

Perspectives on Practice:

Artist-led spaces during regeneration – an interview with Niamh Brown, curator at Ormston House

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Summary:

In this interview for Perspectives on Practice, Niamh Brown, curator at Ormston House, speaks to Ashling McGrory about the journey behind establishing Ormston House as a long-term, artist-led arts space in the heart of Limerick City. The discussion explores the importance of Ormston House's relationships with its programme participants, local creative communities, and wider audiences in securing a 30-year tenancy agreement with Limerick City and County Council. The interview highlights various opportunities and challenges Ormston House encountered in securing a space for culture during a period of economic regeneration.

Key words: Artist-led spaces; creative cities; cultural regeneration; precarious tenancy; local government partnerships

Artist-led spaces

ASHLING

MCGRORY

Introduction

In this interview for Perspectives on Practice, Ashling McGrory interviews Niamh Brown, curator at Ormston House. The interview discusses Ormston House as an artist-led space, centred around the question, “how can we support artists *better*?”. In the context of this interview, artist-led is defined as an organisation, not necessarily managed by artists but led by an artist-centred ethos.

Artist-led spaces and initiatives are often founded on a short-term basis due to the difficulty of securing long-term tenancy. The precarious circumstances of many initiatives in the artist-led sector raise questions about the sustainability of such spaces and their perceived value. This is particularly evident in cities that experience both higher density of artists and arts spaces and greater concentration of regeneration strategies. This interview was conducted informally and edited to draw out the dominant themes of the discussion: the purpose and origins of Ormston House; making space for culture in cities and within regeneration; and public support as a driving force to securing cultural and arts spaces.

Founded in 2011 by Mary Conlon, Ormston House is a cultural resource centre and meeting place for the arts in the heart of Limerick City. In 2021, after several years of uncertainty around tenancy and, consequently, uncertainty around the organisation’s sustainability and funding streams, Ormston House became one of few artist-led organisations in Ireland with a long-term (30-year) tenancy agreement with a local authority (Limerick City and County Council). <https://ormstonhouse.com/>

This interview took place on 15 June 2022.

The origins and purpose of Ormston House

Artist-led spaces
ASHLING
MCGRORY

McGrory:

Can you tell me what Ormston House is?

Brown:

We describe Ormston House as a meeting place for the arts in the heart of Limerick City. We are a cultural resource centre based in a historically rich, Venetian palazzo-style building on the corner of Patrick Street and Ellen Streetⁱ.

We run a programme of artistic and community-led projects, from visual art exhibitions to residencies and performances across multiple artforms. Often our programme responds to a local context. For example, *The Feminist Supermarket* [September to December 2021]ⁱⁱ was a large project inspired by the building's history as Limerick's first self-service supermarket, opened in 1961 by Jack Ormstonⁱⁱⁱ. The supermarket ran until 1982 and the building became known as Ormston House, and that's where our organisation takes its name.

We are part of the artist-led sector, led by an artist-centred programme. Our six Artists-in-Residence and one Historian-in-Residence, play a central role in our thinking. Our operations team is a mixture of both curators and artists. Our core question is: how can we support artists *better*?

McGrory:

Can you introduce us to how Ormston House's journey started as an artist-led space and the wider Limerick context in which it began?

Brown:

Ormston House was founded in 2011 by our Artistic Director, Mary Conlon, during a time when there were a lot of artist-led activities in Limerick City and throughout Ireland. In Limerick, a wave of initiatives and organisations started from 2008 onwards. This happened during the Irish economic recession when

Artist-led spaces
ASHLING
MCGRORY

there was access to vacant spaces due to a lack of commercial interest^{ivv}. Limerick, as a city, really felt the economic crash. In some ways, Limerick never really felt the boom [that preceded the economic crash] as there was much economic stagnation during that period. Creative Limerick, an initiative by the Urban and Economic Development Unit in Limerick City and County Council's^{vi} Planning Department made access to space possible. The Creative Limerick initiative negotiated an agreement between the artist, the landlord of the property and the Council. Rent and rates were waived, the artists covered utilities and maintenance, and the Council extended their public liability insurance to cover the premises and on-site activities [such as exhibitions]. Creative Limerick was intended for temporary projects; if commercial interest returned, the artists would be required to vacate.

Creative Limerick made things possible for the artist-led sector by providing access to spaces, and at its height in 2011, eleven projects were operating in the city centre. It also worked with Limerick School of Art & Design^{vii}, enabling students to use spaces for exhibitions. Organisations such as Occupy Space [2009]^{viii}, Faber Studios [2009]^{ix}, Raggle Taggle [2010]^x and Ormston House [2011] came from the Creative Limerick initiative. Although starting as temporary projects, these organisations grew a strong reputation and had a strong following locally and nationally early on in their conception, helping to build artistic communities and create spaces for experimentation and diverse practices. The timing was important as Limerick City Gallery of Art^{xi} was closed for refurbishment during the beginning of this period, and EVA International^{xii} was transitioning from an annual to a biennial exhibition. It was an interesting and often exciting time to be in Limerick.

As the Irish economy started to pick up, access to and availability of spaces were getting more difficult. One of the first projects from the Creative Limerick initiative forced to leave its location was Occupy Space in May of 2012. The artistic community was shocked, and this event reminded us that these

Artist-led spaces

ASHLING

MCGRORY

spaces and projects were at risk. Although Occupy Space continued nomadically afterwards, their physical presence was missed. While the commercial interest grew in the city centre properties, the Creative Limerick organisations and projects closed one by one. Ormston House is now [in 2022] the last remaining organisation, both with a building and nomadically, from the Creative Limerick initiative.

Creative Limerick was developed by people who understood the value of arts and culture and how these could contribute to wider society and breathe life into the city. It was often a leap of faith between the local authority and landlords when businesses weren't moving into the city, people could not afford the commercial rent or rates, and the city was very quiet. Our history as an organisation is complicated, but if it wasn't for Creative Limerick at the beginning, we wouldn't be where we are now. It wouldn't have been possible somewhere else. For us, we're a legacy of Creative Limerick.

McGrory:

What influence did Limerick's cultural scene have on your programming focus?

Brown:

At first, our programme was developed to explore curatorial strategies, whether concept or research-based exhibitions and projects. Projects were developed with the voluntary in-house team, and other curators and artists were invited to develop exhibitions and projects. As the team grew and changed, people brought their interests and experiences to the programme creating a diverse programme of exhibitions, events, and workshops spanning multiple artforms. In that first year, we hosted exhibitions, talks, performances, and different community groups like many artist-run spaces, without funding. I joined in late 2012, and while the organisation was still

Artist-led spaces
ASHLING
MCGRORY

operating voluntarily, for the first time there was some project funding for the exhibition programme for the following year.

In terms of other local projects, Ormston House was different as it had a membership scheme for artists and practitioners. While the format has changed since 2011, for €10-15 annually, you could apply to two exhibition opportunities yearly, submit proposals for exhibitions and events, and support the programme. In those early days, the programme pace was similar to a commercial gallery model; exhibitions ran for about four weeks, one would close on a Saturday, and by the following Thursday, a new one would open. It was an exciting time to work in Ormston House and to be in Limerick. As a volunteer team of students and recent graduates, we learned on our feet by just doing it, working with the artists, the curators and the rest of the team. A serious level of administrative and technical work was involved, and all on a voluntary basis. We recognised a few years later that we needed to slow the programming speed and put the team's well-being at the programme's centre, and we have now formalised our structure.

Making space for culture in cities and within regeneration

McGrory:

I understand that from 2012, Limerick's commercial economy began to reboot welcoming more commercial businesses to the city and into the spaces that Creative Limerick had occupied. Unfortunately, artist-led initiatives, like Occupy Space, were displaced. It's interesting that during this time of economic regrowth, Limerick became the first Irish National City of Culture in 2014^{xiii}.

Can you tell me a little about the impact of Limerick's National City of Culture 2014's on Ormston House?

Brown:

Artist-led spaces

ASHLING

MCGRORY

First, the National City of Culture [Limerick 2014] has greatly impacted Limerick. Some people may not agree with it or may not feel the same way. There were key events, like *Fuerza Bruta*^{xiv}, who put on a spectacular production in what was then known as Culture Factory^{xv}, now Troy Studios^{xvi}. Everyone still talks about Granny, a giant puppet that took over the city, brought to Limerick by *Royal de Luxe*^{xvii}, and captured the imagination of citizens. Limerick 2014 showed audiences what can be possible in the city by embracing culture.

For those of us involved in arts and culture in Limerick, Limerick 2014 was about showing the best of what Limerick had to offer. Another part of me understands that other sectors saw Limerick 2014 as a rebranding exercise, a way of moving on from a very negative image often portrayed in national press and media. For us, Limerick 2014 was a way of exploring what it means to be a National City of Culture and trying to imagine what we could do in a year. This then started many conversations.

There were multiple ways in which Ormston House benefited. During the preparations in 2013, a pillar structure was created [by the Limerick 2014 team] to connect the city's different art forms: visual art, music, theatre, film and dance. A community pillar was added later as the planning progressed. We all met and talked to each other, some for the first time. It got people in a room together and provided a mechanism to communicate with the Limerick 2014 team. That impacted us in terms of getting to know other people; and to this day, long-standing working relationships began in those rooms. Limerick 2014 started the conversation around a long-term outlook for us as an organisation. Like all Creative Limerick initiatives, we were a temporary project, even though we had become quite established both in our location, with our artistic and local communities, and our audiences. In 2013, we talked with the Limerick 2014 team about our sustainability ahead of funding applications for 2014. We knew we wanted to create a full 12-month

Artist-led spaces
ASHLING
MCGRORY

programme, but we knew all too well the vulnerability of our tenancy. They agreed they would support us if there were a threat to our tenancy. We all understood the optics if a cultural space was to close in the middle of the inaugural National City of Culture. We successfully applied to both Arts Council Ireland's Project Awards and the Made in Limerick funding scheme.

Through the Made in Limerick scheme, Limerick 2014 supported 109 cultural and community projects in the city and county for that year.

Throughout 2014, our audiences were more diverse than previous years as there was more widespread promotion and greater public engagement. The programme was back-to-back and included hosting Ireland's representation at the 2013 Venice Biennale^{xviii}, Richard Mosse's *The Enclave*^{xix}. To be part of its Irish tour was a hugely significant moment for us as an artist-led and volunteer-run space.

Overall, Limerick 2014 allowed us to think about our projects, be more ambitious and expand in terms of what we wanted to do. The real shift was that it allowed us to think long-term and began a conversation about securing the space. Anecdotally, during a group conversation at Ormston House, Mary joked about buying Ormston House, when an artist responded seriously, "well, that could never happen", Mary realised in that moment that we had to buy the building. It wasn't just about Ormston House; it was also about raising the level of ambition for artists in the city.

McGrory:

What is most important about raising those ambitions and how to place them within a city's development?

Brown:

As we progressed as an organisation and as the programme grew more ambitious, we were thinking more about our sustainability as an organisation,

Artist-led spaces

ASHLING

MCGRORY

ourselves as a team, and building our programme. No one on our team was getting paid. Everyone volunteered from a minimum of one day a week to almost full-time hours, all while working part-time jobs or with different organisations. There is only so long that you can work that way, and as the cost of living increased, it became more difficult to live in Limerick on part-time wages. We needed to create employment.

In Ireland, without secure tenancy [a formal lease agreement with clear terms and duration], it's difficult to access funding streams that allow you to cover overhead costs, which include salaries. While we had a great track record with project funding, it couldn't go towards any overheads. We had to fundraise for those costs separately, but this didn't allow for long-term thinking. The only way to move forward was to look at securing our tenancy. And for every conversation about securing spaces for art and culture, especially grassroots projects, there seems to be another conversation focusing on giving spaces to commercial businesses and creating jobs. Such conversations forget that by creating and securing space for arts and cultural organisations, you are helping to create and secure jobs, as well as build capacity within the sector.

McGrory:

What were the next steps that Ormston House took in achieving that vision to buy the building?

Brown:

The building [all ground floor] was originally divided into two operating units: 9 and 10 together [Ormston House] and 11 [a retail unit] by the private owner, who subsequently went into receivership in early 2013. When the owner went into receivership, the building was acquired by National Asset Management Agency^{xx} (NAMA) as one unit, the full ground floor over basement. While NAMA were waiting for commercial markets and interests to pick up in

Artist-led spaces

ASHLING

MCGRORY

Limerick, the receiver agreed to keep us in situ. With the added exposure of the National City of Culture in 2014, there was more commercial interest in Limerick. Conversations and plans to raise funds for Ormston House to purchase the property properly began in 2015. These were had between Ormston House, some of the National City of Culture team, the [Limerick City and County Council] arts office and some other key people.

My colleague, Mary Conlon, was much more involved in this process. There was a lot of advice from different people, including from the National City of Culture team, which, post-2014, became the bid team for the European Capital of Culture for Limerick 2020^{xxi}. This consistency was important to continue the conversation post-2014 into 2016, and after the bid. During that period, we also engaged with two individuals from the private sector who were very interested in the arts and Limerick city being seen as a cultural destination. They advised Ormston House on an application to the JP McManus Benevolent Fund^{xxii}. A valuation of the property was carried out and we wrote the application. We proposed a specific legal structure to protect the potential investment of public and private funds. The local authority would own the building and become the holding company, while Ormston House would be the operating company on a long-term lease for a peppercorn rent. That became an ongoing and complex conversation, and there were significant challenges around the property division as there were multiple units in the lot, of which Ormston House was only one part.

Our successful application to the JP McManus Benevolent Fund was a huge push. We went back to the local authority. When we started negotiations with the local authority on the purchase of the building, there was a business operating in unit 11. Limerick City and County Council would not buy the full lot due the business in situ. We then had to negotiate with the receiver to separate the units. We were successful, and we eventually went to sale agreed [in 2016]. Separately, we were beginning to negotiate terms for a

Artist-led spaces
ASHLING
MCGRORY

long-term lease including securing the property for arts and cultural purpose for the city even if our company were to wind down. We wanted to ensure the legacy of the negotiation for artists and for the city.

While Limerick City and County Council was exercising due diligence in relation to technical aspects of the sale, NAMA sold the lot to Cerberus Capital Management^{xxiii}, and they put the property on the open market in 2017. We discovered this had happened, by chance, when an auctioneer contacted us to arrange viewings. For us, it was like, "how did this happen? We went sale agreed". It was devastating because we thought we were secure.

The building was on the open market for a year. I think people locally knew, but I don't think the reality of what this meant hit home for the city and the communities surrounding us, our audiences and our artists until 2018. It was very real for us; it was heart-breaking. We had to open the space to allow people to view the building, that process was demoralising. We had to start the process again, this time with the receiver on behalf of the new owner (Cerberus Capital Management) and other agents and stakeholders. We also had to look for additional funds as the property market began to recover. That was a very, very long process.

Alongside this, in August 2017, we incorporated Ormston House as a Company Limited by Guarantee [CLG] with a Board of Directors without share capital. Compared to setting out in 2011 with an informal structure, this was a much more formal structure. Our new CLG structure made us more desirable or secure in accessing funding, securing space, and simply becoming more solid. That was all part of the journey of becoming a desirable option for people to invest in, especially with public money. At the time, Mary and I were both co-directors (with different roles and responsibilities) and it felt like at any point, if either of us walked away, the whole thing could fall apart.

Artist-led spaces
ASHLING
MCGRORY

There were all of these conversations; securing the building, trying to create jobs, and under that was a huge governance piece of work. Between 2015 and 2018, our programming shifted to adapt to our capacity as a team. For example, in 2018, we didn't apply for additional funding for a local programme so that we could concentrate our efforts on the process of securing tenancy. Many of our activities were and are international or outside Limerick. During this period, our priority was research and residency, but we did have a space people could use. We had more community groups and festivals using the space, which was brilliant, but we really missed our own exhibitions. The purchase, the incorporation, the temporary programme changes were happening parallel to one another, but all contributed to where we are now. Slowly but surely, Limerick City and County Council, went "sale agreed" at the end of 2019. We were given a 30-year lease by Limerick City and County Council which was formally approved early 2021, which is incredible and unheard of. It was very long and hard, and the journey felt personal and emotional the whole way through.

Public support as a driving force to secure a space for culture

McGrory:

You mentioned at the start that Limerick, in particular, didn't really feel the boom because of economic stagnation during that boom and then, like everywhere else, felt the impact of the crash.

How did the Limerick communities respond to the potential loss of Ormston House?

Brown:

We were fighting hard to keep the conversation going about buying the building. There were a lot of people involved. Certain people really kept it alive and expressed the importance of Ormston House and the arts, in general, in Limerick. But, there was a particular moment with a tweet that was

Artist-led spaces

ASHLING

MCGRORY

sent out in July 2018. It was by one of our audience members and supporters, who had been involved with us in hosting different events. She tweeted an image of the 'for sale' sign in the window, which we had to display. The point of her tweet was around accessibility, calling on the local authority to buy the building so that it could be made fully accessible to the public. The tweet was reshared by others, particularly artists and communities who we worked with and understood the value of what we're doing. I think this was the first time, people realised that there was a threat to us being there. The tweet's timing followed a period in which we had spent much time doing community engagement work. We were host to 'Limerick Together for Yes' (the campaign to Repeal the Eighth Amendment)^{xxiv} for their volunteer drop-in, training exercises, and support services to people affected by the referendum for the last two weeks of the campaign. People who had never stepped foot in the space came in during that time. The tweet blew up in a way that, if we had planned it, it would never have worked. It happened so organically.

That tweet, and the public response that followed, created visibility around the conversations happening. Suddenly, there were new conversations about the value of art spaces in the city centre, it was a really incredible moment. It showed the local authority that people really care about this space. It put on a level of pressure to ensure that we were secured^{xxv}.

Public support came from the people we had hosted and built relationships with; that is important to us. These are relationships that are built over a long time. We are an artist-led space, and we are unusual in that we've been around for 11 years in one location. Thankfully we haven't had to move, and having that consistency, of where you are, sometimes of personnel, allows you to build meaningful relationships with people. We have become familiar and more comfortable for people to access the space again; I think that's really important. We're not an unknown anymore, very generally, a lot of

Artist-led spaces

ASHLING

MCGRORY

people know that they can come into us and they recognise what we do, they recognise whether it's us personally, or if it's Nelly the dog, who is a fixture at our windows or door, keeping tabs on all of Patrick Street. That is important in terms of like garnering public support. We're really grateful for that; we create space for people that don't often have space. And that's so important and central to what we do.

McGrory:

What do you think the purpose of an art space like Ormston House is in Limerick?

Brown:

First, we're located within a catchment area, which according to Pobal [the Pobal Deprivation Index], is one of the country's most deprived areas^{xxvi}. With high unemployment rates for males [70%] and females [40%], only 2% of the population attended higher education between 2006 and 2016. We are very aware of our locality and our communities. We try to create access points and a welcoming space for those who may not visit art spaces. We also try to create, curate and produce projects that have a local significance. We need to create relevant and interesting work for local people here that still has a wider significance and speaks to wider national, international, or global issues. Such themes in recent years include the history of the building, the context of the city, and the River Shannon.

Often with artist-led spaces, they are tucked away, down an alley or up stairs. They are not always visible. A visible space like ours in the city centre is important in a city like Limerick for accessing art and cultural experience. Our location makes it easier. We have large front windows; which already breaks down those barriers. What we hope to do is create a space where people feel welcome, where they can come in and enjoy or experience something. We try to create open and transparent conversations with people and reassure them

Artist-led spaces
ASHLING
MCGRORY

that if they see something that they don't like, that's totally fine. We always remind them that it doesn't mean that they shouldn't come back. There'll be something else that they might like.

I think Ormston House, and the arts and culture in general, create another access point for people to think and to be challenged by ideas. The arts have the power to communicate something, and that's vital in a city like Limerick, giving an outlet to showcase local, national or international conversations. It has the power to highlight a particular issue, whether that be environmental or political, about materials, or purely from an aesthetic point of view.

McGrory:

What does the future hold for Ormston House?

Brown:

Having security in our space allows us to be more ambitious for our programming and access other funding pots that we wouldn't have been able to do beforehand. In a very practical way, it will allow us to refurbish the building in a way that makes it more accessible and energy efficient. That is one goal for now, but we know it will take years.

For us as an organisation, we want to ensure that our team is solid, being paid appropriately and that we are looking after ourselves. Continuing to build strong relationships with artists, working with them and supporting their needs is always central to how we work. From a programme point of view, how we work, we would like to continue what we do but scale-up the ambition. We want to continue vital work in creating spaces for artists and arts workers at every stage of their careers.

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- ⁱ <https://ormstonhouse.com/the-building/>
- ⁱⁱ <https://ormstonhouse.com/programme/feminist-supermarket/>
- ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.buildingsofireland.ie/buildings-search/building/21513004/identikit-9-11-patrick-street-ellen-street-limerick-municipal-borough-limerick-limerick>
- ^{iv} <https://web.archive.org/web/20090202103830/http://www.irishexaminer.com/irishexaminer/pages/story.aspx-qqqg=ireland-qqqm=ireland-qqqa=ireland-qqqid=73270-qqqx=1.asp>
- ^v <http://www.limerickcity.ie/media/Creative%20Limerick%20Explanation%20Document%202013.pdf>
- ^{vi} <http://www.limerickcity.ie/Planning/EconomicDevelopment/>
- ^{vii} <https://lit.ie/LSAD>
- ^{viii} <https://www.limerick.ie/occupy-space>
- ^{ix} <https://www.limerick.ie/faberstudios>
- ^x <https://www.limerick.ie/raggle-taggle-consortium>
- ^{xi} <https://gallery.limerick.ie/TheGalleryLCGA/History/>
- ^{xii} <https://www.eva.ie/>
- ^{xiii} <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/indulge-in-ireland/limerick-city-of-culture/>
- ^{xiv} <https://fuerzabrutaglobal.com/>
- ^{xv} Former Dell Manufacturing Plant in Limerick that closed in 2009
- ^{xvi} <https://troystudios.ie/>
- ^{xvii} <https://www.royal-de-luxe.com/en/creation/the-grandmother-fallen-from-the-galaxy-into-a-field-in-munster/>
- ^{xviii} <https://www.labiennale.org/en/history>
- ^{xix} <https://ormstonhouse.com/programme/the-enclave/>
- ^{xx} <https://www.ntma.ie/business-areas/national-asset-management-agency#:~:text=The%20National%20Asset%20Management%20Agency,the%20years%202003%20to%202007>
- ^{xxi} <https://www.limerick.ie/sites/default/files/media/documents/2017-06/Limerick%202020%20European%20Capital%20of%20Culture%20Bid.pdf>
- ^{xxii} <https://jpmcmanusfund.ie/>
- ^{xxiii} <https://www.cerberus.com/>
- ^{xxiv} <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv47w44r>
- ^{xxv} A number of local media organisations carried stories at this time and an uplift petition gathered over 3,000 signatures. See:
Keep Ormston House open - <https://my.uplift.ie/petitions/save-ormston-house>
Limerick Leader - <https://www.limerickleader.ie/news/breaking-news/325291/breaking-limerick-city-cultural-centre-ormston-house-faces-possible-closure.html>
I Love Limerick - <https://www.ilovelimerick.ie/save-ormston-house/>

Limerick Post - <https://www.limerickpost.ie/2018/07/25/mayors-move-to-save-ormston-house/>