

# Design in Dublin: The city as a site of responsive and agile practice

This article looks at design in Dublin from 2008 onwards and makes the assertion that the recession has brought about a number of characteristics in design practice in the city. There is a movement of contemporary design in Dublin that is responsive, agile and civic-minded, practised by designers, communities, activists and the City Council. With relatively limited written sources on design in Dublin from 2008 onwards to rely on, much of the research for this article took the form of finding and assessing recent design projects in order to establish correlations or patterns. Another key part of my research has been to interview a variety of people involved in design in Dublin, including staff in Dublin City Council, practising designers, design curators and journalists. This primary research has been key in formulating a sense of what has been happening in Dublin in recent years in terms of design, and it is through conversation and examination that civic and citizens' design practices, showing responsiveness and agility, have been identified as recurrent in Dublin design, and that a factor in allowing these modes of practice to develop is the city itself and the situation it has found itself in.

## Introduction

A much talked-about but very real recession hit Dublin hard. A city that, prior to 2008, was booming and building stagnated. While the years following 2008 have been hard, this period of time has allowed for reflection and maturation (not to mention anger and protest). It has also enabled creativity, risk-taking and the opportunity to approach issues in the city in new ways. Here, I will explore the creativity and risk-taking that is reflected in a number of key design projects undertaken in Dublin since 2008. The aim of this article is to suggest that while making the best of a bad situation is not unique to Dublin, there is a mode of design practice emerging from the city that is particular to the place and the circumstance this place finds itself in.

There are a number of notable things happening with regard to design in Dublin: one is the people who are applying design processes in the city. Curiously, it is not just designers who engage in design in Dublin: they are joined by communities and activists. They are also joined by Dublin City Council, who through a number of different initiatives is applying design in the city in new ways. So, in effect, Dublin is being redesigned from a number of directions, by designers, by users and by government. Another notable

characteristic of design in Dublin is the very nature of the design process: it is responsive and agile. Responsive and agile are both words already employed in the design sector, but you will see that I use them differently here. When I say responsive, I am not referring to web design that alters its look and proportions in response to the device you're viewing it on. Rather, I mean that those employing design in Dublin are doing so in response to the city and its conditions. The practices I examine here respond to both problems and opportunities rather than commercial or client demands. And when I refer to agile design, I am not discussing methods of quick, iterative processes and feedback loops favoured in digital design; instead, I am referring to design that is being employed in flexible and resourceful ways. Design processes are being applied to situations that don't look like design projects, by people who aren't necessarily designers, or by designers working beyond their own disciplines or in collaboration with others. This is a form of agility. While one could argue that this range of characteristics and contributors can be found elsewhere, this particular combination of government, designers, community, responsiveness and agility has created something special in Dublin, worthy of further examination.

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I have selected four projects to demonstrate each of these attributes of design in Dublin. First, I will look at the Dublin Honey Project, a co-operative beekeeping initiative, to illustrate the concept of agile design. Next, I will discuss responsive design, using The Empowered City, a project by Dublin City Council, as an example. Staying with the Council, I will further explore the idea of civic design, looking at Dublin City Council Beta. Lastly, I will look at the role that the citizen plays in design in Dublin, by exploring work by activist Kaethe Burt-O'Dea. Through these four examples it will become clear that design in Dublin is responsive, agile and civic-minded, and I will demonstrate just how important it is to the city that design be practised this way.

#### Agile design: Dublin Honey Project

*'[...] we've built our name around collaboration [...] and that's still a resource, and Dublin's great for that, y'know? Everyone's around the corner.'* (Carvill, 2015)

I phone Gearóid Carvill, an architect who has been working in a diverse range of creative disciplines with his studio abgc, mainly to talk about his latest side project, the Dublin Honey Project. We talk about beekeeping, negotiating the city, and how the past number of years have fostered collaboration and creativity as a necessary means of surviving the recession. We agree with each other that Dublin's size and the people who work there make collaboration and cooperation easier than in other places, and we both question how to keep this creative and collaborative spirit as Ireland's economy improves.

*'What I'd like to see though, and I'm talking about myself as well as everyone else here [...] now you've got to change the scale. Because, I didn't invent creative collaboration and there's a city full of little things like that, but how do we ratchet it up to the next level? [...] The people who have been doing the little gigs, and got the two and a half grand from Absolut Vodka in order to have the exhibition, y'know, I want to see them get the 40 grand next time, for the game to get bigger and smarter.'* (Carvill, 2015)

A project of Carvill's that is getting bigger and smarter is the aforementioned Dublin Honey Project, an example of what I identify as agile design in Dublin. Agile design is a design process applied in a situation or by

a person you don't expect: it is design that might not look like design (it could be a community project, a business, a service), or a discipline taken on by a designer of a different stripe. The Dublin Honey Project aims to maintain beehives throughout Dublin city, producing honey from a number of the city's postcodes. It is a collaboration between Carvill, the architect, and Kieran Harnett, a photographer. It began when Harnett was making his honey and putting his own name on it. Carvill stepped in, insisting that knowing where the honey came from was far more interesting than knowing the person who made it, and as such he developed packaging with frequent collaborator, Nicky Hooper that could tell that story.

Local honey is marvellously valuable. Honey produced in your area can strengthen your immunity to the pollen you're living among (Murray, 2015). Bees, believe it or not, love cities. Cities are a little warmer, tend to have a greater variety of flora to harvest from, and tend to be freer of the pesticides and herbicides rife in the countryside. And the feeling is mutual: cities love bees. As active pollinators, bees can contribute massively to the growth, development and diversity of a city's parks, gardens and allotments. So cities really lend themselves to beekeeping, and the Dublin Honey Project responds to and capitalises on that.

Carvill has envisaged the Dublin Honey Project as a co-operative structure, connecting people who want to keep bees, spaces where bees can be kept, and a range of products that are really worth selling. So far, he and Harnett look after apiaries – collections of beehives – in Dublin 14 (Harnett's own garden), Dublin 4 (University College Dublin's orchard) and Dublin 1 (an urban farm cultivated by students in Belvedere College). Carvill and Harnett look after the maintenance and harvesting of honey, and sell most of it through the Dublin Honey Project, while the proprietors of the apiary sites get a jar and a half of honey per hive per year in return for hosting. There are a number of other hosts interested, and while the amount of maintenance Carvill and Harnett can do themselves is limited, there's scope for other experienced beekeepers to look after their own hives, using the Dublin Honey Project as an easier means of selling their own produce.



Fig. 1 Kieran Harnett and Gearóid Carvill, Dublin Honey Project



Fig.2 Dublin Honey Project D9 honey



Fig. 3 A Pivot Dublin workshop hosted by Dublin City Council

Agile design is about stretching beyond a practitioner's own discipline and extending design beyond its obvious applications. A photographer learning to keep bees and an architect building hives and designing honey packaging is a clear display of agility. A creative collaboration that then builds a co-operative network of beekeepers, apiary sites and retailers proves more agile, still. And while a clever urban beekeeping initiative is nothing unique to Dublin (nor is a creative collaboration, for that matter), the city does lend itself to these flexible modes of practice. As written recently, *'there is a connectivity in Dublin which is far from parochial. Multidisciplinary studios, collaborative projects, creative conferences and cultural festivals unite a design community which spans North and South of the city and is connected with just a bike ride'* (Farinella, 2015). It is as though the city itself were designed with agility in mind.

#### Responsive design: The Empowered City

In November 2014, Dublin City Council hosted a two-day conference across the city called Hidden Rooms. Groups of 20 or more people from a host of backgrounds and professions gathered in locations all around the city, each given a brief by a different member of Council staff looking for a pilot project to address a different civic need. With names such as The Universal City, The Fair City and others, each sought to tackle an issue the city faces – few of them new – with a view to suggesting a pilot which the Council could potentially put into action.

One such proposal being acted on is The Empowered City. The challenge faced by the group dealing with The Empowered City was how you enable city dwellers (apartment dwellers being identified as a particular group of people in need) to collectively make and act upon decisions that will affect the place in which they live. City dwellers are dependent on and subject to their neighbours, and apartment dwellers particularly so. I speak with Dublin City Architect Ali Grehan, who initiated Hidden Rooms and led the discussion on The Empowered City as part of the event, and she explains to me the need for examination of apartment living in Dublin: *'I wanted to focus on apartments [...] particularly existing apartments. The talk is always about future apartments, and future standards, [...] but the reality is that we have an enormous amount of apartments in Dublin already and how are they going to play out over time? When you look at them [...] you realise that they're in very important parts of the city; they're in prominent places. They're along the Liffey quays, they're in the city centre; they're not hidden away. The fortunes of those buildings do matter. It's not a case of saying they're privately-owned apartments and they're not our problem. They will become our problem if we don't figure out how to value them better'* (Grehan, 2015).

And while the fates of apartment buildings have ramifications for the city's built environment as a whole, on the micro level there is a key design problem in apartment living, namely how you negotiate a shared



space: 'When you come to apartments [...] you're dependent on how somebody behaves two, three floors away. You don't even know their name, you wouldn't know them if you passed them on the stairs, but if they behave badly, you will suffer. [...] And there doesn't seem to be any effective framework in place to manage that' (Grehan, 2015).

Looking to the American Institute of Architects' Design Assistance Programme as a tried and tested model for enabling communities to come together and use design expertise to solve their own problems, big or small, The Empowered City is moving on to pilot phase. Having run workshops to introduce the idea to design professionals who are willing to volunteer to help a community or residential association with an issue they're facing, Grehan is now on the hunt for the right community group to begin work in autumn of this year, because as she says, 'The solution [to the problems of apartment living] lies in some kind of collective action' (2015).

The Empowered City is very much a work in progress and it remains to be seen just how this mode of practice will work in this context, but it shows not just a willingness but an ambition to better use design in Dublin's civic life. It also shows another key characteristic of design in Dublin that I have identified: that of responsiveness. The Empowered City has sought to respond to a very particular issue in city living: that of the negotiation needed in apartment buildings. It has begun with a broad look at a troubled aspect of Dublin's built environment – existing apartment developments – and drilled down to something which can really shape these spaces for the better, firstly for the people actually living in them, and ultimately for the city as a whole. This is because, as Grehan says, if we don't find a way to improve apartment developments, they become everyone's problem. In fact, the whole Hidden Rooms project was based on responsiveness – establishing a whole host of citywide issues, big and small, that need addressing, and bringing together a wide range of people to respond to them with recommendations. Other pilots being progressed from Hidden Rooms include a recently-launched scheme to assist businesses to use design called Design 4 Growth, a rerouting of traffic in the city centre's busy College Green area and a learning exchange with Lewisham Council in



Fig. 4 Capel St parklet, 2012

Fig. 5 South William St parklet, 2015



London to building modular housing units for those in urgent need of shelter in Dublin. The Council is in a unique position to respond to a great many of the city's issues, and appears to be taking advantage of this. But it is not doing it alone, and is collaborating with the city's wide range of designers and communities in order to respond cleverly and creatively.

### Civic design: Dublin City Council Beta

There is an amount of trial and error in The Empowered City and Hidden Rooms. In fact, the initiative is really built on the idea of trialling: the purpose of those workshops was to produce pilot projects the Council could consider trying out. Perhaps an influence on this project was Dublin City Council Beta, a project by Shane Waring, a colleague of Grehan's in the City Architects Division. 'Beta testing' is a phrase of increasing use, often referring to a means of releasing early versions of a website to an audience to see how they use it, with a view to creating changes soon after to reach the end design. It is a means of working that has gained a lot of currency in the tech world, and it has recently been adopted by the Council as a way of creating and testing ideas on the city's streets. Dublin City Council Beta runs a series of Beta Projects around the city, from commissioning artists to decorate traffic light boxes to creating a small seating area or green space (a 'parklet') on a city centre street. These are projects designed to gather feedback and inform future longer-term changes, just like a beta website.

Beta Projects can be suggested from within the Council or by citizens, and are taken on by staff members across the Council's departments. I discuss with Waring how the idea came about, and it is clear that the project is as much about introducing a new way of doing things within the Council as it is about making changes on Dublin's streets:

*'I was at a conference and I heard one of our engineers, who worked in the Drainage department at the time; she wanted to trial a new tree pit at the bottom of a tree so that it would absorb storm water [...] she felt that with the money that would save it would make sense. [...] It overlaps with three departments, because the Parks department own the tree, the Roads and Planning department own the road and the pavement and the Drainage department own the drain underneath. She's only in one of those, so how does she do it? [...]*

*If that was a formalised project like the Grafton Street rejuvenation, managers get together and they authorise the whole thing, teams come together [...] But if an individual staff member wanted to do something, how do they do it? (Waring, 2015)*

In order to develop Beta Projects, Waring has had to devise a means of getting a trial out there, but also a means of gathering feedback and reporting on a trial's results, which has meant actually trialling a variety of trials in order to find out 'what you need to design out of the process to make it as smooth as possible' (Waring, 2015). A trial is undertaken when it is established that a low-cost, short experiment could lead to insights into how to solve a problem, either for citizens or the Council, or sometimes both. It is removed once a pre-determined period of time has passed, and a report card is made to detail whether the trial has proven that an initiative should go ahead, be scrapped or needs more trialling. One such example is the parklet trial, named #StreetParkletBeta as a means of gathering feedback online as well as onsite. First trialled on Capel Street, and then on South William Street, a spill-out space has been designed to see if additional public space outside a local business is useful for the business and/or local residents. If so, perhaps a parklet structure could be rented from the Council or created by businesses to use car parking spaces in a different way:

*'Businesses at the moment can license pavement space. So if you imagine a situation where the pavement is narrow, or maybe the pavement is wide but there are a lot of people, well in those scenarios would it be useful if they can rent a car parking space? That partly comes back down to your definition of that, is that car parking space, or is that public space that we currently use for car parking?'* (Waring, 2015)

Above all, Waring is keen for Beta to create a simple, quick and consistent means of allowing the Council to make positive changes in the city, and for citizens to recognise and engage with the project. With Beta, Waring is employing civic design in two ways. Firstly, he is redesigning a civic body itself, adapting or introducing new processes to make Dublin City Council more effective. Secondly, he is redesigning the city itself, piece by piece, in small but striking ways. He is collaborating across the Council's departments and





divisions, working with agility, and his project is responsive to the city's needs. He is changing civic life, both inside the city's authority and out on its streets.

#### Citizens' design: The Lifeline

*'Is it likely? [...] this isn't the High Line, but the High Line took fifteen years...the High Line got done and it started with a person like me [...] that's how things happen in cities everywhere. Real change takes time.'* (Project Dublin, 2015)

Healthcare designer, community gardener and activist Kaethe Burt-O'Dea has been working slowly and thoughtfully on a number of projects in Dublin aiming to connect people, places and nature, the most ambitious of which is the Lifeline, a linear park and multimodal transport link. Initially considered for a disused railway line in Dublin 7 connecting Broadstone and Broombridge (hence the comparison to the High Line, New York City's famed linear park created on a disused railway line), Burt-O'Dea is now

proposing the Lifeline finds its home in the former terminus of Dublin's Royal Canal, filled in in the 1920s when the canal was rerouted. Already a linear park of sorts, Burt-O'Dea sees it as the ideal route for cyclists and pedestrians to get between Dublin Institute of Technology's (DIT) new purpose-built campus in Grangegorman and its proposed sports centre in Broombridge, as well as alleviating ongoing traffic problems in nearby Phibsborough. In addition to providing a route through the northwest of Dublin's inner city, the Lifeline could be a hub for biodiversity and a *'living laboratory'* for citizens and students alike (Burt-O'Dea, 2015).

Pushing for the Lifeline to become a reality over the past number of years has meant Burt-O'Dea has had to work closely with a number of key agencies: DIT and the Grangegorman Development Agency who have led the creation of DIT's new campus, the Luas, and, of course, Dublin City Council. At various stages in the process these agencies

Fig. 6 Sitric Road Benchmark, an early project from 2009 leading to the Lifeline

have loved or loathed the Lifeline proposal, either seeing it as a threat to plans for heavier infrastructure or recognising the incredible opportunity for the city that it is. And while Burt-O'Dea acknowledges how important it is to work with these agencies and convince them of the worth of the Lifeline, she puts much more of an emphasis on community involvement and backing: *'everyone lives in the community, or everyone lives in a community, so the community is the area where the most potential lies. If you can get the community to rally, as they did in New York with the Highline, then things will happen [...] You can talk to the agencies, but if it doesn't fit into the "plan" you'll just be discarded.'* (Burt-O'Dea, 2015)

So, in order to involve the community, empowering them through participation, and also creating some sort of sustained income for the project, Burt-O'Dea is treating the Lifeline as not just a potential public amenity, but as a social enterprise. She is developing a range of products – honey from the project's new apiary, soaps created using herbs from her community garden and more in the pipeline – to create employment and gain income.

Closer to home, Burt-O'Dea's slow-growing projects have helped to really change her immediate neighbourhood. Starting with a community composting garden on a small patch of green space at the end of her road, Sitric Road, and moving on to a bench suspended between two upright gardens, she has worked with her neighbours to transform an area once full of burnt-out cars and anti-social behaviour. Her latest endeavour on Sitric Road is to create a *'no-spray zone'*, countering recent Council-led use of herbicides on her street. She encountered Council staff spraying Round Up – a glyphosate that is banned in many other countries – on the weeds on her street, but with the support of her neighbours she has convinced the Council to discontinue spraying in her area, and has encouraged them to consider banning the use of these herbicides, full stop. This work has inspired her to pursue a web platform where projects and achievements such as this can be shared, shining a light on community initiatives and, hopefully, encouraging more. A platform such as this would enable people to *'follow the impact we're having [...] and the archive of what we've accomplished so far; speeding*

*up the connections in the network to facilitate the growth of this kind of thinking'* (Burt-O'Dea, 2015).

Burt-O'Dea is the type of person who sees possibilities everywhere, and is willing to give the time and effort to make them a reality. She knows when to push on alone, and when to rally support from others. She also knows when to work with larger bodies, and when to act without them, forcing them to follow her lead. She is a citizen quite like no other, yet during our conversation she cites many other groups working actively to change the city for the better, too – the community in traffic-ridden Phibsborough, the residents in the nearby O'Devaney housing estate and others. She will take her time, and give each action careful consideration. The Lifeline, created by citizens for citizens, will not appear in Dublin 7 overnight, but when it does become a reality, it will have been well worth the wait.

### Conclusion

*'I thought about what happens when you leave a place, but it does not leave you.'* (Whitney, 2014, p31)

It is estimated that one in seven young people has left Ireland since the recession struck (Norton, 2015), and I am one of them. I do not intend to stay away forever, and in the time I have spent abroad I have kept in close contact with Ireland. This research has been an opportunity to more closely engage with design in my capital city, to examine what is happening there and see if connections could be made between a variety of practices.

I have selected four projects with which to illustrate four key – but interrelated – attributes of contemporary design in Dublin. Firstly, the Dublin Honey Project shows agile design, a means of collaborating to apply design processes to an unlikely design project. Next, The Empowered City illustrates responsive design, the type of design practice used to respond directly to needs or opportunities in Dublin. I then move to Dublin City Council Beta to show Dublin's civic design, using the example of a project redesigning the city's local authority in order to better equip it to redesign the city itself. I finish by looking at the Lifeline, demonstrating how citizens employ design processes in order to change the city for themselves. While I selected these four

particularly fascinating and relevant projects, I had many more to choose from: these characteristics – sometimes on their own, but often in combination – are present in many projects, products and initiatives being pursued in Dublin.

Are these characteristics unique to Dublin? Perhaps not, but neither are they present in every city. And I believe the situation in Dublin since 2008 has brought about some of these modes of practice – they did not all exist before. When in 2011, Monocle magazine cast its gaze on a struggling Irish economy, they quoted designer Ciarán Ó'Gaora as saying, *'This isn't a recession. It's a renaissance'* (p75), and it has proved somewhat true. The recession has allowed (or forced) a responsive and agile mode of working, it has encouraged the Council to approach things differently, and has pushed citizens to take some things into their own hands. Another factor in allowing these practices to develop is the city itself: its size is conducive to collaborative working and proactive engagement. It is big enough to have lots of knowledge, skills and expertise, yet small enough that all of that is close by and discoverable. And the people who live and work there are open, friendly and willing to help. Testament to this is the many honest and generous discussions I had with Dubliners in order to compile this research. Dublin is a city that is open, engaged and connected, and these are crucial in developing the methods of design discussed here.

What remains to be seen, as Ireland begins to come out of recession and grow as an economy again, is whether these characteristics will remain in Dublin. Meaningful design work of this nature should not remain the same – it should grow and adapt with an improving economy. But Ireland needs to be careful not to revert to old habits, it needs to take what it's learned from this recession and apply it to the next boom. I hope that this study is coming not at the end of a period of responsive, agile, civic-minded design, but rather at the start of one. Let's hope our renaissance doesn't recede.