

Art practice, process, and new urbanism in Dublin: Art Tunnel Smithfield and social practice placemaking in the Irish capital

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Abstract: *This paper presents research with Art Tunnel Smithfield (ATS), Dublin, positioning it in Dublin-wide placemaking practices, and situating it within the city's tracts of vacant land and Dublin's bespoke new urbanism. It focuses on the project as a form of social arts practice, giving examples of arts activities and agencies in the space, and locating the work within placemaking typology as 'social practice placemaking' (SPPM). SPPM is conceptualised as an extension of participatory public/new genre public art (Lacy, 2008) to a 'new situationism' (Doherty, 2004). This perspective views the co-production of art as constructive of new spatial configurations and emergent relations between users and space. Locating this work in the socio-politics of urban life, SPPM has to be understood as an art form that dematerializes the built object and is concerned with creative and social processes and outcomes.*

Keywords: architecture, art, critical spatial practice, placemaking.

Introduction

This paper focuses on the case study of Art Tunnel Smithfield (ATS), Dublin, one of three global case studies in a PhD research project focusing on performative arts practices in an urban context as practices of the arts in placemaking, undertaken through participant observation and interviews. One aspect of the research specifically focused on the arts practice and process in grassroots, community-led placemaking, a practice the researcher came to term 'social practice placemaking' (SPPM). SPPM can be defined as comprising a cluster of co-produced, performative and relational creative practices that employ an arts approach to a four-dimensional placemaking design practice. These are driven by community issues and created by architects, artists and urbanists working outside of strict professional boundaries (Zeiger, 2011) with members of a local community, in a polylogic process connecting subject, object, and space.

This paper will first introduce ATS, its locale and context in the city of Dublin as located in Smithfield, and then go on to illustrate examples of arts practices found in the case study. It will discuss this practice in the context of SPPM, and conclude by critically locating ATS in the wider 'new urbanism' concern of Dublin.

Art Tunnel Smithfield, Smithfield, Dublin

Art Tunnel Smithfield was a stretch of community garden and art space initiated by artist and landscape architect Sophie von Maltzan, on the corner of Queen Street and Benburb Street – as one interviewee described it, 'the worst street in Dublin' (community member interviewee). It was sited on land surplus to the LUAS tram development at the River Liffey end of Smithfield, and at the foot of Smithfield itself, a large public realm space renowned previously for horse markets and now redeveloped with a cultural and social offer and programme. Smithfield itself is located in what Kearns and Ruimy (2014, p. 108) describe as

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Dublin's 'Arc of Disadvantage' of inner city Dublin: poorly designed social housing; few social and cultural amenities; numerous vacant sites; few areas of public green space; and an area that has been subject to underwhelming and mediocre architectural regeneration (ibid., p. 50). ATS broke ground in 2011 and closed in February 2014. Von Maltzen described ATS as a 'community pocket park' (Griffin, 2014), and the space included a native wildlife area, a community platform, garden, art gallery and various site-specific installation spaces. Its mission was to 'bring Art into the public realm and create a community pocket park at low cost with local community's, business' and the Council's support' [sic]. Installations were largely placed in the *Art Tunnel* section and community artwork in the *Art Platform* section of the site. There was an area at the far end of the site that formed a bio-diverse 'micro- neighbourhood park' (artist interviewee), planted with native plants, and the *Art Tunnel* and *Art Platform* areas were further purposed as a community garden. Dublin City Council (DCC) architect Ali Grehan suggested the site to Von Maltzan and its proposed development was agreed in consultation with the land owner, local residents, and businesses. The nature of the design and ongoing activity meant that planning permission was not required and it was financially initiated and maintained by local cash and in-kind business sponsorship and crowd-funding. The space was managed and cared for by a group of volunteers, formed by a predominantly female core group of c. six members, with a larger group of c. twenty, and a further group of c. sixty volunteers. Membership of the volunteer group was fluid, as people dropped in and out of the project over the course of its lifespan, and formed of communities of location (those living in the local area) and communities of interest (those from across Dublin with an arts or gardening interest). Access to the space was via a key code shared amongst the volunteer group, and via open access during events and regular gardening activity times



(Fig. 1): Eastward aspect, facing Smithfield.

(Fig. 2): Westward aspect, facing from Smithfield.

Art practice and process at Art Tunnel Smithfield

A variety of arts practices were to be found in place and over time in ATS. Firstly, the space was curated on a basis of three-month installation commissions: these commissions were chosen by the ATS group from an open call and given an under-500 Euro budget, and installed by the artist(s) with or without volunteer help. The installations were architectural in form and akin to 'new genre public art' (Lacy, 2008) in nature. Secondly, arts activity took place in the space on both a programmed and ad hoc basis. Those that were programmed took place in partnership with a local school for example, and involved timetabled activity. Those that were ad hoc responded proactively to the flexible and fluid nature of the space and ideas generated from it, and reactively to opportunities presented by individuals or agencies external to the group, as they arose. These activities involved the core group of ATS volunteers, local community members, passers-by and destination-seeking tourists. Arts processes found in the space

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were centred around installations, projects and events, including installation design and build; the display of visual and sculptural art; painting; music; and spoken word. Much of the time in the space was spent attending to the garden, with activities such as planting, weeding and rubbish clearance constituting another kind of performative process.

Example 1 – *Weave*, Paul Terry, and *Loom Seat*, Sorcha Murphy, 2013

Two of the installation commissions comprised an artist/architect team, creating site-specific installations designed to draw attention to the expanse of wall in the site, and by implication, similar end of terrace sites in Dublin. Artist Paul Terry's *Weave* (Fig.3) was a two-storey rope canopy, placed at the entrance to the site; architect Sorcha Murphy's *Loom Seat* (Fig.2) was created using surplus rope and placed at the foot of the canopy and in a gardened section of the *Art Platform*. The joint commission saw the artist and architect work with community volunteers in the build, a process that involved skill swapping, the artistic and architectural practices being informed by the other.



(Fig. 3): Paul Terry, Section of *Weave*, 2013, Dublin.



(Fig. 4): Sorcha Murphy, *Loom Seat*, 2013, Dublin. In use during Dublin Culture Night, September 2013.

Example 2 – *BURDS*, Ruth Daly, 2013

A new genre public art commission was *BURDS* (Fig. 5) by Ruth Daly. Daly was a local community member who had been volunteering at ATS since its inception. The project was enabled by Daly as a gifted thank you to ATS at the time of her emigration from Ireland. The installation was formed of wooden cut-outs of common urban birds. It was created in collaboration with children who were passing-by and who were asked what animals they had seen in the locale; the children responded 'birds' and then joined the project by making the cut-outs and placing them around the *Art Platform*; in this way the art practice moved from being participative to co-produced.

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(Fig. 5): Ruth Daly, *BURDS*, 2013, Dublin. in-situ in the Art Platform site section.



(Fig. 6): Westward aspect, featuring steel palisade fencing, barrier and anti-pedestrian street signage.

Example 3 – Gardening

ATS was sited aside the Luas Corridor, on a strip of land left as wasteland after the development of the tramway across the north of Dublin. The site was gated off by steel palisade fencing along the length of the site, with a small raised platform between the site and the tramlines; this platform was not intended as a pavement but was used as such. The area as a whole was not perceived as welcoming, with little visual attraction or walkability.

One of the stated aims of ATS was to ‘liven up’ the immediate area and redefine the function of the site to that of ‘community liveability’ (from website). It did this via the repurposing of the site as a garden (Fig.7), a continual work in progress that acted as a ‘civic act and [to] activate further placemaking processes’ and providing a space to spend leisure time in. The garden was tended to on a regular basis by the volunteers through weekly evening weeding and rubbish clearance sessions, after work hours, and on planting sessions during the weekends. The act of gardening formed a performative practice of facilitating community dialogue and neighbourliness; individual and community conscientisation; and area beautification.

Through its art practices and processes, ATS had an affective dimension for those involved. In the examples of *Weave* and *Loom Seat*, the team found their respective creative practices extended in the process of making, interaction and collaboration. The architect reflected that their practice was challenged by the fluidity of the artist’s practice and the social aspect of work; the artist found working with the architect facilitated a new perspective on and aspect to his art process and object:

...in that they had that lovely eye of being able to see the possibility of an artistic installations, but then I really enjoyed them making things that were practical as well, so people would be able to use it as a piece of furniture as well... (artist interviewee).

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The siting of artwork in ATS as a public realm art space also made demands on the artists and the contextual form of the work:

an outdoor exhibition is still quite traditional, so the way you have to approach this [siting at ATS] and the consequence of that, of the work being created and its actual presence, you have to consider (artist interviewee).

BURDS is an example of an arts practice that was initially participative, with the artist engaging with the public as points of inspiration for the resulting art object. This eventually evolved into co-production with the willing involvement of the public as co-creators, a facet of working in an exposed public realm site, and this too became part of the ATS art practice:

you get plenty of people who are kind of amused by what you're doing, and they don't understand why you would be there, and you try to explain to them but they're really, it makes no sense to them at all, why you would be there, doing that, but definitely curiosity is the best reaction we got from most people and then there were people, you could tell, they wanted to be in there with you too, and there was a point when they started joining the ranks... (artist interviewee).

It is with the example of gardening as a co-produced social practice artform, however, that the aim of ATS to 'create relationships between worlds' (artist interviewee) was most keenly observed:

Plenty of people around here living in apartments with no garden. Mondays we do our beer and weeding. It's just as much about sitting down and having a beer and chatting to someone you wouldn't normally chat with (community member volunteer interviewee).

It's a conscious decision to put yourself there, to volunteer, to meet people interested in the same thing, so it's a kind of not just a garden in a scrap of Dublin (community member volunteer interviewee).

The act of gardening engendered conversations about the role and place of ATS in and of itself; these issues extended wider to Smithfield in Dublin, and then wider still to issues of vacant land in the city. This conversational and embodied performativity in the first instance helped the participants to distance themselves from the life-world of the area to critically reflect on the forces that shape their existence (Julier, 2005; Kester, 2004; Kwon, 2004; Petrescu, 2006). This was seen to have a cumulative effect: as one made a transition from sometime participant to team-member collaborator, it affected the group habitus and begun to effect change in others, as multiplicitous process of assemblage (Tait, 2011, pp. 285-6). The impact of ATS was not just on the material urban form during its lifespan, but ATS seeded ideas with its co-producers and influenced them into becoming more open to their own agency in the urban realm, which in turn, compelled a longer-term behavioural relation to place and the Dublin arts ecology (Tonkiss, 2013; Yoon, 2009). Von Maltzan found ATS to be 'a great space to make arts contacts, to find people interested in working in the public realm' (in interview); and members of ATS went on to be involved in the creation of the DCC-initiated Mary's Abbey community garden off Capel Street, eastward along the Luas



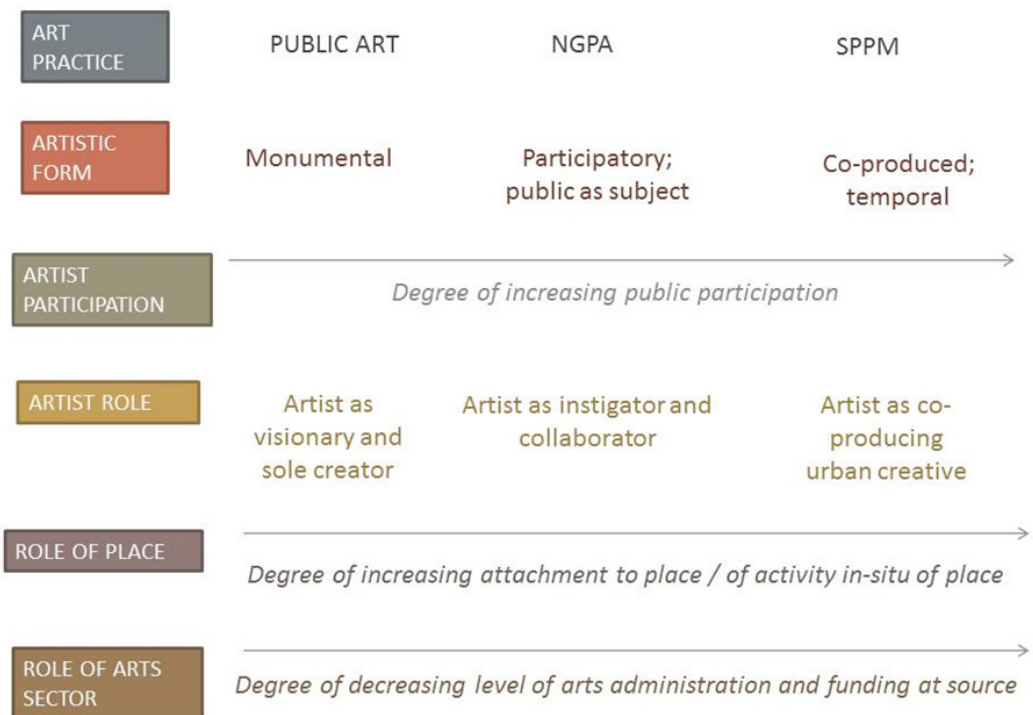
(Fig. 7): Section of the ATS garden, along the Art Platform (*Weave* by Paul Terry seen in the background), July 2013.

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Corridor from ATS, as well as involvement in various other social, cultural and political projects and groups in the Smithfield, Stoneybatter and Capel Street areas of Dublin.

As a social practice artform located in the public realm (Lippard, 1998), ATS can be placed in the arts canon past Lacy’s (2008) “new genre public art” and towards co-produced arts and a ‘new situationism’ (Doherty, 2004) and, as located in placemaking, to SPPM (Fig. 8).



(Fig. 8): An operative and temporal scale of arts in the public realm to SPPM, 2014.

The function of performative practice is to question the idea of city living as well as the practice and roles of artists and architects (Lehmann, 2009, p. 14). As seen in von Moltzau’s own practice in regard to ATS, the practice of landscape architecture was place-led and embedded in the local social, cultural and political ecology, and the arts programming followed this same course, in a localized ‘call and response’ (Lowe, 2015) to people and place. The arts processes in ATS were thus relational (Bourriaud, 1998/2006), the art-in-place practice working with the re-appropriation of urban space, reinventing its use through quotidian activities understood as creative practices in urban contexts. ATS as an urban art intervention is of art as a part of urban design (Miles, 1997), of a bottom-up urban engagement that places the citizen at the root of urban change. A central concept emerging from theory is that such projects are a space to pilot or prototype material alternatives for the urban realm in question (Crawford, 1999; Iveson, 2013; Kester, 2004; Lydon and Garcia, 2015). In a self-activating process, people recognise the potential of a space; they then determine to use the space in varying degrees of creativity; they then use the space and create it to suit their needs and desires (Franck and Stevens, 2007, p. 10). The role of art here is to draw attention to issues and encourage reflexive reassessment via new thinking, acting thus as a catalyst for social change (Brown, 2012, p. 10; Murray, 2012, pp. 256-7) and collective meaning-making via

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inter-subjective encounters (Bishop, 2012, p. 257; Froggett et al., 2011, p. 95).

Social practice placemaking

This paper will now turn to the thinking of social practice placemaking, a placemaking practice informed by social art practice, extending arts critical thinking on the co-production of art as constructive of new spatial configurations and emergent relations between users and space which impact on public life (Yoon, 2009).

SPPM is a conjoining of social practice arts and placemaking, a practice to be understood as an art form that dematerialises the built or made object and is concerned with creative and social processes and outcomes. It is a 'critical spatial practice' (Rendell, 2006, p. 1), an umbrella term for art practices that are contextual, site-specific and in the public realm, and of architectural practices that involve conceptual design and urban intervention. SPPM is a performative artform that 'engage[s] the public in interactive scenarios, responsive contexts and constructed agencies' (Yoon, 2009, p. 70). These projects take place in, and claim as their own, pseudo-public spaces of liminal space (Grodach, 2010, p. 475) and 'non-sites' (Patrick, 2011, p. 65). Together the use of these spaces, the formal or the informal, calls into question what is public space and what can occur in it. The term participant is dissolved (Brown, 2012; Critical Art Ensemble, 1998; Grodach, 2010; Kravagna, 2012; McGonagle 2007) in SPPM to that of co-producer. Its practice goes beyond a top-down 'I manage, you participate' (Saxena, 2011, p. 31) participation model common in architectural practice, and beyond the 'pseudo-participation' that Petrescu (2006) talks of. Instead it becomes a horizontal, collaborative process with a deeper level of engagement with those who traditionally would have been thought of as the participants. All participants — arts, non-arts, professional, non-professional — work as 'urban creatives' (Klanten and Hübner, 2010, p. 2) in a co-produced practice. The 'non-artist' or 'non-professional' co-producer may have no formal training but "funds" (Dewey, 1958) the process by bringing another relative expertism, from their lived experience, together a form of expertism assemblage (Hannah, 2009; Tait, 2011, p. 282).

However, the SPPM artist is not shy or anonymous about their expertism nor their agenda, a rethink of the notion of an artist's sole authorship of works that for Bishop (2006) is informed by Guattari's (2000) resingularisation. The artist's expertism is as creative thinker, disruptor and/or negotiator (Kravagna, 2012, p. 243; McGonagle, 2007, p.6; Reiss, 2007, p. 11) who works in 'radical relatedness' to others and is a 'connective, rational self' (Gablik, 1992, p. 2), bringing people together via a subjective and differentiated experience from one person and instance to another (Grodach, 2010, p. 476). Local and expert knowledge is used as a tool in art creation in SPPM; the function of the art in SPPM is not solely the creation of the art object (and it should be noted that this may not be an object that would be overtly recognised as such by the formal or commercial art sectors) but the collective endeavour of the creation of a material intervention itself. As a relational art practice, SPPM is concerned with human interactions and social context; situated in the urban, they act at a social interstice of the everyday and encourage a rejection of proscribed modes (Bourriaud, 1998/2006). Here, the artwork is created by the community in and for their place (Cleveland, 2001, p. 18; Tait 2011 p. 281) and on their terms (Gablik 1992; Kaprow in Kelly 1993/2003 p. xviii), and the art practice and process together facilitate the negotiation of the personal, social and political of the individual and the collective in space (Petrescu, 2006, p. 83). Such practice faces the same challenges of evaluation as any social practice art, with a concern for discursive, relational and material outcomes, over metric outputs.

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'The vacant land issue' and Dublin's new urbanism

The spaces are there and nobody is using them and they aren't looking like they're going to be used for any development that could be of any benefit...take these spaces and use them for exhibition or workshop spaces or what have you ... (artist interviewee).

ATS is an example of a growing interest and activism in Dublin in 'the vacant land issue', the vernacular phrase spoken by all interviewees relating to the number and city-wide scale of vacant, derelict and not-used land and buildings in the city. This interest is shared by communities local to vacant sites, artists and the city administration. Three hundred vacant sites have been identified by DCC of an estimated, and thought underestimated, sixty-three hectares (Kearns and Ruimy, 2014, p. 66). There is an evident public interest in the re-use of vacant land by the Dublin public, as ninety per cent of Dubliners want vacant spaces to be brought back into public use (Griffin, 2014). In addition, it was claimed in interview that approximately forty thousand people visited *Granby Park* (artist interviewee), a temporary park created by arts collective Upstart with the local housing estate residents. ATS and other such SPPM projects in Dublin have been instrumental in bolstering a groundswell questioning of how vacant land is being thought of in the city – reimagining them as spaces that can be activated by and for the people using a social practice arts-based approach. Not only did residents and passers-by begin to appreciate ATS as somewhere that one could linger in and not just appreciate as a greening beautification of brown land, some started to link the activation of this space to a local, grassroots and self-initiated activism. For example, one local resident stated their motivation to join the nearby Mary's Abbey garden project (initiated subsequently), which transformed a derelict end-of-terrace site, was that they 'didn't want to be one of those people that complains and does nothing about it'. Additionally, a *Granby Park* artist stated that feedback to their project had also seeded ideas to undertake similar work in other areas. As one architect respondent stated describing their involvement in a community-led vacant land project:

You've got to keep on saying, to all these community groups that we work with, 'no, Dublin City council don't own that land, people own that land', and you're [DCC] just looking after it for them. It eventually seeps in... 'cos its true. (architect interviewee).

This comment prompts consideration of the role of DCC in 'the vacant land issue'. For DCC, such projects have fulfilled the function of temporary urbanism, 'an approach to neighbourhood building and activation using short-term, low-cost, and scalable interventions and policies' (Lydon and Garcia, 2015, p. 2), particularly in two respects: firstly, that of land tenure; and secondly, of crowdsourcing ideas for scalable prototyping. Despite a public interest in the animation of vacant land, this research found a pervasive acceptance of an 'othered' ownership of land and of green spaces to be gated that is holding back temporary use potential:

There's just this fear that if you open things up then people will destroy them, local community and the council and the parks, you see these parks closed, you just watch it crumble, it's just that 'we'll lock the gates, we'll keep people out'. Give ownership and the community polices itself, it will happen, 'you couldn't do that in Ireland', well, why couldn't you? (artist interviewee)

ATS and *Granby Park* both proved that projects can be of any timescale, but do not have to be forever, and interviewees across both stated how essential this was in dispelling a fear in landlords over land tenure of community arts and garden projects on their land:

everyone benefits from being able to use that piece of land for that amount of time, but then if people want to put their foot down and say, 'this is our park now, you can't have it back', that would probably prevent that from happening again and landholders would be much less willing to give these short term leases, as long as everyone can accept that, then maybe these things can continue... (DCC interviewee).

This perspective signals a cultural shift in the thinking of Dublin public realm arts practitioners.

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At the time of writing, elements of DCC were showing learning and leadership in this regard, displaying and enacting an attitude to urban co-production in Dublin that goes beyond a consultative one. Lehmann (2009, p. 32) saw a culture of temporary land use, such as can be seen as nascent in Dublin, as one that makes significant contributions to urban life through the generation and encouragement of new urban activities. ATS was such an activity, an 'area catalyst task' comprising a simple and low cost intervention outside of municipal planning or the professional design sector, with disproportionate individual, community and place gains including increased community confidence and control (Kearns and Ruimy, 2010, p. 206). Some Dublin architects stated in interview that they have been surprised with what they have been able to achieve in terms of the design and function of land with DCC; others have stated that they see DCC learning from cultural programming mistakes, and especially ones in the Smithfield area around large scale public events. In interview, DCC respondents also recognised a measure of their own limitations in engagement in the city's vacant land: that it cannot be top-down 'to change the cachet of an area, the people have to manifest it' (DCC interviewee). However, they also noted that 'it is time for a new debate' (DCC interviewee) and that ATS and others had been instrumental in both galvanising an interest in vacant land in the public of Dublin and also in fostering a space and time for this debate. The Government of Ireland/Rialtas na hÉireann Construction 2020 report (May 2014) recognized the need for public engagement in the discussion around vacant land in the city and DCC interviewees recognised that 'regulation inhibits innovation.' DCC is part of the EU-funded urban sustainability and resilience network TURAS, and has created Beta Projects, a scheme that actively canvasses for artists' and residents' suggestions for the alternative use of vacant land, and pilots these where possible. Interviewees saw this as an example of DCC treating the creative community as valued 'cultural translators' (artist interviewee) to bridge the gap between the public and the administration, but, essentially, coming from the level of the street to begin with.

Kearns and Ruimy (2014 p. 48) observe an emerging Dublin urbanism that firstly breaks the 'liveable-city glass ceiling' of a 'bigotry of low expectation' where Dubliners do not believe the city can become a desirable place for people to live. Secondly, the authors consider that this altered perspective is attempting to redress the contemporary Dublin urban difficulty of a successful, liveable inner-city by rendering its response on a cultural and social reimagining (ibid., p. 15). Thirdly, they claim that this movement is led by communities of 'urban pioneers' (ibid., p. 98), a group that would be composed of urban creatives. From the example of ATS as SPPM and its agency within and without its urban creatives, participation in the project can be seen as firstly reflexive and from this, transformative, as based on empowerment to be able to decision-make and coalition build, separate of external organisations (Cornwall 1998, p. 273; Bishop, 2006; Kester, 2004). ATS brought a day-time lease of life to Benburb Street, a challenge Kearns and Ruimy (2010, p. 93) see not being met all over Dublin and its participants saw themselves as urban pioneers (ibid.). The outcome of arts in the public realm may be more politics with a small 'p', but this is no less significant, for what can be seen in Dublin is the creation of Guattari's (2000) 'neighbourhood strategies' where local groups at the grassroots are fundamental to transforming society. In this sense, the SPPM of Dublin at this time, as exemplified by ATS, is as much about a co-operational social structure as it is about a material change in the urban form, as the artwork presents itself as the object and site of experiencing as well as the means to start a process of reflection and tactical response. But this is a susceptible process, and here lies the challenge inherent in the notion of Dublin's new urbanism. Smithfield may still be emerging as a liveable area of the city, a 'proto-urban space' (ibid., p. 127) with increasing cultural programming, consumer activity and footfall, but it is still vulnerable, as attested by the closure of ATS and its return to dereliction.

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