

MAKING SPACE



A look at independent arts spaces in Dublin's cultural ecology: why we need them, how they're faring, and how the city can do better

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It's important that we make some kind of a stand. The voice of the artists in the cultural sector is so weak. The thing that makes Dublin so exciting, so sexy and everything, is what we provide culturally, and if we have no space to do it beyond the national institutions, which is the likely thing, Dublin will just be full of hotels and student accommodation.

Vanessa Fielding, artistic director of The Complex, independent arts centre¹

This is definitely the thing I miss the most about Italy, apart from the weather! You know, in Dublin, you really don't meet outside that much, you really don't meet in spaces where you don't need to buy anything just to earn the right to stay there, and Jigsaw was one of the few places that you could just go empty handed and be received with, you know, welcomes and love anyway. And now, I really can't think of another space like that. Just having a space where you can be with people and have fun, without contributing to capitalism and consumption, is something I miss a lot, and I really hope that we create another space like that. But now it's just hard to see beyond the pandemic.

Emilia Burgio, activist and translator²

What does it mean to act together when the conditions for acting together are devastated or falling away? Such an impasse can become the paradoxical condition of a form of social solidarity both mournful and joyful, a gathering enacted by bodies under duress or in the name of duress, where the gathering itself signifies persistence and resistance.

Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*³

Synopsis

This thesis examines the importance of independent, open arts spaces to Dublin's cultural ecology, a city whose urban spaces have become increasingly financialized in recent years, as well as examining the obstacles and possible paths forward for these kinds of spaces. Part One gives an account of the current situation and a very recent history, and an analysis of what these spaces contribute to the culture of the city. Part Two features excerpts from a round table discussion I organised with artists and culture workers involved in a number of different spaces in Dublin about what has grown out of their projects as well as the challenges and opportunities. Based on that conversation, in Part Three I outline some pathways for strengthening the position of independent spaces.

¹Vanessa Fielding, quoted in Peter Crawley, "No place left to show: How Dublin is turning into a cultural ghost town." *The Irish Times*, October 31, 2019. Accessed 30 July 2021. <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/no-place-left-to-show-how-dublin-is-turning-into-a-cultural-ghost-to-wn-1.3999157>.

² Emilia Burgio, from a whatsapp audio message to the author. 26 April 2021.

³ Judith Butler, *Notes for a Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 23.

PART ONE: The Lay of the Land

A crack appears

It was 2010, two years after the start of the global economic crash that had sent Ireland reeling. I was studying drama in Dublin city centre, and getting to know the place properly for the first time. It was a good time for it. There was still a lot of unemployment, but that meant that a lot of people didn't feel like they had anything better to do, especially people who had just finished college, so they started a band, or an alternative club night, or got into acting, or spoken word poetry. The city was full of empty or unfinished office buildings and vacant old houses, and a lot of young people with a lot of energy. Temporary arts venues popped up across the city, hosting alternative drag nights, storytelling nights, exhibitions, gigs, discussion events, workshops, rehearsals and more. Since there was no money anyway, there was a real DIY spirit, with people just putting on the events they wanted to. There was a lot going on, and a lot of big ideas being expressed and exchanged and transformed—invariably over cans of your favourite cheap Polish beer at BYOB⁴ events—including about what kind of city we wanted to make Dublin into now that the nightmarish dream of the Celtic Tiger was over. There was a feeling in the air that all kinds of things were possible.

It wasn't to last though. Around 2014, the year after I finished my BA in drama, the economy had 'improved.' Ireland had been 'good.' We had taken the austerity as if we actually deserved it. The developers started building again, pockets still full of the money that the Irish state had bailed them out with when it chose to alleviate the debt of the banks and property developers rather than that of its citizens. They started to complete the unfinished office blocks, continuing the row of tall shiny buildings on the quays exactly where they had left off. Rental prices started shooting up again, and the artists and art spaces started getting evicted. We were supposed to have been happy while it had lasted, and be grateful for what we'd gotten. The Provisional University, an activist research project focusing on urban space by two Dublin-based geographers, Patrick Bresnihan and Mick Byrne, has provided a succinct account of developments in Dublin over the last two decades, which were only on pause during the years after the recession first hit:

Urban space in Dublin has been subjected to an intense process of privatization, a process linked to the dynamics of financialization.⁵ The city has served as a terrain of expansion for the financial sector, granting finance a central role in urban dynamics and granting urban space a central role in wider political economic developments. Publicly owned land all around the docks has been privatized in the form of office-driven development and gentrifying residential construction. More broadly, between 1999 and 2008 Dublin's cityscape changed almost beyond recognition, with office blocks and shopping centres springing up left, right and centre. It is not only urban space which has been subjected to this process of enclosure, but urban life itself. The political economic development of Dublin, as in other cities, has been

⁴ Bring Your Own Bottle

⁵ Financialization refers to the increase in size and importance of a country's financial sector relative to its overall economy, or economic and political expansion through deregulation of the financial markets, actors, and institutions. Financialization of cities or urban spaces refers to making financial assets out of certain plots or buildings and out of certain infrastructure.

marked by pressure to attract inward investment. As capital has become increasingly deterritorialized, city strategies have shifted towards a focus on mobilizing highly territorialized forms of “local advantage” to bolster tourism and other forms of consumption based on specific and largely non-reproducible forms of urban culture (...), specifically pub culture, “the craic” and live music. The commodification of urban life and the financialization of the city are intimately connected to manifold exclusions, as those who cannot access credit and will not conform to “brand Dublin” have felt more and more like outsiders in their own city, leading to an extraordinary reduction of what is possible in the city and in the richness and wealth of life in Dublin.⁶

Things were still happening, but artists and organisers of cultural events were starting to ‘professionalise’ themselves more in order to make those things happen, maybe because the venues that were still around were the bigger, more established ones. A lot of the fun seemed to have been sucked out of the scene. There were certainly a lot less BYOB events where you could attend a film screening, see some anarchic performance art and have a good dance to finish the night off all under the one roof. As flocks of cranes returned to the skyline in Dublin, it became clear that the Dublin growing up around us was not a Dublin for all of us. It was a Dublin for tourists, a Dublin for the Google workers, a Dublin for international students whose parents could afford to pay crazy rents in the new student accommodations popping up everywhere. Student housing sounds innocuous, but under Irish legislation students are not legally counted as tenants, so they don’t have tenants rights. That means that student rooms do not have a minimum size requirement, and you don’t have to give them contracts for longer than the college term, so you can kick them out at Christmas and in May and use the rooms effectively as hotel rooms for tourists during college holidays and the summer months. This led to new student accommodation in Dublin being identified in investment reports from the likes of Goldman Sachs as one of the most profitable property assets for speculators to invest in in the world. Just one example of many from a city being built for the benefit of people who don’t live there.

There was a worsening of the housing crisis that had already begun during the boom, when rapidly inflating prices and a shrinking social housing stock had created a new layer of people excluded from housing. Between 1996 and 2008 the number of people in unfit or overcrowded accommodation, homeless or unable to afford housing had already risen by 105%.⁷ Focus Ireland, a charity supporting people in homelessness, reported that at the end of 2008 there were 249 families homeless in Dublin. By the end of 2018 that had increased to 1296 families, an increase of 420%.⁸

Alongside others with a low income, many artists began to struggle to afford the rent of their accommodation, and many also had a studio rent to pay on top of that. Anyone connected to

⁶ Patrick Bresnihan and Michael Byrne, “Escape into the city: Everyday Practices of Commoning and the Production of Urban Space in Dublin,” *Antipode* Vol. 47, No. 1 (July 2014): 40.

⁷ Patrick Bresnihan and Michael Byrne, “Financialization and the enclosure of the city: the right to the city and the right to housing in contemporary Ireland and Spain.” (Dublin: The Provisional University, 2012), 8.

⁸ Focus Ireland press release, “Focus Ireland puts homelessness through the #10yearchallenge.” 27 January 2019. Accessed 1 August 2021.
<https://www.focusireland.ie/press/focus-ireland-puts-homelessness-10yearchallenge-shows-number-families-homeless-dublin-rocketed-420-since-2008/>.

the arts and cultural sector in Dublin began to feel the change in the city too. There was less and less optimism, and people seemed to have less and less energy for organising things. Or maybe it was simply that it took more and more energy to organise things in the first place. It felt like every other week a space was closing. The majority of the spaces that closed were still paying their rent and thus were financially viable. The Provisional University researched Dublin's independent spaces between 2013 and 2016, which is the main supporting research I will be drawing on throughout this thesis, and theorised that the short answer to why so many spaces have been closed down is that *'they don't fit within the vision of Dublin's future development,'* which continues to be dominated by the speculative and commercial value of real estate, alongside the transformation of the city centre into a consumer-friendly environment.⁹ The main reasons spaces close are either because landlords decide to redevelop the property or simply decide that they can charge more rent to a commercial entity, or because of clashes with neighbours over 'anti-social behaviour,' with the police and the city council often supporting the interests of private businesses and individuals rather than the independent cultural spaces. There have been cases of spaces getting shut down by the city on health and safety grounds, because the building does not meet fire safety regulations. The Provisional University's research identified that, in relation to public institutions that ostensibly work to support the arts and public amenities for residents of the city, such as Dublin City Council (DCC), *'there is clearly a failure to legislate for health and safety in a manner which empowers citizens to participate in the production of urban space; make empty spaces which meet safety standards available to citizens; and control rent prices.'*¹⁰ Their conclusion on this point is that public policies that sustain and promote the real estate market and property speculation are contributing to the challenges for independent spaces, rather than supporting the development of such citizen-led initiatives.

An unhealthy cultural ecology?

Fast forward to 2021, and by now journalists have already been writing about the threats to Dublin's cultural scene for years. There is a lot of talk about the disappearance of artist studios and workspaces, and the fact that this has led to another wave of artists and creatives having to leave the city, to other parts of the country or abroad, since even London is more affordable these days. I would argue that it is not the lack of spaces to work in, but the deteriorating health of a whole cultural ecology that is making it increasingly challenging and decreasingly attractive to live and work as an artist in Dublin.

But what is a cultural ecology? This term has been in use in relation to the arts since the 1960s, but the framework has only gained currency more recently, since Ann Markusen, the lead author of a 2011 paper, *California's Arts and Cultural Ecology*, gave this helpful definition:

An arts and cultural ecology encompasses the many networks of arts and cultural creators, producers, presenters, sponsors, participants, and supporting casts

⁹ The Provisional University, "Cracks in the city: an interview on Dublin's independent spaces," Accessed 30 July 2021.

<https://provisionaluniversity.wordpress.com/2014/07/16/cracks-in-the-city-an-interview-on-dublins-independent-spaces/>.

¹⁰ Bresnihan and Byrne, "Escape into the city," 49.

embedded in diverse communities. Forty years ago, scientists and policymakers realized that treating plants, animals, minerals, climate, and the universe as endlessly classifiable, separate phenomena did not help people understand or respond to environmental problems. So they created the integrated field of environmental ecology. In similar fashion, arts producers, advocates and policymakers are now beginning to strengthen the arts and cultural sphere by cultivating a view of its wholeness and interconnectedness... We define the arts and cultural ecology as the complex interdependencies that shape the demand for and production of arts and cultural offerings.¹¹

We have all become more aware in recent years of the importance of biodiversity to an ecosystem, because of the interdependencies that sustain the various life forms within the system, and I would posit that the same is true of a cultural ecology. Different spaces ‘feed’ us in different ways, both as audiences and as artists. The problem in Dublin is not the number of spaces disappearing, rather it is the kind of spaces that are disappearing. The diversity of the ecosystem is under threat. According to a report published by Dublin City Council Arts Office in February 2020, the actual number of artist workspaces has not changed that much in the preceding 10 years.¹² A lot of spaces have closed, but generally a new studio space pops up once one closes, often on the initiative of members of the former space. But when you look through the list of some 80 artists’ workspaces, which includes studio spaces, rehearsal spaces, and venues, very few of them are smaller venues where people can come together to collectively enjoy and *make* art and culture. The big venues remain, the Abbey Theatre and the National Concert Hall for example, but despite the fact that these venues receive the lion’s share of public funding for their respective artforms, these venues are not where the majority of art and culture is being produced, and not where the majority of artists get involved in the arts and develop their practices. Most of the places that have disappeared, and not been replaced by similar venues, are smaller scale artist-run gig and exhibition spaces, including spaces that catered to their specific locality and spaces that were open for anyone to put on workshops or events for cheap or free, such as Jigsaw or Exchange. These were grassroots spaces, collectively organised for the most part, that were open for anyone to participate or create events. The loss of these kinds of spaces means that there are less points of access for people to participate actively in arts and culture, particularly for people who may feel uncomfortable or intimidated by or just disinterested in institutional spaces, or who are not given space to produce work in institutional spaces, for various reasons.

John Holden, in a 2015 report on the cultural ecology of the UK, wrote that

¹¹ Ann Markusen et al, “California’s Arts and Cultural Ecology,” (Sacramento: California Arts Council, 2011), 8.

¹² Jackie Ryan, “Interim Report on Artists’ Workspaces in Dublin City” (Dublin: Dublin City Council Arts Office, 2020).

An ecological approach concentrates on relationships and patterns within the overall system, showing how careers develop, ideas transfer, money flows, and product and content move, to and fro, around and between the funded, homemade and commercial subsectors. Culture is an organism not a mechanism; it is much messier and more dynamic than linear models allow. (...) Culture consists of moments when people and things come together in concatenations, 'flowerings', events and assemblages.¹³

Holden later quotes Geoffrey Crossick, who writes that '*... the need is for a system to create spaces in which something can happen.*'¹⁴ It is in those spaces of possibility that vibrant new artistic practices, collaborations and projects can emerge; practices and collaborations and projects that can flow into and influence other spaces and other cultural actors later too. What has been disappearing from Dublin's cultural ecology over the past five or six years, and not getting replaced at a fast enough rate, are those spaces of possibility. A city needs more than just rooms for artists to work in, and bigger rooms for gigs to happen in. It needs open places people can come together in: places where relationships can form; where people can experience the work of others and have conversations and bounce ideas off each other; places where people to socialise and let off steam and to give each other energy; places where joy to be created, joy that can sustain us and inspire us despite rising rents, threats of eviction, unstable incomes and other precarious economic and social conditions faced by a big range of people in the city. Spaces are not neutral. They are produced by the social relations that take place within them. And those social relations will play a big part in determining what kinds of ideas and projects come out of those spaces.

When spaces are described as 'independent' in the cultural scene in Dublin it means that they are not run by the city council or by another state body, and it also usually means that they are not-for-profit spaces. The word is sometimes used interchangeably with the term 'artist-led.' It does not mean that they don't receive public funding at all, but that they are at enough of a remove from public bodies to be able to take decisions about the governance of their space independently. When I describe a space as 'open,' which is a less commonly used term in the cultural sector in Ireland, I am talking about accessibility for people to come into the space, to make and do things there and shape the life of the space, but that can still look different in different spaces. There can be a literal open door policy, where anyone can come in during opening hours. It can also be a space that opens on certain days of the week for activities, or workshops, or regular group sessions that are free to attend, or has some kind of open groups or collectives attached to it. It might have events that are free to the public and where people are free to become active participants in the events, or avail of resources, or organise events themselves. It might be open to anyone becoming a member, and then having a say in how the space is run. I am not working with a strict definition. It's more of a feeling, of a space that's inclusive, participatory and anti-elitist, and that includes access to and participation in some of the core activities of the space at no cost to the individual, or if there is some cost that there is also a way for that cost to be taken on by other members or organisers in the case of people who can't afford it. In this thesis I am looking specifically at spaces where the art or theatre or music is taken seriously, so made

¹³ John Holden, "The Ecology of Culture," (Swindon: Arts and Humanities Research Council, 2015), 11.

¹⁴ Crossick 2006, as cited in Holden, "The Ecology of Culture," 11.

with the aim of contributing to or countering the wider culture, rather than spaces that frame themselves as night schools or other places where people can learn a specific skill or practise a hobby in the context of a class. I would argue that spaces that are open, to some extent, to anyone who wants to get involved as a maker, and are also aiming at making new and experimental work are particularly important, to cities and to the arts, because I think that erasing or sidestepping the binary between professional art and amateur or 'community' art acknowledges and tries to correct for the fact that a lot of people face significant barriers to becoming an arts professional, whatever that term might mean, and allows for more openness and exciting ideas and people to enter into mainstream professionalized arts spaces and scenes, as well as facilitating the creation of dynamic arts experiences for all kinds of audiences. Inclusivity should not just be viewed as a moral good or the provision of a right to self expression, but as something essential for facilitating the evolution of new art.

In the same report mentioned above Holden describes four essential roles in cultural ecologies, roles that are played by both individuals and organisations, and, I would argue, physical arts spaces as well. Those roles are Guardians, Connectors, Platforms and Nomads. Guardians look after tangible and intangible cultural assets. Examples include museums, libraries, archives, heritage bodies, as well as academics and some galleries and performing arts companies that perform repertoires. Connectors, as the name suggests, put people and resources together, and move energy around the ecology. Examples might include cultural producers, curators, certain organisations and venues, some arts administrators, and bloggers. Platforms are places where work can be presented, namely venues, galleries, community halls, pubs, clubs, streets and websites that host cultural content. These three roles can all exist because of the fourth role, that of the nomad, which describes most of the population of a cultural ecology, who range freely across the cultural world, visiting venues, watching films and TV shows, borrowing library books and so on. Individual artists can also be nomads, showing or performing work in different places at different times.¹⁵

As I see it, the guardians are still standing, and although it is slowly starting to change, traditionally the national institutions (the National Gallery, the Irish Museum of Modern Art, the Abbey Theatre, the National Concert Hall, the National Library, the National Archives, the National Museum of Ireland, the Chester Beatty Library) haven't made much space for people to participate actively as art and cultural producers outside of their own curated circles of collaborators, so they also do not even exercise their full potential as platforms. The number and variety of smaller platforms has decreased, and I would argue that we have lost a lot of connectors in the independent spaces that have closed in the last decade too, as venues can themselves be connectors, offering and curating '*porous, connected and flexible spaces which are vital to a rich creative ecology and dynamic creative economy.*'¹⁶ Independent arts spaces in Dublin were interdisciplinary long before the word was heard of in the bigger institutions for example, with venues such as the Joinery (now closed) regularly presenting collaborations between musicians, writers and performance artists. With fewer spaces where artists and other creatives can be part of a community and programme their own events, artists are becoming increasingly 'nomadic', which I fear is leading us to a cultural ecology where the links are becoming weaker and the interdependencies not being

¹⁵ Holden, "The Ecology of Culture," 29-31.

¹⁶ Ibid, 30.

nurtured, leading to fragmentation, less opportunities for audience development at a grassroots level, and low morale among artists working outside of the commercial subsector. The role of smaller scale, independent, open arts spaces as connectors and as platforms needs to be recognised and better supported by the funding bodies for the arts and culture. As Claire Reddington, one of the cultural producers interviewed in the report by Holden, says, connectors are not given due weight: *'the thing that needs funding is the nodes in the system'*.¹⁷ This would benefit not only artists and local audiences, but the cultural scene of the city as a whole.

It takes a village: community building in precarity

Being part of creative communities over the years has given a kind of value and meaning to my life that I can't get from being part of a family or a group of friends, or a workplace. For me the joy of art is about the doing of something together, the making and the taking it in too. So without someone to do it with, I don't feel I am really doing anything. Like a tree falling in an empty forest. And it can be hard to find someone to make things with.

But spaces like these—whether they are magicked into being in old warehouses, back rooms of community centres or hospitals, old shops fronts that were going cheap— create possibilities for doing things together, even when you don't necessarily know the other people very well, or click with them, or even speak the same language, because you are already on a common ground for making stuff. Everything else becomes secondary.

In October 2017 I was asked by Maud Hendricks from Outlandish Theatre Platform, whose co-created work I had long admired, to be a facilitator in Open Theatre Practice, a new weekly performance-making practice they were establishing in a theatre originally built for staff pantomimes in the Coombe maternity hospital in Dublin 8, where they became the first artists in residence, a situation they initiated and negotiated themselves. The sessions were going to be open to anyone in the area, whether they had an arts background or not. At the time Maud contacted me, I was in a position where I was hardly ever making work, but rather spending most of my time outside of my side job applying for opportunities to show work or get funding, teaching or preparing to teach, or searching for more regular work in the arts. I had recently returned to Dublin after working in Berlin for a few years after graduating from my BA. The isolation I felt back in Dublin in what I was trying to do creatively was hard to manage, especially on top of the economic precarity that was a consequence, as I hustled to find bearable side jobs to supplement my teaching work and tried to get creative projects off the ground. There seemed to be very little time for blue sky making.

I was happy that they wanted me to work alongside them as a facilitator, but being part of the sessions as a participant/creator too is what really helped me get back on my feet again creatively, and regain confidence in myself as a maker. I started creating solo performances for other contexts too. Open Theatre Practice, or OTP as we affectionately called it, became my creative family in Dublin. I met Ingrid, who became a long term collaborator and close friend, at OTP. I found myself in a position to support and give feedback to other makers, which I hadn't had much chance to do since college. Whatever else was going on in a given week, I knew that every Wednesday night there was a group of people that I would make

¹⁷ Holden, "The Ecology of Culture," 30.

something with, or who would give me feedback on something I was making. People I could have fun with.

As with artists in most countries, the life of an artist in Ireland entails a certain degree of economic precarity. In the latest data available on the living and working conditions of artists in the Republic of Ireland from 2010 it was reported that

Some 58% of artist households find it difficult to make ends meet, and 9% have 'great difficulty' making ends meet' and 'some 23% were in arrears in relation to a utility bill (e.g. electricity or gas) in the year prior to the study, compared to 8% of the wider population. Comparisons available for income data for 1978 and 2008 suggest that artist incomes have fallen relative to other workers over this period. Despite relatively high levels of education, work patterns are volatile and many artists report leading stressful lives in which they find it hard to obtain or maintain a good work-life balance, and may experience periods of unemployment.¹⁸

Our social existence depends on interdependence with others. When those interdependencies are weak, especially on top of financial insecurity, that can make people precarious. Many artists work independently as freelancers, and thus are not automatically connected to colleagues or the support of an organisation. We also '*depend on institutionalized forms of recognition, infrastructure that shapes our place in the world,*' and '*when these systems of care and support are fragmented by the uneven impacts of capitalism and global forms of racism and exploitation, precarity emerges.*'¹⁹ And so precarity is directly connected to politics. Independent art spaces can provide an invaluable structure and social network for artists and others engaged in the arts. In the report on the working conditions of artists, they also asked the respondents about the factors that have held back their career development as artists. The most important factor cited was the lack of financial return. The next three factors were a lack of work opportunities, a lack of time for creative work due to other responsibilities, and a lack of funding and other financial supports. The next set of needs was related to more work opportunities, more demand for their work and more education of audiences and the wider public on different artforms. Following that was a set of needs around factors affecting their ability to 'supply' arts work, including a desire for more time, more or better space or equipment, and more networks of artists. I believe that this last set of needs stems at least in part from the lack of arts spaces where artists can share space and equipment, and develop networks. These networks can also help to lessen the burden of some of the other obstacles.²⁰

These artistic communities help to fight social precarity of artists and others, and do so by creating spaces for people to cohabit creatively, socially and economically. A sharing of resources and equipment often fosters a sharing of frustrations and stress, which can be just as important for our wellbeing as artists and people as the sharing of ideas. Where before

¹⁸ Dr Clare McAndrew and Cathie Kimm, "The Living and Working Conditions of Artists in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland," (Dublin: The Arts Council and The Arts Council of Northern Ireland, 2010), 12-13.

¹⁹ Jennifer Shaw and Darren Byler, "Precarity," *Cultural Anthropology*. Accessed 30 April 2021. <https://journal.culanth.org/index.php/ca/catalog/category/precarity>.

²⁰ McAndrew and Kimm, "The Living and Working Conditions of Artists in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland," 14-15.

you had been alone in your room or your studio, now you suddenly had some kind of colleagues. Even if you only see those colleagues one evening a week, or a couple of Sundays a month, it can make all the difference. Often the friendships and working alliances that develop are ones that are not so easily formed in other spaces. While it is subtle, some sort of new norms are produced in these spaces that can allow different forms of relations and collaboration to emerge. Artists can also cultivate different relationships with audiences in these spaces, introducing audience members who perhaps came to support a friend or family member to new things in a welcoming and social environment that is less intimidating than that of bigger institutions, and inviting them to reconsider their conception of what art is. There is less hierarchy and roles are less fixed; an audience member can more easily become a spontaneous performer, kids can decide to show the adults how it is done instead, and newer artists can share the stage with veterans.

None of this is a substitute for a decent living wage, but without these communities it would be hard to imagine even being able to put up the fight for one.²¹ Part of the value of looking at culture as an ecology rather than an economy is that it means we can better examine non-monetary value and exchange within the system, as well as the flow of money. These spaces may not be places that can offer employment to a huge number of artists, or that can even provide paid working opportunities, but they are essential for the development of communities that can help sustain us creatively, socially and emotionally. And, if they were better funded there is no reason that they couldn't provide regular paid work to a variety of artists, if that is something that an organisation was interested in pursuing. There is often a sense in bottom up arts spaces or explicitly anarchist organisations that once money comes into the picture it complicates things, and there is truth in that, but currently many of these practices are effectively subsidised by the people involved in them, so making funded volunteer allowances within the arts in Ireland more available would at least help to make participation in the arts making more viable for more people, by lessening the economic gap between doing paid work in another sector and voluntary work or participation in the arts.

In their research, the Provisional University discovered that a lot of these spaces were created out of a practical need and desire for other kinds of spaces in the city, rather than out of a political agenda:

While most people involved in independent spaces were framing what they were doing in pragmatic more than political terms, they were also motivated by the context of what we would call 'neoliberal urbanism'. This has a lot to do with how commercialized the city has become, how expensive it is to do pretty much anything. For example, quite a lot of spaces emerged from people who needed a space to work from but couldn't afford to rent anywhere as individuals. People were also motivated by how boring and limited social and cultural life had become in the city.²²

People create the culture they don't find available in the city, and create spaces to do it in too. The pioneers of this in any generation are important, because by creating an alternative

²¹ An exciting development worth noting here is the official formation last year of Praxis Artists' Union, a trade union for artists across all disciplines in Ireland. Initial meetings about setting up an artists' union were held in Jigsaw circa 2017, and a trial period was supported by a residency programme in A4 Sounds Gallery & Studio, a space represented in the conversation in Part Two.

²² The Provisional University, "Cracks in the city: an interview on Dublin's independent spaces."

they also expose a whole bunch of other people to the fact that creating alternatives is possible, and so other people start up their own projects and spaces off the back of those first bursts of energy. Ideas flow through the ecology, making the surrounding ground that bit more fertile for the next idea that will come along. The years after the recession, described at the beginning of this text, had been but a brief respite from the mechanisms of financialization of the city, which grinded back into action as soon as it was viable, but it did allow a crack to open up in the city. The physical opening up of buildings developed for private use opened up the imaginations of a generation of culture lovers in Dublin to the fact that these things were possible, and the events and parties that happened in those years also brought a lot of those people to into contact with people who had been involved in grassroots spaces in Dublin for many years already. There isn't room for a discussion on the topic here, but this period also birthed a resurgence of squatting in Dublin, with some of those squats, most notably Grangegorman (evicted for the final time in 2016) also becoming ad hoc venues for performance, music, and solidarity fundraisers.

In the 2010 report, artists were invited to make further comments at the end of the survey and most did so. Themes emerging from these comments include the severe difficulties for many in surviving financially in the context of an economic recession; appreciation of existing supports for artists; the challenge of balancing different demands (including trying to work as an artist and raise a family); and the appropriate role of artists in a society where material values are perceived as stronger than artistic values.²³ On this final point, in terms of how it is possible to shift value systems, I also believe that independent spaces can play an important role. The Provisional University has described this role very well:

In terms of all of these dimensions – ownership, production, governance – people were basically just working it out for themselves as they went along, but as time goes on these ways of doing things become collective practices and knowledge that people who come into the space, or want to set up their own space, can draw on. Nowadays, given the relative breakdown of community and forms of collective organisation (such as trade unions), this is really important. The general problem of 'individualisation' is well known, but when we speak of 'individualisation' we're not just talking about an 'ideology' but a material reality. It's not just that we internalise this attitude that we're an individual and 'look after number one', more importantly it's literally that we can't work in groups because we haven't learned how. Spaces like Seomra Sparoi and Exchange are quite explicit about this and recognise the importance of skill sharing in terms of people learning how to participate in collective decision making and so on. In other spaces it's more informal but in all cases that learning process is happening. Barry from Seomra Spraoi had a really nice metaphor to describe this. He said a space like Seomra is like a gym, but instead of exercising your muscles and your body you're exercising your ability to work collectively, to create community. Those things are very material, you can't learn them from a book – they have to be learnt by doing them. Without this factor, it seems to us, it's not going to be possible to create change in the city at a wider level.²⁴

²³ McAndrew and Kimm, "The Living and Working Conditions of Artists in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland," 15.

²⁴ The Provisional University, "Cracks in the city: an interview on Dublin's independent spaces."

In reflecting on these kinds of art spaces, while it is necessary to look at what they provide artists and audiences practically in the overall ecology, it is very important not to undervalue the more intangible characteristics of these spaces too. Namely, the development of different value systems and collective ways of doing things, which generally develop in a pragmatic way:

While not motivated by political ideologies, participants emphasised the importance of non-commercial, open participation in the production of spaces that can make possible the kinds of activities, events, dynamics and forms of social life excluded by high rents and over-regulation. The fact of coming together to create such a space, and the set of material needs and resources which emerge in the process, give rise to the development of forms of working, playing, and deciding together, and the production of shared knowledges and resources.²⁵

It not only makes an exciting cultural life possible, but it can also bleed into other spaces and projects in the city, as a counter to the commercial mindset that has become so dominant. And while these practices do resist conforming to market capitalism, it is not an explicitly political culture; it stems simply from a need and desire to have space to do interesting things and meet interesting people without having to spend money and is thus an ethos that can be inclusive of people with all kinds of backgrounds and beliefs. And when people are forced to sustain themselves and their cultural practices outside of commercial interests and state funding, '*social relations of dependency, trust, care and mutuality can arise*' that connect people despite their differences.²⁶ While I doubt many of these spaces would describe themselves as political, much less utopian, I think that Davina Cooper's analysis of what she calls 'everyday utopias' describes well the socio-political impact that these kinds of independent spaces can have on the wider city:

Everyday utopias don't focus on campaigning or advocacy. They don't place their energy on pressuring mainstream institutions to change, on winning votes, or on taking over dominant social structures. Rather they work by creating the change they wish to encounter, building and forging new ways of experiencing social and political life. (...) Far from offering totalizing expressions of what an ideal-self-sufficient life could be, everyday utopias are more akin to hot spots of innovative practice, instantiating something like the utopian stands Jeffrey Alexander (2001) discusses, engaged in the work of "civil repair." (...) (T)he "critical proximity" of everyday utopias to mainstream social forces and processes is centrally important. (...) They are not sealed-off, autonomous sites. Through the movement of people and processes, everyday utopian practice can incite non-members also to imagine concepts differently. So visitors can be inspired by what they see and learn, allowing their brief incursion into a more utopian world to reframe the way they experienced and think about a life largely lived elsewhere.²⁷

In summary, as an increasingly financialized and culturally homogenized city, Dublin needs more independent arts spaces, and to protect the ones it already has, for the health of its

²⁵ Bresnihan and Byrne, "Escape into the city," 42.

²⁶ Ibid, 48.

²⁷ Davina Cooper, *Everyday Utopias: The Conceptual Life of Promising Spaces*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 27-28.

arts and cultural ecology, as spaces for creating community, and as spaces to cultivate and share practical knowledge of collective ways of doing things that can make creative endeavours feel more do-able, and the city feel more live-able.

PART TWO: Talking Heads



I sat down (on the internet) with six people from five existing spaces and one space-in-the-works to hear about the challenges and possibilities that they see now and going forward for their spaces and the city more broadly. Some people knew each other already, having shared space over the years, for example Kirkos Ensemble had a space in the Complex for a period during the pandemic, and Dublin Digital Radio are currently based in the Complex. Others were meeting for the first time. What the different projects have in common is that they create space in the city for art, music, theatre or performance, independent from the national cultural institutions and commercial venues, and were all set up with the aim of creating a more accessible or inclusive space for art or music or performance or parties than what they could see around them. The spaces themselves are diverse though, and have different models in terms of how they run their space and main activities, pay their rent, create their events programme and make decisions. While the majority of the spaces have received some public funding over the years, with the exception of the new space Unit 44 none of the spaces pay their rent and other running costs entirely through public subsidies, relying on other income from studio rent, membership dues, hire fees (including corporate hire in the case of the Complex) and fundraising (including crowdfunding).

In the introductory round of the conversation I asked everyone to introduce the space they are involved in, as well as to say something about how it is run and maintained, and where they see the space, or organisation, in Dublin's cultural ecology. Extracts of that introductory round form a who's who, or rather a where's where, beginning on the next page. This first round brought up a lot of issues already, so the conversation flowed from there, with me posing a few more questions along the way, for example about how the relationships and communities developed in the spaces, and follow-on questions about the challenges spaces

face. Central points of discussion were around the often unseen and too often unpaid or underpaid labour that goes into these spaces and how that affects the sustainability, the aspect of relationship building and community building that happens in these spaces and how that can best be facilitated, and the importance and challenge of establishing spaces for arts and culture that are independent from other social, cultural and governmental institutions. Towards the end of the conversation I asked everyone to describe their dream for the space, or for the culture scene in Dublin more generally. What follows the where's where introducing the spaces is an overview of the conversation, with an extract of the dialogue and quotes from individual speakers grouped under those four headings.

A who's who and where's where

Bernie O'Reilly from

Outlandish Theatre Platform, artists in residence at the Coombe maternity hospital in Dublin 8, where they run weekly open theatre making sessions



Photo credit:Futoshi Sakauchi

It's a very ad hoc relationship, we don't have a formal contract. It's based upon the work we have created in the community so far, and it evolves, and involves constant navigation, and discussion and planning ahead as to when we have projects to get access to the space more. We are fortunate in that, when we're there, it's a free space. But the downside of that is, it's not, you know, it's not entirely (ours), it's our space for use when it's not in use, and there's a huge amount of negotiation and

delicacy that's required, because obviously, you're working with an institution, which the primary thing is to teach and to provide care for women and children. So you

“a lot of people who would come and work with us would actually feel much more comfortable walking into the Coombe hospital art space, rather than walking into, say, a more formal, traditional cultural institution”

know, they very much respect the arts being in the space, and, you know, create a lot of space for us. The most interesting thing in terms of developing new work there, and, you know, we're very much interested in creating work with professionals and non professional and community participants, is that the threshold to enter a public space that's a hospital actually seemed to be a lower threshold than entering an arts or cultural institution, like IMMA (the Irish Museum of Modern Art), for example. So a lot of people who would come and work with us would actually feel much more comfortable walking into the Coombe hospital art space, rather than walking into, say, a more formal, traditional cultural institution. But you know, there's that constant negotiation, which is obviously needed within an institution in a kind of more informal residency, you know, this is how and when you're going to have the space, but what that did allow us to do was establish Open Theatre Practice, which is work we've worked with Joan on for the last four years, it's a weekly workshop that takes place at the Coombe, or online for the last year and a half, every Wednesday night. And it's open to anybody who is interested in creating new work. So we create- we're theatre practitioners by background, but our work is quite interdisciplinary, we work with film, sound, and live performance. So our approach would be very much that anybody is welcome to attend, nobody has to commit to coming every week, it's free to attend. That's the joy of having a free space; we can commit as artists to creating work once a week, that's something we want to do and we can manage. And we always said, with or without funding, we would like to do that. So we'll be there creating work every week. And then we invite whoever, who is 18 plus, into the community space at the Coombe to create work with us.

Lisa Crowne from **A4 Sounds**, artist-run workspace and gallery/event space in Dublin 1 that prioritises lower income artists



It more or less is an experiment in the city to see what's possible. And it kind of evolves and reacts to whatever's kind of happening. So at the minute, obviously Covid has impacted everything. And our building is modeled around access to facilities. And it's an art space that focuses on lower income artists. So like, being able to provide art space and facilities to artists, to try and kind of lower the barriers of entry to art in all different ways.

“we also have a collective membership for artists that can't afford studio space, but they need access to a community of people”

We have a membership structure. So there is regular membership where you kind of come in and use all the shared resources and shared space and then you can add on and get a private space as well. So for artists that have a little bit more money and need a more permanent space, they can get that add on. And we have lockers. And then we also have a collective membership for artists that can't afford studio space, but they need access to a community of people. And maybe the advantage of the last year is actually we can do a lot more of that work online now, everyone's kind of tuned in to working like this. So and we've kind of found over the last couple of years with it, as the housing crisis gets worse and worse, lots of younger artists are kind of moving out of the city, so maybe a membership model like that can kind of help reach people that are kind of, there's a lot of people being forced out to the countryside and have less access to people and things. And we also have a community membership for activist groups, we found over the years because there's, now Jigsaw is gone as well, there were no real spaces in the city for organising.

We try to take the best parts of art, and so art has, like even the idea of like, going into an exhibition can be very scary, or Bernie was chatting about going to IMMA, and like even as artists, accessing a space like that is quite intimidating. And then say, like, maybe old Seomra Spraoi or Jigsaw, accessing political spaces can actually be quite scary as well. And they can become kind of toxic, in you know, in terms of insular political stuff. And then maker spaces have all these resources that they kind of share. But they can be very masculine and also very toxic too. So we were trying to pull the best ideas from different spaces, and then build a studio around that, try our best to build a studio around those nice principles from each of those spaces. So that's where we would position ourselves within the arts in Dublin.

Vanessa Fielding from
The Complex, live arts centre in Dublin 7 with artist studios and
exhibition/performance spaces



We're currently in a giant warehouse or a collection of three interconnecting warehouses of about 20,000 square feet. And it comprises studios for about 31 artists. And some of the studios, there are 16 altogether, some of them are individual and some of them are shared. The majority, over half would be visual artists, but they span into theatre and music, and a little bit into film as well. We also have, we have a gallery that's mostly curated by our own team. It's a mixed program, and funded by the Arts Council²⁸. These studios are let on a yearly basis, just talking brass tax, and they're renewable. And their rents are, in part, subsidised.

“I think the multi disciplinary space is the thing that we've attempted to offer”

I think the multi disciplinary space is the thing that we've attempted to offer. And it derived really out of my own practice, obviously, because I've led it from the beginning. And I had started life as a theatre director, but with my own interest in working in the round, which at that time, many years ago now, was a political thing to

²⁸ The Arts Council is the Irish government agency for developing and funding the arts.

do as much as anything else. So I worked in England, in theatres in the round. And there was a kind of inclusivity apart as part of that, the notion was that, you know, there weren't seats that were more expensive than others, they weren't boxes where you could have priority viewing and things and that everybody had equal access to the stage.

We have a capacity of about 350 people in the main space. And I think that that supplies people with some really good opportunities for doing alternative stagings, and things that are of a non-traditional kind. So I think that's our place. And I think things that span more than one discipline that wouldn't necessarily fit easily into a space that requires a seated audience because some venues only have insurance for seated audiences. So that's where they're limited, and we're not.

**Seán Finnan from
Dublin Digital Radio (DDR), online digital radio station, platform and
community, previously based in Jigsaw and currently based in the Complex,
Dublin 7**



We're an online radio station. We started off in Jigsaw, about five years ago. And I guess what we wanted to do was to open up a space for both music labels, or interesting music, art stuff that we knew was happening in the city, but also to put people in contact with one another again. We knew there were lots of disparate groups and things happening. And we wanted to make sure people were meeting each other, getting to know each other, like maybe collaborating and doing different stuff.

“with Covid over the past year and a half...it’ll be interesting to see...how do you keep the membership, the residents, like that social ecology of people meeting each other, doing things together, does it happen in the same way or do we need to rethink that?”

It’s a virtual space, but it’s also a physical space. (...) With Jigsaw, we used to have our studio space there. But then we’d have events in Jigsaw as well, once a month, which allowed people that were residents of the station, people that were members of the station, to meet each other. So it did create a really important social aspect to that space, but with Jigsaw closed now, and with Covid over the past year and a half...it’ll be interesting when things start opening again, like (to see) what our relationship is with the Complex, how do you keep the membership, the residents, like how do you keep that social ecology of people meeting each other, you know, doing things together, does it happen in the same way or do we need to rethink that?

If you have a show on the station, you pay monthly dues, like five quid or whatever. But also, if you don’t have a show, but you like what the station does, or you want to volunteer, you can also pay towards the station. And what that does is you become a member. So you basically have the right to come to our monthly meetings, like, we haven’t had our first AGM (Annual General Meeting) yet, but a few months ago, we officially got the documents sorted, that we are now a co-op (cooperative). So if you’re a member, you can kind of help, you know, steer the organisation and contribute to the long term vision or plans or where the station is going to go. And then the monthly dues, so then they also go towards equipment.

Sebastian Adams from

Unit 44, new rehearsal and gig space in Dublin 7 run by Kirkos, a contemporary music ensemble



“the way we sold that to the Arts Council was that we weren't asking for funding to pay for infrastructure. But we were asking for funding to put on a programme that we could only do if we were paying rent”

In the world of the funded contemporary art music or whatever you want to call it, the only options for space were things like, like Smock Alley, or the Complex or, you know, basically places where you have to pay, and you don't have a kind of low stakes way of putting on a gig. (...) A lot of stuff I would have liked to do, it was just too hard to get the kind of money together. And then there's the added pressure of, if you have got funding for something, it's, you know, it's a huge hassle to get the funding, you feel like you need to promote it very well. And it all takes a lot of extra time other than just doing a gig. So basically what we thought we could do when we had that (incubation space from Dublin City Council) was just invite people in and say, listen, you don't have to prepare, if you don't want to, just come in and do a gig for an hour, invite people or whatever, we'll make a facebook post. And we did about eight concerts in total, actually, it's probably more, we did a good few concerts

anyway in the space of six months. And it got me thinking, this is actually what we should be doing. Because we've been putting on projects, which did collaborate widely in our circle and a bit further into other disciplines. And so we were kind of forging new collaborations, but each time we did that it was like, a huge amount of organisation for sort of one night, and also a big investment from the Arts Council each time we did that. And I started thinking about how much more we could achieve with a lot of smaller scale events. And so when we left the Dublin City Council space, I immediately started looking for somewhere new, that was also around the time that the pandemic hit, so it was sort of casual for a while. And then basically we got enough Arts Council funding to rent kind of, if you go into the bottom bracket of retail spaces in Dublin, and the way we sold that to the Arts Council was that we weren't asking for funding to pay for infrastructure. But we were asking for funding to put on a programme that we could only do if we were paying rent, basically.

The basic plan for it is that we're going to try and have as many gigs there as possible and invite people to do stuff, hopefully start getting requests so we don't even have to go looking for people, as we kind of build momentum. And wherever possible, we won't charge a hire fee at all. And if we do, it'll always be very low. (...) But in general, it'll be like people come in and get use of the space for free. And it's a mixture of us letting people in and day out and kind of also lending the key at times. And we're still really navigating all of that. And in terms of how it's run, it's staff with a little bit of support from volunteers, that's kind of the model that we're looking at. So (we'll be) centered on the funded music sector, but obviously trying to widen that all the time. (...) And in terms of curation, we're trying to be as uncurated as possible.

Frank Sweeney from

A yet unnamed [space-in-the-works](#), and [Praxis](#), the recently formed Artists' Trade Union of Ireland

I've been part of a group of people since the closure of Jigsaw who have been forming a group kind of legally and socially around opening a new kind of social space. And I think maybe what will make this space different from some of the other spaces that are here, is, so I think we are primarily focused on creating space for dancing and live events. And with that in mind, like somewhere for dancing I think will be somewhere that will always be good for organising and meeting. And, you know, I think if we find a space that has potential for artists studios or offices for activists or organisations or exhibitions, that's great. And that's a bonus. But we're definitely, primarily we're looking for a space to dance in without a bar, or bouncers, or high cost of entry or things like that.

“I think we’re all really keen on a non-hierarchical structure as much as possible. And we're also leaning towards a sort of membership model, which lets the space be entirely funded by membership contributions, as opposed to having to rely on putting on events, like every weekend, or having to, like charge every group”

I think we’re all really keen on a non-hierarchical structure as much as possible. And we're also leaning towards a sort of membership model, which lets the space be entirely funded by membership contributions, as opposed to having to rely on putting on events, like every weekend, or having to, like charge every group (that use the space) or things like that. And also, you know, with another pandemic or something like that, we're trying to think about, like what will make space potentially resilient in the future, and also kind of discussing about, like, not really offering any kind of services or any bonuses. Like if you're a member, we're talking, like it's not been decided, but we're talking about maybe not getting in cheaper, if you're a member, or like not getting to do anything done a non-member can't really necessarily do, just trying to kind of set up from the start that the organisation is not like a service, that members kind of received something from that. It's like, you're sort of a part of it as much as anyone who's been organising it from the start.

And finally, a space frequently mentioned in our discussion, which is sadly not reopening after the pandemic as the landlord is taking back the building:

Jigsaw, autonomous social space in Dublin 1 (previously **Seomra Spraoi**), which housed the offices of a number of grassroots political groups and was used by many more for meetings, workshops and social events, as well as being a venue for live music and dance nights



**A labour of love does not pay the rent:
a dialogue on the often unpaid work that goes into running spaces**

Lisa, A4 Sounds:

While I think it's really good to be like, okay, we need to try and provide space to artists for free, and we need to do this for free. And we need to do that for free. You cannot deny that running a space requires an insane amount of labour, and that even the use of volunteers should be questioned. I know, we're kind of like being socialised into, overly socialised into that idea of, you should be able to go to an

exhibition for free, you should be able to do this for free, you should be able to do this for free. But a one night gig requires a lot of labour. It requires a team of people, it requires planning, it requires cleanup. That's an insane amount of labour that people don't generally get paid well for and it's not sustainable. I think the challenge is to keep the costs and access to arts as affordable for everyone as possible, but those people doing the day to day labour ultimately need to get paid. And you will find then, that's why you get burnout, that's why you get places shutting down, places do that, because they run their course. And I don't think people build the art workers' labour into their models properly.

“I think if you're building sustainability into an approach, the idea of volunteerism needs to be kind of talked about very carefully. And then the costs of running a building and the labour that goes into it need to be thought out really, really well. Otherwise, things don't last”

But I think if spaces are like popping up and they're experimental, and the purpose of it is like a radicalness, to kind of go, “this could be possible, if you funded this properly, this could be possible if we invested more money in the arts”, and that was like the core, you know, the mission of it, then I think that high energy is really important. But I think if you're building sustainability into an approach, the idea of volunteerism needs to be kind of talked about very carefully. And then the costs of running a building and the labour that goes into it need to be thought out really, really well. Otherwise, things don't last.

Seán, Dublin Digital Radio:

Yeah, that's something I think we're encountering a lot at the moment. And I think something that we're, I suppose rethinking in a way, like did we factor the sustainability into how we run the organisation? Because, you know, to have a 24 hour radio station that has both the station itself, that's going out to listeners, but also the studio space that needs to be managed and organised as well, requires a lot of work, you know. Now we're faced, when there's a shortage, and we realise that we're all really tired, you know, like, we've been doing this for five years, and a lot of us are coming close to burnout. In some ways, the energy is not the same way it was. It's

like we're at this crossroads like, okay, well, clearly, we do need to pay somebody that's in the space, even part time, who can schedule shows that are coming in, can respond to the emails, show requests, all that kind of stuff. So I think that's something we're kind of thinking about at the moment, like okay, we have enough income that comes in through membership that supports, you know, the costs like internet, the studio space itself, and, you know, any kind of studio equipment that needs to be repaired or whatever else. The next step is to try to maybe do a campaign or something else that can pay somebody to even do, like, 15 hours a week, because otherwise, you know, the station will probably be in jeopardy. Maybe not this year, or next year, but it will not get through another five years without having somebody that's paid there. And it won't be able to fulfill its potential, I don't think, without having somebody that's paid there. Like, I think five years ago, I was really into the idea of, you know, volunteerism, people do this out of love, and will, but after five years of doing it's like, no, there is a phase of that, like people putting the time in to do their own shows, or whatever else. But there is hard labour that goes into that, into doing something, like yeah, any type of space or media organisation that doesn't get advertising.

“a lot of us are coming close to burnout”

Lisa:

Yeah, even the website for DDR is beautiful. Like that requires an insane amount of work. And it's just sitting there for free. Well, we can pay membership dues towards it, but you know what I mean, that's like a thing that's there for everyone to access. But people maybe just take it for granted, but like, that's an insane amount of work. Just to, you know what I mean? Yeah, so fair play to ye, that's great.

Seán:

Yeah, and minor things with the website that could be done better. So it's like, you know, changing the front of it to show, like new shows, upcoming events, blog posts about interesting stuff. You know, a lot of this stuff of how much work goes into it, gets lost, because everything seems static or whatever.

Lisa:

Yeah. Don't worry, as someone that cries behind the scenes I know how much work it is for you.

Joan:

It'd be great to hear if people had experiences or perspectives on, like, how do you make that move to being able to hire somebody? How do you go from a totally volunteer-run organisation to saying we need to pay someone to be there and how can you manage that in terms of like funding, or if it's from membership dues or something else...I don't know if Lisa or Vanessa or Sebastian or anyone wants to say something about that?

Vanessa, The Complex:

Well, we have a staff of 12 now, and we were, certainly at the beginning, we were doing a bit each. And this is a lot of years ago now. So I suppose yeah, we just got bigger. I think that's what we did. We got bigger, but it wasn't easy to be generous, either. And, of course, there were conflicts there, because we would have loved to have let things happen. That, you know, we could have given away space, we could have given away all sorts of things. And Lisa is absolutely right. I mean, managing the space and managing everything is incredibly time consuming. And I think we, you know, we all donated our time to make it, to make the foundation of it solid. And I think we had to come up with a model that enabled us to earn enough money to pay people, starting with us. And then and now we're in this nice position. We do get some support from the Arts Council, and from other people, other organisations. So that's how we do it. And I suppose we just charged corporates as much as we can. And we do give the space away. And we run the Art Factory, which is a support mechanism for some artists that we've chosen to support. That's, that's how we've done I don't know, everybody probably has a different trajectory. So I don't know how you get bigger, but getting bigger was the way.

Joan:

So there's more people using the space that you can charge? Is that what you mean?

Vanessa:

Yeah, I suppose in our case, because we've got lots of different things going on, it was getting bigger in all different ways in any way we could, including having a bigger space. I don't know, if we took DDR, I don't know. I mean, I'd be really happy Seán to have a conversation with you. I'll meet you in the kitchen! And we could have a conversation about how DDR could expand. But I know that we wouldn't be unusual in suggesting expansion is the way but Lisa's right. Like you do need to pay people after a time. It just gets weary. And it's too challenging.

Lisa:

Yeah, I think as well, we were chatting about this last week, we, cause I

kind of like when things slowly build, you're like, oh, I'm kind of good at this. And then you just add on another wee job to your job. And you're like, I'm kind of good at this too. And then you add on another job to your job. And then all of a sudden, you're in a position where you're like, I'm doing 12 people's jobs. So last week, we tried our best to kind of go through every single job that's required to run A4, the programme, and the studio, education stuff, and we can do all those things individually quite well. But when you start putting them together, you start getting burnt out. I think we identified 13 jobs. But we are actually a team of three, four people at the minute but three people are there, and there's just two full time people. So I think we could kind of compact them, like some of those might just be like a day a week or half a day a week or but they're specific kinds of jobs. And all of them need to happen at the same time to make everything run smoothly. So if you take your foot off one job something else slips since it's, it's such a circus maybe sometimes. But so I think we got down to two full time jobs and four part time jobs. And now we have to figure out how to pay those people going forward. And as you said, building the foundation, we all basically worked for free to build a foundation. Okay, nice. And the next point, we can't- I also have to pay my rent, you know, you prioritise artists and their building of work or their making of work and their outcomes and stuff. We are very aware that, you know, people are in all different types of situations, but we as the people that are running the building are also in the same position as say many of the artists that come through. I can't afford 750 quid a month rent by working as a volunteer, you know? So, you kind of have to start drawing lines in the sand and going, actually no, if you want to access this service, if you want this lovely experience where there's friendly staff and it's like a lovely environment to hang out in and there's heating, you gotta help pay, you got to help put money into that to like, so that those staff stay happy and welcome you in it, because they can afford to pay their rent and buy food, which is essential. So where our money comes from, it was coming primarily from membership fees for the studio, some Arts Council funding then for the studio and some Arts Council funding for our programme. And then kind of the three of those together, if they're all going well, covers most of the costs, but we still need to have some income from events and workshops. And you know, there's never enough money to pay everyone a good wage. But most of the time, no, we are actually, we actually got to a really good place at the start of 2020, where we were like, oh, we might all have wages, because we secured a big piece of funding. And then Covid happened. And then we had to cut all our membership fees for the studio. So we were like, we might be sustainable for 2020. And then we went back down. So we're starting again and going back up.

(...)

Bernie, Outlandish Theatre Platform:

I think one (of the challenges) is admin versus creation of work, and I can see Sebastian, when you were saying, we got this funding, and we can pay ourselves,

that actually it's a really wise decision to say, actually we're going to use that funding for somebody to take on the administrative load of what it takes to create work and create a space for people. Because I think there's been times within our journey of creating work that, you know, when you reflect on the amount of hours spent creating and making something versus the amount of time spent connecting people, I think the imbalance between is something that we're always working on and trying to figure out in terms of, you know, our ideal. You know, I suppose with the Coombe we wanted to show what's possible within Dublin 8, so it's almost like an experiment to say, this was an empty space that wasn't used. Now, the hospital has actually invested a huge amount of money in making it a far more functional space for themselves with a space that has tiered seating, there's a lighting rig, there's a good setup, like it's a real extension of the hospital now. So I think, like all things, artists and creatives are willing to work in spaces that most people would rule out as a possible working space. So then, with your use of the space, your resourcefulness and creativeness, you create something. And then often, as I'm sure people have experienced, once you create something good, that building then becomes really valuable, and then you have to move on, like all of those artists studios in Dublin. Once you've shown something is really good and you've worked from the ground up, then you're gone again.

“you can only plan for the one year in advance, or you may have a project that happens to be running over two years, but there's not a long term security within what you're planning for and doing”

In terms of work balance for us in the space, I think the hardest balance is that admin versus creativity, but also, in the idealistic sort of thinking of what we'd like to do to create, you know, to connect to new audiences who might not traditionally go to the theatre, or might not be interested in the theatre that is available in the small theatres around Dublin. I think, if you really want to commit to that vision of creating networks with new audiences, that is a full time job for somebody. So it's all of these things that you might want to do, and to show what's possible, and to make it happen. But actually, the reality is there's full time jobs within everything, you have to give almost respect to what it takes for that to happen. You can't, as individuals, say, I'm going to do it, we're going to do it all, we're going to do this, this, and this. I think you have to really say well, what is possible within what we have? And then of course, we're fortunate that we get the grant to do a project, and then you can bring in a team of people to help support that. But I think the reality of what you can do with the

resources that you have, is really important to keep balancing out so that you're not exploiting your own energy, but more so other people's and what's reasonable within terms of making good work, quality work, but with keeping within your kind of ethos for outreach, and creating new connections. So I think it's just always a fine balance. And then the sustainability of funding streams is problematic in the sense that you don't know what's coming, you can't plan for 2022 yet because you don't know what your funding circumstances may be. So there's always that uncertainty, you know, that's part of the funding structures that we're within. I'm not sure if it's more stable, possibly elsewhere (other artforms). But for us, it's very much, you know, you can only plan for the one year in advance, or you may have a project that happens to be running over two years, but there's not a long term security within what you're planning for and doing.

An army of badasses: building relationships and community

Part of creating work at the Coombe was in response to always feeling that we were creating work on the periphery in any case, and having, you know, really attempted to knock on the doors of what we saw as big theatre institutions when we graduated as actors. And so we very much started creating work within where we live within our environment in response. And a lot of our work, I suppose, is made in response to the changing city. So I think we're within the periphery, but we're very much within Dublin 8, purely because of the work we've created over the years which has developed huge relationships with individuals, organisations, and then support networks within the area. So I think Dublin 8 is our scope. And then what we intend to do, I mean, Open Theatre Practices, you're only going to go to Open Theatre Practice, if you're interested in theatre, it's not for everybody, you know, but we do attempt to include, making sure that we are making people aware of us who might not be friends with us on facebook, or might not be within the theatre community. So it would be again, working through different community organisations within the area to kind of make sure that people who mightn't see that this happens every week in the hospital, are welcome to attend every week.

Bernie, Outlandish Theatre Platform

One thing in the past four years, I found, was that you always had a lot of people coming to the station that were able to contribute, because you have that energy of having a space like the monthly parties, people meet in person, you know, people have energy to do things. When the events dried off in the past year, you notice, after a period of time, that the energy starts going as well. Because you know, you can't, at the moment, we're not in a position to pay somebody to do the nitty gritty admin stuff like which is, you know, just rising exponentially as the station gets bigger. So yeah, that energy of having events or doing things and people seeing each other is really important in volunteer run organisations. So I think (we have)

similar issues as A4, like how do you navigate the future if you're losing the social gel or whatever that makes people want to be involved in things?

Seán, DDR

I think in A4 our space is very lively. And I think that was actually like, probably like invisible labor of all the different people there; it was very organic. So like the building itself we set up that you kind of had, the kitchen was in the middle. So you had to walk through these spaces, communal spaces to meet other people, so you're kind of forced into talking to people in a way. And then we have a- I put a, I've written the word garden down here from before when Seán was talking actually, that was kind of interesting about like, all the relationship building within DDR. And you know, you purposely put on events to make sure that people- or your focus was on building connections with people. That was really cool.

“we thought the focus was art, providing art space and doing a programme of art. But realistically, it's social relations you're practising, like this is the kind of front end, but actually in the back, you're just building like an army of badasses in the city that do things or build up and join forces.”

So you had Jigsaw and then like going to gigs there, Jigsaw had an outdoor space, and A4 has this outdoor space, both those spaces are pretty cool. And without you doing too much, putting too much effort in, you've built this like resource for people to relax around each other. And you know, like, if you go to a gallery, sometimes for an opening, if you have to stand, and there's no space to sit down and kind of just drink a beer, you've reduced the amount of kind of organic relationship building. But when you have these like garden spaces, that you didn't really think of as being a resource, they were just like an add-on bonus, they end up then being actually the strongest resource that you have, cause it's when people relax, and then it is when they will, or they will shoot the breeze with each other. And then you kind of realise what you're actually doing. Like say for us, we thought, you know, the focus was art, providing art space and doing a programme of art. But realistically, it's like social

relations you're practising, like this is the kind of front end, but actually in the back, you're just building like an army of badassess in the city that do things or build up and join forces.

Lisa, A4 Sounds

I think the most important thing for developing the DDR community was being in Jigsaw. I don't think the station would have lasted two years if it was in another place because being in Jigsaw, we had the venue to throw events, which we might not have had access to otherwise. There (were) other organisations using the space in Jigsaw, like, DCHA (Dublin Central Housing Action) was there, CATU (Community Action Tenant Union), like when we started, Rabble (independent Dublin newspaper, now discontinued), was there. So we started initially in the Rabble office and then WSM (Workers Solidarity Movement) were there. Then there was a side studio which Frank used as his own studio. I think other groups were going in and out using that. So there was like an ecosystem of different groups, political groups, artists, whatever, that I think, you know, DDR tapped into, and the other groups tapped into DDR, and it became kind of its own kind of little ecosystem in some ways, which then expanded out.

“that was probably one of the strongest reasons that the station became what it was, because people associated it then with friendships, being part of some kind of cultural commonalities”

And I think DDR having access to Jigsaw and the communities that were around Jigsaw, but also people that were doing shows in the station, like different groups that have come from, like, I dunno, like one type of music scene, people from a different type of music scene that were doing a show might've brought their friends and it all kind of coalesced in that way. And that was interesting over- especially the first two three years, seeing all these different groups start intermingling and becoming, you know, like pals, friends, doing things together. That was probably one of the strongest reasons that the station became what it was, because people associated it then with friendships, being part of some kind of cultural commonalities. And then the interesting thing that was kind of mentioned earlier was what's going to happen now that we don't have Jigsaw?

Seán, DDR

Why being independent matters

Something I feel really strongly about is that independent spaces that are designated for cultural activity are so vital. Because we work very much kind of grassroots up, like there's tonnes of resources, you know, community halls within the Dublin 8 and surrounding area, but like all of those come with their own hierarchical systems. And I think there's something that's really powerful in having an independent space, that means that people who might not usually get to meet each other or might not necessarily go to that community centre, because that means something (about your alliances), that like there is that space that's created. And we're very much focused on developing audiences and creating work that's relevant to local audiences, and I think that without it being an independent space, I think that's just something that there's always, there's always going to be challenges with (using other) spaces, spaces start having their own identity.

As we all know, living and experiencing Dublin, it's changing at such a huge pace that unless arts buildings are, you know, put into these new developments, we're going to be surrounded by the new bloody betting block that's going to be now on Newmarket square (in Dublin 8, previously the site of Dublin food co-op and Dublin Flea Market, alongside other local businesses). And so, unless it's put in now, in 10 years, 15 years time, the city will be completely transformed. And we won't have spaces for people to meet and create an intercommunity space that's not a bloody church or community hall or something.

Bernie, Outlandish Theatre Platform

“We have to step away, I feel, personally, from this idea that the space is a community hall or that the space is a pure gallery space, and open up towards the intricate use of spaces by a diverse group of people”

We work between communities, we work between individuals, not necessarily identifying as part of one community, who have experience and who don't have experience in the arts, and we work with individual artists and with organisations. And I think for any art space, it's important to be aware of the diversity of its users,

the people that use it, as audience members, and audience members can also become makers, and makers can also become audience members, and that circular way of thinking about what a space is and who it's for, and for that to reflect in its vision and mission statement. Obviously the management of the space has to be very practical, but I think it's of huge value to a space if the organiser has that kind of interdisciplinary vision and that intersectional vision, whereby the intersectionality of age groups, of age, of gender, of sexuality, of different artforms comes through in the programming of work. So, never to say, this is only for artists, never to say, this is only for community members. We have to step away, I feel, personally, from this idea that the space is a community hall or that the space is a pure gallery space, and open up towards the intricate use of spaces by a diverse group of people, that have an interest in the development of new work as well as in the programming of existing work. (...) I think the dynamism of that web of intersectionality is what makes arts spaces exciting, bringing the local to the international, and that becomes a rich feeding ground for the development of new work.

Maud Hendricks, Outlandish Theatre Platform²⁹

Dream big(ger): possible futures

In a dream scenario, you'd have a space that is led not by DCC, not like, you know, Arts Council funded, DDC slightly funded, but it'd be an independent space that is literally for community and art, like an arts hub for the community (in Dublin 8). So that it's very clear what that building is, but it gives space and place. It doesn't have to be that you have to come and experience theatre or come and experience the exhibition in those spaces, but those spaces are accessible for everybody who lives or passes through that area.

“I think any kind of space should be of quality, where people can go and spend time and relax. Not everyone can do that in their own homes”

Grassroots spaces are excellent because they're built with who they're serving in mind I think, and they're growing in connection, with people who are responding to the site, people who are interested in connecting, but one thing I do think is the quality of those buildings can often be really bad, because it's case of, what can you

²⁹ Maud Hendricks, co-director of Outlandish with Bernie, was unable to attend the conversation but sent her responses to some of the questions afterwards.

get with affordable rent, and I do think you want a building to be, you walk into it and feel, this is a break from my home, like Dublin 8 is a densely populated area, not everyone has outdoor areas, garden space of their own, so I think any kind of space should be of quality, where people can go and spend time in and relax. Not everyone can do that in their own homes. On a very practical level, if like the Arts Council, in collaboration with Dublin City Council, and I do think it is kind of governmental responsibility, ensuring quality cultural spaces, it doesn't mean they have to run it, if you had funding that ensured that the maintenance, the health and safety, the insurance, all of the running costs of a building, were like catered for, then spaces could really be used and programmed and managed in a way that responds to the local desire for what kind of art they want to see and make, but also brings in international work that is challenging and surprising and it's multipurpose, but in order for it to actually be used by the community it should have the opportunity for groups to rent out that space, so it's intercommunity, people can use that space and it's very much not owned by one thing or another. (...) Yes so I think a kind of mixed income model where you can rent things out, you have to have your box office sellers, which is genuinely responding to local interest, if that means its a panto(mime) that sells out for 10 weeks, if that's what sells out and if that's what will bring people into a venue, I think it's important.

Could there be like an element of, a department set up within the Arts Council or the City Council that could say, we are the advisory body because we are completely connected to policy and legislation updates and things, and like we can be like the big producer guy for five small venues across Dublin, and we can be on top of all that legal, insurance, heavy duty shit, and then, for the people running it, particularly if it's artist-led or activist-led, then it's just about programming, curation, and really making it happen? Because there's legislation and people have to work within it, the cost effective way to do that would be to have one office in DCC or the Arts Council that would basically be ensuring that everybody's complying, and then you could just make the work happen.

Bernie, Outlandish Theatre Platform³⁰

I don't know if all of you will know the Museum's Quartier in Vienna, but what they have there is like quite a number of the biggest museums, all facing onto this courtyard. And as well as the big major institutions, they also have these independent art spaces, like a lot of them are kind of commercial businesses and galleries. But what would be my dream would be if there was some big institutions, but also right beside them all together, little independent spaces that were facing into a kind of central courtyard, which is like, I guess exactly what Lisa you were saying, is so important about A4 and Jigsaw where there's this outdoor space that people can then go and kind of inadvertently almost mingle. Um, and I think it's that thing of

³⁰ Partly from further discussion with Bernie on the topic.

proximity and informality which would lead to so much rich collaboration, but also the fact that you're right beside the institutions means that even though you're independent, you feel part of that and supported by it. And actually I think in Dublin, there is a kind of potential there in music at least because the National Concert Hall building has so much empty space in it. And depending on what happens there, that could be used as a kind of real central hub for, well, not necessarily just for music.

Sebastian, Unit 44

I would actually love it if someone came along and just dropped two more floors on A4's building, because I think it's like, its location is really good and like the garden is going 90. Um, but just for sustainability, we need more. And also for kind of working with artists as they grow as artists, we need more private studios of different sizes to facilitate artists from when they kind of are getting going right through. So when they kind of get a bit more experienced, they need more space. So there's, so there's no expanding space with us really. So I think in the dream, I think we're going to try and look for another building too, to have, just to facilitate bigger private studios for our just so they could maybe start here in this building and move with the need or for, you know, new artists coming in.

Lisa, A4 Sounds

“This time has been good because people are really rethinking public space and taking back public space in a way that I think is really, really healthy”

Another thing about this summer is, like this Saturday, I'm going to an outdoor event, like underneath a motorway, and I've been at loads of events in parks and I've been at loads of events on the beach. And I think that, we also, this time has been good because people are really rethinking public space and taking back public space in a way that I think is really, really healthy. And I think that these kinds of indoor spaces, the way that we're maybe thinking about it is that they're just sort of like a hub or like a base and that we don't necessarily need to like be indoors all the time, just to kind of have that safety space, or maybe thinking about shorter term spaces or like squatted spaces or things like that. But I think to do a lot of those things, you do need to have some kind of a security or like somewhere to kind of do (things), but yeah, I think outdoor spaces are also the future!

Frank, the space-in-the-works

My dream space would be a place that had, you know, like soundproof dancing space, soundproof studios, spaces that people come in and use, that was accessible. One thing that was important, but we haven't really gotten around to over the last while. It's like, you know, training people up, people that are interested in media, you know, showing them how to do things, giving, um, groups that probably don't have that much access to radio or learning about radio, to give these groups access. And I think in a dream kind of space, it would be, you know, central that people could easily get to, to do all these kinds of things. (...) You want to invest in the infrastructure that you can put out- basically have a resource for your members or for residents or for the wider Dublin area, if people are interested. Like that was one of the things we wanted to do. If people were interested in doing radio workshops or you know, how to edit a show or do all these different things. The radio studio would be that kind of resource for people that wanted to do this.

Seán, DDR

“My dream would be that you are able to pay enough people a fair wage to run a space”

My dream would be that you are able to pay enough people a fair wage to run a space. Our goal is to kind of hit (people on a) lower income, to reduce the barriers to access in, right, like free studio spaces is how you do that. And that's how you generate diverse arts and interesting arts and lots of voices. So the actual dream would be, you've enough funding coming in to pay wages, which is the biggest cost, and running costs. And then you could actually do all the work that you do, you know?

Lisa, A4 Sounds

PART THREE: How do we get there?

A 2007 report by the Economic and Social Research Institute of Ireland titled 'The Arts, Cultural Inclusion and Social Cohesion' opens with a quote from the artist, writer and researcher Francois Matarasso, who was involved in compiling the research, stating that it is *'fundamental to democratic society that everyone has an equal right to participate in the nation's artistic and cultural life, alongside the right to participate in formal democratic processes.'*³¹ The introduction then goes on to say that access to artistic resources, the ability to generate and sustain cultural capital and the capacity to engage in active cultural citizenship *'appear to be distributed highly unevenly across Irish society,'* and, quoting Matarasso again, that it is in the role of government to address this, by increasing *'the diversity of cultural expression through various means, including ensuring that all citizens have equal access to the arts not just as consumers, but also as creators, producers, distributors, commentators and decision-makers,'* because *'that is cultural inclusion.'*³²

I would agree with this assessment, and the fact that cultural inclusion has been neglected in the development of the arts in Ireland over recent decades, specifically the access to opportunities for adults with a low income to become creators, producers etc in the arts. I would add the nuance that it is the role of government to create conditions in which citizens are enabled to take initiative to use urban spaces in innovative ways and organise spaces for the forms of cultural expression of their own choosing, whether that be the conserving or transforming of heritage forms, the practising of established art forms or the development of new disciplines. Later in the report, however, it is stated that *'some of the collective benefits from the arts arise only where professional and artistic standards are high, or where the work is experimental in nature and/or controversial, and sometimes such works of arts may not be compatible with large levels of participation and/or equal participation by socio-economic groups.'*³³ I would dispute this claim, and argue that high artistic standards and accessible participation are not at all mutually exclusive. In fact, I would argue that a funding system that operates based on that belief, unfortunately still widely held, has itself been a big obstacle to creating inclusive, funded spaces for exciting new art. The lower the barrier to entry of a space is, the more different kinds of people you can have using a space, and the more different kinds of people you can have using a space, the richer the web of connections, and thus the cultural ecology, and the arts experiences that come out of it, can become.

From the group discussion excerpted in Part Two, it seems to me that the main challenge for the spaces represented in the conversation is covering costs while also remaining accessible and sustainable. The second biggest concern or topic was

³¹ Francois Matarasso, cited in "The Arts, Cultural Inclusion and Social Cohesion," National Economic and Social Form report 35, 2007, vi. http://files.nesc.ie/nesf_archive/nesf_reports/NESF_35_full.pdf.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid, 5.

around how to create a space that is independent from both commercial interests and local community hierarchies and that can make room for multiple groups, to become a kind of hub where relationships between individuals and groups can form. The bottom line is that if these spaces were better funded by Dublin City Council and the Arts Council there could be more access, participation and equity of opportunity in arts and culture in Dublin. More spaces, besides the national cultural institutions, could provide more diverse opportunities to people to participate in art and culture making in their own neighbourhoods, and for free.

A new era in Irish arts funding?

At a housing support group some years ago, someone said to me that one of the worst things about humans is how adaptable we are. A tiny room with a single bed costs €400 now, ok. Now it's €500. Now €600. Now €700. We are angry or exasperated first, but then we accept it. We adapt to the new normal frighteningly quickly, as the last year has taught us too. Yes, it helps us survive, mentally, but because it often happens gradually, it means we can end up finding ourselves in terrible conditions, and having already accepted them. We do what we can with what we have. It's a glass half full attitude, you could say, but that doesn't get you very far when the glass is almost empty. When I asked everyone about their dream for their space or for culture in the city more broadly most of the answers were about the kind of spaces they would like to have, and the stability they would like to have, without specifically mentioning money. And while focusing on what can be done without external supports is great on the one hand, it was only when I added that it seemed obvious that a big obstacle to these independent projects making space available for free to people in Dublin was the lack of public funding, that Lisa echoed that yes, that would be the dream really, to have enough funding to pay people fair wages, and cover running costs, so that they could offer free artist studio space to people who couldn't afford to pay for it elsewhere. It is possible that some of the arts spaces discussed have only received small amounts of Arts Council funding because they have not submitted applications for larger grants, but I would argue that this sense of making do that the economic environment had conditioned, alongside complex application procedures that can be intimidating, would be big contributing factors.

The Covid-19 pandemic brought arts and cultural sectors around the world to a protracted standstill, with many already precarious workers losing a majority of their work for many months, with many still unable to work to the same extent as they had before the crisis. Without undermining the scale of the insecurity created — or arguably merely inflated — by Covid, it also led to some very important developments in the arts sector in Ireland. On 4 April 2020 the Arts Council announced a €1 million fund *'to enable artists to make new and original art during*

the Covid-19 crisis,³⁴ (only half of which was new, and which capped grants at a flat rate of €3000), with Culture Ireland also announcing the 'Ireland Performs' scheme, part-funded by Facebook, for the creation of online content.³⁵ There was a huge backlash from artists, and, for once, politicians and the media were in agreement with them. Artists and organisations around the country signed a letter explaining why this fund, which amounted to an emergency support of the arts and cultural sector to the tune of 20 cent per person in Ireland, and was focused mainly on online output to be made and presented during the lockdown, was not in fact a sufficient support for artists, particularly those whose work may not adapt well to an online format.³⁶ The National Campaign for the Arts (NCFA), originally established in September 2009 in reaction to the huge cuts to public expenditure that followed the 2008 crash, and which had not managed to have much impact in recent years, suddenly experienced a groundswell of support from the public and politicians as well as from the arts community. With the guidance of a new chairperson, Angela Dorgan, it issued a 13-point plan to save the arts at the end of May, and in a matter of weeks the outgoing government announced an additional €25 million for the sector. The NCFA issued its budget submission in September, calling for a huge €135 million for the Arts Council, with the Arts Council asking for the same amount. There was now a new Minister for the Arts, Catherine Martin, a former English and Music teacher, and a month later she announced €130 million for the Arts Council for 2021, a 63% increase on the 2020 amount. For many years Ireland has been at the bottom of the table of EU countries in terms of the percentage of GDP spent on culture: roughly 0.5%.³⁷ Finally, with this increase, we will be spending at the European average. Music journalist Toner Quinn, along with many others, believes that it took the pandemic for people, including the people who make policy and funding decisions, to realise how central the arts are in our lives:

(Politicians) name-checked the local musical society and dance school, the live-music bar and Comhaltas³⁸ branch, the Christmas panto and local festival. All of these events and organisations had been affected by the pandemic, and the politicians saw the impact on their own children, families, friends and communities. 'When that buzz is gone, it's not the same,' said the Cork TD Christopher O'Sullivan. (...) The arts always had an image of being disconnected from people's lives, but the pandemic disrupted that and it

³⁴ Cited in Michael Derven, "Arts Council's €1m Covid-19 package amounts to a pittance for artists," *The Irish Times*, 15 April 2020. Accessed 22 August 2021. <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/music/arts-council-s-1m-covid-19-package-amounts-to-a-pittance-for-artists-1.4226122>.

³⁵ Culture Ireland is a division of the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media is responsible for the promotion of Irish arts worldwide.

³⁶ The statement from performance collective THISISPOPBABY that was the basis of the letter later signed by many more artists and culture workers: <https://twitter.com/thisispopbaby/status/1247187512675753986>

³⁷ Péter Inkei, "Public funding of culture in Europe, 2004-2017," *The Budapest Observatory*, March 2019.

³⁸ National organisation dedicated to the promotion of traditional Irish music, song and dance.

seems everyone could start to see the connections. (...) In its previous campaigns, the arts sector and the Council had fixated on the economic importance of the arts and the big international successes, to the neglect of the local. It was not the lack of big national events that upset people during the lockdown; it was the closure of the local dance school, the pub session in their village, and the summer festival in their town. The lesson is clear: local arts need to be given much more attention and prominence. With its new funding, the Arts Council has to take a serious look at its regional distribution of funds, who it is funding, and who it is not.³⁹

Coming out of the pandemic with a huge funding increase as well as with new insights in the public discourse about the role the arts plays in our lives, there is now a very significant opportunity for the Arts Council to re-strategize, and find new ways to help sustain and nurture the interdependencies between the professionalised arts and local, open arts practices, and particularly the spaces where they meet. When the writers of the report on cultural inclusion examined the Arts Council funding, and interviewed Arts Council staff, they found that while the Arts Council does fund a range of socially inclusive arts practice, this funding is not ring-fenced, which is still the case. The report advised that *‘it would be useful to make available funding specifically for socially inclusive arts, for artists or organisations who wish to work on this, so as to clearly show and underpin the Arts Council commitment to this work.’*⁴⁰

Of the 114 organisations across all art forms that received strategic (structural) funding in 2021 just six were in the category of ‘arts participation,’ three of which are based in Dublin.⁴¹ Only one of the six has a physical space, open to artists with physical and intellectual disabilities to become studio members, and is located in County Kilkenny in the Irish midlands. The amount of strategic funding that went to ‘arts participation’ organisations in 2021 was €1,190,500. The positive is that this is more than double the funding allocated to three arts participation organisations in 2020, €557,160. A further 13 organisations in the arts participation category received smaller, ‘capacity building’ grants in 2021, a special scheme introduced during the Covid-19 pandemic, along with another 7 or so organisations not within the arts participation category but which are independent and either artists collectives or provide arts spaces to a broad range of artists, including A4 Sounds, Kirkos

³⁹ Toner Quinn, “How the Arts Made Their Funding Breakthrough,” The Journal of Music, 22 October 2020. Accessed 23 August 2021.

<https://journalofmusic.com/focus/how-arts-made-their-funding-breakthrough>

⁴⁰ Ibid, 53-54.

⁴¹ I am using the category of ‘arts participation’, defined by the Arts Council as practices where individuals or groups collaborate with skilled artists to make or interpret art, simply as a guideline to identify arts organisations that are open to makers who are not ‘arts professionals,’ while acknowledging that many of the spaces I am writing about would not consider themselves to operate in the field of ‘arts participation.’ I have tried to correct for this by identifying other organisations and including them in these figures too, as specified.

Ensemble and a community circus space in Cork city.⁴² Another welcome piece of news is that the Arts Council is currently developing a new arts participation strategy, in consultation with arts participation organisations around the country, which could be a fantastic opportunity for inclusive contemporary arts spaces to have their voices heard and push for more visibility and support in the sector, at a moment when there is public and political will to do better for the arts and arts audiences.

According to the Arts Council, *'the purpose of strategic funding is to invest in and support the essential infrastructure required to sustain and develop the arts in Ireland.'*⁴³ I would argue that strategic funding should thus be spread over a broader range of organisations, or in fact increased as a whole to include more organisations, in consideration of the diversity of physical spaces and organisations that are essential to a healthy cultural ecology, with specific attention also paid to arts spaces that are open and accessible and operate at the cross section of open participation and contemporary arts practice, across all disciplines. In these spaces there is broader creative scope that makes more room for more people to engage and contribute their own skills and perspectives than more traditional art classes for example. Experimentation means that you aren't playing by the rules, and in relation to art, whether it be music, theatre, visual art, film or whatever else, the rules are conventions that are often exclusionary in the first place, for example the convention of having to sit quiet in the dark for a number of hours is not inclusive of neurodivergent people who might need to move around or make noise or interact with the performers. A more experimental arts ethos can thus be more accessible for a whole range of people who are vulnerable, neurodivergent, or have complex needs, as makers and audiences, as well as allowing more space for new ideas to be tested and developed.

Bernie from Outlandish Theatre Platform pointed out that there is a discrepancy at times in the activities of organisations such as Dublin's Culture Company (which was formed with funding that had been earmarked for culture during Dublin's bid to be the 2020 European City of Culture), that emphasise the value of public engagement in the arts while focusing primarily on one-off projects that leave little space for deeper engagement. More arts spaces can create sustainable cultural spaces and opportunities to engage people in arts activities longer term. And as Bernie also highlighted, there are a huge number of underused spaces in educational and health care institutions, and thus a potential for many more partnerships such as that of Outlandish and the Coombe hospital, for groups that do not have access to other spaces or funding sources. It is not an either/or situation however; we need both —

⁴² For the purpose of this very brief overview of the funding situation for independent spaces I have excluded art spaces and organisations focused on providing space exclusively for children and young people, and festivals, which may make space for arts participations open to the public at a specific moment in the year, as I am looking specifically at spaces open all year round that provide space for adults to participate in art and culture as well as young people and children.

⁴³ The Arts Council. Accessed 23 August 2021. <https://www.artscouncil.ie/Funds/Strategic-Funding/>.

more partnerships with bigger institutions and organisations from other sectors that can provide much needed space for the arts in a high rent environment, and more independent spaces exclusively for arts and culture, that are made sustainable through longer term public funding streams.

Diversity of tactics

The way that artists and culture workers came together last year to demand stronger action from the government to protect artists and the arts, and the fact that they were listened to, feels like a significant moment for the arts in Ireland. Just as the boom years pushed young people to set up spaces where they could afford to come together to do interesting things, the material conditions of the pandemic necessitated action that led to the creation of a new and broad based solidarity between artists and other people who make culture happen in this country. Not only has this led to positive, if long overdue, changes to funding, but I believe it is also an important reconnecting boost to the morale of a whole ecosystem, after a prolonged period when people have felt disconnected and drained. This will be important in re-building momentum in the sector coming out of the pandemic.

Although I very much believe that independent arts spaces deserve more public funding and support, if they desire it, I also think that a big strength of many independent spaces is their capacity to make things happen without any funding or resources, at least in the beginning, as well as their ability to create and build on relationships with the users of the space, and to develop resilience through community. So while I stand by the argument that more public funding is part of the answer to strengthening the position of independent spaces, I also think we need to recognise and celebrate what has been achieved through the membership model, where members fund the rent and running costs of a space. If more sustainable funding does not become available for these kinds of spaces, or for groups that do not want to engage with public funding bodies in order to retain complete autonomy over their activities, this membership system is a viable alternative, and can also be an accessible one if a number of membership options are available, for example A4 Sounds has a collective membership option and community membership for activist groups. There could also be the potential to seek funding or create solidarity funds to cover the costs of a certain number of memberships for people who cannot afford to pay. Dublin Digital Radio have practised collective ownership informally since they started, but have recently legally become a co-operative entity, which is an exciting step that can hopefully inspire other projects with people interested in cooperative ownership. Collectivising the rent started out as a practical way to be able to afford to rent a physical space for many of the organisations, and over time it has developed into a robust model that works well in a cultural scene where funding is highly unevenly distributed. In many cases the necessity of fundraising and collective payment of rent has helped to foster a strong sense of co-ownership and collectivity.

I'd like to include a final insight from the research of the Provisional University here, on the question of which direction different independent spaces should choose in trying to gain more security and sustainability:

In the context of continuing financial and regulatory pressures, DIY spaces in Dublin are faced with two options: to become more like other spaces in the city (in terms of extracting rent from people, becoming bureaucratically "transparent" etc.) or going "underground" (implicitly accepting a position of marginality in the city). Both options are problematic from the point of view of sustaining and enhancing the commons. These dilemmas come back again and again to the question of power relations between the urban commons and its outside (the public and the private), they point towards our limited ability to become a visible presence in the city and to be sustainable on our own terms, a limited ability to impact on health and safety regulations and rent prices, and a wider inability to transform power relations. The question of how to move forward here is an open one. It seems to us, however, that the path forward must pass through the opening up of a collective discussion among DIY spaces. (...) Moreover, our sense is that it will be necessary to engage with and challenge public authorities in the city, particularly Dublin City Council. However, this task is problematic. How can the urban commons, almost invisible from the point of view of public institutions and uninterested in translating itself into the terms of representative politics, fruitfully interact with the city council? How can the commons engage with the public, contaminate and transform it? These questions require further thought and, most importantly, ongoing experimentation.⁴⁴

Engaging with Dublin City Council, and engaging with the Arts Council, can necessitate compromises for some independent spaces, and while I strongly believe that public funding for the arts needs to be restructured in order to have a distribution of funds that reflects the complex needs and precarities of the cultural ecology and allows for the sustainability of smaller arts spaces, I do believe that the city also needs arts spaces that are independent of all public funding. The diversity of spaces that the city has calls for a diversity of funding and supports. I'm sure there are some who would question my grouping together of grassroots or DIY spaces such as Jigsaw with spaces that describe themselves as providing space for professional artists, funded in part by sponsorship from local businesses and corporate hire, such as The Complex. It is true that the spaces are run on different models and have different ethoses, and I by no means want to erase the richness of the diversity of approaches that have developed out of different spaces, but spaces that are independently run and at least initially self-funded face common challenges, especially in becoming sustainable, and so I think it is worth bringing people from

⁴⁴ Bresnihan and Byrne, "Escape into the city," 51.

different kinds of independent spaces into conversation in order to share knowledge. When we speak of a cultural ecology, in practice, all kinds of artists, creatives, organisers, producers and audiences flow in and out of all of these different kinds of spaces in what is a very centralised city, both geographically and culturally. The highest tier of the funded, 'professional' arts world benefits hugely from the existence of local and grassroots arts spaces, and so those higher funded tiers will also suffer if the spaces at the grassroots level keep disappearing. People get exposed to what art and culture can be at the BYOB performance nights and parties at DIY gig spaces, and might then decide to start their own radio show with a friend, or join an open theatre making group, and that might lead to them organising gigs in basements of pubs, or festival performances in funded arts spaces, which might lead on to project funding from the Arts Council to make a bigger project happen, where they can pay collaborators who they know from the DIY gig space where it all started, and where they still go to be part of a community. Without protecting and fostering accessible spaces of possibility, where the barrier to engaging with the arts and culture, as audience or participant or co-creator, is low, a few years down the road you won't have the experienced musicians or actors you have had standing on the stage of the National Concert Hall or the Abbey in recent years. These spaces, however invisible they might be to a mainstream public, are essential to the cultural ecology of the city. They are essential to the life of a city that, like all cities, is built not just of bricks and mortar, but of relationships.

While I was writing this thesis, I felt very tired. Exhausted, in fact. The events of the last year and a half, the masters, and being away from a city and people I love, had taken their toll. Some days I felt unable to think and make connections in the way that I usually can. On those days I just wanted to stop writing, lie down, and come back to it all in a few months, when I have more energy. One of those days it struck me that how I've been feeling is almost like a shorter term version of what so many of us have been feeling in Dublin over the last few years, which has just been compounded by the Covid: a kind of exhaustion, because things feel so hard to do sometimes. Sometimes it feels like so many things in the city that should be with you are actually against you. Sometimes it feels like it would be so much easier to not try anymore, to put your head down and get a normal job, and just go along to events when you can. I wrote this thesis through the tiredness, buoyed on by the things I was hearing and reading about as I did, the things a bunch of people in Dublin have been doing over the past year or so, through their own tiredness. Because that's what it's about, at the end of the day: sustaining each other, with words, with ideas, and with actions. This thesis is a subjective and by no means comprehensive look at the current state of independent arts spaces in Dublin. I hope it can contribute to the ongoing conversation among people involved in the arts and in grassroots culture in Dublin and Ireland about how to continue to build sustainability and community beyond Covid, and how we can cultivate a more fertile ecosystem for more independent spaces to grow in, to ensure the future of a vibrant cultural life for everyone.

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Photo credits

Unless otherwise credited, the photos are from the websites of the respective organisations. The photo on the first page is by Roisin Murphy O'Sullivan and is from the last Solidarity Session in August 2019, gigs organised at Jigsaw that platformed artists living under the system of Direct Provision as asylum seekers and refugees in Ireland.

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