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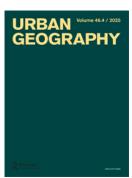
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Omni-temporality and place making: evidence from Colchester in the long-nineteenth century

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on themes of how Colchester, in the south-east of the UK, has reinvented its image through its historic environment during the long-nineteenth century (1750–1920). As the national and global landscape changed, towns like Colchester actively tried to remain relevant and important urban centers. Using Colchester as an exemplar, the article highlights how urban environments have accommodated both modernity and preservation throughout the last two centuries, to showcase attempts to remain relevant and contemporary. The study demonstrates the importance of historic narratives within the urban landscape for a town that seeks to reinvent itself and how they can be harnessed to promote and celebrate local identity, arguing that place branding and place marketing are not just a contemporary phenomenon, but are also evident in the early-modern and modern periods.

Introduction

Society has often brought the past into the present (Hodgkin & Radstone, 2003) and we explore this phenomenon by analyzing the "modernisation" of the past in towns and cities for "place making" activities aimed at contemporary audiences. By "place-making" we refer to the active and meaningful transformation of a place for different reasons, whether destination management, social welfare or economic development (Dupre, 2019). Such modernization is not new – evident in Sweet's (2022) discussion of the rise and development of "historic towns", highlighting how in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the past was "managed" through the incorporation of historic narratives in the reimagining of place for contemporaneous users. More recently, urban places have capitalized upon their pasts to provide a source of competitive advantage in contemporary spatial competition through *inter alia* place marketing and branding initiatives (Warnaby, 2024). Reynolds et al. (2024) highlight how urban stakeholders use the past in such promotional initiatives, arguing that because all places have a

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history, they can draw on the past to portray themselves positively in a modern world (see also Warnaby, 2024).

This article historicizes place making to highlight how the past has been used – and modernized – in the urban environment to meet contemporary imperatives (De Groot, 2009). In doing so, we demonstrate an impulse during the long-nineteenth century to develop a shared sense of historic place for contemporaneous commercial, social and economic purposes, thereby indicating that urban (re)development strategies focused on using the past to generate specific forms of development (such as tourism) are not new (Watkins, 2024). We build on Keenan and Dehaan's (2024) work in this journal, which has examined the engagement with the past in contemporary strategies (or at least recent histories), of neoliberal urban policy, arguing that there are historical precedents for the use of urban histories in place-making strategies.

To explore this use of the past, we investigate the omni-temporality of the urban landscape to demonstrate the relevance of the past for the present. Omni-temporality refers to the simultaneous existence of past, present and future, building upon Ricoeur's(1984) concept of the "threefold present" which has been used in place/corporate branding research (Balmer & Burghausen, 2019) and in urban place making strategies (Malone et al., 2024). Through a historical lens, we analyze how stakeholders in historic places (whether residents, community groups, businesses, councils or planners) successfully responded to contemporaneous crises and developments by "reinventing" their town/ city through place-making activities by modernizing their past to achieve future-oriented goals. We thereby demonstrate that place reinvention and place-making is something that is evident throughout history and not merely a present-day phenomenon, and later we discuss the implications of this for contemporary urban geographers.

Although previous studies have explored the link between the past and contemporary place identity through the lens of the historic landscape (Bullock, 2021; Page & Miller, 2017), they have rarely considered how the past has been managed, reimaged, reinvented, and modernized to help revitalize a place in the present and help achieve a desired future "vision" for a locale. To help our understanding of how to manage this temporality, we draw on the concept of the "useable past", defined in terms of the stories which communities/individuals connect with and shape (Sunstein, 1995), and we examine the kinds of histories which are "useable" in place making strategies in different historic time periods. In so doing, we explore the notion of the modernization of the past (whether material or perceptual) to actively reshape, remold and reinvent the stories and landscapes of the past to fit contemporary imperatives. To achieve this, we argue that when used in different contemporary contexts, the past must be locally owned, have a degree of materiality, and be articulated in the form of mythical/heroic narratives (Sewell, 2024a). Yet, our understanding of how this notion applies in the specific context of urban place making in the UK, through the appropriation – and consequent modernization – of the past is limited, and is what we seek to address in this article.

To illustrate this, we examine the historic town of Colchester (which is currently reinventing itself as "Britain's First City"), as an exemplar to demonstrate how the past has been used by urban stakeholders to address specific place making imperatives over a period of time – highlighting that place "reinvention" is not a contemporary phenomenon. Colchester epitomises the spatial and historical changes of the "long nineteenth century" the United Kingdom town, when some urban places were modernizing due

to industrialisation (Stobart, 2004), some transforming into leisure destinations (Schwarz, 2000), and others becoming historic locations, where local elites began to value and consolidate the notion of the historic nature of places (Sweet, 2004, 2022). Colchester is an exemplar of how the past was used by local stakeholders (residents, corporations and business leaders) to periodically reinvent the town.

The use of the past in urban strategy

The "useable" nature of the past has previously been noted within the urban geography literature when discussing governance and place making. McCann (2013) states that the use of the past is crucial for cementing local identities. However, much of the literature has explored how history is erased or forgotten; Parekh (2015) has shown how gentrification affects the use of the past; whilst Kearns and Lewis (2019) have demonstrated how the past can be erased by new economic aspirations, and Summer (2022) has identified how select pasts that suit visitor demands often ignore the reality of residents' and communities' histories. Keenan and Dehaan (2024) state that although the use of the past is a popular topic within urban geography, there is limited analysis of the concept of "place" and "the past" within public policy literature.

More generally, the remolding – or modernizing – of the past has been noted (see Hodgkin & Radstone, 2003); and examined in the context of the contemporary urban environment, especially in this journal (see Dahake, 2024; Watkins, 2024). Resonating with Hodgkin and Radstone's (2003) more generalized discussion, Land (2023, p. 1012) has shown that urban geographers are interested in how "memory is reconstructed to serve the purposes of the present generation." Benton-Short (2006) demonstrates that spaces can be contested, reimagined, and repurposed throughout time and space. Moreover, Johansson (2012, p. 3624) suggests that place reinvention/reimaging reminds us of what and who can be re-imagined – i.e. "what is sacred and cannot be touched, and what is conversely erased from the presented image – and how this re-imagining is carried out are emblematic of the power dynamics at work" (see also Warnaby & Medway, 2020).

There is clearly an engagement in the literature with how the urban past is reimagined for contemporary uses (Rose-Redwood et al., 2008). In the context of New Zealand, James et al. (2016) have shown how small cities (analogous in the United Kingdom context, to large towns such as Colchester) have transformed their image in response to socio-economic conditions – particularly apposite to our attempt to understand how and why places change. Historical analysis highlights that in the latter part of the nineteenth century England, individuals used local historic sites in attempts to build and foster place identity (Readman, 2005), continuing in very different contexts, where history was used in the construction of local identity after the First World War (Freeman, 2013). However, there has been little connection between urban research and historical analysis to explore how places have, in the modern world, modernized the past to reinvent themselves.

To synthesize these strands of urban research and historical analysis, we apply the idea of the "three-fold present" (Ricoeur, 1984). As already noted, Watkins (2024) has demonstrated how useful the past is for present strategies, but the notion of the "threefold present" helps us understand how and why the past is important; and how it can be managed to meet the needs of the changing present and the future.

Research context and design

Colchester was chosen as a case study as it constitutes a historic urban landscape dating from different historical periods: Roman, Norman, Stuart, Georgian and Victorian. It was the site of the first Roman city in England and was one of the more prominent towns throughout the medieval period, boasting an intact Roman Wall and Roman street layout; a Castle, Abbey and two Priories. It remained one of the wealthier towns in England during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and was ranked ninth in the country for its taxable wealth and seventh due to its taxable population (Baggs et al., 1994). New manufacturing methods introduced by Dutch immigrants in the 1560s saw the town become a leading national center for the cloth trade.

The British Civil Wars changed the town as it was severely damaged when Oliver Cromwell's New Model Army laid siege in 1648. When the town eventually surrendered, it was subjected to a fine of £14,000 which damaged the local economy for years – and according to some, for centuries (Martin, 1959). The town struggled to rebuild, and many scars from the siege remained into the nineteenth century.

It is during the long-nineteenth century where this study focuses its attention, analyzing how Colchester's urban stakeholders – who reflected the urban elite, business leaders and Corporation (the contemporaneous term for the local public administration) – modernized the past and shifted the town's identity over time. During this period, they battled with issues of industrialisation – manifest in the destruction of its Roman gates, old historic churches and residential areas as roads were widened and bypasses built. Yet, before and after this, individuals within Colchester drew on, and modernized its past for contemporary audiences. The town showcases that there are historical precedents to the use of selective urban histories-as-place-making and modernizing the past to maintain specific forms of relevance for contemporaneous audiences.

We use historical and archival methods, which enable the identification of key themes of urban modernization in different periods. As Bar (2019) has shown, historical analysis facilitates the identification of the reoccurrence of previous ideas, enabling a comparison of contemporary urban place making initiatives with those of the past. To achieve this, we use a qualitative, historical methodology which provides a longitudinal element to the issue of town change and reinvention. This approach, although rare in urban geographical studies, helps us observe how a place changes over time, in changing political and social contexts, examining the issue of causality from different spatial scales, alongside the complexity of town reinvention and the contingency of heritage in our places (MacKenzie et al., 2019). The analysis is informed by the theory of the useable past (Sunstein, 1995) to showcase how the past might be appropriated and how it can be deployed in our understanding of place making.

The article uses records from the Essex Record Office, to show how urban stakeholders within Colchester used and managed the town's past. These include primary sources, such as diaries, memoirs and borough records, council minutes, pictures, as well as buildings, monuments and material objects. Analysis of eighteenth-century sources have largely relied upon borough and parish minutes, alongside Morant's 1748 publication detailing the history and antiquities of the town and pictures drawn by various artists. Nineteenth-century material included diaries, images, council minutes, tour guides and plans of the town. Other data was drawn from the British Newspaper Archive,

which contains materials from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Themes identified through the analysis of the eighteenth century allowed comparison and contrasts with the nineteenth century. These afford insight into the different historical meanings of spaces and places and the different views on how they were used by the "middling sort" (i.e. the Corporation, church, and business leaders) in the town at different times during the late eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In subsequent sections, we trace the different forms of Colchester's reinvention over this period, examining how the useable past adapted when urban elites transitioned the town into a market town; and then discuss how the past was disregarded as urban stakeholders sought to navigate a new industrial and modern era. It finally shows how the past was once again appropriated (and modernized) to help the town become a modern, historic town, to highlight the importance of understanding how the past, present and future interconnect.

The romantic market town (eighteenth century)

By the mid-eighteenth century, Colchester's historic materiality had come to define it, in part owing to Daniel Defoe's comments that the town still "mourns in the ruins of a civil war", describing its "battered walls, breaches in the turrets, and ruined churches" (Defoe, 1891). The town's image was defined by its ruins, and its declining textile and cloth industry. Martin (1959) showed that wars with Spain, alongside the Civil Wars of the seventeenth century, damaged the local textile trade. However, in the eighteenth-century Colchester transitioned to being a prosperous market town, using the historic landscape to reinvent itself. Recovery was gradual, largely financed by local patrons who benefited from newer agricultural markets. The success of Colchester's reinvention in material terms is evident by the erection of new Georgian buildings or facades throughout the town center (D'Cruze, 2008).

These historic buildings were extensively used in Colchester's "reinvention", providing stories of the past, and Romantic artists, such as Stuckley, Buck and Turner, came to the town to promote the mystery of England (Stewart, 1996). These artists (as well as previous travelers such as Defoe) were taken with the look and nature of the town, and it fitted in well with the romantic imaginary of the day. This new, romantic, historic image made Colchester relevant for national contemporaneous audiences who were fascinated by the romantic past – but these buildings were also used to highlight Colchester as a market town. One image from 1811 (Cotman, 1811) shows St Botolph's Priory (which is in the town center) as part of a rural rather than an urban scene. The church is depicted as rather solid, yet the graveyard appears to be empty or broken/disused. One of the images of the Priory, drawn in 1805 by S. Prent, shows a man observing the ruins, whilst another by the same artist shows the picturesque scene of the ruins, with a seated man observing it, with the overgrown vegetation on the top of the ruin and along the walls (The Priory Church of St. Botolph and "Colchester Castle" from Architectural Antiquities).

Historic buildings also found new uses and purposes, consistent with the market town image. The Abbey was destroyed in the Civil Wars, but the site and structures (such as the Abbey Gate and the Wall) remained, and the site had become a garden and important for the town's market image – evident in how the *Chelmsford Chronicle* (1833) advertised

its sale. The landscape was reinterpreted and reused according to the image that local patrons and stakeholders wanted to convey; these historic sites helped to convey the picture of Colchester's historic, romantic image whilst also shaping its economic, market town potential.

These historic buildings were essential in connecting the three-fold present as they provided residents with reasons as to why the town had to reinvent itself in their contemporary world of the eighteenth century. The past helped people make sense of their present. Morant (1748) recounted the 200 houses destroyed, the churches damaged or destroyed and the key buildings such as the Castle left dilapidated or in ruins after the Civil Wars, that were still visible to his readers into the eighteenth century. Acknowledging that most of the town's residents, "were in the Parliament's interests" at the start of the Civil War, Morant condemned Cromwell as "self-seeking" and denounced the subjugation of the town under the "tyranny of the army", which "shattered and demolished a great part of eminent a Town as this" (Morant, 1748). Undoubtedly political, Morant used the past to cement local Tory ideals as they reimagined Colchester's past as Tory and Royalist (D'Cruze, 2008, p. 40).

The events of the French Revolution of 1789 brought new political meanings and allowed the town to use its historic materiality to cement itself within national themes of loyalism (Dozier, 2015). These ruins helped explain why Colchester had to reinvent itself at this time and furthered certain local individual interests in reclaiming political power. It also allowed Colchester to cement itself in the national consciousness as it aimed for national relevance, and helped the town reinvent itself as a contemporary regional center as it fought with nearby Chelmsford for local dominance. The past was used to transform the town into a thriving market town. Colchester had modernized the past, through its historic landscape, to ensure that it was presented as a modern, contemporary location.

Industrialisation (1810–1843)

The advent of the industrial revolution saw drastic changes to many English towns and cities, and for towns like Colchester led to a distancing from the past. Hunt has argued that in the nineteenth century, "The Victorian city started to be defended and even admired as a symbol of progress, prosperity and liberty … there was no greater symbol of modernity and progress than the industrial city" (2005, p.132). Industrial cities were re-defining what it meant to be a successful city in the nineteenth century, and this national discourse of modernity transformed local elites, corporations and business leaders' relationship(s) with the historic landscape (Stobart, 2004). Indeed, the early nineteenth century was a period of great change that encouraged local elites in Colchester to re-imagine the town as a modern, thriving *industrial* town. Rather than modernize the past for this new use, historic buildings which were perceived as a hindrance to the creation of an industrial image were removed. There was a move to distance the town from the past as it focused solely on the present. Unsurprisingly, some inhabitants wanted to fully embrace an industrial economy with modern architecture that met contemporaneous needs, such as theaters and new transport infrastructure. However, despite this desire for change, economic development was slow, and Colchester remained a country town until some industrialisation occurred in the latter half of the nineteenth

century. These developments would lead to clashes between those keen to preserve historic buildings and those more interested in promoting modernization and improvement.

One source of contention was the town's Roman walls. The walls were owned by residents whose premises backed on to them, and many of the original Roman gates were torn down in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. When members of the Royal Archeological Society visited Colchester in 1876, they had to rely on their guide to explain the significance of the site, where on 5th July 1648 during the Civil War a sizeable force of Royalists had attempted to force their way out of the town through the East Gate (*Morning Post*, 1876, p. 3). This gate had been largely destroyed on the orders of Parliament in 1652 because more uprisings were feared and removing the gate reduced the chances of long, drawn-out sieges. Further destruction took place in 1676, but the Roman guard house on the south side of the gate had survived until it was demolished by the Improvement Commissioners in 1819 (Baggs et al., 1994). The gate at St. Botolph's was also torn down in 1814 to make room for a new theater in Queen Street. According to modernizers, the change was carried out, "in order to contribute a better effect to the edifice, which is to be both extensive and elegant", noting that public funds had been raised to remove "that long standing nuisance" (*The Suffolk Chronicle*, 1810, p.4). People actively sought to remove these historic sites because they perceived that they were not meeting the needs of the present. Moreover, there also appeared to be a sense of apathy regarding heritage sites, as they were not well maintained by residents.

New transport infrastructure also created a perceived need to remove ancient buildings. The past was considered a hindrance. Consequently, the North Gate was also demolished in stages between 1774 and 1823, according to urban improvers, "for widening the carriage way and foot-path there" (*Ipswich Journal*, 1823, p.2). This destruction continued until the early days of the railway. In 1843, William Wire recorded in his diary (William Wires Journal 1842) various damages to the town's historic fabric, noting that part of the Roman wall had been broken down by the owner of the adjacent King's Head Inn to give his customers a better view of the trains at the new railway station. Essentially, the present and the future was the focus of activity and local business leaders distanced themselves from the past as it was deemed unnecessary.

These industrialisation imperatives quickly faded, and the legacy of ignoring the past became apparent when viewing the positive impact it had on local prestige and national identity (Anderson, 1983). As social attitudes shifted once more, and tourism began to increase throughout England, historic sites became valued as bastions of national identity and symbols of unity rather than division (Sweet, 2004). Residents began to lament the removal of historic architecture, especially the destruction of the Roman city wall. Local antiquarians made their feelings known in talks and speeches at the town's Archaeological Society. The archaeologist Duncan, and others, complained about the lack of attention paid by proprietors to the maintenance of the walls and the gates (Essex Society for Archaeology and History, 1852). In 1896, when an owner of a house in St. John Street broke down some of the Roman walls for the purpose of making a back entrance, this led the Town Council's Museum and Muniment Committee to appoint Henry Laver and Charles Benham to inspect the site, leading the owner to express "regret and desired to make such amends as lay in her power" (*East Anglian Daily Times*, 1896, december 03,

p.2). Although themes of industrialisation never truly faded (evident with the residents' desire to update their own households), influential individuals were trying to preserve the towns' historic identity as the past once again became an important part of the three-fold present.

The historic, modern town (1843–1945)

After the failure to industrialize the town to the extent of other urban centers, the Corporation, alongside other key individuals, reimagined the town once more – rediscovering the connection between heritage and local and national identity, consistent with the growing Victorian fascination with history. The town's topography was in part shaped by the growing influence of the various strands of the preservation movement that had emerged in Britain by the late-Victorian period (Baigent & Cowell, 2016). Many of the churches that were still damaged in some way from the 1648 siege were restored or rebuilt. Restoration projects were often inspired by the Gothic Revival that promoted Norman and Medieval styles of architecture and decoration (Brooks & Saint, 1995). Indeed, by the late nineteenth century, the urban elite sought to preserve the historic fabric of buildings, having been influenced by John Ruskin and William Morris, who argued the importance of the past in an ever-changing present. By 1891, the *Essex Standard* reported, for example, that the

> Council decided not to interfere with the building [St Martin's church], or repair it, however recommendations were made that the Council should take great care in the preservation of old building in the town, as many contain fine woodwork, and are of superior architectural merit. (*Essex Standard*, 1891, p.2).

Local elites in Colchester valued the past and modernized it to reimagine the town as a modern town for contemporary audiences. Historic places were harnessed by "the middling sort" – individuals and groups committed to nineteenth-century visions of modernization and civic ambition. One paper reported a speaker at an event stating, "Colchester is in no sense a decaying, but a rising and increasing place" (Newscutting Album, 20 June 1874). The speaker went on to reference the town's past, present and future all in the same sentence showcasing how temporality was very much on the mind of the local elites. Mythologies of history, displayed architecturally, were important elements in Late-Victorian Colchester's self-representation as a modern location (Anderson, 1983).

The politics of street naming is one such example of modernizing the past. Street names are more than simply markers of physical place, and in Colchester, street names were used by the local authority, and individuals, to celebrate connections to heritage and history that were very important for its claims to political, cultural, and social authority (Minutes of Navigation and Improvement Commissioners). The residential development of New Town in 1878, for example, was developed and named mainly by Liberals and those from the Co-operative movement such as J.F. Goodey; hence the name Gladstone Road – and also Cromwell Road, the first street to be named in the 1870s that had a link to the Civil War (Council Minute book 1871–1877). Indeed, local historic names became the norm; the Civil War was heavily referenced with Lucas Road, and Fairfax Road, soon followed in the 1880s and thereafter with streets

commemorating other Civil War actors such as, Lisle, Goring and Capel Roads (Plan of Wimpole Estate; Sale catalogue of various properties in Colchester, Lexden, Brightlingsea and Tendring Heath). The middle classes used the road names to map New Town as an area which foregrounded ideals of unity, stability and democracy. It was a vision of the past refracted through the lens of a contemporary political culture of consensus.

It is noteworthy that changes to road names in this period did not go uncontested; and reminds us about whose past is being commemorated. The liberal William Wire (who was interested in the history of the town) argued that any change constituted an obliteration of aspects of Colchester's past. Equally concerned by which histories were remembered and which ones erased, another resident wrote a letter to the *Essex Standard* in 1851 arguing that "the old names are very significant, and, in most instances point to some matter of interest connected with them" (*Essex Standard,* 1851, p.4). Concern was raised again in 1856 by another correspondent who preferred that, "old names, full of historical and archaeological meaning, would be revived, the new names by which they have been superseded having no real significance, and being destructive of many cherished historical associations" (*Essex Standard*, 1856, p. 4). Nonetheless, other Colchester residents appreciated the changes. One correspondent to the *Essex Standard* in 1856, wrote of the renaming that,

> Among these we have "Gutter Street," at present called "St. John's Street:" and I venture to think, in deferential opposition to Mr. Wire, that this is an instance in which the new name is an improvement upon the old, both in elegance and appropriateness. (*Essex Standard*, 1856, p. 4)

It is a reminder that historical reinvention focuses upon select, and particular, histories; and the stories which the majority, or those in power, accept and promote; as there was a desire to link the town within a national framework due to the imagined community which centered around British history (Anderson, 1983).

Colchester's historic image was cemented in the preservation of the historic environment, evident with the discussions regarding St. Botolph's Priory in 1884, when the site was damaged by an earthquake – demonstrating how local historic buildings were looked after by individuals and institutions from outside the town. A local newspaper commented that, "We learn that its condition is not unlikely to be brought under the notice of the British Archaeological Association before long" (*Essex Standard,* 1887, p.2). A letter from the Royal Institute of British Architects also stated after the earthquake that the site was of significant "public interest", and in serious need of repair (Letter from the Royal Institute of British Architects, 1887). The following year, the minute book of the vestry of St Botolph's recorded a discussion on the state of the ruined church, pointing out that the building was in danger of collapsing. Concern about the cost of restoration led to attempts to pass on the responsibility for maintenance of the site to the local authority through an approach to the politically well-connected historian John Horace Round and architect Loftus Brook (Minutes 1855–1985).

The development of Colchester's historic image in this way was sometimes at the expense of local, individual stakeholders (Readman, 2022), and this only changed in 1882 when a series of Protection Acts gave local and national authorities powers of protection. As with the earlier movement, before modernity had gripped the town, in the

1740s, Charles Gray, a local antiquarian and Tory MP, rebuilt the south-east turret on the castle keep. In 1749, he restored the "chapel" (specifically its undercroft), and in 1750 repaired a room on the west side of the castle for use as a granary. He also strengthened foundations of the keep and the damaged vaults. The surviving rectangular gatehouse of St John's Abbey was repaired in the 1840s when still in private hands (Baggs et al., 1994). Apparently, one Lord Ashburton had planned to carry out some repairs in 1841, with a "view of restoring to her the architectural beauties of the Abbey gate" (*Essex Standard*, 1841, p.3). Further repairs were conducted by the army, garrisoned in the town in 1860, led by Colonel Montague, who apparently took, "great interest in local affairs" and was certainly thinking about how army and town relations could be improved (*Essex Standard*, 1872, p.3). Regarding St. Botolph's Priory, the ruins had little religious use for the local parish due to its condition; but rather than replacing the site, a new church was constructed next to it in 1837. This new building was paid for by a fund promoted by the *Essex Standard* because "the parishioners were too poor to raise the money." Help came from across the country, such as Suffolk, Essex, Derbyshire and Somerset (*Essex Standard*, 1835, p. 2).

Local stakeholders continued to be essential in the preservation of aspects of local heritage into the twentieth century by paying the majority of the cost of their maintenance and upkeep. In 1902, the house in East Street known as the "Siege House" was purchased and restored by the liberal politician William Marriage (Parker, 1909). When work on restoring the old mill was being done, the external plaster was torn off to reveal many bullet holes in the timbers, which were dated from the Siege in 1648 (Historic England, 2024), and Marriage made a conscious decision to leave these marks exposed for passers-by to see. The building was also used in advertising material produced for tourists as well as for the famous pageant of 1909 (Parker, 1909). It was not just enough to preserve these historic traces; now local townsfolk were now making the effort to exploit them for commercial gain.

Yet, it was not just the urban elite who were involved in using the past in this way; as Readman (2005) has argued, local communities valued the past and took it upon themselves to actively preserve local historic sites. For example, residents, the parish, and its minister took steps to save St. Botolph Priory. Loftus Brock explained in an article on St. Botolph's in the *Journal of Proceedings on the Royal Institute of British Architects* that, "The interest taken in the ruin is not small, but the parish is poor, and it will be difficult matter for sufficient funds to be found in the locality" (*Essex Standard*, 1887, p.5). The vestry minute book of 1912 records that the Vicar of St. Botolph's decided to take the matter of the ruins to the Charity Commission, suggesting to his parish that the building should come under the Ancient Monuments Act of 1882, which saw the priory come into national ownership (Correspondence and papers concerning excavation and preservation of St Botolph's Priory ruins).

However, tensions remained. For example, themes of modernity still surfaced, and debates emerged in 1874 about the preservation of two of the historic churches in Colchester – as the local paper noted, "Yesterday an important public meeting was held at the Town Hall, Colchester for the purpose of raising funds for the re-building the Church of St. Nicholas and removing that of St. Runwalds." One speaker stated that St. Runwalds had to be demolished with reluctance (Newscutting Album, June 20, 1874), and discussions ensued about erecting a memorial to the site. It reminds us

that despite every effort to modernize the past, there will be sites which struggle to fit in with an ever-changing town.

Nonetheless, residents, business owners, the local authority – and external stakeholders such as the railway – were keen to reinvent Colchester as a "historic town". The development of the railway in the nineteenth century saw an increase in the number and social range of visitors to the town. Features and articles on the history of the ruined buildings appeared regularly in the national press, which encouraged attention (*Illustrated London News*, 1869, p.8; *Essex Standard*, 1834, p.4). Posters, postcards and new, cheaper, more accessible town guidebooks were also produced that encouraged imaginative engagement by tourists who wished to investigate the ruins for themselves. *The Eastern Counties Railway Illustrated Guide* published in 1851, for example, listed several historical "events of importance" that took place in Colchester (Truscott, 1851). A series of fourteen illustrated guides to Colchester were also produced in 1864, in "carte-de-viste size", at a cost of sixpence each, and included volumes on the Castle, St John's Abbey, St. Botolph's Priory, as well as other notable "public buildings" and Roman remains (*Essex Standard*, 1864, p.3; *East London Observer*, 1871, p.2). Mary Benham's, *Guide to Colchester* published in 1874, was illustrated by maps, photographs and illustrations of historic buildings, including the ruined abbey and St John's Gate (Benham, 1890). This guide covered a wide variety of subjects, including the town's modern economy and fauna and flora, as well as significant events in its history. Time was interlinked; and there was little distinction made; Colchester's past made it relevant for a contemporary audience.

This historic transformation was reinforced spatially and materially, through the design of the new Town Hall built between 1898 and 1902 at a cost of £55,000. Described by Cannadine (1982, p. 118) as a "secular shrine to civic antiquity", the building was a modern monument that linked the glories of the past to the confidence of the present and provided lessons for future generations. The former Liberal Prime Minister, Lord Rosebery, who in his speech to the gathered assembly at the opening ceremony stated that, "there is no place in this country where the history of an island is so unfolded and spread out as in this old town of Colchester" (*Chelmsford Chronicle*, 1902, p. 5). Rosebury was referring to the histories which had come to represent the town over the previous two centuries; the prominence and richness of the Roman, Medieval and Siege past was clear for all to see; and for Rosebury, Colchester's histories represented the national discourse of England. The elaborate exterior decoration celebrated local connections to legendary historic figures such as Helena, Eudo and Boudicca. Significantly, the personalities associated with the siege were not displayed outside for everyone to see. Colchester's Town Hall negotiated local history carefully, and more consensually, inside the building (Hunt, 2005). The reason for this is that the portrayal of Colchester's siege still divided the political parties, and showcasing one side only would have been problematic. Rather, the interior décor of the Town Hall shows how local elites reconciled the past, where both sides of the Civil War were equally displayed, how they valued local historic landmarks, alongside a lamentation of the loss of some of the sites in the nineteenth century. The Tower room had a small apartment in which these images of the removed landmarks were displayed (Colchester Town Hall: Full Illustrated Description of the building, 1902). The design of the decoration of the Town Hall reflected a historic image which Colchester wanted to present to the nation.

This link with local heritage continued into the twentieth century as the town had firmly cemented its present identity in the past. The castle, for example, had always been in private hands, but when rumors that a potential American buyer emerged in 1917, people were outraged. A report from the *Chelmsford Chronicle* argued that the intervention was nothing short of "vandalism" and made clear that the offer was swiftly and firmly rejected. Soon after this in 1919, the site was taken into public ownership for the first time (*Chelmsford Chronicle*, 1917, p. 5), with this purchase made possible by a donation of £10,000 given by Viscount and Lady Cowdray to the borough to acquire the building and the adjacent properties, to clear the site, so a war memorial to locals who died during the First World War could be constructed. In May of that year, a committee set up to organize the funding, design and installation of a memorial to Colchester's war dead, reported that:

> It has been felt for many years that should a suitable opportunity arise it would be fitting and desirable for the Town of Colchester to acquire the Castle which is one of the most remarkable ancient buildings in England and of great historical interest to the inhabitants as also too many tourists and visitors to Colchester (Borough War Memorial Committee and sub-committees minutes).

In doing so, the past was used to make sense of contemporary events. The council made the heritage site link to the war dead, showing quite clearly the connection between the past, contemporary Colchester, and future remembrance. The Council also acquired the nearby Georgian buildings such as Hollytrees (which had once been owned by the antiquarian Charles Gray), on the condition that they would be preserved and used for some approved public purpose (ibid.) A few years later in 1931, the Castle Museum was relocated and expanded when the Roman vaults began to collapse through overstrain and exposure (Clarke, 1966–1989). The extensive repair work was paid for and carried out by the Colchester Borough Council and thereafter the museum began to expand into other areas of the castle. As Rudsdale noted, up to the Second World War the imperative was about preserving and celebrating Colchester's historic image, and many stakeholders found local identity within these sites (Diary and Papers of E.J. Rudsdale of Colchester, 1935). The past was used to make sense of, celebrate or commemorate episodes in the present with aspirations of a prosperous future.

Discussion

This work has built on Reynolds et al.'s (2024) and Warnaby's (2024) work showcasing the omni-temporal nature of places relating to their marketing. Our analysis of Colchester's "reinventions" demonstrates how the influence of the past permeates the present (Hodgkin & Radstone, 2003), and in particular, how the past has been used, managed and modernized in how the town has been portrayed over the last 300 years. It suggests that place making is not just a contemporary, future-driven exercise, but that throughout this period, local stakeholders in Colchester navigated the omni-temporality of the urban environment, using – and "moderniing" – the city's unique past(s), materialized within the urban landscape to periodically reinvent their place for contemporaneous audiences.

This analysis has highlighted how local stakeholders created the "historic", yet modern, town by navigating the past in order to differentiate Colchester; and shows how different aspects of history were appropriated to ensure a sense of modernity

(Readman, 2005) for contemporaneous audiences. As Lord Rosebury noted in the opening of Colchester's Town hall, the town had come to symbolize the story of England, thereby showcasing the strong relationship between local history and national identity in the long nineteenth century – not just relating to industrialisation but also to British imperialism (Anderson, 1983). It should be no surprise, that, by 1888, Colchester had successfully joined the ranks of cities such as Exeter, Bristol and Oxford as places which could be labeled historic (Brown, 1980) as stakeholders in the town had managed to reinvent the past to meet imperialistic and national imaginaries. It is evident that city identity was not merely about residents and the immediate locality, but was also rooted in the imagined community of the nation, as it displayed an exemplar of the nation's story from the Romans through to the British Civil War (Anderson, 1983). These stories which were important, however, had to be constantly reimagined to ensure that the themes (which local elites focused on through them), resonated with a wider, national community. As this imagined community changes with time, cities like Colchester need to navigate the shifting imaginations to keep reinventing their (hi)stories to remain relevant in the competition to keep on attracting people and capital.

Therefore, "modernising" the past in Colchester, was crucial in helping make sense of the contemporaneous world, and locating the town within the national story. These historical memories and stories allowed those responsible for the town's broader governance to "reinvent" the town in different times to meet different social and economic place-making demands. For many residents, there was seemingly no separation between the past (whether mythical or factual), and their present and future (see Ricoeur, 1984). As the present moved and changed, so did their interpretation and memory of the past, alongside their "expectations" – or their "vision" – for the future, suggesting that Ricoeur's (1984) concept of the three-fold present is useful in understanding place-making activities.

These stakeholders who shaped and "modernised" the past were, importantly, *local* (Whitehand, 1992), motivated by a desire to reposition and promote Colchester for both economic and social benefit. They "modernised" the past to cement Colchester's relevance throughout the changeable nineteenth century, and were increasingly aware that the narratives needed to appeal to wider communities than just other urban elites. In doing so, they transformed the story of Colchester to reflect – and symbolize – that of the nation. Furthermore, as the nation continued to industrialize, places like Colchester then provided a connection to the past – for example, relating to wider themes of the British and English identity which was explored in the Victorian era, which as Readman (2005, p. 149) noted, was "dominated by a distinctive, largely inward-looking, and importantly localized sense." Roman, Medieval and Civil War histories were perceived as being extremely "useable" in this regard because, as Sewell (2024a) demonstrates, they were visible within the material environment, and they were easy to mold and shape to celebrate themes of Empire, Englishness and local pride. Yet as Readman (2005, p. 149) has noted the "engagement with the past was pervasive among all social groups and took a variety of forms." It should not be forgotten that local communities had their own role in preserving and "modernising" the historic environment; as Grose noted on his trip to the town in the eighteenth century, the local parish had made a conscious decision to erect a fence around the site of St. Botolph's Priory in order to preserve it (Sewell, 2024b).

Here, the concept of the useable past (Sunstein, 1995) becomes important. The past which is "modernised" to create an "expectation" and future vision must indeed be useable, and consequently is particularly evident in the materiality of the urban built environment. Furthermore, it should be ideally centerd around mythological narratives, which can be molded and shaped – or "modernised" – to fit contemporary needs and uses (Sewell, 2024a), and subsequently adapted and changed to present different messages at different times. For Colchester, the historic landscape, and the histories within, was used to present the town as a romantic market town, but as the "contemporary" changed a century later, the past was reshaped and "modernised" to present the place as a "historic town" which brought a new relevance.

Here arguably, *consistency* of the past in terms of how it is appropriated for these purposes is crucial. The useable pasts that were on display in Colchester, throughout its various "reinventions", were the same: Roman, Medieval and relating to the Civil War. New stories may indeed be added as places find new histories, but the original pasts remain – demonstrating that the "useable" past in places needs to be consistent with what has gone before (Hassen & Giovanardi, 2018). As Readman (2005) noted, it was important to have a sense of continuity as it provided rootedness and belonging at a time of change. The same pasts that were used in Colchester over the period discussed here (i.e. Roman, Medieval and Civil War) are the same used in today's contemporary marketing initiatives (see https://www.visitcolchester.com/) as the local authority aims to present the city as a modern tourist destination.

This omni-temporal consistency links to the modernizing of the past in this spatial context: although these pasts remain the same, the way(s) they will be interpreted changes, and they will be adapted to meet the needs of contemporary society; in other words, the past cannot remain "static". This modernization of the past may lead to reconciliation, destabilization or reinterpretation of the stories to ensure they provide contemporary meanings (see Reynolds et al., 2024; Warnaby, 2024). We posit that the past in urban place-making strategies needs to be adaptable, flexible and change according to local needs; thus, individuals within Colchester used the same historic buildings and their histories in the town's different manifestations. These sites were appropriated to articulate both past and future-oriented narratives, controlled by the perspectives and ambitions of select individuals (especially local elites). However, it highlights the landscape can be reused and adapted to present an image that meets contemporary needs because the historic environment and the useable past allows reinvention.

The consistency of the past also has significant implications. For example, the "past" that is being used in the present moment for Colchester's place making is itself a "constructed" past used in an older process of place making, – which has implications for how the place is viewed – and matters – for contemporary audiences (Thibodeau, 2019). Continuity of the past means that present day place making activities must always grapple with the fact that "omnitemporal space" being used in the present already holds a selective interpretation of the past. This may limit the place making activity due to the restrictive nature of certain pasts, and tensions may arise if attempts are made to wrestle the past away from the space, or if new pasts are layered over. To counter this, Lloyd and Moore (2015) have argued the need to encourage collaboration to allow new pasts and memories to be attached to places.

In addition, this modernization of the past can lead to tensions. This happens when local elites decide which historic landscapes, and the histories stored within them, should be preserved. Their control over urban topography means that it is their world-view which is advertised and can lead to the issues of "forgetting", and competing histories where individuals or communities' stories are not valued as highly as others (Warnaby & Medway, 2020). This may have been because many of the histories embedded within the urban landscape (such as working-class narratives) have disappeared; and others (such as the medieval term of "Gutter" street in Colchester) are not attractive for a "modern", historic town. This indicates how the theory of the useable past contains a variety of tensions which need to be continuously considered – and managed – by those responsible for urban governance (Sewell, 2024a).

Concluding comments

Thus, we show that the urban environment and landscape is essential in how the past is accessed and displayed. Ignoring the past (whether in place marketing activities or in other urban strategies) in favor of being a modern town has consequences. Places need to be modern to meet contemporary needs, but ignoring the useable historic landscape potentially leads to damaged identities. We suggest that successful place making involves *balancing* the competing dynamics of expectation and memory – and shared understandings of the *useable* past may be one way to navigate this (Reynolds et al., 2024; Ricoeur, 1984; Warnaby, 2024). To stop the constant swing between preservation and modernization, as places wrestle with the issue of being modern, the answer lies within a better understanding of the useable past to help places become relevant and contemporary throughout different periods. As towns and cities "reinvent" themselves to meet modern demands and needs; and as Colchester "reinvents" itself as an important city in our "contemporary" understanding of the British discourse; knowing how the past can be managed, "modernised" and molded is crucial to ensuring successful place-making.

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