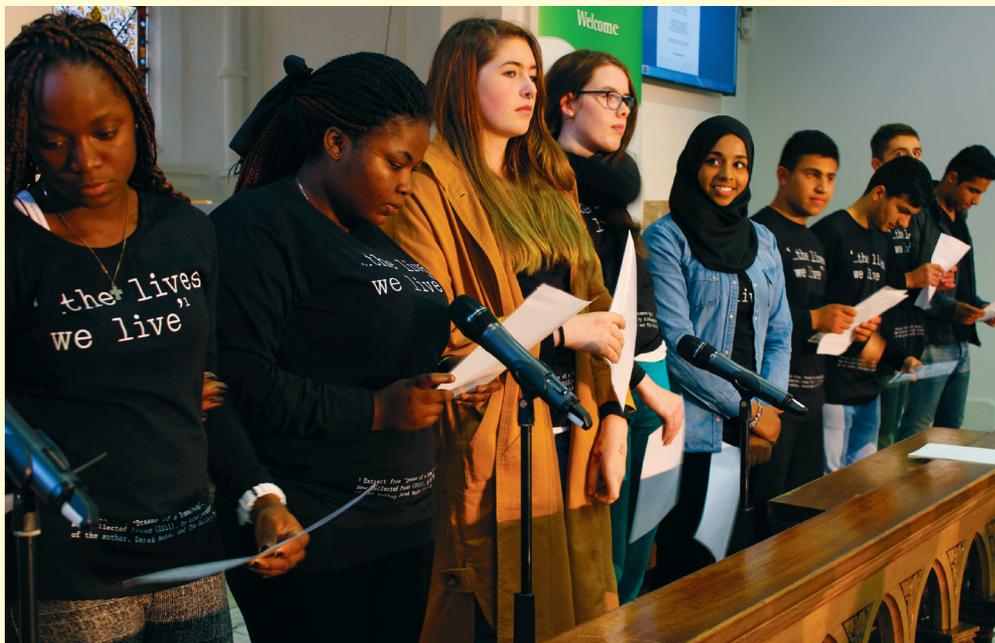


'...the lives we live' Grangegorman Public Art 2013–2021

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In my experience, a beckoning image is a welcome guide when setting out on a new venture. And so it was when I was asked to help form and chair the Public Art Working Group (PAWG) for the Grangegorman Development Agency in late 2013. This invitation coincided with the, then recent, publication of Derek Mahon's *New Collected Poems* in 2011. I was particularly taken with his very last poem, the reflectively expansive *Dreams of a Summer Night*¹ which ends, in an air of perhaps surprised gratitude, with the words '*...the lives we live*'. This summative phrase seemed just right for the task ahead. So many lives, so many kinds of life, so much sadness and, latterly, such hope and renewal have marked the district of Grangegorman that here was a particularly fertile ground for artistic imaginations.



Bradóg Regional Youth Service perform Pauline Brennan's 'You Out There Change It' in multiple languages, Culture Night 2015. Photo: Lori Keeve

As we began to unroll ‘...*the lives we live*’ project I was again looking for an image of what it was we wanted to do. A young Albanian boy supplied it, though inadvertently. At our public launch, Bradóg Youth Service performed. Pauline Brennan had written a poem about addiction, *You Out There Change It*. Nine young ‘new’ Irish, each with their own native language, stood in a line and together simultaneously recited the poem, but each in their own native language. As one young Albanian man finished he looked alarmed as each of the others continued speaking. Why? He, not unreasonably, shared a belief that each language will say the same thing in the same duration of time. His language, however, and to his own surprise, stopped earlier than the others and he was visibly left with nothing more to say. He had noticed something highly significant for the first time. If there can be large differences in ways of saying the same thing, what rich differences might we expect in ways of speaking differently of similar things? There is so much to say, and so many ways to say it, in the lives we live.

In a major urban development on an historic site, such as the Grange-gorman Development, there is indeed much to say. ‘...*the lives we live*’ has been about enabling genuinely important things to be said and shown. The challenge has been to enable that saying and showing, performing and imaging, engaging and reflecting, without being unduly prescriptive. This meant constructing partnerships between those who could authentically speak of lives led in the vicinity of Grange-gorman and artists of various kinds who could shape what might be said, or remembered, into compelling and original expressions. In brief, this meant enabling artists and local citizens to animate the experiences of those who live, and once lived, in the vicinity of Grange-gorman.

In a sense, ‘...*the lives we live*’ has been a natural experiment in two parts. The first concerned particular local community aspirations and preoccupations. The second forged larger-scale, artist-led engagements with specific sites within the overall campus design. So far Public Art Working Group (PAWG) has commissioned four major site-specific art works. From its strategic position, Garrett Phelan’s joyful, fully-functional *THE GOLDEN BANDSTAND – Sculpture* will serve the whole campus. Alexandra Carr’s richly complex *Solaris Nexum* will grace TU Dublin’s new Central Quad with its celebratory explorations of science, sun and light. Walker and Walkers’ *Endless Play* will enhance the public spaces of the West Quad. For the HSE Residential Care Neighbourhood, Fergus Martin *The Blue of the Sky, The Green of the Grass, The Red of a Rose* is working to enliven the experience of those coming to live in these interconnected homes by making richly colourful works, with blues, greens and reds referencing sky, grass and roses. This will complement the already completed works by Oisín Byrne *Long Live The Weeds and The Wilderness Yet* and Joy Gerrard *Dusk/ Dawn* in the HSE’s Phoenix Care Centre.

PAWG has also funded 27 community projects. The aim in this latter strand has been to explore themes of local interest that arise in dialogue with the artists who responded to, and engaged with, our various calls. Consistent themes emerged, symptomatic perhaps of the early communal dynamics which can arise when transforming an historic urban setting like Grange-gorman – with its own dark histories – into a vibrant, optimistic new urban quarter.

The works and events that emerged from this strand of PAWG’s work harmonised well with the injunction of the Finnish-American architect, Eliel Saarinen, who, in 1950, advised:

‘Always design a thing by considering it in its next larger context – a chair in a room, room in a house, a house in an environment, an environment in a city plan.’²

We supported 27 projects which together involved 64 artists and 50 organisations. Here are just some of the themes, at least as I discern them, which emerged from the experiences of people living within what has been designed, whether deliberately or by historical happenstance, in the domestic and urban hinterland of Grangegorman. Each of these projects will be detailed in the substance of this book, but here is a birds-eye view of some of the topics which came into focus.

A pervasive concern turned out to be ideas of 'home' and, more specifically, of 'homemaking'. Home is where you live, but where you live requires further acts to transform a habitation into a home, acts of personalisation and of ownership. Prisoners turn tiny appropriated spaces in their cells into 'incarceration altars'. Echoes of past inmates/patients speak to us through relics of their troubled existence that they would have kept close to themselves (rosary beads, scapulars, etc.), and which have been retrieved from the abandoned asylum. Related themes of 'confinement', 'walls' to be broken down, and the intergenerational expansion of the horizons of lived memory were also prominent. The hidden memories that many 'new' Irish bring with them (exile and, perhaps, searing memories of abuse and grief) fed into themes of dispossession and dislocation. Social history, transformational political histories, and prospective ecological concerns joined the leavening process of this strand of PAWG's work. But so too did optimistic celebratory projects such as actively nurturing the development of new young 'voices'.

All of this, and more, was accomplished on very limited budgets. The Per Cent for Art scheme allowed for the pooling of monies, but those quantities were severely limited by remaining at levels capped in 1996. We successfully added our voice to the argument for substantially revising those quanta upwards for future developments. The new dispensation hopefully will come into force from 2020 onwards.

Our work should be understood as just the first of many phases of enhancement of the newly emerging Grangegorman urban quarter. We developed one model for the particular period of time for which we had responsibility. We hand on the baton confidently to our successors.

The lives we live are profoundly shaped by the opportunities that our environments afford us. But there is a dynamic tension between the familiar and the new, what we call 'home' and what must make 'home', that is the source of our noticing what to appreciate and what to change in our own local worlds. Art helps keep that dynamic well-oiled. Eavan Boland began her poem *In Our own Country* with the words

'They are making a new Ireland
At the end of our road'

And ended it with these:

'We walk Home. What we know is this
(and this is all we know): We are now
and we will always be from now on –
for all I know we have always been –

exiles in our own country.'³

A salutary thought from a life well lived.

1 Mahon, D. (2011). *New Collected Poems*. Oldcastle: The Gallery Press.

2 Saarinen, E. (1950). *Time Magazine*, July 2. See, also, Benson, C. (2013). Acts not Tracts! Why a complete psychology of art and identity must be neuro-cultural. In: T. Roald and, J. Langed, eds. *Art and identity: Essays on the aesthetic creation of mind*. Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi. pp.39-65.

3 Boland, E. (2014). In: P. Meehan and J.A. Randolph, ed. *A Poet's Dublin*. Manchester: Carcanet Press. pp.81.