

ARTIST ANNE CLEARY REPORTS ON AN EDUCATIONAL ART PROJECT IN LIMERICK CITY OF CULTURE, BY CLEARY CONNOLLY WITH ANNE MARIE MORRIN, NIALL QUINN AND MARIA FINUCANE

> PARTICLES OR WAVES A LIMERICK CITY OF CULTURE PROJECT BY ANNE CLEARY

At thirteen—the age my daughters are now—I moved with my family to Limerick, a metropolis after the hamlet of Crossmolina where I grew up. I still remember the excitement of my first trip into town: small shops nestled in narrow streets and lanes, an almost Temple Bar feel, or that's how I remember it.

That all changed rapidly, the Crescent shopping centre in Dooradoyle opened in 1973, then the Parkway on the east of the city during the 1980s, followed by retail parks, DIY centres and what not, and a bewildering array of ring roads to serve them. A textbook case of urban degeneration; the city was depleted, small shops and businesses disappeared, and the city centre became a no-go area after dark, leading to more depletion in a cycle that became difficult to stop.

Limerick City Council has done a great deal in the last few years to try to reverse this

cycle. Sections of the Shannon riverside have been sensitively refurbished, walks and cycleways laid down, the Georgian city rehabilitated in an attempt to bring life back into the city centre, to make it a place of possibilities again. Part of Limerick's problem is the location of the university—very pleasant for those who use it, outside the city along the river, but with little connection to the city centre. The 'American campus' solution imagined in the 1970s was part of the 'turn your back to the city' doctrine of the time, and so for thirty years Limerick City has reaped none of the benefits that usually go along with being a university town.

When we were invited by Mary Immaculate College to work with them on an educational art project for Limerick City of Culture, we wondered what we could do to highlight the qualities of the city, to make people aware of its potential in some small way. Our budget was very limited, neither



of us are quite megalomaniac enough to imagine we could change Limerick and set it right in its tracks... but surely there was something to be done.

I had always been fascinated by the curious names of Limerick's lanes, of which there are many—Lady's Lane, Phayer's Lane, Ball Alley Lane—and the use of the word Bow to designate a laneway with an arched entrance, Fox's Bow, Pike's Bow, is particular to Limerick.

What these laneways really need, of course, is light—many of them are charming in their own right, with arched entrances and cobbles; but dark, shadowy spaces in any city are uninviting, and more so in a city like Limerick, where densities are low in the city centre. But we also thought that the laneways could do with a little bit of love and attention. These lanes are the fabric of the city—places full of history, where people lived, worked and died; an integral part of



life in Limerick before the slum clearance programs that stretched from the 1930's to the '60's.

Working with Mary Immaculate College¹ and Limerick School of Art and Design², we conceived a vast educational project, bringing schools all over the city together to light some of these lanes.

We paired 12 schools with six lanes, and right through the spring, several hundred children used drawing and light to create art for their lane. Students from both colleges acted as lieutenants, taking classes in the schools several times a week to develop the artwork. We explained to the children that they were each a particle in a vast wave of light that was going to illuminate Limerick, that the light would be real, but we also needed the light of their ideas and creativity to bring Limerick's lanes back to life. The children threw themselves into the project, and we ended up with thousands

of drawings to integrate into illuminated ceilings for Limerick's bows. In the end, five bows (we couldn't unfortunately get permission to light the 6th laneway) were illuminated with ceiling artwork and colour changing LED RGB lighting that reveals different drawings in waves as the light evolves.

The capital investment in this project was tiny, but the human investment was enormous. Through the children that took part, we hoped also to reach their parents, grandparents, brothers and sisters and remind them of the value of their city. Like living organisms, cities need constant attention. They need to be cherished if they are to survive, not just by public bodies, but also by the citizens themselves. As Charles Landry stated in his 1996 publication *The Art of Regeneration: Urban Renewal Through Cultural Activity*:

"[...] many of those working to renew our cities have come to see the human potential of a community as its most important asset. They accept that wealth creation, social cohesion and quality of life ultimately depend on confident, imaginative citizens who feel empowered and are able to fulfil their potential."

Having met many of the young people involved in this project, they are certainly nothing if not confident and imaginative; the drawings they made and their wholehearted engagement with the project testify to that. If Landry is right, if community is the key, then perhaps we can look forward to a brighter future for Limerick.

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1. Graphic artwork for Pike's bow, by children from the Presentation Primary School in Limerick
2. Woolworths Lane
3. Fox's Bow
4. Augustinian Lane
5. The launch at Fox's Bow on June 21st
6. Todd's Bow
7. Flower Mill - a sketch by one of the children inspired by the fact that there was once a flour mill on the site.

