FREELANDS FOUNDATION
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FOCUS

Belfast

For this special issue of FOCUS we look at the artistic landscape of Belfast, a unique city with a thriving art community. We hear from artists, collectives, curators, writers and others active in studio groups, art centres, public projects and universities, who introduce different places and perspectives on the city.

In autumn 2022, Belfast hosts the annual Freelands Artist Programme Symposium. 'City as Material' will bring together artists and partners based at g39, Cardiff; PS², Belfast; Site Gallery, Sheffield; and Talbot Rice Gallery, Edinburgh. Launched in 2018 to support emerging artists across the UK, the programme has worked with 80 artists to date, fostering long-term relationships between artists, organisations and places.

In advance of this event, we took a journey from west to east through Belfast to discover how the city itself shapes the way people live, work and make art.

Cultúrlann McAdam Ó Fiaich
216 Falls Road

Cultúrlann McAdam Ó Fiaich is an Irish language, arts and cultural centre located in the heart of West Belfast on the Falls Road. It is home to a range of different Irish language, artistic and cultural activities for everyone in the community. Cultúrlann McAdam Ó Fiaich first opened its doors in 1991 to accommodate Meánscoil Feirste, a nine-pupil school, in which the curriculum was taught through Irish.

Emma Berkery, Associate Artist, Visual Arts Panel

This space is absolutely vital – it has the only art gallery in West Belfast. Much of the community that live in this area do not go into the city centre to visit galleries. So it is vitally important that this is here, as it can be the only exposure to art that children and adults who live in this part of the city have.

The demographic of this area is wonderfully mixed, it is one of the most socially challenged areas in the north and sits really closely to the biggest hospital, The Royal. Hospital staff live in this area, as well as local families, and it's surprisingly multicultural with many newcomer families also. In Cultúrlann itself, we have family and community groups that use this space from all different backgrounds, including economic migrants, refugees and asylum seekers. Central to the ethos of this centre has always been a non-political, independent mindset that values our language and culture as part of the common heritage of all the people. This open, welcoming attitude has given Cultúrlann its reputation as a melting pot of cultures and a hotbed of ideas and innovation.

Cultúrlann functions both as an art centre and as a community centre for the Irish language. Some people are coming in to see theatre, to look at the art, to visit the bookshop or café, and the language isn't the primary draw for them. Then you have people who are learning Irish, who wish to converse and enjoy cultural experiences in Irish to improve their language skills. And of course there are people who are completely fluent and living their lives through Irish.

Our footfall is very high compared with some galleries in Belfast, where footfall can be a challenge. We don't have that issue because there's so much going on in the building – there are so many different things to enjoy.

Conway Mill
5-7 Conway Street

Since the 1980s Conway Mill has been an incubator for local business and enterprise start-ups. It provides a unique multifunctional space for businesses, organisations and individuals. Situated between the Falls Road and the Shankill Road in West Belfast, after an extensive refurbishment Conway Mill is now one Belfast's best preserved and most important historical buildings.

Andy Donnelly, Managing Director

The history of Conway Mill tells and reminds us who we are and what we're about. There are two mills here, the old mill was built in 1842 and was a spinning mill, the other is from around 1907. Both mills stopped operating in the 1970s and the place lay derelict for quite some time before Conway Street Community Enterprise Project Limited was born from a group of local community activists, people who could see the potential in the old mills and what they could mean and become in the local community. Small businesses and cooperatives were set up, as well as an adult learning centre overseen by community leaders, and with the help of well-wishers was given a heart and soul. Now overseen by the Conway Mill Preservation Trust Ltd and with outside investment, in the late 1990s the Mill was renovated, which means so much to people living here.

Presently, there's around 60 businesses, from a hairdresser's, architect's studio, solicitor's, a shop for mechanical parts for taxis, multimedia companies, as well as a bistro. We a have a food bank that helps people and families in these hard times, and a boxing club that's open to the local kids giving them a focus and something to do in the evenings. All this helps bring the community together – it really is a big community hub for people in West Belfast and from afar.

One important project here is the artist studios, we have about 26 artists on the fourth floor of the Mill. It is important for us that we look after them; 'Artists at the Mill' are a vital part of the community, so the whole floor is dedicated for them.

The Conway Education Centre has been at the Mill since 1982. Initially it was for kids who were put out of mainstream education for various reasons during the height of the Troubles, kids who had nowhere else to go. A lot of them would have had problems at home and school. Their daddys, mammys, brothers or sisters might have been in jail though internment etc. – the schools didn't have a lot of time for them. We thought the best thing to do was to try and bring them in here and give them a somewhere to learn. They came for two years and did their exams and we would build up confidence to give them a chance out there. That was one of the main reasons for us being here when we first opened. Our idea is: if you want to do something you've got to get off your backside and do it yourself. We are a very proud people in a community enterprise, which belongs to a very proud community.

Pauline Kersten, Conway Education Centre Manager

Here in West Belfast we are working in an area of multiple deprivation. There are generations of people who have been unemployed. The way the education system works here is not always conducive to people from deprived communities. So there's a lot of people who have had a negative experience with education. They are looking to return to education later in life because they want to get a chance for a job, but also because mental health is a big issue. In most deprived communities, poverty eats away at everything, including your mental health. And because we are in the middle of this community, we try to keep our student fees as low as possible by connecting with the universities in the city. This enables us to offer lots of different options that give a second chance at education for these communities.

Enda Kenny, Costume Designer and Anna Donovan, Artist

EK: The light in here is incredible and it changes so much throughout the day. Also you've got such high ceilings, there's something really awe-inspiring about that. I think you come in, even if you're not in a good headspace, and then you get into your studio and it's almost like there's a weight lifted, just because of the height of the ceilings. I think it helps you to think a bit more creatively, and you have the views and everything too.

AD: There are so many quirky things about this place, not just the building itself, but the people in it. I think that that whole spirit Andy has [established] of 'just do it'. Whenever I came here, I don't know if I was entering that headspace already or if the attitude here was an influence on me, I couldn't tell you. But I did start to think 'I'll just do it. I just want to do this.'

EK: Because it's community run, there's a very different vibe. I think it's very West Belfast, it's very matter of fact and if you've got a really big ego, or you're quite a sensitive flower, you're probably not going to get on too well with the building in itself, because you can kind of feel that off the building. I liked that really grassroots feel to it. Even though we're quite separate as a group up here, and there's that nice kind of anonymity sometimes, you do feel like you're part of something being in the Mill. It's very different to a lot of the more temporary studios that you have around Belfast. This [the Mill] has been going on for a few years. And there's hopefully no chance we're going to get kicked out anytime soon. I think there's just more of a maybe a settled feeling within it which is unique.

Array Studios
48 King Street

Array Studios was established in 1994 in the city centre by a group of early career artists, who were intent on making a difference to the visual arts in Belfast. The studios are also the base for Array Collective, a group of artists rooted in Belfast, who join together to create collaborative actions in response to the sociopolitical issues affecting Northern Ireland.

Stephen Millar, Art Psychotherapist, Artist and Member of Array Collective and Array Studios

There's something weird [that's been] happening in the last five years where vast swathes of the city are just derelict; there are land grabs going on. And although we've outgrown the space here because there's too many of us, there's no other space in the city that could comfortably home us – even though half of the buildings are empty. We couldn't afford to pay the rents that are being asked, but there's just so many derelict buildings. It's like the whole city has been allowed to go to rot, just for a dirty land grab. In this area the process of gentrification hasn't quite begun. But you can taste it, like, it's coming.

In my own practice, and the work Array Collective did for the Turner Prize in 2021, I have created cityscapes that are similar to the ones in the Flintstones – the backgrounds when the characters drove down the street would be like, house, rock, plant, house, rock, plant. These paintings were just recurring Café Neros in a cityscape and I ended up lending them for the Turner Prize, because we felt it was important. We wanted to talk about big rights issues, but we also wanted to touch on the fact that our city was being ruined as well and being gentrified to hell. As Array we have done street actions where we try to highlight those things, playfully, but also to keep those discussions going and keep pressure on people, but it's getting harder and harder. It's like, do people really care anymore? Belfast is different in that it [the city centre] doesn't have a big residential community. And lots of people maybe don't care about that as much as they might do in other cities. We are going to be one of two or three studios left in the city centre. We are holding on [in the centre] because it makes sense for us. But also, if we want to keep being involved in street actions, then we need to be here.

Glider
Various Locations

The Glider is a bus rapid-transit system in Belfast, designed to improve the efficiency of mass transit by connecting east and west Belfast and the Titanic Quarter via the city centre.

Stephen Millar, Art Psychotherapist, Artist and Member of Array Collective and Array Studios

I've been running these jokes on social media for years about the Glider. I've been making little pieces about it, street things about it. I don't think people can tell if I'm joking, or if I genuinely love it and that's okay because I don't even know myself anymore. My favourite thing about the Glider is that it's a bus dressed as a tram. Twenty or 25 years ago, we were promised [by Belfast City Council (BCC)] that the tram lines were going to be relayed because they were all torn up in the 1930s and 40s. But BCC obviously blew all that money somewhere else and instead we got the Glider, which goes east to west. I just think it's mad; it's such a comedy-looking vessel. But all that being said – it is amazing. Because as someone who grew up in the east side of the city, to have the ability to go west, where I work, is amazing. That level of connectivity wouldn't have happened 15 years ago.

There are bus routes in the north of the city that literally zigzag in and out of nationalist, loyalist areas their entire journey. My other day job is as an art psychotherapist, I work mostly in primary schools. One day I'll be in a loyalist area and one day in a republican area. But you get the bus to all these communities and all of a sudden everyone's on the same bus. They don't necessarily talk to each other, they don't live with each other, they don't shop alongside each other. But they're on the same buses, [and] you're all going in the same direction.

Lawrence Street Workshops
1A Lawrence Street

Lawrence Street Workshops was founded in an old stable yard near Queen's University in central Belfast. It is home to a group of artists and crafts producers.

Martin Carter, Managing Director

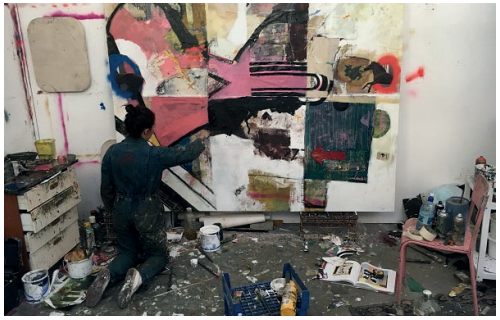
We've been here as a collective since the 1980s. When we first started there was one other artist group in Belfast called Queen Street Studios. Initially you couldn't be a member there unless you had some sort of degree. There's an unspoken rule that education runs the arts here. You need a degree or an MA to be part of it. Lawrence Street was one of the first places where that wasn't the consideration, and it still isn't to this day.

Growing up it always seemed to be the way that if you were creative, people didn't like that. They didn't like me because I wasn't on one side or the other and if you weren't [taking sides] you didn't fit into the establishment.

In 1988, the thing was always 'do something with the Troubles'. The various institutions wanted your art to be about the Troubles, because then it could be put in a museum, and tourists could come and look at it.

In the 1990s there was a real vibe here, there was a bit of a revival. I would put it down to a very simple thing: there was an economic slump. People couldn't leave to go somewhere else for a job. So they ended up staying here and making. And that always seemed to be the problem in Ireland. Historically, people left because there wasn't the work. You only need to go into any small Irish town and you'll see 'So and So & Sons': all the jobs that were good jobs were held within families, so younger people had to leave. I think the revival of creative things happened here because those people didn't leave.

Then the thing for me at that time was to try and build an economic and social space for those people. We tried to get the collective to buy the premises – when we could have bought it for sixty grand or so – but the artists didn't want to. [It was] that thing about taking on responsibilities and not knowing where they would be [in the future]. But it's funny, most of them are still here now.



Ulster University York Street

Ulster University is the largest university in Northern Ireland and the second-largest university on the island of Ireland. Established in 1968, it has one of the highest further study and employment rates in the UK, with over 92% of graduates being in work or further study six months after graduation.

Majella Clancy, Artist and Lecturer in Fine Art, Ulster University

Most people, I suppose, who are involved in the arts and culture organisations here have come through university in one way or another. There's the MFA programme here, which has attracted a lot of people. It was probably one of the few MFA courses across the UK when it started in the 1979, and people came from mainland UK to do the two-year masters. The course has a really good reputation, a really strong reputation. So people would travel to come here from down south. The feeling is, you do your two years during the MFA and then end up staying on.

The students are immediately part of a community. You know everybody. That's one thing I really missed when I moved away for a couple of years, I really missed the sense of – I know it's a clichéd word – but a sense of community. Because it's really strong here. You really do know everybody. And because you know most people, you can kind of make things happen quite quickly.

Jane Morrow, Independent Curator, Writer and PhD researcher at Ulster University focusing on studio precarity and artist labour

The city is quite isolated. It doesn't have great links with Ireland or GB (despite what it might think), so it's a very tight-knit arts community. There is a significant generational divide, for example, work about the conflict here tends to be the preserve of Gen X and above. Younger artists are addressing the lack of progress on other social, cultural and environmental issues that floundered during the Troubles, which dominated over absolutely everything.

There's a pervasive sense – within all sectors, and not least the planning and development of Belfast – that for so long the city missed out: nothing was built or invested in, people didn't visit, the city centre was to be avoided in the evenings. And whilst that's no longer the case, there's a sense that Belfast has a lot of catching up to do.

Northern Ireland has an established and persistent issue with 'brain drain'; it is marked, and multigenerational. A lot of knowledge and expertise is lost, or never nurtured. Not only do artists and arts professionals leave the region to pursue their practices elsewhere, but many simply leave the sector. They see established artists and organisations struggling for space, opportunities and recognition, and they are under pressure to generate some return on investment for an expensive education.

PS^2 are currently doing research into retention and career development pathways for artists here, which is necessary and urgent. For those who return, having practised elsewhere, breaking into the networks and opportunities can be extremely difficult – in a climate of disinvestment in the arts, people hold on to their jobs and networks very tightly.

PS²
11 Rosemary St

PS² has been a vital part of the arts ecology in Belfast since 1994, first of all with Paragon Studios, the artist-run studios and then in 2004 it developed an additional Project Space.

Ciara Hickey, PS² Freelands Artist Programme Curator

PS² delivers an essential role in Belfast in supporting emerging artists and graduates with their first exhibition or residency. A key aspect of the organisation's ethos is that it continues to nurture these relationships over years, and works with established and international artists at every stage of their careers; it is a place for artists to try out new ideas.

One of the characteristics of the space, under the caretaker role of Peter Mutschler, is a responsiveness to the changing city, and an openness to the ideas of the artists and communities who inhabit it. Over the last few years the gallery and studio site has moved in and out of buildings in the Cathedral Quarter, which have been vacated due to a city centre regeneration scheme. With each move the possibilities of the site have been embraced and responded to by the artists and have included: an installation of a koi fish pond in an old fishing tackle shop; a children's crèche; critical writing workshops; a major building project to construct three levels within a small 23m² shopfront; a series of residencies in the storerooms; artist-mapping publication projects charting the rapidly changing city centre; an art-repair shop; live radio and TV programmes; a Butlin's holiday camp for budgies; and collaborations with multiple partners. Offsite projects include *SPACE SHUTTLE* (2007), a structure inviting urban creativity and social interaction around the city at multiple sites, and longer-term neighbourhood projects such as PeasPark community garden in North Belfast and Ballykinler in County Down (2013–ongoing).

While many of the grassroots art initiatives that were set up around the same time as PS² have developed into more formal, 'professionalised' galleries, PS² has retained the ethos and energy of an artist-led DIY project. The experimental and inclusive approach of PS² has led to some of the most memorable artistic moments in Belfast over the last 20 years. The depth and breadth of its programmes, events and exhibitions continues to make it one of Belfast's most dynamic and critical spaces.

Arcade Studios
35 Donegall Street

Arcade Studios is a newly established studio group founded in 2020. It is made up of nine young multidisciplinary artists, based in Belfast city centre, with a focus on painting.

Eimear Nic Roibeaird and Cameron Stewart, Directors

CS: We started this studio group because we had just graduated in 2020 and we didn't have a space. We realised that there's not a lot of painting studios for younger artists, from our viewpoint, and felt there was a real gap for young painters. We are particularly interested in painters who are doing things slightly differently. The gallery space at Arcade is a really great way for us to showcase artists that we think are on to something or contributing something new.

I'd say the culture of painting is fairly one-dimensional in Northern Ireland compared to other places. Say if you're in London or somewhere similar, there's so much more visual information for people to pick up on. But for audiences who are buying or looking at art, at painting, say in Belfast, it'll be straight to Portrush [a coastal village in County Antrim] and derivative images of seaside scenes.

ER: There's a real lack of painting spaces in the city and we weren't going to wait around for someone else to do it. During the COVID-19 pandemic we thought 'there's no point in moping that there aren't any studios and that there's nowhere for us to go – we might as well do something'.

We are just trying to keep working and building something so that we can say, 'look what we're doing, look what the arts provides to the city'. We've had openings now for a full year programme and we bring footfall into the city – people come here into the centre to see art. So if you're thinking of putting an office here, think about what you're missing out on! We are losing so much of our city centre to developments – all the studios and artist-led spaces are having to move out. We are happy here and we enjoy it, but we are also trying to build something. We want to do something really powerful, we want Arcade to last.

The MAC
10 Exchange Street

The Metropolitan Arts Centre (MAC) is an arts venue in Belfast's Cathedral Quarter and home to exhibitions, theatre performances and experimental works. Architecturally, The MAC is built on a trapezium-shaped site opposite St Anne's Cathedral and opened in 2012.

Hugh Mulholland, Creative Director

The MAC was established with a very clear purpose and awareness of our role in the cultural landscape of Belfast and Northern Ireland. So as a (relatively) well-funded organisation we see our role as one of championing the work being made by offering established artists practising here profile-raising or career-defining exhibitions.

It is important that this career progression is done with an understanding of the work that is already happening within other galleries and other cultural organisations operating in Northern Ireland. For the MAC this means that the work of the artists we exhibit is seen within the context of an international programme, which both challenges and connects with an arts-aware audience and a wider public. This means we will often present projects of scale by internationally recognised artists, which might not be possible elsewhere in the city, for example, our current exhibition *Ron Mueck*, which is on between July and November 2022. It is important for us that we are presenting work which, before the establishment of the MAC, you would have had to travel to London, Paris or New York to see.

2022 is the MAC's tenth anniversary, and as you would expect in the early days, we were focused on building our profile and awareness, and this was often about bringing people into the venue rather than reaching out into communities.

That's certainly not the way our thinking is now. In order to better reflect the artists we work with we have established five Associate Partners drawn from wide range of community and activist groups in the city who work closely with us in co-designing programmes that reflect their lived experiences.

In working in this way we are also very aware of and draw on the experience of artists-run organisations and studios like PS^2 or Array Studios, and we hope to do what we can to support their work.

Catalyst Arts
6 Joy's Entry

Formed in 1993, Catalyst Arts is a non-profit artist-run space based in Belfast city centre. It has a long history of being at the forefront of the arts scene in Belfast. As an artist-led organisation, Catalyst Arts uses a model based on collaboration and community, with a strong emphasis on promoting and supporting the arts in Northern Ireland and beyond. It is a members-based organisation, with a volunteer-led rolling two-year director structure.

Manuela Moser and Cecelia Graham, Directors

CG: There's something about proximity, of being in the centre of Belfast for artists. We have something called Late Night Art where people go to all of the different art spaces in the city in one night, as sometimes there is the worry, if you're not in the centre will people travel to you? I think there's also a desire to stay strong in the centre because the city centre has been decimated, there's just so many empty buildings.

MM: Our previous gallery space was located down an alleyway that often felt unsafe or dangerous, but now we're located in a busy entry [alleyway] opposite a pub. With Late Night Art, we have also noticed that because we're so close to PS^2, Arcade Studios and others, we are in that little bubble, and as a consequence Late Night Art has got a lot busier.

CG: Myself, Manuela and another director Kate [Murphy], were all recruited at the same time, and during our first year as directors we spent a lot of time sharing ideas about how we wanted the gallery to run. As a group we want to use the gallery as more of an events or project space, or a workshop space.

MM: Coming from different backgrounds, we all bring different skills and interests too. Because I'm from a literature background and run poetry events and run a press in Belfast, I have brought lots of poets into Catalyst and try to get all those communities into conversation with one another. It's nice to see different groups of practitioners coming together and mixing a little bit.

CG: I think studio groups being in such close proximity to each other [in a city like Belfast] and [making connections with] other artists means there's more overlap here than in other places.

MM: Most people have come through Catalyst. If you do Catalyst, you're a hard worker. If you are doing this [the directorship], it is for the love of it. So you are automatically up for keeping things vibrant and exciting.

The Black Box
18-22 Hill Street

The Black Box is a home for live music, theatre, literature, comedy, film, visual art, science, circus, cabaret and all points in between, based in the centre of Belfast. It is housed in a Grade II listed building in the Cathedral Quarter, originally constructed c.1850 and converted into its current usage as an arts venue in 2006.

Rachael Campbell-Palmer, Director

At the time when The Black Box opened, Belfast had hardly any small to medium fringe-style spaces. We have a lot of festivals here, and that scene was very much growing at the time, but there wasn't really an infrastructure to support those festivals. People like Cathedral Quarter Arts Festival, which first took place in 2000, were having to invest in temporary marquees. There was a case put forward for a festival venue that would be a hub, an incubator, a space which would really support not just the festivals, but also more alternative art forms happening in the city – that's where The Black Box came from.

It very quickly established itself in the sector as a really important part of the ecosystem. It's not been an easy journey for the venue. Partly because there wasn't a long-term plan or strategy at the beginning. But one of the reasons it's survived all these years is because it is much needed, and it's got such a support from its audiences. That's something that's kept it going through a journey that has been challenging at times.

Our core ethos is about being an inclusive and welcoming arts venue where people feel comfortable. The Black Box is something different and I think people really get that. Being in the city centre means it's in a neutral space in terms of polarised communities in Northern Ireland, which is important. The area has changed since The Black Box opened. This does bring challenges especially at the weekend; Friday and Saturday nights can be pretty full-on with so many bars in the area: this can be off-putting to some people who don't want to navigate crowds to get to The Black Box. I think people see this venue as an oasis amidst all that, and it does raise questions about staying in the area.

Poetry Jukebox
Various Locations

Poetry Jukebox is a steel structure, resembling a gramophone or speaking trumpet, with a button to press to hear a poet read their own poem. The first Poetry Jukebox in Ireland was installed for the Belfast International Festival in 2017. Since then, Quotidian – Word on the Street, an arts production company, has made a further two 'touring' jukeboxes, which are installed in venues, streetscapes, hospitals, schools and museums across the city.

Maria McManus, Poet and Artistic Director, Quotidian – Word on the Street

My own practice primarily is as a poet. Quotidian, the Poetry Jukebox and all of the activities that we do really arise out of the fact that I'm a poet, and there was no other way to make the things I wanted to see happen without setting up a company to enable that to take place. I set up Quotidian – Word on the Street and the core mission is to find fresh ways of putting literature into public space.

The jukeboxes were the flagship project and were something we brought to Belfast from another place [the Poetry Jukebox was originally established in the Czech Republic by Ondřej Kobza]. We marry that tradition of poetry in this country, north and south, to animate the public space.

If you were to ask the average person in Belfast what they consider the outside world associates with here, literature is probably one of the last things they would say and yet it's one of the strongest things that we're recognised for across the world. That makes me sad in a way, that people here are often a bit divorced from that part of their own heritage. But what I see with the Poetry Jukebox is the opportunity to really support people to encounter literature in a way that is fun. And also, ultimately, that they begin to own it as part of a shared heritage and as part of a really constructive and affirming way of being in the world. We are surrounded by a lot of destructive public discourse and destructive use of language in Belfast. We're masters of it here. But with the Poetry Jukebox, I see more people willing to engage with public space and language in different ways. That's a win as far as I'm concerned. If you spread the idea of the public space being a valid place to be, people will invent interesting ways to engage. We will use whatever ideas come our way and we'll invent whatever ideas we can.

9ft in Common
Various Locations

9ft in Common is a collaboration between Amberlea Neely of Starling Start, a creative practice and consultancy, and architect Aisling Rusk of Studio idir. It shares the possibilities of an infrastructure of urban alleyways, also known as 'entries', which they see as wild and liminal spaces of possibility. The name 9ft in Common comes from Amberlea's own lease, signed by the original householders in December 1902, which confirms a right of way along the 9ft alleyway adjoining her house.

Amberlea Neely, Founder 9ft in Common and Starling Start

What Belfast City Council (BCC) provide as a solution to antisocial behaviour and burglary problems in the Belfast alleyways are massive security gates, which cost the city over £3,000 each. They're expensive and difficult to put up, [and] they require planning permission. The gates also disrupt the city's green infrastructure, because the alleyways can otherwise contribute to safe cycle or walking routes across the city. Once they go up, they don't easily come down. Belfast doesn't need more barriers.

We have come up with a series of ideas that people can implement in their alleyway to try and make it a better place. Things that you can do yourself, like painting your back gate, or even adding pull-out awnings or benches that you can put down to sit on or pop back up to allow people to pass through the alleyway when you're not using it. Defensive planting is another idea: instead of using broken glass or nails atop walls, growing prickly, thorny plants such as blackthorn, berberis, or pyracantha up your back wall or fence to stop people climbing over.

Because Aisling runs a design studio, we're able to translate all of those ideas into visual vignettes (which can be found on the Ideas page of our website) in response to stories and problems people have shared about their alleyways. These vignettes give design concepts that provide alternatives to BCC's massive gates.

There isn't just one solution – there are many – people can play a part in transforming their alleys themselves. We demonstrate to people that, with a little resourcefulness, there are quick and easy alternatives to waiting for the city council to come and do something for them. You have the right to access the space at the back of your house and 9ft in Common encourages you to make creative use of it.

Vault Artist Studios
4-84 Tower Street

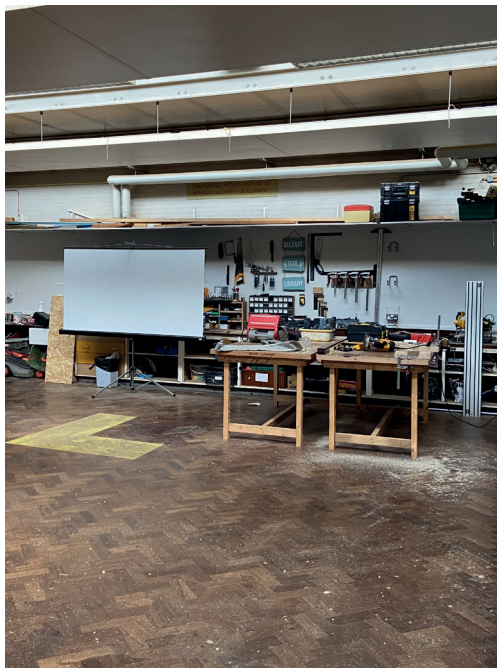
Vault Artist Studios is a community-driven charity that provides affordable studios for creatives working across a wide range of practices. The organisation started as 23 artists occupying the space in a former Ulster Bank in 2017, and Vault is now based in an old school building in East Belfast. The studios make a major contribution to the cultural identity of the city.

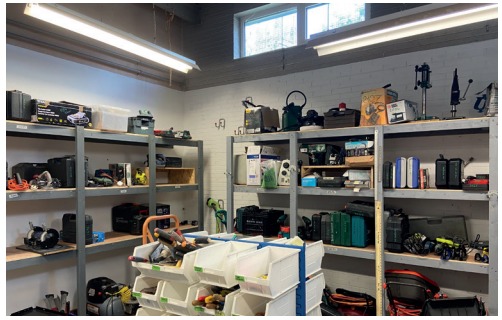
Neal Campbell, Artist and Building Manager

We are one of the only truly multidisciplinary spaces in Belfast. We have visual artists, but we also have circus artists, dancers, performers, writers, comedians … it's a real mix of people. Being truly multidisciplinary has always been written into our DNA. One of the questions we always ask if we're allocating studio space is, 'Is this practice underrepresented within our membership?'

If you're after a space where you just come in, go into your studio and shut the door, Vault is probably not the right place for you. The only way we can make a building of this scale function with very limited resources is if everybody is prepared muck in and do things as a community. We work together – in committees or in working groups – to make this building function, to make things happen; this kind of communal approach to our organisation is crucial. We try to keep as flat an organisational structure as possible.

At Vault we're able to offer affordable spaces to other arts organisations as well, which is super important to us. The city is short of spaces where grassroots culture can happen. At the moment, we are looking for potential new spaces as we have to move and we are acutely aware of that responsibility and of ensuring that we can find spaces that deliver for the needs of all of our artists and, hopefully, for the needs of the city as well.





Belfast Tool Library at Vault Artist Studios

Belfast Tool Library (BTL) is the first tool lending library anywhere in Ireland, north and south.

Neal Campbell, Founder

We have over 1,000 tools here at BTL that people can come and borrow. The library is open to anyone and is a resource for the entire community in Belfast and beyond. At any given time there's probably 300 tools in people's homes doing a job somewhere. We have just passed having 350 members, and are growing rapidly.

To date we've completed well over 6,000 loans: we've saved BTL members 10s of 1000s of pounds and we've repaired countless tools and diverted hundreds away from landfill recycling. There is a great team of people here and it's an incredible resource for the studios, the local area and the city. BTL is very social and it's very much about community in its entirety.

Conn's Water

Conn's Water runs through East Belfast towards the industrial east shore of Belfast Lough, home to the famous shipyards, a key historic part of the city's identity that has seen recent regeneration, including the Titanic Quarter development.

Dr Gail McConnell, Writer and Senior Lecturer in English, Queen's University Belfast

I don't really think of myself as somebody who writes about the city, but it is in my work, of course. When I go to Nebraska in the United States, where my partner is from, I have this feeling of being landlocked, because here we're a ten-minute drive from the sea. Anywhere in Northern Ireland you're within half an hour of the sea. There's something watery about Belfast, it has the shipyards, the River Farset flows beneath it and the River Lagan through it, and the city itself was built on reclaimed mud. There's something watery about the city and Ciaran Carson our unofficial Poet Laureate of the city, who died in 2019, writes about that kind of watery quality. Something about that makes sense to me.

There's a lot that I like about Belfast but it's a funny place I find – not always that easy a place to come into, from outside. If you grew up here there may be parts of the city that you've never been to and would never go to, because of the legacy of the Troubles and a fear that lingers in the aftermath of that conflict. There are parts of West Belfast I just don't know at all and probably never will know. And there'll be people there who have that same feeling about this side of the city.

When I go to cities like London and Dublin, I am reminded that Belfast is like a village really. It's tiny. But the joy of that is that everybody knows everybody in the artistic community. They are generally willing to collaborate, lend a hand, read each other's work, go to each other's art shows and gigs. It gives you a sense that things are possible. The network and the sense of connection … I think that's pretty unique in Belfast.

Queen Street Studios
11-13 Bloomfield Avenue

Established in 1984 in a former printers, Queen Street Studios (QSS) is now located in The Arches Centre in East Belfast. QSS is a charitable group that was initiated to facilitate a growing need for artist studio spaces in Northern Ireland. Today it has 37 self-contained studios, with some studios ring-fenced for early career artists, and a gallery space.

Majella Clancy, Artist

If you're not a collective, it's very difficult, because then you get hit with rates as well as other costs. So people stay together because organisations can apply for charity status, and then apply for support for core funding from various funding organisations. I do find that there's a specific arts culture here in Belfast, maybe because it's quite small. But I think it's [a] really cool sort of mentality with things like Catalyst Arts, which has a new cohort of directors every two years. There's a real sense of things happening – people cut their teeth on things and then they give back. People have a desire to make things happen here.

Mark McGreevy, Artist

I react to the space and to the environmental topography in my practice. I used to work in bog land near Dublin and that informed my work [just] as much. I guess without living in Belfast – because of the bigger costs elsewhere – I wouldn't be able to make work. One of the negatives about working here is that we're kind of like an in-between space of the UK and Ireland. And that's pre-Brexit as well! I think that in-between aspect has affected other people's attitudes towards us. It's hard to get people to come into the space, it's hard to get people to come and visit Belfast, even from Dublin … people don't come up. However the city is cheap, people just do their thing without funding, they find ways. That's always been Belfast's energy, where it has a punky attitude maybe. There's definitely a grisliness to the art that's made here. [It's] a bit rough around the edges.

Gail Ritchie, Artist

East Belfast is really regenerating. So it's great here, we all love it. The studios are cleaner, dryer, bigger … better.The ease of access to things in this space for parking, for loading and unloading, has changed the way I work. I wouldn't be able to do the work with granite that I do without a lift and parking. It changes the materials and the way you make work.

I think overall, in the two moves that we've done as a studio, the quality of people's work has gone up because if you give artists more professional surroundings they are going to feel worth it. I think that sense of things boosts their confidence and actually elevates the work; some of our artists are doing fantastic things, winning international awards.

Jennifer Trouton, Artist

I am the longest-standing member here. I've been here since 1997. I left university and got a studio with Queen Street a year after I graduated; my career has pretty much been built in Queen Street Studios.

Being part of the studio group is a constantly evolving thing. When I look back there was such a different culture, we were all partying and very collegiate and it was very DIY. Over the years, the organisation has become more professionalised: you have bodies funding you and you have strategies, and you have data protection.

We are one of the few studio groups that have straddled the Troubles, as we started in 1984. So we've been in the city centre, we've seen the Troubles all around us, the shops all closed, the barricades, the army, the bombs … Then we've moved and now we're in East Belfast, which has also been regenerated.

Because for 20 years we were right in the heart of the city, we were not a single-identity community, we weren't a Catholic community and we weren't a Protestant community. Therefore, we were very open and cross-community and you didn't really know what your fellow artist was. You have to have grown up here to understand this perhaps, but being in the city allowed us to be neutral, to be a very safe, neutral, creative space that was devoid of the Troubles. There were artists who were engaging with the Troubles, but you didn't have to. So we've seen a lot and we've stayed together. We've managed to grow and just keep moving around the city, with gentrification and everything else. But we're still going, which is in itself something to celebrate.

A Note on Colour

In May 1990, Orbital played a gig at Belfast's art college. In a story that's now been told in a multitude of ways, they had a wild weekend and left a cassette tape behind in a car belonging to one of the promoters and resident DJ, David Holmes. It contained an early version of a track they had been working on, which they subsequently named 'Belfast'. Its euphoric quality made it a touchstone for successive generations of Belfast's citizens. 'Belfast' was released on their third EP, *III*. The record sleeve's blue/green verdigris colour inspired the colour used in this issue of FOCUS.

Images

Cover: Opening event for *We Speak Silent*, PS², North Street, 2017. Courtesy PS²

p.16: University student Yasmine Robinson working in the Painting Studio, Belfast School of Art, Ulster University, 2017. Image courtesy Dougal McKenzie

p.17 left: Portrait photograph of Jane Morrow, 2022. Courtesy Jane Morrow

p.17 right: Painting Studio, Belfast School of Art, Ulster University, 2022. Image courtesy Dougal McKenzie

p.18: Ella de Burca, short residencies, PS², 2022

p.19: PS², Royal Avenue, 2018–19

p.24: Catalyst neon sign. Photo: Dominic McKeown

p.25: Catalyst Arts, 2022. Photo: Simon Mills

p.30: Design concept of a corner mirror in an alley, illustrated by Aisling Rusk, Studio idir for 9ft in Common

p.31: Aisling Rusk and Amberlea Neely at Horsey Hill alleyway. Photo: Simon Mills

All other images courtesy Freelands Foundation

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