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Civic engagement in design-led planning

Towards a narrative for
the future city

Abstract

David Jordan and Fergus Browne explore the role of urban design, alternative methodologies to studying public space and creative urbanism in boosting public participation in the planning and design of our cities. Using their Dublin-based '21st Century Liffey' project as evidence, they argue that it is only through alternative urban approaches that foster real civic engagement, rather than traditional consultation, that decisions on a city's development can truly reflect citizens' expectations.

The 21st century city is an intriguing drama. It is a maelstrom of narratives, where the themes of adaptability, resilience and the circular economy, amongst many others, are in vogue; where cultural regeneration is experiencing an all-time high; where sustainable movement is in; and the deleterious car is out. Despite these principles, conflicts of interest occur, preventing this 'idyllic' city from emerging. In this 'please all' approach, the bigger picture becomes neglected, and the result can be a confusion of unfulfilled plans and an arbitrarily designed built environment. Such a scenario produces a type of civic ambivalence, one which has an insidious impact, affecting the citizens' ability to connect and engage with their city (Browne & Jordan, 2013). It is within this broad contextual setting that this paper

will explore the role urban design, alternative methodologies to studying public space and creative urbanism, can play in enhancing public participation in the future planning and design of our cities. Focusing on the authors' Dublin-based '21st Century Liffey' project as an example of a major contribution by young professionals to the study of the future direction of cities, this paper will argue that it is only through alternative urban approaches, which foster civic engagement, rather than by the habitual constrained tokenism of statutory 'public consultation', can there be genuine public participation, where the decisions on a city's development can truly meet and reflect the expectations of its citizenry. From the initiation of the project, the authors were conscious in their attempt to create a

robust template for inclusive city planning. Indeed, this project's *raison d'être* was about a people-centred urbanism, one in which the public were placed to the fore and centre of the methodological approach. The result saw the final output of the project, 'A Vision for the River Liffey Quays', representing a holistic and honest response to the needs of the people and the city.

> The city, the river, the project

In 2010, Dublin was a challenging place for young urbanists. Ireland was in the depths of a severe economic recession. Not only was there a lack of faith in the hitherto prevailing development paradigm amongst the governing authorities; there was also a crisis of confidence in the future of the city. Added to this was an increasingly cynical public, sceptical about all the plans and proposals for the capital, which were promised in a mass of glossy documents and high-profile media launches, but never delivered. Yet, despite this, or rather because of it, the authors felt that it was the optimal time to initiate an independently-led project exploring the Liffey Quays' future potential.

Why choose the Liffey Quays, one may ask? This was, indeed, a pertinent question, for the methodological template designed could have been applied to any number of interesting areas. However, it was considered by the authors that the Quays best represented a space in Dublin that, while crucial to the lifeblood of the city, seemed to epitomise the lack of public engagement and civic pride in recent years. Despite being the most defining feature of Dublin's legibility - a unique space in the capital - the public realm of the historic Quays was overlooked, remaining in a general state of shabbiness and engineered to accommodate and maximise the flow of traffic (Jordan & Browne, 2014). For the authors, the Quays constituted a fascinating series of dichotomies, where space can be simultaneously described as a divider and as a connector; as a space in-between and as a place left behind. Normally, a city's river is an attraction in itself, for instance the Seine in

Paris or the Vltava in Prague. The Liffey Quays lack this quality. They bisect the heart of the city, but are not part of it. Whilst the river has historically created a strong geographical and symbolic reference point dividing the city into north and south, facilitating the development of strong cultural identities and communities, it ironically can be seen as suffering from an identity crisis. This, however, is not due to an absence of character, but has more to do with a lack of thoughtful design and consideration for this pivotal space. Therefore it can be said that the '21st Century Liffey' project was born from a shared passion to "do something" to help re-imagine this high profile city space and to contribute to a discourse on the future of our public space, promoting the benefits of urban design and public engagement as a driving mechanism and study methodology.

Upon the commencement of the project, the authors actively sought out the support of Dublin City Council, the key statutory body responsible for the Liffey Quays. The Council's response was a proactive one: they welcomed the ideas that would disseminate from such independent research, free from the restrictions and time limitations of any statutory plans. This relationship with the City Council ultimately proved to be very successful, as it resulted in the work contributing to evolving policy discourse in Dublin, forming a part of the City's Public Realm Strategy and succeeding in getting the Quays designated as the primary public space in Dublin City (Dublin City Council, 2012)..

> An alternative approach

There was an awareness that Dublin was on the threshold of a new urban paradigm when the authors devised their initiative, and that in order to foster genuine public participation in the future direction and planning of their city, a swift move was needed away from traditional and restrictive methodologies of the past towards a more creative, alternative and visual approach.

It is the authors' strong belief that the city is a drama, comprised of a plethora of narratives,

and that a multifaceted understanding of these narratives is the key to designing successful and responsive public spaces. By reflecting on the concept of drama and performance, it was quickly recognised that the Liffey Quays had the potential to become the *mise-en-scène* of the city. In this re-imagined scenario, the river would become the protagonist, not only central to a people-focused waterfront, but also the focus of the city in its entirety. By drawing on and extrapolating the key points of a number of established urban design theories, the authors embarked on an extensive urban evaluation of this unique space.

The challenge when conducting this evaluation process was how to balance the level of flexibility and creativity required to embrace a new urban paradigm and foster greater civic involvement, while simultaneously producing a comprehensive evaluation of this key city space, which could then be used to harness support and momentum for the initiative by inspiring city management and planners. The key to achieving this balance was a robust process, where each stage in the

project informed the next.

It has been noted that the Liffey Quays are a paradox, simultaneously part of, but removed from, Dublin life. The overarching project concept was founded in urban design theory and based on the above paradox. By reflecting on various theoretical principles, it was observed that psychological perception is usually absent from typical applied urban studies. Thus, by evoking the concept of the urban *flâneur*, a series of psychogeographical experiments were conducted to create a mental map of urban city spaces along the Liffey Quays. In a similar way, the *flâneur* is both a detached urban observer and also part of society at large. This technique allowed the authors to hold a mirror up to the urban spaces along the Liffey as experienced by the pedestrian user, and present these to the public at large using a series of thought provoking graphics, images and studies, eliciting from them a deeper understanding of the urban spaces in their city (Jordan & Browne, 2014).

Interaction with people who use the Liffey



Fig1 - Painting the Quays red: highlighting street clutter

Quays formed a critical part of the project, which was enhanced by providing them a catalyst through which they could interact on a level they could relate: through personal experience and perception. By conducting interviews and surveys, it was found that 86% of the users of the Liffey Quays had negative perceptions of the space (Browne & Jordan 2011).. By graphically representing street clutter and studying walking routes through

the space, images of a public realm that was hostile to pedestrians, impeded movement and fostered negative experiences became evident (see image 1). The mix of theoretically founded experiments, interaction with the public and a focus on the users' experience produced an insightful overview of this city space, creating a showcase designed to inspire and mobilise change.



Fig2 - Attendees at the launch of the project's first public exhibition

Fig3 - An example of some public feedback from a 'Conversation and Debate' event



> Conversation and debate

Taking inspiration from the celebrated Irish author and playwright Oscar Wilde, who famously said that the only thing worse than being talked about is not being talked about, it was determined that the key theme of the project would be “conversation and debate”. Raising public awareness and interacting with people who use the Liffey Quays on a daily basis were crucial in hoping to realise the desired output of the project of initiating positive change on the Quays. Thus, the methodological process utilised sought to engage with key partners and stakeholders and get the message out to the public by every possible means.

Subsequently, a decision was made to establish a multidisciplinary discussion group within Dublin City Council. This forum acted as a springboard to debate the current problems and the future direction of the Quays with senior officials, and also gave the authors a platform to set out the key findings of the project and advocate for a new people-focused and urban design-led development paradigm to be embraced in this important and complex city space.

In order to broaden the debate, a targeted approach was employed that sought to connect with important urbanist and business bodies in

Dublin. The evaluation document itself became a crucial tool for stimulating discussion and debate, as it was felt by many members of the public that its graphical depictions and studies helped them to identify with the various problems and issues on the Quays, which they believed needed to be addressed.

A project website and a blog were also developed, and the authors hosted a series of public discussion forums, lunchtime debates and presentations, all of which were funded by the key stakeholder organisations. Of all the tools of engagement that were employed, perhaps the most effective from the authors' point of view were the two public exhibitions showcasing the project. In the first exhibition, the focus was on the evaluation of the Quays, with emphasis placed on making the work interactive so as to give the public an opportunity to communicate their opinions and ideas. The public's response was both positive and informative in helping to pinpoint issues that would not have been evident from a purely desk-based study. Feedback from the exhibition and wider engagement through social media and other public events proved critical in influencing the final ideas and designs of the vision for the Liffey. Launched by the city's Lord Mayor, the strategic vision document was the subject of the concluding

exhibition. Whilst the ideas posed in this work were designed to be creative, aspirational, and in some cases conceptual, they became an incredibly effective tool in instigating debate as to how the Liffey Quays should be re-imagined. This was all the more remarkable as such a discussion was completely absent from the city's narrative when the project was first conceived.

It is noted by the authors that the Dublin of 2016 has moved towards a discourse the authors first championed. Whereas earlier the Quays were considered to be 'off limits' as regards addressing the problem of traffic congestion, the Council is now in the process of planning a major River Liffey cycle route, one which will remove traffic lanes and car parking and move towards addressing the balance in favour of sustainable mobility, something the authors' 2030 vision for the Liffey Quays had very much envisaged (Dublin City Council & National Transport Authority, 2015).

> Creative urbanism, civic engagement and the future city

By presenting a reflective overview of the authors' work in Dublin, this paper has demonstrated the universality of the '21st Century Liffey' project, where the commonality of themes explored are applicable to many cities throughout Europe, both now and in the future. The project was in part a response to the ambiguous civic direction and lack of imagination that characterised the development of many cities for much of the past century, and presented the question as to whether this should be the defining feature of the next. The research presented a corollary that the absence of a responsive people-focused urban vision equates to a lack of civic engagement and a subsequent loss of confidence in city governance. If not corrected, widespread cynicism becomes entrenched within the populus, which in turn is reflected in the city planning process. In extreme cases, citizens transition from distrusting scepticism to absolute alienation in terms of their role in contributing to the planning and design process

of cities. The essence and universal appeal of the project was to address this imbalance of power, championing how a design-led and collaborative approach to city planning can be a powerful tool in fostering people-centred planning. By evaluating the past and present of Dublin's Liffey Quays, a creative and imaginative vision for its future was presented, which captured the outcomes and insightful contributions of the comprehensive "conversation and debate" process.

This paper argues that the role of urban design as a catalyst for enhancing civic engagement and in making the planning system more inclusive needs to be strengthened. The discipline of urban design lies at the interface of all built environment professions and can play a much more prominent part in the future direction cities take. City officials prepare plans, strategies and policies, which inevitably affect communities, and strive to create better places for people to live in. Why should people not be at the centre of the very process, which can have the greatest effect on their lives?

The authors' entrepreneurial and collaborative initiative exemplifies the role independent research can play in pioneering creative and innovative solutions to city problems. Throughout the duration of the project, it was noted how creativity flourished within Dublin's community of young urbanists, all wishing to have a say in the future of their city. As demonstrated by the work carried out, cities of the future need to embrace this largely untapped resource, lending adequate support and providing collaborative platforms through which young professionals can influence the established planning process. The universal lesson learned from the '21st Century Liffey' project is that contrary to perceived thought, motivation and vision are the key ingredients needed to enact change, and not just the availability of resources. Imagine if such an alternative template and creative ethos was embraced throughout all European cities. A true urban renaissance could be witnessed, one initiated by the millennial generation, but with the resulting benefits shared by all.

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