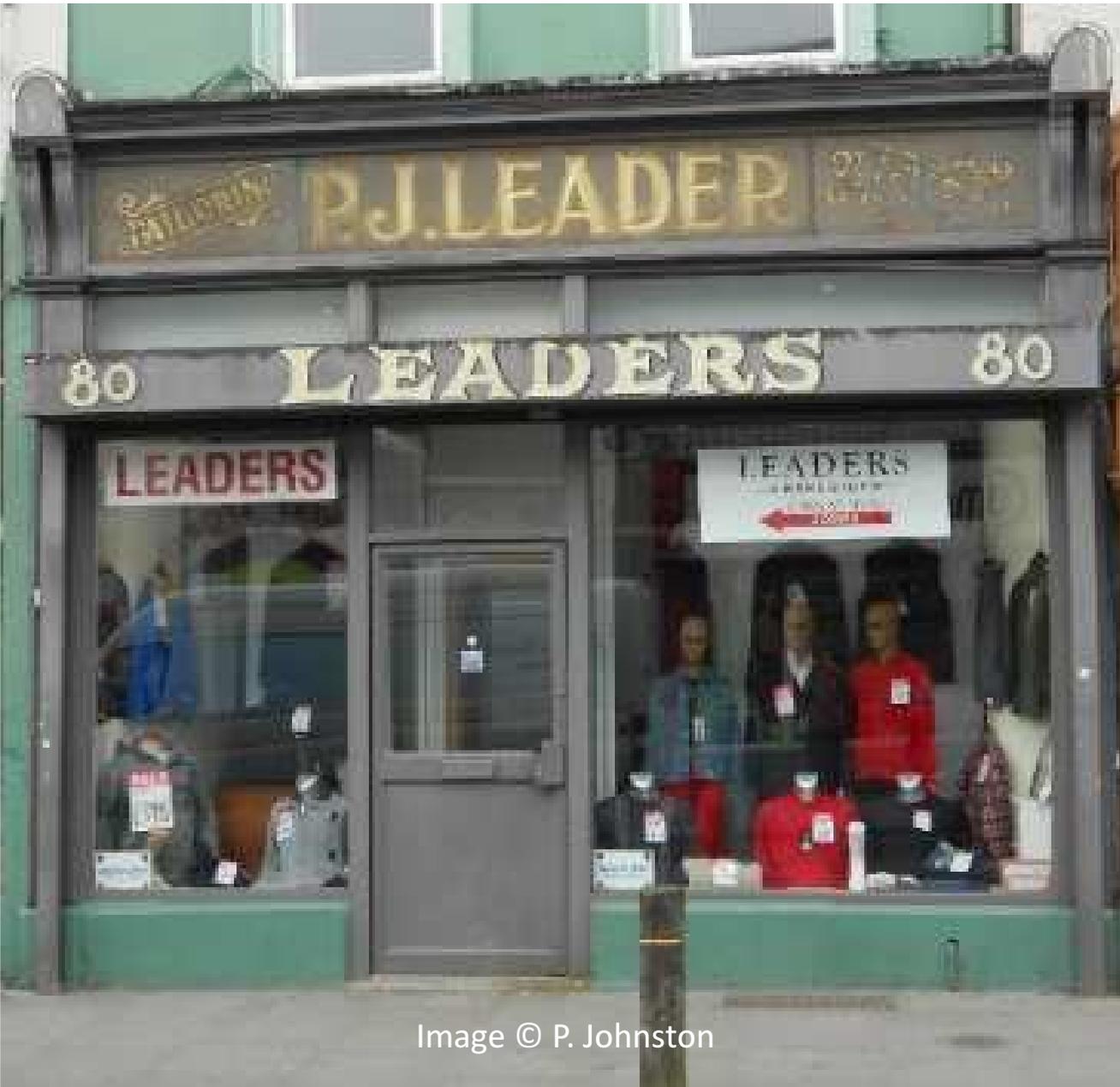
Looking forward

- Oral history can be used in the planners' toolkit.

"Stories of battle and triumph from the inner city – stories from people struggling to revive neighbourhoods abandoned by everyone else – allows us to analyse and to better understand as well as to more effectively plan for the future. Not incidentally, they also help us to admire the power of the human spirit" (Thomas 2004, 66).

Image © J. Sunderland

Thanks for listening

www.pennyjohnston.org/blog

Acknowledgements

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